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# Conspiracy, Security, and Human Care in Donnersmarck's *Leben der Anderen*

John T. Hamilton \*

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**Abstract:** »Verschwörung, Sicherheit und menschliche Sorge in Donnersmarcks *Leben der Anderen*«. Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's acclaimed film, *Das Leben der Anderen* (2006), affords a provocative opportunity for investigating the relation between conspiracy and security. Although state-sponsored conspiracies breed insecurity among the citizenry, they nonetheless also provide the ground for epistemological security, insofar as the threat can be decisively located. In pressing the literal definition of *security* as "the removal of concern," this article interprets the film according to shifting modalities of care. Considered as a vast conspiratorial network against its own populace, the East German Ministry for State Security (the Stasi) represents a mechanized, dispassionate ideal that strives to eliminate concerns about whatever may jeopardize the regime. To counter this security project, Donnersmarck presents us with characters who display a fundamentally human care that is instigated by governmental practices and yet ultimately works against state-oriented securitization and legitimation.

**Keywords:** conspiracy theory, security theory, the ethics of care, Stasi, East Germany's Ministry of State Security.

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## 1. Conspiracy and Security

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Conspiracies have always been the source of both insecurity and security. On the one hand, as countless cases of victims from across history would attest, plots designed and executed by conspiring groups have been responsible for robbing individuals of their psychological, social, economic, political and, ultimately, existential security. Indeed, to be the target of true conspiratorial machinations generally portends the gravest consequences. Certitude, assurance, and confidence – components of a general understanding of security – quickly fall apart, leaving the casualty, if he or she should survive, without any ground on which to stand. Anyone may be involved; no one is to be trusted. On the other hand, for survivors at any rate, the discovery that a conspiracy does in fact exist affords a certain epistemological security. The presence of domineer-

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ing agents who steer events from behind the scenes, the network of invisible or inaccessible forces which influence the manifest course of our political and social lives, the chain of motives which point to a single, master intention – all bespeak an explanatory power that transmutes contingency into necessity, arbitrariness into rationality, objectless angst into identifiable fear. Meaningless violence is thereby granted meaning, however sinister. In brief, the possibility of a conspiracy redeems experience from pure absurdity. It permits those so inclined to peer beneath the surface of things, to arrive at some originating point, which can settle what would otherwise persist under frustrating ignorance. Those affected may see their lives rendered utterly insecure, but the establishment of a specific cause for their suffering or the suffering of others brings with it at the very least a securing rationale, an ability to locate the threat.

These sense-making effects may account for the popularity of conspiracy theories in many of today's cultures, including the most far-fetched and bizarre. After centuries of secularization have left us without recourse to ideas of fate or divine predestination, after historicism and moral relativism have falsified all teleological conceptions, after post-modernism has demolished once and for all the validity of our *grands récits*, we are faced with an explicatory vacuum that remains to be filled. A conspiracy implies that disparate events are actually connected, that random occurrences are not random at all but rather consciously orchestrated. Brian Keeley thus argues: "Conspiracy theorists are [...] some of the last believers in an ordered universe. By supposing that current events are under the control of nefarious agents, conspiracy theories entail that such events are *capable of being controlled*" (Keeley 1999, 124, emphasis in text). The point is valid for wildly imagined as well as for brutally verifiable conspiracies: Attaching subjective agency to evil occurrences works to clarify motives and intentions, which afford a systematic, causal account that dispels the possibility of mere chance. Thus, and perhaps most importantly, insofar as they involve human actors, conspiracies – however malicious, damaging, and fatal – invariably humanize the world. Instead of discounting catastrophes as the work of indifferent nature or inscrutable "acts of God," misfortune can be attributed to real or presumably real human authors. Moreover, this immanent, human aspect recalls human limitations. The powers that control our experiences are not absolute. However improbable in most cases, conspirators *qua* human allow at least some room for negotiation. Men are neither machines nor gods. The very fact that conspirators must act secretly reminds us that they are not omnipotent.<sup>1</sup>

The finite, human quality of conspiratorial organizations may serve as a further link between ideas of conspiracy and security. What makes this link ex-

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<sup>1</sup> This point is raised by Keeley (1999, 116).

plicit, I argue, is the “care” or “concern” – the Latin *cura* – that inheres in the term *securitas*. Following the term’s etymology, *securitas* aims to place “concern or anxiety” (*cura*) off to the side (*se-*). Focused on the imminent future, *cura* consists in the intentionality that operates within human consciousness. Conspirators, no less than victims of conspiracy, express concerns that motivate the actions and thoughts that work to put those concerns to rest. Generally speaking, insecurity persists when all manners of concern (anxiety, fear, danger) linger; and security results when these areas of concern are brought under control. Conspiratorial plots and the theories that potential targets devote to disclosing them both strive for this control, for an ordering that would turn the imminent future into a matter of no concern. In this sense, the various security problems that emerge in connection with conspiracies hardly differ from security problems *tout court*.<sup>2</sup> Such problems are based on the limitations humans must weigh in order to “take care” of anything.

For this reason, security initiatives frequently depend on a variety of trans-individual mechanisms, from governmental institutions to technological equipment. This dependence can be understood as motivated by a desire to transcend human finitude. Accordingly, security projects aim to remove us from concern by positioning multiple agents, organizations, or devices to be concerned in our stead. Sovereign bodies, which occupy a privileged place above the populace, can arguably foresee and identify threats better than others. The structure that defines this relation between the securing agents and those secured differs little from that which allows gadgets, devices, and sensors to catch what human senses might miss. In both cases, individual care is relegated to persons or machines that are designed, technologically or ideologically, for *accuracy*, promising others a life that would be literally *carefree*.

To this end, the secured subject relinquishes the responsibility of self-care by submitting to a higher authority, by obeying the will of a collective, or simply by trusting technology. This act of submission, which belongs to the broader system of trade-offs historically linked to security programs – for example, an individual’s willingness to surrender certain human rights for greater safety – paves the way for abuse. It is not simply a horrific irony that within totalitarian-minded regimes of the twentieth century bureaus explicitly founded to provide security have done so by instilling widespread insecurity among the populace: for example, the Soviet KGB (*Комитет государственной безопасности*, “Committee for State Security”), the Securitate police of communist Romania, and the notorious East German Stasi (*Ministerium für Staatssicherheit*, “Ministry for State Security”). Nor can the tactics of these infamously abusive organs of the State be restricted to the darker moments of recent history. They are arguably always potentially at the ready wherever power is exercised over a

<sup>2</sup> For a general account of the history of the term *securitas*, see Conze (1972-97); Schrimm-Heins (1991). I offer a full discussion of the word’s long semantic career in Hamilton (2013).

population. As Marc Crépon argues, state apparatuses are explicitly charged with inspiring fear so as to maintain the need for security. By exposing the people to a permanent menace, to perpetual insecurity, such organizations legitimize their existence (Crépon 2008, 49). However, one could further interpret the path to abuse according to shifts of concern. What appears to be an abuse of power or flagrant legitimization is, at least on one level, the conversion from the care for the individual to the care for the state (cf. Kleinschmidt 2010, 9-23).

Such techniques of securitization are dehumanizing when their concerns fall completely beyond the human. The greater irony, then, is that by instilling insecurity among the citizenry, by depriving its subjects of the privation of concern, agencies like the Stasi also allow their human subjects to continue to care, to remain human. Fear and anxiety – two perfectly adequate translations for *cura* – persist despite but also precisely because of totalitarian security measures. Moreover, overwhelmed by their own human finitude, which is the base cause of their insecurity (understood as an incapacity to deal definitively with their concerns), individuals targeted by governmental conspiracies may be impelled to form conspiracies of their own.

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## 2. Human Care and the Security Machine

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The dynamics between security, conspiracy, and human care comes to the fore in Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's internationally acclaimed film *Das Leben der Anderen* (*The Lives of Others*, 2006), which unfolds a blatantly humanist tale beneath the dark and extensive shadow cast by the Stasi over the citizens of East Germany's socialist state. Although the film has been criticized for its negligence of historical accuracy, it should not be faulted for presenting the Ministry for State Security as a vast conspiratorial network.<sup>3</sup> Catherine Epstein provides a concise and telling account of what the organization involved:

One hundred seventy-eight kilometers of archival material. Personal files on six million individuals. Forty million index cards. One million pictures and negatives. Thousands of human scents stored in glass jars. 91,015 full-time employees. 174,000 'unofficial' informants. The highest surveillance rate (agents to population) in history. Husbands spying on wives. Colleagues snitching on co-workers. Informants posing as dissidents. State officials harboring Red Army Faction terrorists. "Romeo" agents preying on hapless sec-

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<sup>3</sup> The most outspoken critic of the film's attention to historical facts is Jens Gieseke, who has written extensively on the Stasi; see Gieseke (2008). For similar complaints, see Lindenberger (2008). In both essays, Donnersmarck's liberties with facts are compared with the data and analysis presented in a significant body of work on the Ministry for State Security, including Gieseke's own work in Gieseke (2000) and (2001).

retaries. Commandos kidnapping alleged traitors from West Germany. Agent provocateurs infiltrating literary groups and church circles (Epstein 2004, 322).

Administration of this magnitude betrays a desire for comprehensiveness, an indefatigable ambition to encompass an entire population within the kind of tight order that is the hallmark of conspiratorial networks. The unprecedented scale of this generously funded ministry clearly aimed to keep each individual under watch like a nightmarish shepherd who never lets a single sheep wander from his gaze. Yet, whereas the ecclesiastical tradition of pastoral care worked toward the security of the flock – toward removing the concern of wolfish peril – here, the Stasi, as its name underscores, strove exclusively for the security of the state (*Staatssicherheit*), assiduously working to eliminate the threat of subversive individuals.<sup>4</sup> Despite their propagandistic claim to shield the populace from the fatal seductions of capitalism, in practice these ministers hoped to protect the state from the lure of individual difference. Consequently, in portraying the West as a site of greed, exploitation and violence, it intensified what was only implicit in the classic Plautine-Hobbesian warning: *homo homini lupus* (“man is a wolf to man”), which should now read *homo civitati lupus* (“man is a wolf to the state”).<sup>5</sup> The Stasi’s astounding quantities of human resources therefore represented a will to transcend the human, to transform each individual into an efficacious cog in the state machine.

Donnersmarck’s film persistently demonstrates how trans-individual, trans-human security procedures carried out in the name of the state are undermined when human concerns or insecurities come into consideration. A nearly Manichaean dualism pervades the plot: human care versus the mechanistic removal of care. The story centers on Gerd Wiesler (Ulrich Mühe), an interrogations expert, committed socialist and frighteningly effective Stasi officer. He has been assigned by his superior to monitor the day-to-day life of the renowned playwright Georg Dreyman (Sebastian Koch); and he initially performs this task with his usual discipline and clinically applied methods. At the film’s beginning we observe Wiesler as little more than a piece of some grand machine, a ruthless analyst with a keen sense for mendacity and prevarication, an efficient, self-effacing master of wiretapping, surveillance, and enhanced observation. Expressionless, Wiesler sits absolutely still, a paradigm of patience, attention, and vigilance, living up to his weasel name. Equipped with headphones and a characterless sports jacket buttoned to the neck, this balding man almost perfectly blends into the cold, drab grey of the radio transmitters that

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<sup>4</sup> In alluding to “pastoral care,” I am referring particularly to Michel Foucault’s genealogy of “governmentality” in Foucault (2007).

<sup>5</sup> The famous phrase is from Plautus, *Asinaria*, 495, and was cited by Thomas Hobbes in his dedication to *De Cive*: “Epistle Dedicatory to the Right Honourable William Earl of Devonshire,” in Hobbes (1998, 3–4).

surround him. The flesh of the face, although somewhat ashen, provides the only hint of living color. The technological gear, which replicates Wiesler's motionlessness, further compromises this already diminished depiction of the human subject. The electronic components – the sound meters, the knobs, the switches and faders – seem to have transformed the figure into yet another instrument of technology, as if the human form were but a prosthetic extension of the system. This technologization of the human is underscored by the bureaucratic, numerical moniker – HGW XX/7 – that chillingly supplants Wiesler's proper name. Especially when compared to those under surveillance, HGW XX/7 is an inhuman utensil, completely divorced from human community.

The chiaroscuro of the film's original poster emphasizes this point. Engulfed in darkness and shadow, Wiesler's personhood fails to receive the light that illuminates Dreyman and his girlfriend Christa-Maria Sieland (Martina Gedeck). The armor of Wiesler's tightly buttoned jacket contrasts with the opened shirt collar of his victim wrapped in amorous embrace. HGW's red fingerprint demonstrates how the agent is nothing outside the system that has inscribed him. Life – human life – belongs to others. As Eva Horn comments, "HGW's loneliness, the fact that he, unlike his victims, has no life, reduces him to a mere listening device, sitting in the attic of the house at his listening post with headphones. He is a medium – and nothing but a medium" (Horn 2008, 140). Yet, while Wiesler listens to what is taking place in Dreyman's apartment, we the viewers are of course also observing Wiesler. HGW may be a mere medium for the state's security initiatives, but for us he is a man who has been or is still in the process of being medialized. The portrayal decisively complicates our anxiety about invasive security methods by turning to the fragile individuality of the security officer himself. The mechanizing, dehumanizing effects visible in the shot signal a loss that the film diligently strives to reconstitute. Throughout, the oscillating focus from the victimized object of surveillance to the dehumanized agent illustrates how security projects potentially entail deprivations for all involved, how both the object and subject of security stand to lose something vital.

Machines are designed to operate indifferently, without any feelings, which – among human beings – tend to compromise the task at hand. As an officer of state security, Wiesler must suppress any such emotional disturbance. It is noteworthy that the history of the term *securitas* points to an analogous logic of suppression. In *De officiis* Cicero submits the following definition:

Vacandum autem omni est animi perturbatione, cum cupiditate et metu, tum etiam aegritudine et voluptate animi et iracundia, ut tranquillitas animi et securitas adsit, quae affert cum constantiam, tum etiam dignitatem. (*Off.* 1.69)

There must be freedom from every disturbance of the mind, not only from desire and fear but also from distress, from the mind's pleasure and anger, so

that there may be present the tranquility of the mind and the security which brings not only constancy but also dignity.

Mindful of the etymological motivation of the word *securitas*, the list of troubling emotions – “desire, fear, distress, pleasure and anger” – should be regarded as the *curae* that threaten to agitate the mind and thereby rob it of its inner stability and integrity.<sup>6</sup> As a mental condition resulting from elimination, Cicero’s *securitas* comes to characterize the “blessed life” (*beata vita*) lauded by Hellenistic philosophers. Accordingly, the Latin negating prefix (*se-*) corresponds to the Greek alpha-privative that distinguishes well-known ideals like Stoic *apatheia* (“the negation of disturbing emotions or *pathē*”) and Epicurean *ataraxia* (“the negation of anything that aims to trouble [*tarassein*] the soul”). Historically, Cicero, like most of the Roman Stoics, link the calm state of *securitas* with a decisive withdrawal from the political forum, which is invariably depicted as a hotbed of overwhelming concerns (*curae*) and disruptive passions (*pathē*). By contrast, in the twentieth-century context of *Das Leben der Anderen*, we can see how the politicization of the state’s own self-securitization produces initiatives devised to quell any agitating attack from within. With this politicization comes a perversion that is especially discernible in the character of Wiesler: called upon by his government to preserve the stability of the regime, he becomes a parody of the dispassionate Stoic, no longer driven by the ideal of *apatheia* but rather mired in sheer *apathy* toward the human.

Wiesler’s impassiveness, memorably performed by Mûhe, plays out in a chilling scene early in the film, when he invites a prostitute into his somber, austere apartment. In his insightful reading, Gary Schmidt singles out this episode as exemplary of the dualism that he regards as operative throughout the plot, namely between feminine-coded corporeality and masculine-coded spirituality. Schmidt writes: “The film figuratively aligns the feminine with the state of fact (i.e., the material world) and the masculine with the mental/spiritual world deemed to transcend the former” (Schmidt 2009, 235). Although, as Schmidt brilliantly demonstrates, this tension motivates many of the screenplay’s characterizations, it fails to acknowledge the fundamental definition of the human itself as the conjunction of the body and soul – a conjunction that Wiesler must neglect so as to remain impassive to any corporeal or emotional impulses that would disturb his mission. In my view, the overriding tension that the film presses is rather the opposition between state-oriented security and the human-oriented cares that would undermine it. The peripeteia thus consists in redirecting Wiesler’s *cura*, not from the material to the spiritual but rather from the life of the state to the lives of other humans.

The conversion begins as soon as Wiesler learns that Dreyman is being observed not because he is suspected of being a “subversive” but rather because

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<sup>6</sup> See also Cicero, *Tusculanae Disputationes* 5.2.



the East German minister of culture is infatuated with and lusts after Sieland, who is living in the playwright's home. The surveillance order, therefore, was not issued on the basis of concern for the regime's security but instead on the basis of a wholly personal, sexually charged *cura*. Hardly a dangerous enemy of the state, Dreyman turns out to be an unsuspecting victim of conspiracy. As in a Roman tragedy, Dreyman is regarded by the state's functionaries as an obstacle to be overcome, a rival who must be eliminated in order for the statesman to secure the object of his lascivious desire.

The emergence of an all-too-human concern fatally disrupts the routinized procedures of the Stasi officer and essentially *demechanizes* Wiesler, who is suddenly and irreversibly recalled to his humanity.<sup>7</sup> He slowly but decisively becomes emotionally attached to Dreyman and Sieland, fascinated by the couple's movements, their conversations, their intimacy. Wiesler's increasing fondness eventually redefines the objective of his security enterprise. No longer acting as a political instrument for the state, Wiesler begins to protect the private lives of Dreyman and Sieland. He takes the risk to meet Sieland personally, whose own insecurity has led her to prostitute herself out of fear that she would otherwise ruin her acting career, first by sleeping with Bruno Hempf (Thomas Thieme), the repulsive Minister of Culture, and later by becoming an "unofficial informant" (an *Inoffizieller Mitarbeiter*, or IM) for the state. Wiesler meanwhile is shown to be less and less enthralled to the system that he once upheld so vigorously. Posing as a fan, Wiesler suggests to Sieland that her talent requires no patron. In appreciation and with a rare moment of sincerity, she thanks the stranger and tells him that he is "a good person" (*ein guter Mensch*). Subsequently, back at his listening post, Wiesler is pleased to hear her swear to Dreyman that she will no longer keep her sordid appointments with Hempf. It is as a human – as a good *Mensch* – that Wiesler is able to touch the lives of others and thereby begin to live himself.

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### 3. Humanization

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The state that cares only for itself can never provide security for anyone or for anything other than itself. Its security program exclusively removes the concerns that threaten its own legitimacy and power. Consequently, it effectively spreads insecurity among the populace. Sieland, too, must secure her own career by desecuring others. HGW opts out of this program altogether by becoming human, by becoming Gerd Wiesler, who ultimately learns to care for

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<sup>7</sup> It is precisely this humanization of the Stasi officer that many German critics, mindful of the horrors of the East German regime, found especially questionable; and this has been a fairly common critique among German scholars working on the film. For a brief overview, see Dueck (2008).

other humans and thereby provide them with safety. Dreyman, who is known to be a devoted communist, believes at first that he has nothing to fear. His own disillusionment, which parallels Wiesler's, occurs during his birthday party with friends. This event broaches the uncomfortable issue of blacklisting artists and writers. Dreyman's colleague, the theater director Albert Jerska (Volkmar Kleinert), who has suffered dearly from being blacklisted, hands over his birthday present to Dreyman: a piano score of an etude entitled "Sonata for the Good Man" (*Sonate vom Guten Menschen*). Wiesler is thereby brought into even closer proximity with his surveillance subject, because both have now been identified explicitly by the same human quality. Wiesler's concern for Dreyman is therefore in a sense concern for himself. Days later, when Dreyman learns that Jerska has hanged himself, his anger and frustration impel him to write an article on suicide rates in East Germany, figures that are tightly suppressed by the state, again as a security measure. The plan is to publish the piece anonymously in the West German periodical *Der Spiegel*. Upon being baptized as a good man by the distraught Jerska, Dreyman could regard his birthday as a rebirth into humanity. At the piano, he plays through Jerska's sonata, a rehearsal for the ode that he will compose on a typewriter's keyboard and present as a memorial to his dead friend.

To be human is to be mortal, to be prey to contingencies beyond one's control. And Dreyman correspondingly takes necessary precautions before setting himself to work on the dangerous article. Fully aware that every typewriter in East Germany is registered with the state, he will write the piece on a miniature model that had been smuggled in from the West and is hidden beneath the floorboards. Furthermore, to confirm that his apartment is not bugged, he and his friends devise a ruse, pretending to be engaged in a smuggling plot. In other words, Dreyman stages a fake conspiracy in order to conspire securely against the state that has conspired against him. Wiesler refrains from contacting the authorities, which attests to his sympathy as well as convinces Dreyman (falsely) that he is not under watch. The playwright can proceed with his subversive writing relatively without concern, thanks of course to his unknown but effective protector. Wiesler is still a security agent, yet now an altogether "good" one – one who in fact provides security rather than promulgate insecurity and collective paranoia on behalf of a brutally inhuman regime.

The apathy that ideally characterizes all instruments of mediation is overcome by increasing passion. Wiesler's official reports are no longer *accurate* because his *cura* is now directed far from state matters. The disrupting emergence of strong, impassioned sentiment marks the replacement of political calculability by classical aesthetic feeling. Wiesler picks up a volume of Brecht's poetry that he discovers on Dreyman's desk and closely reads it through. The poem that is singled out in the film is Brecht's well-known lyric "Erinnerung an die Marie A.," which dates from 1920 but was first published in the *Hauspostille* collection of 1927. The camera closes in on Wiesler's face

as he reads the text, yet in voiceover, it is Dreyman who is heard enunciating the lines:

Und fragst du mich, was mit der Liebe sei?  
So sag ich dir: Ich kann mich nicht erinnern.  
Und doch, gewiß, ich weiß schon, was du meinst  
Doch ihr Gesicht, das weiß ich wirklich nimmer  
Ich weiß nur mehr: Ich küsste es dereinst.

And should you ask me, what's become of love?  
I'll tell you: I cannot remember.  
And yet, certainly, I do know what you mean  
But her face, I really know no longer  
I only know now: I kissed it once.

In addition to reinforcing the sympathetic relationship between Dreyman and Wiesler, between perpetrator and victim, the poem evokes the themes of transience, fleeting desire, and failed memory that define the human condition. The rapid alternation between knowing and not knowing is reflected in the repetition of forms of *wissen* (to know): *gewiß*, ich *weiß* schon ... das *weiß* ich wirklich nimmer / Ich *weiß* nur mehr. The desire for certainty – *Gewißheit*, a concept closely linked to security – is both motivated and frustrated by the erstwhile lover's concern. Moreover, these lines from Brecht's "breviary" (*Hauspostille*) decidedly diverge from the conventional image of Brecht as someone who is politically engaged, ironic, and cynical. In the utterly private scene of Wiesler's reading, the poetry serves to depoliticize art and is made to speak instead to transcendent and universal values, values that would appear to contradict the historical materialist vision associated with Brecht.<sup>8</sup> To be sure, the sympathetic relationship between Dreyman and Wiesler – that is, between a type of "actor" and "spectator" – militates against Brecht's entire concept of epic theater, based as it is on breaking the illusion that would foster such identifications. These refunctionalizations of Brecht are fairly evident in the persistent references to "the good person" (*der gute Mensch*) – in Sieland's remark to Wiesler and in Jerska's piano etude, *Sonate für einen guten Menschen*, which at the film's end will serve as the title of Dreyman's memoir dedicated to agent "HGW XX/7." These clear allusions to *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan* both reinforce and disprove the lesson of Brecht's parable: on the one hand, as both Shen Te and Wiesler come to realize, in order to remain good, one must adopt masks and be willing to dissemble in a society that will ultimately abuse moral integrity; on the other hand, and contrary to Brecht's argument, it is only in the post-*Wende* sphere of capitalist liberalism that such goodness can in fact flourish.

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<sup>8</sup> On this point, see Stein (2008, 575); and Schmidt (2009, 243–4).

In *Das Leben der Anderen*, humanization is consistently linked to a liberal view that poses as an apolitical position. Statements from the director corroborate this claim. In an interview with John Esther, Donnersmarck explains, “I really don’t believe there is such a thing as politics. It’s all about individuals. [...] So I tried to focus on individual psychology in the film. Rather than tell a political story, I show how people make the politics and how that affects people.” The director continues by recommending that one should “strike a balance between principle and feeling [...] between Vladimir Lenin and John Lennon” (Esther 2007, 40). Metaphors of balancing commonly surface in discussions of public security: One does not have to conjure an entirely Orwellian scenario to find how security’s promise to eliminate fear or provide stability may encroach upon, compromise, or severely limit human freedom. Indeed, suspicions about exchanging liberty for security course through world history and are perhaps most popularly expressed in the over-quoted line long attributed to Benjamin Franklin: “Those who would give up essential liberty to purchase a little temporary safety, deserve neither liberty nor safety.”<sup>9</sup> As we might expect, this intimation reaches back to classical Roman literature, for example in Livy’s account of the early Republic or in Horace’s lyric reflections on the dynamics of life within the burgeoning Empire.

Throughout this long history, the *cura* about existential threats, which state security claims to exercise, is supplanted by a *cura* about the limitations and trade-offs required for the former. In *Das Leben der Anderen* both species of *cura* characterize the human condition and hence a humanist ideal. Although it would be difficult – but not altogether impossible – to interpret Donnersmarck’s film within a purely Stoic context, it does appear to be sufficiently clear that the concerns exhibited by the story’s individuals (Wiesler, Dreyman, Sieland, among others) are designated by the passions or *pathē* that characterize what the filmmaker regards to be human. In the interview cited above, it is the impassioned music of John Lennon (perhaps as well as his deeply personal forays into political activism) that represents the basic, universal human feelings that must be summoned to balance against the rigorous, political program of Vladimir Lenin. Donnersmarck seems to regard this struggle between musical sentiment and ideological tenacity as central to the film’s conception. In another interview, he divulges that it was the old story, first related by Maxim Gorky, about Lenin’s love for Beethoven’s aptly named *Appassionata* piano sonata that supplied the initial inspiration for the screenplay. According to

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<sup>9</sup> This sentence first occurs as a quote from a message to the governor from the Pennsylvania Assembly in Richard Jackson’s *An Historical Review of the Constitution and Government of Pennsylvania*, which was published in London by Franklin in 1759, p. 289. It was also used as the motto for the book’s title page. A later variant, also set in quotation marks, is found among Franklin’s notes for an address to the Pennsylvania Assembly in February 1775, published in Franklin (1818–19, 1: 517).

Gorky, Lenin confessed, “I don’t want to listen to it because it makes me want to stroke people’s heads, and I have to smash those heads to bring the revolution to them.” Donnersmarck adds: “I suddenly had this image in my mind of a person sitting in a depressing room with earphones on his head and listening into what he supposes is the enemy of the state and the enemy of his ideas, and what he is really hearing is beautiful music that touches him” (Riding 2007).

However, the optimism expressed here is qualified by the fact that at the film’s end, the two protagonists, Dreyman and Wiesler, fail to come into personal contact, even though the Wall has come down, even though the Stasi has been dissolved and the files are now a matter of public record. Nonetheless, the distance maintained between the two figures can also be regarded as the constitutive gap that is prerequisite for care. After the mechanism of State Security has been broken apart, the bonds of humanity are once again reinforced by the *cura* that joins us by keeping us separate. In Germany, the controversy sparked by this film essentially turned on the complaint that a Stasi officer was not depicted with sufficient cruelty. This presumed failure arguably denied today’s audience of a particular pleasure, namely to compare our present society with the recent past and thereby conclude that we are not as bad as people back then. In contrast, Donnersmarck appears to lodge a serious warning: we better hold on to our humanity, lest it disappears entirely into the warm bath of complacency. Conspiracies against the population no less than individuals’ conspiracies against them will never accomplish a life that is carefree – which of course saves it from never becoming careless.

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