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Communist Moral Corruption and the Redemptive Power of Art in *The Lives of Others*

CARL ERIC SCOTT

Abstract: Widespread moral corruption, particularly of the sort fostered by their internal security agencies, was a key feature of communist regimes. *The Lives of Others* provides a dramatic portrayal of this phenomenon as it occurred in East Germany. The film can appear, given its central story of the moral redemption of a Stasi officer through his becoming intrigued by the lives of artists, to be an overly idealistic or audience-pleasing testament to the humanizing power of art. But the film also reveals the possible moral corruption of the artists. This essay provides a typology of the sorts of moral corruption exemplified by the situations of different characters in the film and shows that the main artist is actually saved from his impending corruption by the Stasi officer's actions. This *reciprocal rescue* is the key feature of the film's plot; it teaches that while art can undermine and resist totalitarian corruption, it is also susceptible to its snares—especially when it apolitically relies upon its own resources.

Keywords: communism, *The Lives of Others*, film, art, corruption

INTRODUCTION TO THE FILM

The Lives of Others, written and directed by Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, is a masterpiece of filmmaking that shows how pervasively the German Democratic Republic, through its secret police the Stasi, spied upon its own citizens. The film tells the story of the partial moral redemption of a dedicated Stasi captain, Gerd Wiesler, through his unexpected encounter of artistic beauty in the lives of two artists he

has been assigned to monitor, the playwright Georg Dreyman and his lover, the actress Christa-Maria Sieland. Through his audio surveillance of Dreyman's apartment, Wiesler becomes intrigued by the friendship, love, and artistry he finds therein. He eventually tries to save these artists from the surveillance operation he is in charge of managing, and he does so even after Dreyman really does engage in anti-regime activity.

Why does Wiesler thus risk his life and turn against the East German regime? In the film's pivotal scene, he is deeply affected when Dreyman plays a beautiful piano composition upon learning of the suicide of his friend and artistic collaborator, the director Albert Jerska. Donnersmarck has indicated¹ that this scene was the germ of the entire film, in that he had imagined it when meditating upon Vladimir Lenin's explanation of why he deliberately avoided listening to music, and especially his favorite Beethoven piano sonata, the "Appassionata," on the grounds that it would make him too soft for his revolutionary duties. This quote suggested the idea of exploring what would happen if a man dedicated to Lenin's ideology were forced by circumstances to truly listen to a powerful piece of music and, more generally, to truly encounter art and the artistic way of life. Could the encounter with art find a way to break through the ideological hardening? Donnersmarck obviously believes that, in certain unusual circumstances, it *might* have been able to do so.

It would appear, given only this synopsis and these observations, that the film is basically a testament to the redemptive power of art. However, the plot does not merely concern Wiesler's transformation but also the possible moral corruption of the artists he is spying upon. While this theme of moral corruption is most vividly portrayed in the character of Christa-Maria, this essay particularly explores how the film considers the theme in Dreyman. I argue that Wiesler

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and Dreyman come to enact a *reciprocal rescue* of one another from the communist moral corruption peculiar to their particular stations.

COMMUNIST MORAL CORRUPTION

No serious investigation of communism can neglect considering what Alain Besançon, the author of the book-length essay comparing Nazism and Communism, calls communism's "moral destruction." He says the following about how this destruction developed in the Soviet Union:

At first, a significant portion of the population welcomes the teaching of the lie in good faith. It enters into the new morality, taking along its old moral heritage. . . . Hating the enemies of socialism, they denounce them and approve of having them robbed and killed. . . . Inadvertently, they take part in the crime. Along the way, ignorance, misinformation, and faulty reasoning numb their faculties and they lose their intellectual and moral bearings. . . . life . . . became grimmer, more dismal. Fear was everywhere and people had to fight to survive. The moral degradation that had been subconscious up that point now crept into consciousness. The socialist people, who had committed evil believing they were doing good, now knew what they were doing. They denounced, stole, and degraded themselves; they became evil and cowardly and they were ashamed (31–32).

In comparing Nazism with Communism, Besançon concludes that the latter brought about a "more widespread and deeper moral destruction," even if the former brought crime to a greater "level of intensity." What is this moral destruction?

. . . I do not mean the breakdown of mores in the sense of the age-old grumbling of the elderly as they examine the mores of youth. . . . communism and Nazism set out to change something more fundamental than mores—that is, the very rule of morality, of our sense of good and evil. And in this, they committed acts unknown in prior human experience (36).²

Among these acts would be the training up of a population in which nearly one out of seven persons acted as official informants against their neighbors, friends, and families, such as occurred in East Germany.³ An image that conveys the vast number of persons caught up in such moral destruction is provided by the film, in its footage of the seemingly endless stacks of the Stasi case files. All the despair, fear, and twisted compromise conveyed by the one particular work of fiction that is *The Lives of Others* must, the film visually insists, be multiplied by all those real files it shows accumulated in the former Stasi headquarters. Only such an imaginative multiplication can begin to convey what Besançon is saying.

This essay considers how communist moral destruction or corruption is presented within the poetic world that is the *Lives of Others* by examining how the three main characters, Gerd Wiesler, Christa-Maria Sieland, and Georg Dreyman, are immersed in or threatened with it and how they might be rescued from it.

The film also portrays the rather advanced moral corruption of the German equivalents of the *apparatchiki*, the higher-ups such as Grubitz and Hempf who do not really believe in the communist ideology but use it to secure priv-

ileged positions. Dreyman appears for much of his life to have hoped that the core of socialism is its humanity. Wiesler affirms this same hope in his own manner, that is, insofar as it can be expressed in Marxist phraseology.⁴ In contrast, the moral corruption of the *apparatchiki* consists in concluding that the core lesson of the communist system is that "people don't change," as Minister Hempf puts it, but rather are reducible to a fairly limited number of urges, motives, and sociopsychological types. Those who control the organizations that allow one to more scientifically calculate such reduction and act upon it are better able to manipulate people. "Change" does not occur from the inside through persons connecting with one another and their common humanity but is implemented from the outside by those controlling the surveillance system, those enabled to play upon the basic elements of the "person." Men such as Hempf secretly conclude that Lenin was wrong about the ultimate end obtainable but correct about the means used to secure power. The film, however, does not dwell upon this far-gone corruption of the *apparatchiki*, and so this essay will say little more about it.

WIESLER'S PARTIAL REDEMPTION FROM COMMUNISM'S MORAL DEGRADATION

Until Wiesler begins to change, he is a willing agent of an evil regime. He fits a widespread judgment of the Stasi voiced in one scene by a child: he is one of "the bad men who take people off to prison." We see that in interrogation he will employ physical cruelty (sleep deprivation) and will persecute a subject's relatives innocent of any official crime. With a quiet intensity that bears witness to his conviction, Wiesler trains students in these and other Stasi arts and exhorts them to remember they will be employing these against "the enemies of socialism." All in all, he is morally corrupt due to his ideology.

Unlike Lenin, he did not come to this ideology as an adult but grew up under it as the official order and morality. This is not to say that as a young man deciding to join the Stasi, he did not have to especially dedicate himself to defending that ideology. In the "Bluecaps" chapter of *The Gulag Archipelago*, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn recalls how when he and his classmates were encouraged to join the Russian equivalent of the Stasi, something in them balked despite their acceptance of communist doctrine:

It would be hard to identify the exact source of that intuition, not founded on rational argument, which prompted our refusal to enter the NKVD schools. It certainly didn't derive from the lectures on historical materialism we listened to. It was clear from them that the struggle against the internal enemy was a crucial battlefield, and to share in it was an honorable task. . . . It was not our minds that resisted but something inside our breasts.⁵

Philosopher and student of Eastern Bloc dissidence Chantal Delsol has called this something "scruples," which in an ideological regime are "doubts about the rightness of an action" that by the ideology's lights must merely be irrational.⁶ When it becomes plain to Wiesler that the surveillance of Dreyman has been ordered for the sake of removing the Minister of Culture's romantic rival, he recalls to Grubitz the oath they took

to become the party's "shield and sword," thereby suggesting that this mission is not worthy of that charge. We thus see that Wiesler's young trust in the ideals of Marxism was not left at the typical level but became precisely articulated according to its supposedly scientific precepts, and positively sworn to. The Stasi oath was a promise to accept all the necessarily scruple-deaf methods logically justified by those precepts. And like a monastic, the unmarried and unattached Wiesler seems to have denied himself a normal human life just as he seems to have suppressed normal human feelings.

In the earlier portions of the film, Wiesler has the *cleaned conscience* of the true-believing Leninist. For him, a moral reality exists. As he begins to see a moral integrity in the lives of the artists directly posed against the corruption of the socialist ideal he is also witnessing, he becomes prepared to reject the Marxist–Leninist articulation of the moral life. The film's heart shows us that Wiesler's moral regeneration would not be possible, however, were it simply a matter of his having to admit the *apparatchiki* corruption of the socialist ideal. Rather, what is crucial is his coming to care for the lives of the artists Dreyman and Sieland. This care to some extent begins with erotic motives; his professional suspicion of Dreyman seems initially motivated by an attraction to Christa-Maria. But his jealousy becomes overshadowed by his appreciation of the value of their artistic lives, so that eventually, what comes to particularly entangle him with them is his desire to protect their love for one another. In a series of scenes following the early stages of his surveillance, we are shown his newly aroused interest in eros, evidenced by his haplessly yearning employment of a prostitute, as well as his newly aroused interest in art, reflected in his gazing upon the gifts in Dreyman's apartment and in his pilfering the book of Brecht poetry. The pivotal scene, of course, is the one in which he is powerfully moved by the sonata he hears Georg playing. By that point, he knows enough to know what a tragedy Jerska's suicide is for Georg, and that the G.D.R.'s censorship is implicated in it. He can thus feel the personal import of the art. And unlike Lenin, Wiesler is encountering something he never really has encountered before, something that he has never deliberately steeled himself against. Georg plays a rather stormy composition entitled "Sonata for a Good Man," and after playing it, he shares the Lenin quote and asks aloud whether anyone who has "heard this music, I mean really heard it, could be bad man." Wiesler, evidenced by his shedding a tear, really has heard it. His moral regeneration begins at this scene, as it is immediately followed by his first merciful relaxing of his Stasi code, when he decides to avoid pursuing the incriminating information about some parents in his building that their child innocently reveals to him.

What would have happened had Wiesler not been assigned to spy on Dreyman? He would have remained a Stasi captain, interrogator, and teacher. By the time the G.D.R. fell in 1989, he perhaps would have learned of more *apparatchiki* abuses of power, but he would have remained dedicated to the ideology. As a former Stasi officer, in 1990 he would have suffered a dramatic demotion of career, a degree of public shunning, and perhaps some measures of official punishment, and he would not have been prepared to understand why this was justified.

Similarly, it is necessary to note that Wiesler's moral redemption can only be partial. The fact that he saved Dreyman and tried to save Sieland cannot alter what his entire career had consisted of up to that point. It is true that in his fake reports about Dreyman's writing of a play about Lenin, he writes that "Lenin, though facing increasing pressure, continues with his revolutionary plans," which reveals some level of awareness that it is *he* who is preparing a little "revolution." These "plans" involve working to rescue Dreyman and Sieland, but because they are "revolutionary," the wording likely conveys Wiesler's determination to change his own ways. But here we must ask: where would he have been had his plans succeeded? It is only due to the vengeful action of Minister Hempf that Christa-Maria gets interrogated. If Wiesler's maneuvers had worked, and so had left Georg and Christa-Maria in their place, he would have remained in place as well, a place that would *require* him to continue doing Stasi deeds. Could he have then resigned? But doing so would arouse fierce suspicion from his superiors. Wiesler would not have had any easy way to disentangle himself from the regime's ongoing moral destruction. In fact, even the easier way of disentanglement the plot provides him, with his prison-like demotion to the letter-opening basement, is not totally disentangled. He continues to help the Stasi pry into the lives of others. He does not refuse to do *any* work for them. To survive, he must remain engaged in some morally degrading compromise, as most subjects of this regime were forced to at some level. And this does not even begin to delve into the question of how he deals with the guilt he must now feel. The film ends with him as a pitiable figure, now delivering mail in the free but depressingly graffiti-covered East Berlin in his machine-like manner, apparently alone and stunted by his long Stasi training, but, as we get a glimmer of in the final and incredibly moving scene, having a life open to art and literature, and perhaps also to love and friendship. In the very last shot, something like a smile, something like contentment, is seen on his face. Here is a man who, damaged as he may be, now has his *own* life to live.

THE MORAL CORRUPTION OF CHRISTA-MARIA SIELAND

Christa-Maria is killed when she steps in front of a speeding truck after fleeing Georg's apartment. Although the film makes us uncertain about whether she spontaneously decides to commit suicide or is killed by accident while in a suicidal state of mind, for our purposes it is best to regard her death as a suicide. For in this way, we can see that she succumbs to the very malady Georg had protested against in his *Spiegel* article, that the regime kills off hope and drives its subjects to kill themselves. In her case, however, it is not a lack of hope that kills, but a presence of guilt. She flees from the apartment when, as she thinks, Georg's incriminating typewriter is about to be found by the Stasi due to her treacherous location of it in interrogation. She had expected to be able to feign innocence at this moment, but she proves unable to withstand a furious look from Georg. Wiesler has removed the evidence, but Georg and Christa-Maria do not know this. She flees out into the street and is killed by the truck. Her dying words are, "I can never put right what I've done wrong." Donnersmarck

says that in a sense her soul had already died when earlier that day, in interrogation, she had revealed where the type-writer could be found. There is a level of moral corruption that brings about living death.

The interrogator who convinced her to betray Dreyman was Wiesler, who knew he was being observed by a now-suspicious Grubitz. The film leaves it tantalizingly unclear whether he meant to signal to her that she should not betray Dreyman, by his reprising the “selling oneself for art” theme he had discussed with her in the bar scene, or whether he was doing his utmost to get her to reveal the spot, having calculated that only in this way could he buy the time to remove the evidence and thus at least gain Dreyman’s safety. In any case, the terms of her betrayal as she understood them were that she would get to remain on the stage. She thus proves willing to live out her life of acclaim on the stage, in exchange for Georg’s ruin. This is why the resurgent flash of her conscience that led to her suicide/accident may have spared her from an even worse fate—that of total moral corruption.

If suicide or living death are two of the morally degraded possibilities open to Christa-Maria, there were two other possibilities, both having to do with “being in bed with” the regime, that she was deflected from earlier in the film. First, had Wiesler not intervened by manipulating the door-buzzer, Dreyman might not have ever learned about her sexual liaisons with Minister Hempf. She likely would have chosen to keep them a secret, as she tries to do with her drug habit. We have no reason to think Georg would have learned of them anytime soon. Second, had Wiesler not convinced Christa-Maria in the bar scene to cease seeing Hempf, it appears that she was prepared to resign herself to deeply debasing, if not destroying, her love with Georg by continuing to service Hempf on the side with Georg’s full knowledge.

There is perhaps no moral degradation so tangible as sexual degradation; the film displays the horrifying-enough preliminaries of Hempf’s copulation with Christa-Maria and afterwards we see that she immediately seeks a shower. But the degradation physically manifested in voluntary subservient sex is evoked in a key line by Christa-Maria as the best symbol for what is occurring on a much wider scale: artists such as Georg Dreyman and herself “get in bed with them.” She gets no denial from Dreyman that the metaphor applies to him. Christa-Maria and he, and many other artists in the film, cooperate with the regime’s control over their careers and refrain from presenting anything critical of it. The penalty for not cooperating is plain enough: no sanctioned opportunity to develop or share one’s art. If the film points out that certain artistic activities, such as writing, are less dependent upon these opportunities than are directing and acting, the basic dependence of all of them remains. After seven years on the blacklist, Jerska decides he cannot go on living without these opportunities, and Christa-Maria decides immediately upon her arrest by the Stasi that not only can she not live without them, but that she is willing to sign up as an informant or to grant sexual favors to Grubitz to keep them. Not only is being an artist integral to the very personality of Jerska, Sieland, and Dreyman, but ironically enough, that artistic life provides the very sanctuary needed to escape from the regime’s

crude and cynical atmosphere. The artist thus depends upon the regime to allow her to rise above it.

Earlier, in the bar scene, Wiesler could, for a time, reverse her moral corruption by appealing to the link between her personal integrity and her artistic greatness. Speaking in the name of her audience and echoing Dreyman, he says she is a “great artist” and reasons that since she “already has art,” she need not sell herself for it. But this line of reasoning cannot convincingly separate her art from her having an audience, as we see in the later interrogation scenes. To Grubitz’s question, “What do actors do when they can no longer act?” Christa-Maria assumes the answer is too terrible to contemplate.

GEORG DREYMAN’S CREED AND SITUATION PRIOR TO WRITING THE *SPIEGEL* ARTICLE

When Hempf speaks with Dreyman in 1991, he says that, unlike the new united Germany, the G.D.R. gave one something “to believe in” and something “to rebel against.” Had he said this to Wiesler, Wiesler could perhaps relate to a longing for “something to believe in.” Had he said this to Dreyman’s dissident friend Hauser, Hauser could perhaps relate to a longing for “something to rebel against.” But in saying it to Dreyman, both parts of the statement hit their mark. Dreyman was both a believer in and a rebel against the socialist regime. His belief in it is reflected by his plays, his public stance, and in his own self-understanding. His political rebellion against the G.D.R. only comes to fruition when he writes the *Spiegel* article, but it was grounded in two ongoing rebellions of his: a humanistic understanding of socialism opposed to the G.D.R.’s way of implementing Marxism, and a related yet potentially apolitical emphasis upon the humanizing virtues of art.

Before Dreyman wrote the article, his published work supported the regime—Grubitz’s statement about his loyalty indicate that his plays have not included any criticism of the regime evident to observers such as Grubitz. The film also suggests that Dreyman really regards himself as a socialist playwright, a role particularly resonant in East Germany given the famous example of Bertolt Brecht. Hauser and Christa-Maria speak of Dreyman’s “idealism” and his “faith,” and Hempf characterizes his plays as conveying a “love of mankind” and a belief that “people can change.” How might this humanistic faith be connected with his socialism? Or, what do we know of the “socialist” aspect of his art? The action of the one Dreyman play we do see snippets of, *Faces of Love*, does not itself provide evidence of a socialist message, although the main characters are workers. If we consider the example of Brecht and his collaborators,⁷ particularly in some of their later plays, such as *The Good Person of Szechwan* and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, we can see that while classic humanistic questions are presented, they become connected to the impact of a particular socioeconomic system, so that most characters are presented as standing for various “types” that make up such a system. The socioeconomic system is very determinative: it is the poverty-causing capitalism of Szechwan and the hardened noble classes of the Caucasian kingdoms that primarily hinder people from doing good or finding justice.⁸ Perhaps Dreyman’s plays are

like these ones, albeit more optimistic about the ability of humans to overcome their circumstances. We don't know, but they must contain some material friendly to socialist ideas, given his reputation. We can see that *Faces of Love* ends with celebratory dancing and earlier shows a villain being defeated, but begins with Christa-Maria's character "Marta" having a vision of the imminent death of another character's loved one. Thus, the play teaches that people can change and the good can win, but also that some people are doomed to their fate. "Marta" says she sees "Arthur" fall to his death, "crushed by the great wheel," with the wheel evoking a traditional symbol of fate but also a Marxist symbol for fated history.⁹ The darker side of Dreyman's work and character shows up here; indeed, it seems that in writing this play, he drew on hazy premonitions of disaster looming over his own life.

In sum, Dreyman's work is identifiably socialist (even if it may contain cloaked criticisms of the regime), seems likely to be characterized by a Brecht-like acknowledgment of human tragedy, and yet ultimately conveys a hopeful message. This message, I argue, would be in harmony with a conviction that true socialism, which for Dreyman is a reformist socialism open to personal freedom, is possible. This message also likely relies a great deal on the potentially bridge-building method of imaginatively "putting yourself in the other's place," since on two separate occasions Dreyman uses variants of this phrase, first to defend Jerska to Hempf, and second to defend the Stasi's ban of Hauser's travel to Christa-Maria. He also prefers to assume the best about others: when Hauser asserts (correctly, as it turns out) that the director Dreyman is currently working with is an informant, Dreyman responds that he does not "know" that he is.

Let us consider more closely Dreyman's faith in the possibility of what can be broadly called "reform communism,"¹⁰ or as it was called in the Prague Spring of 1968, "socialism with a human face." Since "people can change," perhaps *human society* can also change and really achieve socialism. As for the Leninist regimes established in the name of socialism, which lamentably developed in such authoritarian ways, it is incorrect to see them as fundamentally tyrannical, so that they would collapse if they granted a real measure of political liberty; rather, what is most fundamental about them is their goal of socialism. If they attempt to moderately reform, we have no reason to think (and we certainly *cannot know*) they will become regimes with market economies and wherein Marxist socialism will be an electoral loser. To assume this would be to assume that the enactment of Marxism absolutely depends on oppression. Such an assumption is heretical by the standards of Marxism, and far worse, it suggests the impossibility of any desirable form of socialism. We are obligated, then, to give reform communism a chance.

Something like this, I hold, is the political creed of Dreyman. While we will see that certain aspects of his stance are "apolitical," I argue that he does have a political view. He does not think the G.D.R. is an adequate attempt at socialism. By 1984, he has read dissident literature such as the copy of Solzhenitsyn's *The First Circle* we see on his desk, he has heard the critiques of the regime that persons such as Hauser and Wallner can make of it, and like them, he "tremendously

admires" Jerska for a "statement" he made seven years earlier that got him blacklisted. He obviously wants a G.D.R. with much greater artistic freedom; he is probably aware that granting this would logically require it to also grant greater freedom of political speech. The suicide article represents a decisive turn, in which he basically says that *we cannot go on living like this*, but he probably knew for some time about the suicide problem. He knows that addressing such a problem demands searching criticism of the *entire* G.D.R. way of life. Such criticism would be impossible, unless the G.D.R. promoted what Gorbachev eventually did: *glasnost* ("publicity"). For these reasons, Dreyman's political view, half-baked as it may be, is best described as that of "reform communism."

Why does he support the regime in his plays and public persona? And why does he at times object to dissidents such as Hauser pushing the authorities too far? Regarding such questions, his appeal to Hempf as a "man of honor" to understand why Jerska cannot "remove his name from that statement" is quite revealing. It reveals how Dreyman thinks the G.D.R. elite must be approached. If the only realistic political hope is to get them to adopt reform communism, this goal can be harmed by insulting them—one must instead understand the position they are in, and the honorific need he assumes they have to stand by what they have said. *Arrogant insult* and *going too far too quickly* can bring about a reaction that only makes things worse.

It is necessary to see, however, that the political vision Dreyman clings to is a mistaken one. The bottom line, which Donnersmarck may or may not accept, is that the Czechoslovakian reformers and Gorbachev were both wrong to think that a communist system could be reformed and yet remain communist by means of offering *some* political freedoms. Had the Prague Spring reforms gone forward, all indications suggest the communist party would have been ousted from power, and the example of the resultant regime would have gravely threatened the authority of all communist states, just as occurred when Gorbachev allowed Poland and Hungary to liberalize in 1989. Circa 1984, the truth about the European communist regimes is that they would fall were they not shored up by the party's political monopoly, by the prohibition of market activity, by the closing of borders, by the wide censorship, by the constant activity of the security organs, and by the fear of Soviet military intervention. Dreyman, as it was with many noble dissidents, does not understand this. Wiesler does: the instant the Wall falls, he knows he no longer need obey his Stasi masters. Erich Honecker understood it, going so far as to ban circulation of Soviet pro-*glasnost* publications. Gorbachev, thank God, did not.

At the shot of Gorbachev in the newspaper, Donnersmarck remarks that "people *can* change." I submit that Dreyman hoped his humanistic message of change might influence up-and-coming party figures *potentially like Gorbachev*; and for Donnersmarck, he was *right* to never abandon this hope. That particular hope, one part of Dreyman's broader ambitions for his art, was not impossible. But reform communism *itself* was impossible; it was a recipe for communism's self-destruction.¹¹ Thus, the reformist artist might do his part to pull a ruler or an up-and-comer into greater openness

toward art and reform, but perhaps he would be able to do so only by himself errantly believing in the viability of reform communism.

Like the tucked-away farm home of Varykino in Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago*, where in the first deep winters of communism an artist might for a time live apart from political concerns, occupied with his poems, his family, and his lover, Dreyman's apartment and his circle of artistic friends serve as a shelter in the still pretty chilly and seemingly permanent communist society of the G.D.R. The healing powers of his refuge are undeniable, as the transformation of Wiesler shows. And because it is less obviously threatened by the regime than is Zhivago's hideaway, it provides a sense of stability. Indeed, were it not for the attraction of Minister Hempf to Christa-Maria, one can imagine that Dreyman's life there could continue in its tolerably happy mode, loving Christa-Maria, writing plays, seeing them performed, holding parties, exchanging beautiful gifts, reading poetry, and perhaps having, as Pasternak wrote of the family circle at Varykino, "endless discussions about art." True, this life would be buffeted by unwelcome news about artists such as Jerska not being able to manage, as well as by accusations from those such as Hauser. For those moments, one could turn to dark compositions such as "Sonata for a Good Man," thereby supplementing the cheery stride piano music Dreyman plays in the extended (i.e., cut) version of the party scene. At times, art would bring about dancing, and at others, art would help heal wounds. Was it not so that "every work of art, including tragedy, witnesses to the joy of existence?"¹² One must not let the regime rob one of the sense that living life is itself good; otherwise, one might "wind up like Jerska." Art would let one maintain this sense, and what is more, it would continually remind one of the need to try to be a "good person." In so many ways, it would serve as a refuge from and rebellion against the G.D.R. way of life. One could "champion life itself" as did Pasternak's Zhivago,¹³ and one could enter the dissident's "quiet moral transformation [that] involved living life as if the oppressive cope of Marxist–Leninism did not exist, or was moribund."¹⁴ In isolation, this quotation might make the dissident stance seem too easily apolitical. For our purposes, however, it brings Dreyman's stance into sharper relief. He wants to live his private life as if the regime did not exist, aided by art, but while also depending upon the regime for many of the accoutrements of this private life and for his very opportunities to try to influence that regime in his public life. That is, he does *not* engage in the enigmatic opposition implicit in publicly acting, most especially in one's art, as if Marxist–Leninism is irrelevant. In a sense, he wants to live like playwright Václav Havel, whose dissidence was obvious, but whose dramatic work became confined to *samizdat* publication, *and* to live like playwright Bertolt Brecht, who was granted a state-funded theater and company in exchange for his support of the regime.

In addition, while the *Lives of Others* ultimately tends to confirm Solzhenitsyn's belief in the concordance of truth, goodness, and beauty,¹⁵ it shows the difficulties in applying this creed. It shows how one can come to rely too much upon beauty, and how that reliance might be used to corrupt one. Moreover, it implies, perhaps contrary to

Solzhenitsyn's stance, that beauty might not line up with truth in the final analysis. For example, the film suggests that artistic beauty pervades (1) Brecht's communism-supporting work, (2) Dreyman's evidently loyal but perhaps subtly pro-reformist humanistic plays, and (3) Dreyman's politically devastating work of literary journalism. All are beautiful, but only the last really conveys the truth. There are other clues. Consider the two gifts besides the "Sonata" opened after the party. One is mistaken by Dreyman as a "backscratcher," but Christa-Maria tells him it really is a "salad fork." "Still," he says, "it's beautiful." An artwork's beauty seems to operate free from its function or intention, and furthermore, it survives the misinterpretation of intention. The other gift is a beautiful pen, which he implies will help him in writing his next play. But its beauty cannot help him in this. Morally charged actions must occur to break his writer's block, namely, Christa-Maria's abandonment of Hempf and Hauser's kindness to Dreyman at the funeral. It may be good to surround one's self with beautiful objects, but it cannot always suffice. And indeed, Dreyman's surrounding himself with artistic beauty seems to have become blinding. Wiesler says he needs to see some "bitter truths," and upon saying this, he uses the door-buzzer to get him to witness Christa-Maria with Hempf, an action that draws Dreyman *outside* of his art-filled apartment.

Christa-Maria and Georg seem to compound art's power with their love for one another, which obviously involves the love of the artistic qualities of each. And their love is potentially stronger than art itself. After Christa-Maria decides to spurn Hempf, she tells Dreyman she "will never leave," and shortly before this, she tells Wiesler that Georg loves her "above all else." That would include art. Indeed, Dreyman had just told her, that though he was losing his care for his writing and for other people, "now all I fear is losing you." It seems possible that through their love, they could survive losing all else. Alas, Christa-Maria betrays this hope. As Donnersmarck says, she has been deeply wounded by the regime, and also suffers from an uncertainty about her personal identity and artistic worth that actors are particularly susceptible to; we must also say that her betrayal reveals that she perhaps loves "being herself" in the beauty and lucidity of art more than she loves Dreyman and being with him. Artistic beauty can be posed against the love of persons, the burdens of ordinary life, and the sacrifices of goodness; it can become its own "truth."

We must, of course, keep in mind that Dreyman's art can potentially influence his society. Again, if he does not experience success in this in any political manner, such success is not impossible, nor is this his art's only way to have an impact on society. His plays can convey to audiences something of the morally regenerating refuge they, too, might find in art; indeed, in the theater they can together enjoy this private regeneration publicly. A dramatic performance in East Germany, at which such mysterious and precious connections might occur, thus retains something of the classical aura of a potentially sacred and regime-altering event. Dreyman accordingly feels a great responsibility for his part in such events. In sum, his art nourishes his private life but also grants him (and burdens him with) an important public role.

DREYMAN'S PATH INTO MORAL CORRUPTION

Wiesler saves Dreyman from punishment by the Stasi for the *Spiegel* article. But also, just as Dreyman saves Wiesler from continuing in the morally corrupt Stasi life, Wiesler saves Dreyman from continuing down a path that slowly but surely is morally corrupting him. In addition, saving him from being caught by the Stasi saves him from another type of moral corruption, the enervating sort in store for any “type-four” artist convicted of political crimes. This essay, however, only examines the first scenario of Dreyman’s possible moral corruption.

Hempf’s intrusion into Dreyman’s life is necessary for Donnersmarck to illustrate that it is not simply the ideologically determined security needs of the G.D.R. that oppress, but the sheer power of its corrupt rulers. Wherever real beauty is created, and especially where this involves displaying the beauty of body and personality, tyrannically empowered rulers such as Hempf, of whom there are many lesser versions, will predictably use their power to seize beauty and satisfy their lusts. They might even use their power for merely vindictive whims—sheer jealousy of Dreyman’s apparent happiness or hatred of his “arrogance” could bring about actions against him. Thus, the intrusion of the Hempf character is central to the world of the *Lives of Others*, and it is pointless to consider Dreyman’s situation apart from it.

But the additional intrusion of Wiesler is another matter. A Stasi guardian angel secretly protecting a person is *not* a normal part of a realistic East German world. Thus, this plot device pushes us to ask how Dreyman would have developed without Wiesler’s actions. As we saw in considering Christa-Maria’s corruption, two of these are particularly key: first, his use of the door-buzzer trick to get Dreyman to see that Christa-Maria is being dropped off by Hempf, and second, his convincing Christa-Maria to stick with Dreyman and abandon Hempf. Again, without the first action, Dreyman probably would not have learned of Christa-Maria’s seeing Hempf for a very long time. And without the second, he would have been faced with the unpleasant choice of either going along with it or breaking off with Christa-Maria. Even more important, since it is Christa-Maria’s refusal to continue as Hempf’s lover that Dreyman says gives him “the strength to do something,” he would not have written the *Spiegel* article that serves as his political, and really spiritual, break with the regime.

Hauser is right to say to Dreyman that “unless you do something, you’re not human!” Certain political situations demand actions of the persons capable of them. Dreyman’s position in the G.D.R. has become, by 1984, if not earlier, morally untenable. Because there are virtually no signs of reform on the horizon, what justification for his continued support of the G.D.R. can he have? Indeed, Dreyman tells Christa-Maria in the conversation about “being in bed with them” that he “so much want[s] to change,” even if this statement also indicates he cannot. This felt need for drastic change coexists with a sort of contentment with his setup. Georg enjoys being “strong” the way Christa-Maria needs him to be—his artistic activity allows him to avoid the Jerska-like brooding that is this strength’s opposite. He enjoys he

and Christa-Maria being a model couple for the artistic community, which can admiringly watch them dance or enjoy their party. Similarly, it is morally important to him to be forgivingly “idealistic,” although Hauser sees this idealism as making him like a “bigwig.” In sum, while Jerska puts things too starkly when he speculates that he owed his own once-warm personality entirely to his artistic success, which he says was only made possible by the “grace of the bigwigs,” without question this applies to some degree to Dreyman. As with Christa-Maria, the danger is he might feel that he can only “be himself” within the setup provided by the regime.

If he had continued on his path of partly wanting to change but never acting on it, by the 1989 revolution, he might have been without close friends and far more closely associated with the now openly hated G.D.R. His reputation as the last significant playwright who had supported the regime would be poor, and it would not be redeemed by any previous acts of covert dissidence such as the suicide article. Moreover, the quality and truthfulness of his art would have diminished—Jerska’s death made him unable to write—and were he to simply force himself to overcome that, to essentially *take* Jerska’s death without the response of the suicide article, he likely would have harmed the spiritual wellsprings of his art. In sum, without these two interventions of Wiesler, the likelihood of years of enervated and compromised decline for Dreyman seems quite high. And at worst, it seems such a Dreyman might wind up believing what Jerska did, that his life-affirming and generous personality was all a function of social privilege. The darkest conclusions about his own life derivable from a post-utopian but still determinist reading of Marx and Brecht might come to dominate his self-understanding. In any case, the key fact is that Dreyman would have remained “in bed” with the regime to the end.

A TYPOLOGY OF COMMUNIST MORAL CORRUPTION

The types of moral corruption by communism we have found presented by the *Lives of Others* turn out to be basically four or five, but the first is not focused upon much by the film, and the fifth we have not had adequate space to discuss here. First, there is what I have dubbed the *apparatchiki* moral corruption. Second, there is communism’s *ideological* moral corruption, exemplified by Wiesler. It is the success of this Leninist corruption that is the necessary condition of all the others. Third, there is the moral corruption in the *traditional sense* of a good person being seduced or cajoled into doing bad acts that she also regards as bad, for the sake of her own gain or security, exemplified by Christa-Maria. Obviously, this corruption occurs in all times and everywhere, but communist societies have the unique trait of establishing security services that are driven, by a peculiar dynamic of ideocratic logic, to systematically cultivate it in the widest scope possible.

Fourth, there is the sort of moral corruption that Dreyman takes some steps down the path of, but ultimately rejects. What should it be called? It might be called the corruption of the reform communist, or of the humanist artist. But there is no reason to think that Christa-Maria is less representative of art than he is, or that she is somehow opposed to his “love

of humanity.” Rather, the difference is that her commitment to being a good person, while still integral to who she is, has its weak points, whereas his commitment is “strong.” He is a person who cannot be enticed into the acts she is. This difference between them is due to a whole host of reasons but seems to most especially depend upon what she calls his “faith,” which we have seen is a faith in mankind, socialism, and the humanizing powers of art. Why isn’t such a principled type by his very nature a threat to the regime? The answer is found in what Besançon calls the communist “falsification of the good.”¹⁶ Dreyman was brought up under an order that linked the pursuit of goodness with the socialist goal. He strongly identified with that goal. And once he had begun to more fully see the evils of the regime, the question of how to undo those evils without rejecting socialism could only yield the answer of a gradualist reform-from-within; at least, it could only yield this answer if he were to maintain his idealism. More importantly, because his idealism was actually fairly vague in political terms and given more manifest expression in the world of art, he would naturally be drawn into a life centered on *expressing* such idealism. If push came to shove, the regime’s rulers would know better than to try to pressure Dreyman into committing deeds in which he would directly harm others or sell himself for gain. But they knew they could reasonably expect that his high hopes for the theater’s humanistic impact would tend to keep him from speaking out against the regime and, indeed, could keep him appearing to still be its full supporter. In essence, the regime held the ongoing cultivation and expression of his moral excellence hostage, requiring in exchange that he continually lend the G.D.R. the artistic aura of this high-mindedness. We are thus led to a surprising formulation: this moral corruption is, with the significant slant given it by the desire to convey moral truth via art, the corruption of the *inadequately political moralist!*

If this corruption is in some senses as old as the world, being the sort of thing we might peg, say, the Harry Truman of the 1920s and 1930s with, *vis-à-vis* his squeaky-clean image being sponsored by the rotten Prendergast machine (although this would be a gross moral equivalence), the communist version *directly* and *intimately* tempts *every* idealistic moralist with it, even those trying to evade politics. In a free society, a person may be at least honorably ignorant about political affairs; in a communist one, everyone, the idealists especially, are pressured into making dishonorable political commitments.

Fifth, although we do not analyze it here, there is another way to morally corrupt stoutly principled idealists, and that is to attack their morale, so as to deprive them of all hope. This seems to be what the G.D.R. has done to Jerska, which we may want to lump with the other possible path of Dreyman’s corruption, the “type-four” treatment that snuffs out the desire to make art.

CONCLUSION

Christa-Maria knows it when she enters the key acts of her moral corruption. Dreyman’s slide into corruption, by contrast, happens without his full awareness. He needs to

be prodded by others’ actions, Jerska’s, Christa-Maria’s, Hauser’s, and most especially Wiesler’s, to get him to resist it. And as has been shown, it is Wiesler’s two actions here that are the really decisive ones in the plot. Moreover, it is Wiesler alone whose actions keep Georg from being subjected to the type-four treatment. Why has Donnersmarck set things up in this manner?

My conclusion is that while Donnersmarck is absolutely serious about the power of art to overcome communist oppression and its corruption, he wanted to balance this primary theme of his film with the cautionary theme of the ultimate insufficiency and corruptibility of purely artistic resources. The major insufficiency of art concerns politics. Art’s very humanistic potency, to both inspire the highest idealisms and to provide healing refuge, attracts persons like Dreyman. In a communist society especially, it can thus enable certain forms of denial and escapism. Donnersmarck, and Solzhenitsyn, stand with Dreyman when he insists that people can change, especially through encountering the power of great and truthful art. But they are not naïve about politics and human failings in the many ways he is. In a particularly shocking instance, Dreyman *looks surprised* when Hauser tells him that he can’t publish the suicide article under his own name! More understandably, and yet nonetheless tellingly, Christa-Maria’s possible weakness and Hempf’s possible ferocity simply do not figure into his thinking. These and similar facts point to a real lack in Dreyman, and to a real point of weakness found in many artists.

For the key parallel Donnersmarck’s film is pointing to, which I call the *reciprocal rescue* from communist moral corruption, is this: as Dreyman is unknowingly saving Wiesler by his art, Wiesler is secretly saving him by his psychological and political cunning. It is a cunning that is systematic and reductive in its calculation of human motives but also able to swiftly move with the interrogator’s actor-like instincts. As importantly, it is a cunning that has inside knowledge about the political regime and an intuitive grasp of its basic realities. It really is, in its stunted regime-specific way, a form of political prudence. Through a variety of moves and deceptions, including his cowing of Udo, Wiesler shields the *Spiegel* article from surveillance, thereby rescuing Dreyman from the type-four treatment. His most impressive feat, of course, is removing the typewriter, but we should be as impressed by his placing the red fingerprint clue of this removal into his final Stasi report, since this indicates his own calculation that the regime would likely not last, contrary to what most Western political scientists would have guessed in 1985.¹⁷

Dreyman is a very admirable character and is the one most like Donnersmarck himself. The film highlights his strengths and blames him less for his various failings and weaknesses than it does the regime. If tragedy inheres in his “trying to be good” in writing the *Spiegel* article, which is both an act necessary to halt his moral corruption, and plot-wise, one that dooms Christa-Maria to hers, this is the G.D.R.’s fault, not his. Nonetheless, the reciprocal nature of the rescue of Wiesler and Dreyman from communism’s moral corruption points to an unavoidable conclusion: Dreyman would have been a better man, a better dissident, and perhaps even a better artist, if he had had more of Wiesler’s cunning in him.

Humanistic art and political acumen need one another. The person best able to do what is good in a quite corrupt society, and probably also in a more typical one of lesser corruptions, is the one taught the fundamental importance of weighing and attending to truth, goodness, and beauty, but also taught to acquire knowledge of the regime and of typical human failings and to employ cunning (and often necessarily reductive) calculation whenever necessary to act defensively or offensively against the regime. And this person must also apply all this knowledge to considering his own place in that society and what it reveals about his own motives. It is a very tall order, and even if obtained, it does not guarantee political success nor the avoidance of tragedies.

But it is essentially a quest for moral and political truth to guide one's life, and in undertaking it, the artist, or any person, can take solace in the words of the great and, at one time, greatly damaged man Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, whose life really exemplified just what these words of his promised: *Lies can prevail against much in this world, but never against art.*¹⁸ True art will be truthful. It will be truthful about the political lies, even the most powerful ones, and even the ones politics-shunning artists are most drawn to. A wise political thinker is not necessarily very artful; but in certain circumstances the artist may well need to sit at his feet or read his treatise to produce true art. True art will be truthful even about the lie that art can stand on its own, or that one finds truth wherever one finds beauty. For beauty divorced from truth may live for a long time, and call itself art, but Solzhenitsyn does not say that lies cannot prevail against beauty. Nor does Donnersmarck. Rather, they are agreed that it is *true art* over which lies cannot prevail. *The Lives of Others*, through the story it tells and its own hard-earned excellence, demonstrates how daunting the task of true art can be, but also how rewarding and absolutely necessary it is.

NOTES

1. Unless otherwise indicated, references to Donnersmarck's statements refer to the director's commentary available on the English-language DVD of the film.

2. Alain Besançon, *A Century of Horrors: Communism, Nazism, and the Uniqueness of the Shoah* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2007), 31–6.

3. John Koehler, *Stasi: The Untold Story of the East German Secret Police* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999), 9.

4. Wiesler notably resists sitting in the section of the Stasi lunchroom reserved for "bosses" on the principle that "socialism has to start somewhere."

5. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago: 1918–1956* (authorized abridgment, New York: HarperCollins, 2002), 74.

6. Chantal Delsol, *The Unlearned Lessons of the Twentieth Century: An Essay on Late Modernity* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2006), 54. On "ideocracy," a term essentially equivalent with "ideological totalitarian regime," see Daniel J. Mahoney, *Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn: The Ascent from Ideology* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001).

7. John Fuegi's landmark of Brecht scholarship, *Brecht and Company: Sex, Politics, and the Making of the Modern Drama* (New York: Grove Press, 1994), shows that large portions of many of the plays we attribute to "Brecht" were written by his unacknowledged, usually female, collaborators (and lovers).

8. A less Marxism-bound reading of *Caucasian Chalk Circle*, one attuned to communism's own crimes and insufficiencies, may be possible. In any case, the allusions the film makes to *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan* (*mensch* can be translated as "person" and is represented in the play by a female character) are several and central: it is evoked by the title of the piano sonata. Christa-Maria tells Wiesler he is a "good man," and the song used in the montage sequence sings (in a fatalistic tone) of the necessity to "try to be good." The key connection between the film and the play is their shared question of whether humans can be good in a corrupt society. While it would take another essay to explore, my hypothesis is that Donnersmarck alludes to the play to suggest that the path he treads in *Lives of Others* is between the Scylla of the too-humanist/optimistic stance of Dreyman and the Charybdis of the too-determinist/cynical stance of Brecht.

9. Marx refers to the "wheel of history" in *The Communist Manifesto*, Signet Classic edition, 62.

10. My understanding of the term comes from Martin Malia, *The Soviet Tragedy: A History of Socialism in Russia, 1917–1991* (New York: Free Press, 1994), chaps. 9 and 11.

11. For the full demonstration of this and the above argument, see Malia, 390–5 esp., and 405–91.

12. Boris Pasternak, *Doctor Zhivago*, trans. Harari and Hayward (New York: Everyman's Library, 1991), 479.

13. Pasternak, from the introduction by John Bayley, xiii.

14. Michael Burleigh, *Sacred Causes: The Clash of Religion and Politics, From the Great War to the War on Terror* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 424–5.

15. From his "Nobel Lecture": "... works which have drawn on the truth and which have presented it to us in a concentrated and vibrant form seize us, attract us to themselves powerfully ... So perhaps the old trinity of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty is not simply the decorous and antiquated formula it seemed to us at the time of our self-confident materialistic youth. If the tops of these three trees do converge, as thinkers used to claim, and if the all too obvious shoots of Truth and Goodness have been crushed, cut down, or not permitted to grow, then perhaps the whimsical, unpredictable, and ever surprising shoots of Beauty will force their way through and soar up to *that very spot*, thereby fulfilling the task of all three." Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Solzhenitsyn Reader*, eds. Ericson and Mahoney (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2006), 515.

16. Besançon, 29.

17. He thought that there was a decent chance that Dreyman would someday read his report, something only possible if the regime fell. Otherwise, he would not have taken the (small but high-stakes) risk that his fingerprint clue might be noticed and understood by someone in the Stasi reviewing old files.

18. Solzhenitsyn, 2006, "Nobel Lecture," 526.