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# Post-Totalitarianism in *The Lives of Others*

FLAGG TAYLOR

**Abstract:** This article argues that *The Lives of Others* contains a particularly powerful portrait of what the Czech dissident–philosopher Václav Havel called “post-totalitarianism.” I will explore Havel’s understanding of this concept and the film’s evocation of its key features. In Havel’s view, these regimes preserve themselves through the principle of “social auto-totality.” They make every person, every citizen, an accomplice in their own oppression. Even more troubling for Havel is that these regimes do not continue to exist because of the evil will and historical misunderstandings of their originators. He suggests these horrors “can happen and did happen only because there is obviously in modern humanity a certain tendency toward the creation, or at least the toleration, of such a system.” Donnersmarck’s brilliant film explores how it is that people are capable of living within a lie. This leads to a consideration of an important but heretofore unexplored question: What is the meaning of the movement of a totalitarian regime to a post-totalitarian regime? Was what seemed for many in the West to be a sign of Communism’s ability to moderate itself actually the emblem of its true evil?

**Keywords:** totalitarianism, post-totalitarianism, Václav Havel, communism

In this essay, I will argue that Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck’s *The Lives of Others* provides viewers with a striking and deep portrait of a “post-totalitarian” regime. Its depiction of totalitarian tyranny succeeds in particular at revealing the nature and function of ideology and the manner in which one might escape its snares. Its success in this depic-

tion is important for our broader reflection on the nature of totalitarian tyranny.

The concept of totalitarianism has come under criticism for many reasons, and there remains much debate about the regimes that might fall into this category. Hannah Arendt’s depiction in her classic work *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and Carl Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski’s model applied the concept to Stalin’s Soviet Union and to Hitler’s Germany. Many critics of the term seized primarily on these two portraits and made two noteworthy arguments. First, they argued that totalitarian theorists focused too much on the state and its various instruments and thus also too much on repression. Second, they suggested that the concept was too static—that it could not account for the change that seemed to be occurring, for example, in the Soviet Union after Stalin’s death.

Václav Havel’s portrait of what he calls “post-totalitarianism” is not susceptible to either of these criticisms. Havel articulates the striking way in which ideology draws everyone into its snares, enabling all citizens to become agents in their own oppression. Havel argues that the simple dichotomies of state and society and rulers and ruled do not fit the reality of totalitarian tyranny. These regimes practiced varied means of seducing the masses and integrating them into approved structures. As Peter Grieder puts it, “Totalitarian polities deployed ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ means in their relentless quest for panoptic supervision.”<sup>1</sup> Thus a proper conception of totalitarianism appreciates that terror and violence may wax and wane at various times. “Post-totalitarian regimes did away with the worst aspects of repression but at the same time maintained most mechanisms of control. Although less bloody than under Stalinism, the presence of security services—such as the Stasi in the German Democratic Republic (GDR)—sometimes became more pervasive.”<sup>2</sup> Havel agrees with Solzhenitsyn that the “Lie”—the enforced participation in the daily ideological distortions of the past and present—is more essential to

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totalitarian tyranny and more soul-crushing than the terror and violence often perpetrated against innocents.

This conception is also then able to account for the evolution of many Communist regimes in the latter half of the twentieth century. We are not stuck with an understanding that seems only to fit the Soviet Union under Stalin or Germany under Hitler. While terror and violence certainly declined in the 1970s and 1980s, the ideological universe of Marxist–Leninism (or what Czeslaw Milosz called the “New Faith”) was perpetuated and hardened in the aftermath of 1968. Havel draws a striking contrast between the atmosphere in Czechoslovakia in the 1950s and that in the 1970s and 1980s. The former period was defined by fanaticism, camps, torture, executions, and suffering. In the latter period of “post,” “advanced,” or “late” totalitarianism, “revolutionary ethos and terror have been replaced by dull inertia, pretext-ridden caution, bureaucratic anonymity, and mindless, stereotypical behavior.”<sup>3</sup>

*The Lives of Others* succeeds in its portrait of this stultifying atmosphere, but I want to suggest this concept is critical for another reason. This distinction between totalitarianism simply and its advanced form is essential in order to make sense of the evolution of the main character, Captain Gerd Wiesler of the Stasi—the central figure of the film. Several critics of the film, though otherwise quite generous in their praise, argue that Wiesler’s transformation is either unconvincing or simply pure fantasy. For Timothy Garton Ash, the conversion of Captain Wiesler “seems implausibly rapid and not fully convincing.”<sup>4</sup> Ash notes that the historical advisor for the film who gives his stamp of approval for its accuracy in many areas offers no example of a Stasi officer who behaves like Wiesler and gets away with it. Even more insistent on this point is Anna Funder, who argues, “No Stasi man ever tried to save his victims, because it was impossible.” The movie must fail in its portrait of totalitarianism, according to Funder, insofar as it must provide space for its central figure to “act humanely.” For Funder, *The Lives of Others* is thus a “beautiful fiction” that overlays an “uglier truth.”<sup>5</sup> Thus a proper understanding of Wiesler’s motives and actions and their very possibility in a regime such as the GDR is directly related to our understanding of the nature of totalitarian tyranny. Does the film have something to teach us about such regimes or must it depart from reality in order to provide the dramatic action necessary to make things interesting?

### THE “POST-TOTALITARIAN” TERRAIN

Scholars have understood both Czechoslovakia and the GDR to have demonstrated the character of a post-totalitarian regime—distinguishing them from both totalitarian and authoritarian regimes.<sup>6</sup> The GDR under Honecker, in particular, has been described as “neo-Stalinist,” “late totalitarian,” or “post-totalitarian.” Mike Dennis argues Havel’s description of such a regime is applicable to the regimes across the Soviet bloc, and Juan Linz suggests Czechoslovakia and the GDR share a special kinship as examples of “frozen” post-totalitarian regimes. The mobilization of party members and the masses is routine, lacking in intensity, and not nearly as frequent as under the regime’s totalitarian phase. The regime strives to achieve the bare minimum of compliance from

the population; thus the real revolutionary, totalitarian fervor is largely absent. The leadership is lacking in charisma, and positions are restricted to those rising from within the party and its technocratic elite. The ideology is still pervasive and dominates the mind and language of the party, yet real commitment to its goals is drastically weakened. Lastly, the existence of a parallel society in which some oppositional activity takes place is fairly common.

Now, let us examine the deepest, most insightful portrait of “post-totalitarianism,” that of Havel.<sup>7</sup> In the Czechoslovakia of the 1970s, Havel worried that the surface calm pervading society might give the appearance of broad support for the regime—and thus send precisely the wrong signal both to the rulers as well as to potential allies in the West. In his first major public letter after his blacklisting in 1969, Havel took great care in describing how below this surface calm, society was plunging into an existential crisis. The crisis was defined by two fundamental causes: fear and apathy or indifference. Havel characterized the fear as a collective anxiety deriving from the recognition of a looming, pervasive presence—the secret police. This organ of the state combined with the myriad of societal collaborators exerted pressure on everyone. Nobody could escape this pressure because everyone had something to lose. Surviving in such an atmosphere of uncertainty and suspicion meant learning to externally adapt oneself to approved language and behaviors. Milosz famously called this strategy *Ketman*—giving the outward appearance of complete orthodoxy while concealing one’s true convictions. Milosz argued that *Ketman* demands a special sort of mental acuity—a special sensitivity to verbal or facial cues that might help one indicate what might be appropriate in a given situation.<sup>8</sup>

Such a society also provides many opportunities for those with the most pernicious of motives to flourish. As Ash put it, “The most independent, intelligent, and best are at the bottom; the worst, the stupidest, and most servile are at the top. The Party is little more than a union for self-advancement.”<sup>9</sup> Those willing to collaborate and inform are guaranteed material prosperity. Therefore, it makes no difference whether one truly believes the platitudes of really existing socialism; as long as one behaves as if one does, one will avoid trouble and most likely prosper. Thus does Havel argue that “the number of people who sincerely believe everything that the official propaganda says and who selflessly support the government’s authority is smaller than it has ever been. But the number of hypocrites rises steadily: up to a point, every citizen is, in fact, forced to become one.”<sup>10</sup> Or, as Milosz puts it: “If biting dogs can be divided into two main categories, noisy and brutal, or silent and slyly vicious, then the second variety would seem most privileged in the countries of the New Faith.”<sup>11</sup>

If this atmosphere gives ample space for those driven by greed and the perverse pleasures of causing others harm, the vast majority of people are moved in another direction. “Work in an office or factory is hard not only because of the amount of labor required, but even more because of the need to be on guard against omnipresent and vigilant eyes and ears. After work one goes to political meetings or special lectures, thus lengthening a day that is without a moment of relaxation or spontaneity.”<sup>12</sup> All this is no doubt quite

exhausting for everyone, and sickening for some. Perhaps not surprisingly, especially in the climate of post-totalitarianism, in which true revolutionary fervor is minimal, people will seek a life largely outside of state organs and the party. The drive to escape, however, will manifest itself as conformism and routine performance. People will be driven to give the absolute minimum, but nonetheless do what is required, so as to carve out a small space wholly for themselves.<sup>13</sup> And less and less was required as long as one behaved according to the approved code. Havel's example from his most famous and influential essay, "The Power of the Powerless," is the grocer who puts the sign in his window that reads, "Workers of the World Unite!" The grocer cares not a whit about the actual content of the slogan. He puts the sign in the window to avoid trouble—to do what the regime asks and then, hopefully, be left alone. By conforming to ideological dictates, the grocer thinks he can escape the pernicious world of politics and secure the private pleasure of family and home and indulge his appetite for material goods and interests. Havel very acutely laid bare the consumerism at the core of a post-totalitarian society. This indifference and general retreat proved quite useful to the regime. Havel concluded, "By fixing a person's whole attention on his mere consumer interests, it is hoped to render him incapable of realizing the increasing extent to which he has been spiritually, politically, and morally violated."<sup>14</sup>

The retreat into the private realm, according to Havel, fails. Because each individual is prevented from relating to a vision of the good and the true in an authentic way, there is a generally turning away from the idea of the good and the true. The lifeless and visibly false phantasm of socialism—of universal brotherhood amid plenty—is the only common or public vision permitted. Individuals then succumb to what Havel calls "existence-in-the-world." Here there is no wonder, no longing for meaning, but only a "world of functions, purposes, and functioning, a world focused on itself, enclosed within itself, barren in its superficial variety, empty in its illusory richness, ignorant, though awash in information, cold, alienated, and ultimately absurd."<sup>15</sup> A general atmosphere of dull uniformity results in a place where nothing distinctive is permitted. Empty, expressionless faces are the outward manifestation of a vague, pervasive anxiety that issues in an aura of unfriendliness. Havel argues, "Standardized life creates standardized citizens with no wills of their own. It begets undifferentiated people with undifferentiated stories. It is a mass producer of banality."<sup>16</sup>

### WIESLER IN THE POST-TOTALITARIAN WORLD

Now I want to show why all this is important for understanding the film as a whole, and Wiesler in particular. The sympathetic critics of the film, such as Ash and Funder, who argue that there was not nor could there be a Wiesler in real life focus on Wiesler's observations of Dreyman. Would a Stasi officer really come to respect or admire someone such as Dreyman?<sup>17</sup> Critics as well as defenders of the plausibility of Wiesler's transformation, by focusing on Dreyman, also seem to point to his experience of beauty through art as its sole basis. Here, the key scene is when Wiesler listens to Dreyman as he plays "Sonata for a Good Man" after Dreyman

hears that his friend Albert Jerska has committed suicide. As one critic put it, "Wiesler experiences the mysterious when he encounters beauty, and it changes him."<sup>18</sup> Donnersmarck, to be fair, has given this emphasis some plausibility. The director has said that the genesis for the film is a remark attributed to Lenin by Maxim Gorky—that were Lenin to allow himself to listen to Beethoven's "Appassionata," he doubted he could finish the Bolshevik revolution. Donnersmarck then sought to create a drama in which he could, in effect, force a Lenin-type to listen to a thing of true beauty. Now, Wiesler's experience of beauty is no doubt part of the story, and a big part at that. Yet I think this interpretation makes Wiesler's change too abrupt and simple. Donnersmarck himself has also said that he wanted the audience to see the change in Wiesler as gradual.<sup>19</sup>

In what follows, I will take a close look at Wiesler and his evolution throughout the film. Wiesler is the pivotal figure in the film, but the basis for the dramatic action lies along two axes—not just along his relation to Dreyman. In particular, I want to look at him and his relation to two sets of characters: to Lt. Colonel Anton Grubitz of the Stasi and the Minister of Culture Bruno Hempf (the axis of disgust); and to Dreyman and his girlfriend, the actress Christa-Maria Sieland (the axis of longing).

The opening scenes of the film all introduce this first axis—we see all three of the central characters who work for the state. Our introduction to Wiesler presents him in two contexts: he interrogates a subject who knows information about a neighbor's escape to the West, and he conducts a class on interrogation based on that previous success. In Wiesler, we see total commitment, self-confidence, and professionalism. His tone and bearing in both cases leave us no doubt that he thinks enemies of the state are quite real and present a threat. This is utterly serious business, and Wiesler conducts both the interrogation and class with scientific precision. He never gets angry nor shows the least bit of emotion, even when encountering resistance by his subject or students. He asks rhetorically, "You think we imprison people on a whim? If you think our humanistic system is capable of such a thing, that alone would justify your arrest." When a student in the class suggests it is inhumane to deprive someone of sleep for such a long time, Wiesler calmly puts a checkmark next to his name on a sheet.

Grubitz, who we meet at the end of this classroom scene, presents quite a contrast with Wiesler. He enters and starts applauding, "Good, very good," as if Wiesler were doing some sort of performance. As everyone exits the classroom, Grubitz not so subtly stares at a female student. He tells Wiesler that he has been offered a professorship. He recalls he and Wiesler sitting in a classroom twenty years earlier and acknowledges that Wiesler enabled him to get good grades (even though life is not about good grades). A trace of ironic knowingness, distance, and unseriousness characterizes Grubitz here, and Wiesler looks at him suspiciously and seemingly annoyed that he has to put up with him. Grubitz himself acknowledges Wiesler's attitude toward him when he asks his friend, "Why do you always think I am scheming?" Grubitz has plans to go to the theater to be seen by Minister Hempf. In short, he is an operator who knows what needs to be done to rise in the system. He has used his friend to succeed in

school and eventually attain a professorship, and he knows which superiors he must please to rise further.

The following scene at the play introduces the third part of this trio, Minister Hempf. Wiesler and Grubitz differ in their on-the-spot assessments of Dreyman. Grubitz calls him the GDR's "only non-subversive writer" who is read in the West, whereas Wiesler detects an arrogance that makes him worthy of concern. When Wiesler suggests Dreyman be monitored, Grubitz reasserts his belief in his innocence. Besides, Grubitz says, Hempf likes Dreyman, so they would be sabotaging their own careers by having him monitored. When Grubitz then wanders down from the balcony to speak with Minister Hempf, his assessment changes quickly. Hempf asks Grubitz directly what he thinks of Dreyman, and Grubitz replies that perhaps he's not as clean as he seems. Hempf laughs heartily and is glad that Grubitz didn't respond like your average Stasi chump, going on about Dreyman as the GDR's only non-subversive writer. Here we must ask why Grubitz changed his assessment in the span of a few short minutes. First, we know Grubitz has made his career partly thanks to Wiesler. So he is smart enough to know he is better off following Wiesler's instincts and not his own. But there is something else going on here too. Grubitz looks at Hempf carefully and reads him—he figures out exactly what he wants to hear. Donnersmarck has beautifully captured the mental acuity developed in a world dominated by ideology, where appearance is everything and everyone must become an actor. Although lacking in ideological commitment, general intelligence, and knowledge of human nature by comparison with Wiesler, Grubitz has a well-developed capacity to thrive in the ideological-bureaucratic world of the state.

We should also note here that Hempf is much more like Grubitz than Wiesler. After tasking Grubitz with monitoring Wiesler, Hempf reminds him that success will bring rewards and make him a powerful friend on the Central Committee. And we soon learn just why Hempf has taken an interest in Dreyman—he has his eye on Dreyman's girlfriend, Christa-Maria, and wants to get Dreyman out of the picture completely. So Donnersmarck has captured the reality that Havel and others had noted about the post-totalitarian world: "Public and influential positions are occupied, more than ever before, by notorious careerists, opportunists, charlatans, and men of dubious record."<sup>20</sup>

Donnersmarck sets all this up early in the film to put Wiesler in motion—his evolution is due in part to a growing disgust with the system and the characters who he knows have come to dominate it. I think we can even infer that his discontent must have been gnawing at him for some time. He and Grubitz are longtime friends, so Wiesler has witnessed his slow but sure ascent in the Stasi bureaucracy. A less intelligent, less committed, less serious friend has surpassed him—and even done so with his own help! The tension between Wiesler and Grubitz becomes more obvious in another early, pivotal scene when the two have lunch in a cafeteria. Wiesler sits down with his tray, and when Grubitz objects and suggests they ought to sit with the bosses at another set of tables, Wiesler replies, "Socialism must start somewhere." Thus Wiesler openly acknowledges what is obvious

to all but dare not be spoken—the vast gulf between reality and the professed goals of the system. During lunch, Grubitz tells Wiesler that the car that dropped Christa-Maria at Dreyman's apartment belongs to Minister Hempf. Since Hempf is a top official, he cannot be monitored. Grubitz openly admits the operation is in place solely to help Hempf destroy his rival, and that he and Wiesler have much to gain by assisting a member of the Central Committee. Wiesler seems totally unmoved and asks Grubitz if that is why they joined the Stasi. The scene ends with Grubitz overhearing a young Stasi officer telling a joke about Honecker and tormenting him by asking for his name and rank. He leaves the young officer unsure about whether his indiscretion will actually be catalogued. Wiesler looks on with utter disgust. The following scene confirms the steady trajectory of ugliness as we witness Hempf's rape of Christa-Maria in the back of his car.

### DISGUST, LONELINESS, AND LONGING

The axis of disgust is what drives the early part of the film. Wiesler's sincere attachment to socialism sets him apart from Grubitz and Hempf. Again, I think the allusion to Wiesler's longtime friendship with Grubitz allows us to infer that what Wiesler sees at the beginning of the film of Grubitz and Hempf cannot be a complete surprise. But these early encounters with Grubitz and his motivations and what he learns about Hempf's designs seem to push him to a new level of disaffection. Wiesler's first independent act in the film—that is, an act neither authorized nor dictated by ideology—does not flow from what he observes of Dreyman but from what he knows of Grubitz and Hempf. He knows that it is Hempf's car that drops Christa-Maria off at Dreyman's apartment. He wants Dreyman to see the ugliness that he sees—when he rings the doorbell that brings Dreyman down to the entrance to the building, he utters, "Time for some bitter truths." So it is Wiesler who is the truth teller, or the agent of reality. He forces Dreyman to look at it in all of its naked ugliness. This is far from a full-fledged political rebellion—Wiesler does not seem to have any particular consequences in mind beyond the confirmation by somebody else of this ugly reality.

But this is, in itself, an extremely important act. For it implies something that will be openly confirmed later—that Dreyman and Christa-Maria—the former especially—have each earned their place by blinding themselves to reality. They, of course, are not agents of the state, and they seem to have carved out a private place for themselves shielded from politics strictly understood. They have the trappings of a normal, decent life. As the other early scenes of the film reveal, Dreyman directs, Christa-Maria acts, they attend and throw parties, they have friends, and they are lovers. But as we also see, Dreyman's success—he is the winner of something called the Margaret Honecker award—comes at the grace of the state. This "normal" world is infected by the looming presence of the state, its agents, and its ideology. We learn Dreyman's friend, the director Albert Jerska, has been black-listed, and so Dreyman must put up with the subpar direction of a lesser talent, Schwalber. And although Dreyman's birthday party is a pleasant gathering of friends, the tension rises to the surface when Dreyman's friend Paul Hauser accuses

Schwalber of being an agent of the Stasi. Jerska cannot participate in the social life of the party. He sits alone on the couch reading Brecht.

The earlier scene in which Dreyman makes his weekly visit to Jerska's flat provides further insight into this private world. Jerska is clearly miserable because of his blacklisting. He cannot attend premieres anymore—they fill him with disgust. And what is a director who cannot direct plays? He says in his next life he will come back merely as an author—then he would not have to depend on the good graces of the state. So Jerska knows two things. He knows he cannot be who he really is. He is quite literally prevented from directing. But he also knows that even prior to his blacklisting, insofar as his art came with the approval of the state, it was not really his art, an expression of his own mind and heart. During the conversation in Jerska's flat, Dreyman tells him that Minister Hempf has given him “concrete hope” that his blacklisting will come to an end. Though Jerska says he is pleased by the prospect, his look suggests he knows this will not happen. Nor does Dreyman really believe what he is saying. So even in this private world, lies are pervasive and distort true understanding.

Dreyman, Christa-Maria, Jerska, Hauser, and the other members of this circle seem to have varying degrees of success exempting themselves from the state and its ideological distortions. But the very idea that this retreat could ever really be successful—that one could live a decent life untainted by politics—is itself a lie. And it is a lie that the regime wants its citizens to believe. It offers them a bargain that is difficult to refuse. “Avoid politics if you can; leave it to us! Just do what we tell you, don't try to have deep thoughts, and don't poke your nose into things that don't concern you! Shut up, do your work, look after yourself—and you'll be all right!”<sup>21</sup> It is a bargain that Dreyman has largely accepted. Wiesler's initial act, then, is meant to show Dreyman just how ugly his bargain really is.

Wiesler stands between two groups. Grubitz and Hempf have embraced and flourished in the system because they are moved by nothing but self-interest and appetite. Dreyman and Christa-Maria have remained relatively unharmed by it because they have accepted what the system has offered: work and relative peace in exchange for obedience. Both of these groups have made their peace with the world of appearances for their own purposes. Havel emphasizes how the post-totalitarian system makes everyone an accomplice. He writes:

Everyone... is in fact involved and enslaved, not only the greengrocers but also the prime ministers. Differing positions in the hierarchy merely establish differing degrees of involvement: the greengrocer is involved only to a minor extent, but he also has very little power. The prime minister, naturally, has greater power, but in return he is far more deeply involved. Both, however, are unfree, each merely in a somewhat different way. . . . For everyone in his own way is both a victim and a supporter of the system.<sup>22</sup>

This is brought out beautifully in the film when Dreyman tells Christa-Maria that he knows about her meetings with Minister Hempf and pleads with her not to go. You don't need him, he tells her. She replies that Dreyman needs the system less than she does, but he gets into bed with them

too. They decide what plays are produced, who acts, and who directs. Here we see what Havel calls the “longing for humanity's rightful dignity, for moral integrity” coupled with the recognition that humanity is also capable “of coming to terms with living within the lie.”<sup>23</sup>

Wiesler and Jerska can no longer abide the world of appearances. They are filled with disgust by the yawning gap between ideological pretense and reality. But they are pushed to act for an additional reason. It has long been observed that tyrannies depend for their perpetuation on isolating people from one another. Hannah Arendt has described how totalitarian regimes take this a step further. They do not stop at isolation but attack the integrity of private life as well. “Totalitarian domination. . . bases itself on loneliness, on the experience of not belonging to the world at all, which is among the most radical and desperate experiences of man.” Later in this essay, she elaborates her conception of loneliness. “What makes loneliness so unbearable is the loss of one's own self which can be realized in solitude, but confirmed in its identity only by the trusting and trustworthy company of my equals. In this situation, man loses trust in himself as the partner of his thoughts and that elementary confidence in the world which is necessary to make experiences at all. Self and world, capacity for thought and experience are lost at the same time.”<sup>24</sup>

Wiesler and Jerska each experience this loneliness. For Jerska, it encroaches upon him from the inside out. He no longer has any sense of who he is or that he might find himself by entering a common world. For Wiesler, the self is constituted wholly by his ideological commitments. So once this outside world is revealed to be hollow, he is completely at sea. Jerska's response is total despair and suicide. Wiesler's initial response is to force someone else to see what he sees. Why should he be forced to bear the burden of the false alone?

So it is this world of hypocrisy, pretense, and falsity that sets Wiesler in motion. But it is another world that sets him on a path toward more active rebellion—what I have called the axis of longing. This is the completely foreign world that he discovers as he sits in the attic of Dreyman's flat—the world of love and friendship. Both axes act as catalysts for Wiesler's transformation. Initially, he acts to prevent Dreyman from exempting himself from all the ugliness that surrounds him. But he also becomes increasingly fascinated by the beauty that is also a part of Dreyman's world. The first thing that really moves Wiesler in this positive way is the love between Dreyman and Christa-Maria. The strangeness of real human feeling for Wiesler is made perfectly plain in his attempt to mimic what he sees and hears by ordering a prostitute. His intrigue only grows as he listens in on Dreyman's birthday party. Wiesler's second independent act is when he breaks into Dreyman's flat for no other reason than to get a sense of what it might be like to feel what Dreyman feels. He touches and carefully observes his birthday gifts, wondering about the giving and receiving of gifts. He also ends up stealing a Brecht book, and we see him in his own apartment reading a poem about a lost love. Wiesler, of course, does not immediately feel these passions. The episode with the prostitute demonstrates his desire for them, desires that he does not

yet know how to satisfy. What he does feel is the *absence* of these passions. He falls in love not with Dreyman or Christa-Maria, but with their love for one another. He also loves their friendships and their dedication to and love of their respective arts.

It is the emergence of this second axis, the axis of longing, that moves Wiesler to a more active rebellion. The content of Christa-Maria's response to Dreyman also seems to move him. It is right after overhearing this conversation that he lies to his coworker, Sergeant Lye, about Christa-Maria's destination. Wiesler then stumbles upon her in a bar and attempts to buttress Dreyman's attempt to restore her faith in herself as an artist. This trajectory continues after he learns of Dreyman's plan to write an essay on suicide in the GDR for publication in the West. He decides not to alert the border guards of what he thinks is an attempt by Hauser to get into West Germany, and he continues not to include anything damning in his written reports. Wiesler also tells his coworker that Dreyman and his friends are writing a play for the GDR's fortieth anniversary (thus repeating the story that Dreyman and his friends had agreed upon).

Yet we ought not to make the mistake of seeing Wiesler's trajectory as easy and steady. This is an error of some critics who suggest no real Stasi officer could become the "good man" (transformed by beauty) who they think Donnersmarck has him become. Another important scene complicates matters and brings the axis of disgust back into play. Wiesler overhears the triumphal meeting between Dreyman, Hauser, and the *Spiegel* editor who plans on publishing Dreyman's suicide essay. Dreyman seems genuinely surprised at how easy his dissident activity is and how incompetent the state security services appear to be. All this does not sit well with Wiesler—he appears to decide to alert his superiors to Dreyman's essay and the plan for publication. He marches confidently into Grubitz's office with an envelope under his arm. However, Grubitz immediately shows Wiesler a dissertation, "Prison Conditions for Subversive Artists," that he has advised. Grubitz tells him he has given the author a "B," so as not to appear too easy. The work puts artists into five categories and suggests the appropriate manner of punishment to ensure the stifling of their artistic impulses. Dreyman is a type four, the "hysterical anthropocentrist," who hates being alone, loves talking and being around friends. With type fours, an actual trial should be avoided—temporary detention and complete isolation will provide no material for their writing. As Wiesler listens to Grubitz recount the analysis, we see him glance down at the envelope in his hand. Disgust with Grubitz has made him reconsider his decision to reveal Dreyman's dissident activities. He tells Grubitz he wants to scale back the operation to be more "flexible." From this point forward, Wiesler continues to protect Dreyman by falsifying his reports. And later we learn that Wiesler has even added details about the content of the play that Dreyman is supposedly writing for the anniversary.

## CONCLUSION

It is two axes, not one, that are behind Wiesler's transformation. Some critics who find this character movement

unrealistic focus on beauty and the axis of longing, but say nothing of the plot elements dealing with what I have termed the axis of disgust. Funder goes even further and argues that believing a Wiesler to be a real possibility is to misunderstand the "'total' nature of totalitarianism." The system created multiple and minute duties to occupy a variety of individuals in the perpetuation of "real existing socialism." Thus, Funder argues, each person could rationalize their involvement by seeing their role as quite small. Each cog in the bureaucratic statist machine could just mind its own business and shrink its gaze to its assigned task—and thus not have to face the massive evils being inflicted on much of the population at the hands of the state and its instruments. But later, Funder also claims that "most ex-Stasi are still true believers." She argues, "The terrible truth is that the Stasi provide no material for a 'basic expression of belief in humanity.' For expressions of conscience and courage, one would need to look to the resisters. It is this choice, to make the film about the change of heart of a Stasi man, that turns the film, for some, into an inappropriate—if unconscious—plea for absolution of the perpetrators."<sup>25</sup>

There is an interesting tension here between Funder's two points. Her first regarding the bureaucratized world of state-sponsored mendacity would seem to enable the system to move largely without "true believers." Her second claim that even most ex-Stasi remain devoted Communists would have required them to have taken a more global view of their role and its relation to the whole. From the perspective of most scholars and dissidents such as Havel, individuals fervently, sincerely attached to socialism were relatively rare in the 1970s and 1980s. The Grubitzes and Hempfs were the character types who flourished in the system. Somewhat paradoxically, it seems that it is Wiesler's sincere attachment to socialism that prods him to reevaluate the state and his role in it.

Yet even my suspicion here about Wiesler's belief is merely an inference—we cannot know this for certain. Yet questions about the level of one's attachment to these ideals are somewhat beside the point. And this, I think, is where Funder's real mistake lies. She wants to defend the honor of the real dissidents—those who risked their lives to resist the state. She thinks the film does them a disservice in making a Stasi officer the hero, and even further, it may lead to a kind of absolution of the evils perpetrated by the Stasi. Her defense of the dissidents is laudable, but here I find this second worry unfounded. After all, there is nothing attractive about Grubitz.

But the deeper point brings us back to Havel. Again and again in his writings, Havel emphasizes the need to not see the political landscape in terms of dissidents on the one side and the state and its accomplices on the other. This division would be to misunderstand the nature of the oppression and the possible manner of its ultimate defeat. And the nature of oppression in the post-totalitarian system is defined by ideology—and ideology leaves nobody untouched. Havel argues that one of the main functions of ideology is excusatory. Its purpose "is to provide people, both as victims and pillars of the post-totalitarian system, with the illusion that the system is in harmony with the human order and the order of

the universe.”<sup>26</sup> This is true from those people in positions of great power and influence down to Havel’s greengrocer who merely puts the sign in his window. To paraphrase Alain Besançon, the question is not who really believes in the ideology, but who is willing to conform to its demands.<sup>27</sup> “For this reason,” argues Havel, “They must live within a lie. They need not accept the lie. It is enough for them to have accepted their life within it and in it. For by this very fact, individuals confirm the system, fulfill the system, make the system, *are* the system.”<sup>28</sup>

The great genius of Donnersmarck’s film is to illustrate this distinguishing characteristic of ideological tyranny. The fundamental line of conflict is not between social groups, or between the oppressive rulers and everyone else. “In the post-totalitarian system, this line runs *de facto* through each person, for everyone in in his own way is both a victim and a supporter of the system.”<sup>29</sup> This does not mean that Havel or Donnersmarck are in any way excusing those who did exercise real power and use that power for evil ends. They both show the peculiar manner in which ideological tyranny engulfs everyone. This is more troubling than a system put in place by a cadre of greedy souls to oppress the many. Post-totalitarianism “can happen and did happen only because there is obviously in modern humanity a certain tendency toward the creation, or at least the toleration, of such a system.”<sup>30</sup> This is the perverse evil of communism—that a system that seems deeply inhuman in so many ways could have survived for so long.

#### NOTES

1. Peter Grieder, “In Defence of Totalitarianism Theory as a Tool of Historical Scholarship,” *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* (September–December 2007): 578.

2. Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 50.

3. Václav Havel, “Stories and Totalitarianism,” in *Open Letters: Selected Writings, 1965–1990* (New York: Vintage, 1992), 331.

4. Timothy Garton Ash, “The Stasi on Our Minds,” *The New York Review* (May 31, 2007).

5. Anna Funder, “Tyranny of Terror,” *The Guardian* (May 5, 2007).

6. See Corey Ross, “The GDR as Dictatorship: Totalitarian, Stalinist, Modern, Welfarist?” in *The East German Dictatorship* (London: Arnold, 2002), 24–5; Mike Dennis, *The Rise and Fall of the German Democratic Republic 1945–1990* (London: Longman, 2000), 185–8; and Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation*, 42–51.

7. In what follows, I am indebted to James Pontuso, *Václav Havel: Civic Responsibility in a Postmodern Age* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004).

8. See Czesław Miłosz, *The Captive Mind*, trans. Jane Zielonko (New York: Random House, 1990), chap. 3.

9. Ash, “Czechoslovakia Under Ice,” in *The Uses of Adversity* (New York: Random House, 1989), 63.

10. Havel, “Dear Dr. Husák,” in *Open Letters*, 56.

11. Miłosz, *The Captive Mind*, 77.

12. *Ibid.*, 76.

13. Ash noted, “I have never been in a country where politics, and indeed the whole of public life, is a matter of such supreme indifference.” See his “Czechoslovakia Under Ice,” 63.

14. Havel, “Dear Dr. Husák,” 59. The second play in Havel’s Vaněk trilogy, “Unveiling,” is a biting portrait of a couple who is perfectly emblematic of this naked consumerist retreat. See Marketa Goetz-Stankiewicz, *The Vaněk Plays: Four Authors, One Character* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1987) and Pontuso, 85–7.

15. Havel, *Letters to Olga* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), 341.

16. Havel, “Stories and Totalitarianism,” 340.

17. Funder also questions whether a Wiesler could really have kept his activities hidden from his superiors.

18. Santiago Ramos, “Why Dictators Fear Artists,” *First Things, On the Square Blog* (July 23, 2007).

19. See the interview with Donnersmarck included on the DVD.

20. Havel, “Dear Dr. Husák,” 55.

21. Havel, “Dear Dr. Husák,” 61–2.

22. Havel, “The Power of the Powerless,” in *Open Letters*, 143–4.

23. *Ibid.*, 145.

24. Hannah Arendt, “Ideology and Terror: A Novel Form of Government,” *Review of Politics* 15:3 (July 1953): 323, 325.

25. Funder, “Tyranny of Terror.”

26. Havel, “The Power of the Powerless,” 134.

27. See “Language and Power in Soviet Society (Part I): A Conversation Between Alain Besançon and George Urban,” *Encounter* (May 1987): 11.

28. Havel, “The Power of the Powerless,” 136.

29. *Ibid.*, 144.

30. *Ibid.*