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# “Truer than the Real Thing”: “Real” and “Hyperreal” Representations of the Past in *Das Leben der Anderen*

Wendy Westphal

## ABSTRACT

With his 2006 film *Das Leben der Anderen* (*The Lives of Others*), writer and director Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck asserted that he had “created a GDR that is truer than the real thing, that is realer than the actual GDR.” In this article, I show that while *Das Leben der Anderen* strives to be an authentic representation of the past through its incorporation of real props and on-site filming, it in fact shows a reality that is “hyperreal.” Despite the film’s various claims to authenticity, its plot serves as a subtext that exposes the very concepts of “truth” and “reality” as, at best, elusive ideals.

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“That’s for the next twenty years. Twenty years . . . a long time.”<sup>1</sup> In Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck’s 2006 film *Das Leben der Anderen* (*The Lives of Others*), these are Lieutenant Anton Grubnitz’s last menacing words to his friend and colleague Captain Gerd Wiesler, as Grubnitz informs Wiesler after the failure of their case that Wiesler’s career as a Stasi officer is over. Indeed, the next scene shows Wiesler banished to the building’s basement, where he spends his days steaming open countless letters. History, however, intervenes and Wiesler does not have to wait twenty years, but rather just four years and seven months until the Wall falls, an event that marks a new beginning for all Germans. It has now been more than twenty years since the Wall fell: twenty years that have transformed the 1984 “present” depicted in *Das Leben der Anderen* into a historical past. With this film, von Donnersmarck recreates the past at a time when Germany is attempting to reconcile multiple perspectives of what life in the German Democratic Republic was like. Portrayals of the merits of the GDR vie with those of the GDR as a surveillance state.<sup>2</sup> Whereas films like *Good Bye,*

*Lenin!* (2003) and *Sonnenallee* (*Sun Avenue*, 1999) evoke mostly positive images of life in East Germany, *Das Leben der Anderen* paints a darker picture of the GDR as a place lacking any real freedoms, a place where the state intrudes upon even the most personal relationships. *Das Leben der Anderen* was widely acclaimed for its craft (among many other awards, it received an Academy Award in 2007 for Best Foreign Language Film), but the portrayal of the secret police in the film has been hotly debated—perhaps the more so since the film was marketed as having “the greatest authenticity” and “never-before-seen accuracy”<sup>3</sup> and deliberately set apart from other popular, but humorous *Wende* films like *Good Bye, Lenin!* and *Sonnenallee*.<sup>4</sup> Despite von Donnersmarck’s attempts to faithfully recreate the material world of the GDR, the plot of *Das Leben der Anderen* presents the viewer with a multiplicity of perceived realities, and shows how protagonist Georg Dreyman’s memories of this period—like those of many East Germans—do not match the reality of the past, creating tension between the film’s aesthetic and the plot. Specifically, the condensed “truer than the real thing” or “hyperreal” film aesthetic, which is designed to solidify the collective image of the past, stands in contrast to the plot of the film, which makes a point of showing the multiplicity of possible perceptions of any given event. This paper illustrates that while simultaneously making strong claims to authenticity, *Das Leben der Anderen* self-consciously questions the concepts of truth, reality, and authenticity in the plot of the film, and by extension actually underscores the unreliable nature of both individual and collective memory.

In an interview, Ulrich Mühe, the East German actor who plays Stasi (*Staatsicherheit*, “State security”) officer Gerd Wiesler, predicted that the film’s reception would “most certainly focus directly on the question as to what kind of GDR-image is being suggested and constructed.”<sup>5</sup> Mühe explains that, compared to the many others he read, the script of *Das Leben der Anderen* struck him with its authenticity:

There have already been many attempts to capture and reorganize the GDR reality and also the topic of the Stasi. I read a lot of screenplays on this topic especially in the 1990s. But they always fell too short, didn’t go far enough. Included a lot of really annoying rubbish. . . . And suddenly there was a book where everything felt right, where I didn’t have to furrow my brow while I was reading and say: “Now that’s exaggerated” . . . I have a feeling for this time because I lived in it, among precisely the people that the film is about. And they were depicted very authentically and with a lot of sensitivity: in their relationship to one another, to art, to the state, to the Stasi. I felt it was important that this film be made.<sup>6</sup>

Mühe was right in predicting that the film’s reception would focus on what kind of image of the GDR it portrayed. Without a doubt, the film stands in stark contrast to

the *Ostalgie* films that preceded it. After attending the film's premiere, for example, film critic Reinhard Mohr wrote:

Coming after *Sonnenallee*, *Good Bye, Lenin!*, *NVA*, and *Der rote Kakadu* (*The Red Cockatoo*), *Das Leben der Anderen* is the first German feature film to take a thoroughly serious look (without any Trabi-nostalgia, Spreewald pickle romantics, and other folkloristic hullabaloo) at what the essence was of the German Democratic Republic that collapsed in 1989—the systematic intimidation, harassment, and suppression of its citizens in the name of “state security.”<sup>7</sup>

Others, however, are wary of the film's claim of authenticity and caution against accepting the story and the imagery at face value as truthful representations of the past. Most notably, filmmaker Andreas Dresen reports with concern in an article for *Die Welt* that the film is currently being shown to school classes with the intention of conveying a “true” picture of the GDR:

By contrast, a film like *Das Leben der Anderen* by Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck stakes a more serious claim and is now shown to school classes with the intention of painting a true picture of the conditions in East Germany. Although precisely this film has as much to do with the GDR as Hollywood with Hoyerswerda.<sup>8</sup>

Jens Gieseke also sees the danger of singling out the film as representative of “the true GDR” and its popular use as an alternative to a thorough historical examination of the topic in schools: “One after the other, classes of school children are being shuttled to the movie theaters. That makes things easier for many people: the students believe that they now know what it was like in the GDR and politicians can get back to their daily business.”<sup>9</sup> Debates surrounding the artistic representation of the past and its impact on individual and collective memories are nothing new to Germany. Indeed, the theory of French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs on collective memory, originally a tool for negotiating narratives about the Holocaust and World War II, is now key in the current debate about the portrayal of the GDR and in answering the question: What image of the GDR will be passed on to future generations? As memory scholar Aleida Assmann reminds us in *Erinnerungsräume: Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses*, our collective memory and our collective forgetting are inextricably intertwined with our conception of ourselves. Thus the memories that are now selected to represent the former state will have a lasting impact on the future perception of the East German past, as well as on the East Germans' sense of identity. In addition, Halbwachs has shown in *La mémoire collective* (*On Collective Memory*) that memories are selected and sustained not just by individuals, but also by

certain groups, and that even private memories cannot be separated from the societal influences in which the individual lives. As a result, memories of both historical and personal events can change according to the current values of the group that recollects them. In this sense, the contemporary portrayals of life in the GDR—whether fictional or autobiographical—are therefore themselves constructs.

If invention is part of this memory-forming process, then the authentication of these memories plays an equally important role, ensuring that the audience engages with the memories as if they were truthful representations of the past. To this end, documenting “evidence” is often integrated into memory texts and films. For example, the book *Zonenkinder* includes photographs and real documents to illustrate author Jana Hensel’s memories, and even an entirely fictional film like *Good Bye, Lenin!* integrates documentary news footage of Sigmund Jähn’s rocket launch and events surrounding the fall of the Wall. The latter example actually complicates the question of authenticity, since the real documentary news footage is viewed on the television of a fictional character in a fictional setting, who in turn is viewed by the real film audience. Here, reality and fiction are nested one within another, mutually lending each other a gleam of truth and a shimmer of illusion, and thus forcing the larger questions: What is real? And exactly what is the status of guarantors of truth in a fictional setting?

In *Das Leben der Anderen*, a fictional film, the character of East German playwright Georg Dreyman is placed under the surveillance of the secret police at the request of an East German politician, Bruno Hempf. Hempf has designs on Dreyman’s girlfriend, a famous East German actress, and uses his influence to coerce her into an affair with him. Dreyman, on the other hand, is said to be one of the few writers whose work is completely in line with party doctrine. Only after his friend, Albert Jerska, a (formerly) famous East German director, commits suicide as a reaction to his long-term ban from the profession does Dreyman take up his pen against the GDR. The Stasi officer in charge of his case, Captain Gerd Wiesler, is quietly critical of Hempf’s base motivation and, in an unlikely twist in the plot, undergoes a dramatic moral transformation which is largely induced by the moving piece of music, the “Sonate vom guten Menschen” (“Sonata for a Good Man”) that Dreyman plays on the piano after Jerska’s suicide. Wiesler begins falsifying reports in order to conceal Dreyman’s work on an article about suicide in East Germany, and in the end even conceals the most crucial piece of evidence, a West German typewriter, to save Dreyman from prison. Until he views his Stasi files two years after the fall of the Wall, Dreyman is unaware that his apartment had been wiretapped, that his girlfriend Christa-Maria had betrayed him to the Stasi, and that Wiesler had saved him by removing the typewriter from its hiding place. After reading his Stasi files, Dreyman writes a book about this episode of his life, dedicating the work to Gerd Wiesler “in gratitude.” Thus the plot

of the film presents the viewer with a multiplicity of lived realities and shows how, like many East Germans', Dreyman's memories of this period are at odds with the truth.

Authenticity was essential to writer/director von Donnersmarck, who spent years conducting research for the film. This effort included interviewing former Stasi agents and their victims and visiting museums and former Stasi prisons, as well as examining visual media from the GDR. In *Das Leben der Anderen* a number of techniques work together to create a strong sense of historical authenticity: filming on location at historical sites,<sup>10</sup> the use of actual Stasi equipment as film props to create an authentic mise-en-scène,<sup>11</sup> and the incorporation of both the bureaucratic language and the interrogation techniques of the East German secret police.

In the audio commentary to the German DVD, von Donnersmarck makes a point of identifying which of the props and film locations are "real," historical sites and which are not. The use of real Stasi equipment was a conscious decision, intended to heighten the film's authenticity. He explains:

wherever we could, we tried to obtain the original equipment—from the wire taps to the device . . . with which Ulrich Mühe [Wiesler] steams open letters at the end of the film. Even that is the original device with which Ulrich Mühe's letters were steamed open. It was important to me to be very authentic even in these small details. Of course we could have also just made copies of these devices, but I believe that one really does sense something. One senses that these devices are imbued with many real experiences and real suffering. And that then helps one intensify the mood of the film.<sup>12</sup>

By pointing out that the equipment used to steam open letters in the film was, in real life, also used to steam open actor Ulrich Mühe's letters when he was under Stasi surveillance, von Donnersmarck ties the fantasy world of the film to real historical and personal realities.

Von Donnersmarck also considered the authenticity of location significant, and visited GDR memorials and former Stasi buildings as part of his preproduction research. In the audio commentary of the DVD, he justifies this:

I believe that places somehow store memories—that feelings that were experienced at a certain place do not somehow disappear but rather are still there, somewhere in the stones. And I think that I sensed quite a lot at these sites.<sup>13</sup>

By using real props and filming, where possible, on site, von Donnersmarck attempts to create an authentic and believable film about the Stasi. "It was, in fact, all real," von Donnersmarck adds, "and I believe that we convey a sense of authenticity with

these little details that would otherwise have been hard to create.” From the outset, von Donnersmarck wants the spectator to completely accept the reality of the film, and for this reason even eliminates the opening credits. In the audio commentary to the North American DVD he explains that the credits would “remind you that this is just a film. And I want you to believe it is *reality*.”

Since the release of the film, however, scholars and critics have responded strongly to the publicity’s claim to authenticity. In fact, even before Andreas Dresen’s critique in *Die Welt*, the question of the authenticity of *Das Leben der Anderen* was the focus of the October 2008 volume of the *German Studies Review*. In this discussion, scholars note inaccuracies ranging from small details like how Stasi reports were signed<sup>14</sup> and the fact that sleep deprivation was no longer used in interrogations in the 1980s,<sup>15</sup> to the much more significant fact that there was no historical role model for the character of Wiesler.<sup>16</sup> Anna Funder, the author of *Stasiland*, points out that the structure of the East German secret police operations would have made it impossible for any single officer to act as independently as Wiesler does. This lack of a precedent is important, since Wiesler’s conversion makes him an essentially positive character, and this at a time when, as Anna Funder notes, “groups of ex-Stasi are becoming increasingly belligerent. They write articles and books, and conduct lawsuits against people who speak out against them.”<sup>17</sup> Hubertus Knabe, the director of the Berlin-Hohenschönhausen Memorial, a former Stasi prison, strongly objected to “making a Stasi man the hero” and denied von Donnersmarck permission to shoot on site.<sup>18</sup> He also pointed out that not a single case is known of a Stasi officer who changed sides as Wiesler does.<sup>19</sup> In his article “Der falsche Kino-Osten,” Andreas Dresen refutes the claim that the film represents a “truthful” image of the GDR and calls the film’s story a fairy tale: “The film quite effectively tells the fairy tale of the good person buried in each of us—even in the worst Stasi informant. Naturally, that type of thing goes over well, not least because it is so pleasantly soothing. The film was not made in the interest of finding the truth.”<sup>20</sup> In defense of the fabrication of a Stasi officer’s moral transformation, von Donnersmarck writes in his “Director’s Statement”: “More than anything else, *Das Leben der Anderen* is a human drama about the ability of human beings to do the right thing, no matter how far they have gone down the wrong path.”<sup>21</sup> Thus, on this level, the plot of *Das Leben der Anderen* depicts not truth, but rather a moral ideal draped with the trappings of reality.

In addition to his use of real props and settings, von Donnersmarck credits the color palette of the film with replicating the feel of the East. While studying visual media of and from the East, he noticed that the colors red and blue tended to be less prevalent than in images of the West. In the audio commentary, he explains that

in fact, there tended not to be that much really bright red or blue. We said that since memory intensifies these tendencies, we have to do the same. And that led us to this color scheme.

To replicate the intensity of memory, a strict color scheme of grays, browns, and greens was used. When the film was previewed in the East, von Donnersmarck reports that the audience told him that that is exactly what the GDR had looked like:

People said everywhere, “That’s exactly what it was like! That’s exactly what it looked like!” But in fact, that is what it looks like in one’s memory, when one attempts to replicate the memory, quasi the inner truth of the GDR. But there were blue objects in the GDR—just not in the inner truth of the GDR.

The topic of memory and how we remember is important not only in the reception of the film; the subject of memory is addressed directly both in the dialog and the plot, and reminds the viewer of the unreliability of memory. When Dreyman decides to read his Stasi files, he makes a conscious decision to “correct” his memory. In his audio commentary, von Donnersmarck ironically calls Dreyman’s trip down memory lane “the strangest nostalgia trip that one can imagine.” Yet this trip actually has nothing to do with nostalgia, which romanticizes the past. Rather, it is an attempt to collect information in order to make sense of his (only partially correct) memories. In the dialog, the topic of memory and how it can both manipulate and be manipulated frame the film. At the very beginning of the film, Gerd Wiesler threatens the prisoner he is interrogating: “We want to help your memory a bit.” And at the end, when an emotional Dreyman leaves the theater and encounters Minister Hempf, Hempf comments: “Too many memories, huh? It’s the same for me.” Contrary to Hempf’s implication that his memories of Christa-Maria are as powerful as Dreyman’s, Hempf’s comment reminds the viewer how very different the experiences of these two characters are. Hempf’s words, the first line of dialog when the film jumps to 1991, also show that one cannot encounter the future without first facing one’s past.

The act of remembering (in the sense of reconstructing the past) is presented allegorically through the staging of Dreyman’s play at the opening of the film, and the restaging of the same play in 1991. If the dialogue’s references to memory were not sufficient, von Donnersmarck shows the spectator how the portrayal of the same “events” (here the play) can change over time. The performance of Dreyman’s play in 1991 is a thoroughly postmodern interpretation of his work, and only the repetition of actress “Marta’s” lines reveal it to be the same play as in the beginning of the film, where we see Christa-Maria (in the leading role) and Georg Dreyman for the first time. In the film’s diegesis, von Donnersmarck makes several nods to the work of East German poet, playwright, and director Bertolt Brecht. Most obviously, it is a



volume of Brecht's poetry that Wiesler takes from Dreyman's room, and which aids Wiesler in his inner transformation. More significantly for the interpretation of the film itself, however, is the way in which Dreyman's play is restaged in 1991. Whereas the first staging of the play employs a socialist aesthetic (the stage set is in a factory, with the actresses wearing identical worker's clothing), the restaging is in a postmodern Brechtian style and employs Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*. The *Verfremdungseffekt* ("distancing" or "alienation") "prevents the audience from losing itself passively and completely in the character created by the actor, . . . which consequently leads the audience to be a consciously critical observer."<sup>22</sup> The 1991 restaging of Dreyman's play is clearly in this tradition: the austere stage set, the costumes, the emotionless tone of the actress's voices, the stark lighting and color scheme, and even the unnatural positioning and posing of the actresses, which has the supporting actresses speak together in the background in the manner of a "choir," are all techniques that prevent the viewer from closely identifying with the characters. The *Verfremdungseffekt* is intended to enable the spectator to view familiar things in a different light.<sup>23</sup> The fact that the restaging of Dreyman's play is featured in this style suggests to the viewer to look at the film itself from a different perspective. The message, it would seem, is that just as art can be reinterpreted, so can the past. Overwhelmed by the emotions released by the 1991 performance, Dreyman flees the theater, only to encounter one of the "ghosts" from his past, Minister Hempf, face-to-face, and as a result of their unpleasant and unexpected encounter Dreyman decides to view his Stasi files. This decision echoes the public debate that followed unification about whether or not to make the past public by opening the Stasi files. In the audio commentary, von Donnersmarck describes Dreyman as "one of these people who say 'I am not going to request my Stasi file. I want to let the past lie.' But now he cannot do that anymore." Dreyman's realization that his memories of the past are at odds with the actual events of the period prompts him to try to find out the "truth" about what "really" happened.

Classic Hollywood cinema has traditionally relied on the sense of realism it gleans from the use of film to create visual images. The "truth" of non-computer-based cinema is indeed that the eye of the camera records exactly what stands before it. As Lev Manovich explains in *The Language of New Media*, "in contrast [to animation], cinema works hard to erase any traces of its own production process."<sup>24</sup> At the same time, many films also strive to create a wider reality; Kracauer explains that

cinematic films evoke a reality more inclusive than the one they actually picture. They point beyond the physical world to the extent that the shots or combinations of shots from which they are built carry multiple meanings. Due to the continuous influx of the psychophysical correspondences thus aroused, they suggest a reality which may fittingly be called "life."<sup>25</sup>

Von Donnersmarck did not manipulate the film digitally at all, yet, as he points out, the visual reality of a world of muted colors that he and his team set before the camera is not the same world that existed in the GDR. For von Donnersmarck, the East German public's positive reaction to the film's aesthetic shows that "fiction is somehow truer than fact." In an interview, von Donnersmarck contended: "in a way we've created a GDR that is truer than the real thing, that is realer than the actual GDR."<sup>26</sup>

This world, one intended to look real but based on historically inaccurate aesthetic representations, represents a type of "hyperreality." In a film review, Evelyn Finger dubs the aesthetic "a metaphorical hyperrealism . . . a parable."<sup>27</sup> The term "hyperreality" is based on Jean Baudrillard's concept of *simulacrum*. M. W. Smith summarizes the concept thus: "The phenomenon of simulacrum is a fatal implosion of the image with the real, and . . . the resultant 'hyperreal' overcoding of the real by the processed image allows appearances to become reality."<sup>28</sup> Hyperreal depictions thus obscure the border between reality and fantasy.

In addition to its color scheme, several other aspects of the film also transcend reality. One hyperreal element is the thoroughly theatrical sequence of events that culminates in the sacrificial staging of Christa-Maria's death (and Dreyman cradling Christa-Marie in the *Pietà* pose) and in ironies such as having Minister Hempf be the person who provokes Dreyman to revisit the past. Another hyperreal element is the intensity of the characters, which reduces them to stereotypes. Bruno Hempf is the typical corrupt Communist politician (a man who is easy to despise). Grubnitz is the self-serving opportunist, Albert Jerska the politically persecuted artist, Dreyman the idealistic writer, the embodiment of integrity (a man the viewer cannot help liking), and Gerd Wiesler is "pure Stasi." Sitting in the attic at all hours of the day and listening intently to every word exchanged, Wiesler is the personification of the Stasi.<sup>29</sup> Friendless and without family, Wiesler, Grubnitz, and Hempf are portrayed as having no lives, no interests outside of the Dreyman case. Author Timothy Garton Ash's response to the film was that "this is all too highly colored, romantic, even melodramatic; in reality, it was all much grayer, more tawdry and banal."<sup>30</sup> Similarly, in his article for *Die Zeit*, Dresen criticizes the West's black-and-white representation of the East as a country "in which there were traitors or resistance fighters. And little in between."<sup>31</sup> In response to the artificiality of Wiesler's character, Dresen writes:

That is why a different Stasi man would interest me more. One with both feet on the ground, living an everyday life. One with a wife and children and nice neighbors. Who drives to his dacha on the weekend with his family in their Wartburg and has a barbecue with his friends. And one who then returns to his office on Monday at nine to spy on and denounce others. Without the order of a minister. Completely of his own accord. A Stasi man like you and me. Showing the daily routine of such

treachery would be a painful process of self-exploration. For both East and West. Where does everyday opportunism start and where moral courage? Perhaps by now there is a willingness to face a story like this, one that does not only depict the past in black and white but rather includes the many shades of gray. Because that is precisely where it gets interesting.<sup>32</sup>

But an everyday criminal would not serve von Donnersmarck's purposes. In an interview for *Cineaste*, he defends the aesthetics of the film by explaining "I don't want to present someone with two hours of Communist drabness. I wanted to present it as beautifully as I honestly could."<sup>33</sup> In the characters of the film, the most important qualities are highly condensed. Like the film's color scheme, which is consciously manipulated to simulate a collective memory, rather than the reality itself, the characters and events of the film are also distillations, created in order both to intensify the viewer's response to the story and to emulate the selectivity of memory itself, *not* to create a historically accurate correlate.

When asked what the film's message is, von Donnersmarck replied that it is "something like: people can change."<sup>34</sup> Yet in addition to the obvious issue of human morality that motivates the plot, at the heart of the film lie the larger questions of "truth" and "reality." The plot of *Das Leben der Anderen* shows a world in which each character's perceived "reality" deviates from the facts of the actual events. On the one hand, von Donnersmarck has meticulously recreated the GDR as an authentic "stage" filled with real props and settings for his film—a visual correlate to the real past. On the other, the plot of the film and its hyperreal aesthetics expose the very concepts of "truth" and "reality" as, at best, elusive ideals.

In *Good Bye, Lenin!*, the protagonist Alex's amateur films become a metaphor for the ways in which different versions of reality and memory are produced.<sup>35</sup> In *Das Leben der Anderen*, it is the world of the theater, with its carefully constructed stage, its well-rehearsed actors, memorized dialogs, and its ever-present "public" which fills a similar purpose. The theater is not merely the backdrop to the action of the film. It becomes a self-reflexive metaphor for the creation of fiction, commenting upon the similarity between staged fictions and realities. Playwrights, directors, and actors construct and enact fictions for public consumption. Dreyman is not a novelist, but a playwright, someone who literally puts words into others' mouths. Even Wiesler is drawn into the world of fictional constructs, as he falsifies his reports and outlines the plot of a nonexistent play about Lenin.

Von Donnersmarck explains in his audio commentary that it was especially important for him to show multiple layers of mutual observation between the characters of the film:

What was important to me as I was creating the screenplay, was that there is always an additional level—that while someone is being interrogated, the interrogation is simultaneously recorded and is then . . . even used again in a class lesson. That the spectator in the theater on the one hand naturally looks at the stage but that the spectators are in turn themselves watched by the Stasi . . .

These layers of mutual observation go beyond the typical spy scenes: they pervade all aspects of the film. In just one example, Minister Hempf has his driver follow Christa-Maria. The driver, in turn, watches Hempf and Christa-Maria in the rear-view mirror of the car; as they pull up in front of Dreyman's apartment, Wiesler observes all three on CC-TV, and in turn forces Dreyman to also witness their affair, by ringing the doorbell. The Stasi, however, are not just the observers, they are also part of the chain of observations. Frau Meineke, for example, observes them entering Dreyman's apartment through the peephole of her door, and even Wiesler is caught spying on Christa-Maria by a drunken bar patron, who finds Wiesler's gaze intrusive and demands of him: "What are you staring at?" Similarly, when Christa-Maria notices Hempf's penetrating gaze at the postproduction party, she asks "Why is he staring at us?" The gaze and the different objects of the viewer's gaze are a central motif of the film. "Eyes down!" ("Blick nach unten!"): the very first line of the film is a command, directing the prisoner's (and perhaps our?) gaze downward. A similar opening is used in *Good Bye, Lenin!*, in which the first words spoken are instructions on how to direct one's gaze: "Look over here, here in the camera!"—a command spoken to Alex and his sister by their father, but which can also be interpreted as a command to the viewer to look more closely at the camera and what it does in the film. Like *Good Bye, Lenin!*, which begins and ends with the characters gazing at the camera/viewer, *Das Leben der Anderen* ends with the gaze of the two main characters being directed straight at the audience. The first is the larger-than-life publicity poster for Dreyman's new novel, picturing Dreyman's face and direct gaze out the window of the Karl Marx Buchhandlung. The very last shot of the scene is of Wiesler looking up after he has purchased Dreyman's book. As he looks into the camera, his gaze is locked in a freeze-frame. The same technique is used in *Good Bye, Lenin!*, which ends with a freeze-frame of Alex's mother looking into the camera (and young Alex looking up at her). Carried throughout the film, the layers of mutual observation direct the spectator to consider the events from not one, but multiple perspectives. Yet another scene that illustrates the film's focus on individual perspective is the staging of Dreyman's play, in which the main character, Marta, has prophetic visions that enable her to see things that happen elsewhere. It is perhaps ironic that in the entire course of the film Marta is the only character to see the real truth, even though she does not personally witness the events she reports. Others seek the truth, but Marta is plagued by it and asks: "Why am I not spared these visions?" Through the film's

interplay with various gazes as well as through the Brechtian restaging of Dreyman's play, the viewer is repeatedly reminded of the numerous ways of both presenting and interpreting events.

In addition to the foregrounding of multiple gazes, the plot, the dialog, and the framing of the shots also work together in showing that it is the search for truth and its elusiveness that is at the center of the film. For example, even before the action begins, there is background information to set the scene. The last sentence of this information: "Its [the Stasi's] declared goal: 'To know everything'" introduces not just the Stasi's obsession with the collection of information but also the hunt for truth that is to follow. Indeed, the words "lies," "knowledge," and "truth" appear quite prominently in the film's dialog. For example, Wiesler plays to his class at the Stasi academy the audio recording of the prisoner interrogation that opens the film, explaining to the students how they can distinguish what is the truth and what is a lie: "someone telling the truth can rephrase himself at will . . . [Prisoner] 227 is lying." Minister Hempf alludes to the state's insatiable thirst for information when he claims "we see more" and that he knows there is something "foul" about Dreyman because his "gut does not lie." Wiesler exposes Christa-Maria's infidelity to Dreyman with the sentence "time for bitter truths," and in response to the journalist Paul Hauser's accusation that Dreyman's director Schwalber is a Stasi informant, Dreyman says, "no, Paul, we don't *know* it." When Christa-Maria is struck and killed by a van, Grubnitz closes the case with the (incorrect) explanation, "We must have gotten a false tip." Finally, when Dreyman meets Minister Hempf outside the theater in 1991, Hempf gloats, "We knew everything about you!" He, of course, is also mistaken, since Wiesler was providing false information for Dreyman's Stasi files. In fact, none of the characters in the film fully understands the events. "Truth" is revealed only in fragments, never as a whole. *Only* the viewer, who has an almost omniscient perspective, is given privileged access to the whole sequence of events and knows that neither the Stasi's files nor Dreyman's own experiences reflect the truth about Dreyman's life in 1984–1985.

Moreover, a thoroughly convoluted web of truth and lies both motivates the plot and shapes each character's interaction with the others. Christa-Maria attempts to conceal her infidelity and her drug use from Dreyman. Dreyman conceals the *Spiegel* article from Christa-Maria. Frau Meineke is coerced into keeping the surveillance of Dreyman's apartment a secret. Wiesler fabricates false reports and conceals the truth from Grubnitz. And even "Ute," the prostitute, does not give Wiesler her real name during their brief intimate encounter. Dreyman's understanding of this whole episode of his life is only corrected years later. Until he revisits his past by reading his Stasi files in 1991, he is completely unaware that his apartment had been wiretapped, that his girlfriend Christa-Maria had betrayed him to the Stasi, and that it was a Stasi officer (and not Christa-Maria) who had removed the typewriter from its hiding place.

While both *Good Bye, Lenin!* and *Das Leben der Anderen* are highly vested in producing authentic representations of the GDR through the use of numerous cinematic techniques, both also force the viewer to question whether it is possible to remember the past “as it was,” and moreover to question impressions of what “reality” is—present or past. In *Good Bye, Lenin!*, the reconstruction of the GDR in the Kerner apartment (a private space) serves as a self-conscious allegory for the process of memory selection and creation that is happening both within the film and in the public sphere. Just as *Good Bye, Lenin!* shows how easily memory can be manipulated, *Das Leben der Anderen* reveals that it is not just memory that is unreliable, but the individual’s judgment of reality itself. While von Donnersmarck painstakingly attempts to recreate an “authentic” or “realistic” GDR, the layers of mutual observation in the film create a world in which, as von Donnersmarck points out, “nothing is simply what it seems to be.”

“Truth” exists neither in the fastidiously maintained Stasi reports nor in Dreyman’s memory of the events, but must be pieced together as he reads between the lines of the reports, recalling what did and what did *not* happen and holding it against what he knows *not* to be true (namely, that he did not write a play in Lenin’s honor!). Furthermore, it is significant that the only real *physical* evidence of the truth of the case is not to be found in the text of the files, but in Wiesler’s red fingerprint smudged in the corner of his last (faked) Stasi report. The fingerprint tells Dreyman that it is Wiesler, not Christa-Maria, who removed the typewriter (with its telltale red ribbon) from its hiding place. By having the viewer observe Dreyman in the process of reconstructing the past as he reads his files, the film prompts the viewer to ask: how do memories, both individual and collective, match with the details of the events? In the film, there is unresolved tension between the film’s claim to authenticity and its plot, which reveals in multiple scenes how elusive the concepts of “truth” and “reality” actually are. Regarding the current debate on the portrayal of memories of the GDR, the film provokes several questions: Is collective memory, through its selectivity, always hyperreal? To what extent can a historically based fiction film that is clearly not a documentary make a claim of “authenticity,” or for that matter to what extent can collective memories stake a claim to authenticity? And finally, in this respect, do films like *Das Leben der Anderen* do a service or a disservice to the collective understanding of the East German past?

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## Notes

1. This and all subsequent translations from German are by the author.
2. To be sure, the GDR *was* a surveillance state of unsurpassed proportions. A country of just under 17 million people, East Germany employed approximately 91,000 Stasi agents in the last year of its existence (the equivalent of one Stasi agent per 166 East German citizens) and relied on

- a network of more than 170,000 regular Stasi informants, creating a ratio of one agent per 66 citizens. These figures are as of 1995. In *Stasi: The Untold Story of the East German Secret Police*, John Koehler suggests that the number of informants (*Informelle Mitarbeiter*) could be as high as 500,000, and "Former Colonel Rainer Wiegand estimated the figure as high as 2 million" (8). Koehler points out that East Germany had "more spies than any other totalitarian government in recent history" (9): the Soviet Union's KGB had 1 agent for every 5,830 citizens, and the Nazi *Gestapo* had 1 agent for every 2,000 citizens. The East German *Ministerium für Staatssicherheit*, by comparison, employed 1 full-time agent for every 166 citizens. Koehler adds: "When one adds in the estimated numbers of part-time snoops, the result is nothing short of monstrous: one informer per 6.5 citizens. It would not have been unreasonable to assume that at least one Stasi informer was present in any party of ten or twelve dinner guests" (9).
3. Thomas Lindenberger, "Stasiploitation—Why Not? The Scriptwriter's Historical Creativity in *The Lives of Others*," *German Studies Review* 31, no. 3 (October 2008): 558: "This was not least the outcome of an extremely carefully staged marketing strategy. Above all, the director and distributor advertised the film as truly 'authentic'—although some inaccurate elements in the plot were quite obvious to every expert."
  4. Lindenberger, "Stasiploitation," 559.
  5. "Es hat ja schon viele Versuche gegeben, die DDR-Realität einzufangen: Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck und Christoph Hochhäusler im Gespräch mit Ulrich Mühe," *Das Leben der Anderen: Filmbuch* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2007), 195: "Es wird sicher ganz knallhart um die Frage gehen, was für ein DDR-Bild da suggeriert und aufgebaut wird."
  6. "Gespräch mit Ulrich Mühe," 182.
  7. Reinhard Mohr, "Das Leben der Anderen: Stasi ohne Spreewaldgurke," *Spiegel Online*, March 15, 2006, <http://www.spiegel.de/kultur/kino/0,1518,406092,00.html>.
  8. Andreas Dresen, "Der falsche Kino-Osten," *Zeit Online* No. 17, April 16, 2009, <http://www.zeit.de/2009/17/Dresen>. Andreas Dresen also presented a very similar version of this text as a speech at the 2009 German Studies Association (GSA) Convention awards dinner in Washington, D.C.
  9. Jens Gieseke, "Stasi Goes to Hollywood: Donnersmarck's *The Lives of Others* und die Grenzen der Authentizität," *German Studies Review* 31, no. 3 (October 2008): 586.
  10. For example, von Donnersmarck points out in the interview on the North American DVD by Sony Pictures Classics that his was the only film team to be granted permission to shoot at the Stasi archives.
  11. Von Donnersmarck explains in the interview on the North American DVD that he wanted to avoid a "digital feel" to the film and went to some lengths to achieve this. For example, he had shop signs for the film made with the technology that was available in 1984, rather than using contemporary printing technologies, and he also insisted on recording in analog sound rather than digital.
  12. *Das Leben der Anderen* (*The Lives of Others*), directed by Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck (2006; Munich: Buena Vista Home Entertainment, 2006), DVD. All subsequent references to the film are from the DVD.
  13. Of course, he is not the first to feel the presence of the past in "authentic" places. More than 2,000 years ago, Cicero ascertained in *De finibus bonorum et malorum*: "[S]uch powers of suggestion do places possess. No wonder the scientific training of the memory is based on locality" (*tanta vis admonitionis inest in locis; ut non sine causa ex iis memoriae ducta sit disciplina*) (Cicero *De finibus bonorum et malorum* 5. 2); English trans. by H. Rackham (*On the Ends of Good and Evil* [*De finibus malorum et bonorum*], Loeb Classical Library [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1914], 393).
  14. Lindenberger, "Stasiploitation," 563. "Only the non-professional informants, the *inoffizielle Mitarbeiter*, were given code names. Professional officers signed their reports with their real name."



15. Gieseke, "Stasi Goes to Hollywood," 582: "Kontinuierliche Dauerverhöre unter Schlafentzug über viele Stunden und Tage, wie in der Eröffnungsszene, waren die Standardmethode der fünfziger und sechziger Jahre, aber in den achtziger Jahren nicht mehr üblich."
16. Lindenberger, "Stasiploitation," 560: "As far as we know from the vast evidence in Stasi files there was no Stasi full-time officer who underwent this kind of conversion."
17. Anna Funder, "Tyranny of Terror," *The Guardian*, May 5, 2007, [http://film.guardian.co.uk/features/featurepages/0,,2072629,00.html#article\\_continue](http://film.guardian.co.uk/features/featurepages/0,,2072629,00.html#article_continue).
18. Funder, "Tyranny of Terror."
19. Hubertus Knabe, "Das Problem liegt bei der PDS," Interview mit DDR-Experte Hubertus Knabe by Claus Christian Malzahn and Severin Weiland, *SpiegelOnline Politik*, September 15, 2006, <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/0,1518,437210,00.html>.
20. Dresen, "Der falsche Kino-Osten."
21. Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, "Director's Statement," *The Lives of Others* official website (Sony Pictures Classics), <http://www.sonyclassics.com/thelivesofothers/swf/index.html>.
22. Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, ed. and trans. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 91.
23. There is a certain irony in staging the second play with the *Verfremdung* techniques, since *Das Leben der Anderen* does not employ the technique otherwise, and one of the main criticisms of the film is that the spectator identifies too closely with the character of Wiesler and is not provoked to critically reconsider either the events of the film or of the past.
24. Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001), 289.
25. Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 71.
26. Anthony Enns, "The politics of *Ostalgie*: Post-Socialist Nostalgia in Recent German Film," *Screen* 48, no. 4 (Winter 2007): 490.
27. Evelyn Finger, "Die Bekehrung," *Die Zeit*, March 23, 2006, [http://www.zeit.de/2006/13/Leben\\_der\\_anderen](http://www.zeit.de/2006/13/Leben_der_anderen).
28. M. W. Smith, *Reading Simulacra: Fatal Theories for Postmodernity* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001), 2.
29. Jens Gieseke, for example, points out that the Stasi would never have set up an observation post in the attic of an apartment building, since that would have been too conspicuous. Similarly, von Donnersmarck admits in the audio commentary to the DVD that Frau Meineke, Dreyman's neighbor, would not have been allowed to stay in the building when Dreyman's apartment was being bugged. Von Donnersmarck's choice to leave Frau Meineke in the building and have the observation post in the attic are fictional elements that heighten the sense of conspiracy and fear in the story.
30. Timothy Garton Ash, "The Stasi on Our Minds," *The New York Review of Books* 54, no. 9, May 31, 2007, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/20210>.
31. Dresen, "Der falsche Kino-Osten."
32. Dresen, "Der falsche Kino-Osten."
33. Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, "Between Principle and Feeling: An Interview with Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck," interview by John Esther, *Cineaste* 32, no. 2 (March 2007), 40–42.
34. Henckel von Donnersmarck, "Between Principle and Feeling," 40.
35. Jennifer M. Kapczynski, "Negotiating Nostalgia: The GDR Past in *Berlin Is in Germany* and *Good Bye, Lenin!*," *Germanic Review* 82, no. 1 (Winter 2007), 82–83: "*Good Bye, Lenin!* explicitly thematizes the creation of historical narrative" and "In a series of self-reflexive gestures, *Good Bye, Lenin!* highlights the role that visual technologies play in the construction and preservation of personal and national history."