

“You Must Remember This”:

The Lives of Others and the Cinematic Imagination

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THE LIVES OF OTHERS WON MOST of the top European and international film prizes between 2006 and 2007, including seven Lolas and an Oscar, but it has also been heavily attacked by some critics both for its sympathetic portrait of a Stasi officer and for its misogynistic portrait of a faithless, drug-addicted actress (e.g., Porton; Foundas). The monstrous Gerd Wiesler, critics have argued, is magically transformed into “the Good Man” of Georg Dreyman’s novel after his sudden exposure to theater, poetry, and music, and the vulnerable Christa-Maria Sieland (Martina Gedeck) must be sacrificed to the film’s central love story, that between Wiesler (Ulrich Mühe) and Dreyman (Sebastian Koch). In my view, much of this negative criticism implicitly acknowledges that *Lives* is tremendously successful at authentically recreating the East Berlin of the 1980s. The film captures the bleakness of the architecture, the cuisine, and the fashion in such unnerving detail that reviews insistently demand that the film deliver documentary accuracy. I too responded to the film’s authenticity and found its recreation of the East Berlin I had visited in 1983 uncanny and unsettling. Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck took pains to film on location in the rare streets that had not been transformed after the fall of the Berlin Wall. He refined the palette of the film to

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capture the sense of color in the German Democratic Republic (GDR), so that greens stand in for blues and orange-browns replace reds (von Donnersmarck, Interview on DVD). Visually, the film strives for the quality of documentary.

But *The Lives of Others* is not a documentary. Although he researched his subject thoroughly for four years, von Donnersmarck’s understanding of character, his interest in relationships, and his belief in the transformative power of art do not come from history, but from an education in classic Western cinema. We do not fault *Casablanca* (1942) or *Rome, Open City* (1945) for being sentimental. We do not blame *The Red Shoes* (1948) or *The Third Man* (1949) for being overblown. Instead, we celebrate these films for the courage of their sentimentality and hyperbole. And von Donnersmarck’s first film is an homage to his cinematic heritage. The performance of Martina Gedeck cannot be divorced from the iconic performances of Ingrid Bergman, Alida Valli, Anna Magnani, Moira Shearer, and Julie Christie on which hers is based. And an awareness of Wiesler’s cinematic antecedents complicates any simple reading of him as a “good man.”

These antecedents have been largely overshadowed by the ideological critiques of *Lives*. Anna Funder, the author of *Stasiland*, an extraordinary book about life in the GDR, fears that *Lives* is fostering a new form of *Ostalgie*.

Groups of ex-Stasi are becoming increasingly belligerent. They write articles and books, and conduct lawsuits against people who speak out against them, including against

the German publisher of *Stasiland*. . . . The system demanded such loyalty . . . that most ex-Stasi are still true believers. A story such as Wiesler's plays into their hands as they fight for their reputation. (Funder, "Tyranny of Terror")

Funder admires *Lives*: "I think the film deserves its public and critical acclaim. It is a superb film, a thing of beauty. But it could not have taken place (and never did) under the GDR dictatorship. . . . No Stasi man ever tried to save his victims, because it was impossible. We'd know if one had, because the files are so comprehensive" ("Tyranny").

Whereas Funder argues that von Donnersmarck is taking brutal fact and turning it into "fantasy narrative," I argue exactly the opposite. Von Donnersmarck's particular achievement is using his cinematic influences—almost all of which are fantasy narratives—and transforming these into a film that many critics have misread as an attempt at documentary reality. Yet an intertextual reading that accounts for these fantasy narratives can do much to shatter this misperception. In fact, the more aware we become of these intertexts, the more we will feel ourselves being pulled into the extra-diegetic world of von Donnersmarck's cinematic influences.

One of the only specifically named intertexts in the film is the work of Bertolt Brecht. But if Brecht championed the idea of *Verfremdungseffekt* (the distancing of the actor from his part, breaking the theatrical illusion that mesmerizes the audience into a witless passivity), von Donnersmarck has been faulted for the unobtrusive camerawork and invisible editing that contribute to an illusion of reality and encouragement of our identification with Wiesler. Von Donnersmarck does not make obvious the manipulative and fictive qualities of the cinematic medium—his influences are neither Fassbinder nor Godard. I argue, however, that his film is every bit as invested in questioning the idea of the "real" as any avant-garde European filmmaker. By endlessly evoking the cinematic source material for his movie, he forces the

cinematically literate viewer to see beyond the illusion of a seamless, self-contained narrative.

An intertextual reading of *Lives* can help us recognize that von Donnersmarck's film is not a work of *Ostalgie*. In fact, its self-reflexivity is a constant reminder that the director—a sixteen-year-old when the wall fell, a West German with East German roots who often visited his family in a frightening and frightened country—experienced the GDR the way he first experienced film, as a spectator always observing from a safe distance. He came into contact with the lives of others as a tourist visiting sites of pain. The scaffolding of his film, a meditation on imaginative deprivation in the GDR, as represented by Wiesler, is his own richly layered imagination weaned on Western cinema. The film's extra-diegetic world represents the reality of von Donnersmarck's position as outsider. His sources of inspiration are not East German cinema. His notions of heroism, self-sacrifice, and virtue were instead formed by years of watching Hollywood movies. *Lives* is an extended contrast between an imagination formed in the absence of all art and an imagination formed by the most powerful cultural force of the twentieth century, Western cinema. This tension between Gerd Wiesler and von Donnersmarck must be at the foreground of any discussion of *Lives*, for the film is claiming not that exposure to art makes human beings good (its portraits of Minister Hempf, who has "really cleaned up the theater scene"; Grubitz, who heads the culture department; and Christa-Maria, who is willing to betray those she loves for the sake of art, prove quite the opposite), but that Wiesler's exposure to art, like von Donnersmarck's exposure to cinema, impels him to be an artist himself.

My defense of *Lives* against those who demand documentary accuracy of the film rests on the recognition that the film is structured around one-to-one correspondences that are not historical, but cinematic. Unlike such impressive studies of cinematic intertextuality as Mikhail Lampolski's, my article attends to the film's thematic rather than visual intertexts. (*Lives* looks distinctively different from the

black-and-white films that it predominantly evokes.) Each character in *Lives* is drawn from previous cinematic characters; nearly every scene evokes scenes from previous movies. *Lives* is especially and intensely nostalgic for a kind of movie made in the 1940s. At least five of the films that *Lives* thematically evokes—*Casablanca*; *Rome, Open City*; *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946); *The Red Shoes*; and *The Third Man*—were made during or just after World War II. Four of them focus on the war or its aftermath. The film has taken fire for insufficiently capturing the political realities of the GDR, but the ideological battle in which the film is engaged—in particular, its take on the relationship between the artist and the state—has less to do with any specific political ideology than with cinema history. Although Western cinema has moved on from this moment in time, the East Berlin of 1984 was still in many crucial ways fighting World War II. Prisoners (as in *Rome, Open City*) were still being tortured. The city itself (as in *The Third Man*) was still divided. And the choice between resisting or capitulating to a despotic power (as in *Casablanca*) was still a daily reality. To evoke the desperation of people cut off from much of the world, von Donnersmarck turns not to other films about Berlin, but looks for inspiration to the populist fables of Frank Capra and to Hollywood's most enduring piece of anti-Nazi propaganda—that is, to George Bailey trapped in Bedford Falls and to an entire cast trapped in the Moroccan desert.

The only film to which *Lives* has been repeatedly compared is Francis Ford Coppola's 1974 film *The Conversation* (White; Beier). Like Gene Hackman's Harry Caul, Wiesler is a cold, solitary surveillance expert who becomes haunted by the voices of the couple he has bugged. As Dreyman rips out the wires that have been hidden under his wallpaper for years, we may remember Harry stripping the walls and floors of his apartment, seeking the elusive bugging devices he believes are secreted there. But whatever empathy we develop while watching *The Conversation* is cruelly denied us by the end of the film. Ann and Mark—the objects of surveil-

lance—are not characters so much as elusive voices. And our sympathies for them, based on the false assumption that they are soon to be murdered, evaporate when they prove to be cunning criminals instead. Even their love affair may be a ruse to trap both the "Director" and Harry. The film is in essence a mind game—and a misogynist one at that. When Harry awakes to discover that Meredith has stolen his tapes, that she slept with him because Martin paid her to, he utters one word: "bitch." Nothing in the film suggests that she is anything but. Both she and Ann are poorly sketched, unregenerate femmes fatales. And Harry, despite his obsession with the "victims" on the tape, finally proves himself a coward. He can attempt to listen in on the murder occurring in the hotel room next door, but he does nothing to prevent it. If von Donnersmarck is using *The Conversation* at all, it is as a negative model. *Lives* is quoting insistently but less obviously from an earlier period of film, when men were capable of heroism and women of self-sacrifice.

Dismissing Coppola—"I watched *The Conversation* before making my film," he says, "but only after writing the screenplay . . . I do like *The Conversation* quite a bit, but I can't say that [Coppola] or his movie were a big influence for me on this" (qtd. in Fetters)—as well as his own countrymen Fassbinder, Herzog, Wenders, and Schlöndorff, von Donnersmarck has cited Frank Capra and his most popular film, *It's a Wonderful Life*, as strong influences instead (Bowman). In *Lives*, when Christa does not come home one night, and Dreyman's apartment is searched but no typewriter is found, his friends Hauser and Wallner assure him that Christa has betrayed him to the Stasi, but Dreyman counters that Christa knew the typewriter's hiding place and kept it a secret; therefore, she must be his "guardian angel." Von Donnersmarck is indeed remembering the cinema's most famous guardian angel, Clarence Oddbody AS2 (Angel Second Class).

We first meet Clarence (Henry Travers) in heaven as he peers through the clouds to get a good glimpse of his charge, George Bailey. We see George Bailey through his eyes as we

first see Georg Dreyman through Wiesler's binoculars as Wiesler observes him from a theater balcony. Wiesler maintains this perch above his subject from his attic hideout for much of the film. Clarence is drafted to save George when he is ready to throw himself off of a bridge; Wiesler saves Dreyman from his own suicidal move—publishing a piece about East German suicide. Clarence saves George by walking him through a Bedford Falls in which he never lived. Because of his nonexistence, his brother died young, his mother is childless, his uncle is in the lunatic asylum, and the town he kept afloat during the Depression was taken over by a despotic businessman. At the edge of despair, George is reminded by Clarence that “each man’s life touches so many other lives. When he isn’t around, he leaves an awful hole.” In heaven Clarence’s superiors have shown him George’s life; on Earth Clarence brings him back from the brink of death by showing him “the lives of others.”

Georg Dreyman’s guardian angel constructs an alternative version of his life as well, in which he is writing a play about Lenin. Wiesler’s fictionalized account of the last weeks of Christa’s life first saves Dreyman from a Stasi prison and six years later brings him back from the death-in-life he has endured since. Throughout the film, Grubitz warns Wiesler that in the interests of his career, he needs to find something damning on Dreyman. He will do himself a world of good by giving Hempf what he is seeking, but Wiesler loses his career by saving Georg.

Like George Bailey, Georg Dreyman is a man of the world who nonetheless remains an innocent. George stands up to his enemy, Potter, at several critical moments during his life, at one point calling him a “warped, frustrated old man.” But he cannot fathom the depths of Potter’s evil. When Uncle Billy loses \$8,000, George turns to Potter for help, asking him to imagine “what it means to [his] family.” Even when Potter responds by calling the police to arrest George, it is not in George’s power to imagine the truth—that Potter himself has stolen the \$8,000. Georg Dreyman knows what

Hempf is—“Someone like him doesn’t even deserve to address you,” he tells his girlfriend. But within minutes he is begging Hempf to remove his friend Jerska from the blacklist: “But put yourself in his shoes for a moment. As a man of honor.” Dreyman turns to Hempf for help when Hempf has just ordered his surveillance and inevitable arrest. Like Potter, Hempf “hates everybody that has what he can’t have.” The supposed man of honor is, of course, raping the woman he doesn’t even deserve to address. Like Potter, Hempf has an omnipresent sidekick. Potter’s lackey is mainly responsible for pushing his wheelchair, Hempf’s for driving his car, but both men are silent onlookers to unspeakable crimes. Potter and his unnamed subordinate (an old man like Potter himself, he is identified as Potter’s “bodyguard” in the closing credits) are filmed almost invariably within the same shot; Hempf and Nowack appear either within the same shot or with Nowack watching his boss through the rearview mirror. (Hempf is no hypocrite. He gleefully orders others’ sex lives monitored and just as cheerfully allows Nowack to monitor his own.) Only twice does Hempf appear without him—as Hempf sits despairingly alone in his room just before he orders Christa’s arrest and at the end of the film when he is no longer in power. *Lives* turns the profound nostalgia of *It’s a Wonderful Life* on its head. Looking back, George Bailey realizes that he had a better life than he had imagined. Reading his Stasi file, Georg Dreyman finds that his life was much worse than he suspected. His girlfriend did not protect him by hiding the typewriter; she betrayed him and his two best friends. He was helped by a complete stranger, not by the woman he loved. There is no consolation in revisiting the past; there is only compounded regret.

Like *It’s a Wonderful Life*, *Lives* is immaculately designed. Every shot, every line, every detail from George Bailey’s life is echoed in his non-life. Every detail from the first two hours of the film is revisited in the last half hour. For example, when a struggling George asks his wife why she married him, she immediately responds, “To keep from being an old maid.”

When he finds her in his non-life, she is a mousy old maid closing up the library. Capra hints at the precarious hold the town has on its sanity and calm during the bank run. Panic starts to set in, and police sirens wail, anticipating the nightmare scene in which George chases the terrified librarian through “Pottersville.” Capra constructs George’s character in each scene through a different interaction with Mr. Gower, Violet, Ernie, his mother, and Mary, so that we feel the intensity of his loss at each moment of non-recognition in the later scenes.

Von Donnersmarck constructs his film in a similar way. Each scene has a corresponding scene. Our experience of the film echoes both Dreyman’s experience of reading his Stasi file and his experience of writing his novel, for we revisit each scene in a subtly or dramatically altered form. The film opens with an interrogation scene in which a prisoner takes forty hours to break; in the parallel scene, Christa offers both her body and any information to Grubitz as the interrogation begins. In the second scene, *The Faces of Love* is performed as plays always were in the GDR, “as social realism, Gorky style”; in the parallel scene, the play is staged “as everything had to be done” in the 1990s, “like Robert Wilson” (von Donnersmarck, qtd. in Wagner). Christa’s character, Marta, has a terrible vision of a man being “crushed by the mighty wheel.” Dreyman cannot bear to sit through his play when Christa’s replacement utters the same line, which clearly brings to his mind the vision of Christa’s own death.

After the first performance, Dreyman begs Hempf to remove Jerska from the blacklist; during the second performance, Hempf admits that Dreyman was under full surveillance. In the next scene, Dreyman removes the wiring from his apartment; in the parallel scene, we watched the apartment being wired. At the beginning of Operation Lazlo, Wiesler easily and eagerly threatens Dreyman’s neighbor, but in a later scene, he has lost the will to ask a little boy in his own building for his father’s name. Jerska reads Brecht at Dreyman’s party; Wiesler steals the Brecht and reads it at home alone. Jerska gives Dreyman the gift of “Sonata

for a Good Man”; Dreyman gives Wiesler the gift of *Sonata for a Good Man*. Hempf terrorizes Christa by following her in his car and forcing her to submit to him; Dreyman follows Wiesler in a cab but chooses not to make contact. Christa showers after her sexual encounter with Hempf and again after betraying Dreyman and his friends to the Stasi. Dreyman hides in the hallway from Christa; Wiesler hides in the hallway from Dreyman. Christa and Dreyman embrace in bed; Wiesler goes home and orders a prostitute. Wiesler sits across the table from Christa in a bar; later she sits across from him at an interrogation table. Dreyman meets Hauser and Wallner in a park to discuss the suicide article; they meet there again to discuss Christa’s betrayal. In the back of Hempf’s car, he and Grubitz plot Dreyman’s demise; later they plot Christa’s end in the same place. Grubitz discusses the various possibilities of typeface with a graphologist; although he has “proven” in an earlier scene that there are only five kinds of artists, there are multiple kinds of typewriters. Through his Stasi file, Dreyman revisits various moments from the film—his birthday party and its aftermath, his work on the *Der Spiegel* piece, the ransacking of his apartment, Christa’s death. And of course, through masterful crosscutting, virtually every scene of the film is taking place simultaneously in Dreyman’s apartment and Wiesler’s attic surveillance unit.

The brilliantly symmetrical structure of *Lives* operates on several levels. We experience the film as a series of scenes that are revisited. Dreyman reconstructs his life by revisiting his own experiences through the distorting lens of Wiesler’s Stasi file. His *Sonata for a Good Man* revisits the film we have watched in the form of a novel. And finally, and most importantly for the argument I am making, von Donnersmarck revisits the multiple films that have formed his cinematic imagination. He toys with their plots; he manipulates their characters; he reshapes their lines. We experience the parallel scenes in his film as *déjà vu*; many of the hundreds of East Germans who have written to the director experience the film as *déjà vécu*, but if we are sensitive to the vocabulary of classic cinema,

we should experience von Donnersmarck's achievement as *déjà vu*, *déjà senti*, and *déjà vécu*. In another lifetime we have seen and felt and lived so much of this film before. We remember no matter how much time has gone by.

Casablanca, von Donnersmarck has confessed, is one of his favorite films, and Georg Dreyman's codename, Lazlo, is no coincidence.¹ Is von Donnersmarck using the name Lazlo, after the fearless Victor Laszlo, ironically, or is he linking the playwright to the cynical character played by Bogey? For Dreyman's very humanity is at question in the opening scenes. His friend Paul Hauser tells the politically compliant playwright that if he does not "take a stand," he is "not human."² He needs the suicide of his best friend to motivate him to action—and silent action at that. Whereas Rick convinces Ilsa to board the plane with Laszlo by reminding her that she is "part of his work, the thing that keeps him going," Dreyman refuses to let Christa in on the secret of his publishing in *Der Spiegel*. Believing he is protecting Christa by not letting her know about his writing or the location of the typewriter, he later learns to his horror that he was actually protecting himself against his lover-turned-informant.

Yet by identifying Dreyman with Laszlo, the film sets up a more startling parallel—between Wiesler and Bogey's character Rick. We first see evidence of Rick Blaine's heart when he allows the newlywed Bulgarian to win at the roulette wheel so that the man's wife will not have to prostitute herself to Claude Rains's Louis. We first see evidence of Wiesler's heart when he rings Dreyman's doorbell so that the playwright will discover Christa's rapist, Hempf. Soon Wiesler will confront Christa in the bar and convince her never to meet Hempf again. Although *Casablanca* sanitizes its vision of coerced prostitution, *Lives* pulls no punches in the brutally ugly scene between Christa and Hempf. Hempf's character is drawn from *Casablanca*'s Louis, but it is inconceivable that Hempf could exit into the footlights with Wiesler. Rick spares the Bulgarians sexual shame—"bet on number 22"—disposes of Major Strasser, and gets Ilsa and Laszlo out of Morocco. Von Donnersmarck

poignantly contrasts the ease of his heroics with Wiesler's horribly ineffective efforts to spare Dreyman and Christa sexual shame, dispossess of the film's villain, or save Christa from going to prison. Rick leaves his cynicism behind and walks off to join the fight against fascism; Wiesler attempts to resist the system and is banished to a basement and the sordid task of steaming open other people's mail.

Christa's ignobility, Dreyman's cowardice, and Wiesler's incompetence stand out in sharp relief against the larger-than-life character traits of Ilsa, Laszlo, and Rick. But the comparison paradoxically makes Christa, Dreyman, and Wiesler all the more moving. The courage, nobility, and self-sacrifice that *Casablanca* embodies are impossible abstractions in a totalitarian state that has done all in its power to eradicate memory.

Casablanca's cynical bar owner—"I stick my neck out for nobody"—is made to confront his past and begin the process of returning to his humanity when his sidekick Sam sits down at the piano and plays "As Time Goes By." Wiesler's conversion seems most profoundly instigated by Dreyman's playing "Sonata for a Good Man." As Dreyman plays, Wiesler begins to cry silently. Von Donnersmarck often cites Lenin's response to Beethoven's "Appassionata," which Dreyman paraphrases—"You know what Lenin said . . . if I keep listening to it, I won't finish the revolution"—as the origin of his film. He wanted to make a picture in which he "force[d] Lenin to listen to the 'Appassionata' . . ." (von Donnersmarck, Interview on DVD). If his picture has a "message," von Donnersmarck has said, it is that we must choose whether to be men of principle or men of feeling. To live ethically, one must learn how to balance principle and feeling (von Donnersmarck, Interview on DVD).

The scene suggests, however, that *Lives* has multiple origins, for although Wiesler is overtly conflated with Lenin, the man of principle, the scene also evokes Wiesler's counterpoint, Rick Blaine, the man of feeling. (Ilsa taunts Rick for hiding the letters of transit: "With so much at stake, all you can think of is your own feeling.") One man cannot act humanely because it

counteracts his principles; the other cannot act politically because he is overwhelmed by feeling.

Although Sam's playing sparks a memory, Dreyman's seems to have the opposite effect. *Lives* makes no suggestion that Wiesler "must remember this." The opening scenes of *Casablanca* present us with a man who has obviously been traumatized, a man who loved and lost, who believed and has now renounced his faith. But the opening scenes of *Lives* give us a man with no past, no memories, no inner life, no regrets. He is simply an automaton—heartlessly interrogating a prisoner, coldly instructing a new generation of interrogators, mechanically bugging an apartment, and in the most terrifying scene in the film, silencing a curious neighbor. All we know of Wiesler's past is that he was always the bright student off of whose papers Grubitz (his current boss) cheated. He has clearly bugged apartments before; he is clearly well practiced at destroying lives. But his encounter with Dreyman and Christa does not appear to elicit memories; it does not seem to generate regrets.

Von Donnersmarck provides no evidence that Wiesler has ever witnessed or experienced love between a man and a woman before. His trauma, unlike Rick's, does not seem personal. It does not seem specific to him, but rather representative of his entire generation. If Wiesler has another twenty years until retirement, then he must have been born at the beginning of World War II. Can his generation remember how any of "the fundamental things apply"? When Wiesler ejaculates into an enormous, overlooked prostitute, we find it easy to imagine that "moonlight and love songs" have never entered his consciousness. (Even the Brecht poem with which he is enchanted—"Remembering Marie A."—celebrates a love that is almost entirely forgotten: "And if you ask, how does that love seem now / I must admit, I really can't remember. . . . / But what her face was like, I know no longer. . . .") Although the form of von Donnersmarck's film betrays a compulsion to repeat, remember, and revisit, the Stasi themselves attempted to know everything by creating a society in which nothing was remembered.

Erich Honecker's government made it official government policy to erase memory by attempting to rewrite the history of East Germany's participation in the Holocaust:

The official East German history texts [gave] the impression that the relentless war against the Jews had not taken place at all: the war had been a class war "waged by fascists and plutocrats against the People," not a racial war directed against specific groups. . . . Capitalist Jews were as guilty of the war as Nazis, while Communist Jews deserved only as much sympathy as non-Jewish Communists. [The history books] contained no analysis of the long history of German anti-Semitism, nor was there discussion of Hitler's racial ideology or his use of the Jews as a universal scapegoat, nor was there any serious consideration of the murders committed by Einsatzgruppen or in the extermination camps of the East. The term Holocaust was not used in the GDR and the murder of Jews was referred to only as a financial crime which helped "monopoly capitalists" to win power in Germany. . . . [B]us-loads of schoolchildren and factory workers [were brought to Buchenwald] to learn about their "heritage" and their "debt" to the resistance fighters of the past. Ghastly monuments, films and photos told the largely fictitious story of the liberation of the camp by a group of Communists who had banded together and fought the Nazis, supposedly "preparing the way" for the Red Army. . . . The fact that the camp had actually been liberated by General Patton proved too embarrassing to warrant a mention. . . . East German historiography made it appear as if [the RAF bombing of their cities] had taken place in a historical vacuum, one in which only they had suffered.³ (Richie 739–40)

The erasure of memory and the rewriting of history made the lives of the Stasi easier. What better way to create a population free of responsibility, concern, and empathy for the lives of others? When Christa emerges from the bathroom seconds before her death, we catch a fleeting glimpse of a yellow star stitched to the collar of her bathrobe. It is not a Star of

David, but it is a yellow star nonetheless. For a Western viewer it is an odd and unsettling fashion statement; we must remember this. But a yellow star in East Berlin, even among the educated classes, had no resonance at all. Honecker's government had so successfully anesthetized the population that it could no longer make the simplest connections with its past.

Von Donnersmarck knows that it is not documentary reality that has spoken the most clearly and potently to the German people. A fictional film had more power to inspire memories and motivate conversations in West Germany than all the bullet-marked buildings or Jewish neighborhoods emptied of Jews. Before 1979, the Holocaust was rarely discussed in West Germany, even when the Eichmann trial in 1961 began a worldwide discussion of the Holocaust that had been repressed by survivors and silenced by Cold War considerations.

Although the Eichmann trial aroused interest amongst people in the rest of the world most Germans ignored it and continued to try to "put the past behind them." Few German universities offered courses on twentieth-century history and none taught about the Nazi period; parents refused to discuss the Second World War with their children, and it seemed that the past would remain firmly hidden away. . . . The general public were first prompted to confront the most criminal aspects of their history not by schools or universities, but by the media. Above all, it was the screening of the American mini-series *Holocaust* in January 1979. . . . which finally brought the horror of what had happened into people's living rooms. . . . it was ironic that it took a Hollywood film—and not a particularly good one—to provoke such a response. (Richie 880)

After reunification, East Germans responded to Hollywood versions of the Holocaust in similar ways. Jane Kramer recounts the moment that an East German historian left the theater after seeing *Schindler's List* "with a crowd of people who were blowing their noses and shaking their heads as if they had never heard of the Holocaust until Steven Spielberg thought to

tell them about it—and this despite the camp visits and the books and the pictures and the vast and profitable and ambiguous industry of the Shoah business" (289). *Holocaust* and *Schindler's List* may certainly be thought of as Holokitsch, but there is no denying the extraordinary power they have had to spark conversation in a country that, nearly twenty years after reunification, remains in deep denial about its horrific past. *Lives* is not Stasikitsch—it is a work of art, but one that recognizes the power of fiction, fiction that can obliterate, distort, sanitize, or heighten reality.

Growing up in a country with a sickening recent history where former soldiers refused to speak about their wartime experiences, von Donnersmarck turned to Hollywood movies for paradigms of good men. So compellingly did Hollywood once construct role models that we know Victor Laszlo and George Bailey are good men before we even meet them. But von Donnersmarck's own "good man" is a far less sympathetic figure than either of these cinematic heroes, and his film refuses to offer us a comfortable definition of a good man.

Jerska gives Dreyman the gift of "Sonata for a Good Man" shortly before hanging himself. He admits that as a director he had to practice sycophancy, that without the largesse of the "bigwigs," he could not practice his craft. In a barbed comment, he tells Dreyman that in his next life he will "simply be an author, a happy author who can write whenever he likes, like you." Jerska knows that Dreyman is able to write by giving the bigwigs what they want. He knows that Dreyman, a close personal friend of the monstrous Margot Honecker, must be a compromised figure in order to continue working in the GDR. (In Wiesler's most horrific act, he threatens to give an interrogated prisoner's children to the state. Margot Honecker institutionalized the policy whereby the children of the "politically suspect" were taken away from their parents.⁴) What then is the meaning of Jerska's gift? And what is the meaning of Christa's? She tells Wiesler that he is "a good man" because he denies that she would "sell herself for art" or that she would "hurt

someone who loves her above all else.” “So you know her well, this Christa-Maria Sieland?” she asks Wiesler. Even after eavesdropping on her every private moment, Wiesler gets her wrong; Christa is in no position to get him right.

One of the terrible truths of von Donnersmarck’s film is that we know George Bailey, Rick Blaine, and Victor Laszlo better than the people of the GDR knew their friends, their neighbors, their lovers. After the Berlin Wall fell, thousands of people opened their Stasi files to find that their spouses, lovers, and best friends had betrayed them. Among them was Ulrich Mühe, whose former wife had spied on him for years. (By some estimates, one in every 6.5 GDR citizens was an informer.⁵) Von Donnersmarck frequently relates the horrific story of Günter Ullmann, who was so convinced that the Stasi had implanted bugs in his teeth that he had all of them removed, only to discover from his Stasi file that his closest friend and confidant was the one who had revealed all of his secrets (Rupprecht). Drawing on iconic cinematic figures to fashion his own characters, von Donnersmarck seems to know them more intimately than he does the characters he has created. He remains, as the people of the GDR had to, always at a distance from those with whom he is most intimate. Thus, the director does not allow Wiesler to help us in our judgment of his “goodness.” A sonata (from the Italian “to sound”) is offered to a man who has lived the last years of his life in silence. From the moment of Christa’s death until he enters the bookstore to buy *Sonata*, we do not hear Wiesler speak a word. As Grubitz demotes him, he does not speak—von Donnersmarck allows the headline of a paper, “Gorbachev elected,” to speak for him. When the wall falls, his noisy office mate tells him so. Wiesler responds wordlessly and silently leads an office walkout. When Dreyman goes in search of his savior, he finds Wiesler silently delivering mail and chooses not to speak to him. Funder is absolutely right: the Stasi files do not tell Wiesler’s story. But neither does Wiesler himself. His silence serves as a dramatic counterpoint to the miles and miles of files that speak the GDR’s crimes and shame.

The closing lines of the film—“Nein, das ist für mich” (“No, it’s for me”)—have troubled some of the picture’s critics, but Wiesler’s silence speaks louder. After all, he is the one who has assured us, along with his students, that guilty men become quieter and calmer.

In the film’s penultimate scene, Dreyman drives slowly alongside Wiesler. He gets out of his cab. Surely, we hope, he will confront HGW XX/7. But Dreyman chooses to imagine Wiesler, not to know him. Dreyman is von Donnersmarck’s surrogate, and von Donnersmarck Dreyman’s stand-in. Dreyman’s refusal to confront Wiesler speaks to the book he will write in which his protagonist will have neither a past nor a future except as it is realized through the artist’s imagination. In this crucial non-encounter, von Donnersmarck foregrounds his own decision to imagine rather than to know his Stasi officer. The scene pays homage to the final moments of *The Third Man*. In that memorable ending, Major Calloway and Holly Martins drive past Anna, Holly jumps out of the jeep to await Anna, and after a long, long shot that Graham Greene argued should end in a kiss, Anna walks right past Holly without stopping. “Dreyman” (“Drei mann”), of course, means “three man.” As in *Lives*, the three main characters in Carol Reed’s 1949 film set in postwar Vienna are a writer (Joseph Cotten as Holly Martins), an actress (Alida Valli as Anna), and a police officer (Trevor Howard as Major Calloway).

From *The Third Man* von Donnersmarck borrows the apartment building with the inquisitive and intimidated neighbors. Mrs. Meineke in *Lives* is a more terrified, more defeated version of the wife of the murdered porter in *The Third Man*. The only one brave or foolhardy enough to identify Wiesler as a Stasi officer to his face is a little boy, his own neighbor, clutching a soccer ball; the freakishly mannish little boy who accuses Holly of murdering the porter also holds a ball.

Unlike Dreyman, Holly is not an artist but a writer of pulp fiction Westerns. He has no artistic pretensions, and when asked to address a cultural reeducation meeting on the contemporary novel, he knows nothing of James Joyce

or stream of consciousness. But when Harry Lime's friend Popescu asks him if he is "engaged in a new book," Holly replies, "Yes, it's called 'The Third Man.' . . . It's a murder story. I've just started it. It's based on fact."

A few lines later in the conversation, Popescu says, "I'd say stick to fiction. Straight fiction."

"I'm too far along with the book, Mr. Popescu."

In the British release, Carol Reed narrates the introductory voice-over in which a black marketeer appears to be telling the story of Holly Martins; in the American release, Joseph Cotten narrates the voice-over introduction, lending more support to the notion that Holly gives up writing cheap Westerns. His novellettes—*The Oklahoma Kid*, *The Lone Rider of Santa Fe*—have taken place in the open spaces and startling light of the Southwest. The good (the cowboy, the lone rider) have been easily distinguished from the bad (the sheriff). The canted angles, distorting lenses, and chiaroscuro lighting that Robert Krasker uses to film a partly ruined Vienna speak to the kind of fiction Holly will produce in his "The Third Man." His work will no longer live in the clear light of day, but in the shadows in which criminals and lame balloon men lurk. He will abandon big sky for the sewers. He will discover a different palette, the gray tones in which friendship and betrayal, loyalty and delusion, and indifference and love coexist. Holly has bought whole the legend of the American hero and reproduced it in his fiction. He subscribes to the myth of the self-sufficient cowboy but spends the film longing for his friend and his friend's lover. In *Lives*, Dreyman has clung to the myth of the happy proletariat. His factory workers in *The Faces of Love* perpetuate the state's desired fantasy of a functioning collective in a culture in which neighbors and lovers are actually drafted to spy on each other. Both writers recycle their material. *The Lone Rider* becomes *The Oklahoma Kid*. And after Christa's death and the fall of the Berlin Wall, Dreyman finds himself unable to write anything new. His Westernized production of *The Faces of Love* is divorced from its context, but its language is the same. Yet if Holly will

finally establish himself as an artist by writing about the man behind the scene, "The Third Man," Dreyman will resuscitate his career by also writing about the man behind the scene, the third man.

When Harry Lime is hit by a truck, three men carry his body across the street. Two of the men—Baron Kurtz and Popescu—are identifiable; the third is not. The third, of course, turns out to be Harry Lime himself, and the dead man is revealed to be a police informant, Josef Harbin. When Christa-Maria, the police informant, is hit by a truck, the three male leads are also present at the scene of the supposed accident: Dreyman, Grubitz, and another man who is unknown to and perhaps never even noticed by Dreyman—Wiesler. The playwright comes to terms with Christa's betrayal and his own safe passage out of the hell of Honecker's East Germany by writing a novel "based on fact" about that third man.

Of all the films with which *Lives* converses, *The Third Man* is the most ethically challenging. Its most amoral character, Harry Lime, is also its most popular. In one of his brief appearances, Harry takes Holly up in a carnival wheel and offers his former friend "20,000 pounds for every dot that stopped." "Would you really feel any pity if one of those dots stopped moving forever? . . . Would you really, old man, tell me to keep my money, or would you calculate how many dots you could afford to spare? Free of income tax, old man. Free of income tax. . . ." Harry and Holly's perspective is, of course, that of the aerial bombers who, as the ruined city illustrates in nearly every shot, eradicated thousands and thousands of moving dots without hesitation. Those same men, indifferent to the lives of others operating below them, are the "good fellows" of Carol Reed's introductory narrative now governing the survivors. Harry's crimes are unspeakable, but they may be no worse than what Calloway and the jovial, martyred Payne have done in the war. Are their sins of commission more horrible than Holly's inaction? Or is the American who sat the war out at home in any position to judge his friend or anyone else? When the carnival wheel stops,

Harry utters the film's most famous lines: "You know what the fellow said—in Italy, for thirty years under the Borgias, they had warfare, terror, murder, and bloodshed, but they produced Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, and the Renaissance. In Switzerland, they had brotherly love, they had five hundred years of democracy and peace—and what did that produce? The cuckoo clock." Von Donnersmarck's film is an extended rejoinder to such a sentiment. Germany under the Honeckers did not breed great artists but systematically destroyed its Jerskas and Sielands. Reed puts these lines in the mouth of the charismatic Harry,⁶ but von Donnersmarck reserves such sentiments for the loathsome Hempf. Hempf "understands" Dreyman's inability to write after the fall of the wall, for "[w]hat is there to write about in this new Germany? Nothing to believe in, nothing to rebel against. . . ." Lime dismisses the naïveté of Holly's writing: "Oh, Holly, you and I aren't heroes. The world doesn't make any heroes outside of your stories." Hempf deals Dreyman a similar blow: "That's what we all love about your plays. Your love for mankind, your belief that people can change. Dreyman, no matter how many times you say it in your plays, people do not change." Like Harry, Hempf flourishes in any regime—he too (as we learn from a deleted scene) has gone over to doing business with the Russians. There is nothing subtle about von Donnersmarck's rejection of Lime's perspective. In his film, heroism must be our aspiration; change must be possible.

It is Anna who claims that "a person doesn't change just because you find out more." Anna's devotion to Harry is one of the most remarkable aspects of *The Third Man*. As Holly is gradually persuaded to betray his friend, Anna becomes more steadfastly committed to her former lover. Again and again, she clings to Harry, even at the expense of her own freedom. If our expectations have been that Anna will have to fall for Holly's charms eventually, we are sadly disappointed. Anna, in the face of overwhelming temptation, refuses to trade her heart or body to either Calloway or Holly. Anna is world-weary. We can imagine how terrible

her life has been. She is neither naïve nor innocent, but she is absolutely incorruptible. Unlike Marlene Dietrich in *A Foreign Affair*, she cannot be bought. Unlike Ingrid Bergman who remains loyal to a saint, Alida Valli's Anna remains loyal to a devil. *Lives* is all the more affecting if we see how much the portrait of Christa is modeled on Anna, an actress who can buy her own freedom only by betraying the love of her life. Christa first betrays her lover, as does the drug-addicted actress (played by Maria Michi) in *Rome, Open City*, only to sacrifice herself for him as Anna does in *The Third Man*. Indifferent to her stage career, Anna tells Holly at their first meeting that now that Harry Lime is dead, she "wants to die." But Anna survives both of Harry's deaths. It is Christa-Maria, who has clung tenaciously to her life on the stage, who chooses death rather than the loss of Dreyman's love.

When Christa-Maria's feet carry her headlong into the street, her death summons to our minds Anna Magnani's in *Rome, Open City* (1945). In Rossellini's film, one of the seminal works of neorealism and one of the great anti-fascist films of all time, Magnani runs after her arrested fiancé and is gunned down by Nazis on a Roman street. But the scene also evokes Moira Shearer's death at the end of Powell and Pressburger's *The Red Shoes* (1948), one of the most exquisite films ever made about the obsession of the artist. Unable to stop her dancing feet, Vicky Page, battling her competing desires for her composer husband, Julian, and for her career as a ballerina, plunges off a balcony to her death. Christa's death conflates memorable images of political resistance and artistic passion as von Donnersmarck's film demonstrates so eloquently how inextricably these two are linked. Unlike the interrogated prisoners in *Lives*, Rossellini's tortured resistance fighters die without revealing the names of their comrades. Denied access to the heroics of Hollywood filmmaking (and notably to the most famous performance by Ingrid Bergman, the woman he would later marry), Rossellini nonetheless creates larger-than-life protagonists à la Michael Curtiz. Rossellini

and his crew began writing the screenplay secretly between 1943 and 1944 and, risking their lives, began shooting on scavenged film stock shortly before liberation. Although *Rome, Open City* features only one artist, it speaks as eloquently as *The Red Shoes* or *Lives* to the desperate pull of art.

Yet if Christa prefers death or ignominy to a life without art, Wiesler is only beginning to imagine what a life informed by art might mean for him. The image of Wiesler stealing a book and privately reading it aloud to himself at home is taken directly from Francois Truffaut's *Fahrenheit 451* (1966). The adaptation of Ray Bradbury's novel is possibly the single most palpable influence on *Lives*. (*Lives* begins in 1984, but Truffaut's dystopia is more visibly present than Orwell's.) In the film *Fahrenheit 451*, Montag, a fireman in a future society in which firemen do not extinguish fires but start them by burning books, steals a copy of *David Copperfield*. In the tragicomic sequence, he begins his forbidden task by reading each word of the copyright page, with his slowly moving finger helping him follow each line of text. Wiesler, a star student, is literate, of course, and reads Brecht with fluency and appreciation, but the parallel is clear—reading literature as a Stasi officer is an alien experience. The activity, as we see from the ransacking of Dreyman's bookshelves, is frowned upon. Like Wiesler, Montag is a true believer who would not even mow his lawn if it were against the rules, but once he begins *David Copperfield*, he becomes intoxicated by books and turns against the system that has just promoted him. In an early scene, he trains young recruits in how to find books hidden in toasters—the scene clearly inspired the opening sequence of *Lives* in which Wiesler instructs young recruits in the art of interrogation and taking a smell sample for the dogs. Although *Fahrenheit 451* was filmed in England by a French director, it constantly evokes the Nazi era. The firemen dress like storm troopers, and the lead is played by German actor Oskar Werner, who, when he greets his superior, Cyril Cusack, delivers a hand motion similar to a Sieg Heil. At the end

of his stirring defense of book burning, Cusack holds up a copy of *Mein Kampf*. The actor who plays Wiesler, Ulrich Mühe, bears an uncanny resemblance to Cusack.

At the end of the film, Montag's wife Linda (Julie Christie) denounces him to the authorities for reading books and leaves him because she "just couldn't bear it anymore." While standing by and watching a private library burn, Montag witnesses the owner of the library setting herself on fire along with her books. Clarisse, also played by Christie, insists that the woman did it because "she was afraid she'd talk and give us [the other book owners] away." Clarisse gives up her career as a teacher in order to become not an artist, but art itself. She, Montag, and fifty others end the film as "book people," people who have memorized single texts so that books will live even after no physical trace of them remains. Dreyman chooses never to know the man Wiesler but turns him instead into a book. And Christa-Maria, like Truffaut's self-immolating, would-be stool pigeon, embodies the two sides of Julie Christie, the Clarisse who cares more about the salvation of art than her own career and the Linda who cannot be trusted to keep a secret. When Dreyman cradles the bleeding Christa-Maria, we are surely meant to recall the Maria of Michelangelo's *Pietà* cradling a dead Cristo. Christa's codename, Marta, suggests her connection to Lazarus. And the films that inspired *Lives* are almost invariably about resurrection. Victor Laszlo and Harry Lime return from the dead, George Bailey from a non-life. The devoted readers in *Fahrenheit 451* disappear from society and reappear as books.

Of all the films I have discussed here, *Lives* looks the most like *Fahrenheit 451*. It is a landscape in which memory has been erased. Anna Funder describes one of the many ways in which East Germany erased and altered memory through its landscape:

In Dresden once, on a blue bridge over the River Elbe, I saw a plaque commemorating the liberation of the East Germans from their Nazi oppressors by their brothers the

Russians. I looked at it for a long time, a small thing dulled by grime from the air. I wondered whether it had been put there immediately after the Russians came into a vanquished Germany, or whether a certain time had been allowed to elapse before things could begin to be rewritten. (*Stasiland* 161)

Funder questions the authenticity of *Lives*, but her book repeatedly poses these questions: What does it mean to live an authentic life? How do we understand what is real? Describing her “adventures in Stasiland” to a friend, she says, “I’ve been in a place where what was said was not real, and what was real was not allowed” (*Stasiland* 96). Unable to actually leave the GDR, many East Germans “withdrew into what they called ‘internal emigration.’ They sheltered their secret inner lives in an attempt to keep something of themselves from the authorities” (*Stasiland* 120). Her book foregrounds the theatricality of a totalitarian regime. When a despised GDR official complains that “escapes were always tried on at Christmas time,” Funder notes that he “uses the word ‘inszeniert’ which means ‘staged,’ as though escapes were orchestrated deliberately to make the regime look bad” (*Stasiland* 133).

Von Donnersmarck is as concerned with authenticity as Funder. Every scene of his film is constructed around the question “what is real?” In the opening sequence, we believe we are watching Wiesler interrogate a prisoner whose friend has escaped across the border. But we cut to a shot of a tape recorder and discover we are in a classroom in which Wiesler is using the interrogation tape to train new Stasi officers. The sleep-deprived prisoner begs for rest. Wiesler threatens to arrest his wife and to give his children to the state. The prisoner gives him the name Werner Gläske. Grubitz enters the room and applauds Wiesler’s “performance.” Some students join in. Are they admiring his skill, or are they intimidated into approbation? Did the prisoner know anything? Was Werner Gläske “guilty”? We can only guess.

Throughout the film, straight-faced lies are told—Dreyman tells Jerska that Hempf is hopeful he will be removed from the blacklist;

Christa tells Dreyman she is going out to meet a classmate; Wiesler tells his buffoonish sidekick that his incompetent report is good—and are met with the same reply: “Really?” The *Der Spiegel* editor who will publish Dreyman’s seditious article celebrates with a bottle of the “real stuff” and toasts the author who will reveal “the true face of the GDR.” But not the editor or Dreyman or the worldly Paul is aware that they are being bugged. No writer could have been canny, observant, or omniscient enough to know the true face of the GDR.

And certainly no viewer of this film is. In a terrifying scene in the Stasi cafeteria, a young man tells a joke about Honecker in the presence of Grubitz. Grubitz first begs to hear the joke and then demands the name, rank, and department of the joker. Afterward, he laughs—“just kidding,” he says—and tells his own joke about Honecker. The tension breaks. We and the young employee end the scene with relief, all of us assured that the incident had no repercussions. But of course it did. We encounter him, years later, in the basement steaming open mail next to Wiesler.

Each of the artists in this film has a difficult time negotiating the line between fantasy and reality. Jerska, sullen and misanthropic, wonders whether the former sociable man was not himself and whether this is the “real” Jerska. Dreyman fears Jerska is “losing touch with reality,” but what hold has it ever had on Dreyman himself, who writes plays celebrating a state that has imprisoned and blacklisted his best friends? Christa seems the most conscious of how corrupt a system she operates in, how compromised she must be to keep her life on stage, but she maintains her grip on reality by popping pills. Nonetheless, it is, crucially, none of the professional artists but the Stasi officer who, as the film goes on, finds it increasingly difficult to distinguish art from reality. Captivated by Christa’s performance in *The Faces of Love*, the tyrannical bureaucrat begins to take on various roles in his own stage play.

Trying to follow the action in Dreyman’s apartment through his earphones, he chalks the floors of his surveillance room with the

stage set. Accidentally running into Christa in a bar, he introduces himself to her as her “audience.” Wiesler’s profound impulse is to direct. As Dreyman loses his beloved director Jerska to the blacklist and eventual suicide, and as his friend Paul Hauser accuses his new director (as Wiesler overhears him) of being a Stasi spy, Wiesler himself attempts to take on the role of director. He orchestrates an encounter between Dreyman and Christa in which Dreyman is forced to see that she is coming out of Hempf’s car. In his accidental encounter with Christa, he insists that she forsake Hempf and reconcile with Dreyman. But it is with Dreyman the playwright that Wiesler is finally most closely identified. Failing as actor, audience member, and director, Wiesler succeeds as a creative writer. His fictional account of Dreyman’s subversive activities saves the playwright’s life. It is not the truth, but a fiction “that will set him free.” But why is Wiesler determined to save Dreyman’s life?

Slavoj Žižek’s reason has been floated by several critics: “The finale of *Lives* recalls the famous ending of *Casablanca*: with the beginning of a beautiful friendship between Dreyman and Wiesler now that the intruding obstacle of a woman is conveniently out of the way.” But the relationship between Laszlo and Rick on which the relationship between Dreyman and Wiesler is modeled ends before the plane leaves the ground. (If Claude Rains’s Louis is the inspiration for any character, it is surely the libidinous, greedy, easily adaptable Hempf.) The relationships between Holly and Calloway and George and Clarence cannot continue either. Nor, of course, do the relationships between Ilsa and Rick, Anna and Holly, or Vicky and Julian. Unlike the vast majority of films made in the 1940s, the movies evoked by *Lives* do not end in sexual consummation. Perhaps Bogey is right, and “the problems of three little people don’t amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world.” Perhaps like so many great works of art, these films acknowledge that repression is often more beautiful than consummation. Or perhaps these two men can never meet in the flesh, but only on the printed page. As the great

Russian novelist who fled first the Communists and then the Nazis wrote, “the only immortality” some fictional characters can share is “the refuge of art” (Nabokov 309).

Žižek misses the point by focusing on these men as potential lovers. Wiesler is not falling in love with either artist; he is falling in love with art itself. Wiesler has wept over a piano sonata and stolen a volume of Brecht. So we are led to believe that art is humanizing him. We feel we are watching the transformation of a human soul as Wiesler fails to report the escape of Paul Hauser, but he is simply waiting to move in for the kill. When the *Der Spiegel* editor hands Dreyman an untraceable typewriter, Wiesler types up a damning report on Dreyman and rushes it to Grubitz. But before he can tell Grubitz his business, Grubitz tells Wiesler the fate that is awaiting Dreyman in prison—solitary confinement. “Suddenly that guy won’t cause us any trouble. Know what the best part is? . . . [he’ll] never write anything again.” Wiesler knows as he types up his report that it will send Dreyman to prison—this does not trouble him. The ruination of Dreyman’s life does not deter him; the prospect of a world without Dreyman’s writing does. Wiesler crumples up the report and begins writing a new one—this one now entirely of his own invention. His decision to save Dreyman coincides with his most successful venture as a creative artist. But Wiesler becomes too intoxicated with his role as creative writer. He loses touch with the reality that he is not directing, writing, or appearing in a play.

So when it comes time for him to interrogate Christa, he believes he has the talent to save her and Dreyman as well as himself. *We* know that Hempf has forbidden her appearance on the German stage ever again. *We* know that no incriminating evidence has been found against Dreyman in the first apartment search. *We* know that if no typewriter is found under the doorsill, Christa will be arrested and prosecuted for perjury. *We* know that there is no way to save both Dreyman and Christa, but Wiesler seems not to know what is clear to any viewer of the film. He has bought his own ability to control this situation. He believes every word

and gesture of his own performance. He stages the whole scene so that he is in control of every element. He turns slowly in his chair to face her and give her time to recognize him as her savior. He sets her up to reveal the hiding place, and then in the most telling moment of all, the stone-faced Wiesler promises her that if she does what he tells her to do, “tonight [she’ll] be back on stage,” and then he smiles. It is the first and only time Wiesler smiles, for he sees the beauty of the plan he has devised. He believes in his own power to save this artist, to save art itself. He gives her a tiny nod, expecting her to tell him the typewriter’s hiding place. She responds with the answer that it is hidden under the doorsill. It is quite clear that Christa is saying that “one” can remove it (“Man kann sie abnehmen”) and even clearer that Wiesler, so caught up in the emotion of the scene he is performing for his “audience” (Grubitz), interprets this as “you can remove the doorsill.” He is not enraptured by the idea of being good, but by the idea of being an artist. Most crucially, by becoming an artist, he has endangered his own life. He must steal the typewriter to save himself, for if it is discovered, then his own report will be recognizable as a fiction.

Wiesler, as an inadequate director, has brought them to this impasse. He has convinced Christa to reject Hempf but cannot see the consequences of this rejection—Hempf’s revenge. He will try to rectify the situation by stealing the typewriter, which must inevitably destroy Christa. Dreyman dedicates his book with gratitude to the man who had the red ink on his hands. But Dreyman’s account of Wiesler’s “goodness” can never mesh with ours. We know better. We know who extracted Christa’s confession from her; Dreyman does not. We know how Wiesler earned her trust; Dreyman does not. Dreyman sees a red ink blot on the last page of his Stasi file; we see Christa’s blood on the hands of the man who saved one artist by destroying another.

Thus, the unreality of *Lives* that has troubled Funder and Žižek is deliberate and necessary. Funder may object that the GDR did not allow Stasi agents autonomy, but it is not von

Donnersmarck who has forgotten this fact but rather the Stasi agent himself. Caught up in the madness of art, Wiesler ignores the fact that he has signed on for a role that does not allow him to understudy any other part.

Yet even as we see Wiesler being drawn into the world of the theater, we must recognize that *Lives* is less about drama than it is about cinema. Von Donnersmarck’s influences too used other art forms to meditate on the singularity of cinema. Powell and Pressburger’s ballet movie has nothing to do with what takes place on the stage at the Bolshoi or Covent Garden. It is a celebration of what can be achieved only cinematographically. The most memorable of the film’s moments are realized not by Shearer’s ballet slippers, but in the magical transformations of the editing room. *The Red Shoes* ballet is one cinematic effect after another as Vicky falls through the air, as her costume turns into a newspaper, as a newspaper turns into a dancer. Vicky leaps into a pair of laced-up ballet slippers and dances on a beach with a ballet dancer who turns into her composer-husband. *Fahrenheit 451* is as much about cinematic literacy as it is about reading books. The film, like so much of Truffaut, is an homage to Hitchcock, with individual shots acting as quotations from *The Birds* and *The Wrong Man*. The score is unmistakably that of Bernard Herrmann. If we close our eyes, we might imagine we are watching *Vertigo* or *Marnie*. In his most overtly metacinematic film, *Day for Night*, Truffaut intercuts shots of a little boy dragging his stick along a fence. The shots are mysterious and inexplicable until finally the little boy arrives at his destination, a cinema showing *Citizen Kane*. The shot is one of the most haunting Truffaut ever filmed. It speaks simultaneously to the deprivation of the war years in Europe when *Kane*, *Casablanca*, and *Shadow of a Doubt* were unavailable to film fanatics and to the epiphanic moment when these films were finally released in Europe, changing the consciousness of a generation of young French directors. Without such overtly revelatory moments (von Donnersmarck cut, for instance, an obvious visual reference to *Rear Window*), *The Lives of Others*

still manages to balance this same experience of deprivation and recognition in nearly every scene of this delicately evocative film. Without the use of special effects or cinematic pyrotechnics, von Donnersmarck shows how his story could, nonetheless, only be told on film. Only in the cinema can space be used to convey claustrophobia; only the camera allows for so many scenes to be built out of silence. Some of the film's greatest scenes—Christa's showers, Dreyman stripping his walls, Dreyman following Wiesler in a cab—use no words, allowing the camera to do all the work. And Mühe's stunning performance as Wiesler is built almost entirely out of the subtlest of facial expressions that could never be read on stage.

None of the professional artists in *Lives* believe in their own talents. Dreyman doubts his abilities to create great plays in the absence of his blacklisted director: "My plays aren't strong enough to stand on their own—they need Albert's direction." Jerska himself "feels like a fraud," and Christa-Maria has sex with Hempf because she doubts herself: Dreyman tells her, "You doubt your talent. You think you need him, but you don't. You're a great artist." But *Lives* does not celebrate the myth of the solitary genius. It illustrates in every frame, in every shot, in every line of dialogue, that art is a collaborative effort. Jerska commits suicide because "what is a director without a play, a projectionist without a film?" Dreyman's article is written in the presence of other writers. Gabriel Jared's sonata is realized by Dreyman on the piano. Brecht's poetry is read aloud by Wiesler. And Dreyman's masterpiece, the novel that restores his voice, is not written in isolation but in collaboration with the fiction Wiesler composed years earlier.

When we consider *The Lives of Others* next to its Hollywood antecedents, we must recognize that the film does not celebrate the myth of the individual activist either. Bogey's Rick saves Laszlo's life, and George Bailey keeps Mr. Gower, Violet, and Uncle Billy out of jail. Wiesler prevents one man from going to prison but destroys the same man's life in the process. The Hollywood movie knows how to dispense with

villains. Rick kills Major Strasser, and George Bailey's town comes to his rescue, effectively marginalizing Potter. But the villain who sets *Lives* in motion is, like many former Stasi, prospering in the new Germany. The film does not argue that an individual man or woman could bring down the GDR but proves to those still suffering from *Ostalgie* that the GDR was far more skilled at bringing down individual men and women.

If I am right then, *Lives* is itself a collaborative effort, a film that could not have existed except in conversation with the many other films in von Donnersmarck's head.⁷ Yet film is conspicuously absent from von Donnersmarck's vision of the GDR. Throughout the GDR, television viewers connected small attachments to their antennae in order to get West German television reception. In the areas around Dresden in the southeast, in the extreme eastern areas near the Polish border, and in Karl-Marx-Stadt, which lay in a deep valley, Western TV reception was an impossibility. The sense of deprivation in these "valleys of the clueless," as they were called, was so great that they produced more émigrés to the West than any other areas of East Germany (Mitchener). Dreyman obviously has such an antenna. When he turns on his television, he watches a Western news report about the *Der Spiegel* piece he has written. But when Wiesler turns on his television, the loyal Party member is clearly watching a state-sponsored news program on poultry farming. Wiesler begins the film by denying himself any semblance of beauty—love, friendship, books, music, cuisine, architecture, nature, fashion. But in this brief but resonant moment, von Donnersmarck hints at the deprivation this first-time director could not have endured. In his endlessly reverberating film, von Donnersmarck proves that Western cinema is the force that has allowed him, not Wiesler, to imagine and empathize with the lives of others.

NOTES

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1. “[H]e begins with the Operation ‘Lazlo’ (did anyone notice the *Casablanca* wink?)” (von Donnersmarck, “The Art of Conversation”).

2. Paul Henreid’s character has escaped from a concentration camp. The aptly named Paul H has done a stint in the terrifying Hohenschönhausen Prison.

3. Anna Funder writes,

In the GDR people were required to acknowledge an assortment of fictions as fact. . . . that East Germans were not the Germans responsible (even in part) for the Holocaust; that the GDR was a multi-party democracy; that socialism was peace-loving; that there were no former Nazis left in the country; and that, under socialism, prostitution did not exist. (96)

But in Jane Kramer’s account, both Germanys reunited under Helmut Kohl embraced a notion of “Victim Germany.”

It is the Germany that Hitler “seized” in 1933 and “occupied” for twelve dark years; the Germany that was “liberated” in 1945 as if it were Holland, or a concentration camp. And it may have been the inevitable Germany, because once the Wall fell in 1989, this Germany turned out to be the only version of themselves that East Germans and West Germans could be brought to hold in common. (257–58)

4. For example, see Rodden: “‘It is our task to pass on those spiritual and moral values to youth that will produce a socialist society,’ [Honecker] declared, defending her forced adoption policy” (14). See also Taylor (364).

5. “In Hitler’s Third Reich it is estimated that there was one Gestapo agent for every 2000 citizens, and in Stalin’s USSR there was one KGB agent for every 5830 people. In the GDR, there was one Stasi officer or informant for every sixty-three people. If part-time informers are included, some estimates have the ratio as high as one informer for every 6.5 citizens” (Funder 57).

6. Orson Welles apparently spontaneously came up with the lines himself during filming.

7. The dual meaning of “collaboration” in English does not exist in German. *Mitwerken* and *zusammenarbeiten* mean to collaborate. But a political collaborator is a *Kollaborateur*. Fluent in English, von Donnersmarck may have our dual meaning in mind.

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