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# Redeeming the demon? The legacy of the Stasi in *Das Leben der Anderen*

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**Owen Evans**

Swansea University, UK

## Abstract

*The Lives of Others* (2006) has been a phenomenally successful film, winning the Oscar for Best Foreign Feature in 2007. Yet despite the critical acclaim it has received abroad, in Germany reactions have been more mixed. Many commentators, especially historians, have been at pains to point out that the transformation of the Stasi officer into the guardian angel of his target is wholly unrealistic in the context of the GDR. However, many of the same critics also concede that the film is very effective. It is this paradox that the present article will examine. Hitherto, very few, if any, examinations of the film have ever looked at its construction and impact as film. We will explore the way that the generic conventions of melodrama have been adapted to create what we might call an authenticity of affect, which actually enhances the film's treatment of injustice and redemption.

## Keywords

East Germany, film, melodrama, MfS, Von Donnersmarck.

In a typically measured and insightful article on Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's *Das Leben der Anderen/The Lives of Others* (2006), the British historian Timothy Garton Ash puts his finger on the film's remarkable worldwide success, which culminated in its Oscar for best Foreign Picture in 2007:

The words 'Nazi', 'SS', and 'Auschwitz' are already global synonyms for the deepest inhumanity of fascism. Now the word 'Stasi' is becoming a default global synonym for the secret police terrors of communism. ... *The Lives of Others* will strengthen that second link, building as it does on the preprogramming of our imaginations by the first. Nazi, Stasi: Germany's festering half-rhyme. (2007: 4)

Without doubt the film takes its place in the canon of German films produced so far since 2000 that have directly or indirectly explored Germany's totalitarian legacies to much global acclaim.<sup>1</sup> Whilst not the first German film to win an Oscar since Volker Schlöndorff's adaptation of Günter Grass's seminal *Die Blechtrommel/The Tin Drum* (1979) – that honour goes to Caroline Link's

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## Corresponding author:

Dr Owen Evans, Department of Political and Cultural Studies, School of Arts and Humanities, Swansea University, Singleton Park, Swansea, SA2 8PP, Wales, UK.

Email: [o.evans@swansea.ac.uk](mailto:o.evans@swansea.ac.uk)

*Nirgendwo in Afrika/Nowhere in Africa* (2001) – *The Lives of Others* has reinforced the extensive interest in German films again, whilst also confirming the world's abiding fascination with this 'festering half-rhyme'.

Despite all the accolades it has received, what is especially striking is the way in which the film's reception is marked by a pronounced ambiguity in many quarters, including Garton Ash himself. Although conceding that it is a 'memorable, well-made movie' (Garton Ash, 2007: 6), the historian lists a series of factual errors in the film, based on his own experience of life in the German Democratic Republic (GDR): 'No! It was not really like that. This is all too highly coloured, romantic, even melodramatic; in reality, it was all much greyer, more tawdry and banal' (Garton Ash, 2007: 4). His objections are echoed by Thomas Lindenberger, who, like his counterpart, acknowledges the film's qualities, before asserting as a historian his 'legitimate task to contribute to the critical assessment of history films' (2008: 558). What has animated most critics is the representation of a senior Stasi officer protecting the object of his own surveillance operation. As Lindenberger puts it, the thought of such an official 'becoming a sympathizer with dissidents should be taken as what it is – a deliberate invention' (2008: 560).

These mixed reactions might seem to suggest that the film has little to offer historians engaged in the ongoing debates about the GDR and its legacy, not least its most contentious phenomenon, the Ministry for State Security (MfS), which remain highly charged a generation on from the fall of the Berlin Wall. Revelations about the activity of *inoffizielle Mitarbeiter* (IM), or informers, continue to emerge to this day. So does the film, as many of its critics argue, turn on a fanciful notion by distorting the reality of the GDR's repressive nature too much, with a far-fetched depiction of a Stasi officer who begins to question his function and change sides? Was the director not justified in his assertion that he 'didn't want to tell a true story so much as to explore how someone might have behaved. The film is more of a basic expression of belief in humanity than an account of what actually happened' (cited in Funder, 2007: 20)? If the film is first and foremost just that, a film, then should it not be judged accordingly? This article will summarize the criticisms levelled at *The Lives of Others* regarding its authenticity, before exploring the conundrum that so many of the same critics also enjoy the film. No matter that it purportedly lacks authenticity in its depiction of the Stasi, or at least the conversion of Hauptmann Gerd Wiesler, the film nevertheless possesses what we might call an authenticity of affect. Despite its perceived flaws, therefore, it remains a valuable contribution to the ongoing discussions about the legacy of the MfS. As Lindenberger is forced to admit at the conclusion of his article:

*The Lives of Others*, despite its obviously exploitationist character, is surely contributing to the renewal of interest not only in the GDR's past, but also in the functioning of totalitarian rule more generally – both at home and in the rest of the world – because it is just a nice, well-done movie, whether historians like it or not. (2008: 566)

The ways in which von Donnersmarck constructed this 'nice, well-done movie' therefore need analysing, not least because it has hitherto been neglected in scholarship on the film.

Like many of the motion pictures to have tackled aspects of Germany's totalitarian past since 2000, director Florian Henkel von Donnersmarck's debut bears all the hallmarks of a film produced knowingly for a dual market. By virtue of the self-professed commitment to authenticity *The Lives of Others* seeks to cater for a domestic market still coming to terms with the seismic socio-political shifts since the *Wende* brought an abrupt end to East Germany.<sup>2</sup> It represents one of the first major productions since 1990 to explore the machinations of the Stasi in quite such careful detail, though it is by no means the first to touch upon the subject.<sup>3</sup> To be taken into the deeper

recesses of the organization as von Donnersmarck sets out to do might be viewed, therefore, as a bold, and welcome, attempt to tackle the past.

Producer Quirin Berg argues that it was the success of films such as *Sonnenallee* (Hausmann, 1999) and *Good Bye Lenin!* (Becker, 2003), which portrayed the more everyday elements of GDR life in detail, together with the passage of time, which allowed von Donnersmarck to confront the darker side of the recent past with greater objectivity.<sup>4</sup> But as Thomas Lindenberger points out:

*The Lives of Others's* authenticity claim is based on distancing itself from other GDR movies: It was introduced as the first 'serious', not funny feature film about the GDR past. In order to promote it as such, its media campaign denigrated earlier films, among them in particular *Sonnenallee* and *Good Bye Lenin!* as purely comic, satirical and not serious – in a way which was simply unfair. (2008: 559)

Although the earlier two films did become mired in debates about the phenomenon of *Ostalgie* (nostalgia for East Germany), which deflected from the more serious discourses they contained, the stance of von Donnersmarck and his producers was a little unwarranted.

In so many regards, the commitment to authenticity in *The Lives of Others* is striking. Painstaking efforts were made to capture the drab atmosphere of East Berlin in 1984 aesthetically, with use of subdued, cold lighting throughout, marked especially by a predominance of blue and brown filters, which form a seamless visual link to the clothing worn by most of the characters. The cinematography is in stark contrast to the brightly lit and richly textured *Sonnenallee* and *Good Bye Lenin!*<sup>5</sup> Particularly effective in view of the subject matter is the film's use of interiors shot in the Stasi's former headquarters in the Normannenstrasse, where the Stasi files are now held. The crew were, however, barred from filming at the notorious former Stasi prison at Berlin-Hohenschönhausen, now a memorial to the victims, whose director, Hubertus Knabe, argued that 'you can't use a place where people suffered as a backdrop for a film so remiss in its dealings with this past' (cited in Funder, 2007: 19).

If von Donnersmarck's attention to detail establishes a highly plausible *mise-en-scène*, it is the detailed insight into the mechanics of the Stasi that dominates large sections of the film. From the outset, we are confronted with the reality of oppression in the nominally democratic state, with a prisoner at Hohenschönhausen being led to an interrogation with Hauptmann Wiesler, one of the two protagonists in *The Lives of Others*. Wiesler's cold treatment of the prisoner, who is addressed solely by his number, thus establishes the officer as an impassive character, efficient and dedicated to the pursuit of 'enemies of socialism' as he puts it.<sup>6</sup> The prison sequence is juxtaposed with Wiesler lecturing students at the Stasi University in Potsdam, imbuing their academic studies with a practical basis by playing a recording of the interrogation. The montage effectively draws out some of what Hannah Arendt famously called the 'banality of evil' (1963), by transposing the obvious suffering of an individual into material for supposed academic analysis. Once the interrogation is over, Wiesler removes the seat of the chair to store the prisoner's smell in a jar, another of the banal, yet unsettling, truths of the MfS, which kept such jars 'for the dogs', as Wiesler informs the students.

Throughout the film, von Donnersmarck provides numerous examples of the efficiency and menace of the organization, 'the largest secret police and secret security apparatus in the Soviet empire and probably in world history' (Dennis, 2000: 79) and 'the most elaborate incarnation of modern secret policing' (Lindenberger, 2008: 561). Central to the plot is the Stasi's comprehensive operation to bug author Georg Dreyman's flat, at the behest of Socialist Unity Party (SED) Minister Hempf, with whom Dreyman's partner, the actress Christa-Maria Sieland, is having an affair. The swift and efficient way in which the bugs are placed throughout the apartment is disturbing, and

has not been challenged as inauthentic. It seems wholly plausible that Dreymann would have no idea that he was under full surveillance, as a somewhat self-pitying Hempf tells him at the western premiere of the playwright's last play towards the end of the film. We then see Dreymann ripping the wires from the walls in utter disbelief at the extent to which the Stasi violated his private space.

Wiesler personifies the ruthless, bureaucratic efficiency of the MfS in compiling the information that would fill the files of those the formal and informal operatives were set upon. The Stasi man assiduously compiles a dossier on Dreymann, as the author discovers with incredulity when he finally gains access to his files. The dominant image of the film is of Wiesler sitting behind a bank of recording devices – and all of the equipment featured in the film was actually used by the MfS for such operations – monitoring and recording the intimate details of the author's life.

The film also depicts other methods variously used by the Stasi to intimidate people. For example, we see Wiesler threatening Dreymann's neighbour, Frau Meineke, with her daughter's expulsion from medical school should she breathe a word about having unwittingly realized that the Stasi are bugging his flat, which hints at the kinds of compromises that many ordinary people were forced to make in the GDR, choosing a pathway between conformity and opposition. More crucially, though, Christa-Maria Sieland, Dreymann's girlfriend, is coerced into becoming an informant on her lover because of her drug addiction. As Mary Fulbrook explains, even if ordinary people were 'surprised and shocked ... to learn the extent of Stasi infiltration' (2005: 3), there was a broad awareness of the consequences of stepping out of line:

Anyone found to have transgressed permissible limits, in whatever way, could be subjected to brutal measures of repression, arrest and incarceration, as well as physical and mental maltreatment; some were forcibly exiled against their will, while others had their lives within the GDR subjected to sometimes unintelligible distortions and miseries in both professional and private lives. (2005: 9)

Alongside such direct tactics, the Stasi were also very skilled at *Zersetzung* (disruption), a psychological tactic used to fracture potentially dissident groups in the GDR by deliberately spreading rumours about informers within the membership. At Dreymann's birthday party, the dissident journalist Paul Hauser leaves in disgust because of the presence of Schwalber, the director of the playwright's latest play, who is suspected of being an informant. The resultant suspicion and bad feeling bears all the hallmarks of *Zersetzung*, which proved an especially fruitful way of keeping certain oppositional groups slightly off balance.

Although the depiction of such activities in *The Lives of Others* is not generally disputed by its critics, certain historians such as Thomas Lindenberger and Jens Gieseke have taken exception to the liberties they feel have been taken with the truth, or the 'borders of authenticity' (Gieseke, 2008: 580).<sup>7</sup> Such responses might seem overly pedantic when directed at a feature film, which is not, after all, an historical document, were it not for the bold claims to authenticity made by the director and producers. As Gieseke notes: 'In every interview, director Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck laid emphasis on his intensive historical research, his conversations with experts, former Stasi officers and dissidents (2008: 581). As a result of such public claims to authenticity, Lindenberger argues quite reasonably that it is the historian's right to present a challenge to those declarations.

It is the figure of Wiesler, compellingly realized by former East German actor Ulrich Mühe, upon whom most of the criticism of the film falls. Mühe portrays Wiesler as an apparently unemotional individual, who carries out his job punctiliously, but without obvious pleasure or fanaticism. His emotional detachment is emphasized by the soulless, colourless flat he inhabits with few obvious possessions or ornaments, visited only it would appear by a Stasi prostitute. By contrast, his

oleaginous superior Oberstleutnant Grubitz emerges as a corrupt careerist figure, a topos of critical GDR literature, who has embraced the system wholeheartedly and appears to have risen through the ranks with far greater speed than Wiesler. Grubitz it is who informs Wiesler of Hempf's wish to place Dreymann under surveillance, but thinks only of the benefits professionally, and personally, of a successful operation against the author. When Wiesler learns that the surveillance operation is motivated solely by the minister's desire to eradicate a love rival, he asks: 'Is that why we joined?', offering an early indication perhaps of his potential to change, to question the validity, the morality even, of his role. Nevertheless, he embarks on the operation with customary efficiency. He seems to be the obedient servant of his state, and thereby highlights one of the intriguing paradoxes of East Germany, namely that despite being a socialist experiment on German soil, geographically it was located largely in the space once occupied by Prussia. Günter de Bruyn has argued that East Germany survived as long as it did because of the Prussian values and virtues that were engrained in the majority of the GDR's citizens (Evans, 2004).

At the root of the most vehement criticism of *The Lives of Others*, is Wiesler's transformation into an unlikely guardian angel for Dreymann and Sieland, apparently inspired both by his exposure to culture – most significantly the sonata Dreymann plays following the suicide of his friend, theatre director Albert Jerska, although Wiesler also steals a volume of Bertolt Brecht's poetry from the author's flat – and the love between the two objects of his surveillance. Both elements serve to highlight the emptiness of his life, as well as exposing the iniquity of the Stasi's operation against Dreymann.

Objections to the depiction of the Stasi in von Donnersmarck's film are twofold, and admittedly not groundless. On the one hand, the manner in which the operation against Dreymann is run is implausible, inasmuch as no officer would have been responsible for this operation alone, as Wiesler is for the most part. The MfS's paranoia was also such that it was constantly checking the loyalty and performance of its own servants, and 'interfered not only in the private lives of its targets but also in the private sphere of its own officers' (Dennis, 2003: 88).<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Wiesler's veiled criticism of the spurious nature of the operation against Dreymann is also telling, in that it would have been highly unlikely that surveillance could have been instigated for the reasons cited in the film, namely a fit of jealousy by an SED luminary.

On the other hand, as Anna Funder is at pains to argue, 'repentance such as Wiesler's is rare' and betrays a misunderstanding of 'the totalitarian nature of bureaucratized evil' (2007: 19). It is perhaps interesting to note her use of the word 'rare' here: not impossible. As Garton Ash reveals in his article, there were actual cases, admittedly rare, of Stasi officers 'betraying' the MfS, although their fate was execution, rather than steaming open letters as Wiesler is consigned to do until the *Wende* (2007: 6). But it is the fact that Dreymann's spontaneous, grief-stricken performance of the sonata should spark the change of heart in Wiesler that is wholly implausible for Anna Funder:

It was impossible. To offer such a fiction as entertainment raises issues about our understanding of how totalitarian systems work, how long it takes after their demise before a society can recognize its true heroes – the dissidents and victims – and what kind of responsibility to historical truth we can legitimately demand of our entertainments. (2007: 16)

But surely, just as a masterpiece such as Günter Grass's *The Tin Drum* (1965) uses obvious fiction to help uncover the psychology of life in Nazi Germany, manipulating history in the process, so *The Lives of Others* can be read as an attempt to provide a more nuanced picture of East Germany in the same way. It would be easy to peddle a simplistic view of the Stasi, and of East Germany, thereby sustaining the rather lazy metonymic equation of the one with the other that has existed

in some quarters in the post-*Wende* period.<sup>9</sup> Instead, by means of Wiesler's epiphany and the drama von Donnersmarck weaves around it, the film manages to rehabilitate a human perspective on the GDR, where a vibrant culture and a commitment to human rights still thrived, even in the face of adversity.

What Funder also seems to ignore, though, is the fact that the film very deliberately juxtaposes Wiesler's character with that of Dreymann. Their fates become entwined during the course of the surveillance, only touching once, briefly, following Sieland's suicide. As the ending reveals, the connection is not severed, despite how it might appear. Indeed, in an ironic twist, the roles are briefly reversed, when it is Dreymann who begins, as it were, to uncover Wiesler's activities, and then 'spies' on the former Stasi officer, as he distributes junk mail to mailboxes.

This interconnectedness between the two characters is clearly signalled structurally in the film by the extensive use of montage throughout. Sergei Eisenstein, the influential innovator of montage, believed it should provoke audiences: 'Eisensteinian montage is based on contrast and conflict, which can exist both within the film as a whole and within a particular shot or scene' (Dick, 2005: 76). Where continuity editing seeks to make the transition between shots seamless, almost invisible, 'montage calls attention to itself' (Dick, 2005: 76). In *The Lives of Others*, the montage has a vital function in how we should approach the film, constantly reminding us that we are not just supposed to focus on the perpetrator, but the victim as well. The most effective example of this is the scene where Wiesler hears the author playing the sonata. Cutting between the two shots, the camera describes an identical circular motion around both characters, their reactions to the music intercut and juxtaposed with each other. Funder, along with many other commentators on the film, offers little or no apparent recognition of the importance of the character of Georg Dreymann to the overall film, which is remarkable given that *The Lives of Others* does ultimately seem to celebrate him as the 'true hero' by virtue of his capacity for forgiveness at the end.

The depiction of the MfS's scrutiny of the cultural milieu is just as important to the impact of the film as the detailed representation of the machinations of the Stasi in general. The importance of the intelligentsia under communism is made explicit in the film when Hempf celebrates Dreymann as one of the 'engineers of the soul'. That the Minister of Culture does not realize this famous dictum is one of Stalin's – and is indeed a misquote – seems laced with irony, revealing him to be a man ready with slogans and platitudes, yet displaying little true understanding of the importance and value of art as anything other than an ideological tool. Nevertheless, just as the state placed its intellectuals on a pedestal, it monitored them closely too. The vast majority of the best GDR writers were spied on, either surreptitiously by IMs or more overtly by Stasi officers.<sup>10</sup> The ramifications of dissent are reflected in *The Lives of Others* by the fate of Albert Jerska, who has been effectively banned from working by virtue of his critical views and whose spirit is thus broken. In contrast, Dreymann is the model writer, feted by the elite, a close personal friend of Margot Honecker, and a *Nationalpreis* winner.<sup>11</sup> Dreymann enjoys the trappings of his celebrity within the GDR, seeking to avoid any confrontation with the darker aspects of the society he lives in, at least until Jerska commits suicide. After the funeral, we hear in voiceover the article he decides to write about the high suicide rate in the GDR, the truth of which the state decided to hide after 1977 by no longer publishing official figures.

Dreymann abandons his former unwillingness to confront the unpalatable truths about his privileged existence in favour of a commitment to engage with the reality in the GDR. In this regard, the film offers a sensitive depiction of the dilemma that afflicted all critically minded intellectuals in the GDR, and the psychological pressure of being trapped between conformity and opposition, given the privileged position they held. The film makes explicit the price that could be paid for adopting a critical stance against the GDR regime, as Dreymann experiences the invasion of his

private sphere by the Stasi, but also, more tragically, loses both Jerska and Sieland. Rather than deflecting attention away from the plight of the victims of the GDR, as Funder argues, on the contrary *The Lives of Others* places the suffering the State inflicted on numerous individuals very much to the fore.

But for all the reservations about the film in terms of historical detail and plausibility, and the extent to which it exploits the past for the sake of a good story, we must not forget that *The Lives of Others* is a film, utilizing techniques and discourses of the medium for its effects. If historians are entitled to deconstruct the film from their point of view, to test its professed authenticity, then, film historians are equally justified in deploying film analysis to explore, and shed light on, the paradox at the heart of the film's reception.

When one looks closely at the composition of *The Lives of Others*, it emerges as a self-conscious attempt to produce a film that might simultaneously appeal beyond Germany, to an audience less *au fait* with the mechanics of oppression and surveillance in the GDR. Timothy Garton Ash cites Anthony Lane's review of the film and how he adapts the closing line – 'It is for me':

You might think that the film is aimed solely at modern Germans, Lane writes, but it's not: *Es ist für uns* – it's for us. He may be more right than he knows. *The Lives of Others* is a film very much intended for others. Like so much else made in Germany, it is designed to be exportable. (2007: 6)

In order to achieve this aim of reaching a wide international audience, which von Donnersmarck managed with considerable aplomb as evinced by the Oscar victory, the film deploys various techniques, the effectiveness of which explains why so many of those who criticized its factual authenticity were forced to concede that it is not a bad film. Anna Funder, who arguably seems to harbour the strongest objection to the film in light of her affiliation with many who suffered at the hands of the Stasi, confesses that the film 'is cleverly plotted, nicely detailed, emotionally powerful and ... it looks beautiful. ... It is the best film I have seen in a long time' (2007: 16). And even as seemingly implacable a critic as Hubertus Knabe by rejecting *The Lives of Others* implicitly acknowledges its inherent affective power.

The key to the film's success lies in the generic conventions it incorporates. Described by many critics as a political thriller, *The Lives of Others* does in fact rely much more significantly on melodramatic devices for its impact. Indeed, the melodramatic mode is fundamental to von Donnersmarck's original motivation for the film, as has been widely reported, allegedly inspired by tales of Lenin's refusal to listen to Beethoven's 'Appassionata' sonata, for fear that it would weaken his resolve for the revolution ahead. The director transposed the idea to the GDR, imagining a Stasi officer's epiphany upon hearing a powerful piece of music (Lindenbeger, 2008: 561). The resultant scene epitomizes the pathos of the film with Wiesler transfixed by Dreyman's performance of the 'Sonata for a Good Man'. As Dreyman finishes, he asks Sieland: 'Can anyone who has heard this music – I mean truly heard it, really be a bad person?' It is an expertly orchestrated montage scene of such heightened emotion, entwining as it does all three characters, with the camera describing the same slow circular motion around Dreyman and Sieland in the apartment below, and the Stasi man eavesdropping in the attic above, reflecting an intensifying bond between them with all characters affected the same way by the emotional power of the sonata. In so doing, it echoes the affective 'excess' of 1950s Hollywood melodrama, one of the characteristics of which could be an 'extreme or overstated emotional tenor' (Langford, 2005: 37). This sequence anticipates the dramatic, emotionally wrought climax of the main narrative arc, when the actress commits suicide, uniting the three characters in the same shot for the only time in the film, effectively both recalling, and then dissolving, the montage of the earlier sequence.

Melodrama has generally been perceived as a pejorative label for the so-called ‘woman’s film’ or ‘weepee’, and is most often associated with the director Douglas Sirk. In a very detailed overview of the genre, Barry Langford reveals how the genre is, in truth, a very broad church embracing an array of different genres, from the Western to the modern blockbuster. Indeed, Langford cites Linda Williams, for whom the form is ‘the fundamental mode of popular American moving pictures ... that seeks dramatic revelation or moral and emotional truths through a dialectic of pathos’ (2005: 31). Von Donnersmarck has grasped this essence of melodrama in his calculated attempt to conflate elements of the arthouse with the popular and thus to appeal to different constituent audiences. But he achieves this blend with no little skill, in adapting some of what Langford identifies as the primary attributes of melodrama – ‘stark and simplified oppositions between moral absolutes personified in broadly drawn characters, eventful narratives packed with sensational incident, a strong scenic element and a powerful emotional address’ (2005: 32–3) – to the context of representing the GDR on screen.

The melodramas of the 1950s dealt with the suffocating nature of society for the protagonists, who were forced to adhere to a dogmatic moral code that conflicted with their own aspirations for personal happiness or self-expression. The nature of this conflict was represented symbolically by the films’ excessive, highly stylized visual and aural appeals to the senses, with use of lusciously coloured *mise-en-scènes* and seductive soundscapes, which were so obviously at odds with the psychological states of the protagonists.<sup>12</sup> It is easy to see how these characteristics could easily be transposed to a GDR context. For here was a society even more obviously marked by the intrusion of the public into the private and the attempt to mould individuals to an ideal ideological template, and where speaking one’s mind, or daring to challenge the system, could have severe, sometimes fatal, consequences. In *The Lives of Others*, Jerska represents the most potent embodiment of the cost of such opposition. Von Donnersmarck eschews the lush visuals usually associated with the visual ‘excess’ of melodrama, creating instead a no less highly stylized, monochrome picture of life in the GDR, in which the *mise-en-scène* is designed to mirror, not contrast with, the emotional landscapes of the characters. As such, his cinematographic rendering of the sombre atmosphere of East Germany in the 1980s is wholly commensurate with his meticulous efforts to generate a sense of authenticity, which was not the rationale of the melodrama in the 1950s. Indeed, the obsession with accurate detail in the film might also be interpreted as an excess in itself. Nevertheless, as in classic melodrama the background does retain a key psychological symbolism, by externalizing the emotional and moral conflicts that afflict the key characters. Indeed, the heavily stylized *mise-en-scène* might still be read as an ‘excessive’ rendering, in that it seeks to represent how the GDR is *remembered* now, rather than how it truly *looked* at the time. One cannot forget too the pivotal role that music plays in the film, as we have seen already with regard to the sonata, and the melancholic soundtrack as a whole significantly accentuates the pathos of the drama as it unfolds.

Where melodrama perhaps lends itself best of all to a tale such as *The Lives of Others* is in its creation of binary relationships. As Langford puts it, ‘melodrama is much more likely to situate meaning not as a process but as a *situation*, fixed and externalized in a binary oppositional structure’ (2005: 38):

Melodrama was characterized by a strongly polarized depiction of moral qualities – what has often been termed a ‘Manichean’ world-view with equally balanced forces of absolute good and evil battling one another in the personalized shape of hero and villain, their contest usually waged over the symbolic terrain of an innocent woman or child. Other classic melodramatic oppositions included those between country and city ... and the family and the world of work ... (2005: 41)

Once again, it is axiomatic how seamlessly von Donnersmarck was able to adapt and incorporate such elements into his own screenplay by structuring the narrative around an array of relationships that engender conflicting moral or personal standpoints. The central juxtaposition of Dreyman and Wiesler is the most obvious, but one can posit several others: Dreyman and Hempf; Wiesler and Grubitz; and, of course, Wiesler and Sieland. But when one analyses these binaries, it is evident how von Donnersmarck is careful to avoid the Manichean tendency of classic melodrama, because with the exception of Hempf and Grubitz who remain the embodiment of evil, each of the other characters undergoes a significant transformation that creates greater psychological differentiation. Living in the GDR forced most of its citizens to adopt a pragmatic approach in order to negotiate the competing demands of private integrity and public duty. It would have been very convenient, but utterly unrealistic, to depict a black-and-white paradigm of good versus evil in *The Lives of Others*. Of course, by depicting Wiesler's change of heart von Donnersmarck has been accused of inauthenticity, but the fact remains that he effectively adapted the binary relationships so typical of the melodramatic form to provide a representation of East Germany that suggests how a reliance on moral absolutes will not necessarily foster a clearer understanding of the patterns of behaviour of those who lived there. As Mary Beth Stein argues: 'The film has moved *die historische Aufarbeitung* (the historical analysis) about the East German past beyond the fundamental opposition of victims and perpetrators and the black-and-white rhetoric of the 1990s' (2008: 577).

One last characteristic of the classic melodramatic mode that is significant here relates to the representation of women. The genre has usually been associated, and accordingly oft disparaged, as being the repository of the woman's film, 'centred on women's experiences, specifically domestic, familial and romantic' (Langford, 2005: 44–5). Although recent scholarship has rightly challenged this narrow taxonomy, Christine Gledhill summarizes Thomas Elsaesser's work on melodrama, which points to the theatrical origins of the form in the 18th century, where it:

constituted an ideological weapon against a corrupt and feudal aristocracy. The bourgeois family's struggle to preserve the honour of the daughter from despotic and unprincipled aristocrats marked a contest over space for private conscience and individual rights. (1999: 158)

Although the cinematic form evolved, this original melodramatic conception may help us understand the role of Christa-Maria Sieland a little better, especially as she too has drawn criticism from some quarters. Thomas Lindenberger accuses the film of misogyny, in that she must be sacrificed for the two leading male characters:

She is conspicuously named not only Christa-Maria as a first name, which is significant enough, but Sieland as a last name, which one could interpret as the female form of Heiland, the savior, in a cocky play on words. Just by name, she is marked as the bearer of sins, and so must be sacrificed. (2008: 562)<sup>13</sup>

On the face of it, it is hard to refute this interpretation, for Sieland is seemingly granted little agency within the film. Nevertheless, Elsaesser's linking of the genre with its theatrical antecedents does allow for a more differentiated reading of the role, placing her victimhood in a broader sociopolitical context; it is not just, as Lindenberger asserts, designed to make the film 'Hollywood-compatible' (2008: 562). For she is not simply the object of affection for both Dreyman and Wiesler, but far more significantly she is Minister Hempf's reluctant mistress. The unscrupulous, ruthless Hempf, whom Grubitz credits as having 'tidied up' the artist scene when he was in the Stasi, behaves like a latter-day aristocrat, forcing himself upon Sieland and launching the operation to try to destroy Dreyman. Irrespective of the implausibility of such an initiative in the GDR, what

is beyond doubt is that the SED elite saw itself as a privileged class in the supposedly classless state of *Arbeiter und Bauern* (Workers and Farmers), living in the luxury, high security enclave of Wandlitz, north of Berlin with access to a lifestyle wholly alien to the people in whose name they professed to govern, and remote from the everyday concerns of their citizens. Like the fictional Hempf, the Party elite was 'despotic and unprincipled', and thus Sieland's victimhood at the hands of the minister does recall the classical roots of the melodramatic genre, rather than the crude signifier of Hollywood tropes that Lindenberger perceives.<sup>14</sup>

Sieland is ultimately crushed in the 'contest over space for private conscience and individual rights' that afflicted so many in the GDR. Hempf forces himself on her in an unsavoury fashion in the back of his official car, in a blatant abuse of his authority. When she later finds the courage to resist his advances, he puts her fate in Grubitz's hands. She is subsequently coerced into becoming an informant on her partner, as so many people were. Ashamed by her betrayal of Dreymann, she throws herself in front of a lorry. Sieland is thus the true focal point of the melodramatic mode that pervades the film. When Wiesler engineers it so that Dreymann sees her leaving Hempf's car – 'It's time for bitter truths', he says – the following sequence is shot through with unmistakable pathos. To the accompaniment of mournful strings on the soundtrack, Sieland tries to wash her guilt away in the shower, while Dreymann sits in despair at the piano. But the melancholic mood of the sequence is heightened still further by a quite brilliant contrivance on the part of the director: Dreymann picks out on the piano a few notes of the same melody as the strings. The fusion of non-diegetic with diegetic sound, even just briefly, wrings an even greater emotional intensity from the situation that at the same time anticipates the pathos of the actress's subsequent suicide. It is a film trick that is hard to be unaffected by, when we see two characters trapped by the system they must live in. It captures precisely what Rainer Werner Fassbinder identified as the essence of melodrama as conveyed by Douglas Sirk in *Imitation of Life* (1959): 'Both [characters] are right and no one will ever be able to help either of them. Unless, of course, we change the world. We all cried over the movie. Because it's so hard to change the world' (Fassbinder, 1992: 89).

It is the careful orchestration of these melodramatic elements in *The Lives of Others* that creates what we might call an authenticity of affect, which is essentially what Fassbinder was describing. Irrespective of the film's historical accuracy, the director has tried to craft a film that provokes an emotional response from its audience, by foregrounding the way in which the GDR systematically sought to break those individuals it deemed a menace. Even if many of the details represented in the film are implausible, the fact remains that much of what is relayed in the film, in terms of the emotional collateral damage, is not: lives were destroyed in such ruthless ways. Writing about film spectatorship, Patrick Phillips explores the concepts of excess and affect, and argues that film should perhaps be seen as a medium 'in which an image, a sound, is always more than what it represents, what its narrative function might be':

A shift in emphasis away from the concept (meaning, system of representation) to the affect (feeling, emotion) becomes important. An affect is what lingers, ... a 'residue', something we feel which is in excess of the representational system that produced it. So, for example, a film which at a 'conceptual' level appears rather conventional, even simple-minded, may leave me with a profound sense of loss or sadness. (2007: 159)

Phillips goes on to highlight how melodrama is 'a good example of a genre where the gap between the conceptual and the affective is very pronounced':

An ideological analysis of a 1950s, American melodrama may reveal all the ways in which it promotes a particular value system, one that is highly conventional and working to support ideas of social stability

and coherence. However, at the level of affect, the experience may be very different, especially for the target audience ... (2007: 159)

His theoretical position might go some way to help explain the paradox at the heart of reactions to *The Lives of Others*, where the emotional ‘residue’ of the film, which is all the more powerful for the strong performances of the leading actors, not least the measured performance by Ulrich Mühe, arguably surpasses the factual, ‘conceptual’ elements of the film. What von Donnersmarck attempts to do is salvage at least one human face within socialism, and in so doing strike a chord with audiences. Tellingly, Phillips draws attention to the ‘target audience’, and as we have already seen, it could be argued that von Donnersmarck had his eye focused more carefully on the world market than just the domestic market. If this is indeed the case, it is the authenticity of affect, transplanted from the American melodramatic paradigm, that might ultimately be of greater importance to him in the final analysis. The film’s Oscar success could arguably be seen to corroborate the assertion in this instance that emotion has supplanted concept.

But what of Wiesler’s Damascene conversion? Is it truly that inconceivable? Is it a melodramatic contrivance too far? The change in Wiesler is commonly associated with the sonata. Yet there are indications much earlier than that of his increasing disaffection with his role. In his dealings with Grubitz, he reveals flickers of distaste at his former friend’s unpalatable self-interest and hypocrisy: at Grubitz’s rather tactless talk of being given a chair at the Stasi University, although Wiesler helped him as a student; at the way he toys with the junior officer over the joke about Erich Honecker; and the way he initially dismisses Dreyman as a threat, only to become a zealous persecutor of the writer, at Hempf’s behest, as it will advance his career. It seems a plausible reason why Wiesler might come to help Dreyman.

But it is the effect that Sieland has on him from the outset that makes the change in him, in the context of the film at least, entirely believable. He is transfixed by her performance on stage, an attraction reinforced cleverly by a series of point-of-view shots of the actress on stage from Wiesler’s perspective. During the operation to bug Dreyman’s flat, Wiesler is momentarily drawn to the photograph of Sieland on the author’s desk, and as he draws the schematic of the flat on the floor of the attic, he dwells in the box representing her bedroom. These are brief, yet telling, indications of his feelings for her. It is little wonder, therefore, that when Dreyman and Sieland make love after Sieland rejects Hempf, Wiesler orders the prostitute. The transformation in Wiesler is shown, therefore, to be that of a man who has grown disaffected by the system, and his exposure to the cultural sphere simply confirms a disenchantment that had already been there.

Of course, both Wiesler and Sieland could be dismissed as heavily manipulated characters, contrived to deepen the melodramatic mode of the film, to ‘Hollywood-ize’ it, although one cannot disregard the fact that both Ulrich Mühe and Martina Gedeck deliver powerful performances. The two scenes they share – in the bar where Wiesler persuades her to return to her lover and not Hempf, and the interrogation scene where she learns that Wiesler has indeed been ‘her audience’ – are laced with the kind of pathos one might expect of a mainstream American movie; but then *The Lives of Others* is a film. It is entitled to deploy such devices. No matter whether the depiction of Wiesler’s humanity is deemed convincing or not, what von Donnersmarck is surely trying to do, in the best tradition of classic melodrama, is access a fundamental truth here; namely that the GDR was an inhumane state prepared to destroy its opponents – real or imagined. Von Donnersmarck might well have exploited the historical facts, but it is hard to condemn the film when it uses melodramatic conventions to show with great emotive power the injustice and inhumanity of a system that callously claimed to be democratic. Of that, we are all in agreement. Despite Dreyman’s

capacity to forgive Wiesler, von Donnersmarck is *not* advocating that there should be a universal amnesty for all Stasi officers and informants. Hubertus Knabe talks of a ‘creeping rehabilitation going on’ (cited in Funder, 2007: 20) in Germany, but, a film such as *The Lives of Others*, if anything, makes a strong case against such a development, because of what befalls both Jerska and Sieland. And the fact remains that Wiesler has hardly entered the new Germany unscathed; there is little to suggest that his life is any richer emotionally than it was.

The claims that the director made for his own film were, arguably, very irresponsible, arrogant even, and the criticisms of historians in that context are understandable and justified. But *The Lives of Others* is a film, which von Donnersmarck wanted to reflect a ‘basic expression of belief in humanity’ (cited in Funder, 2007: 20), to reflect a ‘good man’. Anna Funder’s response to this professed aim is to assert that ‘the terrible truth is that the Stasi provide no material for an expression of belief in humanity’ (2007: 20). But here’s a thing. After Timothy Garton Ash had met with one of the Stasi officers charged with his surveillance, a certain Major Risse, he left the meeting with an unsettling realization:

As I walk back to my hotel room to write up my notes, ... there forms in my mind a startling sentence: ‘Klaus Risse is a good man.’ Not just a man with a carefully separated sphere of private decency, like the concentration camp officer who murdered people during the day then went home to listen to Bach and play with his children. ... I mean a man with a real goodness of heart and a conscience that is not switched off at the office door. (1997: 177)

What Garton Ash and von Donnersmarck perhaps remind us is that there is still much work to be done in coming to terms with the legacy of the Stasi, and the GDR as a whole, and the ongoing investigations need to apply a variety of approaches to disentangle the morally complex nature of that legacy. It does not pay to assume that good and evil are ever quite that easy to separate, and even an apparently redemptive tale such as *The Lives of Others* cannot be accused of doing so. For all its optimism about humanity and redemption, it never lets us forget the truly demonic facets of the GDR.

## Notes

- 1 Other films include *Der Untergang/Downfall* (Hirschbiegel, 2004) and *Sophie Scholl: Die letzten Tage/Sophie Scholl: The Last Days* (Rothemund, 2005).
- 2 The *Wende* is the German term (literally ‘turning-point’) that describes the tumultuous changes in East Germany that began in the summer of 1989, with Monday night prayer meetings in Leipzig, and the floods of refugees fleeing to the West German embassies in Prague and Budapest, all indicating the growing courage of the GDR citizens to challenge the continued Stalinist approach of the ruling Socialist Unity Party (SED), when the other Eastern Bloc countries were following Gorbachev’s calls for Perestroika and Glasnost and opening up to the West. Of course, the emblematic event of the *Wende* was the collapse of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989 and it culminated in the reunification of Germany on 3 October 1990.
- 3 Examples include *Nikolaikirche* (Beyer, 1995), *Wie Feuer und Flamme* (Walther, 2001), and *Good Bye Lenin!* (Becker, 2003).
- 4 Interview in ‘The Making of *Das Leben der Anderen*’ (2006), DVD featurette.
- 5 It is worth observing that Connie Walther’s less well-known *Wie Feuer und Flamme* (2001) did make the same careful aesthetic efforts to resurrect the dull and suffocating atmosphere of 1980s Berlin.
- 6 All translations of dialogue from the film are my own.
- 7 All translations from Gieseke’s original German text are my own.
- 8 The film hints at the Stasi’s rigorous self-regulation when one young officer is demoted to steaming open envelopes after making a joke at the expense of Erich Honecker within earshot of Grubitz; but it remains a peripheral incident in the overall narrative.

- 9 For more on representations of the Stasi, see Paul Cooke (2005).
- 10 For a detailed study, see Walther (1999).
- 11 Margot Honecker was the wife of East Germany's leader, Erich, who acceded to power in 1971, replacing a discredited Walter Ulbricht.
- 12 See Langford (2005: 37) and Gledhill (1999: 157–60) for good summaries of the critical reappraisal of melodrama as an ideologically subversive form.
- 13 Because 'sie' is the German feminine personal pronoun, the implication here is that Sieland is a deliberate echo of the German word Heiland, the term often used for Jesus. This religious allusion is further underpinned, as Lindenberger illustrates, by the composite, and perhaps rather crudely overcoded, nature of the actress's Christian name, Christa-Maria.
- 14 See, for example, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's *Emilia Galotti* (1987[1772]).

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### Author Biography

Owen Evans is a Senior Lecturer in the new Department of Political and Cultural Studies at Swansea University, UK. He has published on German literature and culture, especially GDR literature, with a monograph on Günter de Bruyn and articles on Christoph Hein and Uwe Saeger amongst others. His last monograph, *Mapping the Contours of Oppression: Subjectivity, Truth and Fiction in Recent German Autobiographical Treatments of Totalitarianism* was published by Rodopi in 2006. He has also published on European cinema, with articles on the film *Run Lola Run* and the role of the film festival in Europe. His current major research project is a study of German cinema since 2000, and he is also involved in an Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) network that looks at the cultural reconstruction of memories of the GDR since 1989. He is co-founding director of the European Cinema Research Forum (ECRF), as well as co-founding editor of the international journal *Studies in European Cinema*.