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CHAPTER EIGHT

International 'Auditorism': The Postnational Politics of Interpretation of von Donnersmarck's *The Lives of Others*

Although one might not notice it immediately, Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's first full-length feature film – *The Lives of Others* (2006) – begins with a border crossing. The opening sequence portrays, in part, an unnerving interrogation undertaken by the film's protagonist-to-be, Stasi captain Gerd Wiesler, who is shown impassively extracting information from his unfortunate source, an acquaintance of someone who has successfully defected to the West. The traversal – or rather, in this case, transgression, *going over* – of the national frontier is thus a precondition for the film's beginning and the origin of a central tension to be played out over the course of the work's narrative, namely: the simultaneous construction of and challenge to distinct national identity. Initially an impediment to the free exchange of bodies and ideas across imposed national divisions, Wiesler's empathetic education (what Ute Wölfel has called an 'aesthetic education') will ultimately make of him a martyr to the cause of crossing a variety of borders – an attitude ironically implicit to his idiosyncratic and intrusive reading strategy throughout.¹ Formally, *The Lives of Others* registers this readerly approach by blurring the border between sight and sound, rendering the Stasi spy's sonic experience visual in a manner to be elucidated in this chapter.

Presenting taped audio excerpts of this initial interrogation to a class of aspiring Stasi agents – slightly later in the same sequence – Wiesler insistently reminds his students that the escaped defector and his captive friend are enemies of the East German state; but at stake here, more globally, is a danger to the status of the nation-state as such. After all, one might rightly regard the fall of the Berlin Wall (with which the film concludes) as the decisive beginning of the phenomenon of mature globalization. William Outhwaite and Larry Ray, for instance, contrast today's ostensibly "borderless" world² to the Cold War 'world of borders *par excellence* – both physical borders epitomized by the Berlin Wall and sym-

¹ Ute Wölfel, 'Inverting the Lives of "Others": Retelling the Nazi Past in *Ehe im Schatten* and *The Lives of Others*', *German Life and Letters*, 64.4 (2011), 601–18 (p. 615).

² William Outhwaite and Larry Ray, *Social Theory and Post-Communism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), p. 117.





bolic borders of “us” and “them” in which crossing a land frontier involved the frisson of transgression’.³ 1989 then marks the birth of what might be understood as ‘more porous’ national divisions ‘subject to repeated panics over migration and “asylum”’.⁴ Under protection during the opening interrogation of *The Lives of Others* is not merely an exemplary national border, but the very *possibility* of the same. And in this manner – considering the ultimate collapse of the nation-state being defended – Wiesler’s anxiety regarding border crossing in this first sequence is pertinent not only to the historical conditions in which the film’s narrative is to be set, but, perhaps more importantly, also to the political conditions in which it ends: the postwall Europe in which the film is to be produced and received.

Seen from the perspective of a panic about borders, a new light is shed on von Donnersmarck’s film – which chronicles a political history concluding with this very phenomenon: German unification and the definitive dissolution of the ultimate border between East and West. This is of particular importance for the post-national politics of *The Lives of Others* if we follow Jürgen Habermas’s intimation in *Die postnationale Konstellation (The Postnational Constellation)* that the problematic postwall unification of Germany largely parallels current concerns with postnationalism⁵ – a set of concerns especially relevant to *film* as an international art form and as a purportedly postnational emissary of national heritage. Here, then, I propose to examine how the filmic form itself inevitably complicates the implicitly nationalizing project of the film’s protagonist and an international understanding of this film as a supposed monument to life in the German Democratic Republic. Reading von Donnersmarck’s *début* from the angle of the post-national, I intend to expose how *The Lives of Others* negotiates an East German national identity for an international audience. After outlining the parameters of national cinema in a contemporary globalized environment, I will examine key sequences from the film in order to demonstrate how *The Lives of Others* thematizes and problematizes these concerns both as a matter of plot and, more subtly but just as importantly, also on a formal level.

3 Outhwaite and Ray, *Social Theory*, p. 1.

4 Outhwaite and Ray, *Social Theory*, p. 1.

5 Jürgen Habermas, *Die postnationale Konstellation* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1998).





(Post)national Cinema

The transcendence of national boundaries is central both to the subject of the film and to its intended audience, for, as one of Germany's most recent international blockbusters, *The Lives of Others* must simultaneously be addressed to a spectatorship sharing this collective past and destined for another, broader audience attracted by its Hollywood appeal. As Timothy Garton Ash has put it in the *New York Review of Books*, the film 'uses the syntax and convention of Hollywood to convey to the widest possible audience some part of the truth about life under the Stasi'.⁶ In a recent chapter on the historical thriller, Jaimey Fisher examines this 'Hollywood syntax' in greater detail, treating von Donnersmarck's debut as both a German heritage film⁷ and Hollywood melodrama, highlighting the difference between cinematic works intended to be blockbusters within Germany and those, like von Donnersmarck's, targeted also, or even primarily, at an international audience. In Fisher's view, it is precisely this procedure that positions von Donnersmarck's film as a cultural ambassador of German national identity: 'German historical films would seem to constitute German national cinema, at least as it performs national discourses for international audiences' and 'as it tries to find a niche, both domestically and internationally, in a market dominated by Hollywood product'.⁸ *The Lives of Others* is thus a fundamentally *transnational* text,



⁶ Timothy Garton Ash, 'The Stasi on Our Minds', *The New York Review of Books*, 31 May 2007. Ash's position is quoted by a number of scholars as an important point of departure for aspects of their analyses of the film, including Cheryl Dueck, 'The Humanization of the Stasi in *The Lives of Others*', *German Studies Review*, 31.3 (2008), 599–608 (p. 604); Mareike Hermann, 'The Spy as Writer: Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's *The Lives of Others*', *Gegenwartsliteratur. Ein germanistisches Jahrbuch*, 7, ed. by Paul Michael Lützeler and Stephen K. Schindler (Tübingen: Stauffenburg, 2008), 90–112 (p. 90); Mary Beth Stein, 'Stasi with a Human Face? Ambiguity in *The Lives of Others*', *German Studies Review*, 31.3 (2008), 567–79 (p. 568); and finally Jaimey Fisher, 'German Historical Film as Production Trend: European Heritage Cinema and Melodrama in *The Lives of Others*', in *The Collapse of the Conventional. German Film and Its Politics at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*, ed. by Jaimey Fisher and Brad Prager (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2008), pp. 186–215 (p. 187).

⁷ This term was first introduced to the study of German cinema in two essays by Lutz Koepnick, who uses it to identify easily digestible films focusing on the German past and most predominantly the history of the Nazi era. See Lutz Koepnick, 'Reframing the Past: Heritage Cinema and Holocaust in the 1990s', *New German Critique*, 87 (2002), 47–82; and Lutz Koepnick, 'Amerika gibt's überhaupt nicht: Notes on the German Heritage Film,' in *German Pop Culture. How American Is it?*, ed. by Agnec C. Mueller (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004), pp. 191–208.

⁸ Jaimey Fisher, 'German Historical Film as Production Trend', p. 190. The (in)accuracy of *The Lives of Others* as such an historical fiction has been treated widely in the scholarship on the film. Hermann largely writes off this entire debate, concluding that 'objections to the historical improbability of a Stasi captain's protecting one of his subjects echo recurring debates about the





with political concerns as relevant to today's global environment as to its isolated historical and geographic setting.

As an internationally successful cinematic work examining and presenting this particular national past largely for foreign eyes – indeed, *exclusively* for foreign eyes, if one considers the fact that the nation in question no longer exists – von Donnersmarck's *The Lives of Others* necessarily invites reinvestigation of the very concept of national cinema.⁹ A wealth of recent studies on German film and

authenticity of the representation of historical material in narrative film and may be considered as predictable reactions to an artist's creative treatment of a historical period that is still fresh in the minds of many former GDR citizens and survivors of the regime's terror'. Mareike Hermann, 'The Spy as Writer', p. 92. Daniela Berghahn agrees that 'the authenticity discourse is something of a red herring when it comes to explaining a film's success' and thus addresses to what degree *The Lives of Others* continues in the successful tradition of marketing Germany's dark past to global audiences: '*The Lives of Others* resonates with [...] all-too-familiar depictions of Germany's tainted and traumatic past in cinema [...] to invoke the subconscious Nazi-Stasi association which, arguably, plays an important role in the film's international success'. Daniela Berghahn, 'Remembering the Stasi in a Fairy Tale of Redemption: Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's *The Lives of Others*', *Oxford German Studies*, 38.3 (2009), 321–33 (p. 323). Thomas Lindenberger would disagree, insisting that 'in the case of *The Lives of Others*, "authenticity" matters in a particular way, insofar as the claim to achieve it was crucial for its successful marketing'. Thomas Lindenberger, 'Stasiploitation? Why Not? The Scriptwriter's Historical Creativity in *The Lives of Others*', *German Studies Review*, 31.3 (2008), 557–66, (p. 558). Jens Gieseke, whom Lindenberger cites, judges the numerous historical inaccuracies of von Donnersmarck's historical imagination more harshly than perhaps any other critic, to some extent condemning the genre of historical cinema on the whole: 'The genre of the historical film is without a doubt useful for sparking curiosity. At the same time, however, such films contaminate our memory with a flood of aesthetic images or even with a faux-historical narrative'. Jens Gieseke, 'Stasi goes Hollywood: Donnersmarck's *The Lives of Others* und die Grenzen der Authentizität', *German Studies Review*, 31.3 (2008), 580–88 (p. 585). More recently, Owen Evans argues that although '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 ongoing discussions about the legacy of the MfS'. Owen Evans, 'Redeeming the Demon? The Legacy of the Stasi in *The Lives of Others*', *Memory Studies*, 3.2 (2010), 164–77 (p. 165). Revealing a greater affinity than previously acknowledged between *The Lives of Others* and the kinds of *Ostalgie* films it sought to supplant, Paul Cooke provides both a thorough overview of the authenticity debate – as well as the possibility of moving past it – concluding that the film's self-consciously 'complex view of GDR historiography' permits it to 'engage critically with contemporary debates on the historical appraisal of the GDR'. Paul Cooke, 'Watching the Stasi: authenticity, *Ostalgie* and history in Florian von Donnersmarck's *The Lives of Others* (2006)', in *New Directions in German Cinema*, ed. by Paul Cooke and Chris Homewood (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), pp. 111–27. (p. 117, p. 127).

⁹ One of the foundational and most commonly cited attempts to redefine this term is in Andrew Higson, 'The Concept of National Cinema', *Screen*, 30.4 (1989), 36–47.





European film, more generally, has interrogated the (im)possibility of the persistence of what one might still call national cinema in a presumably postnational, globalized environment – most coming to the conclusion that the two terms are, at the very least, not entirely antithetical, if not, in fact, ultimately engendered one by the other.¹⁰

In their introduction to a collection of essays from 2007 – *The Cosmopolitan Screen. German Cinema and the Global Imaginary, 1945 to the Present* – Stephan Schindler and Lutz Koepnick argue, for instance, that,

Rather than erasing the local, the reality of globalization leads to an unprecedented dynamic in which the local and the global exist in mutual interdependence. One here simultaneously needs and produces the other without requiring the mediation of the national or the nation-state's institutional mechanisms of regulating the political, legal, economic, and cultural aspects of everyday life.¹¹

Local identity can only be defined by and in opposition to what is outside of it, which is to say that the delineation of national cinematic traditions is a definition by difference that can, today, only be accomplished within a global context. Such a context is undoubtedly what Thomas Elsaesser has in mind when he contends, 'The label national cinema has to be conferred on films by others, either by other national or "international" audiences, or by national audiences, but at another point in time'.¹² This is precisely the position occupied by *The Lives of Others*, which resuscitates an extinct national history for the viewing pleasure of an audience that will always be removed from it, be it temporally, geographically, or both at once.

It is for this reason that Randall Halle, most recently, in his *German Film after Germany. Toward a Transnational Aesthetic* (2008), can conclude that 'Transnationalism does not undo national cinema'.¹³ While acknowledging the merits of

10 Randall Halle provides a succinct historical-economic argument for the same – reversing the traditionally assumed historical trajectory from the national to the global – when he contends that 'cinema emerged as a medium for a global market, and only later became bound to national audiences'. Randall Halle, *German Film after Germany. Toward a Transnational Aesthetic* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008), p. 10.

11 Stephan K. Schindler and Lutz Koepnick, 'Against the Wall? The Global Imaginary of German Cinema', in *The Cosmopolitan Screen. German Cinema and the Global Imaginary, 1945 to the Present*, ed. by Stephan K. Schindler and Lutz Koepnick (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2007), pp. 1–21 (p. 12).

12 Thomas Elsaesser, *European Cinema. Face to Face with Hollywood* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005), p. 40.

13 Halle, *German Film after Germany*, p.26.





a postnational perspective,¹⁴ Halle rejects the term to some degree, preferring instead the notion of the *transnational*, and arguing that ‘the transnationalization of Europe preserves a national cinema, even as it recontextualizes that cinema, creates a break, and radically changes its significance’.¹⁵ The current chapter seeks to expose how *The Lives of Others*, as an historical ‘heritage’ film, endeavours to define a national sense of self both domestically and for foreign audiences.

As the German Ministry of the Interior asserted in 1996, ‘Film is the expression of the cultural identity of a country vis-à-vis its own citizens as well as foreign countries’.¹⁶ And, to this extent, the film itself is comparable to the clandestine essay central to its plot – a piece of journalism published in West Germany, thus crossing borders, intended as an envoy meant to convey to the whole of the country some kernel of truth about living under state surveillance. The precise medial history of this text involves an extensive degree of transnational movement, insofar as the essay will be typed on a small East German typewriter fabricated solely for export and then smuggled back into the country from the West and hidden – throughout the film – underneath a loose doorsill, which is to say: on an unsteady threshold. Moreover, the text requires a certain measure of *translation*, as the visiting *Spiegel* editor insists, while debating his intended revisions with the author, claiming that he only wants to ensure that the essay will be correctly understood in West Germany as well as East. Like the film itself, the essay must adopt an arguably somewhat foreign idiom in order to make its illustration of life in the German Democratic Republic comprehensible abroad.



14 As Halle has it, ‘Within the context of this debate, some critics, maintaining what could be described as a *postnational* position, have argued forcefully against the label of national cinema altogether. Behind this position is the fact that in the context of transnationalism, it has become increasingly impossible to invoke a transparent, self-evident relationship between the nation and state. Those participants who fundamentally challenge the term ‘national cinema’ have brought forward particularly astute observations on the permeability of national production and consumption’. Halle, *German Film after Germany*, p. 25. Nevertheless, Halle insists emphatically that one not too readily mistake the transnational (which still contains the possibility for national identity) for the postnational (which would, in a sense, eradicate it entirely).

15 Halle, *German Film after German*, p. 7.

16 Quoted in Halle, *German Film after Germany*, p. 24.





International 'Auditorism'

With an eye to such translation, here I would like to propose an examination primarily of the *medial* manifestation of this dissolution of borders. The presentation of Wiesler's experience of eavesdropping – as we shall see – is emphatically filmic, and both scholarship and popular reviews of von Donnersmarck's début have tended to defend the film's discursive depth by accentuating the voyeuristic surveillance constituting its plot as an allegory en abyme for the filmic medium itself.

Nicolas Beaupré, for instance, praises the treatment of this 'voyeuristic relationship' as a 'reflective consideration of the cinematic medium that is as engaging as the film's actual subject'.¹⁷ And Eva Horn analyzes Wiesler's transformation from pure medium into a 'good person' in order to demonstrate the complicit role that media themselves can play in surveillance.¹⁸ But such interpretations overlook a central lack: the film's protagonist – a Stasi spectator *qua* eavesdropper – is deprived of the most crucial element of the meta-discursive (filmic) mode, to wit: *vision*. Noting this discrepancy, Mareike Hermann appears to intimate its importance – giving the first early hint of a debate burgeoning in the present volume – when she notes that von Donnersmarck 'offers us visual images to complement the audio Wiesler overhears, which lets us, the peeping Toms in the audience, spy on the couple even more completely than Wiesler, the master spy'.¹⁹ The film's story then turns not on voyeurism per se, but rather on an insufficient and problematic 'auditorism' which must then be complemented for the viewer by the addition of the visual register.

A careful consideration of this transposition (or transcription) of the auditory onto the visual will reveal that von Donnersmarck's film comes to advocate its own peculiar politics of reading with significant implications for the appropriate *international* reception of (East) Germany's unique national history.²⁰

¹⁷ Nicolas Beaupré, 'L'enfer des autres', *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire*, 91 (2006), 163–64 (p. 163).

¹⁸ Eva Horn, 'Media of Conspiracy: Love and Surveillance in Fritz Lang and Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck', *New German Critique*, 103 (2008), 127–44 (p. 142).

¹⁹ Mareike Hermann, 'The Spy as Writer', p. 94.

²⁰ This general claim can be contextualized in terms of other studies of *The Lives of Others*. In a similar vein, examining the soundtrack of the film, Lindenberger speaks of a transposition from the pure fantasy of the spy moved by the music into the memory discourse of historical fiction. See Thomas Lindenberger, 'Stasiploitation? Why Not?', p. 561. This is also comparable to Alison Lewis's thesis that the film performs a blending of 'communicative' and 'cultural' memory. See Alison Lewis, 'Contingent Memories: The Crisis of Memory in Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's *The Lives of Others*', in *Limbus 1. Erinnerungskrise/Memory Crises*, ed. by Franz-Joseph Dieters, Axel Fliethmann, Birgit Lang, Alison Lewis and Christiane Weller (Freiberg: Rombach Verlag, 2008), pp. 147–63 (p. 151).





The willing, even careful conflation of visual and acoustic information will come to serve as the chief medium of the global viewer's understanding of the peculiarities of the defunct East German nation and of nationhood as such – which is to say that the portrayal of the very surveillance intended to limit and delineate nationhood ironically serves to deconstruct the arbitrariness of any such delineation.

This precarious dynamic can be observed already in the film's initial shots – the depiction of the interrogation to which I alluded by way of introduction. Von Donnersmarck foregrounds the nascent tension between the auditory and visual registers in his film by beginning with the sound of footsteps in a hallway – as the prisoner is ushered to the interrogation room – before any corresponding visual image is projected. The spectator is thus first required to interpret textual material based on auditory cues alone, initially positing and only later having their imagined visual components supplemented and confirmed. This relationship between sight and sound is then reinforced by the very first line of dialogue: the guard's terse command that the prisoner avert his eyes so as not to see the faces of another pair of individuals passing at the far end of the hallway. Deprived of vision, experiencing the footsteps of his double only acoustically, the prisoner himself is thus in the same situation as the film's viewer.

And this readerly position will itself become the object of an implied mise-en-abyme with the appearance of a tape recorder hidden in the desk of the interrogation room as Wiesler turns it on – thus beginning the acoustic documentation to which we, as spectators, have apparently been playing witness for some seconds already. From the outset, our experience of this filmic reality exists only in a playfully liminal space insofar as it is fundamentally unclear to what extent the sound here is intended to be a diegetic rendering of what is captured by this tape recorder. For if initially this interrogation is unframed, it is soon to be contextualized by a flash forward to Wiesler's presentation of the recording in the classroom, marked by the symmetrical introduction of another recording device, spooling back the selfsame tape as Wiesler (qua professor) comments and elaborates on it.

To the onscreen audience of students, only the auditory aspect of this material is presented, thereby postulating an imaginary or mnemonic space – again, beginning, notably, even before the tape recorder is turned on – in which, for the film's spectator, the crosscutting between the classroom and interrogation serves as commentary and explication. Spooling forward, we witness the success of Wiesler's interrogation and his exhortation that his students learn to listen carefully in order to interpret (it is implied) based on auditory information alone.





This insistence is most emphatic at the moment the professor twice demands absolute silence from his students and quizzes them to determine if anyone among them can identify the sound of scraping screws as he (in the flashback) extracts the scent sample from the seat where the prisoner had been repeatedly instructed to place his palms. As the only available hint enabling interpretation of these tactile and olfactory elements, the auditory is established as the interrogator's dominant modality. As Eva Horn has noted of Wiesler in his function as an interrogator and eavesdropper, 'He too is a medium – [a] listening device'.²¹ Moreover, the predominance of hearing is implied by the very word that Wiesler uses for interrogations: 'Verhören' ('hören' means to hear). The habitual hegemony of the visual seems, however, simultaneously uprooted and re-established by the film insofar as the visual supplement of the flashback is required for the viewer's understanding of this scene.

That this, precisely, is the procedure of the film itself will be intimated only a moment later via the intermediary of the theatre. Wiesler finishes his lecture to the unexpected and ironic applause of an intruding senior officer who invites him to a play that same evening – the subject of the following sequence. And as Hermann has observed: 'The dramatized staging of Wiesler's perfect interrogation, in which his students, as well as the film's viewers, become the audience, and of his performance as a teacher, observed by his superior, serves to underline the parallel between Wiesler's job and the task of the actor'.²² Yet, this parallel between interrogation, classroom and theatre – all liminal spaces allowing an observation of the lives of others – will be extended further to the cinematic experience at hand by the belated intertitle first announcing the name of the film, which immediately precedes the opening of the stage curtains. And, again, this title is layered over the sounds of theatregoers shuffling in their seats before the audience or stage is ever pictured on screen. The film's explicit practice will be to visualize what is otherwise, or at least initially, only heard.

Already *The Lives of Others* seems to present the fundamental irony of its protagonist's project. The interrogator is attempting to *restrict* mobility, to establish *impermeable* borders, as it is on such strict proscription that the discrete identity of his nation depends. But the ostensibly objective politics of observation that characterize the passive medial quality of recording are inevitably rewritten by the supplement of the visual, which acts to integrate (in part) the observer's subjectivity – thereby revealing the very disregard for borders (medial, interpretive, spatial) underlying these intrusive acts of surveillance and their conflation

²¹ Eva Horn, 'Media of Conspiracy', p. 138.

²² Mareike Hermann, 'The Spy as Writer', p. 97.





of private and public space. And if this surveillance is indeed to be regarded as a *mise-en-abyme* of the medium of film, in this context, the capacity of *cinema* to bring together distinct spaces appears to render it inherently transnational. The appropriation of the meta-discursive apparatus (of the visual component of the filmic mode) then operates to corrupt the nationalizing endeavour of the film's protagonist.

This is perhaps nowhere more evident than at the moment of the film's apparent ethical apotheosis: the unsubtle establishment of 'Die Sonate vom guten Menschen' (The Sonata of the Good Person) as the central musical and moral motif of Wiesler's transformation from pure medium into a kind of active author. Now roughly halfway through the film, we have witnessed Wiesler bug and monitor the Berlin apartment of playwright Georg Dreyman and his actress girlfriend, growing increasingly enamoured with their artistic existence. If the immediate inspiration for the playing of 'Die Sonate vom guten Menschen' is the (professionally and politically motivated) suicide of the friend and colleague who had given Dreyman the score, the larger context is perhaps more illuminating for the present purpose.

Read closely, the grand and somewhat saccharine epiphany is doubly placed within the broader concerns of border crossings by the two scenes that precede it: a discussion between Dreyman and his girlfriend of the travel ban inflicted upon the outspoken author Paul Hauser followed by a shot of Wiesler at home. Upon learning that Hauser has been denied a travel permit for a lecture tour in the West, Dreyman finds it only natural, asking if the regime can really be expected to allow such a vocal dissident to travel abroad. And, in the attic above, Wiesler's unwanted and incompetent assistant duly notes this as an assenting opinion in his typewritten report. The chief role of this bumbling eavesdropper may appear to be pure comic relief, but he also operates as Wiesler's own contrasting foil, inasmuch as his presence as an inept interpreter highlights the senior officer's readerly prowess.

The discussion of Paul Hauser and his travel ban will then conclude with Dreyman wondering where he has misplaced a certain book – which, as we are to discover momentarily, has been borrowed by another Stasi spectator. For in counterpoint to the restriction of Hauser's movement, Wiesler – initially content merely to listen in on the apartment below – has crossed the line, physically infiltrating the private space of these living quarters and returning, in orphic fashion, to his own with the cribbed collection of Brecht poetry that the viewer finds him reading on the couch. An unwitting self-critique, this quasi-colonization and pilaging is perhaps akin to von Donnersmarck's own project, if we follow Thomas Lindenberger in his assertion that *The Lives of Others* 'can be seen as a classical case of an "exploitation film"' that enacts a 'West German projection' onto the





East German other.²³ Significantly, this image of Wiesler reading at home is the only instance in the film of direct crosscutting between these two domestic spaces: the distinction between 'us' and 'them' is beginning to break down. Moreover, it is not – in this instance – Wiesler's voice providing the interior monologue for his reading of Brecht, but *Dreyman's* own: the sonic surveillance has gone so far as to appropriate the subjectivity of the other under observation.²⁴

Another sonic cue – the background music – bridges into the moment Dreyman learns of Jerska's death. The soundtrack subtly transcends both time and space as the pensive, melancholic music continues softly under the loud ringing of the telephone in Dreyman's apartment. Von Donnersmarck then cuts to Wiesler, now back in the attic, flipping a switch and lifting a receiver to double the author as he answers the telephone below. Throughout the conversation, von Donnersmarck crosscuts between the author and the Stasi officer: that Dreyman's interlocutor is never pictured visually emphasizes that the important dialogue here, albeit wordless and one-sided, is in fact between Dreyman and Wiesler. Receiving the unexpected news of his friend's suicide, as Wiesler overhears, Dreyman stumbles forward to the piano bench and sits, but does not begin to play until *after* the new background music (which will itself turn out to be the piano sonata, 'Die Sonate vom guten Menschen') has begun to be heard, at which point he retrieves the gifted score from a stack of sheet music atop his Rönisch baby grand.

In perfect parallel to the film's opening sequence, the originally still extradiegetic piano music is first layered over the image in another sound bridge introducing the next shot. Present initially as an auditory manifestation without corresponding visual representation, this use of nonsimultaneous sound elevates the musical motif to an extra-narrative niveau existing in a realm neither purely diegetic nor non-diegetic – a coupling of a consummate constructedness and incidental authenticity that is the hallmark of the cinematic experience itself. The

²³ Thomas Lindenberger, 'Stasiploitation? Why Not?', p. 557. As noted in the introduction to this volume, von Donnersmarck is keen to defend his treatment of the subject with recourse to his parents' East German origins, noting that his family made frequent visits to the German Democratic Republic during his childhood and thus claiming firsthand experience with the Stasi. As a polyglot who grew up internationally, one might, however, make the argument that von Donnersmarck is a particularly 'postnational' individual. Berghahn rallies a defence for von Donnersmarck, choosing to see his 'cosmopolitan upbringing' and looser ties to East Germany as an advantage. In her view, his is a 'prosthetic memory' that 'permits him to look back in empathy, not anger – and to seduce his audience into doing the same'. Daniela Berghahn, 'Remembering the Stasi', p. 323.

²⁴ For Ute Wölfel, 'this demonstrates Dreyman's redeeming force as a "Künstler"'. Ute Wölfel, *Inverting the Lives of 'Others'*, p. 616.





steady motion of the pan from right to left that then encircles Dreyman and his lover at the piano will continue, as if uninterrupted, into the next shot of Wiesler listening above them. Moreover, the quality of the sound does not change in the slightest, despite the entirely distinct spatial setting. In the same manner as the crosscutting that preceded it, this formal consistency between the two shots not only implies a shared space of sorts,²⁵ it also allows the off-screen sound once more to exist both as the variety of mood music typical of Hollywood melodrama and as internal diegetic sound – the music as it is heard by Wiesler.²⁶ Existing only in the imaginary, the space presented, then, is both borderless and textual, which is to say: it is cinematic.

As indicated by the admittedly bromidic dictum immediately tacked on by Dreyman – that only a decent human being could *truly hear* this music – this moment is meant to mark the Stasi spy's full transformation into a good person. Wiesler has, so to speak, gone native. However, as a transformation from pure medium into *Mensch*, Wiesler's metamorphosis will also prove his worth as a good reader. Patently, the rather cheap aesthetic bliss of this key moment is meant to model a response for the film's audience: like the students in his classroom as they learn to *listen*, Wiesler's enraptured, tearful response to the sonata here is clearly meant to mould our own. Ironically, it is his intrusive and imaginative spectatorship – his skill as an interrogator for instance – that has permitted him to become an ideal reader: one capable of empathy. On a larger level, this personal evolution portends a greater transformation, as Matthew Bernstein has established when he writes of Wiesler: 'people do change. So do countries. That change – life in Eastern Berlin after the wall comes down – is shown in the coda of *The Lives of Others*'.²⁷ It is this very sort of empathy, the film appears to imply, that permits the postnational spectator to engage with the universal truths of the German Democratic Republic's atypical political past.

²⁵ As Paul Cooke notes, 'the parallel montage seem[s] to suggest that the Stasi officer is somehow watching as well as listening to his target'. 'Watching the Stasi', p. 122.

²⁶ Indeed, Fisher takes this musical moment as a chief example of what constitutes the melodrama of the film – which he sees, in a somewhat different manner, as at odds with the political: 'Von Donnersmarck's original conceptualization shows, with surprising clarity, how the mute mode of melodrama, in its music, is opposed in the film to the political. Von Donnersmarck does not argue with Lenin or Wiesler but plays them, as he does for the viewers throughout the film, music to melt the heart, an approach common to the melodrama mode'. Jaimey Fisher, 'German Historical Film as Production Trend', p. 202.

²⁷ Matthew H. Bernstein, 'The Lives of Others: Matthew H. Bernstein on an Emotive Thriller Set in Communist East Germany', *Film Quarterly*, 61.1 (2007), 30–6 (p. 35).





Von Donnersmarck's film thus comes to espouse a certain ethics of reading qua authorship: not only is the spectator required to supplement auditory experience with his or her own interpretation but Wiesler also ultimately begins to improvise by falsifying documentation, writing fictions rather than recording events as they happen. At the moment of the greatest dramatic tension, we will even discover that he has secretly confiscated into his own possession the incriminating typewriter, the very emblem of authorship.²⁸ His metamorphosis from mere medium into human being, from passive observer into active reader, is also implicitly a transformation from reader into writer: yet another appropriation of the identity of the individual whom he has been observing. But if the readerly comportment that *The Lives of Others* would appear to advocate is an astoundingly active one, Wiesler's first act of authorial agency will instead be of passive neglect, as he resolves to let Paul Hauser escape across the border – a definitive reversal of his position in the opening interrogation, as I will examine in the concluding pages of this chapter.

Broken Borders

If hearing the piano sonata marks an essential turning point in Wiesler's evolution – the genesis of his becoming an author – this is no less the case for Dreyman.²⁹ Motivated to political action by his friend's death, the dramatist will resolve to write a covert literary essay on the suppressed statistics of suicide in the East German state: an essay tellingly intended necessarily and exclusively for a West German audience. And even the title of the essay, 'Von einem, der rübermachte' (From/Of Someone Who Crossed Over), recasts many of the film's key themes in terms of this disintegrating border: it is firstly Jerska's suicide, of course, that is compared to a successful escape from East Germany, but also, one might argue, Dreyman's switching sides and becoming politically active against

²⁸ In fact, as Hermann highlights, while Dreyman and the others only pretend to write a play in celebration of the fortieth anniversary of the founding of the German Democratic Republic, Wiesler, in his fabricated reports, will be obligated to outline one himself. See Hermann, 'The Spy as Writer', p. 104.

²⁹ As Hermann again notes, 'Both Wiesler and Dreyman are personally transformed as a result of pursuing a deeper truth through their writing: the former goes from recorder and disseminator of overheard dialogue to being a protector and inventor of dramatic discourse, while the latter, who had been an opportunistic creator of abstract dramatic texts, turns instead to the recording and disseminating of previously hidden truth via journalistic discourse'. Hermann, 'The Spy as Writer', p. 93.





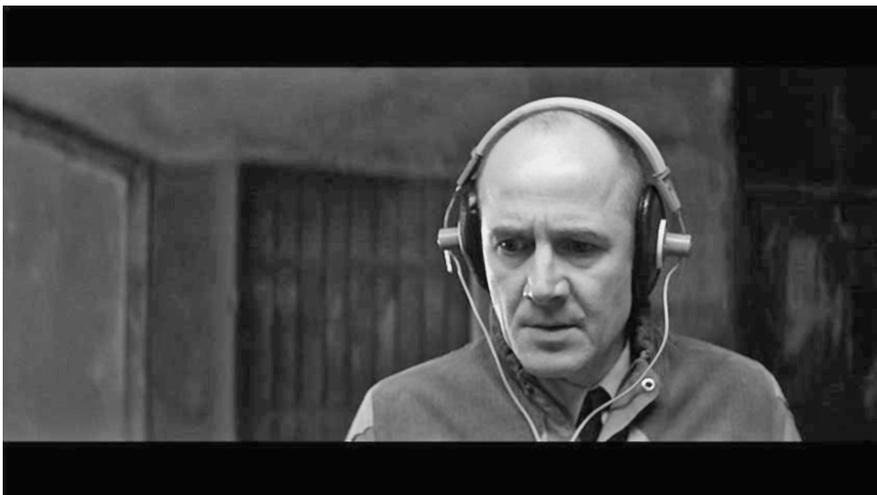
the state. As the origin and inspiration for Dreyman's newly politicized (and newly international) authorship, the acoustic experience of the sonata thus represents not only a novel point of complicity between Wiesler and Dreyman, but also between Dreyman and Hauser, whom the former author approaches as a co-conspirator for his anticipated project.

It is the planning of this essay that first alerts Dreyman to the possibility of Wiesler's presence, to the notion that he might be under observation (Hauser's lecture tour was blocked, as he informs the other, because he naïvely rehearsed its subversive material at home and was therefore overheard by the Stasi). In order to determine whether Dreyman's apartment is indeed unmonitored, as they hope, and thus a safe space for open discussion, the two authors stage the preparation of an invented border crossing, loudly plotting how Paul supposedly will hide beneath the backseat of his West Berliner uncle's distinctive gold Mercedes in order to escape his homeland.

As Wiesler listens in on Dreyman and his accomplices hatching this fabricated plot for Hauser's flight – really just a ruse to discover if they're being overheard – they are filmed in a medium-long shot from a high angle, as if from the eavesdropper's acoustic perspective in the attic. Dreyman turns his head, looking towards the camera, and almost yells up his question regarding which checkpoint Hauser and his uncle intend to use, as if intuitively aware of his invisible observer (and would-be interlocutor's) position. Later, bewildered and relieved by the success of Hauser's fictive escape, Dreyman will spread his arms, cock back his head and again shout towards the ceiling – this time an expression of mockery toward the state security apparatus that, unbeknownst to him, is installed directly above his apartment. Such glances consequently operate in the same manner as an eye-line match, putting the following shots of Wiesler gazing down disconcertingly into a kind of shot-counter-shot, establishing the semblance of direct dialogue.

Again we witness Wiesler picking up his telephone receiver, even dialling the border control about to inform them of the attempted emigration, before deciding to stay silent and allow this one transgression as a tribute to his evolving one-sided amity for Dreyman. The news of Paul Hauser's successfully staged crossing also comes by telephone, and again von Donnersmarck crosscuts between Dreyman holding a telephone receiver and Wiesler holding his. But whereas the previous telephone conversation was notable for the absence of any visual depiction of Dreyman's actual interlocutor, here the Dreyman-Wiesler duo is supplemented by the image of the third party: Hauser's uncle standing in a phone booth in West Berlin. The filmic visualization of Wiesler's acoustic surveillance has permitted him – perhaps obliged him – to penetrate the very border he had always sought to render impermeable.





Dreyman looking up towards the attic, as if performing on a stage (a), as Wiesler looks downwards while eavesdropping (b), giving the impression of an eyeline match, *The Lives of Others*.

But in an important sense this border crossing is, of course, merely a fictive one: a ploy that has been invented by Hauser himself in order to determine whether Dreyman's apartment is bugged. Hauser, as if required by his surname to remain domesticated, has stayed put. Existing only in that imaginary space where the sonata had been heard – between Dreyman's apartment and Wiesler's attic, between auditory information and the visual imagination – this triumph of transnational movement is truly cinematic. Wiesler temporarily misinterprets this





potentiality, ignoring the subjunctive in the telephone call from West Berlin announcing, 'Paul *wäre* drüben' (Paul *would* be across). But the realization of this potential is left entirely to the cinematic imagination. As a wired telephone conversation, the border crossing exists only medially. Equally significantly, the fall of the Berlin Wall will never be directly shown on screen: instead the news is overheard on headphones, on the radio, mediated by the self-same apparatus as Wiesler's earlier surveillance. The definitive disintegration of what might well be the world's most emblematic national border is, by this point, only so much noise.

Globalizing Film

If *The Lives of Others* sells itself in no small way as a document on an East German past addressed to a global audience, it inevitably also becomes a commentary on today's post-*Wende* (hence 'postnational') reality. And, by the same token, despite the potentially nationalizing project of representing this distinctly East German imaginary post facto, the film's own extended emphasis on *mediality* ineluctably transcends the temporal and spatial boundaries of its politically specific subject – as boundaries of this type are utterly insignificant to the *medium* of film.

The very process of creating cinema would appear to involve the transcendence, even the eradication, of space. Indeed, our experience of film always offers us, in some small way, an escape from our domestic space, our home. As Schindler and Koepnick wonder in their introduction to *The Cosmopolitan Screen*:

Though cinema has often fostered narrowly nationalist causes and fuelled the viewer's exoticist desires, the medium's formal syntax [...] qualifies film as an ideal catalyst and training ground for developing what we might want to call a cosmopolitan vision. To be and become other, to experience the essential contingency of how we constantly draw and redraw boundaries around and between us, to probe different ways of looking at things – isn't all this cinema's innermost promise? [...] Do we not inevitably enter a world of global orientations and cosmopolitan deterritorialization whenever a film's first image leads our senses to places never visited before as such, no matter whether or not our objects of pleasure seek to endorse sedentary homes and strictly bounded existences?³⁰

Redefining borders, appropriating the experience of another, indeed, himself *becoming* other and ultimately becoming global, Wiesler's experience, despite its initially nationalist intent, is exemplary of such 'cosmopolitan deterritorialization' and such a 'cosmopolitan *vision*'.

30 Stephan K. Schindler and Lutz Koepnick, *The Cosmopolitan Screen*, p. 14.





That *The Lives of Others* is intended largely as a paean to the political power of art is no secret: in addition to the central role of the sonata, this is made manifest by Wiesler's fascination with Dreyman and Sieland, as well as by his own evolving artistry, and suggested even by the very fact that the depicted literati of East Germany are singled out for such strict state control. Questions of historical authenticity aside, and regardless of the kind of exploitation of which the film has been accused, perhaps *The Lives of Others* offers less an attempted justification for its appropriation of the German Democratic Republic's distinct national heritage than a celebration of the inherently globalizing tendencies of the medium that makes such an appropriation possible.

