Earned Beauty: *Lives of Others;* Synopsis and Discussion

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Introduction

'Weren't you afraid?' listeners demand, when they learn that I spent years travelling alone, by the cheapest means possible, including hitchhiking.

'No', I reply. If pressed, I confess: I trust in God. In spite of armed kidnappers in Africa, the goods I smuggled in Burma, the Texas thug with a gun, I was not afraid.

Except. One country stands out—the German Democratic Republic, the former East Germany. Nothing happened to me there, and yet something about the GDR rattled me. 'East German border guard' became a favourite insult.

Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's 2006 *The Lives of Others* (*Das Leben der Anderen*) invites viewers on a quick trip to the late, in some corners, lamented, GDR. *Lives* depicts the Stasi, the Ministry for State Security (Ministerium für Staatssicherheit). One in fifty East Germans played some role in Stasi spying. Unofficial collaborators *(Inoffizielle Mitarbeiter)* included husbands, doctors, parents, informing on wives, patients, daughters, and sons. Stasi spy archives constitute more written records than Germany had produced in all of its previous history.

Sounds pretty grim. And yet *Lives'* fans report joyous weeping during its final scene. *Lives* won the 2006 Academy Award for the Best Foreign Language Film and too many other awards to list here. IMDB fans voted it number seventy-four of the best films of all time, after *Rashomon*, *Modern Times*, and *Singing in the Rain*. Naysayers insist that *Lives'* fans are naïve. Not I. This review will argue that *Lives* is a profound, if flawed, work of art, and that its beauty, wrung from soul-crushing ugliness, is earned.

The following synopsis is lengthy; *Lives* is a new film, based on an original screenplay. It has not been widely released in the United States. It is dense and rich.

Synopsis

It's November, 1984, the screen title reads, the Orwellian year. We are walking down an institutional hallway. This is Hohenschönhausen, a former Gestapo prison, inherited by the Stasi. The walls range between blue-grey, green, and yellow: the signature spectrum of a Caucasian dying of cirrhosis, or of the Soviet Empire. Get used to it. A tall, uniformed man with a cinched waist keeps a tight grip on his prisoner. Without a second thought, you would have passed this prisoner—a somewhat cocky, handsome redhead, in a windbreaker—in the line getting into the theatre showing this film. No armband or exotic ethnicity differentiates him from his guard or from you. The horror begins.

A slightly built, balding, fifty-something captain, Hauptmann Gerd Wiesler (Ulrich Mühe), clicks on a bulky, reel-to-reel recorder. *Lives* is a trip down spy-technology memory lane. Okay, what's this? The prisoner is ordered to place his hands under his thighs, palms down. The viewer has been girded for scenes of torture. The palms-down routine is quaint as, but less menacing than, punishments meted out in Catholic school. Huh, we think, perhaps along with the prisoner. We can take this. And other viewers are thinking, 'See? I told you that the Commies were never as bad as the

Nazis.'

The captain wears the facial expression of a commuter driving through a familiar toll booth, waiting for the electronic acknowledgement that he's paid his fare. The prisoner is self-assured. He will just continue denying everything. Wiesler points out that the prisoner's so much as implying that he has been detained without reason impugns the benignity of the GDR, and, thus, itself constitutes reason for the prisoner to be punished. Eventually, controlled and righteous anger registers on the captain's face. This man is doing his duty; the prisoner's 'prepared lies' slight the captain.

The reel-to-reel is fast forwarded. In fact, it is being played, later, in an inter-cut scene, to a brightly lit class of prospective Stasi agents; young people listen to the tape and seem like the attentive, ambitious young people one might find at any lecture given by a powerful man whose power the students hope, one day, to take. This interrogation is also a performance. *Lives*' theme of voyeurism is announced. The camera cuts back to the interrogation room, now darkened; these yellow-greens have rotted to the necrotic. The cocky young man sobs, sweats, wilts. He has been deprived of sleep. His mind has been toyed with. He provides the captain with information Wiesler may have had all along. The camera cuts back to the classroom. A student raises his hand and protests that these techniques are inhuman. Wiesler coolly, silently, and efficiently marks an 'x' (like a cross) next to the student's name—which is, appropriately enough, 'Benedikt' (*Lives* is nothing if not a movie worth paying close attention to; 'benediction', from 'speak well', means 'blessing'; in addition, Benedict is the current, conservative, German pope).

Wiesler stares down his students, just as, in the inter-cut scenes, he stares down his prisoner. His job is getting at the truth, that's all, and upholding the very high ideals of the GDR. He allows a moment of exasperated annoyance to show on his face as he takes his prisoner's finally delivered confession; with a wait-for-it flourish, he instructs his students to listen carefully to the interrogation's denouement; wearing gloves, Wiesler kneels and flips screws off the prisoner's seat cover. The cover is placed into a jar sealed with a metal clip. This is a scent sample, to be saved in case the prisoner is to be tracked with dogs.

This, then, as cited in the title of a recent documentary, is the 'decomposition of a soul'. As stated in Stasi documents, 'the aim of decomposition is fragmentation, paralysis, to disorganize and isolate the negative enemy forces and thus allow a political ideological recuperation.'

As the students file out, Wiesler is intercepted by his old school chum and current superior, Anton Grubitz (Ulrich Tukur). Grubitz, tall, superficially handsome, with a floppy, blonde comb-over, suggests a new investigation to Wiesler, who glances at Grubitz's back as he, Wiesler, puts away his equipment. This is the first of many scenes in which Wiesler, without making eye contact, registers others the way an animal registers predator or prey. These moments of unreciprocated glances are feral, and they communicate isolation. The audience begins to learn how difficult it would be for Wiesler to make human contact.

The screen goes black; typed words appear: 'The Lives of Others'. A chill goes down the viewer's back. Will the 'lives' here serve as menu items for a Stasi soul cannibal? Or does that title promise, and not threaten? Are its use of the words not a reflection of callous exploitation, but an invitation to the unique gifts others' lives afford when they are engaged with love?

Wiesler now sits in the box of a theatre, watching, through opera glasses. The play is *Faces of Love (Gesichter der Liebe*), about heroic female factory workers. A tall, handsome man, dressed in a rumpled Bohemian jacket, with no tie, appears in the wings. This is Georg Dreyman (Sebastian Koch), 'the GDR's only non-subversive author', who thinks that he lives in the greatest country on earth. As the playwright, he graciously acknowledges applause from the audience.

When Wiesler views the play's heroine, the sensual, Christa-Maria Sieland (Martina Gedeck), he is no longer the functionary in complete control. Gabriel Yared's soundtrack perfectly emphasizes this moment that kicks the plot into gear; the operatic score luxuriates in a vibrancy, with colour and brio otherwise impossible in a film about the GDR. After the play, Wiesler observes Christa-Maria's embrace of Georg; he looks angry; he looks competitive. He tells Grubitz he wants to investigate Georg. Grubitz reports this to Minister Bruno Hempf (Thomas Thieme). Hempf is a human Jabba the Hut; he's fat and vile; and even the sounds his body makes as he shifts his girth in his theatre seat are grotesque. (Thieme deserves special appreciation for his willingness to be so repulsive.) Wiesler watches from above. Wiesler watching Hempf watching Georg hammers home the voyeuristic theme.

Later, at a cast party, Georg and Christa-Maria dance; their friends stand back and watch. Even among show people, Georg and Christa-Maria are the show. As glamorous as they are, though, they are still behind the bars of a cage: Christa-Maria's shiny dress is the dreary shade of a faded bruise; her eye shadow is a too obvious blue. Hempf, channelling Castro's 'Words to the Intellectuals', says that 'The party needs artists, but artists need the party more.' Hempf nails this by surreptitiously pawing Christa-Maria, who moves away. He praises Georg by announcing, 'Writers are engineers of the soul.' Georg reminds Hempf that that's a Stalinist quote.

Georg tells Hempf that he needs Albert Jerska (Volkmar Kleinert) to direct his plays, but Jerska has been blacklisted. Hempf reprimands Georg: 'there is no such thing as a blacklist' in the GDR. And, Hempf insists, Jerska cannot be trusted. 'People don't change.'

After the party, which he has observed surreptitiously, Wiesler returns to his apartment. His trimly efficient, unostentatious body enters a vestibule, and the camera pans his dwelling as Wiesler hangs his jacket on a hook. Apparently the one colour allowed in Stasiland other than jaundice is beige. Wiesler's wallpaper is beige faux-wood. His apartment is large, spacious, and clean. All angles are at a sharp ninety degrees. Two too small paintings adorn the walls. Nothing is messy or out of place. The scene is chilling. In his pristine kitchen, Wiesler squirts a tube of red paste onto white food. He settles down in front of the TV. Wiesler's sole dinner companion is a televised report on land for chicken farmers. The next scene offers a strong contrast. Georg, in a long coat that flatters his height and adds dash, is transporting a mess of scallions and other groceries. He interrupts his shopping to play boisterous street soccer with the neighbourhood kids. Wiesler is plastered against a wall, watching Georg play. He is wearing a waist-length, multiple-zipped and snapped jacket that is—no surprise here—grey-blue-green, the exact shades of the wall behind him.

With a brisk, practiced efficiency that consumers might wish their Internet providers could emulate, as soon as Georg steps out, Wiesler and his team, working against a stopwatch, wire Georg's apartment. Wiesler's eyes stare straight ahead, never

veering left nor right; his body seems directed, given shape, not by his spine but by his stare. Given the intensity of his stare, and the slightness of his body, he seems almost a mythical creature made only of the stare—straight outward, incapable of the poetry, spirituality, and ethics that arise from introspection, from seeing oneself in relation to what one sees.

Even as Wiesler prepares to spy, a shot through a peephole reveals that he's being spied upon—by Frau Meineke (Marie Gruber), Georg's neighbour. As if by ESP—and Wiesler is so competent that the viewer accepts that ESP may be part of his job description—Wiesler senses a presence. He knocks sternly on her door, and calmly informs her, 'Frau Meineke, one word of this and Masha loses her place at the university. Understand?' The intimacy of Wiesler's communication—he knows her, he knows her daughter, he knows her most vulnerable point—Meineke's cringing stance, her inability to meet Wiesler's gaze as she mutely nods and thus becomes a collaborator, speak volumes, and economically so.

Wiesler is now ensconced in his observation blind above Georg's apartment. In a high-ceilinged, unfinished loft, spattered by light from marred panes and wall chinks, surrounded by bulky equipment that seems the closest he'll ever have to companions, headphones on, Wiesler types his account of Georg's fortieth birthday party.

Before the party, Christa-Maria gives Georg a necktie; at first he resisted accepting it, but he gives in. Georg is the quintessential nice guy. He is tall and effortlessly handsome, but he does nothing to play that up. His hair needs a wash and a cut; his clothes are as rumpled as his friends'. In his small struggle against the necktie, the viewer might guess some of his backstory, how communism's egalitarian ideals appeal to him; how the state has been good to him. In his easy smile one sees a writer who hasn't felt any need, so far, to rock any boats.

Georg is surrounded by people more complicated than himself. He didn't see Hempf paw Christa-Maria; he mentioned the forbidden word 'blacklist'. He does not notice that Christa-Maria needs to take drugs before she can face the birthday party. And he is not in tune with his more radical friends. He does not see Jerska's pain at being denied the opportunity to direct. 'A director without a play is like a projector without film', as Jerska says. Paul Hauser (Hans-Uwe Bauer) storms out of Georg's party, saying that Georg should contact him only when he is ready to take action.

'They unwrap presents, then presumably have intercourse', Wiesler types, as Georg tugs Christa-Maria's hem up to her garter belt, encasing a lush thigh. Wiesler's nightshift replacement, Udo (Charly Hübner) arrives. Wiesler registers awareness of the youth's arrival without making eye contact; he even hands the headphones to Udo without looking. Udo, fat and jolly, expresses lubricious satisfaction in listening to sex. 'I much prefer monitoring artists over peace activists or priests', Udo says. Wiesler rolls his eyes toward the ceiling and sighs. Udo motions to high-five him; Wiesler leaves him hanging.

Wiesler meets with Grubitz at a Stasi cafeteria. He chooses to sit with his inferiors; 'Socialism has to start somewhere', he says. Wiesler tells Grubitz that Christa-Maria is having an affair with Hempf. Grubitz shrugs. 'We can't monitor top officials.' 'Is that why we took an oath on the sword and shield?' Wielser asks.

One of the lower-ranked employees tells a joke: the sun, once it reaches the West, says 'Screw you' to Erich Honecker. Grubitz toys with the young joke teller, alternately

threatening, and egging him on. Here Ulrich Tukur, who is very good at looking both pleasantly bland and diabolically evil, uses that skill to chilling effect. Wiesler's face registers disdain.

On the rough plank floorboards of his aerie, Wiesler draws a chalk floor plan of Georg's apartment. He steps into the diagram marked 'CMS'. As Wiesler metaphorically steps into Christa-Maria's bedroom, the camera cuts to Christa-Maria stopped on the street by Hempf. At first she resists his blandishments, but then, with a look of defeat, she enters Hempf's car, where he paws her resistant form, as his chauffeur watches in the rear-view mirror. Hempf violates Christa-Maria; she allows it because she is afraid. Strangely, more than one reviewer has commented on the sight of Hempf's white underwear in this scene, as if it were indicative of the lack of fashionable clothing in the GDR.

Wiesler sees Hempf's car pull up. Grubitz won't let Wiesler turn Hempf in, so Wiesler turns him in himself. In his first step away from observing and toward the 'engineering' that, according to Stalin, writers perform, Wiesler uses his electronic equipment to buzz Georg's apartment. Georg runs downstairs and sees Christa-Maria getting out of a man's car and tucking her blouse into her skirt. Georg hides behind the building's door as Christa-Maria enters. She takes a shower, panting and crying. Wiesler turns up the volume on his control knob marked 'bath'. Christa-Maria collapses to the floor of the shower. She takes more drugs. She falls onto the bed in a foetal position. Georg, who had been pacing the apartment in a state of heartbreak and confusion, sits beside her. 'Hold me', she begs. He embraces her. Whatever reaction Wiesler had hoped for or expected, Georg's show of compassion was not it. In his attic, Wiesler slumps, his eyes closed, his mouth slack, his arms wrapped around himself and the back of his chair in a simulated embrace. Udo walks in on him. Without a word, Wiesler rises and leaves.

In his apartment, Wiesler washes his face and answers the door. A Stasi-issued prostitute has arrived: a blowsy, buxom, bottle blonde. She serves a fully-clothed Wiesler a carefully timed orgasm. Wiesler clutches at her naked breast and begs her to stay a moment, but she reminds him that she must service other Stasi men before the night is out. She nags him to schedule more efficiently. A look of bitter disappointment registers on his face.

Wiesler steps into Georg's empty apartment. His attitude announces that this time he is here not as a spy but as a mendicant pilgrim. He crouches down, almost kneeling, his head lowered, and, with a reverential air, he strokes only the very edge of Christa-Maria and Georg's rumpled bed.

'Where is my Brecht?' Georg asks. In fact, Wiesler is reading it, a poem about a kiss, a plum tree, and a cloud: 'Erinnerung an die Marie A.' He lays on his couch, not so much as a pillow between his head and the armrest behind him. For the first time in the film, something like a look of human warmth and happiness registers on Wiesler's face.

A phone call informs Georg that Jerska has taken his own life. Georg crumples. But then he composes himself, and turns to the piano. Jerska had given him, for his fortieth birthday, the sheet music for 'Sonata for a Good Man'. Georg plays it. Christa-Maria places her hands on Georg's back.

We see the attic's vast space, and the small grey man in the centre, connected to nothing but surveillance machines, like an embryonic creature ensconced in its shell. He listens to the music Georg plays. The camera moves around, from Wiesler's back to his

front. His face is transformed. He looks possessed. For good or ill? The viewer cannot tell. The camera continues moving until Wiesler's entire face is visible. Then it is clear: a tear is falling down Wiesler's cheek.

Georg says to Christa-Maria that he remembers a quote by Lenin. The actual quote:

> I know of nothing better than the Appassionata and could listen to it every day. What astonishing, superhuman music! It always makes me proud, perhaps naively so, to think that people can work such miracles! But I can't listen to music very often, it affects my nerves. I want to say sweet, silly things and pat the heads of people who, living in a filthy hell, can create such beauty. One can't pat anyone on the head nowadays, they might bite your hand off. They ought to be beaten on the head, beaten mercilessly . . .[1]

'Can anyone who has truly heard this be a bad person?' Georg asks.

Wiesler trudges towards his apartment. A small boy with a ball enters the elevator with him; says that his father says that he is a Stasi agent. Wiesler flashes a look of contempt. 'What is the name of your—' we know he's going to ask for the boy's father's name. Wiesler proceeds, '—ball?' The boy protests that balls don't have names.

Christa-Maria leaves Georg's apartment for an assignation with Hempf. Georg pleads that she not go. Wiesler, troubled by this exchange, checks into a dismal bar right out of a Charles Bukowski short story. As it happens, Christa-Maria enters the same bar. Again, Wiesler's registering of her presence is feral; he does not look at her; he may as well be registering her by scent. After debating with himself, Wiesler approaches Christa-Maria. He breaks the fourth wall. 'I am your audience', he tells her, and we know how true that is. 'You are a great actress.' In other words, she doesn't need Hempf's patronage.

'Actors are never who they appear to be', she scoffs, thinking that Wiesler is just a worshipful fan.

He will not be put off. 'Many people love you for who you are', he says. 'You were more yourself onstage than you are now.' She says that artists sell themselves for their art. 'You already have art', Wiesler says. 'That would be a bad deal.'

'You are a good man', she tells him.

The next morning, when he arrives to relieve a sleeping Udo, Wiesler slips Udo's report from the typewriter platen. The typewritten pages are superimposed over a love scene, as if it were erupting beneath the words. Christa-Maria, inspired by Wiesler's words, has stood up Hempf and returned to Georg; they affirm their deep love for each other with great passion. Wiesler is shot from below as he reads. A faint smile of satisfaction crosses his face.

With Jerska's suicide and Christa-Maria's reaffirmation of her love, Georg resolves to create a more significant work of art. He meets his dissident friends at the Soviet War Memorial in Pankow: Hauser and Wallner meet there in order to avoid the Stasi microphones they know to be in their own apartments.

They supply Georg with a smuggled-in typewriter he can use to type up an essay exposing the high suicide rate in the GDR. All typewriters in the GDR are registered and his typing could be traced to him. The smuggler apologizes: only red ribbon had been available. We had been seeing Wiesler at a typewriter; now we see Georg tapping away. Georg speaks of honouring those who have made it to the other side, a phrase that could

mean the West, or the next world, as a reference to those who died trying to escape. Christa-Maria enters the apartment unexpectedly and catches Georg hiding the typewriter beneath the floorboards; she says nothing to him, economically conveying how day-to-day state terror efficiently has splintered human relations.

Wiesler brings his report to Grubitz. Before he can deliver it, Grubitz describes a new report on prison conditions for subversive artists. It divides artists into five types and details methods to break each. In some cases, the Stasi initiates no harassment, no abuse, no scandals, 'nothing they can write about later'. This approach merely isolates the writer so that he never writes again. As he listens to Grubitz, Wiesler rolls his report in his lap. 'You're hiding something from me', Grubitz says. Wiesler denies it, but he never delivers the report.

Grubitz must discover the identity of the author of the suicide essay, which receives prominent attention in West Germany. A typewriter keystroke expert presents his analysis. This young bureaucrat's tight little presentation of focused attention on keystrokes and their role in state spying involves no blood or torture, but is chillingly effective.

Christa-Maria is arrested, ostensibly for illegal drug use. While being interrogated by Grubitz, she offers herself to him in exchange for favourable treatment. He says it's too late: she's made an enemy of a powerful man. Grubitz raids Georg's apartment. Wiesler sees him in his TV monitor. Knowing he is seen, Grubitz waves at Wiesler. Again, the watcher is being watched. Stasi agents slit Georg's couch cushions, finger his tea leaves, turn back his bed covers, all as Georg powerlessly watches. Georg is not alone; upstairs, Wiesler squirms with him; he had begun altering his reports to protect Georg. Georg has a book by Solzhenitsyn. 'It was given to me by Margot Honecker', he explains.

Grubitz calls Wiesler in to headquarters; gestures to him to sit. Wiesler's assigned chair is the wooden kind for prisoners being interrogated. It lacks, however, the removable cloth cover. The implication could be that the Stasi needn't collect a scent sample for Wiesler; they already have one. Grubitz asks him, 'You are still on the right side, aren't you?' In its most flamboyant move of the film, the camera careens backward to Wiesler, whose head is turned left at a sharp right angle to his body. 'Yes', he replies, emphatically.

Wiesler is ordered to interrogate Christa-Maria in front of a large mirror, behind which Grubitz and a stenographer watch. At first, he keeps his back turned on Christa-Maria. He had, of course, exposed his face to her in their encounter in the bar. He turns slowly; slowly so as not to startle her into blurting out their previous meeting. He alludes to what he had said to her in the bar, 'Remember your audience.' Perhaps he is telling her that she is a great actress, and she is being watched, and it is her job, now, to perform in such a way that will get all three of them—Wiesler, herself, and Georg—out of the fix they are in. After some hesitation, she announces the location of the typewriter.

Agents return to Georg's building. As they rush in, hiding behind the door, in the exact spot Georg had occupied when he ran downstairs after being alerted to Christa-Maria's arrival in Hempf's car, is Wiesler. The agents run upstairs; Wiesler exits rapidly, a typewriter hidden behind his back.

Christa-Maria, clad only in a bathrobe (she had, again, been showering, after her interrogation) walks into the street, into an oncoming truck. Red blood stains her white

robe. Wiesler runs to her, kneels beside her, and, in a heartrending gesture, holds out his hands above her body, without ever touching her. Georg believes that she had removed the typewriter. He arrives; Wiesler stands back; Georg sobs over the corpse of his beloved, begging, 'Forgive me.' The investigation is declared at an end; one might think that the movie would end here, as well.

There are, though, five codas, and their payoff is so great that viewers identify them as the source of the film's most profound power. Grubitz informs Wiesler, who, again, does not look at him, but who registers awareness of the import of what Grubitz says: 'I know it was you. I have no proof. But you're going to spend the rest of your career steaming open envelopes in a basement.' Wiesler accepts these damning words stoically. The End. And yet, Grubitz has tossed a newspaper onto the seat of Wiesler's car; on the front page is a photograph of Mikhail Gorbachev, who, then, in March 1985, had just been elected General Secretary of the Communist Party.

It is four years and seven months later, a screen title announces, and we see letters, delivered down an automated belt, being methodically steamed open on w-shaped steamers. The men steaming the letters are Wiesler and the young man who had told the joke about the sun. The joke teller announces, 'The Berlin wall is down.' Wiesler, without a word, rises, and leaves the room. His co-workers follow.

A curtain rises on a stage. We are, again, viewing Georg's 'Faces of Love', only this time in a slick, new production. Georg watches from the audience, with a beautiful woman at his side. She looks a bit like Christa-Maria. When the character that had been played by Christa-Maria makes her speech, Georg, overcome, must leave the theatre. In the lobby, he is confronted by Hempf. Hempf attempts to sully Georg's memory of Christa-Maria; he points out that Georg has not written anything in years. Georg looks at Hempf in disgust. To think that people like you used to rule a country, he says. Hempf's expression communicates that he regards Georg as naïve; of course it is people like Hempf who run countries.

Hempf had informed Georg that 'we' knew all about his activities. Georg returns to his apartment and finds the wires. He looks horrified, despairing, and yet as if he has gained new knowledge that will further mature him. He then visits his Stasi file. The camera travels to the archive room's 125 miles of rolling metal file cases. Georg appears intimidated when a handcart brings him the numerous notebooks accumulated on him. He steels himself to read them. Georg cringes to read of his sex life on the page; like the reader of a good novel, he is fascinated by the development of the plot. His chronicler, Georg learns for the first time, had become his ally. There is a red smudge on the final page. It was this Stasi spy, Georg learns for the first time, not Christa-Maria, who had removed the typewriter. The author of these accounts, he learns, is 'HGW XX/7'. Georg asks for, and receives, a photograph of the man who had, without his knowledge, shared his life.

Georg is travelling in the back of a taxi. He sees a small, grey, robotic man delivering junk mail to old stone buildings incongruously colourful with graffiti. The man is HGW XX/7. Georg instructs the taxi to stop. Georg gets out. He appears overwhelmed. What could he say that would honour the moment? He re-enters the taxi.

And the final coda. It is two years later, the screen title informs us. The grey, robotic man is still delivering junk mail in a joylessly efficient fashion. He passes a bookstore display window. Georg's handsome face gazes out from a poster advertising a

new book, *Sonata for a Good Man*. Wiesler initially passes, but then walks back, does a double-take. He enters the bookstore. The camera pans back; this is the Karl-Marx-Buchhandlung. Wiesler picks up a copy and flips through it. *Sonata for a Good Man* has been dedicated to 'HGW XX/7.'

Wiesler approaches the cashier. 'Would you like that gift wrapped?' the cool young clerk asks.

'No', Wiesler says. 'It is for me.'

Discussion

Von Donnersmarck's success has generated a backlash. 'Naïve', his critics scorn, 'sentimental', 'melodramatic'. These terms are the egghead equivalent of calling von Donnersmarck a 'sissy'. The most devastating cut, 'Hollywood', translates that *Lives* is worthy to be taken seriously only by the unwashed. Some wanted a crueller film, with more scenes of torture; many rejected Wiesler's change.

These criticisms are themselves naïve; naïve about art and the mechanics of human perception. The *New York Times* dismissed the 2003 documentary, *The Decomposition of the Soul,* which focuses without let-up on non-fiction accounts of Stasi evil, as 'a bore', as the film merely presented horrid facts without 'intelligent, specific, directed filmmaking'. Under prolonged battering, the perceptions of the film-goer, no less than those of the political prisoner, go numb.

As van Gogh said, to startle the viewer's eyes with the pink of a cheek, juxtapose a sliver of green. High, controlled contrast communicates content in a way that monochrome cannot. The love in *Lives,* Georg's for Christa-Maria, and the viewer's for Wiesler, allow us to feel the hate all the more. Furthermore, narrative demands change; Wiesler's high-contrast transformation invests us, and makes us feel, rather than just intellectually acknowledge, the moral miasma that was the Stasi.

Intelligent film-making recognizes the impact on the viewer of economical, restrained scenes: a young man telling a joke in a cafeteria becomes a squirming victim of psychological torture; a mother is intimidated into silence after seeing her neighbour's apartment wired. These scenes transpire in a world without obvious gunshots, death squads, or jack boots—a world that looks like one many viewers inhabit. That these soul-destroying activities are folded inconspicuously into lives that viewers can imagine themselves living highlights their horror.

After screenings of *Lives*, viewers in the former GDR sat with von Donnersmarck and his leads for hours, crying and telling stories he reported that they said they had never told anyone before. Von Donnersmarck worked for, and achieved, verisimilitude.

When I surveyed Americans who had, for the most part, never been to Eastern Europe about their stereotypes of the place, they often mentioned the word 'grey'. Was it really? I remember one night in Poland waking up to my dorm roommate kneeling on my sleeping body. 'I just got back from West Germany!' she crowed. 'It's pulsing with capitalist colour!' A Polish friend had been desperate to spend her months' income on one spool of turquoise silk thread from West Germany.

'The Eastern bloc did look different', von Donnersmarck told NPR's Fresh Air. 'These somehow desaturated, washed-out colours that the East had, there was something very unique about that. I even once spoke to a chemist who explained to me that there

were certain patents that the East did not have, and, therefore, they couldn't make those bright, neon colours that the West had. But I didn't simply want to do it by washing out the colours or doing some lab trick. So I tried to analyze which colours were the most shockingly Western, and I actually found that it was red and blue. Those colours really throw you and seem very loud and extreme. And so I said . . . 'OK, well, look, let's eliminate blue and red altogether.''

The red in the film ratchets up, from the blurt of red on Wiesler's white bachelor dinner, to the red of the typewriter ribbon on which Georg types his magnum opus, to the red of Christa-Maria's blood, and, finally, to the red smudge that informs Georg of Wiesler's support. Red symbolizes passion, compassion, and sacrifice; in a wonderful irony, it also symbolizes communism.

Sets serve verisimilitude equally well as colours. The property master was a former Stasi prisoner. He used actual surveillance equipment, including an original letter steamer. Von Donnersmarck went so far as to interview former Stasi prostitutes.

Housing was at a premium in the Soviet Empire in the post-Second World War period. Jerska, the blacklisted director, is depicted living with a fat drunk, his dog, and a woman the drunk yells at. We all knew people who roomed in such makeshift asylums. Citizens of the empire might fantasize an apartment like Wiesler's. Viewing it, its spaciousness, order, cleanliness, and isolation, one acknowledges how immediately irresistible it would be to someone who has to live like Jerska, and shudders both at its price, and at what one might dream of, under what life circumstances: '*This* is what we sell out for.' Stasi agent Werner Teske sold out, inter alia, for canned mushrooms. In other circumstances, people have betrayed their child for a hunk of bread. In his pan of Wiesler's apartment, von Donnersmarck invites the thoughtful viewer to consider the immediate allure and loathsome retrospect of whatever we ourselves have sold out for.

When Polish teachers presented seminal films, poems, and other artworks to us foreign students in their midst, they began, 'You won't fully understand this, because it is peculiar to our national experience.' That stance struck me as self-indulgent and self-defeating. Why not present your particular experience in universal terms outsiders can be moved by? *Lives* is masterful in its insistence on presenting a particular story in universal terms. In discussions of his film, von Donnersmarck mentions invisibility cloaks in folklore. 'If you had one, wouldn't you use it?' He's teaching viewers the peculiarly GDR narrative of the Stasi using universal and ancient motifs with which most viewers can identify; he's made a kind of monster—Wiesler—a man who has a power many viewers might wish to have.

Spying is a perfect entry point to capture universal interest in the GDR's particular history. Spying is of current interest in the wake of 9-11 and the murder of Alexander Litvinenko. *Lives* came out in the same year as Robert DeNiro's CIA history, *The Good Shepherd,* and *Casino Royale,* a controversial 'reboot' of the James Bond franchise.

But spying is of perennial interest because it may really be the world's oldest profession. We learn by watching others, and we have all been tempted to watch surreptitiously. As NPR's *This American Life* has pointed out, when given a choice between superpowers, most people would choose to be invisible rather than to fly. In addition to wanting to spy, we crave to be spied on. The fantasy of being spied on satisfies our paranoia; it thrills us with a frisson of danger and the suggestion that our

lives are much more exciting than they really are. It flatters us; maybe our quotidian activities are so consequential that someone would bother to read our e-mail or install hidden microphones in our bathrooms.

Spying also thrums with divine association. God is a spy, in one fundamental understanding. God is the one who watches our every move with interest, reports Psalm 139. We are seen; what we do matters. A piece of wildly popular devotional folklore, 'Footprints in the Sand', argues that at the moments when we feel the most alone and bereft, God is closest to us. In *Lives'* fourth coda, Georg reads his Stasi file and realizes that at what, to him, must have seemed the bleakest and most alone moment of his life—when he found Christa-Maria dead on the street—unbeknownst to him, a benign, powerful force, Wiesler, was altering events in order to make life easier for him. The Stasi file scene is in some ways what some of us think our arrival in heaven will be like: a file recording everything we've done will be unscrolled in front of us and examined.

Wiesler could have set up his listening post anywhere, but he did it in an attic, *above* Georg, the position traditionally assigned to God in relation to humanity. Writers, and all artists, have been, in art, traditionally associated with God, in that writers and artists create, a function associated with the divine. After Wiesler breaks the fourth wall, approaches Christa-Maria, and ends her association with Hempf and causes her to return to Georg, Wiesler learns of their love-making by reading words on a page; the page grows translucent; the love-making takes place as if beneath the typed words. Wiesler is shot, God-like, from below. His look is beatific.

Directors, like Alfred Hitchcock, certainly, in *Rear Window,* and film scholars, like Laura Mulvey, have emphasized the voyeuristic nature of film-watching. Part of *Lives'* power may be its placement of Wiesler as the hero. Georg is the matinee star: he's tall, handsome, charismatic, successful, loved, with the hot girlfriend—and he's no deeper than necessary. Wiesler, on the other hand, is like us, an average-looking, working stiff. When Wiesler eats his instant bachelor meal in front of the TV, as he watches a televised discussion of land for chicken farmers, he makes us recall not James Bond but another lonely, nebbish Everyman. CC Baxter (Jack Lemmon) in Billy Wilders' 1960 *The Apartment* is just a working stiff following orders in corporate America. Baxter turns his life around after experiencing an epiphany, and ends his own compromised collaboration with corrupt higher-ups, one of whom is having an illicit affair with a compromised woman Baxter comes to love. As in *Lives,* there are two attempted suicides in *The Apartment*; unlike in *Lives,* both are unsuccessful. In a classic moment in this classic film, Baxter arrives home, cooks an instant meal, and plops down in front of a TV showing unsatisfying fare—capitalist commercials. In these scenes of lonely, average working men, both Baxter and Wiesler are universal; they are the lonely man in all of us.

Georg and Wiesler develop a doppelganger-like relationship. Both believe in the GDR's utopian ideals; both defy cynical GDR reality. Before Wiesler had left a red smudge on his soul-redeeming final report, Georg had smudged his magnum opus, his suicide essay. Georg and Wiesler both interact with boys with soccer balls. Georg and Wiesler hide in the same spot. Georg begs Christa-Maria to forgive him as she lies dying; words Wiesler might have spoken. And, Georg and Wiesler both change, neither into a perfect man, but both into a better man.

Everyman Wiesler watches Matinee Idol Georg in the same way that we, the audience, watch celebrities like Georg. Audiences watching films and reading books

often feel the temptation felt by Wiesler—to break the fourth wall and intervene in the action, to engineer characters' souls. We want to 'rescue' characters in peril. We want to rewrite their narratives. Wiesler fulfils that exact fantasy. Wiesler is the hardcore film fans' surrogate.

Ulrich Mühe's award-winning performance resists penetration or description. This is no Peter O'Toole in *Lawrence of Arabia,* for example, a human meteorological device registering every alteration in conditions via distended nostrils or quivering lips. Mühe appeared to be doing nothing; there are certainly no fireworks scenes. Mühe's body channels Wiesler completely; note, for example, his hesitant, apologetic tread as he approaches the cashier in the bookstore to purchase a book dedicated to him. After watching *Lives* with the sound off, I concluded that Mühe's face speaks what his words do not. When, for example, Grubitz describes how he will destroy Georg as an artist, Mühe looks as if he's a little boy and someone is about to strangle his puppy in front of him. Mühe's Wiesler hides nothing; he simply does not speak it. That a state that monitors everything could allow a turned spy to hide in plain sight speaks volumes about the abysmal level of humanity achieved by communism's guardians. Or by most of us, for that matter, who don't see what is right in front of us.

Von Donnersmarck's script, rich with implications and yet still simple, incites the viewers' imaginations: What is Wiesler's backstory? How did he become a master interrogator who could be moved to tears by the 'Sonata for a Good Man'? In the backstory imagined by this viewer, Wiesler is a sort of high-functioning autistic, uncomfortable in social situations, and yet expert in one, mechanical, function. He had been traumatized by growing up under Nazism, and when the communists arrived offering a brave, new world, Wiesler believed them; he lacked the human calculus to compute the new narrative's errors.

Naysayers claim that *Lives* depicts an impossible transformation that never occurred in real life. The first assertion is untrue; the second is unprovable. Wiesler does not change from being a robotic Stasi agent to becoming a life-affirming, Broadway-anthem-singing, Amnesty-International poster boy. He makes one small choice—to hide a typewriter—that results in one small change: a minor, nascent dissident's not being brought in for questioning. Alas, Wiesler cannot rescue Christa-Maria from Hempf or from suicide; he cannot rescue Georg from writer's block. Wiesler continues to work for the Stasi until the fall of the Berlin wall; even after, given his body language, one has to guess that he still lives in that sterile apartment. We hope he has continued to read poetry.

'No Stasi agent ever did what Wiesler did', naysayers protest. In fact, that can never be proved. Wiesler's invisible small choice, though he is punished for it by Grubitz, might well have been hidden by Grubitz in CYA mode; Grubitz has nothing to gain by telling his superiors that he suspects, but cannot prove, that Wiesler duped him. Grubitz punishes Wiesler out of spite. He didn't like being outsmarted.

Wiesler's tiny act of heroism is not a plot hole in a falsely comforting fantasy; it is, rather, a brilliant and deeply moving portrait of how everyday goodness works. Most good deeds are invisible, and many result in the punishment, rather than the reward, of the 'hero'. Polish peasants who hid Jews during the Second World War often hid their own heroism as well. Fellow villagers might have blamed them for risking Nazi retaliation. Years later a camera crew shows up, to find 'heroes' slopping hogs and blinking into the spotlight. The power structure, and, therefore, the narrative around

them, has changed, and suddenly they are recast as 'heroes'. Very likely we are surrounded by invisible heroes. This is why cinema-goers report their audience's spontaneous tears and applause at the end of *Lives.* We aren't, and can't be, Spiderman, but we may well be Wiesler.

Von Donnersmarck finalized his script in his uncle's monastery. His most heinous character, Hempf, declares that people don't change. People don't change, in this worldview, because humans are not equipped with any immaterial essence that transcends their material reality. The Judeo-Christian tradition insists that people have non-material consciences that transcend material reality, and an immaterial free will that equips choice, and that any person, in any circumstances, including a Stasi agent, can be affected by the conscience and can choose to do right.

Wiesler's final line, 'It is for me', has grabbed movie-goers. Wiesler is simply informing the clerk that he does not need the book gift-wrapped. He is also acknowledging his own awareness of how the one good deed of his life has been seen and acknowledged. Here, again, is the theme of the divine as celestial scorekeeper and spy: just as Wiesler had seen Georg and protected him when Georg did not realize it, so Georg, in a divine gesture, has, in spite of all the harm he's done, seen and elevated Wiesler's best self.

'It is for me' defies the preceding forty years of communism, and the twelve years of Nazism before that. Wiesler's utterance affirms the priority of the individual, of ownership, and of one-on-one intimacy. Under totalitarianism, the collective is the significant unit, rather than the individual, and wealth and art are generated for the collective—'property is theft.' To replace individualism and intimate love with a primary focus on membership in, and loyalty to, the collective, Nazism and communism eroded and degraded the one-on-one relationship, by invading the home, usurping child-rearing authority, and, indeed, by spying. Stasi goals included 'the destruction of all love relationships and friendships'. Wiesler's final sentence is a triumphant declaration that the best in him survived the worst; that it is delivered in Wiesler's signature stoic deadpan makes it all the more glorious.

We live in an imperfect world; *Lives*' imperfection is its misogyny. Almost all the leads and supporting characters are male. There are three females, and all are invidious stereotypes; all are Madonnas or whores. Christa-Maria is an actress, that most feminine of professions. Her life is devoted to the feminine-coded activities of artifice and self-presentation. Throughout the film, Christa-Maria is shot in clingy, satiny materials; she sashays her hips and lounges provocatively. Even when interrogated by Wiesler, she cannot stop stroking her own lips and running her hand between her cleavage. Unlike Georg, Christa-Maria is never shown carrying groceries or playing ball with children; she can't; she's strictly a sex machine.

Christa-Maria functions as the stereotype as ancient as Eve; she is the weak-willed, treacherous woman who destroys paradise by giving in to the blandishments of Satan. She has sex with Hempf, takes drugs, betrays her lover, and destroys herself, in spite of the superhuman devotion shown her by Georg, who does not so much as raise his voice when he learns that she is cheating on him; in spite of a compassionate Stasi agent who gives her a loving pep talk in a bar, and risks himself to help her.

Wiesler's hooker doesn't even have a heart of gold; seconds after his state-sanctioned orgasm, she's out the door, leaving him bereft, showing even the Stasi man

powerless before The Lady Eve. She's the only powerful woman in the film, and she uses her power for evil. Frau Meineke is a mother whose life revolves around her child. She, like Christa-Maria, is weak. She cowers before Wiesler.

Could these characterizations of women have been balanced without damaging the film's verisimilitude or artistic merit? Yes. In Poland in 1987–89, I never attended dissident activity—protest rallies, planning, street scuffles with police—that did not include women. In East Germany, there were women like Vera Wollenberger. Study photos of Leipzig from 1989; were there not as many women in the street as men?

Georg is aided and inspired by several dissidents. Hauser and Wallner are gender-neutral parts. Either or both could have been women. Frau Meineke could have attempted to say something, and been disappeared, without Georg ever knowing why. These small changes would have eliminated *Lives'* misogynist valence.

Scholar Agnieszka Graff has written on an association of women with communism, especially as depicted in the 1983 film, *Sex Mission (Seksmisja)*. In *Sex Mission,* communism is part of a evil feminist plot. Women's roles in defeating communism, on the other hand, have been suppressed, reports Shana Penn in *Solidarity's Secret: The Women Who Defeated Communism in Poland*. Polish director Andrzej Wajda, himself winner of an Academy Award, took this turn in his own oeuvre; first he made *Man of Marble* (*Czlowiek z Marmuru;* 1977), that places a woman, Agnieszka, (Krystyna Janda) centrally in efforts to expose the truth about communism's past; its sequel, *Man of Iron* (*Czlowiek z Zelaza;* 1981), features his crusading heroine scoffing at her own former zeal; now she is a contented housewife.

Lives is often described as a corrective to the 'ostalgie', or nostalgia, for the departed Soviet Empire, depicted in Wolfgang Becker's 2003 comedy, *Good Bye Lenin.* In that film, Alex, a teen-age boy, in post-1989 Berlin, recreates East Germany so as not to upset his mother, who had been in a coma when the Wall came down. Alex's mother is duplicitous and weak. Her heroic husband had escaped to the West and begged his wife to accompany him, along with his children, whom he deeply loved. Alex's mother lies to her children, telling them that their father left them coldly in order to commit adultery. She, in a skewed attempt to replace her lost husband, maniacally embraces communism. Her husband writes love letters to her and to his children, and she, in a microcosmic recapitulation of state censorship, hides the letters. Her delusion holds the entire family hostage; no one can enter the West until she dies.

Alex, displaying the superhero powers of a comic-book blockbuster star, and the unrequited, devoted love of a male for a female typical of misogynist fare, orchestrates his family, friends, neighbours, and even passers-by into an acting troupe, and recreates East Germany for his mother. The GDR, he reports, 'is a country I will always associate with my mother'.

This association of women with communism is not limited to the former Soviet Empire, nor is it new; C. S. Lewis once said, 'In the hive and the anthill we see fully realized the two things that some of us most dread for our own species—the dominance of the female and the dominance of the collective.' It's worth mentioning here that in Oliver Hirschbiegel 2004 film, *Downfall (Der Untergang)*, about Hitler's final days, the most horrific moment comes when Magda Goebbels methodically poisons her own children. The insults Paul Verhoeven visits on his female character in 2006's *Black Book (Zwartboek*) include having her shave her pubic hair on camera, falling in love with a

Nazi (she's Jewish), and being showered by a vat of feces.

When men feel betrayed by seductive, alluring, but strumpet ideologies, do they associate that sense of betrayal with a more atavistic one: that of feeling betrayed by man's *ur* other, women, who, apparently, can never love men enough to eliminate the misogynist taint from art, even great art, created by the best artists, with the purists of intentions? Perhaps von Donnersmarck would consider penning his next script not in a monastery but in a convent.

Like *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* or any number of other buddy movies, the important bond in *Lives* is between two men. Its ending is reminiscent of one for which von Donnersmarck has expressed a 'lifelong love'—that of the 1942 Hollywood romance, *Casablanca.* The Stasi codename for Georg is 'Lazlo', the name of a key character in that film. In a tense stand-off at an airport, cynical Rick (Humphrey Bogart), in a moment of atypical self-sacrifice to the higher good, encourages the love of his life, the beautiful Ilsa (Ingrid Bergman), to leave him and stay with her husband, Laszlo (Paul Henreid), a resistance fighter. Also at the airport is Rick's friendly antagonist, Captain Renault (Claude Rains), a morally compromised Vichy officer. Previously, Renault had said, 'If I were a woman . . . I should be in love with Rick.' *Casablanca* ends with Ilsa eliminated, and Rick and Renault walking off together, Rick saying, 'I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship.' There is no room for women, any women, at the end of *Casablanca* nor at the end of *The Lives of Others.*

The antidote to brilliant movies' flaws, is, of course, more movies. *Man of Marble,* 1990's *The Nasty Girl (Das schreckliche Maedchen),* 2003's *Rosenstrasse*, and 2005's *Sophie Scholl* all address Central Europeans coming to terms with totalitarian pasts in a woman-friendly way.

Finally, the question of art. Von Donnersmarck said that the art that changes Wiesler had to be music, because music is an 'X-ray' that transcends language and rational thought. As reported in the *Washington Post,* 'The director challenged composer Gabriel Yared…to "imagine that you can travel to 1933 and meet Hitler before he commits any of his atrocities. All you can do is play him your new piece of music. What will that piece of music be?"'

Von Donnersmarck is bold. Theodor Adorno famously encapsulated the belief that 'Writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric', Adorno himself stopped composing music. The 2001 film *Taking Sides* opens with a provocative scene: a dramatization of the great conductor, Wilhelm Furtwängler (Stellan Skarsgaard), conducting Beethoven's Fifth Symphony before an audience of uniformed Nazis. The bulk of *Taking Sides* consists of a verbal duel between Furtwängler and the denazification official (Harvey Keitel) interrogating him. Furtwängler protests that he never supported Nazism, but stayed in his country because it needed art during its darkest hour. 'Art for me has mystical powers that nurture man's spiritual needs', he says. The denazification official remains cynical, as did many who just could not buy Wiesler's transformation.

Of course art changes people. All totalitarianisms know this; that is why all exercise a stranglehold on art. It would be obscene, after Auschwitz, to stop writing poetry, out of any misguided desire to appear sophisticated, to surrender art's transformative power to the burners of books and mounters of exhibitions of the degenerate. Von Donnersmarck's further insistence is antique: that *good* art changes people *for the better.* What constitutes 'good' art and 'better' people are concepts

ostensibly abjured by relativism; yet another reason why the film may offend. The tears *Lives* induces may be, in some part, a flood of relief that the old-fashioned concept of human goodness has survived efforts to save it by destroying it.

Art, like reason, like love, like faith, is an invitation, not an incontrovertible order. Its flexibility is part of its power. In declining the invitation, we don't alter that which we decline; we alter ourselves. That Lenin had to refuse art to turn himself into a smasher of heads is testimony to the power of art and what it did to Lenin to resist it. Art does not elevate every audience with every exposure, any more than science reaches every mind. But one can't get what one gets from science, at its best, anywhere else, and the same is true of art. I have seen the transformation that Wiesler's face reveals as he listens to 'Sonata for a Good Man'. Mühe plays epiphany exactly right—as an 'Oh no' moment as much of an 'Aha' one. That is why this viewer's eyes, with so many others', teared up while viewing *The Lives of Others.*

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[1] Maksim Gorky, *Collected Works in Ten Volumes*, vol. 9, *V. I. Lenin* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1978–1982), p. 318.