

‘IMMERHIN BRECHT’: LITERACY AND THEATRICALITY IN DAS LEBEN DER ANDEREN

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Von Donnersmarck’s feature film has been largely understood against the historical background of the Stasi and its victims in the last years of the GDR, and the collapse of the Berlin Wall. The main cultural frame of reference has been post-Wende cinema. Relying on Aristotle’s and Brecht’s concepts of dramatic representation, this article suggests a vantage point from which to reconsider ‘Das Leben der Anderen’, approaching the film on literary and theatrical rather than cinematic or political grounds. Its specific concern is the intersection of book and screen. Focusing on scenes of reading, this article traces literacy and theatricality, first and foremost through the presence and influence of Bertolt Brecht. Jerska reads at Dreyman’s from the same yellow poetry volume that Wiesler then purloins and reads at home. Wiesler’s reading of Brecht marks the beginning of the end of a vicarious life of surveillance, gives rise to the question of integrity, and spurs a dialogue between self and other. The concentration on the seminal role of texts by (and inspired by) Brecht highlights an examination of reading and friendship, which the film locates at the interface of humanity and literacy, at the crossroads of ethics and aesthetics.

KEYWORDS: *von Donnersmarck, Brecht, Aristotle, post-Wende cinema, literacy and theatricality, scenes of reading, books on screen, books as friends, friendship through books, literary influence*

‘The reader became the book ...’¹

Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck’s successful but controversial 2006 feature film *Das Leben der Anderen* has attracted fervent praise and fierce criticism. Accolades emphasize its dramatic and filmic accomplishments, whereas depreciations generally point to its political and ethical failures. Most early reviews of von Donnersmarck’s Oscar-winning film appeared in the popular and trade press, while academic criticism entered the debate to discuss the director’s abnegation of historical responsibility, and

¹ Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, ed. by Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson (New York: Library of America, 1997), p. 311.

to challenge the film's classification by German politicians as pedagogically useful and historically enlightening. While some critics view *Das Leben der Anderen* as an antidote to the illusions of *Ostalgie*, others have placed it at the center of this questionable (n)ostalgic vogue, reprimanding von Donnersmarck's contribution to it.²

Das Leben der Anderen has been largely understood against the historical background of its setting in terms of the Stasi and its victims in the last years of the GDR, and the collapse of the Berlin Wall. The main cultural frame of reference has been post-*Wende* cinema such as Leander Haußmann's 1999 *Sonnenallee* or Wolfgang Becker's 2003 *Good Bye, Lenin!*³ While neither Haußmann nor Becker is the sole author of his film's script, in the case of *Das Leben der Anderen* the director is also the author of the screenplay. To this point, Ulrich Mühe called von Donnersmarck's screenplay 'stimmig', and Marc Silberman classified it as 'an autonomous literary text'.⁴ Becker, for instance, was interested in cinematic homages, ranging from Stanley Kubrick to Federico Fellini; by contrast, *Das Leben der Anderen* strongly relies on a literary and theatrical tradition — a theme that has provoked little critical discussion to date.⁵

² Cf. Nick Hodgkin's 'Screening the Stasi: The Politics of Representation in Postunification Film' for reflections on *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, *Ostalgie* and 'the vogue for Communist chic' (in *The GDR remembered: Representations of the East German State since 1989*, ed. by Nick Hodgkin and Caroline Pearce (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2011), pp. 69–91, especially pp. 70–73, 81 and 85), and for an insightful comparison of the critical reaction to the opening of the GDR Museum in Berlin in 2006 to that of *Das Leben der Anderen*, released the same year and 'widely praised as an authentic view of life' (Hodgin, p. 69). Hodgkin mentions the hope expressed by CDU politician Friedbert Pflüger for *Das Leben der Anderen* to be used 'in classrooms in order to ensure a continued focus on and analysis of Germany's "second dictatorship"' and the general assessment of it as a 'necessary corrective' to the *Ostalgie* masterplot (Hodgin, p. 70). Another CDU politician, Veronika Bellmann, organized the screening of the film in 2007, 'Gegen das Vergessen' (Hodgin, p. 85). By contrast, Anna Funder classifies von Donnersmarck's film precisely in the way the opening of the GDR Museum was received: as a problematic falsification of history and a trivialization of terror, much in the sense of Claus Christian Malzahn and Severin Weiland's 'das hat es — leider — nicht gegeben' (Anna Funder, 'Eyes without a Face', *Sight and Sound*, 5 (2007), 16–20, quoted by Hodgkin, pp. 78 and 89). Hodgkin's notes do not include Funder's prominent political critique.

³ Hodgkin distinguishes *Das Leben der Anderen* from *Good Bye, Lenin!* and *Sonnenallee*, choosing the latter two to contextualize the 'double appeal [...] in the reception of these two key postunification films', observing that 'the reviews of *Sonnenallee* and *Good Bye, Lenin!* were [...] often less about the films than about their context' (Hodgin, p. 71). I would say something similar regarding the better part of the reception of *Das Leben der Anderen*, perhaps even more so, since unlike the other two, von Donnersmarck's feature is not comical. His choice of theme and genre is one possible reason why the film has lent itself to forms of critique that treat it as if it were a documentary. Comedies and satires are surely less likely than tragically oriented drama to be mistaken for depictions of actual political terror.

⁴ Marc Silberman, 'The Lives of Others: Screenplay as Literature and the Literary Film', in *The Lives of Others and Contemporary German Film: A Companion*, ed. by Paul Cooke (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2013), pp. 139–57 (p. 145).

⁵ Marc Silberman, Sophie Bastien, and Roger Cook are to my knowledge the only critics who have pointed to the literary qualities and inter-texts of *Das Leben der Anderen*. While Bastien celebrates von Donnersmarck's multi-leveled homage to art and literature and compares the film's questions to the existentialism of Albert Camus, Silberman places *Das Leben der Anderen* in the context of the German writers' film and backstage drama, tracing a wealth of literary references and allusions, including Brecht. See Sophie Bastien, 'Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck et Albert Camus: Étude comparative', *Bulletin de la Société des Études camusiennes*, 86 (2009), 39–44 (p. 39). In a related vein, Roger Cook has examined von Donnersmarck's film, stressing its 'meticulous compos[ition]', its 'embrace of literary discourse' and its 'complex treatment of literature' but without a detailed consideration of Brecht (Roger Cook, 'Literary Discourse and Cinematic Narrative: Scripting Affect in *Das Leben der Anderen*', in *Cinema and Social Change in Germany and Austria*, ed. by Gabriele Müller and James Skidmore (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2012), pp. 79–95 (pp. 79–81).

Suggesting a vantage point from which to reconsider von Donnersmarck's richly debated feature film, this article's comparative approach to *Das Leben der Anderen* is literary rather than cinematic, theatrical rather than political, considering it as 'a fictional literary film'.⁶ The specific concern here is the intersection of book and screen, the capacity of reading and literature presented in the film. Focusing on scenes of reading and the presence of books, it traces literacy and theatricality in *Das Leben der Anderen*, first and foremost through the presence and influence of Bertolt Brecht. This concentration on the seminal role of texts by (or inspired by) Brecht in the film highlights an examination of reading, which von Donnersmarck locates at the interface of humanity and literacy, at the crossroads of ethics and aesthetics.

Two carefully staged reading scenes in *Das Leben der Anderen* involve the very same Brecht volume that determines subsequent events in the narrative: theater director Albert Jerska reads in dramatist Georg Dreyman's apartment, and captain Gerd Wiesler purloins the book and reads it, after work, at home. Wiesler's surreptitious reading of Brecht signals the emergence of an aesthetic sensibility with subjective powers of cognition that run counter to the State's systematic expropriation of individuality. This marks the beginning of the end of a vicarious life of surveillance, gives rise to questions of friendship and goodness, and kindles Wiesler's dialogue between his self and his other. *Das Leben der Anderen* thus presents the dynamics of alienation and intrusion, of de-familiarization and re-familiarization, carving out a space for reading as a cardinal human activity between life and art. It is ultimately by opposing major Brechtian claims that von Donnersmarck is able to present his own appreciation of tangible books, imaginative literature, and the world-changing dimensions of reading and writing.⁷

'Ist immerhin Brecht', remarks a blacklisted Jerska in his laconic reply to Dreyman's exasperated question whether Jerska had really come to the birthday party just in order to read: 'Bist du wirklich hierhergekommen, um zu lesen?'⁸ Jerska had been sitting reflectively on a couch in Dreyman and his lover actress Christa-Maria Sieland's recently bugged apartment, at a distance from the other guests, fondly clasping a yellow book (Fig. 1). Jerska shows no interest in the guests' alleged euphoria as it covers real human drama, and Dreyman's friend Karl Wallner explains that Jerska does not want to talk to anybody. Dreyman, however, approaches the couch, removes a pile of books, and sits down next to Jerska. Upon

⁶ Silberman, p. 139.

⁷ The idea of tangible books presented visually (in a film, on a screen, on a monitor) encourages an appreciation of medial irony when reading books and facing the different (im)material shapes that they might assume.

⁸ Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, *Das Leben der Anderen* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2006), p. 53. In the film Jerska says tersely 'Ist immerhin Brecht', whereas in the screenplay it says: 'Immerhin ist es Brecht'. Quotations from the screenplay are indicated directly in the text with the respective page numbers. Quotations from the film and the 2007 London commentary are taken from the DVD, *Das Leben der Anderen*, dir. by Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck (Buena Vista International, 2006) [on DVD, includes Deleted Scenes, Making of *Das Leben der Anderen*, Interview with Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck (Toronto 2006) and Director's Commentary (London 2007)]. While the director's commentary is presented in English and is quoted in the original, quotations from the film are in the German original.



FIG. 1. Jerska reading Dreyman's Brecht book at the party

his provocative question, Jerska gently closes the volume ('Gedichtband mit gelbem Einband'), on whose cover we read: 'Bertolt Brecht' (von Donnersmarck, pp. 52–53).⁹

Dreyman is one of Jerska's few remaining friends, who against all the odds after a decade of unspoken *Berufsverbot* still harbors some hope that the East German State might lift its censorship of Jerska's work. Dreyman's reproach of his forlorn friend brings to the fore that it is Brecht after all who is responsible for their bond — about which Jerska stoically reminds Dreyman. That Jerska should choose the Brecht volume at Dreyman's birthday party, and to foreshadow his own death when reading from 'Der Adler' — a poem in which the creature is brought low by censure and eventually dies (von Donnersmarck, p. 52) — are crucial details that hardly escape Wiesler, who is in charge of the round-the-clock surveillance of Dreyman ('Operation Lazlo').¹⁰

In regular shifts the captain monitors (watches, screens, records) the dramatist's life from the attic, and also purloins the yellow volume of poetry from Dreyman's flat shortly after the party. Through this act, Wiesler physically invades and experiences Sieland and Dreyman's private (if bugged) sphere of love and letters that is only partially familiar to him from the limited visual range of his screen in the attic. Now the captain moves from the audio-visual perspective of a concealed and distant eavesdropper to a haptic level that includes the tangible: bed and desk, pens and books. He is, as it were, transformed from a spectator in a theater into an actor entering a stage. Wiesler's attic vantage point compares to the elevated box seat that he shares with lieutenant-colonel Grubitz at the Gerhart Hauptmann Theater at

⁹ The film only shows 'Brecht', while the screenplay spells out the full name.

¹⁰ There is a discrepancy between the film and the screenplay. Cf. Deleted Scene 'Tierverser'. We see Jerska read, but for copyright reasons his voice is muted in the film's reading scene.

the first performance of *Gesichter der Liebe*, which von Donnersmarck meta-theatrically stages,¹¹ while Dreyman and Sieland's flat, where much of the film's plot is set, also 'becomes a stage'.¹²

Das Leben der Anderen showcases the artistic atmosphere of Dreyman's and Jerska's flats, which both include an extensive library and artworks, and in Jerska's case wine bottles and theater posters and in Dreyman's a piano. When Wiesler takes the yellow book home to his bare *Plattenbau* flat with three vacuous generic paintings on its plain walls, he introduces a token that condenses Brecht, Jerska, and Dreyman into his home, and reads from the book at about the same time that Jerska takes his life — which is also when Dreyman asks Sieland whether she had not by any chance seen the yellow Brecht book.¹³ Underscoring this dramatic simultaneity, immediately after learning of Jerska's suicide, Dreyman plays on his piano from the sheet music his friend had given him as a birthday gift: *Die Sonate vom guten Menschen* (von Donnersmarck, p. 76), sharing with Sieland what he recalls of Maxim Gorky's anecdote about Lenin's perception of Beethoven's *Appassionata* (i.e. the power of art, when allowed to take its full emotive effect, to weaken his revolutionary commitment).¹⁴ While Sieland did not approve of Dreyman's friendship with Jerska, whom she calls a 'heiliger Trinker' (pp. 74 and 47–48), it is his friend Jerska's demise that prompts Dreyman to write an article on suicide in the GDR. Intended for anonymous publication in the West, his contribution drives the plot into further crisis, as the complex connections between reading and writing begin to enter the narrative more prominently with the typewriter subplot.

The yellow Brecht book is dear not only to Jerska, but to its owner Dreyman and the purloiner Wiesler as well, a literary novice who gradually discovers the power of literacy and humanity through the theater artists he observes. As a small and treasured item that from its early introduction into the film's plot is charged with heightened significance, the yellow volume covers a noteworthy itinerary as it passes through many hands.¹⁵ Thus through this book's presence the sense of touch assumes increasing significance in *Das Leben der Anderen*, in various episodes beyond the lovers' passion and the crude haptic eroticism that minister

¹¹ When Grubitz leaves the box seat to join Hempf, Wiesler inspects with great interest the program booklet of Dreyman's play.

¹² Silberman, p. 147.

¹³ Wiesler reads from the book in the sequence preceding the scene in which Dreyman receives the phone call informing him about Jerska's suicide, which Wiesler monitors from the attic. Silberman's discussion of backstage drama is of interest in this context, in that it 'traces the trials and tribulations of struggling artists' and in that its 'conflicts generally arise in a parallel or mirror situation that contrasts onstage and backstage encounters' (Silberman, pp. 146–47).

¹⁴ Cf. Deleted Scene 'Abschied von Jerska', in which Dreyman plays the piano at his birthday party, while Jerska, from his isolated position, looks at him for the last time.

¹⁵ The yellow book in *Das Leben der Anderen* is reminiscent of Othello's handkerchief. In Shakespeare's tragedy the embroidered fabric is a time-honored icon that Desdemona receives from Othello. Like Desdemona's handkerchief, the yellow volume also covers a noteworthy dramatic itinerary. Both tokens play indispensable roles in each drama, in that they have a significant bearing on subsequent events — their loss is a mark of disaster, while their presence offers a glimpse of hope. Just as the whereabouts of the handkerchief eventually decide over life and death, Wiesler's theft of the book is at least partially responsible for Sieland's death on the street, especially when considered in combination with the captain's removal of the typewriter only moments prior to the actress's death. In ways similar to Shakespeare's scenario, the catastrophe in *Das Leben der Anderen* is tightly linked to a series of lies, confessions, betrayals, and misunderstandings.

Bruno Hempf imposes on Sieland on the backseat of the limousine. Although the film as a visual work of art with a focus on surveillance and spying unfolds in the realm of sight, touch returns at the very end, when Wiesler gently clasps another book held by someone else before him: Dreyman's *Die Sonate vom guten Menschen*. Repeating the title of Jerska's score, Dreyman's novel fortifies the film's allusion to Brecht's *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan*, and is dedicated to 'HGW XX/7', the Stasi's cryptonym for the man who once was captain Wiesler.

'Brecht had to be in this film; he is a forgotten genius', asserts von Donnersmarck in his London commentary about *Das Leben der Anderen* on 12 April 2007. He celebrates Brecht above all as a 'master of the word whom it is really worth learning German for'. The director reminds his audience of his debt to Brecht, mentioning that he had read *Baal* at the age of twelve.¹⁶ However, despite Brecht's presence as a common denominator in the film and a unifier of the seemingly irreconcilable (the Jerska-Dreyman-Wiesler triumvirate), *Das Leben der Anderen* is not an unequivocal homage to Brecht. Von Donnersmarck's references and allusions to Brecht, both within the film and in his comments about it, are eclectic and frequently at odds with Brecht's principal aesthetic and ethical convictions, especially 'Verfremdung'.¹⁷ In other words, '(mis)using Brecht for a purported aesthetics of resistance [...] but then implement[ing] un-Brechtian strategies of emotional identification', von Donnersmarck 'appropriates Brecht [...] for a symptomatically un-Brechtian purpose [...] insert[ing] Brecht into his own aesthetic system that assumes that great art must remain apolitical in order to humanize a bad person like Wiesler'.¹⁸

Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekte* have played a considerable role in his challenging legacy. He coined the term in the plural, covering a variety of artistic devices meant to secure a critical distance between actor and role and between stage and spectator, and the overall absence of illusion. Among the strategies he endorses are interrupted plots and shifts in chronology, open endings, songs, preludes and interludes, exotic settings, remote times and visible stage techniques — all of which encourage an absence of identification in favor of rational engagement. Instrumentalized distance through de-familiarization avoids the spectator's identification with the stage, as well as that of the actors with their roles, to stimulate ethically informed action.

In his London commentary, von Donnersmarck describes *Das Leben der Anderen* as 'an actors' film' and points out 'how hard it is to believe that Mühe is acting and not real', calling Mühe 'a great actor' because of his immersion in his role. Von Donnersmarck is very un-Brechtian here, and freely equates actors with their roles, merging not only actress Martina Gedeck with the film's stage actress

¹⁶ Brecht's *Baal* charts the decline of a dissolute poet, addict, brawler, seducer and murderer, so that it is easy to imagine how its protagonist's surrender to instinct would appeal to an adolescent.

¹⁷ See Bertolt Brecht, *Werke*, ed. by Werner Hecht et al., 30 vols + *Registerband* (Berlin and Weimar: Aufbau; Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1988–2000), XXII: *Schriften 2, Teil 1. Schriften 1933–1942* (1993), 200–10.

¹⁸ Silberman, pp. 153–55. Silberman's observation refers to the intertext of *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan*, but his insight seems applicable to von Donnersmarck's usage of Brecht more broadly.

Christa-Maria Sieland, but also actors Ulrich Mühe and Sebastian Koch with Stasi captain Gerd Wiesler and dramatist Georg Dreyman. He further hypothesizes that ‘everything could have happened just like that’, while assuring his audience that ‘the story is fictional’, qualifying it as ‘a truthful story but not a true story’, and eventually comparing it to Boris Pasternak’s revisionist historical novel *Doctor Zhivago*.¹⁹

Wiesler’s change of heart — a truthful story? Various critics, most vehemently Anna Funder, have claimed the opposite, decrying the film’s historical irresponsibility and attacking von Donnersmarck for eulogizing GDR life under Stasi surveillance and aestheticizing totalitarianism. ‘Leaving aside the question of the redemptive power of art, it is important to understand that a Wiesler could not have existed’, and thus ‘to believe that a victim could be saved through a perpetrator’s change of heart is to misunderstand the totalitarian nature of bureaucratic evil’.²⁰ Funder calls the film a ‘seductive fiction’²¹ that ‘falsifies a fundamental truth about the regime in order to make a more uplifting entertainment’.²² Such a reminder challenges von Donnersmarck’s insistence on his fiction’s truthful character. Stressing a commitment to history and authenticity,

¹⁹ In light of this comparison and his unresolved ideas about the commonalities and differences between history, fiction, and truthfulness, it is worth recalling what von Donnersmarck does *not* mention, namely that Pasternak set his novel at the time between the Russian Revolution and World War Two; that it was refused publication as a consequence of the independent stance it had taken toward the October Revolution; and that it had to be smuggled to Milan for its first appearance in print. By contrast, *Das Leben der Anderen* came into being almost two decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall, encountered no such obstacles, hardly took a strong political stance, and quickly won an Oscar. Von Donnersmarck’s take on fiction and truthfulness is hence a different matter from the challenges Pasternak’s narrative faced, composed as it was under threatening political circumstances.

²⁰ Funder, p. 19. Should one ever leave the question of art’s redemptive power aside when facing a work of art? Is not art the arena where the *licentia poetica* should thrive? Such license is not a euphemism for the distortion of truth. Rather, it is at the artist’s discretion to be what von Donnersmarck in the London commentary calls ‘truer than the real thing, and [...] more beautiful.’ Shakespeare’s plays are gross distortions of historical accuracy but are nonetheless lauded as exceptional dramatic achievements. *Das Leben der Anderen* ‘is not [...] the first historical drama to include anachronisms and inaccuracies’ (Hodgin, p. 80). If Shakespeare, why not von Donnersmarck? Because a film is not a play, and the GDR is less remote than Elizabethan England? Is recent history automatically more serious, and a feature film by definition further removed than a play from the realm of the imaginary?

²¹ Funder, p. 18.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 16. Daniela Berghahn and Cheryl Dueck classified the film similarly as ‘a fairy tale of redemption’ (Daniela Berghahn, ‘Remembering the Stasi in a Fairy Tale of Redemption: Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck’s *Das Leben der Anderen*’, *Oxford German Studies*, 38 (2009), 321–33 (p. 321)) that ‘humanizes the Stasi’ (Cheryl Dueck, ‘The Humanization of the Stasi in *Das Leben der Anderen*’, *German Studies Review*, 31 (2008), 599–609 (p. 599)). Funder dismisses *Das Leben der Anderen* as ‘a brilliant cold-war surveillance drama’, posing the question as to whether ‘its wish-fulfillment story of a worm turning, play[s] fair with history and the victims of the Stasi’ (Funder, p. 16). While *Das Leben der Anderen* does not follow Aristotle’s ideas of identification, since the spectator may well empathize with an implausible character such as Wiesler, according to Aristotle and Funder, a ‘bad man’ that leaves ‘adversity’ and gains ‘prosperity’ is dismissible — for Aristotle as ‘alien’, for such development moves neither pity nor fear’, and for Funder as irresponsible (Aristotle, *Poetics and Rhetoric*, ed. by Eugene Garver and George Stade (New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2005), p. 35).

he (con)fuses such notions with truthfulness and fictional plausibility, for example when pointing to the putative authenticity of his props.²³ If von Donnersmarck is not much of a Brechtian, he is not much of an Aristotelian either. His filmic fiction does not pass the critics' test of *mimesis* as the ground for plausibility, for a Wiesler not only did not exist, but cannot be imagined to have existed and is hence an incredible protagonist.²⁴

As a feature, *Das Leben der Anderen* privileges a suggestive foregrounding of art and acting, fiction and poetry, rather than a representation of actual life under surveillance during the final years of the GDR. The most evident theme, the Stasi and its victims, is not the film's only topic, and, given its genre, not even its main concern. It is a fictional historical narrative and as such not unlike *Doctor Zhivago*. In this sense, von Donnersmarck is an Aristotelian after all, in that not only plot, but what he envisions as his fiction's general applicability to the human condition certainly weighs heavier than Brecht's rigorous replacement of Aristotelian *mythos* as 'the soul of tragedy'²⁵ by 'Gestus', of a mimetic representation of life and action by a fragmentary, de-familiarizing demonstration.²⁶ Aristotle claims that art 'must surpass reality'²⁷ and ranks tragic poetry higher than historiography. He further maintains that

it is not the function of the poet to relate what has happened, but what may happen, — what is possible according to the law of probability or necessity. The poet and the historian differ not by writing in verse or in prose. The work of Herodotus might be put into verse, and it would still be a species of history [...]. The true difference is that one relates what has happened, the other what may happen. Poetry, therefore, is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular. [...] what is possible is credible: what has not happened we do not at once feel sure to be possible: but what has happened is manifestly possible: otherwise it would not have happened.²⁸

Without being an Attic tragic poet, von Donnersmarck's role as the author of events that did not happen is nevertheless closer to the poetic role of a Sophocles

²³ Cf. Manfred Wilke's insightful text on the 'Frage der Glaubwürdigkeit': Manfred Wilke, 'Fiktion oder erlebte Geschichte? Zur Frage der Glaubwürdigkeit des Films *Das Leben der Anderen*', *German Studies Review*, 31 (2008), 589–98.

²⁴ If unlike a documentary, the feature should not be judged according to criteria of historical accuracy, it is thought-provoking that Funder, who points to Wiesler's historical implausibility and sees exemplified in it the film's irresponsibility, does not place a political argument at the core of this assessment, but implicitly deploys an Aristotelian literary category as the basis of her historical approach: credibility, not actuality. Funder writes that a Wiesler could not have existed, and that *that* rather than the fact that a Wiesler did not exist makes von Donnersmarck's invention untruthful and hence irresponsible. Curiously, her historically spurred critique is tacitly sympathetic to Aristotle's ideas about the probability and universality of tragic poetry that he contrasted with the particularity of historiography.

²⁵ Aristotle, *Poetics*, p. 21.

²⁶ Brecht, *Werke*, XXIII: *Schriften 3. Schriften 1942–1956* (1993), 95.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 85.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 27.

than that of a Herodotus, father of historiography. The question remains, however, whether his film's story is plausible, possible, credible, universal and fictionally truthful, in that it is imaginable under the conditions it depicts. In his London commentary, von Donnersmarck recalls that his film's props were original Stasi equipment borrowed from museums; that the houses on Dreyman and Sieland's street were painted over repeatedly as the film was made (with the post-*Wende* graffiti re-appearing on a nightly basis); and that the cover of the *Spiegel* magazine in which Dreyman's article appears is authentic in that it was designed by *Spiegel*, albeit without ever appearing as an actual issue of the Hamburg weekly. These details portray von Donnersmarck's interest in the authenticity of setting and requisites rather than the actuality of characters or events. The director's enthusiasm about details of presumed actuality vis-à-vis his intended truthfulness may serve as synecdoches through which to approach the narrative location of the film more broadly.

Von Donnersmarck's differences with Brechtian aesthetics make his installment of the yellow Brecht book in the film all the more intriguing. As stated earlier, this volume matters in two crucial reading episodes. In the first, Jerska reads at the party so as to mitigate his despair. This triggers a conversation with Dreyman about reading and friendship, as well as the propriety of places where (not) to read. The second scene shows Wiesler lying on a couch in his apartment, where he had previously tried to find intimacy in a brief encounter with a prostitute. There he reads a poem from Dreyman's book, after having seen and listened to Jerska read from it, and Dreyman talk to Jerska about reading at the party, after having witnessed Sieland and Dreyman's lovemaking, and after having sat on their bed and touched their sheets as well as Dreyman's desk, books, and writing utensils (von Donnersmarck, p. 72).

The choice of poem in this second reading scene that involves the yellow volume is intriguing.²⁹ It is not a political poem on this occasion, but a love poem: 'Erinnerung an die Marie A.', which, albeit without title and in truncated form, is the only actual literary text that appears in the film. Other books and titles referred to, read and written — scenes of reading and writing being numerous, including the spectator's reading of sections of Wiesler's reports as he types them — remain undisclosed or are fictional within the film's fiction, and range from Jerska's score to Dreyman's subsequent novel of the same title, *Die Sonate vom guten Menschen*,

²⁹ Von Donnersmarck's concern with authenticity also gives rise to the question as to exactly which Brecht book is used in his film. While 'Brecht' is visible on its yellow cover as Jerska first closes and Wiesler later opens it, knowing that it contains 'Der Adler' (from which Jerska reads) and 'Erinnerung an die Marie A.' (from which Wiesler reads), the volume itself remains somewhat mysterious. Spectators do not see the book's title, nor which edition it might be, even though they may suspect a volume of *Gesammelte Werke* or *Gesammelte Gedichte*. *Brecht: Ein Lesebuch für unsere Zeit*, ed. by Elisabeth Hauptmann and Benno Slupianek (Berlin und Weimar: Aufbau Verlag, 1965) looks very similar to the volume in the film and contains 'Erinnerung an die Marie A.', but not 'Der Adler'. Cf. Silberman p. 151, note 22, who conjectures without mentioning 'Der Adler' that 'because of its counterrevolutionary content' the book is 'probably [...] a West German edition.'

which is an homage both to the musical sonata form and to Brecht's *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan*.³⁰

Brecht's *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan* is a parabolic illustration of good and evil, (re)written and inspired by a number of people in various drafts during Brecht's exile. This background of the play's composition may foreshadow *Die Sonate vom guten Menschen* as co-authored over many years by Brecht, Jerska, Dreyman, and Wiesler. In Brecht's play, the prostitute Shen Te is one of only a few good people. As she provides shelter for the gods and saves an unemployed airman from suicide, one party exploits and the other ultimately abandons her. Thus Brecht shows how charity and kindness may lead to ruin under adverse social and political circumstances, where being good cannot be reconciled with survival.³¹ Similarly, von Donnersmarck's Jerska hands sheet music about a good person to Dreyman at a point when he realizes that survival and integrity are no longer compatible — after ten years, the existence as a blacklisted artist is something he can no longer bear.

Although in his London commentary von Donnersmarck merely alludes to 'Brecht's beautiful poem' without further detail, it is the first stanza of 'Erinnerung an die Marie A.' that subtly lends the plot its momentum. The discovery of Brecht's verse initiates Wiesler's potentially implausible change of heart and the film's unlikely *peripeteia*. That it is among the most famous German love poems made it a likely candidate for von Donnersmarck's transmission of the poem's initial eight lines. Nevertheless, love poems as Brecht composed and parodied them would be improbable contestants to seduce a Stasi officer — Wiesler, after all, is a novice in matters poetic and amorous alike. His apartment lacks books and ambience, company and memories, making the gloomy attic above Dreyman's bugged flat look comparatively cozy.

It comes as no surprise that Brecht chose traditional love poetry and Aristotle's assessment of Attic tragedy as apt targets for his artistic revolution, the most appropriate genres to de-familiarize and re-invent — as for example his vulgarization of Dante's Beatrice and his provocative and explosive *Stücke* unequivocally show. All the more intriguing then that Wiesler should be mesmerized by the initial lines of Brecht's poem. Beyond attending the premiere of Dreyman's *Gesichter der Liebe* at the beginning, the lonesome captain's experience of art is, we may surmise, limited to his State's tracking of underground culture. Wiesler's presence in the theater is a business assignment; he attends the performance to watch the audience rather than the stage, and does so for reasons divorced from artistic concern.³²

³⁰ That *Sonate* should become the title of a novel is noteworthy for its cross-generic reference to the orchestration of Dreyman's meta-fictional story in which Wiesler's proto-literary efforts play a critical role. Notably, his play about Lenin is a fictional cover-up for Dreyman's article, which the spectator, however, never gets to see.

³¹ In the context of misogyny, Christa-Maria Sieland has been read by Jennifer Creech and Gary Schmidt as comparable to Brecht's split (and initially female) protagonist who finds herself in a dire socio-political situation. Cf. Silberman, pp. 152–53.

³² Wiesler's presence in the theater is reminiscent of the meta-theater in *Hamlet*, where the Prince watches the play within the play to observe the audience — in *Hamlet* King and Queen and in *Das Leben der Anderen* Dreyman and Hempf — and to collect evidence rather than direct the attention to the stage.

Were Brecht to witness Wiesler's tear in the attic as his reaction to overhearing Dreyman play the piano (or the director's claim that Wiesler/Mühe 'cried naturally' in this scene), he would likely deplore the absence of *Verfremdung*. Immersive method acting is diametrically opposed to Brecht's conviction that 'der Schauspieler muß Demonstrant bleiben; er muß den Demonstrierten als eine fremde Person wiedergeben'.³³ While Wiesler listening to Dreyman play Jerska's music shows his clearest emotive response, his reading from 'Marie A.', if more subtly, also portrays the affect Brecht had set out to avoid. In this case, von Donnersmarck prepared for Wiesler a reading scene under conditions that are simultaneously Brechtian (in that Wiesler changes), non-Aristotelian (in that Wiesler's transformation seems implausible), and non-Brechtian (in that Wiesler empathizes and the spectator identifies with him and his dawning humanity).³⁴ Here von Donnersmarck silently challenges Brecht, since Wiesler changes because of his identification and empathy, rather than as a result of distance and de-familiarization.

Brecht would not marvel at von Donnersmarck's transformation of an eavesdropping agent into an emblem of goodness (what Aristotle described as the bad man's prosperity). In *Kleines Organon für das Theater* Brecht states:

In keinem Augenblicke läßt er [der Schauspieler] es zur restlosen Verwandlung in die Figur kommen. Ein Urteil: 'er spielte den Lear nicht, er war Lear', wäre für ihn vernichtend. Er hat seine Figur lediglich zu zeigen oder, besser gesagt, nicht nur lediglich zu erleben; dies bedeutet nicht, daß er, wenn er leidenschaftliche Leute gestaltet, selber kalt sein muß. Nur sollten seine eigenen Gefühle nicht grundsätzlich die seiner Figur sein, damit auch die seines Publikums nicht grundsätzlich die der Figur werden. Das Publikum muß da völlige Freiheit haben.³⁵

'Isn't it so amazing', asks von Donnersmarck in his London commentary, 'how Ulrich Mühe just conveys this sense of loneliness in Wiesler and everything he does [...] so completely without sentimentalism, without asking for pity; he does it just by being such a giant of an actor.' In his description of an actor who is partially fabulous because he does not ask for pity, von Donnersmarck implicitly accords with Brecht. In the scene he stages with Wiesler reading Brecht, however, he distances himself from Brecht's distancing. Further, in the commentary he claims that 'Wiesler does not know how to look for love.' Wiesler, however, after the grotesque episode with the prostitute learns how to discover passion and beauty, memory and humanity, and does so precisely when Jerska's self-inflicted death, Dreyman's searching his yellow book, and Wiesler's reading from it happen in such close temporal proximity. Wiesler's 'exposure to art (Brecht's poetry, music,

³³ Brecht, *Schriften 2, Teil 1. Schriften 1933–1942*, 376.

³⁴ The intended effect for poetry to make the audience learn and change, or enjoy and learn (reflect and change), is concisely summarized in Horace's *Ars Poetica*, where he writes of *prodesse et delectare* that poets desire either to be useful or entertaining, or both, useful and entertaining. Brecht wanted both.

³⁵ Brecht, *Schriften 3. Schriften 1942–1956*, 83.

and [...] the art of living [...] precipitates a fundamental change [...] a dawning realization [...] that he is on the wrong side.³⁶

Following a long surveillance shift, Wiesler returns home one night, lies down on his couch and opens the yellow volume he had removed from Dreyman's desk (Fig. 2).³⁷ Wiesler reads only the first stanza of 'Marie A.',³⁸ and not stanzas two and three, in which Brecht becomes Brechtian and presents his sacrilegious, defamiliarization of the conventional love poem. An external voice (Dreyman's) is heard reciting the lines of the first stanza, while Wiesler reads along silently. The background music supports the spectator's impression of Wiesler's dreaming on after the voice comes to a halt. Dreyman's voice-over underscores the connection Wiesler feels with him — what the director in the London commentary calls 'the real axis of love', the only bond in the film based on deep mutual appreciation without betrayal.³⁹

An jenem Tag im blauen Mond September
 Still unter einem jungen Pflaumenbaum
 Da hielt ich sie, die stille bleiche Liebe
 In meinem Arm wie einen holden Traum.
 Und über uns im schönen Sommerhimmel
 War eine Wolke, die ich lange sah,
 Sie war sehr weiß und ungeheuer oben
 Und als ich aufsah, war sie nimmer da.⁴⁰

In its portrayal of beauty and memory Brecht's first stanza accords smoothly with the genre of love poetry in the Western tradition. The subsequent stanzas, by contrast, present the speaker's purported forgetting, including the lover's face, in a Brechtian rebuttal of love poetry. This motif is taken up and implicitly challenged in Dreyman's play *Gesichter der Liebe*, performed twice in *Das Leben der Anderen*: first with a focus on Sieland's face and Dreyman's love of it (Sieland is not Marie A.), and then on Dreyman's indelible memory of her face, after Sieland's

³⁶ Hodgins, p. 82.

³⁷ Von Donnersmarck portrays Wiesler's reading Brecht as surreptitious, which may strike the spectator as counter-intuitive, since Brecht was obligatory reading in the GDR. 'Marie A.', however, is not a political poem and hence accords well with Wiesler's turn to beauty and memory rather than politically committed texts favored by the State.

³⁸ Silberman calls it 'a series of sentimental clichés' (Silberman, p. 151).

³⁹ While Cook suggests Michel Chion's term *acousmètre* for this scene and its disembodied voice-over (Cook, 'Literary Discourse', pp. 84–86), the physical presence of Wiesler's face is nevertheless striking, as his eyes intently follow Brecht's verses.

⁴⁰ Brecht, *Werke*, XI: *Gedichte I. Sammlungen 1918–1938* (1988), 92. Stanzas two and three read thus: 'Seit jenem Tag sind viele, viele Monde | Geschwommen still hinunter und vorbei. | Die Pflaumenbäume sind nun abgehauen | Und fragst du mich, was mit der Liebe sei? | So sag ich dir: Ich kann mich nicht erinnern. | Und doch, gewiß, ich weiß schon, was du meinst | Doch ihr Gesicht, das weiß ich wirklich nimmer / Ich weiß nur mehr: ich küßte es dereinst. || Und auch den Kuß, ich hätt ihn längst vergessen | Wenn nicht die Wolke dagewesen wär. | Die weiß ich noch und werd ich immer wissen | Sie war sehr weiß und kam von oben her. | Die Pflaumenbäume blühen vielleicht noch immer | Und jene Frau hat jetzt vielleicht das siebte Kind. | Doch jene Wolke blühte nur Minuten | Und als ich aufsah, schwand sie schon im Wind' (Brecht, *Gedichte I. Sammlungen 1918–1938*, 92–93).



FIG. 2. Wiesler reading Dreyman's Brecht book at home

death, when he can neither bear the new cast nor his company, since their presence doubly signals Christa-Maria's absence in his life and on his stage. As faces, visions, and memories powerfully overlap, Dreyman leaves the theater, if only to run into Hempf, who provokes: 'zu viele Erinnerungen, was?', and continues, with relish, to add insult to injury.⁴¹

The repression of the lover's face as her signature is an example of the generic sacrilege Brecht mastered. 'Marie A.' performs the irony of partial forgetting, while at the same time celebrating a mnemonic creativity that disables any repression.⁴² The dynamics of memory and oblivion are at the core of the two stanzas Wiesler does *not* read. That said, the image of him reading the poem invokes Brecht's white cloud as an emblem of remembered love, and anticipates Dreyman's remembrance of his deceased lover's face. Wiesler reading love poetry

⁴¹ While Dreyman watches his play's second performance in the film — which according to Wendy Westphal is a production that deploys techniques of defamiliarization (Wendy Westphal, 'Truer than the Real Thing: *Real* and *Hyperreal* Representations of the Past in *Das Leben der Anderen*', *German Studies Review*, 35 (2012), 97–111 (p. 104)), — what he really views takes place in his mind's eye: Dreyman mnemonically re-views the play's first performance with Sieland playing the lead, and without any emotional distance from his actress/lover. Cf. Silberman's idea of *Gesichter der Liebe* as an 'oblique reference' to Brecht's *Die Gesichte der Simone Marchand* (Silberman, p. 152). The etymological relationship of visions and faces as *Gesichte(r)* is powerful in this context.

⁴² Cf. Martina Kolb, 'Clouds of Knowing, Songs of Experience, Seasons of Love: Bertolt Brecht's Intimations of Dante and Haiku', *Oxford German Studies*, 41 (2012), 103–26, particularly pp. 110–17 for an elaboration of 'Erinnerung an die Marie A.' and the poetics of memory and forgetting, affect and de-familiarization in the context of the cloud image. Cf. Gary Schmidt's observation about the cloud image that follows Sieland's death in *Das Leben der Anderen* (referenced in Silberman, p. 149.).

may also conjure surmises about his personal history, though the film remains silent about the captain's past life — perhaps an eloquent silence.

This complex reading scene embodied in the token of the yellow book marks a turning point in the narrative: the beginning of the end of a vicarious love life in which Wiesler has been able to engage through surveillance. His profession has given him the opportunity to live vicariously without having to be stealthy about a clandestine voyeurism, while his discovery of love and art as being lived by Sieland and Dreyman encourages surreptitious dimensions that lead Wiesler back into his own vulnerable privacy. Wiesler, however, is not really a voyeur in that it is not his sexual interest that triggers his spying. That said, those monitored by him are unaware of being observed; in fact, Dreyman is stunned when he eventually learns from Hempf that his apartment had been bugged. And yet, if Wiesler witnesses all aspects of Sieland and Dreyman's life, he grows uncomfortable precisely with what a voyeur would relish most. The audience witnesses this putative privacy, in the sense that Wiesler himself describes it to Sieland when sitting face-to-face with her in a desolate corner bar, vividly pointing out: 'ich bin doch Ihr Publikum'.

As Grubitz and Hempf, who coerces his 'Perle der Republik' into a sexual relationship on which her acting career depends, Wiesler is also a man without partner, family, or friend, whose days are consumed with work and a few hours off to eat and sleep. He suffers a professional distraction from life, which is at the same time an over-concentration during his mesmerizing acts of spying. Wiesler's political disillusionment sets in as he learns the real reason behind his assignment: Hempf covets Sieland and wants to dispose of his erotic rival. The captain's discomfort is less with the Stasi as an institution at large than with abuse of political power toward private ends. Wiesler calls these offenses (and perhaps also his decision not to wittingly support them) 'bittere Wahrheiten.' Indeed, as soon as he understands Hempf's coercive relationship, he resolves to assist Dreyman in discovering it. The next time Sieland goes out, Dreyman implores her never again to meet the minister, but she leaves anyway. In a corner bar Wiesler approaches Sieland, addressing the prominent actress as a great artist, and using *double entendres* with theater vocabulary to reach a woman in despair. If Sieland initially practices her *coquetterie*, she eventually understands — and returns home to Dreyman.

WIESLER Frau Sieland.

SIELAND Kennen wir uns?

WIESLER Sie kennen mich nicht. Aber ich kenne Sie ... Viele Menschen lieben Sie ... nur weil Sie sind, wie Sie sind.

SIELAND Ein Schauspieler ist nie so, wie er ist.

WIESLER Sie doch. Ich habe Sie auf der Bühne gesehen. Sie waren da mehr so, wie Sie sind ... als Sie es jetzt sind.

SIELAND Sie wissen, wie ich bin?

WIESLER Ich bin doch Ihr Publikum.

SIELAND Ich muß gehen.

WIESLER Wohin gehen Sie?

SIELAND Ich treffe eine alte Schulfreundin; ich ...

WIESLER Sehen Sie, da waren Sie gerade gar nicht Sie selbst.

SIELAND Nein?

WIESLER Nein.

SIELAND Sie kennen sie also gut, diese Christa-Maria Sieland. Was meinen Sie, würde sie einen Menschen verletzen, der sie über alles liebt? Würde sie sich verkaufen, für die Kunst?

WIESLER Verkaufen? Für die Kunst? Die hat sie doch schon. Das wäre ein schlechtes Geschäft. Sie sind eine große Künstlerin. Wissen Sie das denn nicht?

SIELAND Und Sie sind ein guter Mensch.

(von Donnersmarck, pp. 86–87)⁴³

Psychologizing the paradox of acting, Wiesler speaks the truth to Sieland indirectly, all the while trying to be candid, and to assist her in becoming so as well, cleverly pointing to illusions on and off stage in a complex, layered conversation that follows his reading experience of Brecht. Sieland wears her sunglasses during this conversation with the captain. When faced with him the next time, however, she will be stripped of this last protection, now compromised and completely vulnerable. In the interrogation room at Hohenschönhausen, Wiesler once again reminds Sieland of her audience ('denken Sie an Ihr Publikum'), using this coded reference to theatricality from their previous encounter to (re) establish trust as her friend despite appearances to the contrary. Thus when he asks for and she reveals the secret hiding place of Dreyman's Western typewriter in the 'Geheimfach' (a third act of betrayal that confirms the beginning of her end), Wiesler is able to remove this incriminating evidence before the officers can find it.⁴⁴ Negotiating trust and betrayal in secrecy, Wiesler's intervention is a dangerous gamble to save the couple that he will partly lose.

Wiesler's hidden work on 'Operation Lazlo' is entirely opposed to Brecht's theatrical imperative of demonstration ('Das Zeigen muß gezeigt werden'). Yet von Donnersmarck displays a Brechtian interest in detailed observation (which is the basis for Aristotelian *mimesis* as well) and the use of visible equipment, as well as distancing to obtain a clear understanding. The less Wiesler identifies with his role in the State apparatus, the more he becomes a Brechtian actor. He also begins to function as a kind of internal Brechtian audience vis-à-vis the home-show assignment, growing increasingly aware of the misery it causes both himself and others. Wiesler even creates a trans-generic epic distance via Brecht's poem, mitigating the state of alienation in his official role with a reading that instructs him in life, love, and letters.⁴⁵ Further, Wiesler's reading, to borrow Harold

⁴³ Sieland, according to Wiesler, is an immersive, un-Brechtian method actress and more true to herself on stage than in life. In a play on the word, Grubitz later dismissively calls Sieland 'die Schauspielerin' (now a synonym for a liar), when he finds out that the typewriter is not under the doorstep as she claimed it was. Neither Grubitz nor Sieland are aware of Wiesler's timely removal of the typewriter, which renders Grubitz's pun ironic and lends a tragic dimension to Sieland's death, triggered by guilt, shame, and panic.

⁴⁴ Her two preceding acts of betrayal are the liaison with Hempf and her becoming an IM.

⁴⁵ Brecht's theories of distancing and rationalization may be extended to spheres beyond the theater, such as to the visible technique and equipment on stage and in film, or to scenes of reading literature. Brecht practiced *Verfremdung* in dramatic and poetic contexts, and saw it at work in various arts, genres, and periods, for instance in Pieter Bruegel the Elder's Flemish Renaissance painting.

Bloom's words on reading, 'returns [him] to otherness', in that '[i]maginative literature is otherness and [...] alleviates loneliness.'⁴⁶ It is Brecht whose influential role Wiesler witnessed in the lives and passions of artists such as Sieland and Dreyman, and who is Wiesler's didactic mediator.

That stories appear within stories and performances happen within performances has been a commonplace since Thomas Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy* and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Such dual perspectives show staging techniques on and beyond the stage (in Brecht's sense), and draw attention to the potential of the respective works, while placing emphasis on the distribution and representation of one within the other. Something similar holds true for reading and writing scenes as they have appeared across media and ages, including those in von Donnersmarck's film, which portrays a multiple layering of theatrically presented observation. Instances of such staggered ways of watching are the recorded interrogation at the very beginning that Wiesler subsequently uses in his classroom when Grubitz observes his teaching; Hempf, Wiesler, and Grubitz's close examination of Dreyman as a spectator of his own play; Hempf's zooming in on Sieland and Dreyman; Wiesler's monitoring Sieland and Dreyman; neighbor Meineke's witnessing the Stasi officers as they break into Dreyman's apartment (and Wiesler's noticing her at the door's spyhole — an interesting irony in that Meineke first spies on the spy and is then bribed into promising not to have seen anything, to hand over the function of her door's spying capacities to Wiesler); Wiesler interrogating Sieland (and Grubitz witnessing the process); and the second performance of *Gesichter der Liebe*, with Dreyman in the audience once again.⁴⁷

Within the parameters of such a spectacle within the spectacle, von Donnersmarck stages theatrically informed reading scenes that resemble dramatic soliloquies in that they appear as words in solitude by a self to itself as another. Wiesler's growing insight into the power of the book goes hand in hand with his understanding of the therapeutic and ethical potential of reading and writing literature. Ultimately, Wiesler becomes true to himself in the course of his discovery of the universal value that Aristotle ascribes to tragedy, and by extension to art, poetry, and fictional representations more broadly.

Wiesler ends up reading as a consequence of his profession, in which he focuses on the lives of two artist-lovers; not, however, to the point of self-effacement, but with the result of either disorientation (a move away from his former self), or reorientation (a move back to himself via another who reads and opens up to humanity). The film's final scene renders this painfully clear. Wiesler's mimic conveys an anxious anticipation that tells us that he is ready for his imminent reading of Dreyman's book. With this book, he faces his life and reads about himself, for himself, of himself, by himself — via another, Dreyman. The dramatist has just lived through a comparable reading experience of his Stasi file at the *Forschungs- und Gedenkstätte in der Normannenstraße* (Fig. 3), a record to which Wiesler's fictional fabrications have contributed. Wiesler, as it were, turned

⁴⁶ Harold Bloom, *How to Read and Why* (New York: Scribner, 2000), p. 19.

⁴⁷ Another scene which von Donnersmarck eventually deleted is 'Feierabend', where Wiesler spies on his neighbors in his building, from his own apartment. This further emphasizes the vicariousness of Wiesler's life.



FIG. 3. Dreyman reading his Stasi file in Normannenstraße

into a motivated *Stückeschreiber* in the moment that he lost faith in his official task. Once he decided to cover up Dreyman's Western affiliations and his piece on suicide in the GDR, Wiesler produced the respective dramatic mantle: a play about Lenin that Wiesler claims Dreyman was about to compose to celebrate the Republic's fortieth anniversary.

The yellow Brecht book is not the only item Wiesler removes from Sieland and Dreyman's apartment. He steals another object pertaining to the written word, when his attempt to shield the couple leads him to snatch the travel typewriter, that emblem of modern mobility and taboo connection with the West, hidden under the doorstep between living room and corridor. In both cases, Wiesler's act is not shown but implied contextually. This second act of purloining saves Dreyman's life (and might have saved Sieland's, had von Donnersmarck not preferred a complex tragic irony), and destroys Wiesler's career.⁴⁸ From here on in, the ex-captain is demoted to the basement to steam open letters he does not read ('keine Illusionen mehr', says Grubitz). This monotonous, and, compared to his former rank, humiliating task, is yet another instance of State intrusion into the lives and thoughts of its people.

Wiesler's removal of Dreyman's typewriter reaffirms an intense virtual friendship between Wiesler and Dreyman (as if in honor of Jerska), while at the same time securing Wiesler's future reading, which is about to become subjectively

⁴⁸ Wiesler is the last to speak with the dying Sieland, and, facing her, replies that 'es gibt nichts gut zu machen, ich habe die Maschine.' Dreyman comes down too late to see her alive, and ends up holding her body in a street scene that is not only diametrically opposed to Brecht's *Straßenszene*, but has repeatedly been classified as a reversal of Michelangelo's *Pietà* — the name of a visual genre which generally refers to an artistic representation of the Virgin Mary mourning over the dead body of Jesus. It literally means pity, and implies compassion, empathy, affect (but does not imply Brecht).

meaningful to him as a consequence of Dreyman's dedication. Dreyman not only alludes to *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan* when imitating the title of the sheet music that Jerska had given him. Upon perusing his Stasi file after the fall of the Berlin Wall, he also discovers the man who saved him and dedicates his novel to the cryptonym that signifies a former Wiesler who now meets himself in a book, perhaps in Bloom's sense of othering, through further reading of creative literature — Dreyman's book, which just like the feature within which it appears, is a fiction.

That Wiesler's transformation would have been impossible under the power structures that the film portrays and, historically speaking, falsifies these structures, is beyond a doubt. Within the feature film's fiction, however, it is important to point out that Wiesler changes as soon as he develops a genuine interest in art and humanity, love and reading — starting with Jerska's Brecht-inspired sonata and Brecht's poem. At the very end, von Donnersmarck projects Wiesler's future engagement as a reader of a book whose content is even less known to the spectator than to Wiesler, whose words prominently entered Dreyman's massive record, as von Donnersmarck shows in yet another reading scene, when the dramatist retrospectively encounters fundamental truths (within the fiction) about his life to which he had not hitherto been privy.

To be sure, the film's ending offers some closure: Sieland's death and Dreyman's completion of his book. In another way, *Das Leben der Anderen* is most Brechtian as it ends.⁴⁹ 'Der Vorhang zu und alle Fragen offen': thus ends Brecht's *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan* with the gods disappearing on a pink cloud rather than settling Shen Te's existential problems, in a play that radically refuses to provide a satisfying conclusion about the viability of human goodness in hostile circumstances. Von Donnersmarck's film leaves similar questions open, even if its final scene emphasizes once again the promises of reading, handling texts carefully, books as friends, and also friendship through books. Through Shen Te the spectator is prompted to search for endings that might make a difference; and Wiesler, about to enter into another dialogue with a book, points to a way forward.

If *Das Leben der Anderen* falsifies historical terror through a redemptive tale (Berghahn) or a seductive fiction (Funder), von Donnersmarck's feature contributes to an understanding of literacy and the guarding of a time-honored cultural practice that harbors ethical potential. Reading literature is portrayed as a promising activity suspended between life and art. In the final scene, while delivering reading material of a less imaginative kind (commercial flyers), Wiesler happens by the *Karl Marx Buchhandlung*, sees Dreyman's book on exhibit, and purchases it.

The title surely sounds familiar to Wiesler with allusions to Jerska's score, Brecht's play, and the survival of goodness in a world that challenges it. The novel is dedicated to Wiesler 'in Dankbarkeit', and he accepts that it is his and for him: 'es ist für mich' are the film's last words, pronounced in response to the salesman's question whether Wiesler wanted the book gift-wrapped. This book is Wiesler's in

⁴⁹ Overall, the film does not follow Brecht's stratagem. Rather than adopting *Verfremdung* to avoid identification, von Donnersmarck deploys a dramaturgy that resembles the bourgeois stage more than it follows Brecht. In this vein, Silberman refers to Gotthold Ephraim Lessing and qualifies the film as 'the *Emilia Galotti* of German reunification' (Silberman, p. 156). While Brecht would surely not have welcomed Wiesler's abandonment of distance when engaging emotionally with the lives of others, the film's last moment is nonetheless open and indicates a possibly Brechtian option for change and a way forward.

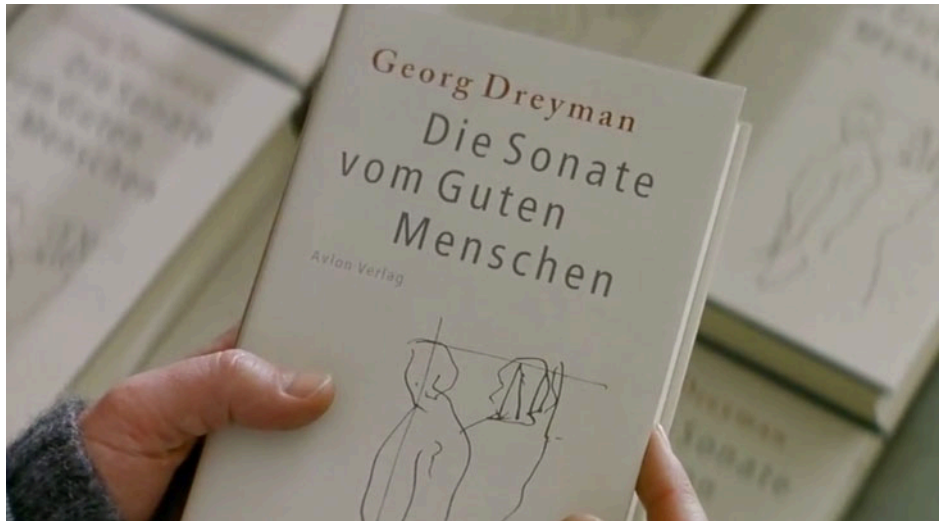


FIG. 4. Wiesler holding Dreyman's book in Friedrichshain

more than one sense. He buys it rather than purloining it, and he speaks, if not in the first person, then at least about himself as a future reader of a book that he has entered. This book ('es') is the subject of his deceptively simple sentence, 'mich' being the recipient who, we can assume, is still in possession of two other tokens that pertain to letters — the yellow Brecht book and Dreyman's typewriter.

Die Sonate vom guten Menschen, about which the spectator finds out very little, is the textual place in which Dreyman's work as a writer and its inspiration by Jerska's score and Brecht's play register as his attempt to maintain beauty and integrity under adverse conditions. His book also pays homage to Wiesler, whom he eventually tracks and observes, moved to see the man who saved him. With this virtual friend he has at least one thing in common in their GDR past: secret composition and anonymous authorship — for a cause.⁵⁰ Like Dreyman's *Sonate*, the yellow poetry volume and the red-ink typewriter are intimately connected to Jerska, Dreyman, and Wiesler, to their friendships and their stories. While Wiesler continues a tradition of well-intentioned theft in Promethean acts with which he surreptitiously relishes the book and secures the typewriter, his appropriations of another's reading and writing matter are spurred by different motivations. The stolen book caters to Wiesler's desires, whereas the removed typewriter is meant to save Sieland and Dreyman. Both thefts point to the presence of another in himself (Dreyman as reader and writer) — and to the paradox of acting as a negotiation between self and other, actor and role. Rather than exclusively an actors' film, as von Donnersmarck suggests, *Das Leben der Anderen* is also a film about literacy and theatricality — via Brecht.

Wiesler steals glimpses and gradually secures an alternative life that the State and his profession had not entitled him to live. As it were, he *purloins letters* that

⁵⁰ Dreyman has written an article on the suicide rate in the GDR, published anonymously in *Der Spiegel* in the West, and Wiesler has creatively altered his reports to cover Dreyman's activity by camouflaging the article as a play about Lenin.

provide him with what Brecht called art's power to enrich the 'Erlebnismöglichkeiten irgendeines Individuums' and its capacity to remember 'menschenwürdige Situationen',⁵¹ and allow him to cultivate an appreciation of life and reading, while compromising the part of his identity that he wants to compromise. Eventually, the ex-captain holds the book that he has in a sense become (Fig. 4), as Wallace Stevens suggests in his poem on the intimacy between reader and book. When Wiesler opens *Die Sonate vom guten Menschen* in the film, Gabriel Yared's love theme, up to this point reserved for scenes with Dreyman and Sieland, is heard once again, suggesting Wiesler's intimacy with reading, through Dreyman.⁵² Ironically, Wiesler's perception of the tangible book comes to resemble a screen memory, in so far as it may serve to conceal a past of which *Das Leben der Anderen* leaves the spectator innocent.⁵³ Screen images of hand-held books with the tactile dimension of reading — ranging from Jerska and Wiesler with the Brecht volume to Dreyman's Stasi file and Wiesler holding Dreyman's novel — offer a synaesthetic interplay that features Wiesler's increasing literacy and self-reflection — possibly even the onset of bibliophilia. While the first ending of *Das Leben der Anderen* closes the story of Wiesler's career, Sieland's life, and Dreyman's relationship with her in a tragically framed street scene, its final ending confronts Brecht with Stevens, creating a place for literary encounters. Set in an actual bookstore in Friedrichshain, the film's last transaction is a fictional reader's purchase of a book.⁵⁴

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

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⁵¹ Brecht, *Werke*, xxvi: *Journale I. 1913–1941* (1994), 417.

⁵² The other occasions for this musical theme are first when Dreyman unwraps Jerska's gift (the score), and Christa-Maria says 'Jerska hat Dir natürlich doch ein Buch geschenkt', and second when Sieland returns home rather than going to the planned tryst with Hempf, desperately embracing Dreyman.

⁵³ While Wiesler's main task in the attic at this time is monitoring the party, so that his perception is visual rather than haptic, it is also true that in the moment that Jerska mentions Brecht, the scene shows Wiesler listening to the audio, taking a private handwritten note of the mention of Brecht on this occasion.

⁵⁴ The book, too, is fictional, as are its author (Dreyman) and publisher ('Avlon Verlag').