***Das Leben der Anderen*: Transcript**

Florian Henkel von Donnersmarck's 2006 film *Das Leben der Anderen* depicts the transformation of Gerd Wiesler from a calculating and loyal Stasi spy into the conflicted employee of an organisation in which he has lost faith. Today I'm going to look at the Stasi in more detail. I'm going to look at what the Stasi was, how it is depicted in the film, and questions arising from the way these two areas don't always match.

Von Donnersmarck's film was a source of instant debate among critics, historians and former victims of the East German regime who were quick to both praise its new look at the East German past, and attack its alleged trivialisation of that past. In order to understand why *Das Leben der Anderen* provoked such a strong reaction, it's important to look at other films dealing with the East German past.

The two key issues are <u>what</u> was depicted and <u>how</u> it was depicted. First of all, at the time *Das Leben der Anderen* was released, German directors making historical dramas overwhelmingly did so about the Second World War, not the GDR. You only need look at the Best Foreign Film Oscar nominations to see this. Since unification, Germany has been nominated for the Best Foreign Film Oscar ten times, five of which were for films set during the Second World War. When *Das Leben der Anderen* won the Oscar in 2007, it was the first German film set in the GDR to do so.

That's not to say that German filmmakers weren't making films about East Germany. But this brings us on to the question of 'how'. At the end of the 1990s a cultural wave that became known as *Ostalgie* emerged in Germany. Fans of *Ostalgie* point to its ability to show a more positive side of East Germany at a time when newspapers and historians were

Copyright: Elizabeth Ward for the German Film Learning Initiative
Available at: www.germanfilm.co.uk

dismissing almost everything East German as abhorrent. *Ostalgie* in film can be seen in light-hearted comedies such as *Goodbye Lenin!* (Becker, 2003), *Sonnenallee* (Haußmann, 1999) and *NVA* (Haußmann, 2005). However, critics of *Ostalgie* point to the trivialisation of the past and a refusal to come to terms with a regime which denied its citizens fundamental human rights.

What makes *Das Leben der Anderen* stand out in this regard are three things. One, it looked at East Germany rather than Nazi Germany. Two, it did so in a non-comedic way. And three, it showed that East Germany, like any country, had good and bad individuals.

What was the Stasi?

Before we look at how the film depicts the Stasi, let's take a look at what the Stasi actually was. The word Stasi is short for the Ministerium für Staatssicherheit or the Ministry of State Security. It was founded in 1950 and based on the Soviet Union's spy network, the KGB. Its job was to monitor individuals in East Germany; there was a separate organisation for foreign espionage. From 1959 to the Fall of the Wall, the organisation was headed by Erich Mielke who, at the time the Wall fell, was eighty-two years old.

The Stasi was made up of full-time employees and 'citizen spies' or *Inoffizielle Mitarbeiter*. One of the most remarkable things about the Stasi was its size. It is thought that up to one in every six East Germans worked as an *Inoffizieller Mitarbeiter* and, over the course of the GDR's existence, the Stasi amassed files on individuals which would stretch out some 120 miles if placed side by side, or roughly the distance between London and Birmingham.

Copyright: Elizabeth Ward for the German Film Learning Initiative
Available at: www.germanfilm.co.uk

Now the film doesn't actually feature any *Inoffizielle Mitarbeiter*. Its agents are full-time workers, so what do we know about these people? Well, when the Wall fell 91,000 people worked for the Ministry of State Security. To give you an idea of the sheer size of its workforce consider the following. In East Germany, there was one spy for every 186 citizens. In the Soviet Union (and remember, the KGB served as the model for the Stasi), there was one spy for every 595 citizens. In Romania, the ratio was one to 1553, and in Poland it was one to 1574 (Dennis 2003, 79). If you want a German point of reference, under National Socialism the Gestapo employed 7000 people for a population of 66 million which meant there was one agent to every 9529 (Dennis, 2003: 4).

What else do we know? The film shows Wiesler opening people's letters in the Stasi's Post Surveillance Unit. We have two real-life examples of what happened here. In Leipzig, the Post Surveillance Unit had 120 employees to open between 1500 and 2000 letters every day. About three to five percent of these letters were never sent on. Some of these letters were personal letters to Erich Honecker, the leader of the GDR, asking for help; some were letters to foreign embassies. But some of the letters the Stasi confiscated were far more bizarre. For example, a twelve year old girl had her fan letter to ABBA confiscated. On a slightly darker note, the Post Surveillance Unit also stole money from letters. The Leipzig unit stole 180,000 DM every year in the 1980s, which today would be about £78,000 per year. This wasn't a one-off. The Post Surveillance Unit in Karl Marx Stadt employed 140 people to open 4000 letters a day, and in the process stole 6.9 million DM between 1986 and 1989 or some £3,000,000 (Childs and Popplewell, 1999: 82).

Copyright: Elizabeth Ward for the German Film Learning Initiative
Available at: www.germanfilm.co.uk

How is the Stasi depicted in the film?

Now we have had an introduction to what the Stasi was, let's look at how it is depicted in the film. We see several different types of Stasi officer. There is the officer Gerd Wiesler, his superior Anton Grubitz, prison guards, and the numerous agents who we see bug and search Dreyman's apartment. We also see the Minister for Culture, Bruno Hempf who, whilst not part of the Stasi network, has the authority to order operations. From this group, the director picks Wiesler to be the film's main protagonist. Von Donnersmarck is very careful in how he introduces us to Wiesler because it's important we have a very clear idea of the type of person Wiesler is from the outset.

Wiesler appears in the first three sequences in the film. The first is in the interrogation room. From the moment the prisoner arrives at the door, everything works like clockwork. There's a knock at the door, Wiesler turns on the hidden recorder, picks up his pencil and addresses the prisoner without even looking at him. Wiesler's first words are important: he doesn't talk to the prisoner, he talks at him. 'Herein', 'Setzten Sie sich', 'Hände unter die Schenkel, Flächen nach unten'. This isn't a discussion, it's an interrogation in which Wiesler has all the power. To emphasise this, the camera captures Wiesler in a medium close-up shot which makes him look bigger and more threatening. The prisoner is shown in a wider shot which means that his body takes up less space on the screen and he is made to look smaller and, therefore, less powerful. Power is also reflected in how Wiesler's questions. Wiseler repeatedly uses 'wir' and 'uns' and contrasts them with the 'Sie' of the prisoner. The effect of this is to say to the prisoner 'you are not one of us', 'you have acted against us'. Furthermore, Wiesler's strength isn't just in his questioning skills. He is shown to have power over his body which the prisoner doesn't. As the prisoner pleads to be allowed to sleep, even falling asleep in the

Copyright: Elizabeth Ward for the German Film Learning Initiative
Available at: www.germanfilm.co.uk

interrogation chair, Wiesler looks as awake as he did at the start. It seems that Wiesler has discipline even over his body's natural functions.

We then see Wiesler in a university lecture hall. He is training the next generation of Stasi interrogators how to be effective officers. His interrogation techniques are clearly considered exemplary and he is deemed the model Stasi officer, entrusted by the State to prepare future officers and in whose hands the future of the State will reside. And, as the mark he places on the seating plan reveals, he is never off guard.

The film then quickly moves to another scene in which we once again see Wiesler at work. Now he's at the theatre, a place of entertainment. But for him, there is no distinction between work and leisure. Even when his superior, Grubitz, sits back to watch the play, Wiesler is spying on Dreyman. And how is he spying on him? With theatre glasses. Audience members use theatre glasses to see the stage and actors more clearly. Wiesler uses them to watch audience members or, in this case, the play's director.

As the film progresses, Wiesler's behaviour starts to change. He starts to falsify reports, he decides not to inform the border guards when he hears about an attempted *Republikflucht*, and he intervenes in the operation to reveal Hempf's liaison with Christa-Maria. This peaks when he deliberately moves Dreyman's typewriter and undermines the entire operation.

The transformation of a character from bad to good is nothing new. It's the staple of many mainstream dramas, not just in film, but also in theatre and literature. What makes it significant in the case of *Das Leben der Anderen* is: one, the character is a Stasi officer who – in culture and in real-life – had hitherto been shown as corrupt and immoral, and utterly unwilling to question what they were doing; two, von Donnersmarck avoids the Hollywood-style 'happy ending'. Far from being a moment of joyous liberation and equality in a new

Copyright: Elizabeth Ward for the German Film Learning Initiative
Available at: www.germanfilm.co.uk

Germany, unified Germany in *Das Leben der Anderen* is just as grey as it was before 1989, only now there's graffiti. Wiesler's job is delivering leaflets. Christa-Maria is dead. Dreyman might be a successful playwright, but he's clearly still traumatised by the loss of Christa-Maria. The only character who seems to enjoy success in unified Germany is utterly corrupt Hempf. Finally, the development from bad Stasi officer to a thinking man might make an exciting film, but as the film's critics argued, just how realistic was this?

In short, it isn't. We can break down the problem with the depiction of the Stasi in *Das Leben der Anderen* into four points:

1. Von Donnersmarck's use of authentic props vs a fictional story
2. The example of Wiesler
3. Wiesler's transformation
4. Wiesler's motivation

Let's look at each of these points in turn.

1. The use of authentic props vs a made-up story

The director went to great lengths to use original props in the film. The letter opening devices Wiesler uses are real, the bugging equipment is real and many of the locations were actual Stasi buildings.

In interviews, von Donnersmarck was keen to stress how important it was that the film used real props. For example, the director said:

Copyright: Elizabeth Ward for the German Film Learning Initiative
Available at: www.germanfilm.co.uk

> Wherever we could, we tried to obtain the original equipment – from the wire taps to the device […] with which Ulrich Mühe [Wiesler] steams open letters at the end of the film. […] It was important to me to be very authentic even in these small details. Of course we could have also just made copies of these devices, but I believe that one really does sense something. One senses that these devices are imbued with many real experiences and real suffering. And that then helps one intensify the mood of the film (Westphal, 2012: 101).

The problem with the film's approach can be summed up in the question: does *Das Leben der Anderen* blur the boundaries between fact and fiction to such a point that we no longer know what is real and what is made up? For example, the film tells us the opening scene is set in Hohenschönhausen prison. It might be set there, but it wasn't filmed there because the owners didn't give von Donnersmarck permission. More troubling is the question whether, because the director is so keen to fill the film with physical examples of authenticity such as the bugging devices, he deliberately encourages his audience to believe that what the characters do with the equipment is real too. Because Wiesler uses a real letter opener, does von Donnersmarck encourage us to assume that Wiesler must be real too? This brings us on to the second problem.

2. The example of Wiesler

Wiesler's transformation from a loyal Stasi officer to a man wracked with doubt has been the subject of much debate. The German author Anna Funder said 'no Stasi man ever tried to

Copyright: Elizabeth Ward for the German Film Learning Initiative
Available at: www.germanfilm.co.uk

save his victims, because it was impossible. We'd know if one had, because all the files are so comprehensive'. Von Donnersmarck was repeatedly asked by journalists whether any real life Wiesler existed. Eventually, he found a real-life example of an officer who did break with protocol, but even then not in the way Wiesler does. But let's remind ourselves of those statistics from the beginning of this presentation. In 1989 there were 91,000 Stasi officers. And out of these 91,000 officers he found one case.

Interestingly, von Donnersmarck doesn't talk about the case of Werner Teske. Teske was a Hauptmann in the Stasi – the same rank as Wiesler – and he decided to defect to West Germany and reveal Stasi secrets to Western officials. The Stasi became suspicious about irregularities in his work and, before he could do anything, he was arrested for treason. In the film Wiesler's punishment is to be sent to the Post Surveillance Unit. Teske wasn't so lucky. He was sentenced to death in 1981 (just four years before the film is set). His execution was kept secret from the public. Even his wife wasn't told and she assumed he was being kept in a Stasi prison. Only after the Wall fell did she learn the truth.

Indeed, if we scratch beneath the surface, there are lots of problems with von Donnersmarck's depiction of the Stasi. For example, Stasi officers rarely worked alone and, if an operation had been ordered by a Minister, several officers would have been involved. The distrust in East Germany wasn't limited to citizens in the GDR. It was just as prevalent in the Stasi and as well as in the government – even Erich Honecker was spied on by the Stasi.

As criticism about the film increased, von Donnersmarck argued that his film was a fiction film, not a documentary, and that: 'I didn't want to tell a true story as much as explore how someone might have behaved. The film is more of a basic expression of belief in humanity than an account of what actually happened.' The director is, of course, right to argue that

Copyright: Elizabeth Ward for the German Film Learning Initiative
Available at: www.germanfilm.co.uk

feature films are free to explore wider themes such as 'What makes someone resist or conform to society?', 'Can seemingly immoral people act morally?'. But if he is so interested in exploring general questions, why does he insist on using so many real props to create the sense of authenticity in the film?

3. Wiesler's transformation

Wiesler's transformation is also problematic. At what point does he actually decide to change? Von Donnersmarck has said that his starting point for writing the film was:

> I was listening to a Beethoven piano sonata, and suddenly I remembered what Lenin had said about the *Appassionata* to his friend Maxim Gorky. He said that it was his favourite piece of music, but that in the interest of finishing his revolution, he did not want to listen to it anymore, because it made him want to "tell people sweet stupid things and stroke their heads" in times when it was "necessary to smash in those heads, smash them in without mercy". […] So, I thought: What if Lenin could have somehow been forced to listen to the *Appassionata*, just as he was getting ready to smash in somebody's head? What if I could build a dramatic situation where Lenin felt that he had to listen to the *Appassionata*, because he was actually trying to listen to something else? (Sony Picture Classics, 2006: 8)

In *Das Leben der Anderen* this is turned into a scene in which Wiesler hears Dreyman play the piece, *Sonate vom Guten Menschen*. The title is a non-too subtle indication to the audience to understand the title as symbolising Wiesler's turning point. When he hears the music he becomes a guter Mensch. To stress this Dreyman then asks, 'Kann jemand, der

Copyright: Elizabeth Ward for the German Film Learning Initiative
Available at: www.germanfilm.co.uk

diese Musik wirklich gehört hat, ein schlechter Mensch sein?'. But how realistic is it that Wiesler would question his ideology on the basis of hearing a piece of music?

Furthermore, even if Wiesler does undergo an inner transformation, he is the only character to do so. All the other Stasi officers are depicted as immoral agents of the State, incapable of questioning their actions or their implications.

4. Wiesler's motivation

What are Wiesler's motives? It's all very well saying Wiesler gained a conscience, but does he really? He seems to be motivated by two things. Firstly, like Dreyman and Hempf, Wiesler seems to have fallen under Christa-Maria's spell. He moves the typewriter to exonerate her, not to help Dreyman. He seems to be increasingly jealous of Dreyman and want to take the playwright's place. For example, when Wiesler falls asleep in the chair, his body language suggests he is holding Christa-Maria, and thereby taking the place of Dreyman. Wiseler's second motivation appears to be political. But it's not that he disagrees with the basic premise of the Stasi, but rather than he thinks it has been corrupted by individuals like Grubitz and Hempf. When he asks Grubitz 'Sind wir dafür angetreten?', Wiesler isn't questioning the morals of the Stasi system, but the morals of those leading it.

Conclusion

Das Leben der Anderen is undoubteldy an important film. It doesn't dismiss East Germany as a light-hearted farcical state which bumbled along for forty years, nor does it portray everything East German as uncompromisingly immoral. It shows that the citizens were

Copyright: Elizabeth Ward for the German Film Learning Initiative
Available at: www.germanfilm.co.uk

capable of good and bad deeds, like everyone, and shows that East Germans – even those working at the heart of the ideological system – were capable of responding to moral challenges and questioning their own behaviour.

But when we look more closely at the film, important questions arise. How realistic is the depiction of the Stasi? How realistic is the film's basic idea that a Stasi officer could change his beliefs so quickly? If Wiseler is the only character in the film who changes, does the film really tell us anything about the Stasi, or is it just about a man who happens to be a Stasi officer?

However, the most important question is one for you to decide: does any of this actually matter? Does it matter that the film's depiction of the Stasi isn't really that realistic? Is the director using the Stasi to look at bigger issues and is that why the film was so successful outside of Germany where audiences might have known very little about the Stasi? Or is the film guilty of hypocrisy? By telling the story of a made-up good Stasi officer, is the director actually making an *Ostalgie* film which argues that Stasi officers weren't really that bad? These are all questions for you to decide.

Copyright: Elizabeth Ward for the German Film Learning Initiative
Available at: www.germanfilm.co.uk

References

Childs, David, and Richard James Popplewell. 1999. *The Stasi: The East German Intelligence and Security Service, 1917-89*. Basingstoke: Macmillan Publishers Limited.

Dennis, Mike. 2003. *The Stasi: Myth and Reality*. Harlow: Pearson/Longman.

Sony Picture Classics. 2006. '*Das Leben der Anderen*: Press Notes'. http://www.sonyclassics.com/thelivesofothers/externalLoads/TheLivesofOthers.pdf.

Westphal, Wendy. 2012. '"Truer than the real thing": "Real" and "Hyperreal". Representations of the Past in *Das Leben der Anderen*'. *German Studies Review* 35 (1): 97–111.

Copyright: Elizabeth Ward for the German Film Learning Initiative
Available at: www.germanfilm.co.uk