

is the fact that the chief observer, Wiesler, often becomes himself the observed. Consider six scenes: (1) When Wiesler is instructing the Stasi class on the art of interrogation at the beginning of the film, we learn at the end of the scene that he has been observed the whole time by his superior officer Grubitz; (2) When Wiesler is leading the team that bugs Dreyman's apartment, he is observed—through a keyhole—by a neighbor across the hall; (3) Just before entering the bar, Wiesler pauses in the street to observe more of Sieland, we suddenly learn that a drunk has been observing him and he startles Wiesler by asking: "What are you staring at?"; (4) When Wiesler interrogates Sieland, he is being observed the whole time again by Grubitz through a one-way mirror; (5) When Grubitz arrives with his team for the first search of Dreyman's apartment, he winks sarcastically at Wiesler through the surveillance camera, as if to say: "I'm watching you"; (6) At the end of the film, Dreyman, having discovered Wiesler's identity, observes him unseen from a passing car as he walks his delivery route. More generally, the movie repeatedly associates looking at a play with spying into people's lives, and of course throughout, we as audience of the movie are "spying" into the lives of others.

## 5

## THE TRAGIC AMBIGUITY, OR AMBIGUOUS TRAGEDY, OF CHRISTA-MARIA SIELAND

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To the question of what *The Lives of Others* is about, one might answer it is about the oppressiveness of totalitarian societies that monitor and control their citizens' lives and careers. In fact, while *The Lives* seems to be about the machinery of surveillance in one totalitarian society in particular—that of the state secret police, or Stasi, in the former East Germany—it reflects the entire spectrum of totalitarian states that have cast their shadow over Europe's "long twentieth century."<sup>1</sup> Indeed, it does not take a great leap of imagination to envision similar scenarios in Hitler's Germany, Mussolini's Italy, Stalin's Russia, or Ceausescu's Romania. But what makes this film much more than a snapshot of any one particular society and its oppressive security apparatus is the fact that Director Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck does not focus on the macro picture as such but crafts a classic human tale with a tragic heroine at its center, a tale in which misguided human passions, compounded by unchecked political power, ambition, and corruption, destroy lives.<sup>2</sup> In true Aristotelian fashion, Donnersmarck presents how the lust of a high-ranking East German state minister (Bruno Hempf) for a glamorous stage actress (Christa-Maria Sieland, or "CMS")<sup>3</sup> sets in motion a chain of events that inexorably leads to her death. Despite his nod to Bertolt Brecht,<sup>4</sup> Donnersmarck succeeds in portraying the tragic dimension of this late-twentieth-century reality much more effectively, I will argue, because he adheres to an Aristotelian conception of the tragic.<sup>5</sup>

Brecht's dramatic theory rejects direct audience identification with the central characters and their actions. Brecht expects the audience to think through the main characters' actions and to gain an awareness of the larger historical, political, and social forces that prevent them from escaping their predicament. The audience is not meant to identify with the central characters or their fate but to leave the theater thinking that the tragedy might have been averted if the tragic figures had not been trapped by the larger social and historical conventions of the time. The character of Mother Courage, for example, in Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children* (1939) encounters the deprivations and horrors of the Thirty Years' War but does not change her ways and learn from her mistakes because she has internalized the horrible logic of war in order to survive. In the play *the Life of Galileo* (1937–1939), the title character of Galileo, unencumbered by the historical implications of his theories, ushers in a scientific revolution that threatens to topple the power of church and state, but he fails to recognize that scientific knowledge cannot be divorced from social responsibility. Brecht works against the audience being drawn in by the tragedy of these characters and instead uses dramatic effects—most famously, the *V-Effect* (*Verfremdungseffekt*, or alienation effect)—to create an emotional distance between the character and the audience and a dialectic between the individual and larger social forces.

As the founder of “epic theater,” Brecht sets himself up in principal opposition to the dramatic theories of Aristotle, the most famous theoretician of ancient tragedy, for whom the natural identification of the audience with the tragic figure on stage was central to tragedy. In his hugely influential aesthetic treatise, the *Poetics*, the philosopher suggests how tragedians should craft their plots to maximize the sensations of “fear and pity” and subsequent “catharsis”—an effect that could best be achieved if the tragic fate of the main character resonated with the audience at some deep emotional level. To achieve this rare form of aesthetic pleasure, the playwright should choose an individual higher than us (in Aristotle's time, this meant someone of noble birth or royal lineage) but also like us; and he should present a figure who was not “perfect” but had some “flaw,” a corollary to the first principle.<sup>6</sup> Finally, Aristotle argued that the plot of the tragedy must arise out of the actions of the characters on stage and that this plot should be arranged in such a way that the audience experiences tragic inevitability. Nothing in the plot could be extraneous; every action had to lead directly to another action, all culminating in the final tragic moment.<sup>7</sup> The “goal” here was not to gain greater understanding of the historical and social forces that

inhibit progressive change (Brecht) but to gain insight into the fundamental tragic nature of existence. This process of tragic purification and purgation (*catharsis*) would, in a perfect tragedy, ennoble the audience and leave it with a deeper and fuller awareness of the world.

Brecht would have been the more logical inspiration for the director of *The Lives*. By establishing a creative dialectic between the state apparatus and the individual, a Brechtian approach might get us to think about the nature of political power and how the tragic fates of the characters result from an incomplete awareness of their own historical necessity. The fact that Donnersmarck devotes the majority of screen time to behind-the-scenes views of Stasi power structures and surveillance methods further suggests that Brecht might have served as the perfect dramatic model for *The Lives*. Aristotle's emphasis on the lone tragic individual, on the other hand, might not allow the audience to appreciate the role of “the political” in the actions of the characters, and we might lose sight of the larger lesson to be learned from the story of political power and its corruption, specifically, the representativeness of the Stasi state. But I will argue that Donnersmarck opts for the Aristotelian approach by making the actress Christa-Maria Sieland the film's tragic centerpiece.<sup>8</sup> The director's artistic decision in no way diminishes the role of the “political”; on the contrary, it gives the story an even greater emotional resonance, allowing the audience to reflect on the pervasive cruelty inflicted on individuals in oppressive regimes.<sup>9</sup>

Donnersmarck opens and concludes his film with a framing device. The audience immediately experiences the Stasi's brutal interrogation and training methods in the initial scenes. With a few deft strokes, the director creates a mood of apprehension, terror, and tension. But the actual dramatic narrative first gets under way when Grubitz suggests that he and Wiesler attend a theater production in the evening. Wiesler is skeptical, but Grubitz reveals his self-serving reason for going: “I heard that Minister Bruno Hempf plans to go to the theater tonight. As director of the Department of Culture, I should be there.” The film's title, *The Lives of Others*, then appears on the screen. This is followed by the scene in the theater, the actual opening to the narrative. Similarly, the logical conclusion to that narrative is the death of Christa-Maria. However, Donnersmarck chooses not to close his film there, instead following the personal trajectories of those men touched by the actress Christa-Maria—her lover Dreyman, their Stasi protector, Wiesler, and even Bruno Hempf, the man she rejected. Between the bookends of these two events, Donnersmarck presents the dramatic arc of Christa-Maria's story.

In the theater, State Minister Hempf, who desires the actress Christa-Maria, orders his subordinate, Grubitz, to launch a surveillance operation on the playwright Georg Dreyman. Grubitz has just finished telling his own subordinate Wiesler that he believes that Dreyman is "cleaner than clean" and doesn't need to be monitored. But Grubitz is naïve about the nature of power: Hempf will use the levers of the state to dispatch a rival and to gratify his desire. Wiesler, at the bottom rungs, clings with a childlike intensity to the ideals of socialism; the midlevel Grubitz wishes to enjoy the prerogatives of power with minimal exertion; but Hempf believes that he is entitled to the spoils of the system: in this case, what he characterizes as the "most beautiful pearl of the German Democratic Republic," Christa-Maria Sieland. Thus, everything that the GDR has at its disposal is brought into motion by the lust of one man. By revealing the intensely personal nature of this "state action," Donnersmarck not only exposes the venality and corruption of the Stasi regime, he recognizes a very elemental truth about human nature and its relation to absolute political power as such, namely, how political power becomes instrumentalized in order to satisfy basic human desires.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, by having the lust of one man serve as the dramatic impetus, Donnersmarck reinforces the Aristotelian nature of his narrative: the tragedy emerges directly out of individual motivations and passions.<sup>11</sup>

While the men discuss their plans, we catch a glimpse of the action on the center stage of the theater. Written by Georg Dreyman, Christa-Maria's lover, the play we see has a Brechtian feel. Brecht, who had chosen to live in East Germany during his final years and had established an influential "house theater" in East Berlin (the Berliner Ensemble), was East Germany's most famous author in its early years. But while Donnersmarck presents Dreyman's Brechtian play on center stage, he launches his own Aristotelian narrative in the film. Interestingly, the outlines of the story that he *does* present on stage foreshadow Christa-Maria's eventual tragedy. In the role of the character Marta, she says: "No, sister, believe me. He has fallen. To his death. The great, powerful wheel has crushed him." If one were to substitute "Christa-Maria" for the fallen "Artur," one could recognize her own upcoming fate.

On another level, the Brechtian play in the film suggests a further historical irony. Though the play could suggest itself as the dramaturgical model for the story to come, it would seem to be counterintuitive since that play, according to Brecht's own Marxist principles, would then need to highlight the injustices of a system, but those injustices should already, theoretically,

have been overcome (*aufgehoben*). In the "perfect" society of the GDR, the Brechtian play could only focus its attentions outward (for example, toward the unfulfilled promise of historical socialism within Western capitalism) or, selectively, inward (by dramatizing the minor shortcomings of the socialist system on its way to greater perfection). (The glimpses of the play we receive seem to indicate the latter model.) The idea that the "real existing" socialism in East Germany might itself be the "crushing wheel" would contradict the Brechtian worldview. Just like Wiesler on his own terms, Dreyman has chosen to believe in the "goodness" and the promise of the system, and that is why he can safely write in the Brechtian vein. (Wiesler, too, is safe in the state as long as he fulfills its functions.) But through the personal tragedy of Christa-Maria, Dreyman will come to realize that the Brechtian model cannot do justice to the elemental tragedy and suffering in human existence.

At the post-production party, Minister Hempf closes in on Christa-Maria. In front of Dreyman, Hempf attempts to initiate a dance but is coyly rebuffed. Dreyman is now left with Hempf. In their conversation it becomes clear that Hempf holds the fates and careers of GDR artists in his hands. Dreyman pleads with him to reinstate his friend the director Jerska, who has been blacklisted from cultural life. When Dreyman asks the minister if Jerska can at least hope for reinstatement, Hempf replies cynically: "Of course he can hope! As long as he lives. And even longer. For hope is always the last to die." In this tense scene between a state representative and an intellectual, it is apparent that the "cultural producers"<sup>12</sup> in the GDR are at the mercy of single powerful individuals who can crush the careers of intellectuals, writers, directors, or actors at whim. Considering how the GDR controlled the entire work world, it would have been impossible for someone trained in the arts to find any other position in official culture once he or she had fallen from favor. This point is forcibly driven home by the scenes of the broken, bitter Jerska, who must live out the rest of his life in cramped corridors, devoid of hope: "What does a director have who can no longer direct? Not much more than a projectionist without film, a miller without flour. He has nothing."<sup>13</sup> Dreyman attempts to console his friend with false promises: "[Hempf] gave me hope. Concrete, literal hope." That hope dies with Jerska's suicide.

As the Stasi begins its surveillance of Dreyman, Minister Hempf takes up contact with the actress and starts to apply pressure, making appointments to meet her on Thursdays. The director leaves it unclear whether these initial contacts are sexual in nature, but it is more likely that Hempf is trying

to "court" her. The scene in the limousine shows a woman so disgusted and resistant to his advances that Christa-Maria probably had to give in to his sexual predation here for the first time. The psychological effects of Hempf's sexual pressure, however, have already taken their toll. In an earlier scene, we see Christa-Maria swallow pills as she prepares for her lover's party. Though she might already have been addicted, Donnersmarck reveals this scene at the moment we know that Christa-Maria is being pressured. Christa-Maria has by now made a "choice": faced with the prospect of being ostracized from the acting profession and ending like Jerska or giving in to Hempf's advances to salvage her career, she has "chosen" to sleep with the minister.

Wiesler decides to make Dreyman aware of the situation: he connects the wiring of their doorbell so that it rings just as Christa-Maria leaves Hempf's limousine. Wiesler thus forces Dreyman to confront Christa-Maria's "betrayal." (Of course, the fundamentally decent Wiesler knows that Christa-Maria is an unwilling participant in this relationship, and by his action he is both testing Dreyman's commitment to her and pushing him to stand up for his lover: "Time for bitter truths," he says as he connects the wires.) After returning to the apartment and showering, Christa-Maria curls up in bed with her back to Dreyman. Though he wants to broach the topic of Hempf at that moment, Dreyman instead remains silent and hugs her. A warm smile slowly appears on Christa-Maria's face.

Clinging to a precarious balance within herself, one that might allow her to save her career, to do what she needs to do to rescue herself, and to keep some dignity and purity intact despite her wretched compromise, Christa-Maria feels that her bond with Dreyman can at least allow her to *believe* in a purer, better world, the possibility of a more whole self. Earlier Christa-Maria told Dreyman: "You are strong and forceful. And that's how I need you, to be whole and pure [*heil!*]" Christa-Maria admires Dreyman's aura of wholeness and moral integrity. As a more fragile human being, she lacks the inner reserves to resist the moral pressures that face her in the form of Hempf. At the same time, she has a deeper awareness of human nature and the corruptive forces that surround her. Whereas Dreyman manages to believe in the purity of the system while still reaping its institutional rewards, Christa-Maria cannot afford that luxury. Her dilemma is stark: compromise or go under. Her beauty and sexual allure are both the keys to her success as an actress and what make her seductive to the forces of corruption. But this is not a woman who decides to sleep with a more powerful person to advance her career. Her life and passion are acting; she has a talent that no

one doubts but herself; and yet her career and livelihood will be crushed if she refuses Hempf. Her only other choice is to end up like Jerska.<sup>14</sup>

This brutal reality is emphasized in a later scene. Just before she plans to rendezvous with Hempf, Dreyman tries to stop her. He implores her to believe in herself: "You are a great artist. You don't need him! You don't need him. Stay here. Don't go." Dreyman seems to believe that true love will conquer all. The more worldly-wise Christa-Maria has to spell it out for him: "No? . . . I don't need him? And I don't need this whole system? And you? You don't need it either then? Or not really? Then why do you do it? Why do you sleep with them, too? Why do you? Because they can destroy you just as easily, despite your talent, in which you don't even doubt."<sup>15</sup> Christa-Maria implies that what she is about to do in a literal sense is what they have all been doing metaphorically. But as a beautiful, alluring woman, she is expected to pay the higher price: expose her body to a flesh-and-blood representative of the system. While Dreyman at most makes intellectual compromises, Christa-Maria must become the living spoils of the apparatus. What Jerska said earlier about his professional life applies even more to Christa-Maria. Dreyman can continue writing as a dissident within the system even if he can no longer stage plays—as he in fact does after Jerska's death; her career *requires* performance: once she is removed from the stage, her career is over. It is easy for Dreyman to expect Christa-Maria to make a sacrifice, but hers must be complete, whereas his is only partial. At the same time, she confronts Dreyman with the stark reality of their predicament. What difference does it make to "sleep" with the apparatus if you have already had to sleep with them all along? Her honesty reveals a higher moral sensitivity to their existence in the GDR.

By deciding to meet with Hempf, Christa-Maria sides with the part of herself that accepts political realities as they are. She jeopardizes her relationship with Dreyman by seeing Hempf, but she will do what she needs to do to preserve herself; she will separate the feelings she has for Dreyman from the more immediate concern for survival. But Donnersmarck then introduces a perfectly situated plot point to test her character. Wiesler, who has just overheard their exchange, enters a bar for a nightcap. Shortly after, Christa-Maria comes in and Wiesler summons the courage to talk with her. Aware of her intention to meet with Hempf but having to keep that information concealed, Wiesler continues with the line of thought that Dreyman had previously introduced. He presents himself as a member of her devoted audience and tells her that she is a great artist who must trust in herself:

"You are a great artist. Don't you know that?" "And you are a good man," Christa-Maria responds. With that, she returns to the apartment and Dreyman's arms. Wiesler appeals to the better side of Christa-Maria's nature—not the side that makes compromise after compromise to save her career, but the one that makes her the great artist others know she is. When she tries to lie to Wiesler, one of the kinds of routine lies that were second nature in the GDR, he responds: "You see, now you weren't at all like yourself." Instead, her higher, more honest self is revealed during live performances on stage, where she is allowed to be who she "is": "I saw you on stage. There you were more like you are than you . . . now are." This is the Christa-Maria her devoted fans can see; it makes her into a great actress;<sup>16</sup> and with the strength of that knowledge she can return to Dreyman.

Christa-Maria's reclaiming of her "true" self is the turning point, or *peripetia*, in the tightly woven plot; for with that decision she has sealed her own fate. In choosing to stand by Dreyman, she must turn her back on Hempf. In a later scene, we see a lonely, dejected Hempf sitting on the edge of a hotel bed after another failed rendezvous with Christa-Maria;<sup>17</sup> this scene transitions in right after Christa-Maria, who has figured out that Dreyman has become an active dissident, tells him: "I am now completely with you, no matter what." Of course, she should realize that a powerful man like Hempf will not take her rejection lightly. Though she might be tempted to repress this awareness, she can be under no illusions:<sup>18</sup> Hempf will come down hard on her for her betrayal; indeed, the tentacles of control now begin to squeeze her ever tighter. ("Whether you break her neck or not is up to you," Hempf later tells Grubitz. "In any case, I don't want to see her playing on a German stage again.")<sup>19</sup> Donnersmarck could simply have shown us the vindictive side of Hempf and let us *assume* that the communist hack would act in such a petty way, but he blends in the short, poignant scene of the dejected Hempf alone in the hotel room. Even this corrupt, despicable human being seeks physical connection—with a beautiful, alluring woman whom he feels he cannot attain by any other means.<sup>20</sup> His corruption lies in his using force and coercion simply because he can. Here, too, Donnersmarck goes against any moralizing impulse and the instinct to see and judge power in terms of black and white; he shows us a world where power serves to conceal as well as compensate for deep-rooted insecurities.<sup>21</sup>

Christa-Maria's decision to return to Dreyman also represents the turning point for her lover. Whereas Christa-Maria tells him that "she will never again leave," Dreyman tells her "that he will now have the strength. I

will do something."<sup>22</sup> Indeed, Dreyman will now be motivated to write the incriminating article about hidden suicide statistics in the GDR for the West German newsmagazine *Der Spiegel*, which in turn will enable the Stasi to close in on Dreyman. But what is important is that Dreyman's motivation is brought about by Christa-Maria's renewed commitment. Her love for him and the risks she takes upon herself inspire Dreyman finally to take a principled stand against the regime, something that his dissident friends have long encouraged him to do. Her example and willingness to take on great risk for her lover bring out the moral courage that Dreyman has until now failed to exhibit. The tragic irony is that the very decision that the two lovers make at the height of their passion, a decision that makes them more fully human, is the one that will lead to Christa-Maria's demise.

The events leading up to Christa-Maria's arrest and interrogation follow rapidly. Provided the pretext by Hempf to bring her in for questioning, Grubitz uses the opportunity to discover who is behind the *Spiegel* article. In the scene with Grubitz, Christa-Maria succumbs to fear and pressure, offering to work as a Stasi informant (IM) and even to sleep with Grubitz ("Maybe I can do something that might not be so disagreeable to both of us") if doing so can rescue herself and her career. Though she first thinks she has been taken in for the illegal purchase of drugs, Grubitz informs her of her actual offense: "You have turned a very powerful man into your enemy." Christa-Maria now realizes that she must pay the price for having chosen Dreyman over Hempf. She is even willing to expose her lover as the author of the *Spiegel* article, for in the following scene we see the Stasi appear at Dreyman's doorstep. Christa-Maria has informed on Dreyman, though she has not revealed (yet) the most important incriminating detail: the hiding place of the typewriter, which even for the Stasi is a necessary precondition for arrest.<sup>23</sup> What others say about Christa-Maria, and what she fears about herself, is that she does not have the courage to withstand Stasi pressure.<sup>24</sup> But should we expect that of her? Though under no illusions about the regime (unlike the idealistic Dreyman), Christa-Maria never intended to become a political dissident or to offer moral opposition. She has chosen a form of "inner emigration" in her art that can give her at least a semblance of freedom and sanity. It is a choice made by countless intellectuals and artists within totalitarian societies. It may lack the heroism and the prestige of active resisters, but we should not minimize the suffering and loneliness felt by those who merely seek to survive out of fear for themselves or their loved ones. Individuals with strong moral or ideological convictions may

have the stamina to take on great personal risks;<sup>25</sup> but individuals who cling to a sense of their moral self while pressured to compromise their humanity day after day can embody a more profound sense of tragedy.<sup>26</sup>

Christa-Maria is then brought to interrogation with her secret supporter Wiesler. Donnersmarck suggests several possible explanations for their peculiar hedging behavior in this scene. Wiesler gradually turns his swivel chair to face her, fearing that she will recognize him from the bar. He does not want to startle her, since he knows that Grubitz is observing their "performance." Though Christa-Maria clearly recognizes him, she tries to conceal her surprise. But what is going through her mind? Does she think that Wiesler's earlier actions in the bar were just the clever ploy of an ill-intentioned Stasi agent? Was she foolish to trust him then and must now pay the price? Or does she think that Wiesler may actually be on her side (he was, after all, the "good man" who inspired her to return to her lover Dreyman) and may be willing to help her? Why else would he need to conceal his identity now? (Wiesler surely did not reveal enough to her in the bar to incriminate himself.) Donnersmarck further complicates matters by having Wiesler (or so it seems) give Christa-Maria encouraging gestures to trust him and divulge the hiding place of the typewriter.<sup>27</sup> We find out later he intends to use that information to remove the device, but how could she know that? Is there enough evidence for her to assume that he will help her? How? These kinds of questions are important as they relate to the nature of her moral complicity, but the director ultimately leaves her motivations unclear. Do Wiesler's interrogation tactics, which play on her fear and vanity, get her to reveal the hiding place? Is it the minuscule hope—her *only* hope—that perhaps this man will rescue her? Or is it resignation and the futility and desperation of the situation? In any case, there can be no doubt (based purely on her actions and not her motivation) that on some level Christa-Maria betrays her lover to the Stasi. Whatever the reason for her confession—whether she confesses out of a small hope for salvation or out of a mixture of fear and vanity—Christa-Maria falls back on the most basic instinct of survival.<sup>28</sup>

There seems little hope that Christa-Maria will be able to redeem herself. She returns to her apartment and once again takes a shower, her usual response to a feeling of self-defilement. Dreyman comes in and asks her where she's been; she lies to him, prepared to keep up the pretence. Wiesler told her in interrogation that an accomplished actress like her should manage to dissemble in front of her lover, and indeed we would expect Christa-Maria

to be able to do so. But then the Stasi appears at their door, demanding a new search. With information provided by her, Grubitz quickly locates the spot in the apartment where the typewriter is supposedly hidden just as Christa-Maria exits the bathroom in her bathrobe.<sup>29</sup> She looks in humiliation over at Dreyman, who realizes her betrayal. Unable to bear the intensity of his glance and the guilt of her decision,<sup>30</sup> she rushes out of the apartment into the street. Though the director leaves it open whether Christa-Maria is so shaken that she is not entirely conscious of what she's doing or whether she intentionally puts herself in the way of the oncoming truck, she becomes one of the many victims of suicide that the "perfect society" of the GDR tries to conceal from the world.<sup>31</sup>

How does Christa-Maria become a tragic figure? What allows her to redeem her humanity and leave the audience with a profound sense of tragedy for her plight? How can we connect with someone who has betrayed the trust of her lover? Christa-Maria is not a "perfect" character, but she must fight to retain her humanity in the face of insurmountable pressures. The fact that she does not always make the best decisions but still remains aware of the morally ambivalent nature of those decisions allows us not to lose faith in her better, more noble nature.<sup>32</sup> Donnersmarck gives us several reasons not to question her essential nobility. First of all, Christa-Maria is incapable of doing exactly what everyone expects the actress to do so easily (and what everyone else in the GDR seems to have mastered), that is, to act "naturally" in a thoroughly duplicitous environment.<sup>33</sup> In moments when she should conceal her intentions and protect herself, she cannot; only when acting on stage can she reveal her true self ("Here you were more like you are than you now are"). The reason her audience loves her, Wiesler implies, is because it recognizes her essential sincerity and genuineness as an actress; but that same lack of guile also prevents her from being a successful "actor" on the "stage" of the GDR. Christa-Maria should be able to lie in interrogation; but her interrogators have no problems detecting her lies. She should also be able to feign shock or disbelief when the Stasi uncovers the typewriter in front of Dreyman; but she is incapable of dissembling in a society that demands continual dissimulation.<sup>34</sup>

When Dreyman looks to her in disbelief, Christa-Maria is not able to keep up the pretence. Though she confesses out of weakness and fear, she recognizes now she had betrayed not only her lover but her better self. If the latter is gone, what does she have left? The confession might have seemed the only possible decision for her in that time of psychological duress, but

it now reveals its terrible price: she has forfeited that part of her humanity that made her both a great artist and a person worthy of love and respect. On the other hand, Dreyman's reaction, though understandable, is harsh, based on a too simple view of the circumstances. He is quick to judge Christa-Maria without truly understanding her predicament. He has to believe in her absolute moral purity—he disregards his dissident friends' concerns for her reliability—for his worldview can accommodate only absolutes. For Dreyman, there must always be good and bad people; and while his moral certitude is what attracts Christa-Maria to him, it also prevents him from understanding the ambivalent universe she inhabits and in which she fights to survive. While Christa-Maria measures herself against the high standards and expectations that Dreyman sets (and then condemns herself based on them), Dreyman's own moral rectitude prevents him from appreciating the moral complexities she faces.

Suicide becomes the only way out. Though it is impossible for Christa-Maria "to make good again what I have done," as she says in her dying words, her decision to take her life should not be seen as a momentary gesture of desperation or self-loathing but as her final effort to reclaim autonomy. The system has systematically stripped her of dignity and freedom, but what it can't take away from her is the freedom to condemn herself according to her own standards and values. Perhaps the most horrible indictment against totalitarian regimes is that in them suicide can become the last honorable means to express humanity and dignity. Once societies turn behavior patterns such as betrayal, deceit, and duplicity into second nature, into one's "true" nature; once they crush individual hopes and aspirations, then some will choose to opt out of that dehumanizing form of existence. Donnersmarck highlights one such seemingly random suicide and thwarts our expectations of what we tend to think about suicide, namely, that it exhibits moral failure or weakness of character. Instead, he shows us that for people like Christa-Maria, and in repressive societies like the GDR, suicide can become the sole means to reclaim moral autonomy. With Wiesler at her side, the dying Christa-Maria says: "I was too weak." But her life was one not of weakness but of an inner struggle against the worst human instincts that the system both encourages and exploits. Her tragedy resonates with the audience not because it sees her as a pure moral beacon, but rather because she is an all-too-fallible woman who seeks to survive on her own terms but ultimately is crushed by the "great, powerful wheel."<sup>35</sup>

Donnersmarck could have chosen to end his tragic tale with this final

scene. His tightly woven Aristotelian narrative followed the tragic heroine from the heights of her fame as an artist in the GDR to her anonymous suicide on the dreary streets of East Berlin. In Aristotelian fashion, the film's ending triggers a "catharsis": the audience feels for the plight of this woman, whose weaknesses certainly contributed to her downfall but whose tragic fate was nonetheless cruel and undeserved.<sup>36</sup> The director has also created, as Aristotle had demanded, a character that, though "higher" than ourselves,<sup>37</sup> is still "like us"—not excessively moral, pure, or righteous, but with shades of both strength and weakness. It would have made sense to end the film here.<sup>38</sup> The audience would have recognized that life is essentially tragic, and the aesthetic pleasure of the film would have resided in experiencing someone of great promise and merit encounter an undeserved fate. But Donnersmarck decides to append a non-Aristotelian conclusion to the film; one could even say that he devises a Brechtian finale. Is the "natural" ending to the film (the death of Christa-Maria) simply too tragic for our modern sensibilities? Would the Aristotelian conclusion perhaps make this film less commercial, less acceptable to audiences that expect Hollywood consolation and reconciliation? Why does the director deprive us of the full cathartic release of his tightly woven plot?

Let me explore first what I have termed Donnersmarck's "Brechtian" solution. By reconnecting his story to the larger historical forces (the rise of Gorbachev; the fall of the Wall; German reunification), the director contextualizes the tragedy of Christa-Maria and redeems it within the larger scope of recent historical events. One could now say: even though she had to die, the greater trajectory of history allows us to learn from her example and to move toward a more informed and humane society. Many of the final scenes of the film take place in former Stasi headquarters, which is now dedicated to education about that period, finding out about Stasi informants and procedures, and contributing to what Germans term *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*—a coming to terms with the past by openly confronting it. This concept is itself "Brechtian": learning from the dialectic of history in order to move toward a more progressive future.

But what if we were to interpret the ending in another way? What if the director has instead taken Aristotle one step further? What if he decided to show us the *effect* of Aristotelian catharsis on the "audience" of his characters? The release and purgation of emotion (catharsis) following tragic performances should, Aristotle suggested, somehow ennoble and refine our awareness of life and the world around us. The effect of tragedy *purifies*—

puts our souls into a forge of emotion to distill out their impurities and to heighten our sensibilities. As the ancient dramatists practiced it, tragedy is, in essence, moral, even if it uses the amoral means of art to achieve its ends. What is original in Donnersmarck's script is that it does not end with the tragic death of the heroine but follows the lives of the three men in Christa-Maria's world *after* the tragic events and shows us how she continues to haunt them. In the case of Hempf, he still thinks about her and reveals perhaps deeper emotions than one would expect, but he can't understand her tragedy as something *he* had caused. He selfishly thinks about how Christa-Maria wounded *him* and the resentment he still feels toward her betrayal. Her tragedy, then, has not changed him one bit, and his life continues to be as miserable as it was before.

Wiesler's life changes fundamentally with Christa-Maria's death. By protecting her from harm, he had put his own career at risk; he must pay the price by losing his position as high-ranking Stasi interrogator. Wiesler's secret devotion to Christa-Maria pushes him to break with his former self but opens him to a warmth and humanity that he had lost. Whereas Christa-Maria struggles to hold onto a humanity that she's always in the danger of losing, Wiesler hopes to recapture a humanity compromised by years of working for a dehumanizing, soulless regime. Christa-Maria's death is, therefore, a truly humbling experience for him, bringing his world of power and status crashing down. We cannot but have the sense that Wiesler's life has been enriched despite this. Wiesler is the only one of the three men who actually *gives up* something because of his commitment to Christa-Maria; but he is also the only one who, despite these sacrifices, reflects an inner peace and a sense of reconciliation with his life and the consequences of his decisions. Donnersmarck's brilliance in showing the humbled Wiesler walking the streets of Berlin as a postman, pulling along his pathetic little bag,<sup>39</sup> reinforces the message that this simple man, who went through the vicissitudes of strong emotions and personal loss and who sacrificed everything to become a "good man," is now richer in soul and awareness than those who do not fully learn the lesson of Christa-Maria's life and death. In the end, he has every right to say that Dreyman's book is "for him," because he's now in the position to *receive* it.

As for Dreyman, the full impact of Christa-Maria's death doesn't hit him at first. In the theater, Dreyman watches his same Brechtian play from the beginning (in the very same scene) being performed in a reunified Berlin, this time in a modern, trendy staging.<sup>40</sup> Dreyman seems to have perfectly

adapted to the new requirements of the capitalist theater world and has made the necessary adjustments to succeed in a different system. But he leaves the theater when he is painfully reminded of Christa-Maria. While he still remembers her, her death has not substantially changed him and he has continued in the same paths of his former life. Above all, his art remains unchanged (except for the staging and costuming to reflect different tastes), devoid of passion and immediacy. (It is not surprising that his dramatic art could make the seamless transition from East to West because it remains unthreatening and sterile in both systems.) And his emotional life is built on a fundamental misreading of Christa-Maria's death: he has conveniently made a martyr out of her, perhaps blaming himself for being too hard on her, but probably convinced that she had removed the typewriter for him.<sup>41</sup> Once again, Dreyman can accommodate only simple, uncomplicated truths about people, and he has come to terms with Christa-Maria's death in neat, manageable categories.

Hempf's revelation in the theater lobby changes all that. Sifting through the Stasi records, Dreyman discovers that it wasn't Christa-Maria at all who had removed the typewriter; it was an unknown Stasi agent intervening on their behalf. This discovery has two profound effects on him. For one, he understands that an anonymous man took on great personal risk to help them. His sense of compassion was stronger than his loyalty to the system or concern for his own life and career. When Dreyman later follows Wiesler and witnesses the humbleness of his life and station, he realizes even more how much this man had to sacrifice. But at another level, Dreyman also realizes the truth about his lover Christa-Maria, that his neat picture of her was based on false suppositions and that she was a more complex and conflicted person than he cared to admit. This revelation gives him a fuller picture of her as a human being, and he can now grasp the pressures that she was under. Instead of believing that it was all about *him*, he can see that it really was about *her*, above all, her attempts to navigate an impossible situation. The impact of these discoveries finally allows him to confront the full scope of her tragedy and to achieve catharsis.

Dreyman can now achieve a breakthrough as an artist. He has found a subject matter that actually relates to his life experience, one that emerges from a deeper awareness of individual sacrifice and suffering. By understanding the full extent of Christa-Maria's tragic situation and sacrifice, Dreyman can write a novel that is more than just an exercise in creative writing. Since his fame and reputation had previously depended on tacit support and



approval from the East German culture office, Dreyman never really had to risk anything as an artist. His successes fell to him too easily, and they didn't require him to probe his conscience. The death of his friend Jerska and his subsequent decision to write a subversive political piece on suicide in the GDR may have been his first steps in the direction of greater creative awareness and moral reckoning. But even then, his article remained primarily an intellectual exercise—a rationalist's attempt to come to terms with the phenomenon of suicide and the death of a close friend. The discovery of the full story behind Christa-Maria's death and Wiesler's involvement, however, crashes through the convenient inner barrier that he built up around that tragic event. He is now able to take in its full suffering and then to release it in the cauldron of art. The catharsis of Christa-Maria's tragedy has finally changed him at the core of his being and he can move away from his cool, bloodless dramas and produce art truly enriched by personal experience and suffering.<sup>42</sup>

How, then, does Donnersmarck's Aristotelian approach relate to the political dimension of the film? How does it prove superior to what could have been a more Brechtian treatment of power structures? The Brechtian model assumes the corruption of current political structures and a conspiracy of elites against the realization of a humanistic ethic. While Brecht had meant his plays to critique residual capitalist institutions that impeded progress along a Marxist continuum of historical-materialist evolution, his theories could be appropriated by any storyteller intent on pointing out the oppressive nature of institutions—even, ironically, if those institutions happened to be (allegedly) fully realized socialist states. Brecht's most mature dramatic creations, such as *Mother Courage and Galileo*, were far from being one-dimensional victims of the dominant political realities of their time; they were also complex individuals whose faults, vanities, and weaknesses contributed to their tragic downfalls. However, Brecht's theories and methods of dramaturgy kept the audience's focus on power structures and how they blinded his characters to their full human potential. His characters were immersed in an unfolding historical struggle that was larger than they were and that they could not fully comprehend, but Brecht intended to render this struggle explicit to his audience members through dramatic means so that they could effect progressive change. Brecht's vision, despite his efforts to do justice to the reality of moral complexity and ambiguity, required "victims" and "perpetrators"; it required, in short, a belief in moral absolutes.<sup>43</sup>

If one leaves aside the slightly Brechtian optimism of the final scenes, where the director holds out the hope of a more progressive future through a direct confrontation with the past, the darker heart of Donnersmarck's story is the Aristotelian tragedy of his central heroine, Christa-Maria. Here, the moral lessons to be learned are more ambiguous, more uncertain. Christa-Maria is not a pure "tragic heroine"; nor does her betrayal of her lover seem to correspond to our simple notion of how a "moral" character should behave. Moreover, Donnersmarck shows us other characters who exhibit similar behavior, such as the poor neighbor Frau Meineke, who must suffer in silence while Dreyman's apartment is being bugged due to fear for her daughter's future.<sup>44</sup> Shouldn't a truly moral person try to help her neighbor, we might ask ourselves, even if that means jeopardizing her daughter's university career? Certainly, the director presents several characters who exhibit more traditional "heroic" models of moral courage, such as Dreyman's friend Paul Hauser, a man imprisoned by the system, the film implies, for political resistance. Hauser could have become the moral beacon in a film that otherwise shows its characters in various stages of moral compromise with the regime. But instead, Hauser's intransigence has rendered him slightly inhuman and cold, as though moral righteousness automatically entitles one to feel superior, even toward one's fellow citizens. Does the very fact of Hauser's imprisonment give him that right? And Jerska—are resignation and bitterness the only possible responses to artistic blacklisting? While Donnersmarck in no way intends to whitewash the culpability of the system in its destruction of these human lives, he also does not want to give us one-dimensional, holy victims, making it easy for us to lay the blame.

This returns us to Christa-Maria's tragic situation. What is it in her independent story that gives us a deeper understanding of this regime's moral corruption? What makes Donnersmarck's film such a masterpiece in capturing the essence of late-twentieth-century political oppression?<sup>45</sup> Through the character of Christa-Maria, Donnersmarck can reveal to us the insidiousness of everyday, banal forms of moral corruption. It is not a question of laying the complete burden of blame on a generic system of political governance or oppression, such as on the East German state, or on neatly defined "perpetrators," such as the Stasi and its informants; that would be far too easy and predictable. It is to show how the so-called system as a whole infiltrates the moral fiber of its citizens at a root level and forces them through gradual increments to surrender their personal integrity and autonomy. This is not a classic system "from above," in some pure

Brechtian sense; those systems are long gone and have been superseded by more clever and pervasive mechanisms of control and suasion. It is now a complete "society" of peers and neighbors—of friends, family, and lovers. In short, there are no morally pure figures in this gray universe, for each has been forced to make corrosive moral compromises along the way. But in subtly fleshing out the portrait of one such anonymous figure in this dark period—that of the actress Christa-Maria, or "CMS"—Donnersmarck has allowed us to see how difficult it is for any one person to hold onto a sense of moral self when the pressures to surrender integrity have become all but insurmountable. The "heroes" in Donnersmarck's world, therefore, are not the ones who inhabit an absolute, coherent moral space—such as the Paul Hausers or the Georg Dreyman, for example. The "heroes" are the ones who, while remaining anonymous, fight an uphill battle just to cling to a promise of a better world, the ones who at least have the potential to be redeemed by art. Donnersmarck's film is not about the "political," the high and the mighty, or the morally virtuous; in the end, it is a film about those unsung "lives of others."

## Notes

1. I use this term in contrast to Eric Hobsbawm's reference to Europe's "short twentieth century" as I see political totalitarianism as the defining feature of the entire twentieth century (and beyond).
2. There has been much discussion surrounding the historical accuracy of the film and its supposedly fanciful portrayal of the Stasi reality. Here it might be helpful to remember Aristotle's words in the *Poetics* concerning the difference between history and dramatic art: "The poet and historian differ not by writing in verse or in prose. . . . 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" (Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Francis Ferguson [New York: Hill and Wang, 1961], 68). While there might not be a single documented case of a Stasi agent who acted like Wiesler, there is also nothing to suggest that there could not have been a Stasi agent who might have acted like him.
3. The film puts a human face on the anonymous tragedies of the regime's victims. In the protocols to her case Dreyman later finds Christa-Maria's initials, CMS. But behind these clinical bureaucratic, and dehumanizing initials resides a human tragedy. This film won't allow Christa-Maria Sieland to remain CMS.
4. Aside from the "Brechtian" play written by Dreyman, we see Wiesler read Brecht's poem "Erinnerung an die Marie A." Unlike Brecht's theater, which had explicitly didactic, political overtones, many of Brecht's poems can be enjoyed on purely lyrical terms. (After Christa-Maria's death, the camera pans over open sky and the tops of trees, an image that

seems to allude to the opening lines of Brecht's poem: "It was a day in that blue month September / Silent beneath the plum trees' slender shade / I held her there / My love, so pale and silent / As if she were a dream that must not fade.") Does this indicate Donnersmarck's greater appreciation for the lyricist than for the Marxist dramatist?

5. The world of theater and drama is central to the film. It is about dramatic performance on many different levels and it is structured like a play. While we the film audience watch the characters perform, they are either watching a dramatic performance (while they are watching each other) or Wiesler is "watching" (and directing) the "performance" in the apartment or Grubitz is watching the performance of Christa-Maria and Wiesler (who are, of course, "performing" for each other), etc. The characters are always "on stage"—for each other and for us, the "guilty" onlookers. The similarity of the plot of *The Lives* to that of the German classic *Emilia Galotti*, G. E. Lessing's eighteenth-century "bourgeois tragedy," seems more than coincidental. There a prince asks for the help of his minister to seduce the bourgeois maiden Emilia. The corrupt courtier Marinelli uses the mechanisms of state power to kidnap and hold the girl against her will so that the prince can seduce her. Lessing himself wrote a famous disquisition on Aristotle's aesthetics, and the tightly woven plot of *Emilia Galotti* owes much to Aristotelian principles.

6. "There remains, then, the character between these two extremes—that of a man who is not eminently good and just, yet whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but some error or frailty" (Aristotle, *Poetics*, 76).

7. Friedrich Nietzsche understood the difficulty of creating this dramatic necessity: "We know the sort of technical problems that absorb all of a dramatist's energies, often making him sweat blood: how to give necessity to the knot and also to the resolution, so that there is only one possible outcome" (Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner*, section 9, in Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols and Other Writings*, ed. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005], 249). Nietzsche's observation is based on an understanding of the underlying ethical dimension of tragic art. Dramatic necessity is not merely an arbitrary formalistic principle but rather reflects a subtle awareness of how profound tragic situations could resound in viewers on a subliminal level, thereby effecting a change in their inner being.

8. Surprisingly, most of the studies on the film seem to emphasize the central male characters of the film. This reflects a bias against, and a diminishment of, the fascinating female lead, Christa-Maria, and it leads to essential misunderstandings about the film. For example, Thomas Lindenberger suggests that the film is "misogynistic" (!) and then goes on to present dismissive opinions of Christa-Maria ("Stasiplotation—Why Not? The Scriptwriter's Historical Creativity in *The Lives of Others*," *German Studies Review* 31, no. 3 [2011]: 562).

Interpretations often write the actress off based on her supposedly negative traits (betrayal, drug addiction, neuroses, vanity, etc.) and then turn to the two male leads, Wiesler and Dreyman, who refract more comforting and traditional aspects of "goodness." But I think that we miss the problematic heart of this film if we do not recognize that Donnersmarck shows us a dominant "man's world" represented by the three main male characters (Dreyman, Wiesler, Hempf) who, in their obsession with the beautiful female object of desire (Christa-Maria), corrupt and destroy an essentially innocent woman.

9. Mary Beth Stein claims that the film's "focus on human motivation makes the plot more universal and universally understandable to foreign audiences, but it leaves the ideo-

logical rigidity and deep-seated paranoia of the SED state largely unexplored. . . . The tragic love story has the effect of blunting the film's political impact" ("Stasi with a Human Face? Ambiguity in *Das Leben der Anderen*," *German Studies Review* 31, no. 3 [2011]: 570). But Stein here reveals a Brechtian sensibility—i.e., that somehow the story would be more effective if it focused on the "political" superstructure. Yet it is Donnersmarck's wise decision to tell an Aristotelian tragedy that allows the story both to transcend its specific Stasi milieu and at the same time to transmit to its audience the corrosive nature of this particular form of twentieth-century totalitarianism.

10. Manfred Wilke claims that dissatisfaction with the regime increased in the final years because people began to realize that members of the all-too-human "clique at the top," the handful of privileged families in the regime, were treating their country like their own "private commissary" (*Selbstbedienungsladen*): "They were only concerned with their privileges, a sybaritic lifestyle and personal power" ("Fiktion oder erlebte Geschichte? Zur Frage der Glaubwürdigkeit des Films *Das Leben der Anderen*," *German Studies Review* 31, no. 3 [2011]: 598). On the other hand, Stein critiques the director for personalizing the motivations of the Stasi power elites, arguing that this was not "realistic" and also detracted from the "political" ("Stasi with a Human Face?" 570–71). I think Donnersmarck's decision to "personalize" the motivations does not arise from his supposed desire to appeal to foreign audiences or to Hollywood but springs from a deep, pessimistic insight into the nature of human passions and political power.

11. The elemental nature of Hempf's drive, his lust for the beautiful Christa-Maria, is similar to the elemental force of Achilles' anger: it triggers the series of events that will lead to Christa-Maria's demise.

12. The term *Kulturproduzenten* is revelatory of the way in which the GDR saw "its" artists only in terms of their production value to the state.

13. Stein accurately, I think, refers to the regime's targeted practice of *Zersetzung* (decomposition) in the way Jerska is shown to be treated in the film, and this practice leads to his thorough isolation and psychological withdrawal and "decomposition": *Zersetzung* "aimed at the systematic destruction of people by disseminating malicious rumors and creating fear and doubt" ("Stasi with a Human Face?" 574).

14. Jerska is Christa-Maria's negative pole, the horrible "other" that she seeks to banish because he's a living shadow of what she might become. Preparing for the party, she tells Dreyman not to associate with Jerska, that he should not bring that emotional wreck into his life ("*Hoi dir nicht diese Kaputtheit in dein Leben*").

15. The theme of artistic self-doubt reoccurs throughout the film. Whereas Dreyman appears self-confident and never doubts his talent, Christa-Maria questions hers. But self-doubt is an integral part of the creative process and can lead to great artistic production. Great confidence in one's abilities and artistic talent, on the other hand, can yield mediocre, commercial work. It is Christa-Maria's insecurity in this regard that makes her the more human and ultimately more tragic figure.

16. She is a stage actress, not a movie actress, and one is required to reveal much more of oneself in live performance than on film, which in addition allows for numerous takes and final editing.

17. In his description of the scene in the script, Donnersmarck writes: "[Hemp] realizes that she will not come, that she will never come again. That it is over" (*Das Leben*

*der Anderen: Filmbuch von Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck* [Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2006], 113).

18. In the scenes after Christa-Maria sides with Dreyman, she appears to be on a high, seemingly oblivious to the consequences of her decision. She rejoices in her renewed commitment to Dreyman and her sense of liberation from Hempf. (We know that she is dancing on the precipice.)

19. Hempf's words reveal Donnersmarck's keen awareness of the differentiated power competencies of the regime: while Hempf supplies the incriminating evidence against Christa-Maria to the Stasi officer Grubitz, letting him decide how to deal with her, he, in his capacity as minister of culture, will blacklist her from cultural life.

20. An interesting parallel is the scene where Wiesler is shown engaging in sexual intercourse with a prostitute to find human connection. Here, too, it is the character of Christa-Maria that triggers this need.

21. Hempf's insecurity is revealed again in a later scene when he tries to project his own failings and frustration onto Dreyman. After Christa-Maria's death, he tells Dreyman: "We knew everything about you. We even knew that you couldn't really satisfy our little Christa." Hempf too cannot shake her lingering memory. (He leaves the theater at the same scene, which for both evokes the memory of the dead actress: "I had the same feeling," he tells Dreyman. "I had to leave too." Despite his audacity in comparing himself to Dreyman, Hempf at least admits to his feelings.)

22. These words, written into the protocol by Wiesler's coworker, are spoken during moments of "intense intimacy."

23. The fact that Christa-Maria refrains from telling him the hiding place of the typewriter may not minimize her guilt in revealing Dreyman as the writer of the *Spiegel* article, but she may hope that Dreyman will manage to escape the Stasi dragnet.

24. When Dreyman is about to tell her about the *Spiegel* piece, Christa-Maria asks him not to: "Perhaps I am really as unreliable as your friends say," Christa-Maria fears her own trustworthiness when put under Stasi pressure.

25. Dreyman's confidant, the journalist Paul Hauser, personifies this type: he is stern and uncompromising and has paid the price for his resistance, but perhaps fails to appreciate the moral complexities of everyday lives in the GDR.

26. This dilemma is portrayed well by the character of Dreyman's neighbor Frau Meineke. Though she would like to tell Dreyman about the surveillance, Wiesler's threat to end her daughter's medical career at the university if she says anything puts her in a horrible predicament. Christa-Maria's situation echoes Lessing's title character in *Emilia Galotti*. There Emilia provokes her death at the hands of her father not to prevent the prince from taking her by force but because she knows that she, as a passionate young woman, might not be able to resist his sexual advances. In both cases, the central tragic heroine is not the simple, resolute figure that others (e.g., Emilia's father in Lessing's drama, Dreyman in *The Lives*) think that she is or want her to be but a more complex, passionate character with conflicting emotions, forced to make difficult choices.

27. Wiesler echoes the words he spoke to her in the bar, that she should consider her audience. (This causes Grubitz to chuckle; he thinks it is a strange interrogation tactic and not a subtle reference.) Is this just another of Wiesler's hints for Christa-Maria to remember him? Is he trying to gain her confidence? Is he just playing to her vanity? Also, Wiesler gives

her an intense, beckoning nod after asking where the typewriter is hidden. Is this a sign that she should trust him to help her?

28. Christa-Maria at first says that she knows nothing about a typewriter and that she had previously lied, but then decides to confess during interrogation. We cannot exclude the possibility that Wiesler's offer that she will be able to return to the stage was the decisive factor in her decision to confess. But is this so terrible? The world of her art is the only thing that Christa-Maria has left to sustain her in this oppressive society.

29. Christa-Maria is wearing a white bathrobe, white being the symbol of purity. Donnersmarck also adds a fascinating little detail: on the upper-right-hand corner of the bathrobe's lapel there is a golden star. For a director like Donnersmarck, so conscious of every cinematic detail and so aware of historical resonances, the golden star must suggest the golden Star of David the Jews were forced to wear in the Third Reich. But what does the director mean by this? Does he give Christa-Maria the ultimate symbol of the victim? Does it refer to the continuity between totalitarian systems on German soil? Or does he want to compare her fate to that of the countless other victims during the Third Reich who suffered similar anonymous tragedies through no fault of their own? Timothy Garton Ash has alluded to the simplistic identification in people's minds of "Stasi" and "Nazi" in his review of the film ("The Stasi on Our Minds," *New York Review of Books*, May 9, 2007), and others have also criticized the historical verisimilitude of showing Grubitz in a "smart" Nazi-style uniform, also likely to suggest totalitarian continuity in Germany. Yet I don't have a problem with Donnersmarck referencing this; on the contrary, I think he is getting us to reflect on the persistence of certain human types despite outward changes in the regime.

30. In the notes to this scene, Donnersmarck writes: "Dreyman now looks at her, full of suspicion and harshness. Her gaze cannot withstand his."

31. Donnersmarck films this scene very suggestively: Christa-Maria runs out of the building, casting a quick sideways glance down the road. We can hear the sound of a truck in the background. She stops at the edge of the pavement and then steps out onto the street, looking forward. As she turns to face the street, she has a blank, stunned look just before the truck hits her. In the notes to this scene, the director makes it a more straightforward suicide.

32. In an Aristotelian sense, Christa-Maria's "tragic flaw" might be her lack of personal self-confidence, which makes her doubt her talent and renders her susceptible to the pressure of others.

33. In the brilliant scene with Wiesler and the young boy in the elevator, even a child's innocent question could lead to terrible repercussions.

34. According to Stein, the "film illustrates how communist dictatorships produced a similar schizophrenia whereby individuals negotiated the tension between state and self through the creation of distinctly public and private faces." I argue that Christa-Maria's greatest vulnerability is that she fails to achieve the "Stasi habits of studied inscrutability or what Markus Wolf termed *Die Kunst der Verstellung*" ("Stasi with a Human Face?" 576).

35. Donnersmarck accentuates her humanity with a symbolic gesture. Dreyman holds the dying Christa-Maria in his arms in the street. Her position in her lover's arms recalls Michelangelo's famous Pieta; there the dying Christ lies in Mary's arms. This reference suggests the Christlike purity of his heroine, whose weakness and fallibility and attempt to remain human under difficult circumstances must elicit our compassion. Of course, the

director gives her the only telling name of the characters: she is both Christ(a) and Maria, victim and consoler. She is the woman into whom all three men (Dreyman, Wiesler, Hempf) project their longings and desires and from whom they await salvation. But none of them take her for the woman she is: complex and ambiguous, weak and strong, talented and ridden with doubts, strongly sensual and strangely aloof. While the men envision her as the figure of purity and perfection, she must fall victim to their unrealistic expectations.

36. "Pity is aroused by unmerited misfortune, fear by the misfortune of a man like ourselves" (Aristotle, *Poetics*, 76).

37. Donnersmarck accentuates Christa-Maria's glamour, particularly in contrast to the drab, depressing reality that surrounds her. In the scene at the seedy bar, she appears with large, dark sunglasses and wears an opulent fur hat. She is aware of her superiority, and she exudes an aura of exclusivity and mystery. As a coveted actress in the regime, she is granted the rare but highly fragile privilege of being exclusive in the otherwise ruthlessly egalitarian society of the GDR.

38. I will disclose here that I was at first disappointed with the film's ending, thinking that its somewhat lengthy historical coda detracted from the visceral power of the original story of Christa-Maria. But after repeated viewings I have come to understand and appreciate Donnersmarck's decision to conclude the film in this way.

39. Wiesler is the only one whose status remains unchanged in the "new" Germany. While those with former prestige manage to keep their standing in the reunified country (Dreyman's plays are still performed and Hempf seems well fed and well clothed), the lowly Wiesler does not experience any upward mobility: he has graduated from opening letters to delivering them!

40. Donnersmarck has an excellent eye for the German theater world: many plays performed in Germany's state-subsidized major theaters are presented in pretentious, artsy productions that appeal only to an elite educated audience. In fact, the current German theater scene shares this in common with the former East Germany and its cultural sponsorship. Rarefied and insular productions are often the result. Is this film Donnersmarck's attempt to write and "stage" a viable, competitive (cinematic) alternative to the state-sponsored theatrical fare?

41. When Grubitz removes the plank from the hiding place and finds it empty, he mutters: "The actress." Dreyman looks up in realization: both of them suspect that Christa-Maria had removed the typewriter.

42. "The literature that transcends the dehumanizing aspects of political repression is also the vehicle through which Dreyman and Wiesler are, in effect, reconciled to one another and their separate pasts" (Stein, "Stasi with a Human Face?" 567).

43. The fact that so many discussions of the film return to the simple moralistic dichotomy of "perpetrators" and "victims" indicates to me that they have fundamentally misunderstood Donnersmarck's film. He shows us a disturbing, morally ambiguous world, one too difficult for many of us to accept, where there are no neat and clear distinctions between victims and perpetrators but where everyone is compromised by various degrees of complicity. It is no coincidence that the dominant shade of color in the film is gray.

44. The film opens with another such character, one who is "forced" to betray his neighbor after extreme physical and psychological duress from the Stasi, even if his only crime might have been friendly association with his neighbor before he attempted to flee to

the West. Lindenberger claims that the director could have made a greater film about such “lesser” characters (“Stasiplotation,” 564–55). The fact is: he did.

45. Lindenberger faults the film for being too generic in its portrayal of a totalitarian state, arguing that such a lack of historical specificity renders the film inauthentic (*ibid.*, 565). But here I must agree with Wilke: the question is not the factual accuracy of the historical details as such but rather the overpowering atmosphere of the film itself, which allows the audience to *feel* the pervasiveness of totalitarian control at a subliminal, “gut” level. The director “conveys a feeling of authenticity that goes underneath the skin” (Wilke, “Fiktion oder erlebte Geschichte?” 599). The content may not be applicable only to the Stasi reality, but certainly the GDR state perfected this form of physio-psychological penetration of its subjects to an unprecedented degree.

### Part 3

## THE LIVES OF OTHERS AND OTHER FILMS



Martina Gedeck (as Christa-Maria Sieland) and Sebastian Koch (as Georg Dreyman).