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***The Lives of Others*
and Contemporary
German Film**

A Companion

DE GRUYTER

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CHAPTER TEN

On the Lives of Objects

The historical film depends to a large degree on the filmic representation of objects of everyday life that are either associated with a particular past or, in the case of films about recent events, identified as being no longer part of the present. Production design plays a key role in conveying this sense of pastness through a heavy reliance on objects – the things that make up everyday life and the stuff with which characters surround themselves.¹ Yet by visualizing the difference between the bygone world of the narrative and the contemporary conjuncture, these objects – furniture, house wares, clothing, electronics and so forth – also resist the unique claims on physical reality that distinguish film from other visual media. Separated from the flow of life, the historical film does not partake in what Siegfried Kracauer calls ‘the redemption of physical reality through film’, leaning instead toward theatrical effects, illusionist tendencies and allegorical impulses.²

Closer attention to this object world allows us to move beyond assumptions about representation that keep the historical film under the sway of the realism-illusionism divide and to examine the enlistment of physical reality in the reconstruction of the past from a decidedly contemporary (i.e., presentist) perspective. Precisely because of film’s precarious relationship to physical reality, the objects in the historical film are frequently enlisted in the imagination of times and places marked as other or introduced to establish the terms of difference. This has profound implications for our understanding both of historical narratives, as articulated through subject-object relationships, and of the meaning of history as organized through objects (or things) as the materialization of specific attitudes and ideas about the past. ‘From a *theoretical* point of view human actors encode things with significance’, writes Arjun Appadurai; yet ‘from a *methodological* point of view, it is the things in motion that illuminate their human and social context’.³ Accordingly, their function within the diegesis offers a useful entry

1 The growing interest among cultural historians and theorists in things and objects – their filmic representation obliterates the difference between both terms (e.g., in Heidegger’s distinction between *Ding* and *Objekt*) – is reflected in recent anthologies such as *The Object Reader*, ed. by Fiona Candlin and Raiford Guins (London: Routledge, 2009).

2 Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film. The Redemption of Physical Reality*, with an introduction by Miriam Bratu Hansen (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

3 Arjun Appadurai, ‘Introduction’, in *The Social Life of Things. Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. by Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986), pp. 3–63 (p. 5).

point into the ideological operations that distinguish the historical film and define its precarious position between realism, illusionism and allegorization.

For that reason alone, the objects chosen to interpret – rather than merely represent – the distance between present and past should never be treated as self-evident in their function within the mise-en-scène or be regarded as secondary to the production of narrative meanings or historical insights. On the contrary, reading a historical film such as *The Lives of Others* through what I call the lives of objects allows us to better understand the unique status of objects as visualizations of both the social and cultural discourses associated with them and the forms of attachment and strategies of incorporation articulated through them. In this particular case, the objects chosen for a historical reconstruction of the GDR circa 1984 are profoundly dependent on contemporary forms of engagement: the sensory pleasures through which spectators respond to these audiovisual semiblanes and evaluate their cultural and aesthetic significance; the political memories and historical knowledges that guide their recognition and appreciation of period styles; and the reading strategies that integrate them into ideological formations and interpretative frameworks. It is with these larger questions in mind that I approach the culture-politics interface marked as East German through the kind of objects that visualize its historicity (i.e., its pastness) and, in the process of historicization, give rise to a decidedly West German theory of cultural production. Greater attention to the objects of everyday life is central to a better understanding of the aestheticization of history and the commodification of memory that continue to trouble postunification representations of the GDR; but it also brings into relief the pivotal role of the object in the filmic production of history, memory and nostalgia more generally. In other words, the objects in the historical film allow us to make use of the important distinction made by Philip Rosen among history, historiography and historicity, with the latter defined as ‘the particular interrelations of the mode of historiography and the types of construction of history related by it’.⁴

Essential to the reality claims of film and its illusionist potential, objects occupy the centre of what Laura Marks calls haptic visuality and play a key role in the process of grasping, quite literally, the texture and textuality of the past.⁵ Of course, objects in film are only visual representations of objects; yet their physical presence within the mise-en-scène can never be fully contained by the frame or

completely integrated into the narrative. As part of production design, objects reach beyond the diegesis, evoking qualities and experiences shared with the extradiegetic practices of architecture, technology, fashion and design. Embedded in specific conditions of cultural production and consumption, objects often serve as heuristic devices in the above mentioned culture-politics interface. In this particular film, typewriters, telephones, tape recorders and television monitors, together with books and magazines, stand in for basic cultural techniques such as reading, writing, speaking and listening. They are introduced to represent the struggle between individual expression and political control or, to phrase it differently, between artist and state. Yet the fact that these tools and techniques are identified with a historically specific mode of cultural production – namely, in a socialist state that no longer exists – further complicates the filmic status of objects as objects because of their association with memory culture and historical debate, that is: with formally very different but closely related narratives about culture and politics that, not surprisingly, involve processes of objectification and *Verdinglichung* (reification).

On the one hand, the objects in the diegesis serve as markers of historical authenticity even where they are in fact anachronistic; they situate the story in a particular time and place and do so through fiction effects markedly different from, say, the spatial regimes prevalent in historical exhibitions. On the other hand, these objects construct (and hence allow us to reconstruct) a particular relationship to the past, one that is sometimes nostalgic, sometimes fetishistic, and sometimes allegorical. These two sides align the historical film in often problematic ways with claims of authenticity that have less to do with history as commonly understood than with the spectator’s particular relationship to that history. The audience’s familiarity with the look of an era and the filmmaker’s heavy reliance on set and costume design in recreating the past are openly acknowledged in the term ‘period film’. Similarly, the emotional investments in the kind of pasts mobilized in the making of national history and identity are considered crucial to the nostalgia effects of the so-called heritage film. But in ways not yet fully understood, the ideological demands on the mise-en-scène of history remain inextricably linked to the visual, narrative, affective and haptic qualities that make the objects from the past – in the diegesis and beyond – nodal points for conflicting projections, interpretations and appropriations.

Whether seen as an important contribution to coming to terms with the German division or analyzed through the lens of *Ostalgie* (i.e., nostalgia for the old East), the numerous films about the GDR made since unification rely heavily on the materiality of everyday life to evoke a political system and ideology that has been soundly defeated. What better way to consider their role in historical representation than by *not* writing about stories and characters and instead focus-

⁴ Philip Rosen, *Change Mummified. Cinema, Historicity, Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), p. xi.

⁵ Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film. Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), p. xi.

ing on physical objects and the relationships organized through and inscribed in them? Precisely such a strategy informs my approach to the questions raised by *The Lives of Others*, a much discussed contribution to post-1989 West German representations of East Germany in films, novels, exhibition culture and historical scholarship and their shared reliance on bits and pieces from that country's vanished lifeworld in articulating decidedly contemporary views on history, politics and culture.⁶

The continuing scholarly indifference to the actual building blocks of the historical film is all the more surprising in light of the centrality of production design to German film history from Expressionist cinema to New German Cinema; the same could be said about the privileged role of objects – 'stranded objects', in Eric Santner's phrase – in staging the haunted scenes of post-Holocaust mourning and melancholia.⁷ Confirming the importance of objects in imagining the politics-technology interface of the future, Fritz Lang's *Das Testament des Dr. Mabuse* (The Testament of Dr. Mabuse, 1932) with its 1962 sequel, Harry Piel's *Die Welt ohne Maske* (The World without a Mask, 1934) and Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Weilt am Draht* (World on a Wire, 1973) are telling examples of the obsessions in German cinema with technologies of surveillance; but little attention has been

paid to the material reconstruction of the past and its enlistment in contemporary political debates, reason enough to start out with some introductory remarks on the benefits of approaching postunification films about the GDR from the perspective of production design and its objects.

There are good reasons (disciplinary as well as methodological) for pursuing such an approach: to counteract the continuous privileging in German film studies of questions of narrative in the negotiation of (national, ethnic and gendered) identities; to resist the discursive logic according to which every film about the GDR is evaluated based on criteria of historical accuracy and authenticity; and to avoid the tendency in more theoretical contributions to read films symptomatically but, in the process, bracket everything that confirms film as an aesthetic practice with a special investment in the object world. As should be apparent by now, my larger goal behind reading *The Lives of Others* through the 'totality of objects' and a thus evoked 'totality of life', to draw on two terms coined by Georg Lukács in his analysis of the historical novel, is to expand the parameters within which we evaluate the historical film and to acknowledge the uniquely filmic reconstruction of the past as an integral part of other object-based historical practices from museum exhibitions to retro consumption.⁸ But whereas Lukács draws attention to objects in the name of a materialist conception of history, I use their placement in the diegesis to untangle some of the contradictions that inform all postunification representations of the GDR. This means to ignore much of what has preoccupied critics and scholars so far, including the film's melodramatic employment of German history, the problematic narrative of redemption and reconciliation, and the highly gendered figure constellations that make both possible.

Confirming my earlier comments on the blind spots of narrative analysis, the critical reception of *The Lives of Others* consists largely of symptomatic readings that quickly bypass the visual surface of history, its texture and textuality, and downplay the spectatorial pleasures afforded by the historical film as a genre with a particular investment in the look of things. Instead the Oscar-winning film has been analyzed as part of other revisionist accounts of the German division and the kind of nostalgia for East Germany known as *Ostalgie*.⁹ Usually *The Lives*

6 The special issue of *German Studies Review*, 31.3 (2008) on *The Lives of Others* addresses many of these issues; see the articles by Thomas Lindenberger, 'Stasiploitation – Why Not? The Scriptwriter's Historical Creativity in *The Lives of Others*', 557–66; Mary Beth Stein, 'Stasi with a Human Face? Ambiguity in *Das Leben der Anderen*', 567–79; Jens Gieseke, 'Stasi Goes to Hollywood: Donnersmark's *The Lives of Others* and die Grenzen der Authentizität', 580–88; Manfred Wilke, 'Fiktion oder erlebte Geschichte? Zur Frage der Glaubwürdigkeit des Films *Das Leben der Anderen*', 589–98; Cheryl Dueck, 'The Humanization of the Stasi in *Das Leben der Anderen*', 599–608. On the importance of marketing in this context, see Lu Seegers, 'Das Leben der Anderen oder die "richtige" Erinnerung an die DDR', in *Film und kulturelle Erinnerung. Plurimediale Konstellationen*, ed. by Astrid Eil and Stephanie Woinka (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008), pp. 21–52. On the West German perspective, see Anna Funder, 'Eyes without a Face', *Sight and Sound*, 175 (2007), 16–20 and Daniela Berghahn, 'Remembering the Stasi in a Fairytale of Redemption: Florian Henckel von Donnersmark's *Das Leben der Anderen*', *Oxford German Studies*, 38.3 (2009), 312–33. On the centrality of gender to these revisionist projects, compare Jennifer Creech, 'A Few Good Men: Gender, Ideology, and Narrative Politics in *The Lives of Others* and *Good Bye, Lenin!*', in *Women in German Yearbook*, 25 (2009), 100–26, and Gary Schmidt, 'Between Authors and Agents: Gender and Affirmative Culture in *Das Leben der Anderen*', *German Quarterly*, 82.2 (2009), 231–49. See also Andrea Rinke's contribution to this volume. On the problem of historical authenticity, also see Wendy Westphal, 'Truer than the Real Thing': 'Real' and 'Hyperreal' Representations of the Past in *Das Leben der Anderen*', *German Studies Review*, 35.1 (2012), 96–111.

7 The reference is to Eric L. Santner, *Stranded Objects. Mourning, Memory, and Film in Postwar Germany* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990).

8 Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983).

9 Surveys of these films can be found in Ralf Schenk, 'Die DDR im deutschen Film nach 1989', *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, 44 (2005), 31–38 and Katarina Kuperstein, *Zwischen Ostalgie und Reflexion. Die filmische Darstellung der DDR nach der Wende* (Saarbrücken: VDM Dr. Müller, 2010). On some of the broader implications, see Thomas Lindenberger, 'Zeitgeschichte am Schneidetisch. Zur Historisierung der DDR im deutschen Spielfilm', in *Visual History. Ein Studienbuch*, ed. by Paul Gerhard (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2006), pp. 353–72.

of *Others* is grouped together with more 'serious' films that approach the last decade of the GDR from a Western perspective and often focus on the Stasi as the embodiment of the East German *Überwachungsstaat* (surveillance state). Examples include two well-known films by representatives of New German Cinema, *Das Versprechen* (The Promise, Margarethe von Trotta, 1995) and *Die Stille nach dem Schuß* (The Legend of Rita, Volker Schlöndorff, 2000), as well as the successful television miniseries *Weissensee* (Friedemann Fromm, 2010). Resisting the project of national reconciliation through (failed) heterosexual romance, former DEFA directors (in a variation on the famous Marx quote) have depicted the final years of the GDR as either tragedy (e.g., *Abschied von Agnes* [Farewell to Agnes, Michael Gwisdek, 1994]) or farce (e.g., *Letztes aus der DaDaer* [Latest from the DaDaer, Jörg Foth, 1990]). Meanwhile mainstream productions such as *Sonnenallee* (Sun Alley, Leander Haußmann, 1999), *Helden wie wir* (Heroes Like Us, Sebastian Peterson, 1999), *Good Bye, Lenin!* (Wolfgang Becker, 2003), *NVA* (Leander Haußmann, 2005) and *Der rote Kakadu* (The Red Cockatoo, Dominik Graf, 2006) draw upon the conventions of the heritage film, including its heavy reliance on production design, in conjuring up bygone worlds, mentalities and sensibilities. The latter have played a key role in translating the problems of unification into the conciliatory registers of *Ostalgie* or, in the case of *Good Bye, Lenin!*, its humorous deconstruction.¹⁰

But as the latter films illustrate, *Ostalgie* is only secondarily a narrative phenomenon; like the preoccupation with heritage in postunification German cinema and culture, it is primarily based on, and articulated through, the world of objects. Most films about everyday life in the GDR use set and costume design to simultaneously serve the nostalgic pleasures of *Ostalgie* and marginalize the GDR within the visual archives of a unified Germany. At first glance, aligning *The Lives*

of *Others* with such objectifying treatments seems counterintuitive, given the implicit diagnosis of a trivialization of history. The melodramatic tone of this ambitious art film shares little with the comedic and parodistic modes prevalent in filmic and televisual simulations of the GDR as a site of retrospective projections. Similarly, its humanistic belief in the utopian power of art stands in sharp contrast to the cult of the commodity that has turned East Germany into an object of cultural consumption and performative identification. But as in earlier treatments, the film's fantasy of national reconciliation – over the body of a dead woman (as some critics have rightly noted) – is achieved through the recreation of the East as the exoticized other, a process not dissimilar to what Paul Cooke has described as colonization.¹¹ More relevant to my discussion, in the same way that the blanket dismissal of *Ostalgie* as sentimental kitsch is often predicated on a high-culture disregard for the materiality of history and (post)memory, the moralistic insistence on appropriate forms of engagement sometimes hides the instrumentalization of postunification representations of the GDR in the corresponding phenomenon of *Westalgie* (i.e., nostalgia for the old Federal Republic) as *Ostalgie*'s secret double. This elusive mixture of temporal detachment and emotional attachment is most apparent in the film's colour scheme, a result of von Donnersmarck's decision to shoot in analogue rather than digital technology, with all reds and blues drained from the film stock, thus creating a visual effect similar to patina. The narrow colour range, consisting largely of browns, greys and blues, has been described as key to the film's reconstruction of 1980s East Berlin 'as it really was'; it also has been criticized for contributing to the denunciation of the GDR, and of socialism, as lacking in colour and, hence, vitality.¹² Yet in less obvious ways, this historical patina can also be seen as a symptom of nostalgia for the kind of futures past associated with the two sides in the Cold War divide.

Rereading *The Lives of Others* through the lives of objects reveals the numerous ways in which production design is also informed by a postunification perspective on (the marginalization of) literature in the public sphere. In other words, the representation of the GDR as a society of writers and readers, even if the latter are Stasi agents, is inseparable from nostalgia for the divided *Leseland* (reading country) of the 1980s of which West Germany was the other half. With von Donnersmarck approaching the former East from a position of retrospection as well as extraterritoriality, his film must thus be read as displaced *Westalgie*,

¹¹ Paul Cooke, *Representing East Germany Since Unification. From Colonization to Nostalgia* (New York: Berg, 2005).

¹² 'A World without Red and Blue: An Interview with Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck', *Projections 15 Seminar. European Cinema*, ed. by Peter Cowie and Pascal Edelmann (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), pp. 225–35.

¹⁰ On *Ostalgie*, see the special volume edited by David Clarke, 'Beyond *Ostalgie*: East and West German Identity in Contemporary German Culture', *Seminar*, 40.3 (2004); Anna Saunders, "'Normalizing" the Past: East German Culture and *Ostalgie*', in *German Culture, Politics, and Literature into the Twenty-First Century*, ed. by Stuart Taberner and Paul Cooke (Rochester: Camden House, 2006), pp. 89–103; and Greg Castillo, 'East as True West: Redeeming Bourgeois Culture: From Social Realism to *Ostalgie*', *Kritika. Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 9.4 (2008), 747–68. On films in the context of *Ostalgie*, also see Jennifer Kapczynski, 'Negotiating Nostalgia: The GDR Past in *Berlin Is in Germany* and *Good Bye, Lenin!*', *Germanic Review*, 82.1 (2007), 78–100; Jaimie Fisher, 'German Historical Film as Production Trend: European Heritage Cinema and Melodrama in *The Lives of Others*', in *The Collapse of the Conventional. German Film and Its Politics at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*, ed. by Jaimie Fisher and Brad Prager (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010), pp. 186–215; Nick Hodgkin and Caroline Pearce, eds, *The GDR Remembered. Representations of the East German State since 1989* (Rochester: Camden House, 2011), especially Nick Hodgkin, 'Screening the Stasi, The Politics of Representation in Postunification Film', pp. 69–94.

that is, nostalgia for the FRG's thriving literary public sphere and its reliance on writers as the nation's moral conscience. The incessant complaints about the fundamental transformation of the public sphere in the new information age, and the attendant decline of (high) literary culture, are inseparable from legitimate concerns about the triumph of neoliberal capitalism and global consumer culture, a point made by Dominic Boyer and Anthony Enns in their analyses of *Ostalgie* as postsocialist nostalgia; yet the same concerns have inspired nostalgia for the imaginary other Germany, the old FRG, that is always present in postunification representations of the GDR.¹³ In *The Lives of Others*, these two positions come together in the preoccupation with the final flourishing of literature in the East (and of critical journalism in the West) and the acute awareness of the disappearance of both worlds acknowledged in the film's melancholy tone.

Rather than reconstructing this process through the figure of Georg Dreyman, I focus on the objects that visualize his dilemmas as an East German writer and play a key role in the filmic representation of the Stasi and its observational techniques, that is, of recording, transcribing, copying, interpreting and so forth. Such a process-based approach to writing is essential for understanding the contemporary investment in the GDR as both a surveillance state and a literary culture, a structural tension captured in the terms *Stasiland* (land of the Stasi) and *Kulturnation* (cultural nation). The linkages between the two reveal the constitutive elements behind the historicization of the literary public sphere under conditions of dictatorship, the related diagnosis of a decline of literary culture today, and the melancholy attachment to the cultural life and political culture of the decades leading up to unification. Last but not least, the strategies through which von Donnerstmark distinguishes a humanistic from a totalitarian definition of literature allow us to revisit some of the criticism levelled against the film and, instead of reproducing the East-West antagonism informing many contributions, to shift attention to the aesthetic and ideological alternatives visualized through the world of objects: bourgeois humanism or socialist modernity, literary public sphere or surveillance state.

Conceptual support for rereading films about the GDR from the perspective of things – and the function of things in relation to bodies and stories – can be found in the recent turn in historical scholarship toward material culture and its recognition of the importance of product design for understanding historiography and historicity. Here Rainer Gries's definition of 'products as media' and Paul Bett's

notion of 'the return of history as design'¹⁴ offer useful entry points into the parallel projects of textual analysis and historical contextualization and shed new light on the bifurcated narratives of mass culture and modernity in East and West Germany during the Cold War. In the popular films associated with *Ostalgie*, the kind of objects enlisted in a thus described return of history as design include the iconic two-cylinder car in *Go, Trabi, Go* (Peter Timm, 1990), the hilarious *Multi-funktionsisch* (multifunction table, or MUFUTI) in *Sommerallee* and the beloved Spreewald gherkins in *Good Bye, Lenin!*¹⁵ Confirming the intricate dynamics of allegorization, fetishization and commodification, memories of GDR everyday life and material culture during the early 2000s enjoyed great popularity in television shows and are still kept alive through fan clubs, theme parties and mail order catalogues for *Ostprodukte* (products made in the GDR). Adding the perspective of musealization, the material culture of 'the first socialist state on German soil' can be found on full display in the DDR-Museum in Berlin and the Dokumentationszentrum Alltagskultur der DDR (Documentation Centre of Everyday Culture in the GDR) in Eisenhüttenstadt.¹⁶ But what are the implications of this growing attention to GDR material culture for the analysis of a film like *The Lives of Others*? If it is true, as Daphne Berdahl and others have argued, that consumer objects open up an alternative to the privileging of the resistance narrative dominant in the East German branch of the Stiftung Haus der Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland or the Zeitgeschichtliche Forum Leipzig (ZGF), what precisely is the function of such objects in a film 'about' the paradigmatic struggle between 'Geist und Macht' (spirit and power) evoked since the 1910s as a central conflict in Ger-

14 See Rainer Gries, *Produkte als Medien. Kulturgeschichte der Produktkommunikation in der Bundesrepublik und der DDR* (Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2003) and Paul Betts, *The Authority of Everyday Objects. A Cultural History of West Germany Industrial Design* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), p. 249.

15 Daphne Berdahl, "'Go, Trabi, Go!': Reflections on a Car and its Symbolization over Time', *Anthropology and Humanism*, 25.2 (2000), 131–41; by the same author, '(N)ostalgie for the Present: Memory, Longing, and East German Things', *Ethnos*, 64.2 (1999), 192–211. A rare discussion of the filmic representation of consumer culture can be found in Michael D. Richardson, 'A World of Objects: Consumer Culture in Filmic Reconstructions of the GDR', in *The Collapse of the Conventional*, pp. 216–23.

16 See Daphne Berdahl, 'Re-presenting the Socialist Modern: Museums and Memory in the Former GDR', in *Socialist Modern. East German Everyday Culture and Politics*, ed. by Katherine Pence and Paul Betts (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), pp. 345–66; Paul Betts, 'The Twilight of the Idols: East German Memory and Material Culture', *Journal of Modern History*, 72.3 (2000), 731–65; Martin Blum, 'Remaking the East German Past: *Ostalgie*, Identity, and Material Culture', *Journal of Popular Culture*, 34.3 (2000), 229–53; Jonathan Bach, 'The Taste Remains': Consumption, (N)ostalgia, and the Production of East Germany', *Public Culture*, 14.3 (2002), 545–56.

13 Dominic Boyer, '*Ostalgie* and the Politics of the Future in Eastern Germany', *Public Culture*, 18.2 (2006), 361–81; Anthony Enns, 'The Politics of *Ostalgie*: Post-Socialist Nostalgia in Recent German Film', *Screen*, 48.4 (2007), 475–91.

man society and revisited, after 1989, in the controversies surrounding writers Christa Wolf and Sascha Anderson and their work as unofficial Stasi informers?

In answering these questions in the case of *The Lives of Others*, we must begin with the constitutive tension between historical representation and retrospective reconstruction as articulated through production design, including the choice of locations and the look of interiors. In early interviews von Donnersmarck repeatedly described how his production team went to great lengths to return East Berlin neighbourhoods to their original look before unification. Yet for the reasons noted above, they invariably ended up reproducing contemporary cultural topographies, with all the adjustments necessitated by urban reality and filmic fantasy. For instance, Dreyman's apartment building, a typical example of *Grünzeit* architecture, is supposed to be in Prenzlauer Berg but the exterior scenes were in fact shot on Wedekindstrasse in Friedrichshain. Stasi colonel Wiesler lives in one of the infamous modern *Plattenbauten* (prefab high rises) found on Leninplatz and similar showcases of socialist city planning. The film team's difficulties in protecting building facades from being sprayed with graffiti overnight, recounted in the 'Making of' feature on the Sony Pictures Classics DVD, confirm the director's historicist ambitions; but these anecdotes also reveal to what degree the difference between an oppressive regime intent on controlling all forms of writing and a free society presumably powerless against such renegade acts of (re)inscription become an integral part of the promotional strategies. The choice of the famous Soviet War Memorial in Treptower Park (instead of the more neutral Teufelssee near Köpenick in the screenplay) as the setting for a conspiratorial meeting illustrates the growing emphasis during the production on East Berlin as a city with a burdensome socialist history. Meanwhile the oft-cited problems concerning the use of historical sites indirectly validate the importance of cinema as a site of collective memory. Key scenes were shot inside the old Stasi headquarter in Normannenstrasse, now the repository of the Stasi archives. However, initial plans to use the main Stasi detention centre, now the Berlin-Hohenschönhausen Memorial, were vetoed by its director, suggesting competing views on the uses of German history in the new Berlin Republic.

With the look of history in film often influenced by historical paintings or paintings from the period, it should not surprise that the production team sought inspiration from visual material produced during the GDR to recreate the disillusioned atmosphere of socialism's final decade. As a result, history returns in the form of film history, with the historical film clearly benefitting from the increasingly important role of films in history. Confirming the highly mediated nature of the genre, production designer Silke Bühr reportedly watched famous DEFA films such as *Die Legende von Paul und Paula* (The Legend of Paul and Paula, Heiner Carow, 1973) and drew on other visual sources such as photo-

graphy – perhaps even Helga Paris's 1970s photo series of East Berlin neighbourhood bars or Harald Hauswald's 1987 photo book of East Berlin – to gain a sense of the GDR lifeworld and its visual self-representations. Her exterior reproduces the old-fashioned urbanity and picturesque decay that, after prompted many artists and intellectuals to move to Prenzlauer Berg and richshain and that, notwithstanding the hipster reclamation of 1970s prefabricated structures as monuments to mid-century modernism, continue to be favoured over products of GDR modern architecture and city planning. By contrast, through postmodern alignment of modernism with totalitarianism, the SED regime film is reduced to the sterility of the functional public and private spaces inhabited by its representatives. Their privileges are on full display in their signature cars, the Volvo 760 state limousine reserved for the state minister or the luxury, the banality of life in a modern(ist) dictatorship manifests itself in the mundane details such as the wood-panelled Stasi offices and the rubber in the Stasi canteen – symbols of the petty-bourgeois culture of provincial authoritarianism and philistinism that the Federal Republic proudly claim have overcome by the 1980s.

All historical films, especially those aiming at authenticity, rely on stylisation to produce their ideological effects. Aware that historical authenticity is a product of illusionism posing as realism, von Donnersmarck at one point in his approach to set design a 'making everything graphic'.¹⁷ Corroborating this statement, the actor Sebastian Koch (in an interview included among the extras) describes how the director set out to find big things in small things; looking for a filmic version 'truer than the true thing'. In accordance with convention, *The Lives of Others* introduces the corresponding material things primarily in the service of the narrative, to mark turning points, highlight dramatic moments, and reveal underlying conflicts. Unlike in *Good Bye, Lenin!*, these objects do not serve as means for ironic commentary or tokens of fetishistic desire; it would be nearsighted to simply see them as extensions of the character, worst, as mere decoration. As the second part of the essay will show, the transformation of objects into sites of contestation and manifestations of difference can be traced from the most personal ones, especially those related to the body (clothes) and the home (furniture), to the most political ones, including those used in the acts of surveillance that *de facto* eliminate the separation between private and public sphere.

¹⁷ Diane Carson, 'Learning from History in *The Lives of Others*: An Interview with Writer Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck', *Journal of Film and Video*, 61.1-2 (2010), 18.

To begin with the protagonists' clothes, their function as objects – or, more precisely, as membranes mediating between bodies and spaces – is two-fold: to foreground the performative nature of their identities and to locate these performances in a culturally mediated fantasy of German division. Throughout costume designer Gabriele Binder emphasizes the uniformity of menswear, suggesting that the Stasi officer and the literary author only act out predetermined roles in the performance of oppression and resistance. At the same time, she clothes the East Berlin intelligentsia in the familiar uniform of 1980s alternative culture shared by East and West: functional parkas, baggy trousers, long hair and unshaven faces or beards, further evidence of the similarities in countercultural tastes and the contemporary investment in this doubling effect. Dreyman and Wiesler's sartorial choices identify them as professionals and, across the culture-politics divide, as inhabitants of the same world of ideologies and ideas. Dreyman's brown corduroy jacket and wool trousers, worn with an open beige dress shirt, suggests a writer or intellectual; his look is mid-career Günter Grass without the moustache and pipe. Wiesler's three-tone grey Terylene parka, with the two corduroy side flaps and three snap buttons, announces a faceless organization man, the kind found in all large state bureaucracies. His grey-in-grey ensemble, which includes a small man purse with wrist strap, resembles the standard attire of central committee members during the 1980s; comparisons to a younger and thinner Erich Mielke, the Minister of State Security, are perhaps intended.

Of course, these uniforms also point to significant differences in their meaning for the two antagonists. For the ascetic Wiesler, the uniform represents a way of denying his individuality and guarding against intimacy, whereas Dreyman moves with grace and ease, clearly comfortable in his body. The dialogic structure of the Dreyman-Wiesler relationship is sustained through the figure of Dreyman's girlfriend, Christa-Maria Sieland, whose main function is to facilitate communication between the two men and their surrogates, State Minister Bruno Hempf and Wiesler's superior Anton Grubitz. The glamorous style of the famous actress – her camel hair coat with large fur hat, her body-hugging silvery dress and her cream-coloured negligee – appears extraterritorial to both ideological projects, the denunciation of socialism as totalitarianism and the romanticization of German literary culture as oppositional culture. For that reason, the woman has to be eliminated from the narrative in a melodramatic scene that takes full advantage of the implied connection between male creativity and female sacrifice.

Similarly, the men's apartments function not only as manifestations of their different personalities; in the larger context, they also serve to illustrate the richness of bourgeois humanism and the failure of socialist modernism. Like the chamber-play film of the Weimar era, *The Lives of Others* presents the home – and the private sphere more generally – as an externalized manifestation of the main

characters' internalized conflicts. The screenplay describes Dreyman's apartment as follows:

It is a representative and generously sized Berlin prewar apartment, with few but beautiful pieces of antique furniture and large dynamic paintings in the socialist expressionist style. [...] During his inspecting of the apartment [Wiesler] stopped in front of an antique lamp: a wooden Moor with golden turban bearing the light fixture. For Wiesler, this was pure decadence.¹⁸

Spacious and comfortable, the actual apartment includes a low sofa and chairs in mid-century modern style, a large wooden desk and grand piano, heavy patterned drapes and curtains, numerous bookshelves and side tables, simple white lamps, countless knick knacks and artworks and the obligatory potted palm found in Berlin bourgeois interiors since the *Gründerzeit*. With high ceilings and parquet floors, the rooms are decorated in a bourgeois bohemian style, evidence of the privileges accorded to the cultural elites in East German society. Some of the artwork offers pointed commentary on Dreyman's compromised position as a writer (i.e., the large marionette on the wall), Sieland's eventual betrayal (i.e., the female marble statue next to the telephone) and the complications arising from the mingling of love and politics (i.e., the drawing depicting Adam and Eve). A silver *Jugendstil* dragonfly sculpture on the armoire in the hallway captures best what for the Stasi agent epitomizes the excesses of hedonism but what for the writer signifies the rewards of a well-lived life made possible by literary productivity and political accommodation.

By contrast, the Stasi colonel lives in a small apartment in a prefab high rise described as follows in the screenplay: 'Wiesler's one-bedroom apartment is furnished with the kind of pieces most easily attainable in the GDR: thin wood furniture with steel legs. Any attempt at decoration is missing; the only embellishment is a calendar of the National People's Army'.¹⁹ An example of the so-called P2 prototype, complete with a pass-through from kitchen to living room, the actual apartment is a showcase of modern socialist living: small rooms with low ceilings and sparsely furnished with functional furniture. Despite its textured wallpaper and brown drapes, the living room offers little comfort except for a small sofa and coffee table and a television set as the sole source of entertainment. The simple meal consumed in such a sterile environment – rice with tomato paste – only adds to the overall sense of deprivation and isolation. In the same way that the

18 Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, *Das Leben der anderen*. Filmbuch (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2007), pp. 40–41.

19 von Donnersmarck, *Das Leben der anderen*, p. 37.

eclectic *Gründerzeit* style favoured by Dreyman comes to stand in for tradition, intimacy and a sense of belonging, the postwar interpretations of the Bauhaus legacy are now equated with alienation, coldness and social anomie. By using the presumed honesty of materials such as glass, steel and concrete in denouncing an oppressive political regime, the film effectively enlists modernism as a stand-in for the failed project of socialism, a connection established through their shared belief in social engineering and aesthetic functionalism.²⁰ According to this logic, the ethos of transparency symbolized by glass in the modernist aesthetic was appropriated by the project of socialist reconstruction and reinterpreted within its totalitarian regimes of order and control. The habitus of sobriety, as Theodor W. Adorno and Ernst Bloch noted in the 1950s, was to achieve the reconciliation of subject and object; but as functionalism stopped anticipating social change in aesthetic form, its direction was reversed, no longer a weapon against oppression but an expression of it.²¹

Jonathan Bach describes the contemporary attachment to this aesthetic and political project as modernist nostalgia, a longing for the longings once possible. Its manifestations in the historical imagination of the postunification years are everywhere, including in the West's continued need for the East as the historical locus of these abandoned hopes:

The inability of unification to act as the *Aufhebung* (sublimation) of the socialist trained and capitalist-propelled desire for harmony resulted in a form of postunification nostalgia in the East that has as its object not the GDR itself, but the longing associated with the GDR. What had been a frozen aspiration for an indefinitely deferred future shifted to nostalgia for that aspiration.²²

Not surprisingly, the close attention to the object world by film director, costume designer and set designer is most apparent in the representation of surveillance as both a technology of state control and a technique of reality construction. This connection is articulated through the actual tools and techniques of surveillance: the enormous Stasi card archives, the rows of shelves with files, the two-way mirrors, strange contraptions like the steam letter opener or the chair with removable seat (for smell sampling) and, of greatest relevance to the narrative, the moni-

tor, open-reel recorder, telephone and typewriter set up in the attic of Dreyman apartment building. Significantly, the objects associated with surveillance – the is, with controlling the flow of information – have their counterparts in the objects involved in the circulation of information, namely the books, magazines and newspapers in Dreyman's apartment. Upsetting these clear divisions, the decision by Wiesler to take a Brecht volume from the writer's desk and read it home marks the beginning of his momentous transformation from passive recorder to active creator (or, rather, inventor) of a new socialist reality. That confrontation takes place through the juxtaposition of new and old media, with literature portrayed as emancipatory and technology as oppressive, only heightens the profoundly nostalgic forms of appropriation through which *Ostalgie* and *Wesalgie* converge in a postunification fantasy of the historical conflict between art and power. This mutual articulation of an East and West position on culture and politics – and their respective futures past – is inextricably linked to the technologies of observation mobilized by the Stasi colonel and the very similar techniques of visualization employed by the film director. But unlike von Donnermarck, his uncanny double is almost entirely defined through the devices that control him.

Complicating the frequent description of Wiesler in terms of voyeurism (i.e. the kind explored by Hitchcock in *Rear Window*), these devices are primarily auditory in nature and include the reel-to-reel tape recorder used during the opening lecture to Stasi officers in training, his interrogation of prisoners in Henschönhausen and his increasingly compromised role in 'Operation Laszka' the around-the-clock surveillance of Dreyman. There is no doubt that vision plays a key role in the film's regimes of surveillance and involves highly voyeuristic pleasures. Wiesler's use of binoculars during the theatre performance establishes his relationship to Dreyman and Sieland both as individuals and as a couple: these acts of looking, observing and ultimately 'seeing' (i.e., the truth) continue through the monitors that allow him to influence the dramatic events from afar and the windows and glass doors from behind which he maintains his position as omnipresent spectator. But it is sound and the much more intimate act of listening that facilitate his transformation from an invasive recorder of violation against socialist conformity to a clandestine defender of artistic freedom and individual free will. Headphones play a decisive role in his emotional and personal undoing: first when he listens to Jerska reciting a Brecht poem at the birthday party and, later, when he hears Dreyman play the 'Die Sonate vom guten Menschen' (The Sonata of the Good Person) after the suicide of the blacklisted theatre director. Upon receiving the news of Jerska's suicide – significant through a telephone call monitored by Wiesler – Dreyman sits down at the piano reaches for the sheet music and, quite literally, turns symbols into sounds, b

²⁰ See Paul Betts, 'Building Socialism at Home: The Case of East German Interiors', in *Socialist Modern*, pp. 96–132. On the role of architecture, see Greg Castillo, *Cold War on the Home Front: The Soft Power of Midcentury Design* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

²¹ Theodor W. Adorno, 'Functionalism Today', trans. by John H. Smith, *Oppositions*, 3 (1988), 35–40 and Ernst Bloch, 'Formative Education, Engineering Form, Ornament', trans. by John H. Smith, *Oppositions*, 3 (1988), 45–51.

²² Bach, "'The Taste Remains"', p. 548.

not before the opening theme is already heard on the soundtrack, with the slight disconnect between musical notes and finger movements continuing in the subsequent cut to the Stasi agent listening in quiet rapture on his surveillance shift. In interviews, von Donnermarck has cited Lenin's comment on the incomparability of listening – truly listening – to Beethoven's *Appassionata* and following through with the ruthless business of revolution as the main inspiration for the film, an inspiration acknowledged in Dreyman's use of the same quote in the diegesis. Accordingly, Wiesler begins to act like a human being and use the state apparatus in the interest of art after listening to Dreyman's soulful rendition of 'Die Sonate vom guten Menschen'. And suddenly he no longer looks like a Stasi agent but an audiophile with an expensive headset. The ideological fantasy that informs this much commented upon moment of personal redemption is central to what I have earlier described as the postunification reconstruction of East German cultural politics as the bad other of what the West German literary public sphere has been or could have been.

In fact, all forms of cultural production or consumption – and closely related, all sensory registers – in the film are depicted through their communicability or translatability: listening becomes writing, writing seeing, and reading listening. The closeup of the Stasi typescript detailing one important night in Dreyman's apartment is superimposed with scenes of passionate lovemaking, with the image of text giving rise to moving images. The closeup of Wiesler reading the stolen volume of Brecht poems motivates the first of two voiceovers, with the words of 'Erinnerung an die Marie A.' (Remembering Marie A.) merging with an elegiac musical score. The second one occurs when we see an emboldened Dreyman writing his *Spiegel* article about suicides in the GDR, with the clicking sounds of the mechanical typewriter giving rise to a musical version of the Wolfgang Borchert poem 'Versuch es' (Try It). These moments are part of a series of closeups of typewriters and typescripts that alternate with closeups of Dreyman speaking and Wiesler listening and that, taken together, are intended to show the power of aesthetic experience and the sources of artistic inspiration. Not surprisingly, the turning point in the story is announced through the relationship between two very different kinds of East German keyboards, a piano, a Roemisch made by the well-known Dresden-based piano maker, and a typewriter, a Groma Kolibri produced in Markersdorf near Görlitz.

The underlying assumptions about the transformative effects of great art and the subversive powers of the romantic artist must be evaluated against the ascendancy of digital technologies and the marginalization of literary forms by visual media during the 1980s. In other words, *The Lives of Others* can also be read as an allegory of the changing conditions of cultural production and reception before and after the fall of the Wall. The characters' preoccupation with the

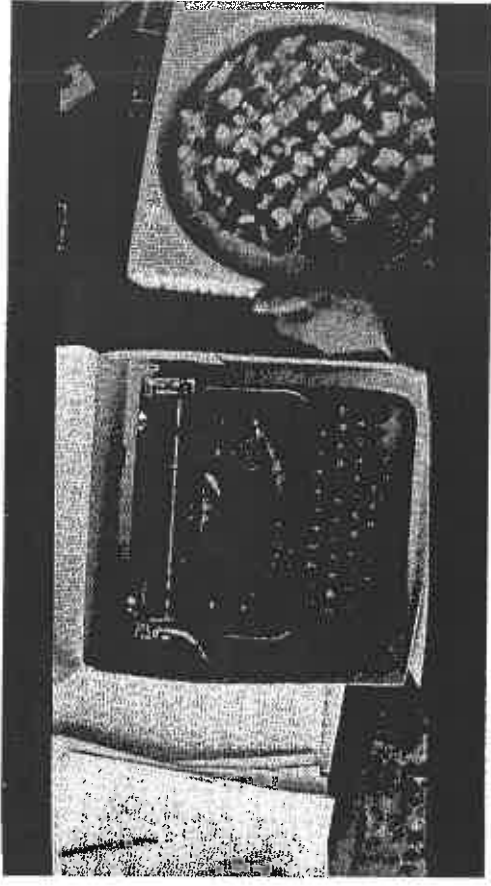
tools and techniques of writing, reading, listening, watching and recording clear indication of the growing role of technology in the changing dynamics between art and politics. Within the discursive field marked by auteurist inflections, filmic traditions and historical references, these tools and techniques contradicto- rious functions: to show the workings of the East German surveillance state and its political instrumentalization of culture, to evoke the tradition of literary public sphere still committed to the praxis of critique and, to introduce a third layer of references, to identify the emergence of a very different and elusive culture-technology interface in contemporary media practices no longer reducible to the model of the panopticon (in the sense of Bentham and Foucault) and the state apparatus (as defined by Althusser). Considering these additional layers requires us on the remaining pages to tease out the broader implications of the allegory of cultural production and reception inscribed in the filmic representation of the scene of surveillance and its transformation into the scene of resistance.

In *The Lives of Others*, listening (and, to a lesser degree, looking) is presented as a precondition of writing, which also means: writing is confirmed as a privileged form of artistic expression. Once again, this connection becomes clear soon as we reconstruct the process from the perspective of the object world: more specifically, of objects as sites of multiple inscriptions. As noted earlier, headphones and recording devices function as conduits to a world of private ambitions and desires otherwise hidden from view, and listening to the voices of sounds of others gives rise to previously suppressed experiences of empathy and the sublime. These feelings cause Wiesler to intervene in the existing regimes of surveillance and, by redefining the relationship between reality and fiction, to protect autonomous art from state intervention. The turning point will be described (in accordance with Brecht's media theory) as the transformation of the medium from an instrument of reception to one of production. Unlike the writer who spends much of his days unwittingly performing for his unknown (or man) audience, therein competing with his lover, the famous actress, the Stasi colonel spends much of his job actually writing: taking notes with a pencil (or using interrogations, typing summaries of the discussions between 'Laszlo' and his friends and, finally, inventing the fiction of Dreyman's artistic subversion of the SED regime. In that sense, Wiesler can be described as the more successful author, creating the kind of alternative reality Dreyman can only dream about with his rather conventional socialist realist plays.²³

²³ For further discussion of this aspect of the film see Marc Silbermann's contribution to this volume.

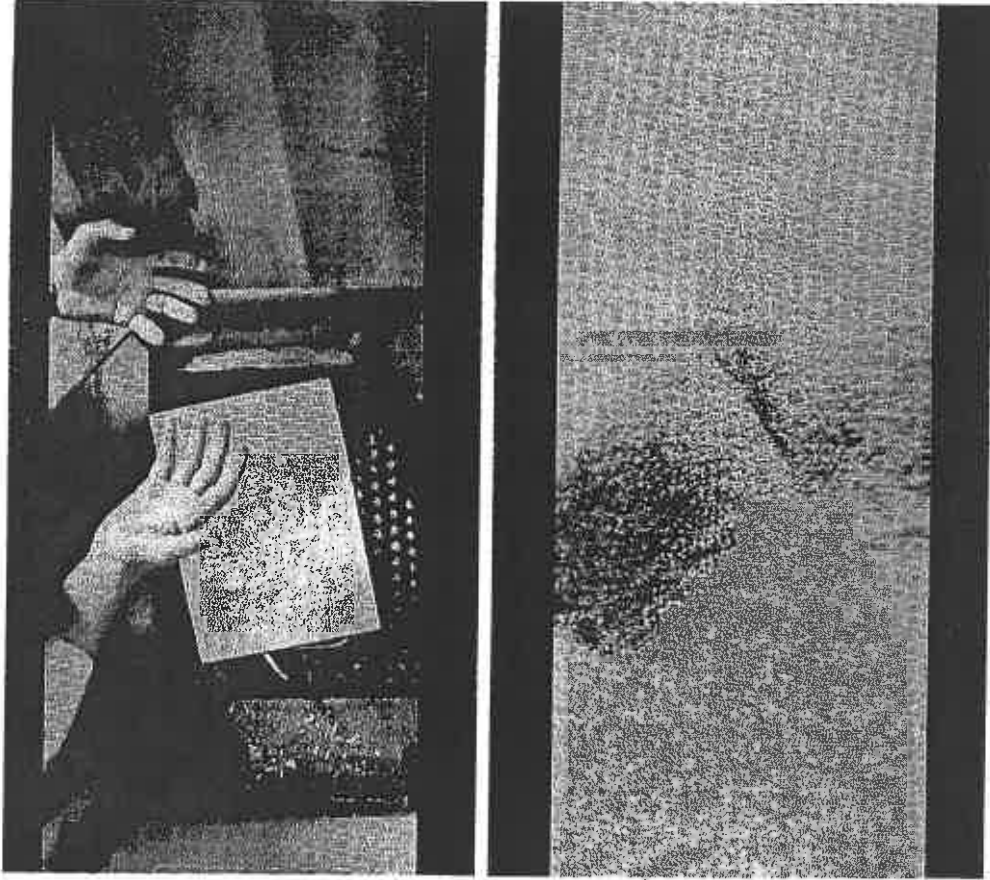
A mechanical typewriter brings together Wiesler and Dreyman as two authors with a very different investment in the future of socialism, the power of speech and the preservation of the state. At a time when electronic typewriters had become the norm in most state bureaucracies and when computers were transforming large-scale data systems and personal writing practices in the West, both men continue to use old-fashioned writing tools: pencils for Wiesler and pens for Dreyman. The fact that Dreyman's typewriter of choice is a Wanderer Torpedo, a prewar design, suggests a direct connection between the romantic image of the writer as public intellectual and the mournful recognition of the replacement of the literary public sphere by the market place as the primary measure of relevance and success. This association is indirectly confirmed by the introduction of a second typewriter, a Groma Kolibri made in East Germany during the 1960s but in this portable version produced exclusively for the export market. The West German journalist who asks Dreyman to write about the high number of suicides in the GDR for *Der Spiegel* provides him with this untraceable model to safeguard his anonymity. The Kolibri (German for humming bird) returns to its place of origins hidden under a birthday cake – an association that, given the active role of writers in the fall of the East German regime, might be read as a veiled reference to the birth pangs of a unified Germany. Expertly identified as the model used for the *Spiegel* typescript by a Stasi graphologist, this typewriter becomes the means of transforming East German literature from what some scholars have described as an *Ersatzöffentlichkeit* (substitute public sphere) into a *Gegenöffentlichkeit* (counter public sphere), with literature no longer compensating for the lack of open political debates but becoming an instrument in its final realization. But this transformation comes at a high price: the sacrifice of individual lives and the death of political utopias.

Both losses are acknowledged in repeated appearances of the colour red as a symbol of love, death and socialism. Its symbolic powers are first acknowledged when Dreyman hides the Kolibri under a doorstep and gets red ink stains on his fingers. The corresponding passage in the screenplay, which describes him as 'Lady Macbeth extending his red hands toward his friends' (109), suggests personal guilt: over his failure to prevent Jerska's suicide, which gives rise to a newly found sense of purpose, and over his role in the death of Sieland who ends up being punished for his critical stance. Later the colour red returns as a stain on the first page of the *Der Spiegel* manuscript written by Dreyman and then on the last page of the report written by HGW XX/7, with the similarities between ink and blood clearly intended.



The Kolibri typewriter (a), correctly identified by the Stasi graphologist (b), *The Lives of Others*.

These two paradigms of writing establish the terms under which Wiesler and Dreyman end up collaborating on the same project. In the beginning, Wiesler merely records reality, with surveillance introduced as the ideal model of filmic realism. Since Dreyman is unaware of the fact that his entire apartment has been turned into a recording studio, he continues to talk openly; meanwhile, in a friend's apartment, they play loud pop music to cover up conspiratorial talk. Initially, the transfer from voice to text follows the model of writer and secretary; however, this relationship changes under the humanizing effect of autonomous



The colour red as a symbol of love, death and socialism. Dreyman with red ink on his hands (a), and a red stain on the last page of HGW XX/7's report (b).

art. At that point, Wiesler becomes the author of a very different reality that has Dreyman and colleagues working on a historical drama featuring Lenin. Years later, it is in turn the writer who, sitting in the Stasi archives, becomes a reader of his own life as invented by a man 'humanized' by an aesthetic experience and who subsequently decides to write a novel dedicated to the anonymous agent known to him only as XX/7.

To briefly summarize the broader implications of reading historical films through their objects: the contribution of objects to the visual reconstruction of

the GDR is evident in the visual quality of *Ostalgie* and can be traced in everything from museum exhibitions to retro consumption. However, the role of production design in the filmic representation of the GDR and its alignment with a distinctly West German perspective on culture and politics is less obvious and has not yet received the same kind of scholarly attention. The discourses on cultural production and reception that are part and parcel of these nostalgic modes of appropriation can be examined most productively through the representation of their constitutive elements and techniques, including their strategies of transmission and transformation. In the words of Stefan Wolle, the virtual GDR has been recreated as a 'dictatorship of beautiful images' even as, or perhaps because, it was a 'dictatorship of the texts', that is: of writing, editing, transcribing and so forth.²⁴ The representation of the lives of objects in *The Lives of Others* reveals how this transfer from image (and sound) to writing is in fact achieved and in what ways objects are used both to articulate the opposition between socialist modernism and bourgeois humanism and to organize the profoundly nostalgic relationships among historicization, aestheticization and commodification. The objects foregrounded in von Donnersmarck's fantasy of cultural production and reception may not be part of the redemption of physical reality through film; but as I hope to have shown, they are essential to the functioning of the historical film and, by extension, its affective and ideological project.²⁵

²⁴ Stefan Wolle, 'Die Welt der verlorenen Bilder: Die GDR im visuellen Gedächtnis', in *Visual History*, pp. 332-52.

²⁵ I am grateful to the members of the UT-Austin film studies faculty group for their insightful comments on an earlier version of this essay; thanks also to Paul Cooke for his helpful feedback. All translations from the German are mine unless noted otherwise.