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EMPATHY AND IDENTIFICATION IN VON DONNERSMARCK'S *THE LIVES OF OTHERS*

Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's *The Lives of Others*, set in the German Democratic Republic in 1984, five years before the fall of the Berlin Wall, has been called the first accurate depiction of the psychological terror wielded by the Stasi, the East German secret police, who safeguarded the dictatorship of the proletariat. The film is about the psychological and political transformation of a Stasi officer, Wiesler, who undertakes the surveillance of a prominent playwright and his actress lover. The mechanisms through which Wiesler comes to empathize and identify with the subjects of his investigation, as he observes and listens in on the rich blend of passion, poetry, and politics that characterizes their lives, are explored in depth. Wiesler's transformation is based in part on the capacity to form implicit models of the behavior and experiences of others, based on the mirror neuron system, that Gallese and his colleagues call "embodied simulation." Underpinning the processes of empathy and identification so central to this film, embodied simulation is an unconscious and prereflexive mechanism through which the actions, emotions, and sensations we observe activate internal representations of the bodily and mental states of the other. Embodied simulation also expands our understanding of the power of the primal scene, which has long been identified as a major organizer of unconscious fantasies and conflicts throughout life, and which forms the central metaphor of the film. Embodied simulation scaffolds our aesthetic response to art, music, and literature, underlies the dynamics of spectatorship, and potentially catalyzes resistance to totalitarian mass movements.

The *Lives of Others*, a film written and directed by Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, is set in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) in 1984, a year with Orwellian overtones of faceless systems of oppression. The film shows us the human face and destinies of those who lived under the reign of terror imposed by the Stasi, the East German secret police, whose declared goal was "to know everything." The film is

about the internal transformation of a Stasi officer, Gerd Wiesler, who undertakes the surveillance of a prominent playwright, George Dreyman (“the only nonsubversive writer who is still read in the West”) and his actress lover Christa Maria Sieland (in the words of the culture minister Bruno Hempf, who covets her, “the loveliest pearl in the GDR”). Enraptured by what he hears as he listens in on their lives—a lavish blend of literature, music, art, poetry, and passionate lovemaking, each aspect enriching and ramifying the others—implausibly Wiesler begins to change. The mechanisms through which he comes to empathize and identify with the subjects of his investigation are the focus of this paper.

The *Sonata for a Good Man*, the musical composition that haunts *The Lives of Others*, reminds us, in the words of von Donnersmarck, that “human beings have the ability to do the right thing,” through processes of empathy and identification with others, even in social conditions that seem to eradicate the very possibility of goodness. This lyrical and moving composition first appears when a recording of it is given as a birthday present to Dreyman, still in good standing with the regime, by Jerska, a dissident theater director who has been blacklisted by the Stasi and forbidden to pursue his vocation. Upon learning later that Jerska has committed suicide, Dreyman plays the sonata for the first time and wonders, “Can anyone who has heard this music, I mean truly heard it, be a bad person?”

This statement (and indeed the film as a whole) was inspired, von Donnersmarck (2007) tells us, by Lenin’s reflection to his friend Maxim Gorky that he couldn’t listen to Beethoven’s *Appassionata*, his favorite piece of music, because it made him “want to stroke people’s heads and I have to smash those heads to bring the revolution to them. . . . at that moment *The Lives of Others* was born.” The director tells us that he found Lenin’s statement to be “one of those extreme examples of someone shutting out their own humanity and going by principle.” He states, “I thought about creating a film situation where I could force Lenin to listen to the *Appassionata*, and thereby give history a different course” (von Donnersmarck 2007). “I suddenly had this image of a person sitting in a

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depressing room with earphones on his head and listening to what he supposes is the enemy of the state and the enemy of his ideas, and what he is really hearing is beautiful music that touches him. . . . I sat down and in a couple of hours had written the treatment” (quoted in Riding 2007, p. 3). In *The Lives of Others*, Lenin is turned into the Stasi captain Gerd Wiesler, and the *Appassionata* into Gabriel Yared’s original composition, *Sonata for a Good Man* (von Donnersmarck 2007).

The film depicts the GDR as a miniature masterpiece of psychological intimidation in which the populace was kept in check by a force of over a hundred thousand secret police who handled more than twice as many citizen informers—at one time informers numbered close to one out of every seven Germans (von Donnersmarck 2007; Ash 2007). Such a system, in which family members, friends, and coworkers routinely informed on one another, is an unlikely backdrop for a film whose central theme is the capacity of human beings for goodness, compassion, and change. However implausible this transformation of a Stasi captain from party apparatchik to a man of feeling and principle may be in social reality—later I will discuss some of the criticisms of this film along that line—the fact that the film has been such an enormous critical and box office success, receiving the Oscar for best foreign film and a record seven German film awards—speaks to the idea that goodness continues to flourish “as an idea and a value in that other reality, psychic reality, the world of unconscious fantasy” (Schafer 2002, p. 6).

Wiesler is first seen teaching new recruits at the Stasi’s legal academy, where he plays for them tapes of a recent interrogation he conducted with a young man accused of helping someone escape to the West. He begins by telling them that “the enemies of the state are arrogant,” and systematically attempts to eradicate any vestige of empathy for the victims of interrogation, reminding his students that “your subjects are enemies . . . never forget that.” As he instructs his recruits on how best to break the spirits of their subjects, it is clear that part of his job is to instill institutional loyalty over individual conscience and to heighten their tolerance for injustice and cruelty. Wiesler’s fierce, passionate, and penetrating gaze as he alternately cajoles, intimidates, and browbeats his subject over a two-day nonstop interrogation shows that his existence has been narrowed to a single-minded eroticized focus on hunting down and destroying the enemies of the state. When a student who hears the subject of this protracted interrogation beg for sleep asks, “Why keep him awake so long, it’s inhuman?” Wiesler turns a penetrating gaze on him, replying, “The

best way to establish guilt or innocence is nonstop interrogation,” and surreptitiously puts an X next to the student’s name on his seating chart.

At the instigation of a former classmate, Anton Grubitz, who has surpassed Wiesler in professional advancement, Wiesler turns that penetrating gaze on Dreyman and his lover Christa, quickly pegging the former as “an arrogant type. The kind I warn my students about.” When Wiesler observes the playwright embracing Christa at the opening of his play, tellingly called *The Faces of Love*, one senses that he is as disturbed by their unabashed sensual delight in each other as by the sight of Dreyman conversing with a fellow dissident writer. Afterward, he agrees to oversee Dreyman’s surveillance himself.

The surveillance begins at the party after the play, where he witnesses Dreyman appealing to Minister Hempf to take Jerska off the blacklist so that he can resume his work as a theater director, suggesting that Jerska has changed. Hempf tells Dreyman, “That’s what we all love about your plays . . . the idea that people can change. People don’t change”—a remark that encapsulates one of the central themes of the film. In focusing on Wiesler’s transformation, von Donnersmarck hoped to illustrate that “people can change; try to strike some kind of balance in any moral or political decision between whether you’re going to be a person of principle or a person of feeling” (quoted in Esther 2007, p. 40).

Wiesler and his gray nylon clad Stasi team set up their surveillance apparatus with chilling efficiency and precision, warning the neighbor across the hall who observes through her peephole, “One word of this to anyone and Masha [her daughter] loses her spot at the university.” The emotional richness and depth of the lives he listens in on pose a stark contrast with his own withered existence, reflected in his bare and dreary apartment in a cement-block tower, in his meager, unappetizing meal of a tube of red sauce squeezed onto a bowl of something, and in his crude and truncated sexual encounter with a state-regulated prostitute who services a number of his fellow bureaucrats in the building, one after the other. Wiesler’s simplistic morality and slavish adherence to state-defined norms of good and evil, together with the analization of his sexuality, exemplify how totalitarian mass movements can foster regression to latency-age functioning in its citizens, evident in the submersion of individual will and autonomy in identifications with leaders who embody a combination of paranoid traits, aggression-laden grandiosity, and antisocial behavior—like Hempf and Grubitz (Kernberg 1989, 2003a; Diamond 2006). At their worst, such leaders may foster and unleash rationalized hatred and

destructiveness in ordinary citizens, offering bureaucratized channels for its expression.

Yet having taken up his post as an observer with his tape recording apparatus and earphones in the attic of Dreyman's apartment building, a dim and luminous space reminiscent of a cathedral or monastery, Wiesler comes to inhabit a transitional space that blends objective happenings with subjective imaginings, half real, half reverie (Winnicott 1953; Konigsberg 1996). The surveillance apparatus evokes not just the ubiquity of surveillance in the GDR, but also the experience of film viewing itself, particularly the film apparatus and our relationship to it as spectators. For as spectators we see what Wiesler only hears and imagines. We are to Wiesler what Wiesler is to Dreyman, and this makes our identification with Wiesler's transformation more palpable.

Wiesler's transformation, then, is a gradual rather than magical process (von Donnersmarck 2007), fueled by a succession of events and experiences, both internal and external. Almost from the beginning of the investigation he realizes that the sacred mission to expose an enemy of the state is fueled not so much by suspicions about Dreyman's loyalty to the Communist Party as by Hempf's wish to satisfy his lust for Christa, and by Grubitz's to further his career. The revelation of the corrupt motives fueling the investigation comes as a shock to Wiesler, who, when he presents Grubitz with the evidence that Christa has been seen emerging from the minister's car, is informed that this must be stricken from the official record and that his professional future rests on his capacity to be loyal to the party, which in this case means helping the minister get his rival out of the way. Wiesler, a man of principle, if not empathy, asks, "Is this why we joined?"

As the investigation progresses, Wiesler comes to recognize that Dreyman, far from being a subversive, is like him dedicated not only to protecting the socialist state, but to keeping alive its utopian ideals, now sadly obscured by layers of bureaucracy. However, the processes through which Wiesler comes to empathize and identify with the objects of his investigation are more complex and multifaceted. In demonstrating them, the filmmaker makes use of a number of psychoanalytic concepts (Gabbard 2001), including the conscious and unconscious mechanisms involved in empathy and identification; the neurobiological underpinnings of empathy and imitation in the mirror neuron system, which forms the scaffold for more complex processes of identification and mentalization; the link between empathy and aesthetic experience; the ubiquitous

nature of primal scene fantasies; and their role in catalyzing the symbolic function. For Wiesler, through his observation of the lives of others, comes for the first time to experience art, poetry, and music, and this newfound aesthetic dimension in turn expands his capacity for and comprehension of human experience. I will discuss each of these mechanisms of change in turn.

EMPATHY AND IDENTIFICATION

As he eavesdrops on Dreyman and Christa from the attic, processes of projection and introjection, central mechanisms of identification, are put into play (Klein 1946). Through such unconscious mechanisms, aggressive and threatening as well as good and loving aspects of the self are projected into the observed others, who come to embody such feelings and qualities, which are then reintrojected to the enrichment of the ego and object relations. Our first indication that Wiesler's identification with the couple is so powerful that he is unable to maintain his position as an objective recorder of their lives comes when he feels compelled to alert Dreyman to Christa's affair with Hempf. "Time for some bitter truths," he mutters, giving vent to a vengeful impulse to spoil the couple's bliss. Using his surveillance equipment, he triggers the doorbell so that Dreyman will go downstairs in time to see a disheveled Christa emerging from a sexual encounter in the minister's car. Later we see Dreyman cradle Christa in his arms on their bed, where she has collapsed in mute despair. The subsequent cut to an image of Wiesler, his face vulnerable and disarmed in sleep, his body mirroring the curved (spooned) bodies of his subjects, gives us the first visual clue of his rudimentary identification with his subjects. His relaxed, even blissful, expression and almost child-like bodily posture, so different from his usual hypervigilant mien and impervious stance, bespeaks an unconscious imitation of the bodily states of the subjects of his investigation. One senses in his benign bodily posture some amelioration of the vengeful, spoiling impulse that fueled his initial intervention into their lives—an impulse perhaps modulated by his witnessing the gentleness and compassion with which Dreyman responds to Christa after learning of her infidelity.

A number of theorists from Freud on have explored how the processes of empathy and identification are intertwined, and how both are involved with imitative mechanisms. Freud (1926) wrote that "it is only by empathy that we know the existence of psychic life other than our own" (p. 104).

He hypothesized that “a path leads from identification by way of imitation to empathy, that is, to the comprehension of the mechanism by means of which we are enabled to take up any attitude at all towards another mental life” (Freud 1921, p. 110). Although identification as the process by which the self takes on the characteristics of others through imitation or emulation has been well elucidated in psychoanalytic theory (see, e.g., Etchegoyen 1985; Olds 2006; Pigman 1995), the specific mechanisms by which this occurs have remained elusive. The neurobiological mechanisms that underpin processes of empathy, imitation, and identification have recently been elucidated by Gallese and others. Neuroimaging studies have shown that the same neural structures activated when we act intentionally, or experience sensations and emotions, are activated also when we observe others’ intentional actions, sensations, and emotions (Rizzolatti and Craighero 2004; Gallese 2001, 2002, 2005a,b, 2007). This mirror neuron system functions in a multimodal fashion, providing representational content to a number of sensory channels simultaneously (e.g., visual, auditory, motor, tactile) and is thus a rudimentary mediator between the experiential knowledge we hold of our own body and our implicit understanding of other’s experiences (Gallese, Eagle, and Mignone 2006). The capacity to form these implicit models has been termed by Gallese (2005b) “embodied simulation” and is seen as a forerunner of empathy and identification (Gallese 2003, 2005a,b; Olds 2006; Kandel 2006). Gallese (2005a) tells us “I call it embodied—not only because it is neurally realized, but also because it uses a pre-existing body model in the brain, and therefore it involves a non-propositional form of self-representation” (p. 42).

Thus, the discovery of mirror neurons suggests an underlying mechanism through which we perceive and understand others as a sort of simulation, or imitation, of their actions that is largely unconscious and prereflexive—a virtual enactment of the lives of others (Fadiga et al. 1995; Gallese 1999, 2000; Gallese, Eagle, and Migone 2006; Rizzolatti et al. 1996). Similar mechanisms of embodied simulation are thought by Freedberg and Gallese (2007) to underlie our aesthetic response to works of art—which also involves an internal imitation of the observed actions and emotions of others as depicted in painting, sculpture, and even music (Lahev, Saltzman, and Schlaug 2007). Most important, the continued plasticity of the mirror neuron system can contribute to positive new experiences that promote the formation of new adaptive implicit procedural patterns, whether through interpersonal encounters or aesthetic

experiences. Research also suggests that embodied simulation scaffolds the more cognitively sophisticated mentalizing mechanisms, which require more complex understanding of the ways that desires, motivations, and intentions of others may fluctuate according to different social contexts (Gallese 2007; Fonagy et al. 2002; Fonagy 2003).

In sum, the mirror neuron system has been found to form the basis for social cognition, including imitation and the learning of complex actions (Iacoboni et al. 1999; Buccino et al. 2004), the processing of action-related sentences (Tettamanti et al. 2005), basic forms of mind reading or understanding of the intentions that underlie actions even when the actions are not completed (Gallese and Goldman 1998; Iacoboni et al. 2005), linguistic processing and the understanding of communicative actions (Buccino et al. 2004) and intentions (Gallese 2007), and for our intuitive understanding of aesthetic experience (Freedman and Gallese 2007).

The mirror neuron system forms the basis for intermodal mapping that provides representational content not limited to any form of interaction, be it visual, auditory, or motoric (Gallese 2005a,b). Using fMRI, Gazzola and colleagues found that audiovisual mirror neuron systems represent actions independently of whether they are heard or seen, in humans as well as primates (Gazzola, Aziz-Zadeh, and Keysers 2006). Further, audiovisual mirror neurons enable us to recognize, reconstruct, and visualize the actions of others, even if only partially heard, by evoking motor aspects associated with those actions (Kohler et al. 2002; Keysers et al. 2003, 2004). Interestingly enough, in one fMRI study of auditory processing, individuals who scored higher on an empathy scale showed the strongest activation of the mirror neuron system, suggesting a possible link between activation of this system and empathic responsiveness to others (Gazzola, Aziz-Zadeh, and Keysers 2006). Gallese and colleagues have also explored the ways that the somatosensory mirror neuron system enables us when observing other bodies to map different body locations onto equivalent locations on our own body. Damasio (1999) makes a similar point when he links the emergence of emotion to neuronal mappings of the body state, called "as if bodily loops." The activation of these loops is likely not only internally driven, but also triggered by the observation of others. When we observe someone being touched or caressed, somatosensory circuits are activated as if our own body were being subject to tactile stimulation (Freedman and Gallese 2007; Gallese 2005b). It appears, then, that there is a cross-modal system dimension to the mirror neuron system, in that the mental simulations it entails are all

functionally interrelated, or possibly a form of one another—a concept that has obvious relevance to *The Lives of Others*, in which the actions, emotions, and sensations of others are heard as well as observed.

EMBODIED SIMULATION AND THE PRIMAL SCENE

An ability to recognize and implicitly understand the multisensory or multimodal experience of others may in part account for the ubiquitous nature of the primal scene as a major organizer of unconscious fantasies and conflicts throughout life and also in art, particularly cinema (Arlow 1980). Indeed we could see *The Lives of Others*, in which surveillance of a couple is the central narrative mechanism, as an aesthetic elaboration and symbolic expression of “a universal psychological theme . . . the fantasies and effects of the primal scene experience” (Arlow 1980, p. 534). It should be noted that when we refer to the primal scene we are using the term not just to refer to the witnessing or fantasy of parental sexual intercourse, but also to “the child’s total store of unconscious knowledge and personal mythology concerning the human sexual relation” (McDougall 1980, p. 56), as well as to the individual’s experiences and fantasies of the parental relationship in general (Knafo and Feiner 1996; Arlow 1980). The potentially catastrophic consequence of seeing what one should not is a major theme from the beginning of the film. Dreyman’s play, *The Faces of Love*, begins with Christa collapsing on stage after seeing a vision in which the husband of a coworker falls to his death, saying “I see it, though I’d rather see any other horror.” Shortly thereafter, as we observe Wiesler observing Christa and Dreyman embracing, half-hidden behind the curtain, the primal scene mechanisms are set in motion. In a kind of folk psychology, critics have noticed that Wiesler’s exposure to the intense erotic connection between the couple plays a major role both in his determination to put Dreyman under surveillance and in his ultimate transformation. Lane (2007) speculates that when Wiesler attends the premiere of Dreyman’s play his suspicions about the playwright are raised by “the kiss that Christa Maria exchanges with Dreyman . . . or most wounding of all, their happiness” (p. 88). Another reviewer (Zacharek 2007) speaks to the same point in describing Wiesler: “an invisible witness to their comings and goings, their casual conversations, their lovemaking, he falls into a kind of love with them.” And in falling in love with the couple, reservoirs of curiosity, passion,

mortification, jealousy, eroticism, and vengefulness—all the legacies of the primal scene (Arlow 1980; Blum 1979; Knafo and Feiner 1996)—are awakened in Wiesler.

THE PRIMAL SCENE AND THE SYMBOLIC FUNCTION

Initially Weisler's reaction to the primal scene has a paranoid-schizoid dimension, in that his exposure to the sexual passion of the couple appears to be experienced as "a catastrophe leading to a fallen world" (Britton 1992, p. 42), and he positions himself as an "avenging angel," expressed through his orchestration of Dreyman's discovery of Christa's affair with Hempf. Britton (1992) tells us that where paranoid-schizoid mechanisms predominate, the full recognition and experience of the primal scene is felt to pose a threat to life itself, and the emotions of envy and jealousy that it evokes are experienced as intolerable. However, as he fluidly identifies with both members of the couple and with their passionate connection, depressive anxieties around guilt over his own destructiveness and hostile attacks on them, fear of damage done, and desires for reparation take center stage, catalyzing the symbolic elaboration of his own wishes, desires, fears, and affects. The linkage between the primal scene imagery and symbolization evident in the film is also reminiscent of Freud's definition (1905) of the primal scene as a catalyst not only for sexual excitement, but also for curiosity, creativity, and sublimation.

That the primal scene is the locus for multiple, fluid identifications not only with the dyad, but also with each individual in it, accounts for the constantly shifting and evolving nature of subjectivity (Ogden 1992; Britton 2004), evident in a number of aspects of the film. Wiesler, disappointed by his brief encounter with the prostitute in his dreary cinder-block cell of an apartment, enters Dreyman's apartment, takes a book of Brecht's poetry from his desk, and kneels beside the bed in what can only be interpreted as a desire to see the locus of the sexual rapture of the couple and to experience, firsthand, aspects of their lives to which heretofore he has had only auditory exposure. Subsequently he is shown reading a Brecht poem, his face transformed by an expression of passionate comprehension about the unifying and symbolizing function of eros (Green 2001; Klein 1930; Laplanche and Pontalis 1964, 1968; Stein 1998a,b).

One day in blue moon September
 Silent under a plum tree
 I held her my silent pale love
 In my arms like a fair and lovely dream
 Above us in the summer skies
 Was a cloud that caught my eye
 It was white and so high up
 And when I looked it was no longer there.
 [quoted in von Donnersmarck 2007]

This poem, “Memory of Marie A.,” expresses poignant longings for a love that is both enticing and elusive, along with the awakening of desire for an unattainable object, also evocative of primal scene fantasies. We see here Wiesler’s recognition that “sexuality derives not just from the drives, themselves, but is powerfully influenced by the pursuit of a lost object that has become fantasmatic and displaced” (Stein 1998b, p. 265). Wiesler’s entry into Dreyman’s apartment, a transgression of the rules with which he indoctrinates his students, also bespeaks the desire to imagine and to partake of a good primal scene in which a couple unite joyfully and freely, which Britton (1989, 1992) links with the advent of depressive functioning.

FROM EMPATHY AND IMITATION TO IDENTIFICATION AND MENTALIZATION

Subsequently, Wiesler actively enters the lives of the couple, not only to make reparation for his role in threatening their relationship, but also to revivify and recharge his own internal object world. When Dreyman, shattered by the suicide of Jerska, his mentor and colleague, confronts Christa about her affair with Hempf and beseeches her not to meet him, we see in Wiesler’s expression his recognition of the hurt and suffering in those he observes, as well as his comprehension of his own role in the process that often accompanies the depressive position (Klein 1946). Specifically, he realizes the way in which the totalitarian system has compromised both members of the couple—as Christa’s response to Dreyman’s plea for her to give up her affair indicates: “But you get in bed with them too. Why do you do it? Because they can destroy you too despite your talent and your faith. Because they decide what we play, who is to act and who can direct. You don’t want to end up like Jerska and neither do I. And that is why I’m going now.”

The lengthy shots and fixed camera in this scene of the couple's dialogue create the illusion that what one is seeing is real, as though, in the words of the filmmaker, "I'll just put a camera here and film it" (von Donnersmarck 2007). Subsequently, Wiesler steps out of the role of observer not to control the lives of others, but to engage in dialogue with them. When he unexpectedly encounters Christa in a bar, distraught after her confrontation with Dreyman, Wiesler obliquely reveals his identity to her ("I am your audience"), while she obliquely reveals her internal struggle between "selling herself for her art" to Hempf or staying loyal to Dreyman. The following dialogue between Wiesler and Christa illustrates how his comprehension of the couple, which heretofore has been demonstrated through facial expression and bodily experience, has now entered the verbal, intersubjective realm, where he is able to understand and articulate their desires, motivations, thoughts, and feelings—in other words, their intentional mental states (Fonagy et al. 2002) separate from the prefabricated and false identities projected onto them by the party apparatchiks.

- WIESLER: Ms. Sieland? You don't know me but I know you. Many people love you for who you are.
- CHRISTA: Actors are never who they are.
- WIESLER: You are. I've seen you on stage. You were more who you are than you are now.
- CHRISTA: So you know what I'm like?
- WIESLER: I'm your audience.
- CHRISTA: I have to go.
- WIESLER: Where to?
- CHRISTA: I'm meeting an old classmate.
- WIESLER: You see, just now you were not being yourself.
- CHRISTA: No?
- WIESLER: No.
- CHRISTA: So you know her well, this C.M.S.?
- WIESLER: What do you think?
- CHRISTA: Would she hurt someone who loves her above all else? Would she sell herself for art?
- WIESLER: You already have art, that would be a bad deal. You are an artist. You are a great artist, don't you know that?
- CHRISTA: And you are a good man.

Wiesler's encounter with Christa signals the convergence of the two contradictory worlds, now both aspects of Wiesler's conflicted, if expanded, identity. Until this point, Wiesler's solitary existence in the

bare and Spartan attic and the multitextured world of the couple have been depicted by inter-cutting between two separate spheres of sound and action that are visually distinct if experienced simultaneously. Subsequently, the internal integration of these conflicting worlds is shown in the simultaneous projection on the screen of the official report on the couple's activities and the vivid imagery of their lived reunion—the latter perhaps a product of Wiesler's imaginings. The interpenetration of the film's two parallel but separate worlds signifies Wiesler's capacity to envision himself as both subject and object, victim and victimizer, observer and observed, desired and desirer. This reversibility of roles indicates the movement from mirroring to mentalizing the emotional states of self and other that is linked with the depressive position (Aron 1995; Fonagy et al. 2002).

Wiesler's identification with both members of the couple, and with their relationship, provides him entry into a triangular space, a move that dismantles his slavish and unitary identification with the group ideals and group identity of the GDR; these are now countered by a set of ideal self-standards and self-representations. Wiesler's intervention with Christa, which signals his entry into this space, leads her to return to Dreyman, thereby altering the fate of all three characters and irrevocably linking their destinies. When Christa returns to him, Dreyman tells her, "Now I have the strength, now I will do something." In a sense he is speaking for all three, each of whom goes on to resist the regime: Christa by opposing the advances of Hempf; Wiesler by covering up the couple's subversive activities in his official reports; Dreyman by writing an article with two fellow dissidents, on the suppression of information about the high suicide rates in the GDR, an act intended to avenge Jerska's death. He uses a typewriter smuggled in by an editor of a West German weekly who publishes the piece, which begins as follows: "In 1977 our country stopped counting suicides. They called them self-murderers. But it has nothing to do with murder, no bloodlust, no heated passion. . . . It knows only death, the death of all hope" (von Donnersmarck 2007).

Wiesler, who realizes that this article will indeed "show the true face of the GDR," undergoes several more kaleidoscopic shifts in his identifications, alternately acting on behalf of the state and on behalf of the couple, who have come to represent aspects of his own principles and feelings. When he hears Dreyman ridiculing the Stasi—"Who would have thought our state security was so incompetent? Who would have thought they were such idiots?"—Wiesler mutters "just wait"; he then

prepares a report documenting Dreyman's subversive activities. However, when Grubitz tells him about his classification system for artists, terming Dreyman "the type 4 hysterical anthropocentrist" who if kept in isolation for ten months "will never write again" (von Donnersmarck 2007), he decides not to turn it in. One senses that he is unable to condemn Dreyman to such a fate, and further that he is disgusted by this perversion of scholarship.

Christa undergoes a similar trajectory of shifting and conflicted identifications. After her encounter with Wiesler, she decides to end her relationship with Hempf, who retaliates by having her arrested for possession of drugs, telling his henchman that he "never want[s] to see her on the German stage again." Threatened with the loss of her work as an actress, she joins the army of citizen informers, receiving a new identity and the code name Marta, along with a supply of drugs. Yet she gives Grubitz, who conducts her interrogation, false information about the origins of the subversive article, rescuing Dreyman and his coauthors. Ironically, it is only when she is interrogated by Wiesler himself that she finally divulges the location of the typewriter, an incriminating piece of evidence linking Dreyman to the article. Indeed, we see Wiesler snap back into role as "sword and shield of the party" when Grubitz, who is beginning to question his loyalty, asks, "Are you still on the right side?"

But despite Wiesler's shifting identifications between interrogator and interrogated, guardian and betrayer of the GDR, it is he who removes the incriminating typewriter just as the Stasi team arrives, in hopes of ensuring the survival not only of Dreyman but of the couple. Thus, in the end Wiesler moves from imitation to empathy to identification to identity consolidation to mentalization—a trajectory catalyzed and sustained through the internalization of dyadic and triadic relationships (Kernberg 2005a; Britton 1992; Fonagy et al. 2002; Kernberg et al. 2008). Wiesler's transformation presents a counterpoint to the identify dissolution of Christa; faced with losing her status as an actress, she betrays Dreyman and then, after saying, "I was too weak, I can never put right what I have done," throws herself in front of a car. For his suspected role in the cover-up, Wiesler is consigned to steaming mail open in a Stasi cellar. In 1989, the Berlin wall now down, Dreyman, haunted by Christa's suicide, learns inadvertently, in a chance encounter with Hempf at an opening of *The Faces of Love*—now restaged to reflect the ethos of a reunified Germany—that he had been under full surveillance and that they "knew everything." In 1991, the Stasi files finally declassified, he searches

through the stacks of files on his case and finds incontrovertible proof of Christa's treachery. He also finds evidence (a red smudge on the page) that it was Wiesler, identified in the file as HGW XX/7, who protected him, not only by removing the incriminating typewriter (which had a red ribbon), but also by filing a falsified report that has him writing a play in honor of Lenin's birthday rather than the subversive article about suicide.

Moved, he tracks down Wiesler, now a lowly postal worker. But overwhelmed by the magnitude of what the former Stasi captain has done for him, he finds himself unable to approach Wiesler directly; instead he observes him, as once he was observed by Wiesler. Two years later we see Wiesler passing the Karl Marx Bookshop in what used to be East Berlin, only to be stopped in his tracks by a poster with a photograph of Dreyman advertising his novel, which in a literary transposition of the film's musical score, is titled *Sonata for a Good Man*. Opening the book, he discovers that it is dedicated to "HGW XX/7 in gratitude." "Do you want it gift wrapped?" asks the clerk. "No," replies Wiesler; "It's for me."

This statement has been called "a cinematic haiku" (Ash 2007). Some have seen in it an affirmation of the values of individual freedom and autonomy in a liberal democracy, which makes it "for us" in the West as much as "for me" (Lane 2007). *The Lives of Others* is as much about internal as external freedom, about a human being's capacity to choose and attain goodness, and to overcome defenses against it, if goodness, as Schafer (2002) reminds us, involves "taking responsibility for others perceived as whole objects, about concern and reparative intent, about the capacity for gratitude, generosity, and reciprocity" (p. 18). In Wiesler's few words we see also his recognition that not only his goodness but his subjectivity has been recognized—that he has moved finally from being an observing subject to the object of the gaze of others. Indeed, von Donnersmarck (2007) has commented that Wiesler's discovery of the dedication represents the fulfillment of the love between Wiesler and Dreyman, which he refers to as the "actual love" in the film, a point underscored by the recurrence, at the very end, of *Sonata for a Good Man*, the love motif of the film. Wiesler's connection with the couple thus catapults him to a developmental plateau on which both his corporality and his morality are infused with meaning, a meaning linked with the other even as it emanates from a self that is fulfilled and replete: "it's for me."

**POSTSCRIPT: RESPONSE TO CRITICS
OF THE LIVES OF OTHERS**

It is important in conclusion to address some of the contradictory reactions to *The Lives of Others*, a work that has brought to light major controversies about the Stasi era and its depiction in film and literature. The musician Wolf Biermann saw the film as a mirror of his own experience of being persecuted and blacklisted by the Stasi, but others who lived through that era have questioned the wisdom of depicting such a transformation in a climate where “real life has not yet delivered real justice—compensation, honor and recognition to the victims of the Stasi” (Fundar 2007a, p. 18). The nature of the system itself, they argue, with its multiple layers of surveillance in which Stasi agents spied and informed on one another, not to mention its relentless systems of indoctrination, made such a defection highly implausible. The most compelling critique, perhaps, is that made by a former citizen of the GDR, the Austrian writer Anna Fundar, author of the book *Stasiland* (2007b), which documents her own experience of interrogation and torture at the hands of the Stasi. She comments on the “moral weirdness” at the heart of the film: “How would we feel,” she wonders, “if a wonderfully moving film, one alive to nuance and contradiction and acute about the human desire for forgiveness were made about a Gestapo officer who had a change of heart and started trying to save Jews he had been ordered to persecute?” (Fundar 2007a, p. 20). Yet Ash (2007), an American who was himself the object of surveillance in the GDR during this era and who spent many hours interviewing Stasi operatives for his book *The File* (Ash 1997), disagrees. He states that he never knew a Stasi agent who was a “vile man.” He describes them as “weak, blinkered, opportunistic, self-deceiving men who did evil things,” but says he “always glimpsed in them the remnants of what might have been, the good that could have grown in other circumstances” (Ash 2007, p. 6). He states also that he had heard of Stasi informers who wound up protecting the objects of their investigation, particularly during the 1980s, when many became disillusioned with the regime, though he concurs that there is no evidence in the Stasi files of any Stasi official helping or protecting its victims.

However, it is important to remember that the film is not meant to be a documentary: instead it is a kind of fable framed in an historical context. The internal experience of the protagonist is the main issue, not the historical veracity or plausibility of the events depicted. Further, internal

transformations like Wiesler's can never be captured in an historical record. Indeed, even in the film there is no official record of Wiesler's actions, but only several disjointed clues—the red stain from the illicit typewriter, for example.

Von Donnersmarck (2007) has stated that he intended not to replicate history or to tell a “true story, but to give imaginative reconstruction to the range of choices and possibilities for action that any one of us might take given certain historical circumstances.” Underscoring the fictional and universal nature of the film, von Donnersmarck has insisted that although the film is centered on the Stasi, he didn't “conceive it as a Stasi film. I conceived it as being about how people behave when they have complete power over others; how does it feel when your privacy is in no way safeguarded?” (quoted in MacNab 2007, p. 12). The film is not a documentary, then, but perhaps it penetrates to a truth of felt human experience during this era in a way a documentary could not. In addition, the point is not so much whether such events ever happened as whether one could imagine them happening. One of our unique human capacities is to imagine worlds we have not seen before, to imagine deeds that we have not done, and such imaginings enlarge and correct our experience. As Gallese (2007) tells us, brain-imaging studies show that “when we engage in imagining a visual scene, we activate regions of the brain that are normally active when we actually perceive the same visual scene . . . including areas supposedly involved in mapping low-level visual features such as the primary visual cortex” (p. 522; see also Kosslyn 1994; Kosslyn and Thompson 2000). Hence, to imagine is to enlarge our experience infinitely.

Finally, there are parallels between the film and actual events in the lives of both the director and the actors that contribute to its authenticity, despite its position between reality and imagination. We know, for example, that as a child von Donnersmarck witnessed his mother, who was on a Stasi list because of her defection to the West, being “strip searched and humiliated in all kinds of ways” at the border when they visited their relatives in East Berlin. He states, “That was a very strange experience for me. . . . as an 11 year old I didn't feel much compassion for the fear that my parents were going through. I just thought it was interesting, strange and amazing that an organization such as the Stasi would have the power to undress my mother” (quoted in MacNab 2007, p. 12). He states that it was the first time he had witnessed fear in adults. Further, Ulrich Mulhe, the actor who plays Wiesler, was married to an

actress who informed on him for the Stasi, and who subsequently waged a successful lawsuit to halt publication of a book exposing her treachery. Finally, after the idea of the film was conceived, von Donnersmarck (2007) spent over two years interviewing Stasi agents and their victims to ensure historical accuracy, and many hours looking at photographs and films of the GDR in order to provide an authentic visual re-creation of the era. Thus, the film constructs reality, as well as reflects it, and this is the secret of its power. It re-creates the climate of bureaucratic evil even while it creates a climate of forgiveness, reparation, and reconciliation.

Perhaps most important, there has been considerable research and speculation about the conditions under which ordinary citizens may submerge their humanity and identity in totalitarian mass movements, particularly as a mechanism to redress previous historical grievances or traumas (Kernberg 2003b; Volkan 2004). However, we know very little about the processes through which a Stasi operative or even a Nazi may recover his or her capacity for empathy and identification with others. *The Lives of Others* perhaps offer some answers.

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