

# MARRIAGE IN THE SHADOWS



## Inverting the Lives Of 'Others': Retelling The Nazi Past in *Ehe Im Schatten* and *Das Leben Der Anderen*

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### ABSTRACT

The article compares Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's film *Das Leben der Anderen* (2006) with Kurt Maetzig's early post-war film *Ehe im Schatten* (1947). The comparison is based on significant narrative and thematic elements which the films share: They both have a 'theatre couple', representatives of the 'Bildungsbürgertum', at the centre of the story; in both cases the couple faces a crisis caused by the first and second German dictatorship respectively and then both try to solve the crisis by relying on the classical 'bürgerliches Erbe', particularly the 'bürgerliches Trauerspiel'. The extensive use of the 'bürgerliches Erbe' in the films activates the function this heritage had for the definition of the German nation in the nineteenth century. However, while Maetzig's film shows how the 'heritage' and its representatives fail in the face of National Socialism, von Donnersmarck's film claims the effectiveness of this 'heritage' in the fight against the East German dictatorship. Von Donnersmarck thus inverts a critical film tradition of which *Ehe im Schatten* is an example; furthermore, as this tradition emerged from dealing with the Third Reich, von Donnersmarck's film, it will be argued, is more interested in the redemption of the Nazi past than the East German past.



Gleichgültig welcher Dreck in der Welt ist:  
Die wahre Kunst, das wirklich Künstlerische  
bleibt immer rein und wahr. Nein?  
(Hendrik Höfgen in István Szabó's *Mephisto*)

When Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's *Das Leben der Anderen* came out in 2006, most critics and audiences were enthusiastic; the film was not only well made but seemed to present a compelling image of life under the East German communist dictatorship. While for some critics the persuasiveness of this image was due to its 'authenticity',<sup>1</sup> this elicited strong objections from others who pointed out historical inaccuracies in the film.<sup>2</sup> The debate about the 'authenticity' of the film seems to be being replaced gradually by the emphasis in more recent criticism on the film's fairy-tale qualities; the question now becomes what the fairy tale of a villain redeemed through art allows von Donnersmarck to say about life in a dictatorship. Despite differences among critics, a consensus seems to have emerged that this 'fairy tale' offers a generic plot about 'totalitarian rule'<sup>3</sup> and 'the triumph of humanity in inhuman times'.<sup>4</sup> *The Lives of Others* is received outside Germany as a generic film about totalitarian rule, which just happens to be set in an otherwise unimportant communist country', states Thomas Lindenberger.<sup>5</sup>

The generic substance of the film links it for many critics – one way or another – to the National Socialist dictatorship. Daniela Berghahn stresses the film's rootedness in Hollywood conventions and its proximity to more recent Holocaust films such as *Schindler's List* (1993) or *The Pianist* (2002). For Mary Stein the film 'reminds the viewer of more than surface similarities between the two dictatorships'.<sup>6</sup> Discussing audience expectations, Lindenberger suggests that in 'the U.S., some may see it just as the continuation of the old German story, Nazis being replaced by Stasi'.<sup>7</sup> One of the first to point out the link between the two German dictatorships in the film was Timothy Garton Ash: '*The Lives of Others* will strengthen that second link, building as it does on the preprogramming of our imaginations by the first. Nazi, Stasi: Germany's festering half-rhyme.'<sup>8</sup> While Garton Ash had a 'link through evils' in mind – 'I soon discovered that men and women living behind the Berlin Wall, in East Germany, were

<sup>1</sup> Wolf Biermann, 'Die Gespenster treten aus dem Schatten', *Die Welt*, 22 March 2006: [www.welt.de](http://www.welt.de) (accessed 25 February 2008); Thomas Brussig, 'Die DDR in Das Leben der Anderen', *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 21 March 2006: <http://www.filmportal.de/> (accessed 6 October 2010)

<sup>2</sup> Jens Gieske, 'Stasi goes to Hollywood: Donnersmarck's *The Lives of Others* und die Grenze der Authentizität', *German Studies Review*, 31 (2008), 580–8.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Lindenberger, 'Stasiploitation – Why Not? The Scriptwriter's Historical Creativity in *The Lives of Others*', *German Studies Review*, 31 (2008), 557–66 (564).

<sup>4</sup> Daniela Berghahn, 'Remembering the Stasi in a Fairy Tale of Redemption: Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's *Das Leben der Anderen*', *Oxford German Studies*, 38 (2009), 321–33 (333).

<sup>5</sup> Lindenberger, 'Stasiploitation', p. 564.

<sup>6</sup> Mary Stein, 'Stasi with a Human Face? Ambiguity in *Das Leben der Anderen*', *German Studies Review*, 31 (2008), 567–79 (569).

<sup>7</sup> Lindenberger, 'Stasiploitation', 564.

<sup>8</sup> Timothy Garton Ash, 'The Stasi on Our Mind', *The New York Review of Books*, 31 May 2007: [www.nybooks.com/articles/20210](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/20210) (accessed 25 February 2008)

facing similar dilemmas in another German dictatorship'<sup>9</sup> – it is the 'link through human triumph' that has become prominent in the film:

*Das Leben der Anderen* pursues a strategy similar to the many films about the Nazi past which contribute to the normalization of Germany's past. Like these recent historical imaginaries about the solidarity of Germans and Jews and the triumph of humanity in inhuman times, *Das Leben der Anderen* transcends shifting ideological agendas and relies on the universal and timeless appeal of emotions.<sup>10</sup>

Agreeing with critics on the link between the Third Reich and the GDR in von Donnersmarck's film and particularly agreeing with Berghahn's thesis of 'normalisation', in this article I will compare von Donnersmarck's *Das Leben der Anderen* with a film about National Socialism that is thematically and structurally related, namely Kurt Maetzig's *Ehe im Schatten* from 1947. The aim of this comparison is to show that *Das Leben der Anderen* is not only based on filmic narratives about the Third Reich but rewrites – indeed, inverts – them in order to redeem the past – not, it will be argued, the communist past but the National Socialist past of Germany. For the 'preprogramming of our imaginations', as Garton Ash called it, is even more important to the film than has been discussed so far.

One of the central elements of this comparison is the linking of 'bürgerliches Erbe' with life in a dictatorship. This has become a topos in other films dealing with the question of art and politics or, more specifically, artists and their attitudes towards the National Socialist dictatorship. Cheryl Dueck writes of *Das Leben der Anderen* that 'we are ultimately left in the film with the question whether art can humanize'.<sup>11</sup> Until recently, this question, with regard to the first German dictatorship, has been answered in the negative not just by Maetzig's film but also by such a famous film as Szabó's *Mephisto* (1981). What makes this negation particularly significant is the fact that the art discussed in Maetzig and Szabó is the classical, German 'bürgerliches Erbe', particularly linked to the stage and the idea of a 'Nationaltheater': Schiller and Goethe are frequently quoted in these films which engage with a corpus and tradition that had served as an essential part of Germany's national identity during the nineteenth century and that the Nazis had tried to occupy and reapply to their own purposes for this very reason. What Maetzig's film is concerned with is the failure of a milieu, namely of the 'Bildungsbürgertum', the representatives of classical 'high culture', in the face of National Socialism, and thus also the failure of a national identity linked to the interpretation and representation of that very culture. I will argue that von Donnersmarck inverts this collapse

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Berghahn, 'Remembering the Stasi in a Fairy Tale', 333.

<sup>11</sup> Cheryl Dueck, 'The Humanization of the Stasi in *Das Leben der Anderen*', *German Studies Review*, 31 (2008), 599–609 (607).



of national ideals and their bearers and shows the milieu as potentially revolutionary and resisting the (second) dictatorship; he thereby offers the 'bürgerliches Erbe' as national consensus again, made tasty and digestible by Hollywood.

*Ehe im Schatten* was the first German feature film made after World War II and the defeat of the National Socialist dictatorship to examine the fate of German Jews. The film is based on a novella by Hans Schweikart dedicated to the lives of the theatre couple Joachim Gottschalk and Meta Wolff who, together with their twelve-year-old son, committed suicide in 1941 when Gottschalk could no longer protect his Jewish wife from deportation. Similarly, Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's *Das Leben der Anderen* was greeted as the first serious feature film<sup>12</sup> to deal with the fate of intellectuals and artists in the 1980s opposed to the communist dictatorship in the GDR.<sup>13</sup> Both films deal with victims of the two German dictatorships of the twentieth century, the dictatorships' 'others': In both films the victims share a belief in 'pure' or 'apolitical' art, which they ultimately rely on in order to tackle the threats caused by the respective political systems. A prominent point of reference for the films in this respect is the 'bürgerliches Trauerspiel', which functions as a blueprint for the extreme experience of dictatorship. Yet while Maetzig's early post-war film questions the usefulness and potential of the classical 'bürgerliches Erbe', von Donnersmarck's post-Wende film affirms it. Indeed, in *Das Leben der Anderen* the 'bürgerliches Trauerspiel' forms the basis for the realisation of an 'ästhetische Erziehung' of sorts which reaches out to the nation again.

## EHE IM SCHATTEN – DEALING WITH THE NATIONAL SOCIALIST DICTATORSHIP

In Kurt Maetzig's *Ehe im Schatten* we follow the fate of the actors Elisabeth Maurer and Hans Wieland from 1933 to 1943. We get to know them

<sup>12</sup> Evelyn Finger, 'Die Bekehrung', *Die Zeit*, 23 March 2006: [http://images.zeit.de/text/2006/13/Leben\\_der\\_anderen](http://images.zeit.de/text/2006/13/Leben_der_anderen) (accessed 25 February 2008); Alexandra Wach, 'Das Leben der Anderen', *film-dienst*, Nr. 6, 14 March 2006: <http://www.filmportal> (accessed 10 October 2010)

<sup>13</sup> Both films were debuts and instant successes with the audiences as well as with most critics. *Ehe im Schatten* was the only German post-war film that premiered on the same day in all four sectors of Berlin, and was screened for the American and German staff at the Nuremberg Trials; within a short period of time more than ten million people had seen it, and in 1948 it won the 'Bambi' for best German post-war film (Christiane Mückenberger, *Sie sehen selbst, Sie hören selbst ...: Eine Geschichte der DEFA von ihren Anfängen bis 1949*, Marburg 1994, p. 85). *Ehe im Schatten* was moreover an international success as well. Von Donnersmarck's *Das Leben der Anderen*, on the other hand, made the fate of oppositional artists and intellectuals in the GDR so popular that it won not only the 'Deutscher Filmpreis' in 2006, but also numerous international awards, among them an Oscar for best foreign film in 2007 and the Caesar as well as the British Academy of Film and Television Arts award for best non-English film in 2008.

in 1933 as rising stars of the Berlin theatre, at the peak of their first success; ten years later, completely isolated from society, they commit a joint suicide. While their first success coincides with the takeover of power by the National Socialists, their death in 1943 coincides with the ruthless Holocaust on a national and international scale. Maetzig actually changes the year of death of the historical models in order to focus on the atrocities against Jews following the 'Wannsee-Konferenz' in 1942.

In Maetzig's film, Hans Wieland – like Joachim Gottschalk – begins a successful career as a film actor in addition to his work in the theatre during the Third Reich, while Elisabeth Maurer, his Jewish wife, is banned from acting and gradually stripped of her civil rights as well as excluded from social activities. The film tells the story of a couple, yet the woman's fate is at the centre of the plot. Unlike a good number of DEFA films of the immediate post-war period, which evolve from the male suffering of the ordinary soldier,<sup>14</sup> *Ehe im Schatten* depicts the suffering of a woman and genuine victim of National Socialism. Despite this focus, Maetzig's film is not trying to show the persecution of German Jews per se. Elisabeth Maurer and other German Jews stand for the group of integrated Jews. As they and their non-Jewish friends and partners all belong to the 'Bildungsbürgertum', the film is also a portrayal of that particularly German milieu.<sup>15</sup> Thus it considers the guilt and responsibility of bourgeois artists and intellectuals in the light of the Holocaust. This results in a critical portrait of the milieu.

For Maetzig the Gottschalks were a positive example of human behaviour in times of inhumanity,<sup>16</sup> and so are Elisabeth Maurer and Hans Wieland, whose suffering, fear, and increasing isolation the film accentuates as features of the dictatorship: both protagonists are shown as truly human and preserving human dignity. Yet this sympathy for the couple is linked to a more critical view of the milieu. At the end of the film Wieland has a sudden flash of recognition. He not only accuses the Nazi followers of

<sup>14</sup> Anke Pinkert, 'Can Melodrama Cure? War Trauma and Crisis of Masculinity in Early DEFA Film', *Seminar*, 44 (2008), 118–36.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Schäfer, *Geschichte des Bürgertums*, Cologne / Weimar / Vienna 2009, pp. 93 and 105.

<sup>16</sup> Maetzig was genuinely interested in the topic as it covered a crucial part of his own biography: 'Ich empfand eine tiefe Entsprechung zu dem, was ich selber gefühlt und erlebt hatte. Und es gab dabei eigentlich noch einen Grund, über den es mir – ehrlich gesagt – schwerfällt zu sprechen. Aber er war doch ein wesentlicher Antrieb für den Film: Meine Eltern haben sich nicht in gleicher Weise verhalten wie die Familie Gottschalk, das heißt, sie sind nicht mit aller Konsequenz bis zum bitteren Ende zusammengeblieben, sondern sie haben sich im gegenseitigen Einvernehmen und pro forma scheiden lassen. Ich hab's erst erfahren, als meine Eltern schon geschieden waren. Ich hab's nicht gebilligt. Ich bin dann mit meiner Mutter zusammengezogen und hab beobachten müssen, wie diese ständigen heimlichen Treffs mit meinem Vater unter immer unwürdigeren, düsteren, geheimnisvolleren Umständen vonstatten gingen und wie sie beide eigentlich an ihrer Würde Schaden nahmen. Diese Frage der menschlichen Würde in solcher Situation hat für mich eine sehr große Rolle gespielt. [...] Meine Mutter hat später auf der Flucht vor der Gestapo ihr Leben selbst beendet' (quoted in *Kurt Maetzig – Filmarbeit. Gespräche, Reden, Schriften*, ed. Günter Agde, Berlin 1987, p. 35).

being an instrument of the worst atrocities; he also accuses himself, his wife and, in a wider sense, his milieu for having been ignorant of politics and blind to the real nature of National Socialism:

Aber wir sind ja selbst schuld, dass es uns so geht. Wir haben uns nie um Politik gekümmert. Wir haben immer geglaubt, es wird schon nicht so schlimm und wir könnten uns der Verantwortung als Einzelne, als Künstler entziehen. Wir sind ja genauso schuldig wie Sie.<sup>17</sup>

This plea for the responsibility of the individual does not lessen or diminish the terrible fate of Elisabeth Maurer and others, nor does Wieland's plea claim that the atrocities committed in the Holocaust are in any way self-inflicted; yet it seriously questions the role of the milieu of artists and intellectuals.<sup>18</sup>

This milieu is present through its representatives such as the members of the theatre, the general practitioner and uncle of Elisabeth Maurer, Dr Louis Silbermann, or Dr Herbert Blohm, a lawyer and admirer of Elisabeth's, who after 1933 becomes a senior civil servant in the Ministry of Propaganda. Besides its social representatives, the milieu is present also in its foundational texts and values, which from the turn of the nineteenth century onwards provided the ground for national self-definition. The film begins on stage with the death scene of Luise from Schiller's *Kabale und Liebe* (1784) and ends with the dying monologue of Johanna in Schiller's *Die Jungfrau von Orleans* (1801), both seminal texts from the canon and foundational texts of German bourgeois identity:

During the nineteenth century, Schiller's work and the memory of the man and writer took on increasing significance for the German nation. He became one of the leading symbols of the German *Kultur*, and his statues were monuments of and for the Germans and Germany [...]. Schiller was celebrated as the herald of the forthcoming German nation and definitively established as a national icon.<sup>19</sup>

The choice of the death scene from *Kabale und Liebe* for the very beginning of the film not only foreshadows the actual death of the two protagonists by poison administered (as in Schiller) by the man; it also invokes a set of bourgeois core values, particularly the notion of morality and freedom embodied in romantic love as opposed to love as an instrument within morally corrupt and oppressive power structures. In Schiller's play, as in

<sup>17</sup> Kurt Maetzig, *Ehe im Schatten*, Berlin 1947.

<sup>18</sup> On Maetzig's intensive reflection of the relation between art and politics see Seán Allan, "Sagt, wie soll man Stalin danken?" Kurt Maetzig's *Ehe im Schatten* (1947), *Roman einer Jungen Ehe* (1952) and the Cultural Politics of Post-War Germany', *GLL*, 64 (2011), 255–71.

<sup>19</sup> Wulf Koepke, 'The Reception of Schiller in the Twentieth Century', in Steven D. Martinson (ed.), *A Companion to the Works of Friedrich Schiller*, Rochester, NY 2005, pp. 271–95 (p. 271).

the first 'bürgerliches Trauerspiel', Lessing's *Emilia Galotti* (1772), morality and individual freedom are acknowledged and pursued as humanly and politically superior by the bourgeoisie,<sup>20</sup> the then weak class which attempts to distinguish itself from the intrigues and machinations of feudal absolutist rulers and their courts. Indeed, with the quotation from Schiller, Maetzig's film invokes a birth scene of German bourgeois self-understanding, in which the aspiring class tried to form itself as a contrast to the politically powerful aristocracy and its neglect of human freedom and integrity. As such, the 'bürgerliches Trauerspiel' became part of the national canon via stage and school, and formed a pillar of national identity

reflect[ing] the Germans' struggle with their cultural heritage and their ideals of *Humanität*, *Weltbürgertum*, and *Freiheit* that they associated with the classical period. The Weimar *Klassik* was not only the pride of the Germans, and their justification to feel culturally equal to other Europeans; it was also the orientation point for Germany's *Einheit* and *Freiheit*. Whatever political attitudes were attributed to Schiller, the reception of his work has never ceased to be political [...].<sup>21</sup>

Maetzig's film is characterised by an abundance of intertextuality. There are references to the classical period, invoking bourgeois fights and ideals: in order to encourage the couple Maurer/Wieland on their fifth wedding anniversary in 1938, one day before the 'Reichspogromnacht', uncle Louis recites from Goethe's and Schiller's *Xenien* (1797), and during the 'Reichspogromnacht', a policeman who has been asked by Hans Wieland to help the Jewish citizens explains his failure to do so with his superior's order to move to Goethe Street when Schiller Street is on fire:

'Ich sag noch, Herr Leutnant, in der Schillerstraße schlagen sie die Scheiben kaputt!' 'Dann gehen Sie in die Goethestraße,' sagt der Leutnant.<sup>22</sup>

An earlier allusion occurs during the scene of Elisabeth's exclusion from the theatre in 1933. While Hans Wieland is defending her against two colleagues, we see a bust of Schiller looking down on the argument. Schiller's bust is a reminder of the human and political ideals which had been seen as 'national property'; this is contrasted with the stigmatisation of the first actress for 'racial impurity', an act contradicting one of the most famous lines by Schiller: 'Alle Menschen werden Brüder'. Besides Schiller and Goethe the film also refers to later poets. Elisabeth Maurer recites from Heine's 'Meergruß' (1825), and in the last scene of the film leading up to

<sup>20</sup> For the historical complexity of the term, see Schäfer, *Geschichte des Bürgertums*, pp. 38–43.

<sup>21</sup> Koepke, 'The Reception of Schiller', p. 291; see also Nicholas Martin, 'Schiller After two Centuries', in *Schiller: National Poet – Poet of Nations*, ed. Nicholas Martin, Amsterdam and New York 2006, pp. 7–21.

<sup>22</sup> Maetzig, *Ehe im Schatten*.



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the couple's suicide she quotes not only Schiller's *Jungfrau von Orleans* but also Büchner's *Dantons Tod* (1835) and plays Ballade No. 1 by Chopin. This wealth of culture invokes a broad set of bourgeois values and experiences: from the struggles to gain moral superiority and resist the corruption of absolutist rule to the struggles for political freedom and civil rights and against all forms of opportunism and enforced conformity. With regard to the political side of this struggle, it is noteworthy that the film includes two poets who had to leave Germany for their convictions – Georg Büchner and Heinrich Heine, the latter of Jewish origin.

The film uses the 'bürgerliches Erbe' for several purposes. Firstly, it doubtlessly poses a contrast to the National Socialist crimes and underlines the complete denial of freedom and humanity. However, there is another layer of meaning in these references. The Schiller bust we see is a copy of the famous Dannecke bust, a classicist ideal made of white marble that may not only be a reminder of neglected values but also the representation of an idealisation or myth-making which removed the actual Schiller and his work from real life and life's challenges. Consequently, the heritage often proves an empty shell: The majority of 'Bildungsbürger' shown in the film gradually conform to the new system and betray their colleagues and friends who are suddenly outlawed 'Jews'. This failure of the representatives of 'bürgerliches Erbe' finds a metaphor in the scene from the 'Reichspogromnacht' mentioned above. The classics are 'present' as street names, mere words, not something that the policeman or the majority of people understand as essential for humanity and worth defending.

Due to this ambivalence, the attribution of the 'Erbe' to the victims also shows them in an ambivalent light. On the one hand, Hans's and Elisabeth's solidarity in times of persecution makes them the last resort of humanity and resistance to complete corruption, and therefore they seem to preserve part of the humanist substance of a society that has turned barbarous. On the other hand, as representatives of 'bourgeois high culture' they are limited in that their 'Bildung' does not provide them with an awareness and understanding of the political situation. This partial blindness can be read as resulting from the idealisation and reification of their forefathers during the nineteenth century which seems to have rendered the heritage useless or irrelevant for modern times. Yet the partial blindness may also refer back to the original texts themselves, as seminal characters like Emilia and Odoardo Galotti, Luise and Miller, her father, are by no means shining examples of a successful bourgeois emancipation but rather broach the issue of barriers to the emancipatory attempts, one of them being the narrowness or inwardness of the bourgeois milieu itself.<sup>23</sup> Consequently, the group of victims portrayed in *Ehe im Schatten* is seen as

<sup>23</sup> James van den Laan, 'Kabale und Liebe Reconsidered' in Martinson (ed.), *A Companion to the Works of Friedrich Schiller*, pp. 115–36 (p. 115).



humanly and morally superior and a counterpoint to the Nazi barbarism. However, Hans Wieland and Elisabeth Maurer in particular are also seen to contribute to their situation: Their love counters segregation, exclusion, racial persecution, cowardice and opportunism, but it also intensifies their blindness towards actual political developments. 'Es wird schon nicht so schlimm ...', the leitmotif of the film repeated by many characters, marks them as 'ignorant'.

Maetzig's film links a number of strands and, I would argue, intertwines them successfully. Thus, the critical light he sheds on the German 'Bildungsbürgertum' does not relativise the terrible situation of Jews during the Nazi dictatorship in general or that of the two lovers in particular. Instead, Maetzig's film quite effectively masters the ambivalence his approach engenders: the inwardness and blindness of the lovers has multiple roots – in their political indifference, their belief in the purity of art or rather its apolitical character, in the blindness and ensuing opportunism of most of their friends or colleagues, in the political situation that excludes and isolates them, and in their attempt to protect a last fragment of the private sphere from the destruction going on around them and to thus reassure each other of their own humanness. When Elisabeth explains to her uncle that she cannot emigrate as it would be too much for her to lose her husband after having already lost her vocation, it seems cavalier to dismiss her reasoning as that of a 'damsel in distress' in need of 'patriarchal protection'.<sup>24</sup> Maetzig acknowledges both – the meaning of loss and deprivation and the blindness of the milieu.

## DICTATORSHIP AND MELODRAMA

While *Ehe im Schatten* was mostly enthusiastically received at the time, it has been more critically judged by recent scholars; even Maetzig himself subsequently discussed serious weaknesses.<sup>25</sup> The interpretation as well as appreciation of the film seems mainly to depend on the evaluation of its melodramatic overtone. The sentimental tinge that some of the actors bring to the production is often more generally attributed to a continuation of film traditions of the Third Reich.<sup>26</sup> Thus critics have described certain features of the film as Ufa-style melodrama and have particularly questioned the contribution of the composer Wolfgang Zeller, who became infamous for the film score of the anti-Semitic propaganda film *Jud Süß* (1940), or of Friedl Behn-Grund, who previously had been behind the camera for the propaganda film *Ich klage an* (1941) legitimising

<sup>24</sup> Robert Shandley, *Rubble Films*, Philadelphia 2001, p. 87.

<sup>25</sup> See Agde, *Kurt Maetzig*.

<sup>26</sup> See Agde, *Kurt Maetzig*; Mückenberger, *Sie sehen selbst*; Shandley, *Rubble Films*; Detlef Kannapin, 'Was hat Zarah Leander mit der DEFA zu tun?' in *Apropos: Film 2005 – Das Jahrbuch der DEFA Stiftung*, Berlin 2005, pp. 188–209.

euthanasia. With regard to Behn-Grund, several critics have pointed out similarities between the death scene in *Ich klage an* and the death scene in *Ehe im Schatten*.

In a particularly harsh and yet casual manner, Shandley reproaches Maetzig's film for its 'melodramatic fashion to which a German filmgoer in 1947 would have been accustomed'.<sup>27</sup> And he speculates that the

filmmakers presumed they needed such heavy-handed melodrama [...] in order to draw the sympathies of the audience [...]. But the screenplay, the documentary-style camera-work, and the melodrama also suggest that it was not a certain bet that a German audience would respond positively to the fate of Elisabeth Wieland, Kurt Bernstein, or any other Jewish characters in the film. But to an audience raised on Ufa products, kitschy sentimentalism was a sure thing.<sup>28</sup>

For the remaining discussion of Maetzig's film, I will pursue the hypothesis that the melodramatic overtone can actually be interpreted as a part or even as an intensifier of the ambivalence with which the 'bildungsbürgerlich' milieu is depicted.

The first point to make is that the melodramatic style of *Ehe im Schatten* is not necessarily due to Ufa traditions alone but also to the choice of paratext. As Thomas Elsaesser has demonstrated in his famous essay on melodrama, the 'bürgerliches Trauerspiel' itself contributed to melodrama as a genre. According to Elsaesser, melodrama is already an element of the bourgeois sentimental novel by writers such as Richardson or Rousseau in which 'extreme forms of behaviour and feeling' are introduced in order to explicitly depict 'external constraints and pressures bearing upon the characters' and to show 'quasi-totalitarian violence perpetrated by (agents of) the "system"':<sup>29</sup>

The same pattern is to be found in the bourgeois tragedies of Lessing (*Emilia Galotti*, 1768) and the early Schiller (*Kabale und Liebe*, 1776), both deriving their dramatic force from the conflict between extreme and highly individualised forms of moral idealism in the heroes [...] and a thoroughly corrupt yet seemingly omnipotent social class (made up of feudal princes and petty state functionaries). [...] The ideological "message" of these tragedies [...] is transparent: they record the struggle of a morally and emotionally emancipated bourgeois consciousness against the remnants of feudalism.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Shandley, *Rubble Films*, p. 86.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 86–7.

<sup>29</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, 'Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama', in *Home Is Where The Heart Is. Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, ed. Christine Gledhill, London 2002 (first published 1972), pp. 43–69 (p. 45).

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

Elsaesser concedes that in the case of Lessing and Schiller the 'melodramatic-emotional plot' forms only a 'rudimentary structure of meaning' as the plays 'belong to the more intellectually demanding forms of melodrama'.<sup>31</sup> However, 'the element of interiorisation and personalisation of what are primarily ideological conflicts, together with the metaphorical interpretation of class-conflict as sexual exploitation and rape is important in all subsequent forms of melodrama, including that of cinema'.<sup>32</sup>

If we take Elsaesser's definition into account, Maetzig's use of the 'bürgerliches Trauerspiel' allows a fusion of the cultural tradition of German bourgeois society with the highly emotional, crisis-laden narrative of melodrama. The discussion of the immediate past becomes a discussion of national values from the extreme point of view of the victims organised through melodrama. According to Shandley, it is the latter that fails:

While the film certainly tackles the most important moral question of its day, it is hard to tell whether that is what would guide a spectator's reception of it. Viewers may be moved by the wrongness of the Nazi persecution of the Jews or by the sentimental tale of two lovers dying in each other's arms. The effect may well have been the same as if Elisabeth had died of cancer.<sup>33</sup>

In contrast to Shandley, I want to argue that Maetzig's film applies conventions of melodrama in a critical way. On the one hand, *Ehe im Schatten* reinstates the melodramatic principle of a '[...]totalitarian violence perpetrated by (agents of) the "system"',<sup>34</sup> visualised and articulated as extreme experience, which gives melodrama back what it lacked in the Third Reich – political and social reality. On the other hand, the melodramatic tinge of the film is to a certain degree not just a mode of presentation but a comment as well, which draws critical attention to the generic conventions used.

Maetzig's film uses a number of visual and narrative elements that can be found in melodramas of the Third Reich, exemplified by well-known films such as Käutner's *Romanze in Moll* (1943). Yet elements such as the privatisation of conflict, the production of escapism, passivity or renunciation, which Silberman analysed as 'within the fascist system',<sup>35</sup> acquire a new meaning in Maetzig's film. In the case of Elisabeth Maurer, confinement to the private sphere and to the role of a housewife who becomes focused on her husband are shown as the result of the persecution of Jews after 1933 and as acts of exclusion from former

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Shandley, *Rubble Films*, p. 84.

<sup>34</sup> Elsaesser, 'Tales of Sound and Fury', p. 45.

<sup>35</sup> Marc Silberman, 'The Illusion of Escapism: Helmut Käutner's *Romanze in Moll*', in *German Cinema: Texts in Contexts*, Detroit 1995, pp. 81–96 (p. 82).

colleagues and friends. Helplessness and the lack of alternatives on the part of Elisabeth Maurer are shown in the film as a consequence of increasing discrimination as well as dependency on the 'Arian' husband's protection. At the same time, they are seen as part of a delusion not only on the woman's part but on the part of Hans Wieland as well, who keeps misreading and misjudging the options that he and his wife have. In contrast to a film like Käutner's, it is not renunciation that characterises the 'female position' in *Ehe im Schatten*; instead a profound misunderstanding or non-understanding becomes characteristic of the couple.

Illusions and escapism are seen as part of this non-understanding and are an indication of blindness. In this respect it is significant that the film shows two Jewish members of the milieu, the friend and actor Kurt Bernstein, and Elisabeth's uncle, the practitioner Dr Louis Silbermann, making different choices: the first tries to emigrate and eventually goes underground to escape persecution; the other stays in Berlin, initially in order to help his patients then his fellow sufferers, until he too has to go into hiding. It is essential that the film does not simply show these different choices as opposites, as right or wrong. Both Elisabeth and Hans meet and help Bernstein and Silbermann; the film leaves it open whether they survive and how. At the same time, the end of Elisabeth and Hans is cast in an ambivalent light.

The end of the film returns to the beginning as the two protagonists are again united in a narrow, isolated space – which this time is real, not on stage, and characterises their actual situation; yet it is still and also a place of illusion or make-believe in which Elisabeth is 'acting' and consciously denying the reality which caused the isolation and narrowness: In 1943, after ten years of exclusion from the theatre, she seems 'on stage' again, dressed up and quoting the parts in private which she is denied in public. This simulation of a long-gone past ends with the couple's suicide. The film reaches its melodramatic finale when Elisabeth, after drinking poison, quotes the dying monologue of Schiller's Johanna and thus is not only actually dying but at the same time performing death. The melodramatic death which, as Mückenberger rightly states, resembles a 'Hochzeitsritus'<sup>36</sup> when Hans lays Elisabeth (in a white dress) and himself down on the bed, is clearly a 'Liebestod' and therefore a final reference to bourgeois theatre tradition. Coming back to the 'bürgerliches Erbe' in the last scene, it has for Elisabeth and Hans become a private escape and defence against the world, creating a futile space of peace which allows them only to die together. Those who go on struggling to survive, Kurt Bernstein and Dr Silbermann, have by then gone underground and have stopped quoting the classics. The two lovers die in private and not on stage for the 'nation',

<sup>36</sup> Mückenberger, *Sie sehen selbst*, p. 82.



in the 'Nationaltheater' – concepts that the very subject of the film shows as undermined and seriously called into question.

## *DAS LEBEN DER ANDEREN* – DEALING WITH THE COMMUNIST PAST

*Ehe im Schatten* could be seen as adopting an approach which became pronounced and prominent in later films, the most successful of which was undoubtedly István Szabó's *Mephisto* (1981). Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck in *Das Leben der Anderen* relies on this tradition and, I will argue, draws strength from its inversion. Von Donnersmarck's film revives the various paratexts and the discussion of their national meaning by applying them to the German post-war dictatorship of the GDR. The story of the successful playwright and loyal socialist Georg Dreyman, who turns dissident when his friend, the theatre director Albert Jerska, commits suicide after an almost ten-year ban from his profession; and of Stasi Captain Wiesler, who instead of spying on Dreyman becomes his guardian angel and thus dissents himself, takes up essential elements of Maetzig's film with the 'bürgerliches Erbe' and its representatives at the centre. The national dimension of this adaptation appears in its implicit and explicit linking to recent turning points in German post-war history: the Biermann affair of 1976 is the implied beginning of Jerska's ban; the main story ends in 1985 with Mikhail Gorbachev becoming General Secretary of the Politburo in the Soviet Union; this signals the massive political changes of the late 1980s culminating in the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and German unification – both events that are featured in von Donnersmarck's film.

Like Maetzig's *Ehe im Schatten*, *Das Leben der Anderen* depicts the Berlin milieu of artists, writers, and intellectuals, but now in the early 1980s. Like Maetzig, von Donnersmarck puts the milieu to the test in order to show the claims, impositions, violations and effects of the post-war Communist dictatorship and the milieu's potential and ability to resist them. Like Maetzig, von Donnersmarck has a theatre couple at the centre, and for Georg Dreyman and his partner, the actress Christa Maria Sieland, the 'work permit' is at stake too, this time not for 'racial' reasons and of course not linked to imminent extinction: the GDR is the 'dictatorship of lesser degree'.

The love story of Dreyman and Sieland stands in the melodramatic tradition of the 'bürgerliches Trauerspiel' of two lovers threatened by the 'quasi-totalitarian violence perpetrated by (agents of) a "system"'<sup>37</sup> which here, as in the case of Hans Wieland and Elisabeth Maurer – or Ferdinand and Luise – tries to manipulate one or both partners in order to separate them. As is the tradition, the harassment of the true lovers finds a focus in the distress of the woman who is forced into a cooperation of sorts

<sup>37</sup> Elsaesser, 'Tales of Sound and Fury', p. 45.

with the exploiting system, an echo of the 'guilty' Emilia Galotti and Luise Millerin. The betrayal of cooperation causes death: Sieland's melodramatic suicide in a white bathrobe implies absolution in the 'bloody' end. All these elements keep the paratexts present, yet also provide a starting point for the discussion of differences with regard to the classical texts as well as with regard to Maetzig's film.

A first aspect that deserves further examination is the relationship between Christa Maria Sieland and Minister Hempf. Sieland is introduced not only as a successful actress but also an insecure and instable character. While the film implies that Sieland's insecurity is partly due to the nature of the political system with its ideological dictate over life and truth, it likewise seems to be simply part of her individual character. Both these aspects are dramatised in the forced relationship between Sieland and the cynical and egotistical representative of the state, Minister Hempf. In the true fashion of a Prince Guastalla or, indeed, Duke Almagro, Hempf seems to have complete power of disposal over 'his' subjects including their bodies and sexuality. Hempf's personal power to elevate or destroy forces Christa Maria Sieland into sexual favours which she hopes will save her career. With Hempf von Donnersmarck reintroduces 'the agent of the system' of the classical texts (for which Maetzig's film had substituted the modern mass of followers) and even goes so far as to translate the political conflict again into 'sexual exploitation and rape'.<sup>38</sup> The obvious mistake of this is, of course, the misreading of the GDR which, after all, was a modern, not a feudal dictatorship.<sup>39</sup> Within the film and its paratexts there is, however, another striking issue which is seminal for von Donnersmarck's revision of the tradition: The dramatic conflict which traditionally forms the centre of the 'Trauerspiel' is demoted in the film. In *Das Leben der Anderen* it provides the running-board for a second plot: Von Donnersmarck's use of the 'bürgerliches Trauerspiel' is complemented by the application of another classical concept, that of Schiller's 'ästhetische Erziehung'. Von Donnersmarck thus includes a theory of aesthetic reception as superior plot element. This redirects attention from the female melodrama of destruction to the aesthetic impact or force which the melodrama has on a recipient; rather than dramatising complex societal conditions, Christa Maria Sieland and her death take on the quality of a single segment in a story of 'ästhetische Erziehung'. While the 'Trauerspiel' of Lessing and Schiller poses questions about the value system of the aspiring bourgeois class, and while Maetzig adds a meta-discussion of this heritage by including an interpretation of the classical texts, von Donnersmarck offers a naive reading of the paratexts which denies their critical and ambivalent aspects

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>39</sup> Jürgen Kocka, 'The GDR – A Special Kind of Modern Dictatorship', in *Dictatorship as experience*, ed. Konrad H. Jarausch, New York and Oxford 1999, pp. 17–26.

in favour of their ideal substance ‘materialised’ in an idealistic wish fulfilment.

The concept of ‘ästhetische Erziehung’ is introduced in what looks like a variation of Goethe’s ‘Prolog im Himmel’: during the first meeting of Dreymann and Minister Hempf at the premiere party of one of Dreymann’s plays, the cynic Hempf challenges the idealist Dreymann by declaring that ‘man will never change’:

Aber das lieben wir ja auch alle an Ihren Stücken: die Liebe zum Menschen, die guten Menschen, den Glauben, dass man sich verändern kann. Dreymann, ganz gleich, wie oft Sie das in Ihren Stücken schreiben: Menschen verändern sich nicht.<sup>40</sup>

Following on from this, Stasi Captain Wiesler becomes the proof of man’s ability to change; this change is brought about through ‘ästhetische Erziehung’. While in Maetzig the ‘bildungsbürgerlich’ milieu despite all its ‘Bildung’ is seen as failing to acknowledge and/or resist Nazi corruption, von Donnersmarck sets out to show the milieu’s resistance thanks to its ‘Bildung’.

From the theatre sequence at the beginning of the film it becomes clear that von Donnersmarck does not care for art in the GDR let alone socialist art: We see the production of a play of Dreymann’s with a supposedly socialist-realist factory stage-set and Christa Maria Sieland as a working-class clairvoyant of sorts. For von Donnersmarck it is sufficient to allude to a cliché in order to then focus on the ‘true core’ in art untouched by the corrupt and compromised outside and able to ‘erziehen’. This ‘true core’ is initially preserved and enclosed in the private sphere.<sup>41</sup> Von Donnersmarck, like the paratexts, depicts the private sphere as a source of affection and solidarity communicated through poetry, music, female beauty, and what is effectively lifestyle. However, while in the paratexts the private sphere turned out to be ambivalent and incapable of dealing with reality, von Donnersmarck revises this model. In *Das Leben der Anderen*

<sup>40</sup> Von Donnersmarck, *Das Leben der Anderen*.

<sup>41</sup> A compelling detail in this respect is the similarity of the flats the two respective couples Maurer/Wieland and Sieland/Dreymann live in. Both flats convey ‘Bildung’: there are several pieces of art (etchings, drawings, sculpture), grand pianos (in von Donnersmarck’s film the piano is even a Roenisch), big desks in the middle of the rooms, books, and period furniture; in both sitting rooms sideboards are dominant. While Maetzig’s choice of interior décor is typical of the time, von Donnersmarck’s choice is not despite some GDR features such as the television. This is even more apparent as von Donnersmarck took great care to make the other flats/rooms in the film look ‘real’ or ‘authentic’, which resulted in flats such as Wiesler’s and Hauser’s with their ‘typical’ GDR wall units and sofas and an almost complete lack of decoration/individuality; interestingly though Jerska’s room lacks, like Dreymann’s flat, the ‘typical’ GDR design and is dominated by a wardrobe, small side tables, and book cases from the 1930s. Particularly seen against the stereotypical GDR flats, the artists’ flats root the events and people not only in the milieu of the cultured but suggest not so much the GDR of the early 1980s but, indeed, Germany in the 1930s and 40s.

the private sphere does of course, in line with the 'Trauerspiel' tradition, collapse when Christa Maria Sieland betrays Dreymann by giving the Stasi the evidence they looked for; the betrayal leads to Sieland's suicide, which traditionally signals the insufficiency and disintegration of the bourgeois private sphere as societal counter space. Yet in von Donnersmarck's film the death of the woman does not any more indicate the failure of a basic worldview as it does in Lessing, Schiller, and indeed Maetzig, but the failure of a weak individual. At the same time, Sieland's function on the aesthetic level, as someone beautiful belonging to Dreymann, is part of those elements of the private sphere that are not destroyed but reach beyond the narrow private space and succeed in an outsider's – Stasi Captain Wiesler's – moral redemption:

Schiller held firmly to the view that art has no direct moral purpose. As he says in the twenty-first Letter, "die Schönheit gibt schlechterdings kein einzelnes Resultat weder für den Verstand noch für den Willen." But art, if it is to be a vital human activity, must be capable of touching our moral lives through the restorative and integrating effect.<sup>42</sup>

Thus von Donnersmarck sets out to illustrate 'art's touch'. Wiesler's moral transformation begins when he understands the purely egotistical nature of his task which indicates not only inequality and injustice but also immorality 'Schiller and Lessing style': 'Wir helfen also einem ZK Mitglied seinen Rivalen aus dem Weg zu schaffen',<sup>43</sup> as Hempf's marionette, Stasi Colonel-Lieutenant Grubitz, puts it. After this first impulse, Wiesler's metamorphosis is advanced through beauty, love, and friendship educating his heart and sense of morality; this is predominantly an education among men. Watching the beauty, love and personal tragedy of Christa Maria Sieland brings a first awakening of his heart. This is continued when Wiesler eavesdrops on a conversation between Dreymann and Jerska, and notes down Brecht's name, the collected poems of whom he 'confiscates' from Dreymann's flat on the next occasion. At home, reading in the book, the 'inner' voice which recites Brecht's 'Marie A' is in fact not Wiesler's but Dreymann's; this demonstrates Dreymann's redeeming force as a 'Künstler' and also anticipates the aesthetic transfiguration of Sieland's death: In the death scene, the film cuts from the pietà-like position of Dreymann and the dead Christa Maria to a shot of the spring sky, an image reminiscent of Brecht's lines: 'Sie war sehr weiß und ungeheuer oben/ Und als ich aufsaß, war sie nimmer mehr da.'<sup>44</sup> The decisive instance of Wiesler's 'ästhetische Erziehung' is linked to *Sonate vom guten Menschen*, a present by Jerska for

<sup>42</sup> Lesley Sharpe, 'Concerning Aesthetic Education', in Martinson, *A Companion to the Works of Friedrich Schiller*, pp. 147–168 (150).

<sup>43</sup> von Donnersmarck, *Das Leben der Anderen*.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*



Dreymann. Dreymann plays the piece on learning that Jerska committed suicide, and Wiesler, the secret audience, is overcome by emotion, crying as he sits in front of his observation apparatuses. The aesthetic artefacts, including Christa Maria Sieland, stand in a context of male friendship which proves its potential to reach out to another man; this community of three is eventually given an aesthetic monument when Dreymann writes a novel, with the title of the piece of music given to him by Jerska, and dedicates it to Wiesler.

The separation of female melodrama from male aesthetics supports a gender difference which in *Das Leben der Anderen* has serious aesthetic and political implications. Christa Maria Sieland, the only woman in the film, appears weak and prone to corruption. What is more, her betrayal of Dreymann is not a betrayal out of love and does not represent a failure of the milieu Sieland belongs to. She betrays Dreymann to the Stasi in order to save her career; it is even possible to interpret this betrayal as a repetition of a first betrayal of their mutual love which took place when Sieland exchanged sexual favours for a secure career. That Sieland is acting out of egotistical reasons becomes even more obvious in comparison to the male trio: Contrary to her egotism, Jerska, Dreymann, and Stasi Captain Wiesler act and take risks out of friendship, moral conviction, and responsibility. It is telling that Sieland actually objects to Dreymann's friendship and solidarity with the 'outlawed' Jerska because she needs Dreymann to herself: 'Du bist stark und kraftvoll und genau so brauch ich dich. Hol dir nicht diese Kaputtheit in dein Leben.'<sup>45</sup>

The 'Trauerspiel' constellation in *Das Leben der Anderen* is thus diminished to an individual drama of a beautiful woman who, out of weakness, falls victim to a ruthless system. This allows other values of the bourgeois private sphere to be saved instead of perishing with the true lovers or appearing compromised by the faults traditionally inherent in this sphere. Indeed, the fall and death of the woman purges the sphere of its ambivalence and clears the way for an idealised fulfilment of the 'true values' of freedom and moral integrity on a national scale.

The *Sonate vom guten Menschen* deserves special mention here. Firstly, it redeems the Stasi Captain by moving him to tears; secondly, except for 'touching Wiesler's moral life' the *Sonate* also prompts Dreymann to formulate the essential message about art and politics:

Ich muss immer daran denken, was Lenin über die *Apassionata* gesagt hat: 'Ich kann sie nicht hören, sonst bringe ich die Revolution nicht zuende.' Kann jemand, der diese Musik gehört hat, ich meine wirklich gehört hat, noch ein schlechter Mensch sein?<sup>46</sup>

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

Here Dreymann introduces explicitly pre-ideological concepts of 'good' and 'bad' and of moral change via 'pure art'. In *Das Leben der Anderen*, the problem is not 'What is right or wrong?' The problem is pre-ideological: 'How to become Good?' And the answer which Dreymann gives, explains also what 'Bad' is, i.e. Lenin and the Russian Revolution of 1917. A pre-ideological notion of art is presented as a precondition for moral freedom and integrity. This is, effectively, the reversal of Maetzig's approach, which exposed and discussed the notion of 'pure art' as itself ideological and susceptible if not adaptable to oppression and persecution.

I suggested that *Das Leben der Anderen* is an inversion of a cinema tradition that dealt with the role of artists during the Third Reich, particularly with a belief in 'pure art' as a defence against politics. Maetzig's *Ehe im Schatten* has been discussed as part of this tradition for which it is exemplary, as it includes the backdrop of classical 'bürgerliches Erbe' as an element of bourgeois self-understanding in Germany. The first result of the comparison was that von Donnersmarck's film claims resistance and humanity where the post-war film analysed failure and blindness. Part, if not pre-condition, of this inversion is that where Maetzig discusses the classics as interpretations and representations, von Donnersmarck uses them naively as plot-models of wish fulfilment driven by a longing for redemption. The past to be redeemed is, however, not the GDR past: For this the film neither pays enough attention to the historical reality of the GDR of the 1980s nor does it visualise one of the sections of the population that did actually initiate the 'Wende'. The longing for redemption which seems accomplishable due to the successful revolution of 1989 is fed by the 'other' past of the first German dictatorship; it is the cinematic presentation of the Third Reich, our 'pre-programmed imagination' as Garton Ash called it, that von Donnersmarck roots his story in. What this indicates is a longing for a past as it 'should have been', a trust in the 'bürgerliches Erbe' as it ideally should have served in the confrontation with the Nazis – an unshakable human and political consensus and a guideline to national revolt against the oppression and the most horrendous atrocities committed under this dictatorship. Had the classics remained such a national denominator,<sup>47</sup> Lenin's Revolution would never have reached Germany and occupied its eastern part for forty years. Berghahn locates *Das Leben der Anderen* within a discourse of 'normalisation' of the German past; it seems justified to go even further and describe it as an attempt to recover national innocence.

<sup>47</sup> After 1945 the 'heritage' became a human denominator again on both sides of the divided Germany and also a political point of reference in the GDR until the 1970s. However, by the 1980s and most certainly after 1989, the classics did not provide a representative national ideal anymore (see Petra Stuber, *Spielräume und Grenzen: Studien zum DDR-Theater*, Berlin 1998).

# MARRIAGE IN THE SHADOWS

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## Notes

This DVD production has adapted the publisher's original pdf file. Original page numbers and British publishing conventions have been observed to facilitate correct citation.

Correction, page 604: The Gottschalk's son was actually eight years old when he died.