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VISUAL STORY TELLING AND HISTORY AS A GREAT TOY – *THE LIVES OF OTHERS*

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Abstract: *The Lives of Others* is an important film for two reasons: 1) it is a striking example of how cinema tells a story by visual means as much as the script (which in this case is much weaker); and 2) the film raises an extremely important questions for history in our virtual era, a time when the reach and influence of film makers far extends that of the historian.



1. *The Lives of Others* (typical street scene)

Introduction

In 2006 *The Lives of Others* won numerous festival awards around the world for best picture and for its acting and cinematography. It also won “Best Foreign Language Film” at the Oscars in Hollywood. This category at the Oscars, I have long suspected, was created so that a foreign film would not win “best picture” every year. Be that as it may,

the critics heaped praise on this film and, by almost all accounts, *The Lives of Others* is a “must-see” film. I agree that it is for two reasons (neither of which probably have much to do with why it won the Oscar, or why it was made in the first place by director Florian von Donnersmarck): 1) The film is a striking example of how cinema tells a story by visual means as much as the script (which in this case is much weaker); and 2) the film raises an extremely important question for history in our virtual era, a time when the reach and influence of filmmakers far extends that of the historian.

The Anti-Aesthetic as a Vehicle for Visual Story-Telling

Good film demands much of its audience and the best films exact a huge emotional toll. They change our pulse rate, they affect how comfortably we sit through them, and, after they end, they can leave us changed people for having experienced them. *The Lives of Others* does not do this with its banal screenplay but through the use of a fierce and unrelenting ‘anti-aesthetic’. Most of the walls are pallid green, the lighting is almost always dim, the sun almost never shines for the two and a quarter hours of the film (we see it through muted windows rarely and once or twice reflecting off of distant buildings). The clothing is plain and bright colours are almost non-existent (a red blouse at a party, a brief glimpse of a red coat, one orange book jacket on a bookcase, a red typewriter ribbon). *The Lives of Others* takes place in so many night scenes and so many grey days in what are surely the dullest surroundings imaginable.



2. *The Lives of Others* Party scene following the play

The colour in the film does a masterful job of setting and maintaining the tone and in illuminating the closely watched lives of those who lived in East Germany under the panoptic eye of the state police force, the Stasi. If you do not like the film's aesthetic then you might wish to ask yourself: "What colour is systematic totalitarian repression?" A good deal of the answer for me is the colour palette von Donnersmarck washes over our eyes for the length of the film. It is one that keeps the viewer anxiously engaged and tells the story much more strongly than the screenplay.¹

From the opening scene, a man being led down a sickly pale green and white hallway to a 48-hour long interrogation, where the pale glow of the morning sun eventually shines into his sleepless tear-filled eyes, the film's uncomfortable aesthetic sets the mood. It continues on into a classroom scene where the young Stasi are trained in austere surroundings, it is inescapable. We see and we feel a constant dull on drab, an aesthetic of evil and hopelessness. It continues to the theatre where a play, approved by the state, is being enacted and afterward to the party where artists dress in dull and unassuming tones, everyone hoping to avoid standing out in the crowd. Evil breathes deeply in the atmosphere of this film.

Think, by contrast, of how warm hues and soft tonal complimentaries are often used in films to make us feel good (an excellent example is Shanee Gabel's *Love Song for Bobby Long*), and to invite us into the warmth of the story being told by the script. *The Lives of Others* coolly keeps us distant but no less compelled through its cruel tonalities. Note how often you catch yourself watching with your arms folded over your chest. The street scenes, day and night, are set in heavily drawn shadows, and the night is even gloomier. The film takes us on to scenes of Brutalist Modern architecture, partially illuminated by pale yellow light. Inside these buildings we visit apartments decorated in browns and tans, the kind of place where we listen to the scripted TV news program while eating a dinner of cold yoghurt and ketchup. When a game of soccer is played in the shadowy street, a pathetic, partially deflated, little ball is used. The hooker who is called to his home by the Stasi is well past her prime and works a tight schedule of 30-minute appointments. And on and on it goes, even after the Wall comes down.

One good reason to see *The Lives of Others* then is simply to think about how our emotional relationship to the wide-screen is so deeply impacted by the colour palette chosen. Films do not have to be “beautiful” to possess a near perfect aesthetic. Sometimes the setting demands an anti-aesthetic (a complete violation of what we have been led to believe the role of colour in film should be). In this film, the drably cool anti-aesthetic is among the best reasons to brace yourself and see it. But there is an even more compelling reason to see this film: what it tells us about history in our time of image saturation.

History: “A Great Toy”



3. *The Lives of Others*. Stasi Captain Wiesler (Ulrich Müehe)

For some, the most distressing thing about *The Lives of Others* is that it uses generalized events from an actual place (The German Democratic Republic), an actual police force (the Stasi), from an actual historical time period (1984-1991) to tell its story. The most

problematic aspect of the film, during a time in which the former Stasi and their supporters are attempting to rehabilitate the historical image of the force, is that the film tells the story of a Stasi Officer who never existed. In it we meet and quietly come to root for Stasi Captain Wiesler, who comes to see the value of art in life and helps the playwright (Georg Dreyman), on whom he is supposed to be gathering information to be used for his incarceration. Indeed, as Dreyman finds out in the Stasi archive after the fall of the Berlin Wall, it was Stasi Captain Wiesler's actions [which jeopardized his own career], that kept Dreyman out of prison. The problem is that not one single Stasi ever did this sort of thing as no Stasi operation gave any one person this range of flexibility. The film is a fictive account set in otherwise actually existing historical circumstances.

Citing these grounds, some angry reviewers say it would have been fine if the country or the Stasi were not named and the story was presented simply as an anonymous fiction about good and evil. These critics point out that viewers are even made to feel sorry for the Stasi officer when we see him demoted to a cold damp basement where the former teacher, master interrogator, and spy is reduced to steaming open letters. Later in the film we are again asked to pity him as in the new Germany he delivers junk mail in a pathetic little cart.

The Stasi were among the most effective and repressive police operations in modern history. The force employed about 100,000 people and worked with over 200,000 citizen informants. In a population of 17 million about one person in 50 had direct involvement with the Stasi. This can be put into better context when we consider that that the Russian KGB had about the same number of agents for a population of nearly 300 million. The Stasi archive on East Germans contained, by 1989, about 50 million pages. Typical interrogation techniques included long periods of solitary confinement (which led many artists to never make art again), to the threat (and actual practice), of removing children from parents and placing them in horrific state-run institutions. The Stasi were masters of fear and psychological torture.

I am among those who do not like what von Donnersmarck has done with this film in terms of its specific identification of location and the Stasi and the creation of a fictive good Stasi at this time. But I refuse to become angry with a filmmaker for doing what it is the right of every filmmaker to do, to make films. In terms of abusing history von Donnersmarck has done nothing exceptional but his film does point to a distressing aspect of the times in which we live, when the reach of a filmmaker far extends that of the best historians. For ninety-five percent of my affluent Canadian university students who watch this film in class, this is their first exposure to any information concerning the Stasi (who ceased operations around the time that these students, now 19-21, were born). It is a fact of life today that a mass distributed fiction such as *The Lives of Others* (whatever limited impact it actually has), will far outreach any fact-based story of the Stasi (unless someone were to make such a film – and make it as well as von Donnersmarck has done).

Fiction now trumps history and plays with it at will. Today, images are not only interesting because they work as mirrors, representations, or counterparts of a “real”, but also when they “contaminate reality and ... model it” (Baudrillard, 1987:16). It is the very reference principle of images that now must be subjected to radical doubt. In the *Evil Demon of Images*, Baudrillard further alerted us to this development, already present over two decades ago:

It is precisely when it appears most truthful, most faithful and most in conformity to reality that the image is most diabolic – and our technical images, whether they be from photography, cinema or television, are in the overwhelming majority much more figurative, realist, than all the images from past cultures... the immense majority of present day photographic, cinematic and television images are thought to bear witness to the world with a fine resemblance and a touching fidelity. We have spontaneous confidence in their realism. We are wrong (*Ibid.*:16).

So, in the mind of some people, especially those who suffered under the Stasi, this film is especially “diabolic”. But by its very making, the film becomes a case of the serious problem Baudrillard describes.

Baudrillard went on to argue that this problem is seldom more painfully evident than when we are faced by negationists (such as Robert Faurisson [France]) who deny that the Holocaust took place. The ironic role played by Faurisson and his ilk is to raise the question: how do we know the Holocaust? For my generation, and younger people, we know it mainly through the movies or television images or the many simulations of the holocaust tourism industry.

We are rapidly reaching a point beyond which we will be able to tell each other histories and as such films or novels are rapidly becoming as important as well documented historical writing. Both are simulations, we cannot trust images yet we feel we must remember, it is who we believe we are as a species. These are of course very problematic waters to negotiate when your subject includes something like the East German Stasi or the Holocaust.

Films like *Holocaust*, *Shoah*, or *The Lives of Others* do not take us closer to the events – even when they desire to do so. No image takes us closer to an event. Indeed, images keep us at a distance from events by creating an artificial depth of field between event and interpretation that is stronger than what text alone can provide. Film, most ironically, cannot take us closer to events because of the problem of image uncertainty in our time. So Baudrillard’s assessment really puts a point on it in relation to a Holocaust denier like Faurisson:

...where the holocaust-deniers are plainly absurd and wrong is when they themselves espouse realism and contest *the objective, historical reality*, of the holocaust. In historical time, the event took place and the evidence is there. But we are no longer in historical time; we are now in *real time*, and in real time there is no longer any evidence of anything whatever. The holocaust will never be verified in real time. Holocaust denial is, therefore,

absurd in its own logic, but by its very absurdity it sheds light on the irruption of another dimension, paradoxically termed “real time”, a dimension in which, paradoxically, objective reality disappears. ...and this is indeed the undoing or defeat of thought and critical thought... it is the victory of real time over the present, over the past, over any form of logical articulation of reality whatsoever (Baudrillard, 2002:108-109).

In the case of films about the Holocaust or the Stasi it seems that “reality has “preferred to disappear behind the perfect alibi of images” (Baudrillard, 1990:181).

Why do images (films like *The Lives of Others*) bother people as they do?

They disturb us because in our time images have become vitally important. Images often stand in for reality now, their magical status possessing something of the radical illusion of the world, the fact that we do not know the real but the appearances behind which it hides (Baudrillard, 1999:140). Baudrillard forces us to wonder why we are coming to prefer the “exile of the virtual” to the “catastrophe of the real” (1995:28).

In *The Lives of Others* we have a vivid example of what Baudrillard means when he says “the intensity of the image matches the degree of its denial of the real” (*Ibid.*:130). Today so much of our so called “reality” is filtered through the media, including tragic events of the past. Baudrillard cautions us that:

This means that it is too late to verify and understand those events historically... the tools required for such intelligibility have been lost. ... What is actually occurring, collectively, confusedly ... is a transition from the historical stage to a mythical stage: the mythic, and media led, reconstruction of all these events... The Heidegger affair, the Klaus Barbie trial, and so on, are just so many feeble convulsive reactions to this loss of reality, which is now our *reality*. Faurisson’s claims are a cynical transposition of this loss of reality into the past. The statement ‘It never existed’ means simply that we ourselves no longer exist sufficiently even

to sustain a memory, and that hallucinations are the only way we have left to feel alive (1993:90-93).

In a time when our reality is ever more hyperreal (more real than real), we can expect films which tell stories like this one about the good Stasi man. We can expect filmmakers, who are now more powerful in their reach than the best historians, to use history like a great toy. There is not much point getting angry about this film for doing what films do, playing with reality and history. Through its stunning anti-aesthetic and its otherwise weak story this film raises some of the most important issues of our time concerning images, despite itself.

About Author: Dr. Coulter has taught Sociology at Bishop's since 1995. His current research and teaching interests include contemporary theory, the arts, technology and culture, and photographic imagery. In 2006 he was awarded Bishop's highest honour for teaching: The William and Nancy Turner Prize. He is also a past winner of the Division of Social Science Teaching Award in 2004 and has several times been recognized for his teaching including the Faculty Evaluation Committee Merit Award for Teaching in 2000. He is the Founder and Principal Editor of the International Journal of Baudrillard Studies (On The Internet: www.ubishops.ca/baudrillardstudies). In August 2008 the Times Higher Education Supplement applauded Dr. Coulter and IJBS for courageously responding to the challenge of producing a high quality open access academic journal on the Internet. Since September 2006 he has been Canadian Contributing Editor to European Art (On-line) Magazine (<http://www.euroartmagazine.com/new/>) He is also a manuscript reviewer for Women's Studies Section at the Aid To Scholarly Publications Program in Ottawa. Gerry's current research and writing are in contemporary theory, the arts, cinema and culture.

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¹ For a synopsis of the film see: <http://www.movieweb.com/movies/film/FlaTrecesIN7dc/synopsis>