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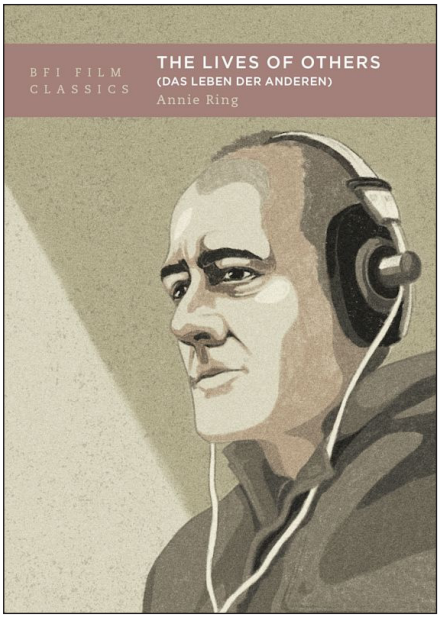
Book Review: Annie Ring, *The Lives of Others (Das Leben der Anderen)*, (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022)

Lauren Cuthbert, School of Language, Literature, Music and Visual Culture, University of Aberdeen, UK, l.cuthbert20@abdn.ac.uk

Annie Ring, *The Lives of Others (Das Leben der Anderen)*, (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022), pp. 104, ISBN: 9781839025303 (pb), £12.99; ISBN 9781839025310 (ebook ePub), £11.69; ISBN 9781839025327 (eb PDF), £11.69.



Before the 2022 adaptation of *All Quiet on the Western Front* won Best International Feature at this year's Academy Awards, the last German-language film to win this award (under its previous title of Best Foreign Language Film) was Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's 2006 historical drama, *The Lives of Others*. Concerning the moral transformation of an East German surveillance agent, the film has only become more relevant in the years since its release, with internet users around the world having their information tracked and stored by corporations. Annie Ring's book, part of the BFI Film Classics series, makes a convincing argument for the lasting importance of the film, through analysis of its technical achievements and aesthetic prowess, and also offers thought-provoking new interpretations of many of its characters and themes: most notably, her complex reappraisal of the film's central female character, Christa-Maria Sieland, who is commonly dismissed as a victim of misogynistic writing, and her less optimistic interpretation of the film's ending.

In her first chapter, 'A Contemporary Classic – and a Conservative One?', Ring begins with an exploration of the political complexity of the film. She acknowledges that *The Lives of Others* was well-received by both liberal and conservative international audiences, a compelling dichotomy which reflects the film's ambiguousness, even though it is firmly rooted in time, place, and genre. The film's ambiguous political perspective does not isolate it as a film exclusively about the former German Democratic Republic (GDR). Instead, Ring argues that 'a narrative about Germans as victims is not the film's primary interest' (25), which rings true considering the universal appeal of the film, demonstrated by its many accolades and awards, and also by its $77.3 million global box office gross. Ring argues that *The Lives of Others* is not solely or even primarily a film about German identity, but rather a genre piece about the redemptive power of art and morality in a totalitarian society. This chapter also marks the first of many comparative reference points used by Ring to situate the film within a wider context. Ring draws comparisons between *The Lives of Others* and films including Alfred Hitchcock's *Torn Curtain* and *Vertigo*, and Francis Ford Coppola's mystery thriller *The Conversation*. Ring uses these films to situate *The Lives of Others* within the genre conventions of spy films and melodramas: for example, *The Conversation* also focuses on a surveillance who faces a moral dilemma as he is wiretapping. Ring also makes careful use of images to compare *The Lives of Others*' depiction of the Stasi with the one

in *Torn Curtain*. Hitchcock's film features Stasi agents who dress glamorously and work in modern, bright offices, while *The Lives of Others* is, down to its utilitarian costume design and use of real former Stasi offices, considerably more historically accurate.

The second chapter, 'The Authenticity of a Very Hollywood German Melodrama', explores genre, with special consideration to the conventions of melodrama as well as historical accuracy. Long regarded as an accurate portrayal of life in the GDR, Ring complicates this idea of the film's authenticity: she acknowledges the set design, colour scheme, and mise-en-scène as having contributed to an overall feeling of historical accuracy, but points out several divergences from such accuracy in the plot. Notably, Ring argues that the film's main female character, Christa-Maria Sieland, who betrays her love interest by becoming a Stasi informant, is 'not historically representative' (29) because there is no evidence of women informing on their partners in the GDR. Ring competently summarises the debate over the film's authenticity, especially in contrast to the film's melodramatic narrative. She highlights the domestic setting and the moral, "good versus bad" conflict of the film's conflict as key elements of melodrama, as well as the conflict resolving through the sacrificial death of a primary character, 'a death whose tragedy is assuaged by some degree of conflict resolution' (30). Ultimately, Ring argues that the film's melodramatic genre sometimes takes precedence over historical accuracy in plot, but that melodrama itself can be utilised as a 'disguised political mode' (32). The holes Ring pokes in the film's accuracy, therefore, do not puncture the integrity of the film as a whole; instead, they deepen its complexity.

Ring's comparative reference points do not exclusively refer to other films. In chapter three, 'Depicting the Stasi's Surveillance Regime', she draws connections to Kafka's *The Trial* and Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon in her discussion of the film's approach to its theme of surveillance. Further, in chapter four, 'The "Good" Spy of East Berlin: Captain Gerd Wiesler', Ring aptly condenses the primary themes of the German Enlightenment with reference to the film's central character, arguing that 'his journey reflects Jean-Jacques Rousseau's philosophy of the individual, who liberates himself [...] from oppression to express his own true and singular personality' (48). This is a stand-out section of the book, as it makes the Enlightenment easily understandable, which is no mean feat. The film itself makes several intertextual references, primarily to Brecht's writings, which are given due consideration in chapter five, 'Brecht and the Politics of an Aesthetic Education'. Ring argues that, even though Brecht himself believed in the transformative power of art, the film's narrative does not align with Brecht's Marxist ideals, because Wiesler's transformation moves him towards 'a liberal individuality more in tune with capitalist cultures on the other side of the Berlin Wall' (61). She also argues that, because Brecht's only appearance in the film is through the romantic poem that Wiesler reads, Brecht's actual political standpoint is absent

from the film entirely, leading to the 'misreading' (61) of Brecht. Ring's exploration of Brechtian aesthetics and how they are utilised and potentially misused in the film is incisive, and her ability to simplify complex ideas without smoothing over the nuance is at its most visible in these moments of intertextual analysis.

Another highlight of the book is chapter six, '"Sister art is / Coming on stage": Christa-Maria Sieland'. Sieland's character has been rightly criticised as yet another woman who dies in the service of her male love interest's character development. Ring acknowledges this writing decision, which has been described as misogynistic by many critics including Thomas Lindenberger and Gary Schmidt, while also making a compelling argument for Sieland's relevance to the narrative beyond being a love interest, a betrayer, and finally a dead body. Ring draws together Sieland and the Stasi agent Wiesler by highlighting the film's 'chiasmic shape' (69) – as Wiesler develops his morality and becomes the *gute Mensch* (Good Person) the audience hopes he will be, Sieland is pressured to abandon her morality and betray her partner. Sieland's profession as an actor becomes more relevant through Ring's analysis: it reflects the way in which her character represents 'how difficult it is to embody authentic selfhood' (73). Ring's assertion that Sieland 'is the true carrier of the *Good Person* intertext' (79) is compelling and well-argued, and it serves to make Christa-Maria a more complex character than she may have seemed on the surface.

The book ends, appropriately, by discussing the film's ending – an ending which is more ambivalent than it first appears. As argued in the final chapter, 'Success? Georg Dreyman and German Reunification', the unified Germany of the film's last ten minutes is not a positive contrast to the miserable and oppressive GDR that came before it. Instead, unified Germany is grey and graffitied, and Ring notes the careful placement of a group of homeless people in the background of one of the final scenes. *The Lives of Others* ends on a hopeful and satisfying note, but Ring carefully deconstructs the setting of unified Germany to argue that a hopeful ending does not necessarily make the film a fairy-tale.

Overall, Annie Ring's analysis of *The Lives of Others* is well-written and deeply thought-provoking. Alongside analysis of the film's aesthetic and philosophical themes, Ring brings historical fact to the fore in a way which makes a reductive black-and-white reading of the film and its political message entirely impossible. Ring's analysis ultimately positions *The Lives of Others* as a deeply complex film with wide-reaching political appeal and an intertextuality that convincingly situates the film as both a classic piece of cinema and an increasingly relevant one.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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