



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

GERMAN TEACHERS' RESOURCES

TEACHING FILM AND LITERATURE FOR AS AND A2

STUDYING:

DER BESUCH DER ALTEN DAME
FRIEDRICH DÜRRENMATT

DER VORLESER
BERNHARD SCHLINK

GOOD BYE, LENIN!
DIRECTED BY WOLFGANG BECKER

DAS LEBEN DER ANDEREN
DIRECTED BY
FLORIAN HENCKEL VON DONNERSMARCK

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INTRODUCTION AND RESOURCE RATIONALE

These resources have been developed in response to changes in the content of the AS/A2 curricula for modern foreign languages (French, Spanish and German), which are effective from September 2016. They have been designed to give support and guidance to MFL teachers in selecting and teaching the film and literature content of the curricula.

There are five sections to this resource:

1. Why teach this text?

This section explains the relevance and benefits of teaching this text/film for teachers and their students. It also describes how the text/film fits in to the A-level as a whole, as well as its links with other A-level subjects.

2. Ways to read this text

This section briefly describes the different critical lenses for reading a text/film, as well as outlining different themes. This section will be particularly useful for the A2 exam questions, which are theme-based. Topics from previous exam questions have been integrated into this section.

3. Students

This section suggests how this text/film can appeal to certain students, according to interests, studies and background. For example this film will appeal to students who may be interested in studying social policy.

4. Useful passages/sequences

This section highlights specific sequences/passages from the film/text that are especially rich and point towards the ways in which these can be used for teaching.

a. Characters

This sub-section highlights a passage which would be useful in the teaching of characterisation and character relationships in the text/film. This sub-section is particularly useful for the AS exam questions, which focus on character analysis.

b. Themes

This sub-section highlights a passage which would be useful in the teaching of a major theme in the context of the whole text/film. This selected sequence/passage is normally an effective inroad for the discussion of the wider concerns/themes of the text/film. This sub-section is particularly useful for the A2 exam question, which is based on wider analysis of themes/context.

c. Language

This sub-section highlights a linguistically rich and/or interesting passage/sequence in terms of grammar, style, tone, genre, register, dialect, pronunciation etc. This sub-section is not exam-focused but teachers may find it useful for other focuses i.e. themes, characterisation, genre.

d. Cinematography/form and genre

The cinematography sub-section focuses on directorial and cinematographic technique in films. It aims to guide teachers who may not be familiar with teaching film. This sub-section is particularly useful for AS and A2 exam questions that deal with colour, sound, directorial technique, etc.

The form and genre sub-section focuses on the structure, form and genre of literary texts in order to guide the teaching of certain kinds of texts (novels and plays).

5. Further reading

This section provides links to websites, useful sources, articles and online books in English and each target language that can be used as pedagogic resources and/or preparatory material.

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DER BESUCH DER ALTEN DAME
FRIEDRICH DÜRRENMATT, 1956

DER BESUCH DER ALTEN DAME, FRIEDRICH DÜRRENMATT, 1956 (ROUTLEDGE FOREIGN LITERATURE CLASSICS, ED. BY PAUL KURT ACKERMANN: 1973)

When famed billionaire Claire Zachanassian returns to her hometown of Gullen, she offers the impoverished townsfolk a terrible bargain and a seemingly impossible choice: she will bequeath a vast sum of money to the town, but they must kill Alfred III, the man who jilted her in her youth.

Why teach this text?

This Swiss tragicomedy is one of the most acclaimed pieces of twentieth century German language literature. Its pessimistic social vision of a post-war Europe allows the play to be encountered again and again by new audiences, since the location and time period of the drama remain unspecified. The play treads a fine line between uproarious comedy and dark, disturbing tragedy. Dramatic tension intensifies as the play builds inexorably towards its climactic moment of truth – will the townsfolk kill one of their own for money? With unsettling humour and touches of Greek tragedy and German Expressionism, Dürrenmatt explores the nature of human behaviour when people are in desperate circumstances.

Ways to read this text

First and foremost this play examines the corruptive power of money on even the most morally virtuous of people, as well as questioning the morality of revenge as justice and asking to what extent justice may be bought. Over the course of the play we witness the behaviour of representatives of institutions of justice in reaction to the offer made by Claire Zachanassian. Yet this play may also be read from a feminist perspective, as Dürrenmatt considers the agency of women in society, the lack of choices or opportunities available, and the dehumanisation they may face when society deems their actions to be wrongful. *Der Besuch der alten Dame* questions not only whether vengeance or justice can ever be bought, but also examines perception and sight, what makes an individual human, and the nature of love. Employing a variety of stylistic and theatrical techniques in this play, Dürrenmatt notably relies on repetition, contradiction, black comedy, and Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*, distancing the audience and reader from the play's content to allow them to better understand and critique the play's themes.

Students

Although the play's complex language and alienating style may prove challenging for some students, its social critique of human behaviour still remains relevant today, and may even provide links to other topic areas on the German A-level syllabus, such as social responsibility, poverty, the law and justice, or ethics in the media and the press. *Der Besuch der alten Dame* may appeal to students of drama, history, politics and philosophy, or those interested in pursuing careers in journalism or politics.

Useful passages

1. Themes

Verfremdungseffekt

While not strictly speaking a theme of the play, this dramatic technique is key to understanding how Dürrenmatt's text functions and what his intentions are. First developed by Brecht in the 1930s, this concept in performing arts involves the staging and performing of a dramatic work such a way that the audience is consciously aware of the strangeness of the play they are watching. Through constant estrangement, defamiliarization, and distancing, the audience may more clearly perceive the playwright's intentions. The often nameless or strangely named characters of the play are to some extent flat, and we are actively prevented from identifying with them or their feelings by the oddities in Dürrenmatt's text. This is exemplified particularly in the naming of Claire's entourage, and in the bizarre scenes where she and Alfred III revisit the haunts of their youth, acting out love scenes as if they were younger, and as if Claire had not already demanded his death.

'Ich gebe euch eine Milliarde und kaufe mir dafür die Gerechtigkeit'

Returning to her home town as a wealthy and powerful widow, Claire Zachanassian seeks to right the wrong done to her by Alfred III when they were young lovers. He spurned her, marrying another woman, which forced Claire to flee the town with her child in the wake of a failed paternity suit, become a prostitute, and work her way back up through society by marrying for money. Now returning to her hometown, her personal '*Bordell*', she offers the Gulleners a vast bequest on the condition they kill the man who wronged her. Initially, they refuse, but over the course of the play we witness the corruption of representatives of social institutions from the priest, to the schoolmaster, and the policeman, as they rationalize Claire's request, convincing themselves that their killing III would be just. This is foreshadowed throughout the play by Claire hiring two former gangsters and saving them from the death penalty, and her positioning over the stage in the second act, a puppet-master pulling all the strings, dangling the prospect of wealth and prosperity before the townspeople to the point where they all become complicit in her scheming.

2. Characters

Alfred Ill: A shopkeeper, and the town of Gullen's most beloved citizen, Ill is married to Mathilde and father to a son and a daughter. Named as the mayor's successor towards the beginning of the play, he falls from the top of the hierarchy of popularity in the town once his former lover Claire arrives, demanding his death. Ill is an emotional character who shifts from confidence and self-assurance at the start of the play, to paranoid and eventually resigned to his fate as the play ends. He is betrayed by everyone he knows, even his wife and children, all because of the lure of money.

Claire Zchanassian: Someone who has known both the highs and lows of society, Claire was Kläri Wäscher as a young girl in Gullen. She and Alfred Ill were lovers, but he cast her aside to marry the daughter of a shopkeeper. As she returns to her hometown as a wealthy old woman, she now takes revenge on Ill for spurning her in favour of money and profit by turning his friends and family against him with the promise of wealth. During the play, Claire is presented as a scheming and dangerous eccentric who has lost her humanity through bitter experience. This is shown through her artificial hair, hand, and leg, as well as her bringing a coffin ready for Ill to Gullen, and her owning a black panther (her nickname for her former lover), who escapes yet is shot during the course of the play.

3. Language

Throughout this play, Dürrenmatt makes use of language to provoke a sense of defamiliarization and confusion in his audience in order to highlight the tragi-comic nature of self-interest and social betrayal in the play. Relying on clichés of advertising, sing-song antiquated vocabulary, strange repetitions, as well as the disorientating fusion of outrageous slapstick and classic Greek tragedy, *Der Besuch der alten Dame* unsettles its audience and grabs their attention. From the very opening scene when Gulleners exchange a range of descriptions of their town, life, and social standing, language is manipulated by Dürrenmatt to great effect. The bizarre rhyming names of Claire's entourage dehumanizes them as victims of her wealth and control, and the odd repetitions of sounds and childish pet names add a sinister feel to dialogue in which no ugly words are spoken, despite the dark subject matter. The citizens of Gullen frequently chant together in one voice, echoing the words of authority figures, and the representatives of social institutions, tempted into betraying Ill, use language to justify and convince themselves that they are doing right thing. Ill is powerless to fight this, unable to use language to regain some control over his fate; he dies dignified, but in silence.

4. Form and genre

In an extremely distinctive final scene, Dürrenmatt has the Gulleners assemble on stage in two choruses as might be found in an ancient Greek tragedy. Although the content of the speech is still modern, albeit with the strange inflections of vocabulary as seen in the rest of the play, the style of this scene is alarmingly different to the rest of the play – a further example of defamiliarization on Dürrenmatt's part. Traditionally embodying a collective morality towards the protagonist, the Greek chorus's role is altered here: in an odd moment of innocent cynicism, the chorus praises the '*heilige Gut des Wohlstandes*' just after the corpse of Ill has been removed from the stage. This allows the audience to perceive the hypocrisies and cruelties of Western affluence and capitalism, through an ancient theatrical trope. The ancient Greek-style chorus reinforces the timelessness of the themes of greed, power, revenge, corruption, love, hatred, death, justice, crime, and punishment dealt with by Dürrenmatt in his play. The fact that the location of Gullen and the time in which the play is supposed to be set are never specified during the course of the drama likewise indicates not only the play's timeless relevance, but the ubiquity with which such themes as this play's are found in any time and place.

Author biography

Born in 1921 in Switzerland to a Protestant minister and his wife, Friedrich Dürrenmatt initially studied painting at the University of Zürich, despite his strong interest in philosophy, mathematics and ancient languages. Although he was not particularly successful academically, his bohemian lifestyle enabled him to establish connections in the world of art and literature, and in 1952 he published his first short story. Abandoning his studies, Dürrenmatt married the actress Lotti Geissler, becoming a prolific writer of novels, plays, criticism, and radio dramas. *Der Besuch der alten Dame*, first performed in 1956 when the playwright was aged 35, remained Dürrenmatt's most successful and critically acclaimed work in his lifetime, ensuring his lasting reputation as one of German language literature's most well regarded twentieth century playwrights.

Further reading

- Loram, Ian C., ““Der Besuch der alten Dame” and “The Visit””, in *Monatshefte* 53:1 (1961), pp. 15–21
- Matzkowski, Bernd, *Der Besuch der alten Dame: Textanalyse und Interpretation* (Hollfeld: C. Bange Verlag GmbH, 2011)
- Reed, Eugene E., ‘Dürrenmatt’s “*Der Besuch der alten Dame*”: A Study in the Grotesque’, in *Monatshefte* 53:1 (1961), pp. 9–14
- Sandford, John E., ‘The Anonymous Characters in Dürrenmatt’s *Der Besuch der alten Dame*’, in *German Life and Letters*, 24:4 (1971), pp. 335–345
- Whitton, Kenneth S. *The Theatre of Friedrich Dürrenmatt* (London: Berg Publishers, 1980)

Useful websites

- <http://www.press.uchicago.edu/books/durrenmatt/index.html>



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DER VORLESER
BERNHARD SCHLINK, 1995

DER VORLESER, BERNHARD SCHLINK, 1995 (DIOGENES TASCHENBUCH EDITION: 2003)

An internationally and critically acclaimed novel, *Der Vorleser* tackles the Holocaust and questions of guilt and responsibility, exploring the difficulties experienced by post-war generations in Germany as they try to come to terms with the events in their nation's past. The novel tells the story of Michael Berg's relationship with an older woman, Hanna Schmitz, who turns out to have been a former guard at Auschwitz and later hangs herself.

Why teach this text?

Part of this text's commercial and critical success, both in Germany and around the world, is its accessible and unadorned style. Schlink's prose is clear and free from philosophical rambling, enabling readers to get close to the characters. Nevertheless, the novel engages with serious questions of human nature, morality, guilt, and the balance between understanding and forgiveness, leaving us certain of only one thing: nothing is ever simply black and white.

Ways to read this text

A provocative vision of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, this text acts as a useful stimulus for discussions of the Holocaust and of other atrocities, such as conflicts in the Middle East and the Armenian genocide, addressing themes of morality and personal responsibility. As *Der Vorleser* explores the blurred lines between victims and participants in historical traumatic events, we see the varying responses of different generations to these events, as well as how exactly individuals and nations may try to come to terms with the past, through normalisation or memorialisation, for example. Schlink's novel also raises the question of whether popular culture is an appropriate medium for presenting the Holocaust, while encouraging us to consider the ethical implications of drawing parallels between this atrocity and others. Through this text, we may consider the social taboo of the underage Michael's relationship with Hanna, as well as the importance of education and whether or not a person may differentiate between right and wrong inherently or only through being taught. After the collapse of Communism and Capitalism at the end of the Cold War and the subsequent rise in nationalism and tribal rivalry, Schlink looks to the past in his novel and asks us to consider whether fear of what is different and taking advantage of others' weakness is in fact inherent to human nature.

Students

Given the many issues raised by this text, it will appeal to students interested in a variety of fields, including history, politics, ethics, philosophy, and sociology. Its exploration of Hanna's illiteracy and its potential consequence may attract students interested in working in education and women's rights. The Oscar-winning 2008 English language film adaptation may interest students of cinema, while also providing a different way of approaching the text.

1. Themes

'Als ich fünfzehn war, hatte ich Gelbsucht. Die Krankheit begann im Herbst und endete im Frühjahr. Je kälter und dunkler das alte Jahr wurde, desto schwächer wurde ich.'

The opening line to *Der Vorleser* is ripe for symbolic interpretation. Beginning with the narrator as a boy in his sick bed suffering from jaundice, yet he as soon as he goes out for a walk and is violently sick. A middle-aged woman helps clear away his vomit, washes him, and sends him home. This is Michael's first encounter with Hanna, and in the days that follow he cannot stop thinking about her. Questions arise: what should we make of Michael's illness, given that in German literature especially, it often indicates an outsider, moral depravity, or an excess of imagination (e.g. Thomas Mann's *Tod in Venedig*). Or is the narrator's illness a metaphor for German society in the 1950s? We could interpret Michael's being sick as symbolic of a society beset by guilt and shame – 'Schuld und Scham' are words that recur frequently throughout *Der Vorleser* – as a result of the war. Hanna's cleaning up of his vomit would be particularly appropriate in this case, given she, more than anybody else, stands for the repression of the past. She has no history, is obsessed with hygiene, and is keen to wash away the past.

2. Characters

Michael: As the novel's narrator, Michael is quite unreliable and it often seems that we must read and understand the story he tells better than he does himself. He frequently represses memories of the past, evading and avoiding key elements of his tale (most notably Hanna's illiteracy). He fails to notice the benefits of his present-day perspective or else chooses not to make use of it. Thus we as readers are enabled to judge not only Hanna as a perpetrator of Nazi crimes, but also Michael who paints her as a victim in an attempt to defend her through his clearly biased account of the events of the past. Does the experience of learning to read better make us 'better people'? Or does this allow us to become more aware of the ambiguities of moral questions raised in *Der Vorleser*?

Hanna: For Michael, Hanna's illiteracy equals innocence not ignorance, both in the sense of lack of guilt and an infantile innocence of all the 'evil' in the world. Knowledge, in Michael's view, does not make people 'better', it simply burdens them with the horrors of past and present. Once she learns to read, Hanna acquires this guilt and is destroyed by it. We are forced to ask whether her suicide

represents an attempt at paying the price for her actions or an evasion of responsibility. Nevertheless Hanna's illiteracy acts as a metaphor for an explanation as to why some people turn to evil. Can a lack of education really be why a person fails to treat others with respect? Must we really learn to read and write before we can be expected to behave morally? Or is literacy actually the only guarantee that anyone will behave morally?

3. Language

The language and style of *Der Vorleser* was one aspect that received high praise when it was first published. Abandoning the typically brooding and introspective style of many other German novels, Schlink's prose is clean, simple, and easy to follow. He is not given to florid digressive passages of philosophical abstraction nor does his writing fall into the stereotype of German literature being 'hard work'. This accessibility through Schlink's language and the potential for the novel to universalize the Holocaust – as has been the case with many popular culture representations of the horrors of the Second World War, such as *Sophie's Choice* (1982) and *Schindler's List* (1994) – raises serious questions. Is popular literature or film a suitable medium for the presentation of the Holocaust? Or is it better that such a difficult and fraught topic be dealt with only in history books or documentaries?

4. Form and genre

The novel's three parts are written from the present-day perspective of the narrator, Michael Berg, as he looks back from the early 1990s. Part one takes place in the late 1950s. The narrator is fifteen, and his world revolves his family, schooling, childhood illness, and, increasingly, the thirty-six year old Hanna Schmitz. In part two, the year is 1965, the last year of the Auschwitz trials and the start of the student protests. Michael, who is now a law student, observes Hanna on trial for her role as a guard in an outpost of Auschwitz concentration camp and the death of a large number of women on a forced march.

Realising that she is illiterate, he believes this may have led to her criminal actions (he speculates that she became a guard so that she would not have had to take a promotion and reveal her secret), and wonders if he should pass on this knowledge to the court. In part three, Hanna learns to read and write in prison with the assistance of tape recordings of canonical texts of German literature made by Michael, who never visits her. On the morning of her early release she hangs herself. Eighteen years have passed since her incarceration, making it 1983. A decade goes by before Michael writes his story in post-reunification Germany. In a novel of such ambiguity, which shows us that nothing is black and white, we are forced to consider how ordinary people may act in extraordinary situations. Confronting issues of human nature, morality, guilt, and the balance between understanding and forgiveness, this unsettling yet compelling novel is a testament to attempting to come to terms with the past, as well as a provocation for us to ask uncomfortable questions about ourselves and others, which are still relevant in today's world.

Author biography

Bernhard Schlink was born to a German father and a Swiss mother in 1944, in the small town of Bethel near to the city of Bielefeld. His father had been forced out of his position as a preacher and professor at the Theological Faculty at Giessen University just over a decade earlier, having renounced the Protestant Church's support for Hitler. This eventually landed Schlink's father in concentration camps. Such moral integrity in the face of so many other Germans' complicity with Nazism – is one that clearly shapes his son's best-selling novel. After the war, Bernhard Schlink studied law at West Berlin's Free University, graduating in 1968. He became a judge at the Constitutional Court of the federal state of North Rhine-Westphalia in 1988. Then, in 1992, he was professor for public law and the philosophy of law at the Humboldt University in Berlin. Alongside his academic and legal career, Schlink has also published ten works of literature between 1962 and 2010.

Further reading

- Johnson Sally and Frank Finlay, '(Il)literacy and (Im)morality in Bernhard Schlink's *The Reader*'. In: *Written Language and Literacy*, 4:2 (2001), pp. 195–214.
- Klöster, Juliane, Bernhard Schlink. *Der Vorleser*, Oldenbourg Interpretationen, 98, (Oldenbourg, 2000).
- Schlink, Bernhard, and Helmut Moers, *Interpretationshilfe Deutsch. Der Vorleser* (Stark Verlagsgesellschaft, 2000).
- Schmitz, Helmut, 'The Return of the Past: Post-Unification Representations of National Socialism: Bernhard Schlink's *Der Vorleser* and Ulla Berkéwicz's *Engel sind schwarz und weiß*'. In: Clare Flanagan and Stuart Taberner (eds.), *1949/1989: Cultural Perspectives on Division and Unity in East and West*, German Monitor 50 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), pp. 259–76.
- Taberner, Stuart, 'The Morality of Loving a Concentration Camp Guard. Teaching Bernhard Schlink's *Der Vorleser*'. In: *Deutsch Lernen und Lehren*, March 2002

Useful websites

- On the Holocaust:
<http://www.holocaust-education.de/>



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GOOD BYE, LENIN!
DIRECTED BY
WOLFGANG BECKER, 2003

GOOD BYE, LENIN! DIR. WOLFGANG BECKER, 2003

Following the life of Alex Kerner and his family between October 1989 and German Reunification the following year, *Good Bye, Lenin!* is a critically acclaimed coming-of-age tragicomedy that simultaneously explores familial emotions and great historical events. Alex's mother, devoted to the Socialist East German state, has lost her husband and after a heart attack leaves her in a coma for eight months, she wakes up in a world where the Berlin Wall has fallen. To protect her from the shock and avoid a second, potentially fatal heart attack, Alex decides to keep her in the dark, pretending that the GDR still exists and nothing has changed.

Why teach this film?

Now seen as a modern classic, this film offers a way into understanding German society towards the end of the twentieth century through its engaging yet pleasantly absurd story. As Alex attempts to make history stand still, we are presented with a tragi-comic exploration of political upheaval and personal crises. As the film gently mocks the tenets of Communism and Capitalism, the Kerner family embodies Germany's struggle to reconcile with its past and present.

Ways to read this film

Primarily, this film can be seen as an examination of social history and political change through both a macrocosmic and a microcosmic lens, allowing audiences to gain an insight into life in East Germany before and after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Yet the film also explores many themes which tie into other areas of the A-level specification, such as the nature of family roles and responsibilities, political activism, immigration, and the reliability of the media. Becker's film looks at both the nature and examples of social stereotyping.

Students

It goes without saying that this film will appeal to students interested in modern European history, and the examination of individuals' lives amid a time of massive political change would also interest students of politics and economics. However, the nuanced balance of tragedy and comedy in the film could appeal to students interested in drama or theatre studies. The moral questions explored in the film around the treatment of Alex's mother would make appealing not only to students interested in philosophy or ethics, but perhaps even those interested in pursuing careers in healthcare, therapy, or social work.

1. Themes

3:35 – 4:30

This key scene at the beginning of the film establishes a foundation on which many of the film's most important themes are built. We gain an insight into Alex's relationship with his mother, Christiana, when he was a child, as well as learning something of his hopes for the future. The style of the film here, the transition from super 8 film to a standard cinematic shot, highlights the difference between childhood and the reality of adulthood. Clear parallels can be drawn here between nostalgic reflection on the past and the harsher, clearer reality of the present. In this brief scene, themes of old and new are set up, particularly through Alex's reflections about Sigmund Jähn, the first East German in space, alongside themes of familial relationships and personal hopes and dreams. These ideas recur throughout the film, as the viewer reflects on the extent to which we each attempt to create our own perfect world, and how far this is actually possible. Alex creates his mother's perfect world, foraging in bins for former GDR products and creating elaborately faked news reports with his friend Denis, but at what cost? He (somewhat ironically) states, '*Die DDR, die ich für meine Mutter schuf, wurde immer mehr die DDR, die ich mir vielleicht gewünscht hätte*'. Perhaps, in the end, the love and support of one's family is what truly matters.

2. Language

55:39 – 104:31

In this scene, the family celebrates Christiana's birthday, after which she and Alex watch a fabricated news report together to explain the appearance of an enormous Coca Cola advertisement on a nearby building. This film exemplifies Alex's use of language in the film in order to create and manipulate reality for his mother (and himself). By altering the reality of post-*Wende* East Berlin so that it is aligned with his mother's recollection of an earlier socialist society. The viewer therefore questions what reality is, and to what extent the world we live in is fabricated and constructed. Perhaps there is no such thing as an objective reality, only different realities founded on our beliefs and preconceptions, as well as the information we receive from others. As Alex affirms, '*die Wahrheit ist nur eine zweifelhafte Angelegenheit*'. Throughout the film he ironically mirrors the propaganda efforts of the former GDR, creating a fictional reality for his mother, providing the viewer with a microcosmic insight into political spin on a family level.

3. Characters

Alex: The protagonist and narrator of the film, Alex mediates our understanding of events through an ironic, sardonic, and witty voiceover. Through this the viewer gains an insight into the tumult and chaos surrounding German reunification, as well as how tumultuous and chaotic family relationships can be. Alex's commentary on political, social, and historical events arguably presents them in a less dramatized way than a documentary or news report may (although the film does include archive footage, which we will come to later). The fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the GDR are not presented in particularly spectacular or melodramatic way. This suggests not only the imperfections and flaws of the GDR, but also of West German capitalism: both fall under Alex's ironic commentary, which remains distant and unemotional as far as political events are concerned. The film focuses instead, through Alex, on the experiences of individuals in the Kerner family, encouraging the viewer's empathy via universal themes of familial conflicts and relationships.

Christiana: Alex's mother is the subject of the film's opening scene, a flashback to her interrogation at home by the Stasi after her husband's flight from the GDR. We later learn that Alex's father did not run away with another woman, as Christiana had always claimed, but rather his escape was planned, as Christiana was due to follow after with the children. However, her fear of being arrested when applying for an exit visa prevents her from fleeing the country, and so she devotes herself to life in the GDR. After her stroke and subsequent coma, Christiana is presented with a fabrication of a socialist world that no longer exists. The more she discovers about this world, the

more elaborate and farcical Alex's pretences must become in order to prevent her from discovering the truth. When she first ventures outside their flat, she witnesses a statue of Lenin being flown away by helicopter, but interestingly she does not (or cannot) follow. Stepping into the real world away from Alex's lies and distortions, allows Christiana to begin to face the truth of her life and her situation regarding her husband, her family, and her country.

4. Cinematography and style

The director's use of comedy, slapstick, and farce is undeniably effective in portraying the chaos and turmoil of Berlin at this period in history, as well as some of the hypocrisies of the former GDR regime. This is a film built on lies, a world created around distortions of the truth, which will inevitably fall apart sooner or later – an apt parallel of the former GDR. The director makes effective use of news reports and archived documentary footage during the film, which allows him to also play with how the truth is represented. The viewer is also reminded that the film is about real events, although we are shown how easy it can be to distort and present reality differently through the media. Montage is another tool of the director's which works alongside documentary footage to juxtapose not only the two different sides of Berlin at the time of the *Wende*, but also two contradictory political regimes. The colourless shots of supermarkets in the former East contrasted with the bright colours of the new goods in western supermarkets is a good example of this, yet the metaphor is more profound: this juxtaposition offers the viewer a glimpse into the pitfalls of each system, as the lack of choice or change in the East is contrasted with the excesses and potential wastefulness of the West.

Further reading

- Cooke, Paul and Chris Homewood, eds., *New Directions in German Cinema* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2011)
- Creech, Jennifer, 'A Few Good Men: Gender Ideology, and Narrative Politics in *The Lives of Others* and *Good Bye, Lenin!*' in *Women in German Yearbook*, 25 (2009), pp. 100–126
- Downing, Crystal, 'Staging Ideology and Love in *Good Bye, Lenin!*' in *Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 43:2 (2013), pp. 5–16
- Godeanu-Kenworthy, Oana, 'Deconstructing Ostalgia: The National Past between Commodity and Simulacrum in Wolfgang Becker's *Good Bye, Lenin!*' in *Journal of European Studies*, 41:2 (2011), pp. 161–177
- Hodgkin, Nick, *Screening the East: Heimat, Memory and Nostalgia in German Film since 1989* (2011)
- O'Brien, Mary-Elizabeth, *Post-Wall German Cinema and National History: Utopianism and Dissent* (London: Camden House, 2012)
- Prager, Brad, 'Passing Time Since the *Wende*: Recent German Films on Unification', in *German Politics & Society*, 28:1 (2010), pp. 95–110

Useful websites

- <http://germanfilm.co.uk>
- <http://www.filmeducation.org/pdf/film/GoodbyeL.pdf>



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

DAS LEBEN DER ANDEREN
DIRECTED BY
FLORIAN HENCKEL VON
DONNERSMARCK, 2006

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Set in East Berlin in 1984, Donnersmarck's first full length feature film is both a human drama and a political thriller. As the Stasi begins surveillance on the ostensibly compliant socialist playwright, Georg Dreyman and his partner Christa-Maria Sieland, an actress, we witness the extents to which state security in former East Germany went in order to ensure control over its citizens. Ordinary people spy on friends and strangers, either through coercion or of their own volition; fear, blackmail, and oppression loom large; and human tragedy comes to the fore under the iron grip of a paranoid regime which drives its artists and creative citizens to exile, compromise, or suicide. No coincidence, perhaps, that it opens in 1984.

Why teach this film?

After the comedies of *Sonnenallee* and *Good Bye, Lenin!*, *Das Leben der Anderen* was significantly the first major drama made about the former East German state after the fall of the Berlin Wall seventeen years earlier. Less tinged with nostalgia for an ideologically divided Germany than these earlier films, *Das Leben der Anderen* takes a cold, hard look at life under the former GDR and the oppression of the Stasi. Internationally praised and critically acclaimed, this film has firmly established itself as one of the most significant German language films of the past decade, winning not only an Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film, but also seven Deutscher Filmpreis awards.

Ways to read this film?

Historical drama, historical thriller, human tragedy, this film could be categorised in a wide variety of ways. *Das Leben der Anderen* closely focuses on a personal story against the backdrop of totalitarian repression, sinister power games, and shifty political manoeuvring. Although criticised by some for its bleakness and occasionally taking liberties with what was possible under the former GDR, the film is a generally accurate peek through the cracks of former East Germany.

Students

This film will appeal to students interested in modern European history, particularly thanks to its examination of the inner workings of state security under a politically oppressive regime. Students of economics and politics may also be interested, particularly those concerned with civil rights and issues surrounding freedom of speech. However, the consideration of the lives of people on both sides of the fence, so to speak, of a totalitarian regime, as well as the balance of the good and the bad in all characters in the film, will appeal to students interested in theatre or drama studies, as well as philosophy or journalism.

1. Themes

Sonate vom guten Menschen

Music plays an important role in this film and was in fact one of the director's inspirations for making the film. Donnersmarck did not initially intend to make a film about the Stasi, but was moved by a quote from Lenin and not being able to listen to music often: "It affects your nerves, makes you want to say stupid, nice things, and stroke the heads of people who could create such beauty while living in this vile hell." A key moment in the development not only of Gerd Wiesler's character, but also of the themes of freedom and surveillance is when Georg Dreyman plays a piece of music by Beethoven for Christa-Maria – these two characters representing artistic resistance to the oppression of the GDR. Unbeknownst to them, listening in the attic is Wiesler, who is moved to tears by the beauty of the music. We, the viewers, watch as he begins to transform from an outside observer of Georg and Christa-Maria into part of their lives. We wonder to what extent this music makes him desire freedom from the regime he represents; the music affects Wiesler as we witness how the regime is affecting the lives of artists. This balance, evoked many times throughout the film, in the yin and yang of characters' lives, the secrecy of surveillance, and the resistance to the regime, is likewise an important theme in *Das Leben der Anderen*.

2. Language

Opening scene

Language, speech, and silence are all intrinsic aspects of *Das Leben der Anderen*: what is said and not said, what is shared and what is overheard, all drive the story forward, ratcheting up the tension as the film progresses. As the film begins, we are faced with two scenes which are intercut with one another: an interrogation, and a later training class given by Wiesler for aspiring agents of the Stasi. Having told the students how to deduce whether an interrogation subject is telling a lie, Wiesler judges a student's question to be too compassionate or empathetic, and a mark is placed next to this student's name on the register. Through its use of language, what is spoken and left unspoken, this scene encapsulates not only the fear inspired by the Stasi and their ruthless uncompromising interrogation of GDR citizens, but also the extent to which

surveillance was carried out within GDR society: even in the headquarters of the secret police. Language and the layering of multiple scenes heightens the tension and the intensity of oppression in the film itself and in the historical period shown.

3. Characters

Gerd Wiesler (HGW XX/7): Devoted agent of the Stasi, Wiesler is, at the beginning of *Das Leben der Anderen*, the very embodiment of the agency he works for: an authority figure, lecturing others on surveillance techniques, isolated, austere, and focused, both in work and in the outside world. He is a true believer in the GDR and its secret service's means of enforcing the government's ideology. Setting up an observation post in the attic of Georg Dreymann's apartment building to spy on the playwright, his girlfriend, and their friends, Wiesler begins his calculating surveillance of the "lives of others", which will eventually lead to his redemption. Through his secret access to Georg and Christa-Maria's lives, Wiesler becomes inextricably bound to them despite the fact that they hardly share a single scene in the entire film. As a man who has sacrificed his personal life for his country – spending his evenings alone with a microwave meal or in the company of a prostitute – Wiesler has also lost some of his humanity along the way. Ironically, it is the infringement of human rights he engages in by spying for the Stasi which paves the way for him to regain some humanity. He spends the next twenty years after the main events of the film steaming open letters or delivering mail, only to be finally vindicated for the moment of compassion which costs him his career in the Stasi by the dedication in Georg Dreymann's book four years after the fall of the Berlin Wall: "*HGW XX/7 gewidmet, in Dankbarkeit*".

Georg Dreymann and Christa-Maria Sieland:

Christa-Maria and Georg are prominent figures in the theatre world of the GDR, sympathetic to the dissident views of many other artists in East Germany, who nonetheless make concessions to the government. Georg toes the party line regarding the content of his plays, and Christa-Maria reluctantly takes favours from political figures and submits to their corrupt demands. As the film progresses, these sacrifices take their toll on the characters' relationship. Interestingly, as Wiesler becomes more and more engrossed in his surveillance of the playwright and the actress, he becomes more like an actor playing a role as opposed to a convinced and committed government agent. At the same time, Georg becomes the cover operator, the man engaged in secrecy and covert action. However, any control that Georg believes he has over the situation is an illusion, just like the GDR's control over their citizens: eventually things come to breaking point. In a moment of cruel irony, when Wiesler has already secretly removed incriminating evidence of Christa-Maria's betrayal of Georg from their flat, the actress flees the building, running into the path of an oncoming truck, which ends her life: '*der Einsatz ist beendet*' (Obersleutnant Anton Grubiz)

4. Cinematography and style

The style and cinematography of *Das Leben der Anderen* is perfectly suited to conveying the claustrophobic and oppressive atmosphere of GDR society under Stasi surveillance through a muted colour palette. The mournful soundtrack mirrors the mood of society and the blending of diegetic and non-diegetic sound over the course of the film parallels the intertwining and eventual meeting of Wiesler's world and that of Georg and Christa-Maria. Tightly edited and paced, the film builds up tension and discomfort for the characters and for the viewer, as we witness Wiesler's awakening from loyal state agent to betrayer of GDR ideals and sympathiser with those he has been spying on.

Further reading

- Berghahn, Daniela, 'Remembering the Stasi in a Fairy Tale of Redemption: Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's *Das Leben der Anderen*', in *Oxford German Studies*, 38:3 (2009), pp. 321–333
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- O'Brien, Mary-Elizabeth, *Post-Wall German Cinema and National History: Utopianism and Dissent* (London: Camden House, 2012)

- Prager, Brad, 'Passing Time Since the *Wende*: Recent German Films on Unification', in *German Politics & Society*, 28:1 (2010), pp. 95–110
- Westphal, Wendy, "'Truer than the Real Thing": "Real" and "Hyperreal" Representations of the Past in *Das Leben der Anderen*', in *German Studies Review*, 35:1 (2012), pp. 97–111

Useful websites

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- <http://www.bpb.de/system/files/pdf/NSUEAK.pdf>
- https://www.goethe.de/resources/files/pdf72/Das_Leben_der_Anderen.pdf
- <https://www.tynesidecinema.co.uk/documents/view/5294b6097cbb88d01d0018fc>