

Media of Conspiracy: Love and Surveillance in Fritz Lang and Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck

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To a large extent, the history of conspiracies has been a history of media, not only in reality but also according to the folklore of conspiracy theories. Techniques of surveillance, of secret message transfer and interception, of imperceptible manipulation and control, are the matter of which conspiracies—real or imagined—are made. Secret letters, encrypted messages, their interception, clandestine messengers, cameras and microphones, hypnotic messages from TV or by phone—all of these secret uses of media are essential elements of conspiratorial communication or manipulations. Not only does effective conspiracy require the use of media, but countless latter-day conspiracy theories also hinge on them. Thus the notorious Jewish world conspiracy, such as it is fantasized in the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, is presented not only as a political and financial network but as a media agenda, whose principal goal is to manipulate worldwide opinion by secretly controlling newspapers and publishing companies.¹ A more contemporary example: technical media such as radio, telephone, and television have forever been suspected of being used for surveillance or some form of mind control, be it to subliminally influence consumers through hidden TV advertising or to politically brainwash citizens via

1. *Protocols of the Meetings of the Learned Elders of Zion*, trans. Victor E. Marsden (London: Britons Publishing Society, 1925), protocol 2.

so-called mainstream media.² As media enable and inform our perception and our communication, as they surreptitiously intervene in almost every aspect of everyday life, they represent perfect tools of manipulation and thus ideal candidates for any kind of conspiratorial suspicion. That which shapes our relationship to the world may also distort it: media, as their name indicates, come *between* us and other human beings, *between* us and the world. This is why media are, in Michel Serres's sense of the word, parasitical: "There are channels, and thus there must be noise. . . . This is the paradox of the parasite. . . . The parasite is the essence of relation. . . . The parasite is being and non-being, relation and non-relation. He is a noise of the system that can only be supplanted by noise."³ The conspiratorial suspicion directed toward media dwells exactly on this paradox: the condition of transmission of information, the medium, is at the same time the condition of noise, of nontransmission or erroneous transmission. This is why many conspiracy theories and much fiction about conspiracies are centered on media and media effects. For example, Friedrich Schiller's novel *The Ghost Seer* (1787–89), dealing with the eighteenth century's fear of conspiracies by Jesuits, Freemasons, and Illuminati, unfolds a lurid panoply of media manipulations: messages passed on with unnatural speed, apparitions of ghosts, stolen letters, and magic images.⁴ In a yet more modern example, the mother of all conspiracy films, John Frankenheimer's *Manchurian Candidate* (1962), famously merges the phantom of Chinese brainwashing techniques with the all-too-Western form of manipulation through the new medium of television.⁵ The conspiracy here is mainly a twofold media effect—hypnosis both by the ominous Chinese mind control and by the influence of television—that brings the McCarthyesque figure Iselin to power. If conspiracy fiction and conspiracy theories are fantasies on the dark side of politics and society, their fixation on media's uncanniness—media being paradoxically familiar and strange—reveals indeed a constitutive, hidden side of power, its *mediality*.

2. For an early and almost classical example of media criticism as conspiracy theory see Vance Packard, *The Hidden Persuaders* (New York: McCay, 1957).

3. Michel Serres, *The Parasite*, trans. Lawrence A. Schehr (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 79.

4. See, in this issue, Stefan Andriopoulos, "Occult Conspiracies: Spirits and Secret Societies in Schiller's *Ghost Seer*," which analyzes these media effects in Schiller's novel.

5. Torsten Hahn succinctly places *The Manchurian Candidate* in the context of contemporaneous media paranoia, such as Packard represents ("Z wie Zombie oder V wie Verräter? Manchurian Candidate—Sleeper—Subliminal Man: Mind Control und Literatur," in *Freund, Feind und Verrat: Das politische Feld der Medien*, ed. Cornelia Epping-Jäger, Torsten Hahn, and Erhard Schüttpelz (Cologne: Dumont, 2004), 118–37). See also Timothy Melley's excellent analysis in this issue, "Brainwashed! Conspiracy Theory and Ideology in the Postwar United States."

Power has always relied on media and has been constituted by media effects. Government not only consists in overt media effects such as the visual and textual representation of power but is equally based on less obvious medial procedures such as the recording and archiving of data or the reception and transmission of information—to name just a few basic bureaucratic techniques. One of power's most important and yet most disturbing media techniques is surveillance. Surveillance—in the broad sense of an imperceptible yet omnipresent monitoring through optical and acoustic devices—constitutes power as a media effect by the differential between the one who is seen or overheard and the one who is watching and intercepting. Michel Foucault's use of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon as the model of modern power indicates that power relies on the mere effect of being able to see while remaining unseen.⁶ The primary relation of power, to follow Foucault's argument, is thus the relation between the one seeing and the one being seen: "Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power."⁷ The modern obsession with conspiracies and their secret use of media, however, suggests limitations of Foucault's model. The person in the Panopticon knows that he or she is being observed, potentially uninterruptedly—and therein lies the disciplining power that Foucault analyzes. In modern conspiracy theories or fictions, media anxiety focuses on an even more uncanny structure: surveillance whose victims are unaware of being seen and overheard. The "dark powers" that conspiracy baiters are everywhere trying to uncover, especially in ineluctable elements of everyday life such as money, water, or media,⁸ are thus the very darkness of power: its invisible mechanisms and its reliance on an asymmetry of perception between the powerful and the powerless. Conspiracy theories and fictions see surveillance and interception precisely as the dark side of power, be it in the form of a state monitoring its citizens or that of sinister and subversive counter-sovereignties, such as the Jewish or communist world conspiracies.

The long history of secret state surveillance—from baroque listening devices designed by the Jesuit Athanasius Kircher, through the mail censorship

6. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin, 1991), 170–77, 200–203.

7. *Ibid.*, 201.

8. For the default objects of conspiracy thinking—secret signs on the dollar bill, the fluoridation of water, or media—see Peter Knight, "Introduction: A Nation of Conspiracy," in *Conspiracy Nation: The Politics of Paranoia in Postwar America*, ed. Peter Knight (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 1–17. For a thorough interpretation of the allegedly secret signs on the one-dollar bill see also Jakob Tanner, "The Conspiracy of the Invisible Hand: Anonymous Market Mechanisms and Dark Powers," in this issue.

of the notorious “black chambers” in eighteenth-century Europe, to the secret agents of nineteenth-century police and today’s omnipresent video monitoring of public space—cannot be retraced here.⁹ This history reflects the conspiratorial side of state power itself: its continuous reliance on secrecy and its intrusion into private communications. The *arcana imperii* of the modern state are, it seems, to a great extent medial arcana, secret interceptions and encroachments on its citizens’ privacy. This is why the practices and institutions of surveillance are the lurid emblem of what could be called a “state paranoia,” a conspiratorial thinking both by the state and by the citizens. State paranoia goes both ways. On the one hand, state surveillance is claimed to be necessary to monitor the political behavior of the population for subversive behavior, conspiratorial activities, or treason. The McCarthy era, as much as Stalinism or the Nazi regime, but also the secret police system in the German Democratic Republic (GDR), the notorious *Staatssicherheit*, were instances of intense paranoia in the government. State paranoia, however, finds its reverse side in the citizens’ anxiety in the face of a ruthless, omniscient, and manipulative regime. State paranoia in citizens is the permanent fear—whether justified or not—of being monitored, bugged, and controlled by a state power that acknowledges neither civil rights nor protection of privacy. While the two faces of state paranoia might seem mirror images of each other, and often mutually provoke each other, I resist the temptation to investigate examples taken from the realm of current events. Instead, I would like to take a look at two films, both dealing with fantasies of conspiracies that turn around technologies of surveillance: Fritz Lang’s silent movie *Spione* (1928) and the tremendously successful film by Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, *Das Leben der Anderen* (2006).

Both films tell stories—more or less tragic—of a loving couple that confronts a hidden clandestine power. In Lang’s case, it is a politically indeterminable kind of world conspiracy, masterminded by a diabolical banker named Haghi; in Henckel von Donnersmarck’s case, it is the square and stuffy, nonetheless equally ruthless system of *Staatssicherheit* in the GDR spying on a Berlin artist couple. The overwhelming success of *Das Leben der Anderen*—it won seven nominations of the Deutscher Filmpreis and was awarded an Oscar as best foreign movie—can be only partially explained by the (reunited Germans’) need for a convincing aesthetic treatment of the GDR past. Rather, it reveals a more archetypal interest: the public’s enduring fascination with

9. See Thomas Y. Levin, Ursula Frohne, and Peter Weibel, eds., *CTRL [Space]: Rhetorics of Surveillance from Bentham to Big Brother* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002).

the subject of secret surveillance and the dark medial side of power. Both Lang and Henckel von Donnersmarck exploit and revive this fascination by a similar plot structure: they oppose the intimacy of the romantic couple to a political apparatus that intrudes into their togetherness and disrupts or even—as in the case of *Das Leben der Anderen*—destroys their intimacy and eventually their lives.

This classically tragic confrontation of love and politics, intimacy and impersonal power, is served by the assumption that love, the intimate *rapport sexuel* between two persons, precludes the political dimension. The political, goes this assumption, is about groups, not individuals; it is about hostility, not the singular involvement of two individuals. *Hostilitas*, according to Carl Schmitt the essence of the political, is the confrontation of collectives, not of two individual persons (whose conflict would be enmity [*inimicitia*], not hostility).¹⁰ As a consequence, the private and political realms must strictly be separated, hence the call for protecting the private realm (tastes, beliefs, communications, and secrets) from the grasp of the political. This is also why the blurring of these spheres appears either as a tragedy (the destruction of the private through political machinations) or as corruption (the infiltration of the political realm by private interests). Of course, both phenomena—tragedy and corruption—make for wonderful literary works. There is, however, a third possibility: that one partner of the loving dyad is in fact in the game not for personal but for political reasons. The togetherness of the loving two is disrupted by treason, by the secret intrusion of a third instance: the political. The possibility of this *Liebesverrat*—treason of love—blurs the distinction of the private and the political in a way that undermines the very idea of privacy, thereby opening an abyss of suspicion. Who is my lover really? What is he or she really after? Whose side is he or she on? Is he or she betraying my secrets? It is this mistrust at the heart of private and intimate relations that constitutes an important part of any kind of conspiratorial thinking. And it is precisely this suspicion that both films address, this unbearable blurring of the intimate and the political.

Lang's silent movie, shot in 1927 and based on a script by his wife, Thea von Harbou,¹¹ tells the story of two secret agents, the expatriate Russian beauty Sonja Barranikowa (Gerda Maurus) and the handsome German

10. For this important difference between hatred and enmity see Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1976).

11. For the historical context of the film shooting that immediately followed the release of *Metropolis* see Patrick McGilligan, *Fritz Lang: The Nature of the Beast* (New York: Faber and Faber, 1997), 134–40.

agent “Number 326” (Willy Fritsch), working against while falling in love with one another. While Number 326, whose real name is never given in the film, is a nimble and efficient agent in the service of the German police, Sonja is the honey trap for a conspiracy masterminded by the banker Haghi (Rudolph Klein-Rogge). The movie starts with a staccato of images and messages, frantic phone calls and radio waves, reporting an ominous series of crimes—all involving the use and abuse of media: the theft of important diplomatic papers, the assassination of a minister to seize files he was carrying, the murder of a messenger about to betray the conspiracy, and eventually the ridiculing of the police by the press. “Almighty God—what power is at play here?” asks the exasperated chief of police. “I” is the answer, given by a close-up of a diabolically leering man with a striking resemblance to Trotsky: Haghi, the mastermind of the shady conspiracy at the center of the film. Its headquarters is the Haghi Bank, a modernist building with a banking storefront and, in the back, a labyrinthine system of staircases and control rooms guarded by armed officers. Though Haghi’s ultimate political or financial interests remain unclear, his conspiracy obviously concerns international politics and the rather vague idea of “world domination”—the default telos of modern conspiracies. He steals a secret Japanese treaty, thereby possibly triggering a “war in the East.” What is much clearer, however, is Haghi’s method. He controls an immense empire of surveillance experts: agents—like Sonja—who seduce, manipulate, or spy on politicians or diplomats, the very spies of the film’s title. And Haghi is also a master of surveillance technology: he sits in a wheelchair at a huge desk with telephones, telegraph equipment, an intercom, microphones, and a slot that spits out written messages and newspapers (fig. 1). Via this interconnected control post, Haghi can communicate instantly with his agents and messengers for news about his ongoing secret operations. His paranoia is such that the name of any visitor entering the bank is announced by a little screen above his desk. The power Haghi seeks to exercise over everybody and every event is thus supplied by a neat and ubiquitous system of surveillance and manipulation. There are agents with tiny cameras hidden in their lapels to secretly photograph any person who frequents the police; there are bugs hidden in vases to intercept even the intimate afternoon conversations between Sonja and her new romantic interest; and there are secret messengers and henchmen to execute Haghi’s orders. The precise nature of Haghi’s power to manipulate everybody for his goals becomes most evident in the opening scene, when he tries to coerce Lady Leslane, the ambassador’s wife, into revealing the date on which the Japanese secret treaty will be signed at the embassy. Of course, Lady Leslane scornfully refuses—until Haghi produces

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Figure 1. Haghi at his control-post desk. From *Spione*. Copyright Friedrich-Wilhelm-Murnau-Stiftung/Transit Film

photographs showing her secret vice: opium smoking. At this sight, she instantly breaks down and promises to do everything asked of her. Haghi's conspiracy is thus a media conspiracy: it consists precisely in his ability to monitor every individual's most concealed private secrets—his or her vices, desires, or crimes—and to use this information to manipulate and subvert. His power is that of total surveillance—a structure that Foucault historically ascribes to the formation of modern police at the end of the eighteenth century. It is, as Foucault writes, a “faceless gaze that transformed the whole social body into a field of perception: thousands of eyes posted everywhere, mobile attentions ever on the alert, a long, hierarchized network.”¹² Haghi's conspiracy is the dark and diabolical mirror image, albeit more refined, of the very force that is set to oppose it: the police. Lang's film stages an institutional fantasy that exalts the structure of modern power. This power consists—as we see in the blackmailing of Lady Leslane and in the romance between Sonja and Number 326—in

12. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 214.

blurring the separation between the individuals' intimate sphere and the political realm. Power intervenes in the most private affairs such as vices, desires, or loves—exploiting and manipulating these for its own purposes.

This is precisely what happens between the two agents, Haghi's spy Sonja and her opponent Number 326. Haghi recognizes in Number 326 the most capable of police agents and, to seduce and neutralize this archenemy, sets Sonja on him. The two spies meet in a hotel where Sonja, after a faked shootout, begs Number 326 to help her escape. Whereas she pretends to be an innocent young woman who shot a man trying to rape her and who is now hounded by the police, Number 326 plays a dandified hotel guest whose face covered with shaving cream keeps the police from thoroughly searching his hotel room where Sonja hides. Both agents are masters of playacting: Number 326 changes his looks from a sleazy tramp to a decadent dandy to a clean-shaven, good-looking leading man within minutes of the film's beginning—each time foiling even the spectator's powers of recognition. Sonja also quickly changes roles and appearances: from a cool, dressed-up femme fatale receiving her orders in Haghi's office, she turns into a desperate young ingenue theatrically throwing herself into her victim's arms, and eventually morphs into a soulful Russian expat in a chaste embroidered blouse when she meets Number 326 for a tryst at her home (fig. 2). Although endowed with the secret agent's hallmark talent—chameleonesque powers of transformation and disguise—Sonja nevertheless, after having met Number 326, tries to withdraw from Haghi's game. She tells Haghi immediately after her first encounter with Number 326 that she cannot work against him: "He reminds me of my brother Sasha." Haghi insists that she continue her mission, promising to spare Number 326 if she accomplishes one last task: smuggling the stolen treaty out of the country.

Both partners thus meet in their roles as agents of rival institutions that employ exactly the same tricks and ruses. Being agents, Sonja and Number 326 have no real identities but only code names, roles to play, and missions to fulfill. They function as media for their institutions: gathering information, transporting secret documents, transferring messages, and manipulating others in the interest of the conspiratorial powers they work for. When Sonja and Number 326 stage their falling in love in the hotel scene, they at first just follow their respective conspiratorial scripts—their love being nothing more than a *mise-en-scène*, a media effect of powers they work for. But then they really fall in love—and thus ideally out of politics. At this point, where a genuine private interest in each other sets in, Sonja tries to withdraw from her mission, precluding the political, that is, conspiratorial, entanglement so as to protect the private one, love being the foreclosure of any political interest. The con-



Figure 2. Sonja and Number 326 disguised as a tramp. From *Spione*. Copyright Friedrich-Wilhelm-Murnau-Stiftung/Transit Film

spiratorial structure of power in Lang's film, however, does not allow for such a kind of separation. Haghi not only never really consents to let Sonja go but even tries to use her love for Number 326 to his own diabolical ends. If the conspiracy in *Spione* is mainly based on the use of media to encroach on individuals' most private secrets, it is not limited to technical media such as photography, eavesdropping devices, or radio broadcasts. Rather, conspiratorial power transforms individuals into media, strips them of their identity, exploits them as mere tools for communication or information, and, most important, exploits their most private feelings. The conspiracy is the unnatural merging of the political and the private, the intertwining of the most personal, intimate desires and the machinations of a political apparatus. Lang, however, resists the all-too-classical temptation to naively oppose the apolitical purity of a love affair to the sinister intrusion of dark powers. On the contrary, he emphasizes the inseparable entanglement of love and conspiracy. Just as media, in Serres's meaning, are the parasites of communication, both enabling and disrupting or distorting it, so is the conspiracy in Lang's film. It enables the encounter of

Sonja and Number 326; it makes them fall in love, creates their relationship—and at the same time disturbs and abuses this love. It both constitutes and threatens their affair. Haghi, the master of all media, becomes the medium—but also the parasite—between Sonja and Number 326. Near the end of the film he organizes a train accident that is supposed to kill Number 326—but the disaster only brings Sonja and her lover together again. In fact, Haghi is the very personification of something that cannot be represented as such: the mediality of power. He is the center of all media operations in the film and himself serves, I intend to demonstrate, as a medium for the relations and communications of others. As such, he effaces himself in various disguises, from a banker to a clown tellingly called “Nemo.” And, as Raymond Bellour remarked, Haghi is also the indicator of the mediality of the film itself. In various scenes he does not so much look at his partners on the set as, in some of the striking close-ups of *Spione*, at the spectator, especially in the scene where he reveals himself to be at the center of the conspiracy. “It seems that Haghi looks at me,” writes Bellour. “He, the ‘master spy,’ spies me out, observes me, nails me in my seat. Me? Who? The spectator. But how can it happen that Haghi becomes my spectator?”¹³ In the figure of Haghi, Lang opens up the conspiracy within the film to the world of the spectators and makes the conspiratorial mastermind look at—and monitor—the spectators themselves, ultimately drawing them into the dark world of surveillance and control that Haghi has created.

The historical background of Lang’s unsettling yet brilliant conspiracy fantasy is not hard to guess. Weimar political life was marked by the omnipresence of police informers infiltrating political parties, clubs, and even the public realm.¹⁴ The police agents, however, were not the only ones operating clandestinely. The German Communist Party and the Russian Embassy also sent out secret agents to infiltrate in turn the army, the *Reichswehr*, the police, worker’s associations, sports clubs, and the like. Their goal was to seed discontent among the “working masses,” to insinuate revolutionary ideas and to ultimately prepare for a Bolshevik-like revolution in Germany.¹⁵ No wonder Haghi’s goatee makes him resemble Trotsky. But as a banker, Haghi also ren-

13. Raymond Bellour, “Le regard de Haghi,” *Iris*, no. 7 (second semester 1986): 5.

14. For a short analysis of the film and the novel *Spione* see Eva Horn, “Spionin-Spion,” chap. 6 of *Der geheime Krieg: Verrat, Spionage und moderne Fiktion* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2007), 228–69. This chapter places *Spione* in the context of the phantasm of the female spy as a product of World War I concepts of enmity.

15. For the communist agents who flooded Berlin in the 1920s see Karl Schlögel, “Unter den Linden 7. Sowjetische Botschaft Berlin,” chap. 6 of *Berlin Ostbahnhof Europas* (Berlin: Siedler, 1998), 111–35.

ders the cliché of the Jewish financier-marionetteer of European politics angling at world domination. Von Harbou's novel *Spione*, released simultaneously with the movie's launch, is much more explicit in its anti-Semitic overtones.¹⁶ Nevertheless, the political allusions in Lang remain vague, more lurid and fantastic than politically concrete and explicit. Lang's conspiracy, as Tom Gunning remarked, follows the logic of *coup de théâtre* rather than an effective rational scheme.¹⁷ What Lang stages is precisely the medial structure of modern power. He elaborates conspiracy less as a concrete historical situation than as a genuinely modern structure of power, a reverse mirror image of what Foucault describes as the epistemological structure of the police, while emphasizing its medial constitution. This power, Lang claims, functions as a parasite of the most intimate social relations, constituting and destroying them in the same motion, making it impossible to separate the private from the political.

Unlike Fritz Lang's flashy thriller, Henckel von Donnersmarck's film is more of an intimate play: a melancholic tale about crushed lives and loves, destroyed talent and the profound loneliness of those who get involved with the conspiratorial sides of power. The story concerns a GDR celebrity couple, the renowned *Staatsschriftsteller* and playwright Georg Dreyman (Sebastian Koch) and his girlfriend, the Berlin theater star Christa-Maria Sieland (Martina Gedeck). Even though Dreyman seems entirely loyal to the political system and Sieland is naively uninterested in politics, the German secret police, the famous Stasi, begins to spy on the couple by bugging their apartment, an operation led by Stasi captain Gerd Wiesler (Ulrich Mühe, himself from the GDR). As the wiretapping operation does not seem to reveal any subversive activity, Wiesler—"HGW XX/7" in the telegraphic style of Stasi documents—realizes that the reason for the observation is not Dreyman's political unreliability but the fact that a state minister (Thomas Thieme) is having an affair with Sieland and eager to be rid of his rival Dreyman. With HGW spending hourslong shifts listening to the noise and conversations in the bugged apartment, he is slowly "turned" by this "life of others," becoming ever more engrossed in and empathic toward his victims—to the point of deliberately omitting compromising facts from his reports and even intervening to attempt to save the couple from the state police.

Superficially, HGW is just another spy like the agents in *Spione's* dark network. But whereas Haghi's conspiracy represents a fantastic, obsessive, yet

16. Thea von Harbou, *Spione* (Berlin: Scherl, 1928).

17. Tom Gunning, *The Films of Fritz Lang: Allegories of Vision and Modernity* (London: British Film Institute, 2000), 134.

homologous counterforce to the state police, the state in *Das Leben der Anderen* is itself the conspiracy. It is a precise expression of state paranoia—a paranoia of the state directed against its citizens suspected of “subversive behavior” even in the most trivial details of everyday life. HGW is at first presented as a fitting representative of this state paranoia and its surveillance complex. He is constantly observing everything around him, as pitilessly suspicious, cynical, and clinical as any interrogations expert. Unlike Lang’s glamorous and diabolical agents, HGW is entirely drab: dressed in a gray, nondescript sports jacket, self-effacing and disciplined, introverted, obviously without any friends or private life. He too is a medium—listening device, messenger, and, as interrogations expert, “lie detector” in the service of the system whose stuffiness and insipidity fully inspires its medium’s colorlessness. Historically, the Ministerium für Staatssicherheit gathered information on about 10 percent of the East German population, relying on full-time professionals and, more important, on “unofficial collaborators,” the famous IMs (*Inoffizieller Mitarbeiter*). In fact, the whole civil surveillance system comprised 2 percent of the entire GDR population, meaning that among fifty citizens, at least one was an informer. These IMs often were the friends, colleagues, family members, and neighbors of their victims. The type of information they gathered concerned not just the target’s “suspicious behavior” but practically any everyday event or conversation the IM might witness—neighborly relationships, conjugal spats, family disputes, workplace incidents. For example, the following quote is from a file on Wolf Biermann, written by his neighbor “IM Lorenz,” that is, Klaus Peter Gerhard:

On September 2 I first encountered my future neighbor W.B. I introduced myself and my wife and informed him that I had been granted the apartment. . . . Since September 2 a practical and reasonable relationship has been established to W.B. When workers are present, he inquires after the work’s progress without becoming involved. He offers his help, which we have hitherto not accepted. I find this development promising. A cautious enhancement of the relationship seems possible, given that people are likely to visit—like XX and the actress XX—who have known W.B. long and well. . . . The developing neighborly contacts are to be well balanced and very cautiously engaged.¹⁸

What becomes clear here is the type of information that the Stasi was after. The dust of everyday life, the merest details of any social existence, was

18. Quoted from Wolf Biermann, “Akteneinsicht,” www.planger.de/aktenein.htm. The link is given on the film’s home page.



Figure 3. Smell sample gathered by the Stasi. From *Das Leben der Anderen*. Copyright Buena Vista

gathered—to sleep today in the vast archives of the so-called Birthler office, the Bundesbeauftragte für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der ehemaligen Deutschen Demokratischen Republik (Federal Commission for the Files of the State Security Service of the Former GDR). Unlike Lang’s Weimar conspiracy, avid for the kind of personal details to leverage politically, the Stasi’s interest was much broader. It archived even its citizens’ odors—so that police dogs could track them (fig. 3). The Stasi was probably the most comprehensive attempt ever made by a state to monitor its citizens. Whereas a conspiracy à la Haghi uses private information—as in the case of Lady Leslane or Sonja—to obtain political results (the revelation of the date of the signature, the treaty’s smuggling), the Stasi’s surveillance system seems vastly less discriminate: the private lives of GDR citizens (sometimes even those of West Germans) are investigated in the interest of the bulk accumulation of private details. In the film, the actress Sieland is first blackmailed into an affair with the minister of state Hempf and later into informing on her partner, Dreyman. As an IM, Sieland is not supposed to undertake any complicated kind of spy mission but only to produce more private information—information that no bug can reveal: she thus betrays the hiding place of a typewriter on which Dreyman had written a highly critical article that he anonymously published in the West German magazine *Der Spiegel*. Sieland is coerced into prostituting herself and betraying her most intimate friend and lover—but these are entirely private betrayals, not political ones. The state paranoia behind Stasi surveillance does not intrude into the citizens’ privacy to glean *political* secrets or

to transform private secrets into political advantage. It aims at the private life as such, politicizing the private sphere by an indistinct and minute monitoring of its every detail. It thereby functions much more like the Panopticon Foucault describes: it is not about observing without being observed but about a general consciousness of being under observation, to be felt by every member of German society. It is an instrument of discipline, of influencing the behavior of those who know themselves to be constantly scrutinized. The GDR population lived in the Panopticon. Mühe points this out in his interview included in the published script of the film: “I knew . . . that in every workplace and every institution there was always a Stasi officer. We knew that they were watching us, that they were listening, that they tried to get invited to parties. That was part of normal life. It was also normal to hear the clicking in the telephone line when one was wire-tapped.”¹⁹

The Stasi officer HGW is the instrument of this monitoring; he is asked to report in writing every last conversation or activity taking place in the artists’ apartment. He becomes the medium in various respects: bugging the apartment, listening and reporting, but also interpreting the activities of his targets. His reports translate the banalities of life into bureaucratic jargon: “CMS [Sieland] and Lazlo [the code name for Dreyman] packen Geschenke aus. Danach vmtl. Geschlechtsverkehr” (CMS and Lazlo unpack their gifts. Afterward presumably sex). HGW’s loneliness, the fact that he, unlike his victims, has no life, reduces him to a mere listening device, sitting in the attic of the house at his listening post with headphones. He is a medium—and nothing but a medium (fig. 4). Media, however, are unreliable—and so is HGW. The medium starts to distort the message he is supposed to transfer. HGW becomes ever more fascinated with the “life of others”—the love life between Sieland and Dreyman, their artists’ conversations and parties, their intellectual life and readings. At one point he even steals a volume of Bertolt Brecht poems from their apartment to read. Diverging from his initial mission to expose the “life of others,” he proceeds to protect that life—by not reporting accurately about Dreyman’s increasingly politically dangerous activities. In the end, he even intervenes by taking the incriminating typewriter out of its hiding place to keep his Stasi colleagues from finding it. Although the film’s home page celebrates HGW’s change of heart as the consequence of his “plunging into the ‘lives of others’—love, literature, free

19. Ulrich Mühe, Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, and Christoph Hochhäusler, “‘Es hat ja schon viele Versuche gegeben, die DDR-Realität einzufangen’: Ein Gespräch mit Ulrich Mühe,” in Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, *Das Leben der Anderen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2007), 188.



Figure 4. Stasi officer Hauptmann Gerd Wiesler at his listening post. From *Das Leben der Anderen*. Copyright Buena Vista

thought and free speech—[which] opens his eyes to the poverty of his own existence,”²⁰ the film remains relatively discreet about HGW’s feelings. His progress precisely reveals the parasitical nature of media, equally capable of transmitting information and distorting it. HGW is the go-between between the manipulative and suspicious imperative of the state and the unprotected and harassed citizens. His choice not to betray but to protect the couple is certainly an ethical one—but the ethical choice for him is not to be a medium anymore but to function differently: to be “a good person.” “Sie sind ein guter Mensch” (You are a good person), says Sieland in a casual encounter with HGW—without knowing who he really is.

What choices, then, are left for the targets of the Stasi’s conspiratorial attack? What is the impact on the citizens of the conspiratorial structure of state power as in the GDR? State paranoia has always two sides: it is the state’s paranoia against its citizens and hence its need for total surveillance—but it is also the citizens’ conviction that the state is evil, lawless, corrupt, and capable of any kind of injustice or violence against them. The citizens’ version of state paranoia is built on a clear-cut separation of the private—which is the realm of moral integrity—and the political—which is the realm of ruthlessness and corruption. Only by protecting the private against the political, by not playing the state’s game, could one remain in a position of moral integrity and be “a good person.” This idea is at the center of Henckel von Donnersmarck’s film. Its

20. See www.movie.de/filme/dlda/site.html?id=index.

secret leitmotif is “the ballad of the good person”—*Die Ballade vom guten Menschen*. This is the title of a score for piano given to Dreyman as a birthday present by a friend who will later commit suicide, his politically motivated suicide triggering Dreyman’s more critical view of GDR politics; at the end of the movie *Die Ballade vom guten Menschen* is the title of a book that Dreyman, years after the end of the regime, writes about his experiences. Having discovered that HGW in fact protected him from the Stasi, he dedicates the book to “HGW XX/7,” Wiesler’s code name in the Stasi files. The “good person” is thus HGW, who sacrifices his career to protect the couple—without success, since Sieland, having betrayed her lover Dreyman, runs out of the house in despair and dies in a car accident. Being a good person in the logic of the film means withstanding corruption and connivance with the state—a tragically impossible task, but an idea that preserves the concept of an ethically “pure” individual untainted by political involvement. Being a good person is also Dreyman’s ethos as a writer and intellectual when he tries to use his fame in aid of a friend who was banned from his profession. The film shows how Dreyman’s impulse to be “a good person” by still cooperating with the state will fail—just as HGW fails to save Sieland’s love and life. This theme of the good person ironically recycles the title and subject of Brecht’s famous play *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan* (*The Good Person of Sechuan*). However, whereas Brecht’s parable cruelly demonstrates the intrinsic impossibility of remaining a good person—you cannot be altruistic all the time—Henckel von Donnersmarck keeps believing in “good person” ethics in the face of state terror. The individual tries to be a good person and is tragically crushed by the situation. Henckel von Donnersmarck’s film is, unlike Brecht’s parable, a tragedy, and not only by virtue of its melancholic ending—Sieland’s death, HGW’s demise, Dreyman’s creative crisis, and his sobering realization of the fact that he was always monitored. Also, its ethics—its enthronement of the good person unblemished by the political sphere—is a structurally tragic one in the clear opposition it establishes between the private and the political, the good person and the corrupt, conspiratorial state. It is this tragic structure, I believe, that made Henckel von Donnersmarck’s film—after all the humorous or nostalgic films and novels on the subject of the GDR past—so appealing to an audience trying to come to terms with this past. It was a tragedy, after all, one might say; people were trying to be good but were crushed and corrupted by the brutality of the regime. This is a conclusion that is more than acceptable for both sides—West Germans and East Germans, former IMs and their victims.

Conspiracy fictions, much like conspiracy theories, revolve around the dark side of power. That does not mean that this dark side of power is entirely

imagined or fictitious. On the contrary, fictions on conspiracies often offer an insight into these hidden mechanisms of power, an insight that must be taken seriously in its political, epistemological, and ethical implications. Both Lang's and Henckel von Donnersmarck's films identify this dark side with the mediality of power. Focusing on surveillance and monitoring, both films dramatically stage this mediality as the illegitimate intrusion of the political into the private sphere, especially into the intimacy of a loving couple. Lang, however, illustrates the intrication of political interests and private desires: his agents belong to the logic of conspiracy, meet via the conspiratorial scheme, and only after having fallen in love try to withdraw from the political game. They are media of the conspiracy—its eyes and ears, its messengers and its instruments. The two spies besotted with each other are never just themselves, never act entirely in private—being agents, they always belong to the political *and* the private. Their love affair thus sheds light on the inseparability of the two spheres, given the omnipresence of the conspiratorial gaze. Lang also has no illusions about the homology between Hagi's conspiracy and the police—these are mirror images of one another, as both exert a hidden and permanent control over anything and anybody that might thwart their logic. In Lang's case, the reality underlying his fiction is the modern form of power-knowledge that Foucault has described as the essence of the police: a neat and omnipresent form of surveillance over the entire social space. Henckel von Donnersmarck, in contrast, tries to put things back in order. He separates a sphere of the private or, in his own lofty words, “love, literature, and freedom of thought” from the evil realm of an entirely corrupt, self-serving, cynical state that in its attempt at total control has taken on the hallmarks of a conspiracy. In his film the historical reality underlying his fiction is not implicit as is Lang's allusion to Weimar informer systems but is strongly emphasized: Henckel von Donnersmarck's film is all about the German past, a fiction that in the German audience's mind has almost supplanted the ugly and complicated individual cases of the GDR past that are so hard to tell and so hard to understand. The film's take on the Stasi surveillance system is concise: the Stasi system of surveillance is not the intrication of the private and the political but the disciplinary politicization of *everything* private. The monitoring gaze is no longer hidden but allowed—or even intended—to disseminate paranoid insecurity. While Lang, in a lurid and theatrical plot, exposes the machinations of a secret system of surveillance, Henckel von Donnersmarck is interested less in the thrill than in an ethical and tragic aspect of his subject. He promulgates the individual ethos of the good person capable of resisting the evil state—even at the price of total failure. Unlike Brecht, to whom he alludes in various instances,

Henckel von Donnersmarck sentimentally believes in the possibility of “being a good person”—even if one is a Stasi officer like his hero HGW. The disaster and profound melancholy at the film’s ending, reflected by the somber film music and the set’s broken colors, is not—as in Brecht’s *Der gute Mensch von Sezuan*—a demonstration of the intrinsic impossibility to be good. It is rather a tragic coincidence of human weakness (Sieland), good intentions (HGW), blindness (Dreyman), and excruciating pressure (the Stasi system). Serving up tragedy, Henckel von Donnersmarck offers a story that ultimately enables a process of mourning and empathy for facing the German past. And by an act of convincing and consoling aestheticization, he presents a form of redemption for the lies, baseness, and crushed lives left behind by the Stasi system. In *Das Leben der Anderen* it is ultimately the work of art—both the fictitious Dreyman’s final novel *Die Ballade vom guten Menschen* and Henckel von Donnersmarck’s celebrated film itself—that is offered as a retrospective panacea to a historical form of power that was in fact conspiratorial. The question remains whether this sentimental and tragic take on it should be the last word. What we cannot grasp from Henckel von Donnersmarck is an analytic view on the Stasi’s system of power and its impact on individuals that were not as pure, as good, or as privileged as the film’s heroes. What was the impact of permanent surveillance and pressure on the identities of people in the GDR? How did they come to terms with this system? How did it affect social relations? But also, how did the system work, and who were the people who ran it? What was their interest, what was their understanding of this type of work? The films, the novels, and the historical research to analyze this form of power, and thus to dissect the conspiratorial element of modern power, are yet to be written.