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## Legal Tender

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Published by Cornell University Press

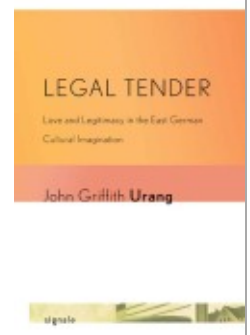
Urang, John Griffith.

Legal Tender: Love and Legitimacy in the East German Cultural Imagination.

1 ed. Cornell University Press, 2010.

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## EYE CONTACT

*Surveillance, Perversion, and the Last Days of the GDR*

Corinna hatte die Stirn gerunzelt.

—Ich kann nicht glauben, sagte sie, daß es bei der Stasi liebenswerte Männer gab.

Corinna wrinkled her forehead.

—I can't believe, she said, that there were likable men in the Stasi.

—From a conversation between Marianne, the protagonist of Brigitte Burmeister's 1994 novel, *Unter dem Namen Norma* (Under the Name Norma), and Corinna Kling, a friend of Marianne's boyfriend from Mannheim (in the former FRG)

When public fury and court injunction opened the archives of East Germany's Ministry for State Security in 1991, the Stasi became the most transparent secret police in the history of state repression. Historians, lawyers, and victims raced to uncover the complete catalog of the Stasi's misdeeds, from the banal to the murderous. That the Stasi, that frantic fact collector, would become the object of another such compulsive drive to know suggests a certain historical irony. "One extreme follows another," Timothy Garton Ash observes in his personal history of Stasi surveillance, *The File*. "Probably no dictatorship in modern history has had such an extensive and fanatically thorough secret police as East Germany did. No democracy in modern history has done more to expose the legacy of the preceding dictatorship than the new Germany has" (21). In the turbulence following unification, historical disclosure seemed to supply some sense of moral clarity. No matter how tangled the threads of deception and betrayal pulled from the archives, the important thing was to bring the whole knotted mass to light.

For cultural producers confronting the legacy of the Stasi past, the material is even murkier, even more amorphous. Facts sprawl into feelings, actions into motivations. Fictional accounts of state surveillance leave the fixed moral categories so

prevalent in postunification discourse—domination, victimization, and resistance—and enter the crisscrossed and multilayered channels of fantasy and desire. In the examination that follows, four Stasi narratives from the past two decades provide entry points into what might be called the phantasmatic dimension of state surveillance: the place of the Stasi in the collective imagination of the former GDR and in the changing cultural vision of unified Germany.

Positioned between the Stasi's obsessive pursuit of information and the archaeological zeal of postunification Germany, these fictive depictions of surveillance work all evince a zone of tension around the question of certainty. In the ideological configurations of both the pre- and postunification order, uncertainty provokes anxiety; it is not just unknown elements that threaten the system's stability, but rather not-knowing as such that causes concern. This anxiety becomes a structuring feature of these Stasi narratives; the professional inquisitors they portray are all chronically underinformed. Indeed, a great deal of the narrative tension in these texts derives from the disparity between the protagonists' understanding of the events unfolding around them and the historical reality of the GDR's last days.

Formally, these narratives could not be more different. Where two of the texts resolutely withhold narrative certainty, playing intricate shell-games of perspective, the other two provide (or claim to provide) epistemological and moral clarity. Yet despite the differences in their narrative frameworks, these texts share a remarkable assumption about the possibility of real knowledge. In the course of their duties, the protagonists all catch glimpses of another way of being, an always-foreclosed alternate reality that becomes ever more tantalizing the farther it retreats. In this parallel universe, knowledge—specifically knowledge of the other—resides not in secrets unearthed or coerced, but rather in intimacies freely given. By a logic familiar since Plato and Augustine, knowledge and truth correlate with love. Thus my argument will treat these texts not just as police-state thrillers or spy capers, but as love stories—albeit gone awry: narratives of missed connection, ill-fated attraction, and deviant desire. While realized love is always absent in the lives of these Stasi agents, its opposite—what we might call “not-love”—is all the more emphatically present. The most striking instances of not-love in these texts are “perversions”: scopophilia, onanism, homosexuality, exhibitionism, and sadism, to name a few of the acts with which these narratives associate Stasi work.

We have come a long way, then, from the programmatic pairings of socialist realism and the (more or less) glamorous romance of the New Course, from the decorous, sublimated “neue Romantik” and the bourgeois domesticity of the 1960s and 1970s *Wohlstandskommunisten*. In the Stasi narratives explored here, romantic love exists only as a distant memory, a wistful longing. The political and narrative clarity of the love story has been replaced by a chaotic tangle of contradictory impulses and desires, an ideological and libidinal pandemonium arising from the implosion of the GDR's framework of legitimation, and its replacement, just as suddenly, by the symbolic order of a unified Germany. What will emerge in the

following analysis, then, is not only an outline of the fantasy life of the East German surveillance state, but also an account of the retrospective revision of these fantasies in postunification Germany.

The names of the works under consideration suggest what is at stake in asking such questions here and now. Brigitte Burmeister's 1987 novel, *Anders* (German for "different" or "other than"), brings us into the "other" Germany, where we find that the contemporary Western categories of self and other, of private and public, are not entirely adequate to the alterity of East German public culture. Conversely, the titles of Wolfgang Hilbig's *Ich* ("I") and Thomas Brussig's *Helden wie wir* (Heroes like Us), both published in 1995, are constructed around first-person pronouns. The former simultaneously establishes and undermines the unity of the narrating self, destabilizing its emphatic first-person singular with scare quotes. This typographical detail reflects a keynote of epistemological doubt throughout the novel—an uncertainty that doubts even its own uncertainty. *Helden wie wir* (Heroes like Us) seems less existentially dubious. "We" exist definitively: we are "heroes." But who is included in this heroic—or mock-heroic—"us"? Is it the Stasi? The East Germans? Unified Germany? The pointed satire of Brussig's novel both critiques and deploys the categories by which such lines of inclusion and exclusion might be drawn. Finally, Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's 2006 film *Das Leben der Anderen* (The Lives of Others) returns us to the question of the "otherness" of the GDR. One of the great achievements of the film, as attested by its numerous awards, including a 2007 Oscar, is how it brings this "other" Germany back to life through its fraught emotions and painstaking detail. Yet the urgency of the film's staging of "East Germanness" also attests to an undercurrent of anxiety, a concern that certain aspects of the East German experience are not "other" enough—indeed, that they are all too familiar.

### **"With life I have only eye contact": *Anders, oder Vom Aufenthalt in der Fremde***

Few critics have failed to point out that Brigitte Burmeister's 1987 debut novel, *Anders*, owes a great debt to the French *nouveau roman*, one of the author's primary research interests in her earlier career at the Institute for Romance Languages and Literatures in East Berlin.<sup>1</sup> Critics' fixation on this intertextual affiliation owes in part to its relative novelty in GDR literature. Even amid the increasing cultural openness of the 1980s, the *nouveau roman*'s modernist experiments seemed an unlikely prototype for East German prose. This was not the GDR literature readers were used to. Eschewing the linear, event-driven narrative of East Germany's

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1. Colin Grant remarks: "The success of the novel in 'inviting a different kind of reading' ... was underlined by the reviews published elsewhere which tended to stress its formal similarities with the *nouveau roman*" (76). See also Gebauer, 91.

still-doctrinal realism, *Anders* confronts the reader with shifting temporality, wavering subjectivity, and epistemological unreliability. In light of such uncertainties, the placement of *Anders* in the context of an established literary tradition may be understood as an attempt to master the novel's cryptic style and form: the *nouveau roman*'s indeterminacy of action is at least a certain uncertainty. At the time of its publication, *Anders*'s indeterminacy, the impossibility of finding out what, if anything, is actually going on in the novel, seemed to provoke a good deal of consternation in critics on both sides of the Wall.<sup>2</sup> Such unsettling ambiguity is not just a matter of perception or perspective; it is built into the pathways along which meaning circulates in this text and its context.

*Anders, oder Vom Aufenthalt in der Fremde* (Anders, or Of a Foreign Sojourn) is told as a series of fifty-three letters from David Anders to his "loved ones at home," friends and family, perhaps, in his rural hometown. Anders insists that he never intends to send these missives: "I let my letters disappear into the desk drawer," he writes (16). In his letters, Anders describes his experiences in his new home, a large unnamed city, probably Berlin. Despite a wealth of details about his work life, the reader never gets a clear sense of Anders's duties and activities. His job seems to involve observation and reporting but otherwise remains vague.

Always watching from the outside, Anders complains of an *Ereignisarmut*, a "dearth of experience." He has no friends and little interaction with the outside world. "With life I have only eye contact," he says (15). This situation improves, however, when he makes an unusual friend, whom he refers to only as D. Though the impulsive, nonconformist D. is nothing like Anders in temperament or worldview, they seem to hit it off. Eventually D. takes Anders home with him and introduces him to his wife.

Anders's initial encounter with D.'s wife, to whom he will refer throughout the novel as "the Woman" (*die Frau*)—is characteristically visual, even cinematic. Entering D.'s apartment, Anders sees her writing at her desk: "First I saw the Woman. She was encased in a cone of light like an insect in amber. She did not look up as D. and I entered the room. She held her head bent, as though she wore the light like a heavy crown" (19–20).

This ethereal vision of the Woman cues a memory of lost love. Anders describes a riverbank in summer, where he waits for someone addressed only as "you": "I didn't know then that you were coming for the last time" (20). Like the initial sighting of D.'s wife, this scene is conspicuously visual. Even the brief, indirectly reported conversation between Anders and his companion, which concludes several pages of dense landscape description, takes place in a visual register—or, more appropriately, overwhelms the visual register. Anders writes: "Everything around

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2. For a detailed account of *Anders*'s reception, particularly in the GDR, see Colin Grant's article "Brigitte Burmeister's *Anders, oder Vom Aufenthalt in der Fremde*: Tracing the Texts in a 'New Novel,'" esp. 75–77.

us vanished, and you asked me the question. I've forgotten my answer. I had the sensation of seeing how our words sank into the evening mist that swallowed up the sky's milky color . . . so that, when we looked up, there was just a pale, empty space" (21).

As he gets to know her, Anders's relationship with D.'s wife carries echoes of this lost love from the past. After she gives him a pile of her writings, Anders writes:

Why this exactly, why in this way? If you had just asked me the question, one single important question, and not on paper, but up close, so that I could see your face, while everything around us would vanish . . . as though swallowed by fog, and around us a pale, empty space, and within it clear and indestructible my answer: yes. (68–69)

This time, the question asked of Anders would not collapse the field of vision entirely, but rather would focus it—everything in the scene would vanish except the most important: “your face.” Now he would be able to answer: yes. This scenario, however, is hypothetical. The Woman has not recapitulated that question from long ago, that intimate question asked face-to-face, but rather has handed Anders a pile of her writing, ostensibly so that he could use the remaining space on the pages—the backs, the margins, between the lines—to write his own story (40). The writing on the pages, Anders assumes, is intended as a message to him: “My name is nowhere to be seen,” he thinks as he reads, “but I know that she means me” (42). Likewise, his letters are increasingly addressed to her: the “you all” (*ihr*) of the “loved ones at home” is replaced by the “you” (*du*) of “the Woman.” Communication, however, is not transpiring. His letters are never sent, her messages remain inscrutable: “How can I answer you,” he writes, “if I don't understand your message?” (68).

In light of these episodes, we can begin to posit two opposing semiotic regimes in the novel. On the one hand, visibility and the written word, tokens of distance, rupture, and a failure to communicate; on the other, aurality and dialogue, which would signal intimacy, presence, participation. As the novel progresses, Anders becomes increasingly frustrated with his life of distanced observation: “I hate the observer,” he says. “It's not enough. What I want is something else [Was ich will, ist anders]” (80). This other—*anders*—that he wants is both the other and himself, Anders.

Anders's growing discontentedness with his position as observer, his desire to replace eye contact with face-to-face encounter, has self-evident professional repercussions: “Unlike my coworkers,” he says, “life has awakened in me a desire to become a bad observer, that is, a participant” (134). Eventually, Anders's coworkers notice his inferior output and force him to sign a contract promising to distance himself from his nonconformist friends.

How can we contextualize these rival influences—one, inflected as dissident and libidinal, that pulls Anders toward society, communication, and contact; the

other, associated with his job, the state, and propriety, that demands he hold himself above the fray, observing and reporting? Applying a perhaps overly programmatic interpretive schema, we can recast this dichotomy in political terms. As the embodiment of party bureaucracy, Anders in his loneliness would attest to the critical attenuation of the ties between state and society in the GDR of the 1980s, the persistent and widening gulf between party and populace described in the previous four chapters of this book. “Against the will of the SED,” Gert-Joachim Glaebner notes, “society since the beginning of the ’60s had attained a certain autonomy. It had emancipated itself from the party” (3).<sup>3</sup> Anders’s yearning for approach would signal the desire to overcome this dissociation, to intervene more immediately and effectively in the everyday life of GDR society, “to become a participant.” Within this analogy, surveillance—Anders’s longing gaze—becomes an expression of the state’s unrequited love, a desperate effort to maintain contact with an indifferent beloved: the people.

The latter possibility, that of face-to-face or dialogical relationship, would stand not only for the negative space of the GDR’s foreclosed public sphere, but also for East Germany’s active counter-public sphere—the so-called *Nischengesellschaft*, or “niche society”—which replaced various dysfunctional social systems, from the aesthetic to the economic.<sup>4</sup> This is the world inhabited by D. and his wife, the world of self-publication and unofficial gatherings, barter and black market.

It is the allure of this world, of the counter-public life shared by D. and his wife, that tempts Anders to trade observation for participation. Yet the more Anders’s harmless watching gives way to active intervention, the more his activity looks like the *modus operandi* of the Stasi. That Anders’s attentions might have ominous consequences becomes apparent when D. and his wife suddenly disappear. This section, the dramatic high point of the novel, is also where the narrative’s murkiness is most pronounced. In a fever-induced delirium, Anders imagines an interrogation, apparently of D. “Why are you making this so hard for us?” the interrogator asks in classic form. “Twelve hours, and not one sensible word. And you know that we already know everything” (121). “Of course you know everything,” says the man being interrogated. “You have his reports, after all” (122). Anders’s reports, it seems, have incriminated his friends.

Perhaps seeking answers to the mystery of his friends’ disappearance, Anders visits the abandoned apartment of D. and his wife to read “the Woman’s” writings. Nowhere in the novel does he more fit the mold of a Stasi snoop than here, breaking into an author’s apartment to read her unfinished manuscript. In a way, however, this purloined letter seems to have reached its intended destination. Like the section she gave to Anders, the rest of “the Woman’s” novel is addressed to

3. I was alerted to Glaebner’s argument by a passage in Charles Maier’s *Dissolution* (36).

4. The term *Nischengesellschaft* was coined by Günter Gaus, the Federal Republic’s ambassador to the GDR between 1974 and 1981. See Gaus, 156 ff.

an unspecified “you”—a *du*, as a number of wordplays suggest, that in fact refers to Anders. “You’re not what I expected,” writes “the Woman.” “You’re different [Anders bist du]” (260).

It is a curious form of communication between Anders and “the Woman,” these long letters never sent. Though they are formally addressed to the other, they seem intended less to initiate dialogue than to lament its impossibility. Such skepticism regarding the communicative potential of the written word, I suggest, can be read not only philosophically or poetologically, but also as a fairly direct reflection of the political conditions informing the novel’s production. This dynamic comes into focus as Anders reads further in “the Woman’s” manuscript, and the novel’s Klein-bottle plot turns in on itself. The manuscript that Anders is reading, we may infer, is that of Burmeister’s novel. “Now the man who was originally addressed as ‘you’ is having a say,” Anders writes in his letter, describing “the Woman’s” manuscript. “He’s informing his relatives about this or that detail from his monotonous life” (261). Via this metanarratological switchback, the “authorship” of the text that we are reading changes hands; we are now led to believe that we are reading Anders’s account of “the Woman’s” account of Anders’s account of “the Woman.”

This feedback loop offers an apt metaphor for the conditions of cultural production within the GDR’s dysfunctional public sphere. In the system of censorship and self-censorship that ensured the state’s control of public discourse, all published texts were, to a degree, palimpsests. As a generic account might have it, the state rewrites the text of the author rewriting the introjected text of the state.<sup>5</sup> With Anders stepping in as an all-purpose surveillance bureaucrat, the drama of the East German publishing industry plays out in miniature. For “the Woman’s” manuscript is not simply intended “for the desk drawer”—a phrase used in the GDR to refer to unpublishable texts—but rather for the man who will fetch it out of the drawer, the same man who would literally overwrite her story with his own.

At times, “the Woman’s” manuscript is almost a panegyric to her personal snoop and *Lektor*, that uniquely East German hybrid of an editor and a censor.<sup>6</sup> “Neither of us will declare love for the other,” she writes, “but to me you are indispensable [*unentbehrlich*].” D., whose marginal notes in the manuscript add another voice to the conversation, sees the matter more straightforwardly: “Admit it,” he has scribbled in the margin, “you love him!” (261).

5. In “Old Movies: Cinema as Palimpsest in GDR Fiction,” Katie Trumpener describes “the often palimpsestic structure of GDR fiction, in which characters find a superimposed veil of memories—voluntary, involuntary, personal, collective, historical, subjective—overlying, coloring or muffling the world around them” (40–41). I am suggesting here that this superimposition expresses the fraught relationship of GDR cultural products not only with the past, but also with the political present.

6. In the GDR publishing industry, the *Lektor* had a role somewhere between that of an editor and a censor: before a work could be published, it had to pass through the *Lektor*’s careful ideological evaluation.



In a 1990 interview, Burmeister described the growing “suspicion” she felt as she wrote *Anders* that its hero might be an agent of the secret police:

My own suspicion that the “hero” could be a member of the Stasi came about through a verbal association. This character is very lonely, looks out of the window, “observes” a lot. In French the word is “observer”—“observe”—and “observe” is a security service term. Then I said to myself, “This bastard is a member of the Stasi.” And I fought against this suspicion for a long time, but finally gave up. I grew to like the character more and more as I went on writing. (von Hallberg, 133)

It is a remarkable testament to the pervasiveness of the East German state security service that an author could find herself wondering whether a character she herself had invented was moonlighting as a Stasi snoop. Burmeister’s subsequent discovery seems even more counterintuitive: that despite this suspicion, she “grew to like the character more and more.”

What is it that makes *Anders* likable, *unentbehrlich*, even lovable, within the terms of the novel? And what might this mean for the political-allegorical interpretation we have been pursuing thus far? With *Anders* as its feckless avatar, the state seems at first to be cast as a star-crossed lover, a pitiable, even likable figure. As much as he longs to make contact with his beloved, he is doomed to helpless observation. Embodied in *Anders*, this state is a lonely watcher and a loving reader. It can be an interlocutor—indeed, an interrogator—only in its fevered dreams. Unfortunately, the East German state’s fever-dream was also a reality: the state within a state of the Stasi. Likewise the state was not just a passive reader. The censor’s interventions—and the prophylactic revisions of self-censorship—sapped the communicative potential of the written word, turning authorship into palimpsest, dialogue into feedback.

Yet it is precisely this interference that necessitates the counter-public sphere, that shadow society from which *Anders*—and the organization he represents—is categorically excluded. In a 1999 interview, Burmeister discussed the loss of this counter-public sphere with the collapse of the GDR, specifically the lamentable disappearance of a certain mode of writing and reading she calls “the conspiratorial” (*das Konspirative*): “‘The conspiratorial’ is something that I miss from GDR times. Now it seems like one can say anything, push the limits further and further out. . . . But that’s not always good for the quality of literature. Crudely put, one is going for sensation, not subversion” (Gebauer, 97).

Following this line of argument, we are forced to revise the earlier claim that the overpresence of the state in the public sphere led solely to a designification of public discourse in the GDR. The model of the “conspiratorial” public sphere suggests that the opposite might equally—and concurrently—be the case, for state surveillance also creates the conditions for the “conspiratorial” mode, that intimate confederacy of writer and reader that raises the stakes, heightens the drama, overdetermines

the significance of the communication that passes between them. This heightened sense of significance is captured in a passage from Monika Maron's 2004 novel, *Endmoränen*, the story of a writer working on a biography of Wilhelmine Enke, the lover of Friedrich Wilhelm II:

Fifteen years ago this harmless biography could have been a hammered Morse code from the underground, a pale flare on the horizon, a smoke signal over the pathless forest, and whoever wrote it could be assured of the importance of their activity, indeed of their whole existence. Even those who didn't write the biography but shared in the outrage it triggered, even secretly, could feel important, because their receptivity for messages of this kind made them indispensable [*unentbehrlich*] to the sender. They were initiates, and people like them guaranteed the survival of culture. (40)

Within East Germany's tightly controlled public sphere, dissent was often a matter of a few evocative words, an ambiguous phrase, a coded "smoke signal." For this reason, East German authors could expect conscientious, critical readings from their audience, but also, and especially, from their *Lektoren*. Like Anders—and through agents like Anders—the surveillance state pored over these communications, searching for evidence of obedience or dissent, for signs of love or hate. East German state surveillance hobbled art and ruined lives, but it also considered art important enough to ruin lives for. This apparent incongruity helps to account for the ambivalence attested by the novel's convoluted love story. "Admit it," D. says to his wife, "you love him." Perhaps she worries that at the level of fantasy, of illicit desire, she does.

### **"What a simulation this reality was!": "Ich"**

Written in 1995, eight years after Burmeister's novel, Wolfgang Hilbig's *"Ich"* shares *Anders's* temporal and geographic setting. With the added clarity of hindsight, *"Ich"* captures the heady, even apocalyptic atmosphere in late-'80s Berlin, the look and feel of a society sliding inexorably toward dissolution. Hilbig's novel, which garnered a great deal of critical attention and a number of literary prizes, narrates the day-to-day life of a low-level Stasi agent. "W." has been assigned to observe the underground literary scene in East Berlin, in particular an avant-garde writer known as *Reader*.<sup>7</sup> Much of the novel's present-time action occurs literally underground, in the warren of cellars beneath Berlin. W. uses these tunnels as a means of surreptitious access and movement, but also as a space of contemplation. Alone in his subterranean retreat, he reflects on his peculiar job and tries to

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7. The protagonist in *"Ich"* is known variously as W., M. W., Cambert, and C. The nomenclature seems to be motivated both temporally and thematically: at some point, W. becomes C. almost exclusively, perhaps indicating a wholesale identification with his Stasi persona.

reconstruct the circumstances that brought him to it. The narrative of *Ich* is as labyrinthine as W.'s hideout, a bewildering tangle of past and present tense, third- and first-person narration, direct and indirect discourse. In this redoubled obscurity, narrated and narrational, the reader joins W. in epistemological crisis, in the desperate effort to determine what has taken, is taking, or will take place.

Throughout the novel, W. tries to ascertain which parts of his life constitute "reality" and which are "simulation": "So he had simulated his life before. . . . But when had he awoken to this reality?" (64). The theoretical resonance of such language is not accidental. Like all participants in the Berlin literary scene, W. is an avid reader of contemporary French philosophy, even if he has misgivings about the scene's apotheosis of Foucault, Derrida, and others (22). W.'s fascination with Jean Baudrillard's concept of "simulation" is particularly important. By Baudrillard's account, reality itself has become a simulation—which is not to say it does not exist. Instead, simulated reality is in fact hyperreal, no longer tethered to substance or origin. According to Baudrillard,

The real is produced from miniaturized cells, matrices, and memory banks, models of control—and it can be reproduced an indefinite number of times from these. It no longer needs to be rational, because it no longer measures itself against either an ideal or a negative instance. It is no longer anything but operational. In fact, it is no longer really the real, because no imaginary envelops it anymore. It is a hyperreal, produced from a radiating synthesis of combinatory models in a hyperspace without atmosphere. (2)

This vision of an irrational reality that has ceased to measure itself against "either an ideal or a negative instance" is an apt description of GDR ideology in the 1980s. By this time, the guiding principles of East German socialism had evaporated. The working class had little use for its ostensible vanguard, the SED, and the egalitarian promises of a Workers' and Peasants' State had borne fruit only as collective privation. For Hilbig and his peers, writers like Baudrillard offered a compelling new way to describe and critique the conditions of the East German public sphere.

Yet, as Sylvie Marie Bordaue points out, Hilbig does not adopt the language of the French structuralists and poststructuralists uncritically: "Baudrillard, like Foucault and Deleuze, is invoked in a negative context in the text and is portrayed as an example of a false and modish world" (180). While recognizing the descriptive power of poststructuralist theory, Hilbig worries that such thinking could lead to a total disavowal of the real—and therefore capitulation to the realities of state power.<sup>8</sup>

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8. Bordaue quotes a lecture by Hilbig in which he says that Baudrillard's idea of simulation "must have been very attractive to the ideologues of the GDR" since it facilitated their spurious claims to legitimacy (Hilbig, *Abriss der Kritik*, 53; qtd. in Bordaue, 180).

Such uncertainty regarding the reality of reality leads to the deep ambivalence identified by Julia Hell in her article “*Wendebilder*: Neo Rauch and Wolfgang Hilbig.” Hilbig, Hell argues, rejects the “specular realist epistemology” prevalent in the official literary culture of the GDR, the totalizing “view from above” that aims at knowledge and mastery (280). Such a totalizing viewpoint can only operate according to what Hilbig calls *Beschreibungsrituale* (rituals of description), the bankrupt literary practices of East Germany’s linguistic dictatorship (284). This critique of official literary culture in the GDR, according to Hell, “testifies to an implicit belief in the ‘visibility’ and the ‘truth’ of reality behind the ‘Beschreibungsrituale’ that distort it.” Yet, Hell suggests,

there is also a more radical strand in Hilbig’s writing. . . . There is ‘nothing to see’ because reality—that which lies behind the official *Beschreibungsrituale*—has been destroyed by [these rituals of description], or rather, our ability to perceive the reality has been shattered. (“*Wendebilder*,” 285)

The following reading of “*Ich*” will address this contradiction, plumbing the depths of the text’s apparently bottomless simulation, for there *is* a “reality” in Hilbig’s novel, a level of causes, events, and consequences that can break through the otherwise total simulation in the narrative. Such moments of rupture, of reality’s incursion into simulation, can be characterized as *catastrophe*, understood both as dénouement and disaster: a sudden turn, a revolution, a calamity. In “*Ich*,” two very different catastrophes prove capable of piercing the membrane between simulation and reality: violence and love.

Despite an undercurrent of imagined or indirectly reported violence throughout the novel, only one act of physical aggression in “*Ich*” is marked for the reader as “really” happening. This incident, long foreshadowed and invested with considerable significance by the novel’s symbolic framework, compels a reevaluation of many of the events and circumstances preceding it. While brutality is largely suppressed in “*Ich*,” love is entirely absent, defined only negatively by what it is not. In the novel, we see love solely as a lack, an always-unfulfilled potential for connection, change, and growth. In place of love is a passionless simulation of intimacy, a sadistic attraction to cruelty. W.’s emotional compass allows only desire without attachment, sensation without engagement. In W.’s “perverse” libidinal order the catastrophes of love and violence have been evacuated of their potency. Diluted, they are easily confused; the closer W. comes to real interpersonal contact—to love—the more violent his fantasies become, while thoughts of violence tend to provoke his sexual interest.

In this way, “perversion” shields W. and his coworkers from the consequences of their actions, transforming the scruples of love or the shock of violence into a seemingly meaningless play of fantasy and desire. An investigation of the portrayal of “perversion” in “*Ich*,” in particular the key role of “deviant” sexuality in defining and delimiting the Stasi personality, reveals the missing thread that would lead to

the surface of this sunken labyrinth. The novel suggests that if there were a way out of this simulated reality for W.—which there is not—it would be found in heterosexual romantic love.

When he first starts working for “the Firm,” W. experiences the psychosexual dimension of his trade—what might be called the erotics of surveillance—in one of its most basic manifestations. Out walking at night, he stops to watch a conversation taking place in a neighbor’s house. Soon, such clandestine observation becomes a habit—or perhaps a job, as it is never clear whether W.’s nightly rounds are part of his assignment at the “Firm.” Whether business or pleasure, this new activity has a distinct voyeuristic allure: “The organs of speech, as he explored them with his eyes, suddenly took on the character of body parts from the so-called private area” (127–28).

Eventually, voyeuristic tendencies creep into W.’s sex life. After beginning a physical relationship with his landlady, Frau Falbe, he discovers that his imagination is more and more necessary for sexual arousal. Frau Falbe is not surprised to learn of W.’s flights of fantasy. As she explains, her now-absent husband displayed similar proclivities:

Didn’t I tell you, she said, that he was in the security service as well? . . . My husband talked about it sometimes and said we’re all in the service because we can’t do it with women. Because we can’t do it with people in general. We can only investigate people. . . . Foreplay, my husband used to say, for him that’s the important part, just like at work. There, he said, we just do the foreplay as well, it’s much more exciting. . . . He always wanted to see everything . . . Watching, he said, that’s the thing. (264–65)

Frau Falbe’s initial characterization of the Stasi type as a man attracted to the service because he “can’t do it with women” is not the first insinuation of a link between homosexuality and Stasi work in the novel. In an earlier conversation, Frau Falbe tells W. how Harry Falbe, who seems to be either her son, nephew, or husband, had been harassed and threatened by the Stasi, apparently in an effort to recruit him. “They said,” Frau Falbe explains, “that he’s the other way round, that he should admit it!”

“Homosexual?” W. asked.

“Yes, that he’s a homo, that he’s gay, they told him that. But I know better, because Harry doesn’t lie to me.” (217)

Frau Falbe goes on to describe how the agents, in particular a man named Feuerbach, who happens to be W.’s current boss in Berlin, escalated their intimidation to abuse:

“And you know what happened that night? The guy stuck his pistol up his . . .”

“Impossible!” said W.

“Oh, it’s possible all right, he stuck it in him, Harry told me exactly how it happened. Harry wasn’t wearing anything, just his coat over his pajamas, that’s what he was wearing when they put him in the car and took him away. And back at the office the man stuck the pistol in his backside and said: ‘Should I pull the trigger? You like that, you queer dog,’ he said. ‘Admit it, you’re a queer, or I’ll pull the trigger’...”

“Unbelievable!” said W. (217)

As her story goes on, the “reality” of the violence it describes gives way to a scene of fantasy construction—a simulation of violence. “Really the story was unimportant,” W. thinks.

Much more interesting was the inflection with which Frau Falbe told it. She really didn’t narrate as much as gasp it out, with a throaty voice, without paying any attention to his interjections. She had propped up her upper body on the desk, twisting halfway out of the armchair, and held one hand on the triangular neckline of her blouse, as though she wasn’t getting enough air.... He had to admit that he was excited by the woman’s discomposure. (219)

Despite its manifest cruelty, Frau Falbe’s story occasions not horror but desire in both the teller and the listener. This incident, in fact, begins their erotic relationship. “Excited/infected” (*angesteckt*) by her “discomposure” (*Aufregung*), W. returns the next day to hear the story again. “A moment later,” Hilbig writes, this time in the third person, “they were rolling across the double bed” (220).

The play of fantasy—the simulation of reality—at work here is best summed up in a note scrawled idly by W. a short while later:

The game of the idea of the incident with the pistol [das Spiel der Vorstellung der Sache mit der Pistole]... the idea of the game of the woman of the incident with the pistol... the story of the idea of the woman of the game of the incident with the pistol... and so on... the structure of the genitive of the genitive,—that seemed somehow familiar to him!” (231–32)

As W. points out earlier, such a “stringing together of genitives” is a characteristic usage of the Stasi. “Essentially, it was a linguistic form used to destroy one’s sense of reality” (23).

In playing “the game of the idea of the incident with the pistol,” W. and Frau Falbe begin a relationship within the Stasi’s “perverse” libidinal order, for the “incident with the pistol” is a thoroughly transgressive fantasy, simultaneously breaking sexual, moral, and political taboos. W. is oddly pleased by the alleged unscrupulousness of his employer: “W. felt a certain satisfaction in the thought that his superior officer had such a reputation” (218–19). For W., the latent and manifest violence

of his profession is just a matter of *Ruf* (reputation)—he has only ever heard about it but never seen or experienced it. It is, in other words, simulated, phantasmatic violence: “just the foreplay,” as Frau Falbe’s husband had put it.

“*Ich*” exposes the dangers of this illusion of inconsequence, maintained through such psycholinguistic mechanisms as the Stasi’s “reality-destroying” genitive. Thus W.’s split with “the Firm” (though less a decisive repudiation than a kind of “inner exile”) is possible only after he has relinquished the erotics of the “rampant genitives,” the infinite chain of phantasmatic desire that confuses simulation and reality and binds him to his profession. The “something else” for which he gives it up will be love—or something like it.

In many ways, the love story in “*Ich*” is highly dubious; W.-in-love is not so different from W.-just-doing-his-job. To put it bluntly, he seems less a lover than a stalker. Yet in light of its importance to the novel’s conclusion I will hazard a more credulous reading of this subplot than it might at first seem to warrant.

When W. first begins working for Feuerbach and “the Firm’s” Berlin branch, it is unclear what his official duty is to be. He is supposed to keep an eye on *Reader* and his circle, and instructed to write detailed descriptions of those involved in the avant-garde literary scene. Eventually, however, a more specific task is assigned to W.: he is told to find a West German “contact” to facilitate work in West Berlin. The contact person Feuerbach has in mind is “the girl that runs after *Reader*” (192), a woman whom W. had already noticed and labeled “the Student” (*die Studentin*). Essentially, W. thinks he is being groomed to become a “Romeo spy,” an East German agent who seduces Western women into spying for the Stasi.<sup>9</sup>

Here, W. balks. Instead of passing on to his superiors the profile he has written of *the Student*, W. decides to keep it for himself. With this small act of defiance, W. begins his “private operation”—to shadow *the Student* on his own initiative (315). Since he is not following her for his job, W. decides that he must have another motivation: “It occurred to me,” he thinks, “that I must love *the Student* in a very peculiar way and chased after her for that reason” (322).

Still, W. does intend to give Feuerbach some account of his “private operation”—just not a profile of *the Student*. He decides to invent a character called “the Woman” (*die Frau*), a wholly superior being due to her origins in the “free West.”<sup>10</sup> “Her hands were entirely different hands, her arms were different, her musculature was made of another, much finer material than anyone else I knew...her DNA was

9. For more on the Romeo spies, see Elisabeth Pfister’s *Unternehmen Romeo: Die Liebeskommandos der Stasi*. In his autobiography *Man without a Face*, Markus Wolf, chief of foreign intelligence at the MfS, boasts: “If I go down in espionage history, it may well be for perfecting the use of sex in spying. My Romeo spies gained notoriety across the world by winning women’s hearts in order to obtain the state and political secrets to which their targets had access” (135).

10. It is an intriguing coincidence that both Anders and W. refer to the objects of their affection as “die Frau.” Where the word is not distinguished typographically in Burmeister’s novel, Hilbig puts it in italics. I have retained this usage, though I chose to capitalize the English word in both cases.

absolute West-DNA" (323). Such magnificent alterity, then, is what W. imagines as corresponding to "the Firm's" conception of a Westerner.

As he allows his invention free rein, it becomes less and less clear whether this is still W.'s projection of "the Firm's" imaginary image or his own increasingly violent fantasy:

As I saw her, *the Woman* was...an unapproachable being—and for that matter...much stronger than I. I couldn't do otherwise, I had to surround *the Woman* with an obscene thought if I wanted to make her attainable. With the thought, to catch up to her one evening and to throw her down on the cold stones in the dirty half-light of the pedestrian bridge over the train tracks at Storkauer Straße..., to throw her into the Eastern dust of this concrete tunnel so that she would finally lie in reality, and to force apart her legs...

One may *think* anything, my superiors in the security service said, one even *has* to. Maybe they even said, it is the *duty* of the writer to think *everything*... (324)

W.'s rape fantasy seems to combine both a desire for proximity—a brutal, coercive version of Anders's wistful longing for approach—and the distancing effect identified throughout "*Ich*" as characteristic of the Stasi mentality. At the same time as he tries to make *the Woman/Student* "real" and "approachable" through the creation of this rape scenario, W. insists that it is only a fiction (after all, *the Woman* is his invention), and that it is his *duty* as an agent and a writer—roles that are inseparable throughout the novel—to fantasize in this manner. W.'s partition of *the Woman* from *the Student* may best be understood as a kind of object splitting, whereby *the Woman* becomes a "bad object," the object of W.'s violent fantasies and perverse desires. Significantly, *the Woman* is also the "bad object" of the Stasi: a Western provocateur in the Eastern underground who is politically dangerous, tactically desirable, and diplomatically untouchable. In separating *the Woman* from *the Student*, W. attempts to isolate and disavow the part of his personality he has given over to the Stasi. The agent Cambert (his code name) might stalk *the Woman* with violent and lascivious intent, but W. follows *the Student* because he "must love [her] in a very peculiar way" (322).

In a scene near the end of the novel, W. is confronted with the indivisible reality of *the Woman/Student*. While he is following her through the streets one night, she suddenly turns and walks toward him. Eye to eye with his quarry, W. panics and flees. Thinking about the event later, W. concludes: "There was no doubt about it, I fled from her. She turned the tables and became my pursuer just like that!" (330). This scene models the catastrophic potential of love in "*Ich*," its ability to overturn the perverse order of simulation and allow "reality" to break in. The one-way gaze of W.'s voyeurism becomes reciprocal contact.

Here we might recall Emmanuel Levinas's concept of the face-to-face encounter, the moment he calls the "entrance of the ethical": "The proximity of the other



showing me his or her face, in society with me, and the implications of that encounter overturn the logical and ontological play of the same and the other, transforming it into ethics" (76). In a very literal way, the face of *the Student* confronts W. with the ethics of his actions, with the violence, real and imagined, of an "operation" he has adopted as his own. He suddenly realizes that Cambert and W.—his professional and private selves—are one and the same.

Through a number of disclosures by Feuerbach, W. learns that *Reader* is in fact an "unofficial employee" of the MfS and that he has been given the task for which W. was being considered: that of wooing *the Student* as a possible contact in West Berlin. Whether out of jealousy or goodwill, W. decides to warn *the Student* of her entanglement in this spy caper and smuggles a note into her pocketbook revealing a fact he has recently "stumbled across" (358): "It said: she shouldn't get involved, I could tell her some interesting things about the writer S. R. Just by way of example: I happen to know that he is a homosexually inclined person, and this is perhaps significant for a certain ambiguity about him" (360).

W.'s claim is a bald ploy to wrest *the Student's* affection away from his rival. But why "out" him in this way? When he uses *Reader's* alleged homosexual tendencies to drive a wedge between the writer and *the Student*, W. proves to be the consummate Stasi man. This, after all, was the tactic that Feuerbach had used to press-gang Harry Falbe into "the Firm." Yet, paradoxically, W. intends his note to signify the opposite. By labeling *Reader* a homosexual, W. hopes to create an ontological distinction between *Reader* and himself. As W. sees it, he may have given himself over to his job—given up his very "Ich"—but he has not relinquished the last trace of his former self, which in the novel's psychosexual shorthand is his heterosexual self. In pursuit of what he takes to be love, W. would turn his back on the Stasi's simulated world. As he thinks back later on this event, W. finds a small consolation in this escape attempt: "I made an effort: I wanted to reveal myself to *the Student*—probably!—myself and the Operation: Reader" (372).

With the qualifier "probably" (*vermutlich*) W. calls his own intentions into doubt. The love story in "*Ich*," the story of W.'s "private operation," cannot be taken wholly at face value. Within the world of deception and self-deception inhabited by W. and his coworkers, motives are slippery and unreliable. Yet, ultimately, the novel's narrative itself confirms the logic by which sexual deviance—here represented by homosexuality—would become a token of ontological difference, the logic of splitting and disavowal. The essential difference, however, is not between W. and *Reader*, but between "the Firm" and the society around it.

This confirmation can be found in the novel's final catastrophe, a sudden moment of violence that cuts through the layers of fantasy and simulation, revealing the "truth" of Stasi perversion. On the way to his meeting with *the Student*, W. is arrested and thrown in prison. After a few weeks in solitary confinement, W. receives a late-night visit from a highly inebriated, nearly incoherent Feuerbach. Without warning, Feuerbach attacks him:

In the darkness, Feuerbach threw him against the wall and yanked down his pants; he felt a hard cold thrust between his buttocks, it was metal, it was the barrel of Feuerbach's pistol, the muzzle boring painfully into his insides.—Should I, you dog... belov-  
 lowed Feuerbach... Should I shoot you in the hole, you queer bugger? (366)

Here “the game of the idea of the incident with the pistol” is visited upon W.—neither as a game nor as fantasy, but bodily. “As though to prove the reality of the scene that night,” we read a page later, “his anus hurt for a week when he had to relieve himself” (367). This scene, the novel's only instance of directly reported violence, offers not only narrative resolution, but, more importantly, moral clarity. Feuerbach's Stasi, it seems, is not just trafficking in fantasies, simulation, “foreplay,” but rather in acts of “real” depravity.

In this light, we can see how the concept of perversion would function in “*Ich*” as a marker of “the Firm's” alterity, for where there is perversion, there must also be its opposite, an assumed “normality” that consolidates its identity by disavowing the abnormal, deviant, perverse. In the libidinal economy of “*Ich*,” this normative pole is only hinted at because we are trapped, with W., in the labyrinth of the Stasi's perverse order. The novel suggests that history itself will see to the overturning of this order and the creation of conditions under which “real” social ties—“real love,” we could say—might be possible. It is no coincidence, then, that W.'s nearest approximation of heterosexual romantic love—his “private operation,” culminating in the face-to-face confrontation with *the Student*—becomes an “omen” for the changes that are underway in the GDR: “It was a sign that something was coming at us in this country” (330).

What he calls a “small event that could get larger” (330) will ultimately become the 1989 revolution. Near the end of the novel, W. reflects on the atmosphere of malaise and unrest in the GDR of the late 1980s, a mood he summarizes with the word *Haß* (hate):

The reasons for this hate were not the untenable or broken promises of the government, not the blindness and toadying of its representatives, not the fraudulent elections, perhaps not even the Wall, the police, the party hacks with their double standards and cowardice... *we* were the reason for this hate... We, the small and low, blurred, tireless shadows that clung to the people of this land: we nourished this hate... We were the shadows of life, we were death... we were the dark side of humanity split off and become flesh, become shadow-flesh. “I” was hate... (371–72)

In W.'s lyrical self-abnegation, the Stasi becomes a projection of the “dark side of humanity”—the “bad object,” we might say, of civil society. We see such projection at work as well within Hilbig's novel, in the emphatic assertion and reassertion of the perverse nature of the Stasi mentality, in the logic of disavowal that “*Ich*” both critiques and upholds. What remains to be seen, however, is why the Stasi in

particular becomes this “bad object”—why this institution is freighted with the disavowed “perversion” of a bygone state.

**“Was that what you wanted to know?”: *Helden wie wir***

At the hands of satirist Thomas Brussig, the Stasi is treated very differently from what we have just seen. The history of the Ministry for State Security is less a tragedy than a farce as told by Klaus Uhltscht, the hero of Brussig’s comic novel *Helden wie wir* (Heroes like Us). In Brussig’s novel the Stasi is ineffective, incompetent, and inconsequential—a far cry from the sinister, formidable organization depicted in “*Ich*.” Yet the Stasi in *Helden wie wir* shares a significant characteristic with Hilbig’s “Firm”: in both texts, the Stasi is manifestly perverse. *Helden wie wir*, however, associates surveillance work with a collection of harmless and humorous kinks, rather than with sadistic depravity, as in “*Ich*.”

*Helden wie wir* is framed as a monologue in which Klaus Uhltscht tells his life story to Mr. Kitzelstein, a reporter for the *New York Times*. *New York Times* readers should be interested in his story, Klaus opines, on account of his key role in the events of November 9, 1989. “The story of the Wall’s end,” he declares, “is the story of my penis” (5).

Klaus’s exposure to a certain erotics of surveillance begins in the stuffy and repressed atmosphere of his parental home. His mother is an uptight hygiene inspector who teaches young Klaus to be afraid of germs, public toilets, and especially sex. As one might predict, Klaus becomes obsessed with the latter, a process he outlines meticulously for Mr. Kitzelstein. From the eye-opening disquisitions of his more enlightened peers at summer camp to his careful study of Siegfried Schnabl’s sex-ed standard *Mann und Frau intim* (Man and Woman Intimately), Klaus’s adolescence is a dogged quest to learn more about this mysterious, frightening, thrilling subject. The greater his ignorance, the more obsessive his fascination: “But *Mann und Frau Intim* afforded no clues to the G spot. Did it, or did it not, exist? Did it exist only in the West? Was the G spot peculiar to Western women? Would the solution of this mystery be rewarded with a Nobel Prize? Other people were always privy to information I knew nothing about” (62).

One of the things Klaus knows nothing about is the Stasi, the headquarters of which is across the street from his childhood home. When Klaus learns that the Stasi had been involved in the dismissal of one of his favorite teachers, he puts the pieces together: “I suspected duress of some kind, presumably on the Stasi’s part. Such a great big building, and nobody knew what went on there. Everyone spoke of it in whispers. A teacher was fired and no one would tell me why. Ergo, there was something fishy about the Stasi” (63). Klaus makes the Stasi his “secret enemy,” staking out the building and writing down what he sees. When his father finds out about Klaus’s activities, he is extremely upset: “Writing in mental anguish, he told me that if my activities ever came out, he and my mother would be convicted of espionage and sent to prison” (64).

And his father should know. He is himself, as Klaus soon finds out, an employee of the Stasi. Later, Klaus will describe him as “every inch the man from the Stasi. He was probably an interrogator—the one who switches on the spotlight and shines it in your eyes, who roams the interview room in his shirtsleeves and expects you to earn your glass of water by confessing all” (70). As this description attests, Klaus’s father is not a very nice man. He is gruff and indifferent by turns, paranoid, misanthropic, and highly critical of young Klaus. Nonetheless, or perhaps all the more, Klaus looks up to his father with admiration and awe. And when his father suggests that Klaus join the Stasi as well, Klaus jumps at the chance. This career move, however, does nothing to counter Klaus’s inferiority complex. On the contrary, his association with the Stasi will ultimately be added to his litany of failures.

Nor does Klaus’s new job lessen his sex obsession. In fact, it offers vast new resources for the exploration of his number one hobby. At training camp, Klaus meets Raymund, a self-styled ladies’ man and chronic masturbator, who leads his fellow cadets on a moonlight cruise to pick up women. After an alcohol-soaked night aboard the *Wilhelm Pieck*, a young woman named Marina takes Klaus home with her, where he trades his virginity for a case of gonorrhea and a newfound appreciation for the mysteries and delights of the sexual act.

Eventually, Klaus is assigned to his first post: the “Periodicals Postal Subscription Service” in Berlin, which in reality is a Stasi front. Klaus is shocked and dismayed to find that his coworkers are neither suave, competent master spies nor even grim bullies like his father, but rather eccentric, blundering buffoons. “Was I really in the genuine, legendary Stasi,” Klaus asks himself, “or in an outfit that only called itself by that name the better to disguise the *genuine* Stasi, which would one day send for me?” (123).

Because of his tendency to assume that everything he doesn’t know must be a sexual secret, Klaus’s always-inscrutable work assignments become increasingly sexualized—just as his sex life becomes more and more influenced by his Stasi work. Thus, for instance, his misinterpretation of his boss’s exhortation to “put ourselves in the enemy’s place so as to render his actions predictable”:

I once found, on Grabs’s desk, the transcript of a bugged telephone conversation in which AE Individualist [the code name of a dissident under Stasi surveillance] was referred to as “Chicken-fucker.” I was intrigued despite myself. *Chicken-fucker?* What did it mean? ... Would it be easier for me to put myself in the enemy’s place and render his actions predictable if I myself became a chicken-fucker?

With this in mind, I bought a whole broiler after work, took it home, and, without consulting higher authority, sexually abused it. (194)

When he checks Schnabl’s *Mann und Frau intim* to see if it says anything about sex with a broiled chicken, Klaus becomes aware of the full scope of his deed: “I had done it with an *animal!* A *dead* animal! A *dead young* animal! A *headless*,

i.e. *mutilated*, dead young animal! I had simultaneously indulged in *four* perversions” (195). Suddenly, Klaus realizes his mission and calling, to do his part toward improving the GDR’s balance of trade: “What an idea: the invention and exportation, in exchange for foreign currency, of patented perversions!” (199). With Schnabl’s book as his guide, Klaus sets out on a twisted path of discovery:

No, Mr. Kitzelstein, *fucki*ng was for ordinary folk. *I* aspired to be a disciple of Part III, Chapter 9—to plumb the cavernous depths of *Sexual Aberrations* and illuminate them with the torch of scientific research. I knew what it meant to have a vocation. I would be a historic missionary instead of a Nobel laureate, become a Great Pervert instead of persisting in my potentially lethal, physically injurious, legally hazardous sex life. (245)

Klaus works diligently on his project, inventing such perversions as “mass sodomy,” achieved by putting on a condom filled with tadpoles, one for each East German who had defected the previous day.

Klaus’s decision to turn his back on what he considers a “normal” sex life and become a “pervert” follows closely on the heels of a pivotal event in the novel: the beginning and abrupt end of what he calls his life’s only love story (173). After losing his wallet in a telephone booth, Klaus gets a phone call from a young woman named Yvonne. She has found his wallet and wants to give it back in person. They get along immediately; Yvonne charms Klaus with her spontaneity and *joie de vivre*, and Klaus—to his surprise—manages to woo Yvonne with dignity, perhaps even *panache*. When their chaste courtship gives way to physical passion, however, things begin to go wrong:

She lit some candles and settled herself in my lap, and we kissed. I found myself in a genuine ethicomoral predicament. Why? Because it became clear to me that I wanted—let’s not beat about the bush—to *fuck* her. Could my conscience permit me to fuck an *angel*? An angel, what was more, whom I *loved*? (191)

As usual, the prospect of sexual activity sends Klaus spiraling into guilt and self-recrimination. It seems impossible to him that love and sex could coexist.

Suddenly something happens that derails him completely:

And then she said something she shouldn’t have said: two fateful words. “Hurt me!” She whispered. That did it.... What did it mean, *Hurt me*? At that moment.... my world disintegrated. Was I supposed to scratch her? Draw blood? Hit her? Bite her? Dislocate her arms and legs? I didn’t feel equal to anything of the kind.

I rose, got dressed, and left. (192)

Despite his careful studies of *Mann und Frau intim*, Klaus has no idea what to make of Yvonne's S-M play. Her mild transgression of the boundary between sex and violence magnifies Klaus's confusion on the subject, causing his world to disintegrate. The problem, it seems, is that he has no sense of scale. When Yvonne says, "Hurt me," he doesn't know whether to scratch her or dislocate her arms.

This lack of a sense of scale—one might say moral scale—represents a general characteristic of the Stasi in Brussig's novel: never deliberately cruel, they seem to contemplate or perpetrate horrendous acts almost unwittingly. Klaus's boss Wunderlich, for instance, suggests matter-of-factly that "injured hands were more effective than handcuffs. If only our dissidents could have their bones neatly broken in some way . . . People with both hands out of action couldn't print leaflets or accompany subversive songs on the guitar, piano, or accordion—they couldn't even pick up a phone" (162). To intimidate one suspected dissident, the Stasi kidnaps her young daughter—a task carried out blithely by Klaus, who seems to feel that his most reprehensible action that day was beating the little girl at Parcheesi and Old Maid. Much of the comedy in *Helden wie wir* springs from these wild oscillations of moral standards, the sheer exuberance with which the narrative hurls Klaus back and forth between utter amorality and moral hairsplitting.

Brussig's comic Stasi is not entirely innocuous, however. Though the narrative requirements of comedy keep Klaus and his colleagues from going too far (the kidnapped girl, for instance, is set free on the same evening), the reader can only imagine what effect their ridiculous capers have offstage—on the owners of the apartments they ransack or on the kidnapped girl's mother. Thus the Stasi of *Helden wie wir*, as embodied in Klaus Uhltscht and his colleagues, is simultaneously harmless and brutal, naïve and perverse. Indeed, it is to the extent that they refuse to acknowledge how ineffectual they are that Brussig's Stasi men become genuinely dangerous.

In the novel's climactic scene, which takes place at the Bornholmer Straße border checkpoint on the night of November 9, 1989, the East German police-state's combination of impotence and latent menace finds appropriate expression. On that night, thousands of GDR citizens gathered at the Wall all over Berlin, following a remark made by the SED press secretary suggesting that the border might be opened. "It was a pathetic sight," Klaus says of the Bornholmer checkpoint: "Thousands of them confronted by a few dozen border guards, and they didn't dare to make a move" (256). Like the Stasi, the border guards are helpless to staunch the tide of history—though no one knows it yet. It is here that Klaus decides to intervene and does so by showing the border guards, in an idiom they are sure to understand, how inadequate they are: "That was when I had an idea, a kind of inspiration: the border guards might also be sons of mothers of the *Have-you-been-playing-with-it?* type. It *was* an inspiration, there's no other word for it. Slowly and deliberately, I unbuttoned my coat, undid my belt, and unzipped my trousers" (258).

The guards, “as if mesmerized,” open the gate. The story of the Wall’s end, as Klaus had claimed at the beginning of the novel, does indeed seem to be the story of his penis. Here, some backstory is necessary. Five days earlier, while attending the famous November 4 demonstration at Alexanderplatz, Klaus had decided to respond to Christa Wolf’s speech with a speech of his own. As he descends the stairs of an underground passageway leading to the stage, he trips and falls onto a broomstick, skewering himself in an agonizing, if improbable, manner.

Klaus wakes up later in the hospital with a “squashed frog” for genitals. However, he does find one consolation in his misery. Mysteriously, his “squashed frog” undergoes a radical transformation in the days following the accident: “Imagine waking up one day,” he says, “and finding that your familiar little dick had been replaced by the biggest *membrum virile* you’d ever seen” (244). This, then, is the irrefutable argument with which Klaus confronts the Bornholmer guards. For “sons of mothers of the *Have-you-been-playing-with-it?* type”—that is, for repressed, perverse, sex-obsessed men, precisely the men who fill the ranks of the East German police state—such a demonstration of penile superiority cannot fail to convince.

What are we to make, then, of the story of Klaus’s penis, which happens also to be the story of the Wall’s end? Is it simply an elaborate adolescent joke? One interpretive clue can be found in the novel’s final passage:

I’ve no illusions, Mr. Kitzelstein: no one will believe a social outcast and Stasi pervert, kidnapper and rapist *manqué* like me, but so what? No one who dismisses my story can possibly understand what’s wrong with Germany. Why not? Because nothing makes sense without me—because I’m recent German history’s *missing link*.

Was that what you wanted to know? (262)

Here, in this parting question, Brussig’s novel reveals the ultimate object of its satire. “Was that what you wanted to know?” Klaus asks Mr. Kitzelstein, the *New York Times* reporter. The whole novel, then, becomes the answer to an implied question: the demand of a Western audience for a “missing link,” a Rosetta stone of recent German history. Klaus offers himself as this missing link. As he put it a few pages before, “My own contribution to the debate is the story of my perversions, my little trumpet, my snooping and informing, my impotence, my abnormal masturbatory fantasies, my combination of megalomania and staggering naiveté” (253). Yet how does the story of Klaus’s screwball sex life provide the “missing link” required by Mr. Kitzelstein and his readers?

One answer can be found in the trope of perversion, which performs two functions in Brussig’s novel. First, it satisfies—with manifest irony—the paradoxical demand of the triumphant West that the history of the Stasi depict an institution that was depraved, corrupt, and decadent, but at the same time ultimately ineffectual. Although Klaus’s twisted libido usually lends itself more to light comedy than to moral reproof, it is also characterized by the distorted sense of scale mentioned

above, an underlying amorality that makes possible a seamless drift from the droll to the cruel. The trope of perversion allows Brussig to give Mr. Kitzelstein and his readers the Stasi they “want to know”: one that is laughably hopeless and casually ruthless, paralyzed by neurotic guilt yet ignorant of the true nature of its crimes.

The Stasi’s “inherent perversion” would also satisfy a related, more fundamental ideological demand of postunification discourse: that the East German security state be identifiably, ontologically *different* from the new order. For the German reader in 1995, anchored in postunification reality, the practices of Brussig’s Stasi are safely “other,” products of a system conspicuously distinct from the present order. The reader is comfortably on the other side of this perverse, deviant state, a state that functions—and falls—according to the logic of “*Have-you-been-playing-with-it?*”

The not-other order, the “normal” according to which Klaus and his coworkers seem “perverse,” is played by “the only love story” in Klaus’s life, his brief relationship with Yvonne. This truncated romantic subplot is the point at which things could have gone differently for Klaus. Here, with only a touch of the novel’s characteristic irony, heterosexual romantic love becomes the normative benchmark against which the distance of deviance is measured. Where *love* incorporates, assimilates, and legitimates, *perversion* disavows, disowns, and abases. The vestigial traces of romantic love in *Helden wie wir* lend potency to its machinery of disavowal, the disintegrative power of its scenario of perversion. The analysis of Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck’s 2006 film, *Das Leben der Anderen* (The Lives of Others), that follows will reveal more clearly what is being disavowed in the abrogation—the abjection, in Julia Kristeva’s terms—of Stasi surveillance.<sup>11</sup>

### “It’s for us”: *Das Leben der Anderen*

In his review of Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck’s *Das Leben der Anderen* for the *New York Review of Books*, Timothy Garton Ash calls attention to another reviewer’s modification of the film’s closing line:

One of the finest film critics writing today, Anthony Lane, concludes his admiring review in *The New Yorker* by adapting Wiesler’s punch line: Es ist für mich. You might think that the film is aimed solely at modern Germans, Lane writes, but it’s not: Es ist für uns—it’s for us. He may be more right than he knows. *The Lives of Others* is a film very much intended for others. Like so much else made in Germany, it is designed

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11. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva explores a phenomenon she calls *abjection*, the process by which we separate out and cast off that which “disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (4). In its ambiguity, its blurring of the border between self and other, the abject challenges our very sense of self.



to be exportable. Among its ideal foreign consumers are, precisely, Lane's "us"—the readers of *The New Yorker*. Or, indeed, those of *The New York Review*.

With an eye to the conclusion of Brussig's *Helden wie wir*, we might include the readers of the *New York Times* among the "us" for whom *Das Leben der Anderen* is intended. Donnersmarck, like Klaus Uhltzsch, reproduces the Stasi that Western audiences "want to know": an organization that participates in a distant, defunct, deviant social order. In this, we might say, the film protests too much. Even as it insists on the absolute alterity of the East German surveillance state to its own cultural context, *Das Leben der Anderen* reveals continuities at the level of fantasy. Try as it might to repudiate the social order that it depicts, its fascinated gaze can't look away.

This wavering is evident in the film's ingenious opening sequence, which alternates between Hohenschönhausen Prison, where a prisoner is being cross-examined, and a classroom, where the interrogator, whom we will come to know as the film's main character, Captain Wiesler (Ulrich Mühe), is using a reel-to-reel recording of the interrogation to train Stasi cadets. On the one hand, this lead-in makes every effort to locate us temporally, geographically, and morally: subtitles announce time (1984, fittingly) and place, while the establishing shot of the prison and the depiction of physical and mental torture make it clear that this is not the GDR of recent nostalgia films. "Good-bye Lenin," Donnersmarck seems to say, "hello Stalin." On the other hand, these first few scenes present us with a bewildering proliferation of audiences. In the first shot, we stand behind (and, we might infer, with) the prisoner, then oscillate between the prisoner's and the interrogator's point of view. Suddenly we are sitting in on Wiesler's class, then, in the next scene, watching Wiesler watch a play. These on-screen audiences call our attention to the precarious status of identification in the film. Whose side are we on? And who are "the Others" of the film's title?

Although these positions seem fluid at first, one spectatorial permutation comes to the fore in the course of the film. Having bugged the apartment of Georg Dreyman (Sebastian Koch), a well-respected but party-loyal writer, and his girlfriend, actress Christa-Maria Sieland (Martina Gedeck), Wiesler sits in the attic of their building, listening in on their conversations and quarrels, celebrations and setbacks. As many reviews have pointed out, a large part of the film's appeal lies in watching the subtle play of emotions on the face of Captain Wiesler, portrayed with minimalist intensity by Ulrich Mühe. Like a Greek chorus, he performs audience for us, wincing and thrilling to the melodrama downstairs. Here the emphasis should be on *melos*, "music," the instrument of Wiesler's moral transformation. Garton Ash recounts the story, as told by Donnersmarck on a number of occasions, that the genesis of the film was a remark by Lenin that he could not listen to Beethoven's *Appassionata* because it made him want to do nice things, rather than smash heads for the revolution. How, Donnersmarck wondered, could he make Lenin listen to

the *Appassionata*? Hence Wiesler's exquisitely (if improbably) complex audio surveillance operation. As viewers, we are in a position to experience the drama even more intensely; through an omniscient camera, we see what Wiesler only hears. If the *sounds* of others are enough to transform this impassive Stasi man, then how much more compelling must be the combined effect of sound and image?

In this sense, *Das Leben der Anderen* seems not to share *Anders's* distrust of the spectatorial mode—associating spectatorship with distance and rupture—but rather assigns both visuality and aurality a transformative, even redemptive role. Moreover, where *Anders* would look for truly transformative experience outside of the public sphere, within private or counter-public spaces, *Das Leben der Anderen* finds redemption in the making-public of private experience. This redemption is twofold. Through his conversion, Wiesler redeems himself (at least in the eyes of Dreyman and, perhaps, the viewer), while at the same time, his change of heart justifies the audience's identification with him. It redeems, in other words, our participation in the erotics of surveillance.

As a number of film scholars have argued, the pleasure of cinema can be found largely in the interplay of voyeurism and exhibitionism. In her influential essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey states: "The position of the spectators in the cinema is blatantly one of repression of their exhibitionism and projection of the repressed desire onto the performer" (17). In other words, cinema is fueled by fantasies of watching and being watched. Even more explicitly than in many films, *Das Leben der Anderen* puts this vision onto the screen; watching the watcher, we imagine the next link in this spectatorial chain. What if our own suffering were so great, our triumphs so profound, as to move the indifferent powers-that-be to tears of sympathy or joy? Yet, as a case like the Stasi makes unavoidably clear, submission to surveillance, even in fantasy, has real-life ramifications for the exercise of power and social control.

For a film like *Das Leben der Anderen*, such an intertwining of cinematic conventions with the machinery of social domination represents a significant quandary. On the one hand, the film's driving sense of outrage zeroes in on the erosion of privacy in the East German Stasi state. On the other hand, its own erotic economy is backed by voyeuristic pleasure—the pleasure that emerges from the camera's incursion into the characters' most intimate experiences. How can it resolve this contradiction?

Given the adulation and emulation of Bertolt Brecht by Dreyman and his circle, we might expect the film to avail itself of Brechtian alienation effects—calling attention to its status as performance, rather than as a mimetic depiction of reality—in order to dismantle the bonds of identification between audience and characters. This critical distance would encourage viewers to reflect on the power dynamics inherent in the very act of spectatorship. Yet, far from following Brecht, Donnersmarck's film never strays from the conventions of cinematic realism, combining a straightforward narrative with the emotional guidance of expressive acting and

a moving soundtrack. When, in the midst of his transformation process, Wiesler steals a Brecht volume from Dreyman's apartment, he savors a romantic poem from 1920, "Erinnerung an die Marie A." (A Memory of Marie A.)—not coincidentally a poem written by the young pre-Marxist Brecht rather than the Brecht of the radical Epic Theater. Having thus inoculated itself against Brechtian critique, the film is free to enjoy what the later Brecht might have called cinema's "culinary" satisfactions: emotional absorption and vicarious sensation.<sup>12</sup>

With its wholesale investment in the narrative pleasure of cinema, Donnersmarck's film has a lot to lose in the disruption of fantasy projection and character identification. And so, instead of calling attention to the problematic status of spectatorship within its narrative and erotic economies, *Das Leben der Anderen* settles on a strategy of splitting and disavowal. In the course of its plot, the film separates good, redemptive spectacle—the human drama that transforms Captain Wiesler—from bad, perverse surveillance. Like W. in "*Ich*" (albeit with less dubiety), Wiesler must jettison his "perverse" desire in favor of genuine, transformative love. The need to mark this passage helps to account for the otherwise gratuitous scene in which Wiesler engages the services of a prostitute in his dismal apartment. Here, Donnersmarck avails himself of a stock cinematic trope: the prostitute's massive fleshiness, which threatens to engulf Wiesler's slight frame, suggests rampant desire and unchecked carnal appetites. And yet the encounter is all business, mechanical and indifferent. Still seeking the intimacy left unfulfilled by the sexual act, Wiesler implores her to stay a while, but the prostitute has a client waiting in the same building—another Stasi man, we infer. Wiesler's vice, it seems, is also that of his colleagues. In the course of his surveillance operation, however, he exchanges this Stasi desire, this emotionless concupiscence, for empathy and self-sacrifice—in short, for love. And lest the audience find his ardent eavesdropping somehow indecent, Wiesler is provided with the foil of a salacious assistant, who enjoys monitoring libidinous artists because "they're always at it." Wiesler takes no such prurient pleasure in the operation: his is the chaste attachment of idealization.

His first face-to-face meeting with the object of his devotion calls attention to the nature of this attachment.<sup>13</sup> Intercepting Sieland on her way to a liaison with the lecherous minister Bruno Hempf (Thomas Thieme), Wiesler approaches her, claiming to be a fan:

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12. For more on "culinary" theater, see "The Modern Theatre Is the Epic Theatre," in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*.

13. I have chosen to frame Wiesler's surveillance operation as a heterosexual love plot in order to shed light on the cinematic and narrative conventions informing Christa-Maria's role in the film. An equally strong argument could be made that Wiesler's homosexual desire for Dreyman is the more important affective attachment in the story of his conversion. These readings need not be mutually exclusive, however, particularly if one considers the dynamic in terms of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's theory of erotic triangulation, whereby homosocial desire between two male characters is routed through a female figure; see Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, esp. 1–27.

WIESLER: Many people love you because you are who you are.

SIELAND: Actors are never “who they are.”

WIESLER: You are. I’ve seen you on stage. You were more who you are than you are now.

SIELAND: So you know what I’m like?

WIESLER: I’m your audience.

This tribute from the audience to the actress collapses the levels of spectatorship in *Das Leben der Anderen*. On behalf of the viewer, Wiesler pleads with Sieland to be an ideal—a screen for projection and identification, an object of cinematic fantasy—and not “what she is now,” a fallible human being degrading herself out of fear and desperation. Having seen her on stage, Wiesler claims to know her “real” self—that is, her ideal self. For “many people,” himself perhaps included, such knowledge is tantamount to love—or vice versa, according to the consecution of love at first sight. Wiesler’s love, we may assume, is of the first-sight variety. When he glimpses Sieland at the play for the first time, he slowly lowers his opera glasses, a classic cinematic pantomime of spectatorial fascination.

For the film’s splitting strategy to succeed, Sieland must be both ideal and abject.<sup>14</sup> She is rendered abject in her dealings with the repugnant Hempf, whose brutal advances remind us how low Sieland has sunk in her professional and pharmaceutical dependency (she relies on him both to ensure her continued employment and to provide a steady supply of barbiturates). Their trysts take place in Hempf’s state limousine, a claustrophobic space that renders even more conspicuous the power discrepancy between them, both physical and symbolic.

Thus, as the object of Hempf’s obscene attentions, Sieland becomes living proof of the brutal perversity of the East German surveillance state. Inspiring Wiesler’s loving regard, however, she represents the transformative potential of cinematic sound and image, catalyzing a miraculous conversion from Stasi snoop to “good man.” Ultimately, the split between bad, perverse surveillance and good spectatorship is visited on Sieland’s body. Her tragic fate, we might say, is the price of the film’s disavowal; to separate good spectatorship from bad surveillance, the link between them must be broken. Sieland’s death scene, which references everything from Christian iconography to opera to Rossellini’s *Open City*, represents the height of pathos in the film.<sup>15</sup> Dreyman’s heartbreaking Pietà embrace of his lover—whose given name, after all, is Christa-Maria—triggers cultural associations of redemption and self-sacrifice, while Wiesler’s disconsolate confession to

14. Of course, the notion that a female character could embody both the ideal and the abject instance is not a new one: the prevalence of “virgin” and “whore” dichotomies in film, indeed in Western culture, need hardly be mentioned. And like many of her predecessors, Sieland does not fare well at the intersection of the corporeal and the ideal.

15. Matthew H. Bernstein’s review of *The Lives of Others* in *Film Quarterly* points out this intertextual allusion to *Open City* (34). In his review Garton Ash calls the staging of Sieland’s death “frankly operatic.”

the dying actress completes his rehabilitation and secures our sympathies for him. Even as it confirms the transformative power of love—a love born of empathetic watching and listening—the catastrophe of Sieland's death verifies the depravity of the East German surveillance state, a system that serves only the perverse whims of its corrupt rulers.

What is at stake, then, in these narratives of secret police work? Why do *Das Leben der Anderen*, *Helden wie wir*, and “*Ich*” take pains to recreate a Stasi that is so manifestly and variously perverse? As I argued above, “perversion” always exists in relation to a normative counterpart. In all of these narratives, this “normal” pole is consolidated according to the generic conventions of romantic love. The split between love and perversion allows these texts to isolate and discard part of the symbolic order into which they interpenetrate. How can we account for the urgency of this repudiation, especially when the state apparatus in question has already been annulled by history itself?

I would suggest that this repudiation goes deeper. What is being disavowed in *Das Leben der Anderen*, *Helden wie wir*, and “*Ich*” (albeit satirically in Brussig's novel) is surveillance as an integral mechanism of social control. Portraying surveillance as the purview of an ontologically corrupt institution—an institution filled with voyeurs, sadists, and perverts—these narratives would deny any continuity between the command-and-control strategies of East and West. In fact, however, as *Anders* reminds us, surveillance—demoscropy, perhaps—is a necessary function of any modern complex society. In a 1999 interview, Burmeister claims that those critics who jumped to label *Anders* a Stasi novel had missed its larger point:

I really didn't want to write a novel about the Stasi. *Anders* is about something else: a bureaucratic base-function underneath the level of the Stasi, agencies that are there to observe, measure, and collect, for instance how often you go to the doctor, where you move to, and so on. Everything is recorded somewhere. Lives become data. (Gebauer, 93)

There is little in this statement to mark the bureaucratic base-function described in *Anders* as particularly “East German.” Far more, it resembles the vision of modern Western society associated with Foucault and his followers: “Our society is one not of spectacle, but of surveillance. Behind the great abstraction of exchange, there continues the meticulous, concrete training of useful forces; the circuits of communication are the supports of an accumulation and a centralization of knowledge” (Foucault, 217).

In this age of linked accounts, instant credit, data mining, and eerily precise demographic marketing, being watched is nothing new. In retrospect, what seems disturbing—indeed, obscene—about the Stasi is not the inhumanity of its methods, but rather their humanity. Stasi agents and informers were real people, tasked with collecting not data, but ideas and memories. The Stasi thrived on human weakness,

on greed, betrayal, and cowardice. It targeted one's most intimate personal relationships, driving a wedge of mistrust between friends, family, lovers. Modern surveillance—what we see of it, anyway—seems indifferent to our beliefs and intentions. It just keeps track.

In the narratives discussed in this chapter, we come face-to-face with state surveillance. With varying degrees of sympathy, these characters confront us with the fact that surveillance is not the operation of an impersonal system, indiscriminately sorting zeroes and ones like a fiber-optic Maxwell's Demon, but rather a deliberate strategy of social domination. An ideology that would conceal such domination would disavow surveillance as the perversion of a bygone regime, the brutal tactics of a power-hungry dictatorship. And indeed, the new way seems more moral, or at least less ruthless. There are no secret agents—no human agents at all, in fact. In a sense, though, this might be even more frightening. Perhaps at some level we prefer to be watched than to be ignored. Our watchers might be leering with a voyeur's lascivious gaze, a sadist's obscene intent; or, as even the antiheroes of *Anders*, "*Ich*," *Helden wie wir*, and *Das Leben der Anderen* did once, they might be falling in love.