

## Memory on film

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## **Memory on Film: Testimony and Constructions of Authenticity in Documentaries about the GDR**

### **Abstract**

This article considers the construction of authenticity in documentary films dealing with repression in the former East Germany, focusing on Stefan Weinert's *Gesicht zur Wand* (2009) and Christian Klemke and Jan N. Lorenzen's *Das Ministerium für Staatssicherheit: Alltag einer Behörde* (2002). Taking as its starting point the observation of two modes of authenticity in Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's Oscar-winning feature film, *Das Leben der Anderen* (2006), the article analyses the interaction between referential and emotive elements in non-fictional representations of repression. The use of eyewitness testimony is central to both documentary films, and the grouping of personal accounts can create a self-authenticating 'mediated remembering community'. However, the observation of complementary and competing authenticities in the medium highlights how the authenticity of the witness account can be both harnessed and undermined by its (re)mediation in cultural artefacts. This adds to our understanding of how versions of contested pasts circulate and become salient.

### **Key Words**

authenticity; Christian Klemke; documentary; East Germany; eyewitness testimony; Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck; Jan N. Lorenzen; mediated remembering communities; memory studies; Stefan Weinert.

## **Memory on Film: Testimony and Constructions of Authenticity in Documentaries about the GDR**

Watching the film for the first time, I was powerfully affected. Yet I was also moved to object, from my own experience: “No! It was not really like that. This is all too highly colored, romantic, even melodramatic; in reality, it was all much grayer, more tawdry and banal. (Garton Ash, 2007)

Timothy Garton Ash’s review of Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck’s Oscar-winning film *Das Leben der Anderen* (*The Lives of Others*, 2006), particularly his ambivalence towards its authenticity, reflects much of the academic and popular reception of the work. The tale of a State Security officer, so drawn to the lives of the couple he observes that he falsifies reports and removes incriminating evidence from their apartment, provoked a mixed critical response. Praise for the film’s authentic representation of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and of the mechanisms of repression and control stood alongside criticisms of historical inaccuracies and its improbable story of redemption.<sup>1</sup> The debate surrounding the authenticity of *Das Leben der Anderen* indicated not only the ongoing negotiation of memories of the GDR in the united Germany, it also signalled the importance of this category in such memory debates.

Indeed, Pirker and Rüdiger (2010: 12-13) argue that ‘the question of how – and above all how successfully – historical “genuineness” can be suggested’, is a key issue in the production and reception of memorial media.<sup>2</sup> This phenomenon has been linked to the ontological uncertainty of the postmodern world, in which the authentic has come to be considered as *a priori* of value, even a measure of product quality (Chhabra, Sealy and Sills, 2003; Olsen, 2002: 162; Wight, 2009: 137). And yet there

is more to the concept of authenticity than simply the desire to return to an imagined life away from the disorientation of post-modernity. The construction of authenticity is also related to power, specifically the power to determine meaning. As Bruner (1994: 409) argues, ‘the more fundamental question to ask [...] is not if an object or site is authentic, but rather who has the authority to authenticate’.

In the following, I seek to explore the construction of authenticity and its link with authority in the context of non-fiction film. My focus will be on two works that make arguments about the politics of the united Germany in relation to the East German past, in particular the oppression of individuals by the State Security Service (the Staatssicherheitsdienst or Stasi) and the SED (Sozialistische Einheitspartei/Socialist Unity Party): Stefan Weinert’s *Gesicht zur Wand* (*Face the Wall*, 2009) and Christian Klemke and Jan N. Lorenzen’s *Das Ministerium für Staatssicherheit: Alltag einer Behörde* (*Ministry of State Security: Everyday Life of an Agency*, 2002). Understandings of the East German dictatorship remain highly contested in the German public sphere, with memories of social and financial security and nostalgia for the East (*Ostalgie*), competing with memories of repression and total control. The struggle to present an image of this part of German history that is received as ‘authentic’, ‘true’ and, therefore, authoritative, is thus central to efforts to promote acceptance of one version of the past over others. In this context, the films named above both make extensive use of eyewitness testimony; however, close textual analysis reveals two quite different methods of authenticating the viewpoint of the filmmakers via the framing and setting of the witness accounts.

### **Modes of Authenticity**

The tension between criticism of historical inaccuracies in *Das Leben der Anderen* and praise of the film’s treatment of the repressive side of the GDR dictatorship

indicates the multiple uses of the concept of authenticity with reference to representations of the past. The discourse surrounding the authenticity of the film (or the lack thereof) has focused on factual details (e.g., Eckert 2006, Giesecke 2008, Lindenberger 2008, Wilke 2008, Wolle 2006) and the accuracy with which von Donnersmarck recreated ‘the look and atmosphere of East Berlin in the mid-1980s’ (Stein, 2008: 568; see also Dueck, 2008: 599; Eckert, 2006: 500; Gauck, 2006). However, this focus on the indexicality of the images on screen was, as seen in the response of Garton Ash above, often coupled with an appreciation of the gripping plot, and the emotional response that the film generates in its viewers (see also Lindenberger, 2008: 560; Biermann, 2006). Indeed, Berghahn (2009: 323) describes the ‘authenticity discourse’ as ‘something of a red herring when it comes to explaining a film’s success’, arguing that in the case of *Das Leben der Anderen* this should be sought rather in the popular appeal of the ‘redemption narrative’ (2009: 324). Berghahn (2009: 333) contends that von Donnersmarck ‘relies on the universal and timeless appeal of emotions’, and ‘sacrifices historical authenticity for affect’. Similarly, Evans (2010: 173) explores the use of the conventions of melodrama to create, in his terms, an ‘authenticity of affect’, which ‘provokes an emotional response from its audience, by foregrounding the way in which the GDR systematically sought to break those individuals it deemed a menace’.

Two distinct understandings of authenticity appear to be at work here: the first relating to the referentiality of events and objects, and the second to the affective response of the viewer. Pirker and Rüdiger (2010: 17) also note two modes of authenticity in popular representations of the past: the mode of the authentic witness – that is, original objects, eyewitnesses and auratic places; and the mode of the authentic experience – that is, replicas, copies, reenactments and reconstructions that are not

necessarily 'originals', but which evoke a 'feeling of authenticity'. They argue: 'whereas in the witness mode, the object as a representative of the past is the core focus, in the experiential mode, the subject and his or her feelings and life world are central'. In historical feature films, such as *Das Leben der Anderen*, these two modes function slightly differently. The object of study, the film, is necessarily a product of the present, a reenactment of the past rather than a relic from it, thus the mode of the witness would not appear relevant.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, the concept of witness authenticity can be linked with the demand for an identity between the objects, characters and plot, and a common understanding of a past reality. The filmic representation of the past is, in this reading, meant to function indexically in a similar way to the eyewitness or original artefact. In contrast, the appeals to an affective response in the viewer, 'universal' emotions, and a sense of history without accuracy, can be understood as a form of experiential authenticity, in which the subjectivity of the viewer is the focus, and not the objective portrayal of the past.

The criticism or praise of the film in terms of its authenticity was thus dependent on the mode in which it was read: either as a document or as a fiction. Engell (2007: 16) notes that 'a film that is declared fiction can of course be read as a document – for example of the fashion of its time or the concerns of a particular epoch or social stratum'. The reading of fiction film in this mode is not entirely arbitrary; rather it is dependent upon the semiotics of the film itself (Engell, 2007: 16-17) and/or the marketing, which 'must send a message, coded in its stylistic and generic symbols, telling us how to interpret it' (Saunders, 2010: 14-15). In this way, authenticity is constructed in a social process and in an interaction between production and reception. *Das Leben der Anderen* was marketed and produced as both

a fictional feature film and as a document of the East German dictatorship<sup>4</sup> – the mixed reception reflects this combination of two different modes of authenticity.<sup>5</sup>

But what about documentary film as it is commonly understood: an artistic product that claims to have ‘worth as historical *record*’ (Saunders, 2010: 12)? Several studies have analysed documentary in terms of narrative, ideology and affect (to name but a few: Gaines, 1999; Nichols, 1991; Nichols, 1994; Plantinga, 1997), and linked this to their construction of ‘truth’ (e.g. Rabinowitz, 1993; Williams, 1993) or the presentation of history (e.g., de Leeuw, 2007; Rosenstone, 2006: 70-88). Sénécheau (2010) considers the role of archaeological artefacts in generating authenticity in television and educational films about Germany’s distant past. However, none of these authors considers in detail the different modes of authenticity at work in documentary representations of recent history, of pasts that are still publicly contested. If the two modes of authenticity – witness/indexical and experiential/affective – can be present in historical feature films, are both modes also present in documentary films about the past? How does authenticity function in documentary? And how is it constructed? What is the impact on the viewer?

### ***Gesicht zur Wand***

Stefan Weinert’s 2009 documentary, *Gesicht zur Wand*, is comprised of five eyewitness accounts narrated by individuals who were incarcerated in the GDR for attempting to leave the country. These individuals have vivid memories of first-hand psychological and, in some cases, physical suffering at the hands of the repressive forces of the SED. Indeed, the use of eyewitness testimony, specifically the testimony of victims of persecution, is of central importance to the construction of authenticity in this film. Victim accounts function as ‘signals of authenticity’ (Heuer, 2010: 81) for the viewer that provide a ‘gesture of authentication’, authorising the account of the

past offered by the medium in which they are embedded. In her analysis of the figure of the ‘moral witness’, the testifier who is also victim, Aleida Assmann (2006: 90-91) argues that the authenticity of the account is assured by the direct physical experience of suffering. In her view, the body itself gives testimony to past violence: ‘as embodiments of traumatic experience, they are as victims at the same time living proof of the crime of which they bring tidings’.

### *Virtual Performance*

Nonetheless, it is not simply the narration of events by an individual with subjective experience of suffering that constructs authenticity. The testimonies are embedded in the film in a particular way which creates further links between past and present, and which is likely to generate a specific emotional, physical and cognitive response in the viewer. An important part of this is the mode of narration, which can be described as what Nichols (1991: 122) terms ‘virtual performance, or the everyday presentation of the self’, that is, the presentation of ‘the logic of actual performance without signs of conscious awareness that this presentation is an act’. In their reviews of the film, critics note the lack of ‘distractions’ (Scally, 2009); the director is praised for allowing ‘his protagonists to express themselves’ (Finger, 2009); and for ‘avoiding any unnecessary additions or didactic material’ (Deutsche Film- und Medienbewertung (FBW), 2012). The witness interviews are received by these reviewers almost as unstaged raw footage.

Indeed, when the witnesses narrate their past, they do so largely unselfconsciously and with genuine affect; they do not appear to be aware of performing. Yet their emotional response to the telling of their story has a powerful effect on the viewer that is comparable to actual performance in fictional film. The ‘virtual performance’, or ‘everyday presentation’ of emotion creates an impression of

subjectivity (Nichols, 1991: 122), which, in turn, has the potential to generate empathy. As Nichols (1991: 122) argues, the impact of the ‘expressive dimension’ of ‘virtual performance’ is augmented in documentary by ‘the sense of historical authenticity and privileged access’. The apparent lack of performance makes the medium of film appear transparent to the viewer, who gains the impression that what s/he is observing is the event of testimony itself, not a filmic mediation. This impression is heightened by intradiegetic background noises – cars going past, clocks chiming – which give the sense that we are viewing *the* world, not *a* world (see Nichols, 1991: 109). This may be an illusion, like all representations, this is ‘mediated immediacy’ (Pirker and Rüdiger, 2010: 18), not a window pane onto reality. Nonetheless, the construction of medial transparency in this way is also a powerful method of generating authenticity. As Richter (2010: 50) states: ‘the authentic representation presents “*the represented through its representation as not represented*”’. The viewer experiences the witness accounts as authentic, because they are constructed as being unmediated, unperformed and unrehearsed testimony.

### *Embodiment*

The apparent transparency of the medium also means that the viewer feels directly confronted with the victim. As Plantinga (1997: 70) observes, in contrast to textual forms, ‘the filmed interview allows us to *see* and *hear* the interviewee, giving us information about spatial context, gesture, facial expression, tone of voice, and inflection’. The political potential of this emotional appeal can be highlighted with reference to Landsberg’s (2004: 2) concept of ‘prosthetic memory’. According to Landsberg, through engaging the visitor or viewer both physically and cognitively, feature films and interactive museums allow the individual to ‘[suture] himself or herself into a larger history,’ he or she ‘does not simply apprehend a historical

narrative but takes on a more personal, deeply felt memory of a past event through which he or she did not live'. Central to Landsberg's argument is the concept of cinematic identification – seeing the world from the victim-protagonist's point of view promotes, for Landsberg, empathy with that subject position (see Landsberg, 2004: 124-125). Documentary testimony may not have the same power as fiction to involve the viewer physically in a story – the narrative of the past is generally recounted rather than shown. However, the apparent medial transparency still has the power to engage the viewer in the events being depicted, that is, the testimony of the witness; the gaze of the audience becomes that of the interviewer behind the camera (see also Hallas, 2007: 38; Nichols, 1991: 54).

With Hallas (2007: 37-38), I see this as a form of embodiment of the film's narrative, of the account of life in the GDR, the attempt to leave the country, arrest, imprisonment, release, and traumatic after-effects. The film is structured around these six stages in the victims' biographies. The work makes an argument about the GDR past and its relevance for the present, particularly the grotesqueness of *Ostalgie* for these individuals, and the failure to punish those responsible for human rights abuses. However, it makes its argument not through the use of 'Voice of God' narration (Nichols, 1991: 37), but through individual testimony, and, in combination with 'virtual performance' and the apparent transparency of the medium, this testimony becomes embodied for the viewer – no longer abstract, but imaginable as pain inflicted on a real person. This is particularly important in terms of Assmann's (2006: 90-91) definition of the 'moral witness' as bearing the marks of the trauma s/he narrates, that is, of authenticating his or her testimony with physical presence. It also demonstrates the interaction between witness and experience authenticity and the inseparability of the two forms. The witness authenticates because s/he has direct

links to the past; however, the physical presence of the victims and the immediacy of their testimony are illusions *experienced* by the viewer through the construction of medial transparency.

We might also link this usefully to Gaines's (1999: 90) concept of 'political mimesis', the 'relationship between bodies in two locations – on the screen and in the audience – [...] the starting point for the consideration of what the one body makes the other do'. In our context, the filmmakers do not use bodies in physical struggle, in order to inspire '*audiences to carry on that same struggle*' (Gaines, 1999: 91), but bodies demonstrating a psychological, emotional and political struggle. Nonetheless, this struggle is *also* physical: the victims show involuntary emotion at the recounting of the stories, and the medium of film encourages mimicry of this physical response in the audience (see Gaines, 1999: 91) – we may feel, like Anne K., tears spring to our eyes as she recounts the story of a young prisoner being raped with a toilet brush. The physical response has the potential, following Landsberg (2004), to generate a 'prosthetic memory' of the trauma, which, in turn, can inspire political action in the present. Documentary, as Gaines (1999: 92) notes, is particularly effective at inspiring a political response because the 'aesthetic of similarity establishes a continuity between the world of the screen and the world of the audience, where the ideal viewer is poised to intervene in the world that so closely resembles the one represented on screen'. In this way, we see the interaction of indexicality (the referentiality of the work) and affect (the mimicry of victim emotions) to generate not only authority for the narrative of the film, but also to promote political action on the part of the viewer.

### *Auratic Sites*

The question of presence and absence, and present and past, is complicated further in the film through the use of auratic locations, that is, sites where the suffering

recounted by the victims took place. The oral accounts of the victims are interspersed with images of the prisons in which they were incarcerated in the GDR. In several scenes, the witness returns to the site of his or her suffering – the prison in which s/he was held, or the land appropriated by the SED state – and narrates past experiences within this auratic space. So what is the impact of this use of location?

In her analysis of the use of archaeological relics in documentary, Sénécheau (2010: 93-94) argues that such objects ‘give the impression of offering “unadulterated” evidence of human action and thereby appear to allow “immediate” contact with the past’. She states that images of archaeological objects thus often stand for the claim of a documentary ‘to transmit authentic information, that is, to present “truth” and “reality”’. The auratic spaces in *Gesicht zur Wand* perform a similar authenticating function: they seemingly provide literally concrete evidence for the crimes that the witness describes. This is a doubling of witness authenticity: individuals who experienced the past, *and* buildings with seemingly direct links to it. Moreover, the process is dialogical: the auratic site authenticates the narrative of the witness; however, the narrative of the witness provides the site with its authenticating aura as they mark it as a place of suffering. As Pirker and Rüdiger (2010: 19) argue the aura of an original object or an original site does not arise *a priori*, but only through such a process of ‘ascribing significance’.

However, the use of auratic sites also adds to the testimony of the witnesses in a way which might be viewed as a further example of the authenticity of affect. With reference to Rea Tajiri’s *History and Memory*, in which Tajiri travels to sites related to her family’s past, Nichols (1994: 8) describes revisiting space as:

staging the ritual (physically, corporeally) of seeking the touch of authenticity:  
to put oneself in physical contact with this (altered) geographical referent, to

receive its imprint, to let the past reverberate through what it has become, and what we make of it.

In *Gesicht zur Wand*, the blurring of levels of time, of past and present, is seen strikingly in the witness Mario R.'s use of tense as he recounts his experiences in the Berlin remand prison in which he was held, now a memorial museum: '[I] knew neither when I was first brought here [...] nor during the period of imprisonment, that I *am here* in Hohenschönhausen' [my emphasis]. The shift between time levels is further augmented by reconstructed (or fictional?) elements added to the testimony: the noise of a typewriter as Mario R. recounts the extent and depth of his interrogation; the sound of booted footsteps walking down a long corridor as the camera fixes on the glass-brick windows of a prison cell. These reconstructed features add a spectral quality to the film; they appear as disembodied elements from the past returning to haunt the present of the victims.

As a result of medial transparency, the viewer is invited to accompany the witness on their journey to the past made present, and the witness provides a tangible link between the two levels of time – between the historic site and its former function as a place of repression. As Anne K. 'shudders' when she returns to the former women's prison at Hoheneck, the viewer may shudder with her, feeling viscerally the spectral presence of the past site in Anne's life, and, as a long-shot views it embedded in the German landscape, in the country as a whole. In providing this link between past and present, the film authenticates a narrative not only of suffering but also of the impact of this suffering on the present, and the political significance of this part of the German past. Anne K. describes the whole GDR as 'a big internment camp', hardly permitting space for *Ostalgie*; we learn that the victims Andreas B., Lothar R. and Mario R. are unable to work because of the psychological effects of their experiences,

whereas Mario R.'s interrogator is seemingly living very comfortably in the united Germany. The cognitive impact of these statements is augmented by the emotive and corporeal aspects of the film – the experiential authenticity or authenticity of affect generated by the sense of travelling back in time with the witnesses, and of being confronted directly with their testimony.

### *Remembering Communities*

It is also significant that the viewer is not presented with a single witness, but with a set of five overlapping witness narratives. The testimonies are not presented as discrete wholes, but intersect following a distinct trajectory focusing on the six core stages as described above. The cutting of the narratives occasionally gives the impression that one witness is able to finish the sentence of the other: Andreas B. states 'over and over they asked the same questions', the film then cuts to Mario R. who lists the particular questions he was asked; Lothar B. states 'then we were supposed to work', the film cuts to Catharina M., who seemingly completes his sentence with the word 'forcibly'. This creates the sense that the victims are remembering together, as a group, even though their testimonies have evidently been recorded separately. We might view them in this regard as a 'remembering community': following Aleida Assmann (2006: 24), memory can constitute community through generating a network of individuals whose memories intersect and overlap to lend one another coherence and credibility.

However, for Assmann, a remembering community in this sense is formed through the process of communication, particularly oral communication, and thus requires individuals to be simultaneously present. The creation of a remembering group in cultural media, where the narratives are disembodied and the testimony constructed in a media technology, is something rather different. These individuals

cannot interact, and their memories are not mutually negotiated in the same way that individual memories have been shown to change in conversational remembering (Welzer 2002, 2010). In this respect, the testimonies are not originally produced in a remembering community; however, they are presented and might be received as a cohesive whole. They can be viewed as what I have described elsewhere as a ‘mediated remembering community’ (Jones 2012, 2013). The construction of such communities not only creates a further sense of authenticity or authority for the narratives, as they appear to overlap and support each other, it also allows the film to claim wider political relevance. Indeed, at the start of the documentary these witnesses are described as ‘standing for a group of approximately 72,000 people once imprisoned for attempting to flee the GDR’.

### ***Alltag einer Behörde***

At first glance, Christian Klemke and Jan N. Lorenzen’s 2002 documentary *Alltag einer Behörde* appears to be structured in a very similar way to *Gesicht zur Wand*. Here, however, it is not victims of Stasi and SED repression who recount their stories, but former high-ranking Stasi officers who describe their own perception of the role they played in the GDR. Nonetheless, the film does not, and does not aim to, authenticate the voice of perpetrators of state violence. That the film-makers are aware of the potential for the film to do just that is seen in their statement ‘on the problem of the “perpetrator perspective”’ printed on the sleeve of the DVD:

The statements of the former MfS [Ministerium für Staatssicherheit/Ministry for State Security] employees, as self-incriminating as they often are, do not remain uncommented. The language of the film, the image, the word, the montage, the music contrasts and contradicts the statements of the perpetrators

and makes their evasions and attempts to gloss over the past obvious to the viewer.

This statement might also be seen as a response to the film's controversial reception on its release in 2002 – Harmsen (2007) notes that commentators questioned whether it was right to give such individuals a platform for their political views (see also Hodgkin, 2011: 77).

Nonetheless, reviews of the film indicate that these fears were unfounded – the accounts of the Stasi officers are seen to undermine themselves or to be undermined by the texture of the film. Harmsen (2007) describes them as 'justification', 'nostalgia' or 'cynical lying'; an un-authored review in the *Berliner Kurier* (2003) notes that the 'detailed portrayals of the eyewitnesses speak on the one hand for themselves, but do not remain without comment'; True (2003) argues that when the Stasi officers speak, 'even their choice of words betrays them'. Yet this film is simultaneously seen to offer an authentic view of the internal workings of the MfS and of the motivations or current attitudes of the former Stasi officers: Kellerhoff (2003) states that the film 'mediates exactly the perversion of this system of repression'; several reviewers note the lack of guilt, shame and regret in the narratives of the Stasi officers and appear to assume this reflects the genuine attitudes of these actors of state-sanctioned violence (Clauss, 2003; Harmsen, 2007; Schweizerhof, 2003; Tittelbach, 2004; True, 2003). An analysis of the ways in which this film creates authenticity not only in respect of the narrative of its witnesses, but also for the argument of the film against those witnesses, can deepen our understanding of the constructed nature of authenticity, and highlight the potential for subversion of the witness voice.

### *Unreliable Witnesses*

What is interesting in this respect is that many of the features identified as key to authenticity in *Gesicht zur Wand* also hold true for *Alltag einer Behörde*. The narratives of the witnesses can be described as a ‘virtual performance’; they appear unrehearsed and immediate. Indeed, as indicated above, although certain aspects are considered distortions or lies, the testimonies of the officers are generally received as offering privileged access to the attitudes and motivations of the Stasi elite. These are seen to be authentic, if self-incriminating. Moreover, the apparent transparency of the medium allows the viewer to feel directly confronted with the perpetrators – their testimony too is embodied. This effect is seen strikingly in Harmsen’s (2007) comment that ‘the film is a good opportunity to see the Stasi face-to-face, and not via the detour of a feature film’.

Nonetheless, the viewer is not encouraged to feel empathy for the subject position of the witnesses in this film. Their status in society as ‘perpetrators’ (a term repeated in reviews of the film) makes them morally suspect. In literary terms, these narrators are unreliable, as the attitudes and views they espouse are unlikely to be those of viewer. Moreover, they do not stand alone in the text: from the beginning of the film, a ‘Voice of God’ narrator competes with the accounts of the witnesses. As in traditional narrative, this third-person, unnamed and seemingly omniscient voice is authoritative exactly because it is not embodied and does not create an impression of subjectivity. The voiceover provides overarching historical commentary, framing the GDR as a totalitarian dictatorship, and thereby setting the context in which the subsequent narratives of the witnesses are received. In the section, ‘Operative Procedure 2: Decomposition’ (*Zersetzung*), the ‘Voice of God’ lists possible measures taken by the MfS to break up oppositional groups: encouraging alcoholism or sex with minors, destroying existing relationships, negligent treatment by doctors and

anonymous telephone calls. The camera then cuts to former Stasi officer, Willi Opitz, who states: 'I stand by my biography, with all ifs and buts, and I simply simply won't be pushed into thinking I committed any crimes'. The viewer is thus encouraged to conclude that Opitz specifically does not view the wilful destruction of individual lives as a criminal activity. This interweaving of third-person and first-person narrative functions as a distancing mechanism, discouraging the viewer from seeing the world from the witnesses' point of view.

### *Files and Footage*

The apparent objectivity of the 'Voice of God' narrator is augmented by the fact that he is frequently not reading from a script, but from the Stasi files themselves. In the section 'Operative Procedure 4: Imprisonment', for example, the voiceover reads from the 'house rules' (Haftmordnung) of the Stasi remand prisons as the camera pans over images of prison cells. The conditions in the prisons that emerge from this document seem to directly contradict the witness Siegfried Rataizick's claims that former prisoners are lying when they state they were ill-treated. At other points, the files are used not to contradict the witnesses, but to authenticate what they say and simultaneously highlight the impact of their actions. For example, Kurt Zeiseweiss describes the illegal control of suspected dissidents' post; this is cut with the voiceover reading from a file relating to similar actions against a victim with the codename 'Schreiber', including from a confiscated letter.

Original footage from the period, generally (though not exclusively) recorded by the Stasi itself, is deployed in the film in a similar way to discredit the witnesses, or to highlight the impact of their actions on their victims. When, for example, former Stasi officer Horst Männchen states that the personal lives of normal citizens did not interest him, only the political aspects were worthy of surveillance, this statement is

followed by a grainy recording from the Stasi archive of a man and woman dressing, having evidently been captured *in flagrante* by the camera of the secret police. Männchen's assertion that such actions did not interest the MfS is further contradicted by the fact that this footage was evidently used by the Stasi for training their officers. The voiceover narrating the original footage for this purpose expresses disgust at the 'moral reprehensibility' of this 'female spy, over fifty years old', who is having 'extramarital sexual relations' with not only her colleague, but also another acquaintance.

The use of files and footage can be seen to play a similar role in terms of witness authenticity to that of the auratic sites in *Gesicht zur Wand*. As artefacts with a direct link to the past, they authorise the text in which they are embedded. However, in *Alltag einer Behörde*, this is not the account of the witnesses, but the argument about the world that the documentary is making. The footage and artefacts appear to be without narrative, or perhaps, more accurately, without a narrative relating to the present political context. This means that the historical material can be appropriated in order to authenticate the argument of the film in which it is embedded, even where this argument might be contrary to the original intentions of those recording the images. In the case of the material taken from Stasi training videos, the footage undergoes a double (re)interpretation. The images recorded by the secret police, with intent, but without commentary, are first given both context and explanation by those who used this material to educate MfS officers on the practicalities of their work and the nature of the 'class enemy'. Subsequently, in a radically changed political environment, both original images and the commentary of the MfS are embedded in the documentary film in the service of a narrative that undermines the legitimacy of this work and, indeed, of the very act of recording the original material.

### *Reconstruction*

Nichols (1991: 117) argues that, in contrast to fiction, the documentary form works with ‘conventions that call for evidence drawn from the historical world indexically, as it was seen and heard to occur rather than with metaphorical likenesses.’ The use of files, footage and original artefacts would seem to conform to these unspoken rules. Nonetheless, *Alltag einer Behörde* also uses techniques of reconstruction or metaphorical replication of the past. The section ‘Operative Procedure 3: Arrest and Interrogation’, for example, contains black-and-white images of two men walking purposefully from a typical GDR vehicle towards the door of a house, as, on the audio track, former Stasi officer Wolfgang Schwanitz explains the arrest of suspected dissidents; this scene is then followed by original footage from a Stasi training video, recording the arrest of the suspect ‘Revisor’. The only difference in the presentation of these two scenes is that the latter is marked with the acronym BStU (Bundesbeauftragte für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der ehemaligen DDR/Federal Commissioner for the Files of the State Security Service of the Former GDR), indicating its status as an original document found in the Stasi archives.

Indeed, it is often difficult for the viewer to identify which aspects of the film are reconstructions and which are recordings from the period under discussion: the filmmakers use authenticating markers for the reconstructions (e.g., period clothing and objects, black-and-white or sepia tone, shaky camera movements) to suggest that what has been recorded in the present, in fact belongs to the past. Moreover, the distinction between the filming of a pro-filmic ‘reality’ and the filming of its reconstruction is often not clear-cut: the black-and-white images of a transport van entering a GDR prison are unlikely to be taken from pre-1989 footage, and indeed are not marked as such; however, the images appear to be genuine contemporary

recordings of the former Magdeburg prison at ‘Moritzplatz’, now a memorial museum. The images of the interrogation block in the Berlin prison at Hohenschönhausen are images of a pro-filmic reality, but this reality is of the present memorial, not the past prison. The sound effect of the cell doors being closed and locked, and of faint (almost supernatural) human screams, as the camera pans back along the prison corridor is a further reconstructed (or one might even say fictional) addition, which, as in *Gesicht zur Wand*, lends a spectral quality to the images.

The impact of these reconstructed elements in terms of authenticity is comparable to that of the interaction of past and present seen in the use of auratic locations in *Gesicht zur Wand*. The reconstructions similarly blur the two levels of time, filming present locations, as if they were still past, and in the service of a narrative about the nature of the Stasi and its political relevance for contemporary Germany. Moreover, the re-enactments of the past are, for the most part, a reconstruction of *victim* experience – the film replicates transport to the prison, entering the prison wing, the interior of the cells, and the heavy door closing and locking. As discussed above, re-enactments are an example of experiential authenticity: the images are felt to be authentic even where they are not originals. Their use in *Alltag einer Behörde* is also an example of authenticity of affect: these scenes are designed to evoke a visceral response in the viewer by transporting them metaphorically back in time and encouraging them to imagine what it was like for the victims of the men they see testifying on screen. In contrast to *Gesicht zur Wand*, this is a counter-subjectivity to that of the talking heads and a powerful method of ensuring that their perspective does not dominate, even when it is not verbally contradicted.

Indeed, the Stasi officers narrating their memories and experiences in this film would also seem to form a mediated remembering community. Their accounts of the past overlap and intersect with one another, confirming and validating each other; yet, as in *Gesicht zur Wand*, these individuals do not physically remember together. Their memories are brought together by the medium in which they are embedded, and the medium structures the narratives it produces, providing the framework within which the viewer is encouraged to understand and interpret the witness accounts. Moreover, the example of *Alltag einer Behörde* points towards the political significance of the form that the mediation of eyewitness testimony takes. As the mediation of victim testimony in *Gesicht zur Wand* allows potentially disparate narratives to be brought together to make a coherent argument that might promote the interests of the wider remembering group, so in *Alltag einer Behörde* the accounts of individuals are brought together as a remembering community to make an argument that runs counter to the interests of its members.

### **Complementary and Competing Authenticities**

The analysis of the mechanisms of authenticity in these two films highlights the political potential of the interaction between witness/indexical and experiential/affective modes of authenticity. Authenticity is constructed using not only originals or replicas, but also through evoking an emotional or bodily reaction in the viewer, blurring past and present and encouraging identification with the victim subject position. This, in turn, is likely to result in a specific appropriation of this past by those with no lived experience of the period, and offers the potential for a political response on the part of the viewer.

It is perhaps nothing new to say that documentary film combines cognition with emotion. As Rosenstone (2006: 74) observes: 'like the dramatic film, the

documentary wants you to feel and care deeply about the events and people of the past'. However, the above analysis allows us to understand this in terms of constructing an experience of *authenticity*. In turn, this reveals the inherently interlinked and complementary nature of the two modes of the authentic. The witness authenticity of the objects, buildings and remembering individuals creates the potential for the emotional and experiential authenticity of the recipient of the memorial medium – they ascribe significance, and offer an apparently direct link between past and present. However, the witness authenticity is constructed in part by the viewer *experiencing* the artefacts and people as actually there (rather than mediated through the film) and as the past made present.

In the memory struggles of the present, the complementary authenticities play an important role in one remembering group's efforts to assert their voice over the competing authenticity of another. In the case of *Gesicht zur Wand* and *Alltag einer Behörde*, it is victims who harness the power of authenticity to authorise their narratives against those of the actors of state-sanctioned violence, and it would seem politically important that they are able to do so. Nonetheless, the combination of historical authenticity with emotion can risk oversimplification of the past. With reference to Oliver Hirschbiegel's *Der Untergang* (*Downfall*, 2004), Heuer (2010: 80-81) argues that Hirschbiegel's film is a prominent example of the tendency in popular history to construct documentary authenticity by combining 'factually supported instruction' with instruction via emotion. For Heuer (2010: 85), this may promote an affective understanding of the past in the audience, but it also risks a passive response by offering 'closed histories' that remove the opportunity for reflection. In the case of the films discussed above, this is perhaps seen most clearly in the distancing of the viewer from the narratives of the MfS officers. It may seem politically desirable that

their voices are discredited, and the subject position of the victim authenticated; however, if emotion outweighs cognition, the viewer is not given the opportunity to really engage with the perpetrator perspective, to understand how an individual might come to commit violence against his or her fellow citizens.

The analysis of the two films also highlights the importance of considering the impact of the medium on memory and testimony. All memory is mediated, be it by speech, written text, film, memorials or the new media (Erl, 2011: 113). Close examination of individual media technologies can reveal the ways in which mediation determines not only how we remember, but also what we remember. The observation of mediated remembering communities demonstrates how the authenticity of first-person testimony, particularly testimony within a group, is harnessed in order to construct a similar kind of authenticity for media with far broader circulation and the potential for a greater political impact. The comparison of *Gesicht zur Wand* and *Alltag einer Behörde* reveals that the particular form the mediation takes can both support and subvert the authenticity of eyewitness testimony in the service of the authenticity of the memorial artefact. Mediated, or ‘staged’, remembering communities such as these are seen not only in documentary film, but also in written anthologies, museum exhibits (Jones 2012) and even internet discussion forums (Jones 2013). The proliferation of (re)mediated testimony in such a wide range of cultural forms confirms the centrality of this type of remembering in the media societies of the present. However, the ways in which these testimonies are embedded in the particular medium and the power structures behind its production determine both the meaning of these narratives in terms of understandings of the past and their significance for the memory contests of the present.

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## Notes

- 1 For further discussion of the reception of *Das Leben der Anderen* see, for example: Cooke, 2011; Hodgin, 2011; Seegers, 2008; Westphal, 2012.
- 2 Unless otherwise stated, all translations from German are my own.
- 3 Though not entirely so, as Donnersmarck claimed to have used original artefacts in the film. See Evans, 2010: 167.
- 4 For a detailed discussion of the marketing of the film as ‘authentic’ see Seegers, 2008.
- 5 Westphal (2012) adds to these two modes through consideration of the “hyperreal” in the film, and the self-conscious undermining of the very concepts of truth, reality and authenticity.

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