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Authenticity – An Important Property for Artistic Documents?

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Introduction

Taking a historical perspective, the term authenticity has been used in many ways in different fields such as law, theology, psychology and philosophy, but also in the field of aesthetics in disciplines like literature, music and visual art. In Ancient Greek the term was used mostly for written documents; the adjective later also takes on the meaning of authoritative, legal and recognized (Knaller 2006: 18). In Latin we find the term *auctoritas* used in legal discourse meaning the author or creator and therefore also signifying authority.

From the middle of the 18th century authenticity is used as a noun not only in English, but also in German (*Authentizität*), French (*authenticité*), Italian (*autenticità*) and Spanish (*autenticidad*).[1] According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* authenticity means the "quality of being authentic, or entitled to acceptance"[2] in four different meanings:

1. As being authoritative or duly authorized.
2. As being in accordance with fact, as being true in substance.
3. As being what it professes in origin or authorship, as being genuine; genuineness.
4. As being real, actual; reality.

Both as professionals and in everyday life we often encounter the terms "authentic" and "authenticity". In archives and libraries preservation is an important context for authenticity. We may be concerned whether a document is authentic or not – a question important not only in relation to digital documents: "Authenticity is a concern for any area of scholarship that analyzes and interprets documentary sources." (MacNeil 2005: 265) In everyday life we may have noticed advertisements for "authentic" food or for an "authentic" holiday destination, promising the real thing: "People increasingly see the world in terms of real and fake, and want to buy something real from someone genuine, not a fake from some phony." (Gilmore & Pine 2007: 1).

As with so many other terms, there is no clear definition of the term authenticity, neither from a historical nor a current perspective; the concept has – as have many other terms and concepts – traveled "between disciplines, between individual scholars, between historical periods, and between geographically dispersed academic communities" (Bal 2002: 24). However, these examples already indicate two important meanings of authenticity today: authentic as original (not false or copied) and authentic as real and actual (mirroring reality).

By looking across disciplines we can conclude that authenticity in most cases is actively constructed and a product of circumstances: "Behind any definition of authenticity lie assumptions about the meaning and significance

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[1] For the etymological history of the term see Knaller & Müller 2005: 40-65.
[2] www.oed.com/view/Entry/13325?redirectedFrom=authenticity#eid, accessed October 20, 2015.

of content, fixity, consistency of reference, provenance, and context." (Smith 2000: vi)

Today the term is used in both a normative and non-normative way; it is also used to describe objects in reference to tradition or reality, and is closely connected to morality and ethical value. For instance, we might think of theater performances which use authentic costumes or may judge music performances according to how a piece was played at the time of creation, upon which instruments and so on. But even "[a]n inauthentic document may still be of much interest, but it cannot be fully or correctly understood unless one knows that it is not authentic." (Scott 1990: 22)

The notion of authenticity seems to have grown more and more important for artistic documents during the last decades, for instance for fictional texts like novels or for feature films. Critics are using the term as a kind of distinction for novels and films – an authentic novel or film is a good novel or film. Authenticity in these cases does not mean questioning the novel or film as an original work of art; rather, what is meant by authenticity is the relationship between reality and the content of a novel or film, assuming possible mimesis in terms of a mirror-like relationship. In these cases we apply the notion of authenticity to much more than objects, talking about how we experience the reading of a novel or watching a motion picture. If we consider art to be constructed, using different means in order to obtain authenticity, we are also talking about truth and accuracy.

The Representation of Historical Events in Artistic Documents

Looking at German literature and film, it seems to me that questions of truth and authenticity are becoming especially relevant when dealing with historical events, especially the Holocaust and the person of Adolf Hitler when we are talking about World War II, and life under surveillance of the secret police in the GDR, a more recent period of German history – obviously sensitive subjects for many Germans.

How these stories can be told, and who is allowed to do so, as well as questions concerning authenticity – is the presentation correct according to the historical facts? – have been asked about works like Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993), the Italian Oscar-winning *La Vita è bella* (1997) by Roberto Benigni as well as about films like *Der Untergang* (*Downfall*), a 2004 German-Austrian film depicting the final ten days of Adolf Hitler's life in his Berlin bunker and Nazi Germany in 1945, although they all are works of fiction.

And why, we can ask, is authenticity so important when we are talking about fiction? The problematic relationship between reality and its representation has been discussed in historiography for ages now. And also in literary studies it is widely accepted that literary texts do not simply mirror reality, but that they are literary adaptations of reality. I would like to claim that this happens because of how the producers are using elements of the paratext in convincing us that what we read or watch is real, is authentic.

Gérard Genette's Concept of Paratext

In his study, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (which appeared in French with the title *Seuils* in 1987), Genette uses numerous examples to show what role the title, subtitle, forewords and cover blurbs play in interpreting a text, as well as the degree of an author's celebrity, his age and gender, awards, honorary degrees, on so on: "the paratext is what enables a text to become a book and to be offered as such to its readers and, more generally, to the public." (Genette 1997: 1)

Genette divides the paratext into a peritext and an epitext: the former being aspects that are relatively closely associated with the book itself, such as the dustcover, the title, genre indication, foreword and epilogue or even various themes, while the latter consists of statements about the book beyond the bounders of the book, such as interviews, correspondences and journals. In so doing, Genette explores non-textual elements such as format and cover design:

> Most often, then, the paratext is itself a text: if it is still not the text, it is already some text. But we must at least bear in mind the paratextual value that may be vested in other types of manifestation: these may be iconic (illustrations), material (for example, everything that originates in the sometimes very significant typographical choices that go into the making of a book), or purely factual. By factual I mean the paratext that consists not of an explicit message (verbal or other) but of a fact whose existence alone, if known to the public, provides some commentary on the text and influences how the text is received. (Genette 1997: 7)

Genette is talking about books, but opens the concept for other media:

> This is all the more true, undoubtedly, for the paratext outside of literature. For if we are willing to extend the term to areas where the work does not consist of a text, it is obvious that some, if not all, of the other arts have an equivalent of our paratext: examples are […] the credits or the trailer in film, […] and other peritextual or epitextual supports. (Genette 1997: 407)

In following Genette's terminology, a number of scholars have applied his concept on other media like film.[3] Talking about films we can identify some central elements of the paratext, divided into peritext and epitext:

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[3] There are first of all some German publications like Klaus Kreimeier and Georg Stanitzek (Eds.), *Paratexte in Literatur, Film, Fernsehen*. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2004, but also Jonathan Gray (2010), *Show sold separately. Promos, spoilers, and other media paratexts*, New York University Press, New York and London.

Peritext	Epitext

• Opening credits
• Closing credits
• Filmmusic
• DVD-cover with similar elements like a book cover
• Film on DVD:
    ○ Chapter
    ○ Extras
    ○ Exclusives Making of
    ○ etc.
	• Film poster
	• Trailer/teaser
	• Internet pages
	• Writings about the film like reviews, articles etc.
	• Interviews with the producer, actors etc.
	• Awards
	• Seminars, conferences about the film ort he producer
	• Press Booklet

I would like to demonstrate how some of these elements are used as an advertisement strategy in the case of a very successful German film: *The lives of others* (2006) by the young West German director Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck. The elements of the paratext are used, as my analysis will show, to convince the audience about the authenticity of the historical events presented to them by the film.

The Lives of Others (Das Leben der Anderen)[4]
Let me start with a short synopsis of the film:

The film begins in East Berlin in 1984, five years before Glasnost and the fall of the Berlin wall, and tells the love story between the play writer Georg Dreyman and the actress Christa-Maria Sieland. But *The lives of others* is not only a love story situated in the theatre scene of East Berlin that moves between conformity, internal emigration and suicide, but also a political thriller that tells us about the structures of political power in the GDR. Captain Gerd Wiesler, a highly skilled officer who works for the Stasi, East Gemany's secret police, spies on the couple. During this process he becomes more and more disillusioned, recognizing that he is not spying on the couple because they are enemies of the state, but because a minister cannot take his eyes off the attractive actress.

During the film Dreyman's position towards the state slowly changes. When his close friend theater director Alfred Jerska is driven to suicide, he can no longer remain silent and starts to write an article for the West German

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[4] www.sonyclassics.com/thelivesofothers/swf/index.html, accessed October 20, 2015. These pages include beside the trailer and information about the GDR and the Stasi, a statement by the director, an interview with the director, reviews, and cast and crew bios.

magazine *Der Spiegel* exposing the GDR's policy of covering up the high suicide rates under the regime.

Wiesler is changing too: While he observes their day-to-day life, he begins to be drawn into their world – The Lives of Others – drawn into love, literature and music. Wiesler tries to protect the couple by hiding evidence and falsifying reports, but he can't avoid the unavoidable: Christa-Maria's drug addiction forces her to expose her lover as the author of the article, her tragic death ends the surveillance of Dreyman but also Wiesler's career.

The question of morality and acting rightly, being a good person is the main theme in the film, telling us that change is possible and that each and everyone has the choice to be good.

The film was highly acclaimed and award winning and can be considered one of the most successful recent German films about the GDR. In its first year, 1.7 million cinema viewers saw the film in Germany alone. In the United States it found one of the largest audiences for a foreign-language film in recent years.

Telling a fictive story about fictional persons, the quality of the film was nevertheless approved in terms of being authentic and therefore representing the truth by many reviewers. Misha Glenny, for instance, finds the film's authenticity "mind-blowing" (BBC Radio, 14. Apr. 2007, quoted in Dale 2007: 157). In contrast to earlier best selling films like *Sonnenallee* (1999) or *Good bye, Lenin!* (2002) – often reduced to nostalgic comedies by critics – *The lives of others* was said to be "one of the first attempts, since unification, to be serious about East Germany in film" (BBC Radio, 14. Apr. 2007, quoted in Dale 2007: 157).

How to Achieve Authenticity?
So let me come back to my initial question of what means the producers are using in order to convince us of the film's authentic value. First of all: There need to be elements within the film that support our experience of a realistic story. Let me mention some of the most obvious first:

The producers are using inserts with time and place to give us an authentic feeling, almost like in documentaries: During the first 35 seconds of the film three inserts in a row inform us of the time ("November 1984") and the place ("Berlin-Hohenschönhausen", "Untersuchungsgefängniß des Ministeriums für Staatssicherheit" ("Detention centre of the Ministry of State Security"/Stasi prison at Hohenschönhausen). In the production design too the focus was on using "authentic" objects like the furniture in Wiesler's flat, the cars or the uniforms. A picture of Erich Honecker on the wall of the interrogation room, the use of GDR music, GDR news on the television, real books, newspapers and journals, and the use of real locations like a street in East Berlin help the viewer to associate what he/she is watching with the GDR – a kind of reconstruction of how East Berlin in 1984 may have looked. This will be evaluated both by people who lived in the GDR, having personal experience of the time and the events, but also by people without these

experiences who will judge according to what they think it looked like, their imagination about how a secret police works etc. But films are not only reproducing reality, they also produce reality by their own, confirming pictures we already had or giving us new pictures. Only those who experienced surveillance by the Stasi or those who have expert knowledge like researchers in the area are able to judge if there are parts in the film that are not very realistic or even unrealistic. Some critics have pointed out Wiesler's post on the attic as highly unrealistic, nevertheless most viewers and critics were convinced that what they were watching was real. Why?

As I already mentioned earlier, one important factor is to be found in the use of paratextual elements focusing on research, personal experience and memory, and approval by leading intellectuals and political institutions.

Different materials were used to broadcast the message of authenticity:

Already in December 2004 – over one year in advance of the opening night – there were articles about the film in German newspapers like *Tagesspiegel* and *Berliner Zeitung* where the director and screenwriter Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck tells about his work on the film. He mentions both his personal experience as a child living in the West and visiting relatives in the East and tells of his search for an "internal truth":

> Aber mir geht es nicht darum, eine weitere folkloristische Requisitenschlacht zu schlagen. Bei mir steht nicht die Spreewaldgurke im Mittelpunkt. Ich bin detailversessen, aber ich will nicht die äußere, sondern die innere Wahrheit der DDR zeigen. (Lichterbeck 2004)

> I am not interested in doing yet another folksy piece with props galore. The 'Spreewaldgurke', the canned gherkin from the upper Spree, isn't my focus. I am obsessed with detail, but I want to show not the external, but the internal truth about the GDR.

Both in interviews and statements printed in many different sources, for instance in the book accompanying the film, in the press booklet and on the web pages, von Donnersmarck talks about the years he spent on research studying a lot of relevant literature, talking to eyewitnesses, both former Stasi employees and their victims,[5] and using the expertise of persons like Professor Manfred Wilke, a leading figure in the field of research about the GDR and the Stasi.

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[5] For instance in the Press booklet: 3 (Director's statement): "I met Stasi victims who had been jailed and harassed in Hohenschönhausen (where the central detention center of the Stasi was located). I asked 'unofficial agents' about their activities and I talked to documentary filmmakers who had worked on these topics."

Besides this research von Donnersmarck points out his personal experience, even though it was only as a child back in the 80s: "I knew the East Berlin of 1984 pretty well, if only as a child." He tells the story of his parents who came from the East and his mother who was "on special Stasi lists" and about the fear he experienced in the East: "When we visited our friends in the East, I could see fear in their faces: fear of being seen with us, fear of what it could do to their lives and careers if this was reported to Stasi." (The lives of others – Press booklet: 8-9)

What the director refers to is his memory of what he experienced as a child, a memory pretty much in accordance with the picture of the GDR as a place where everybody spied upon everybody and where fear ruled. Even though he did not live in the East, he has a certain experience and expertise that makes us believe that he knows what he is talking about.

Many serious German newspapers and magazines asked leading authors, freedom fighters and intellectuals of the former GDR like Wolf Biermann and Joachim Gauck to write about the film. These prominent reviewers confirm the authenticity of the film; their authority in the area of personal experience and correct memory is used to give the film legitimacy. Biermann, for instance, talks of a "realistic genre study":

> The basic story in *The Lives of Others* is insane and true and beautiful – by which I mean really very sad. The political tone is authentic, I was moved by the plot. […] This film was able to convey things to me that I could never have imagined 'being real'. […] I can't get over it that such a west-born [sic] directing greenhorn like Donnersmarck and a handful of established actors are able to deliver such an unbelievably realistic genre study of the GDR with what is probably a purely invented story. (Biermann 2006)[6]

But not only important persons from the former GDR praised the film, the political establishment in unified Germany too points out the importance of showing the film in schools in order to tell the young generation about life in the GDR. In this context the *Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung (Federal Centre of Political Education)* produced a film booklet.

Besides all this the film received many awards,[7] some of them already before opening night, and most important of course the 2006 Academy award for best foreign language film – all together contributing to give the film importance, truth and authenticity.

However, the film is telling a clearly fictive story, even if we can assume from our experience and knowledge about the Stasi that the surveillance of the couple would have been possible. More problematic is

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[6] The article originally appeared in *Die Welt* on March 22, 2006.
[7] Four Bavarian Film Awards, seven German Film Awards, the 2006 European film award for best film, best actor and best screenwriter and the 2006 Academy award for best foreign language film.

Wiesler's change because there is no real person inside the Stasi who changed the way he did, as far as we know.

Anna Funder, known author of *Stasiland: True Stories from Behind the Berlin Wall* (2003) formulates it as follows:

> Joachim Gauck, the former head of the Stasi File Authority, has said that the records of the Stasi show that such a thing never, ever happened. The reason it never happened goes right to the heart of the East German system itself, and it needs to be understood, so that one can try to grasp the moral weirdness at the heart of this movie. (quoted in Dale 2007: 157)

But this aspect of the story was not dwelt on. The hype was around a film that supposed to be "truer than a true story". Responding to the question of what is fact and what is fiction, von Donnersmarck answers:

> The film is historically true in the way that a film like 'Doctor Zhivago' is true about the Russian Revolution, or that "The Deer Hunter" is true about the Vietnam war. It is a truthful account, but not a true story. There was no Captain Wiesler in 1984, and there was no Georg Dreyman who wrote an article about suicide in 'Der Spiegel'. However, there were plenty of stories that were similar. […] Any technical aspect of Stasi work – from surveillance to the machines that can steam-open 600 letters per hour, right down to the odor samples – are of course authentic. My research was extensive. […] I talked to Stasi officers and to their vicitms. […] All of these stories somehow influenced my film. (The lives of others – press booklet: 9)

Not only von Donnersmarck research and personal experience, but also the experience of many of the actors is revealed to the audience in different ways. Both in the press booklet and in the press (often probably just mirrored from the publicity material) the background of the actors is highlighted: "Most of the East German members of my team had Stasi experience." (The Lives of Others – press booklet: 14)[8]

Especially Ulrich Mühe, a well-known and prominent East German actor who lived and worked under Stasi surveillance (Mühe accused his former wife of being an Stasi informant but was forced in a trial to draw back these accusations[9]) is quoted:

> Ich habe seit der Wende viele Drehbücher gelesen, die sich mit der Stasi auseinander setzten", sagte er [Mühe]. "Dieses war das erste, das mich überzeugt

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[8] On the question if it is true that Mühe was under surveillance through the Stasi, von Donnermarck answers: "He found out from his files that 4 members of his theater group […] were actually spying on him. […] He also found out that his wife of 6 years, […], was registered as an informer with the Stasi throughout all the years of their marriage unbeknownst to him [.] When people ask him how he prepared for the role, Ulrich Mühe anwers [sic]: 'I remembered'." (The Lives of Others – press booklet: 13)

[9] See for instance Furlong 2006.

> hat. Eine sorgfältig recherchierte Geschichte, die sich genauso in der DDR hätte zutragen können. (Lichterbeck 2004)

> Since the fall of the wall I have read many scripts dealing with the Stasi", said Mühe. "This was the first one that convinced me. A carefully researched story, that really could have occurred in the GDR this way.

On the DVD both von Donnersmarck and Ulrich Mühe focus on the authenticity of the film by using elements of the paratext like "Extra materials" and audio commentary. The viewer is assured that the producers have used both historical sources and qualified persons in the preparation of the film, and that the authority and truthfulness of these people is a guarantee for the film's authenticity. Nevertheless, some of the original extra materials had to be removed because of the trial that Mühe's former wife had won. Both on the film posters and the DVD covers the names of the actors and the awards are used to give the film credibility.

The sources of von Donnersmarck's research in preparing the film are mentioned and quoted not only in different publications, but also specified at the end of the film. The end credits consist of 13 names of persons used as historical supervisors. Both government agencies and memorial places are thanked by the producers. A large part of the audience – we may conclude – will be aware of von Donnersmarck's use of these sources in one way or another; an awareness that will influence whether he/she chooses to accept the proclaimed authenticity of the film or not:

> I am not saying that people must know those facts; I am saying only that people who do know them read [...] differently from people who do not and that anyone who denies the difference is pulling our leg. The same is true, of course, for the facts of context. (Genette 1997: 8)

These paratextual elements are of great importance in promoting the film as an authentic artefact, but Regardless of how credible Wiesler's transformation is and how realistically circumstances in the GDR of the 1980s are represented, the film succeeds in making its viewers feel not just with those spied upon, but also with the spy Wiesler and his qualms, decisions and actions. This immediacy results in an authenticity of images in the moment they are perceived; it is only when we start to think analytically that we see how the film's classic drama structure and the clearly purposeful use of film music renders factual inaccuracies invisible or unimportant.

Conclusion

Taking all these elements together we can conclude that the film succeeds in presenting the story and the conflict as likely. Both the reconstruction of the location and the use of "original" equipment, but also the stories broadcasted by the producer about using authentic material, basing the film on research etc., and last but not least the viewer's feeling of immediacy are important in

reaching this result. Whether a viewer is willing to accept the film as authentic or not of course depends on many elements, amongst others whether he/she has personal experience from that historical period or not and how much he/she knows about and trusts in the paratextual elements focusing on the great authenticity of the film. On the side of the audience – at least in Europe and in Northern America – there seems to be a desire for immediacy, and in close connection to this, a desire for originality, authenticity, and truth. We want "to be drawn into the film and to identify with the main character[s]" (Bolter & Grusin 2000: 150), we want to be moved by what we see, and we want to believe in the story told. Therefore we need to accept that what we see is authentic or as authentic as it can get. At the same time we probably realize that authenticity, at least when it comes to artistic documents, is no fixed measure, but constructed in order to convince the audience to believe in what we watch.

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