A Metamorphosis: From HGW XX/7 to a Good Man: A Story of Encountering the Other and the Self in Music

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Abstract

This paper explores the transformative power of music on psychological and political ideologies through the lens of the film The Lives of Others. It examines the character of Hauptmann Gerd Wiesler, a Stasi agent whose life undergoes profound changes after encountering the piece Sonata for a Good Man. Integrating insights from musicology, psychology, Sufism, and political science, the paper delves into how music transcends ideological boundaries, enabling deep personal introspection and connection. Unlike prior studies that focus broadly on art, this paper focuses specifically on music as a transformative force, offering a deeper exploration of how music incites psychological and ideological change. The analysis argues that music creates a liminal space where conventional boundaries dissolve, fostering a critical re-evaluation of one's beliefs and perceptions. This transformation is evident in Wiesler's shift from a loyal ideologue to a compassionate individual, impacting his emotional and cognitive states as well as his actions and ideologies. The paper highlights the capacity of music to challenge and alter both political and personal landscapes, emphasizing its role in facilitating ideological and emotional liberation. The paper contributes to a broader understanding of art's impact on human behaviour and societal structures by examining the intersection of music and transformation within the context of East Germany. Through Wiesler's story, the paper illustrates how art, particularly music, can be a potent force in challenging and reshaping ideological confines and nurturing human connection and empathy.

Keywords

The Lives of Others, music and transformation, psychological change, political ideology, Sufism and music, musicology, art and political change, East Germany totalitarianism, interdisciplinary analysis

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"Without the musician, all life would be loneliness."

(Thein, 2016, p. 30)

"People don't change" (von Donersmarck, 2005, 00:16:03-00:16:15). In the first 20 minutes of *The Lives of Others*, Bruno Hempf's words envelope a celebratory event in cynicism. His words suggest human nature is immutable, incapable of transformation. The individuals illustrated in *The Lives of Others*, however, are anything but stagnant. The characters undergo significant shifts, with Wiesler's transformation being the most stark. While initially submerged in East Germany's rigid ideology, he emerges as a different - maybe even a good - man. Don Donnersmarck, the director, says that it was a conversation between Lenin and his friend, Maxim Gorky, that inspired the film and Wiesler's character (Diamond, 2008; Riding, 2007). Lenin lamented that he could not listen to Beethoven's *Appassionata*, his most cherished piece of music, because it made him "want to stroke people's heads" (as cited in Riding, 2007, para. 18). However, his duty demanded that he "smash those heads to bring the revolution to them" (as cited in Riding, 2007, para. 18). Wiesler's genesis is intrinsically linked to music, as is his metamorphosis.

The literature on music, emotions, and political change is limited. While scholars and writers have studied these elements in isolation and within the broader context of art, a cohesive analysis through an interpersonal lens is absent. The literature concurs that art helps the mind create and explore an imagined existence (Achebe, 1990; Jarvie, 1987; Kermode, 2000; Stamatopoulou, 2018). Art observers can make sense of the world they momentarily leave behind by entering this alternate plane. This is because art exercises the human imagination, taking the mind on unexpected journeys that provide novel insights that would not be possible in this world alone (Achebe, 1990). Some scholars have attempted to conceptualize and make sense of how music similarly takes the senses away to a different existence (Becker, 1994; Clarke, 2014; Gabrielsson, 2010). However, the literature in this area is limited, and discussion about the transformation that results from music is scarce. Many insights into music and the mind come from spiritual writings, which believe music's meditative effect catalyzes identity shifts (Akhtar, n.d.; "Interview: Davod Azad," 2023).

Political scientists have also dedicated their attention to music in their study of political resistance and structural change (Bennett, 2014; Hall, 2001; Street, 2003). However, this work tends to undertake systematic rather than interpersonal analysis. The focus is on how music mobilizes the masses (Street, 2003). Political scientists are uninterested in the political effect of music in intimate interactions.

Diamond's (2008) exploration of the identification process in *The Lives of Others* is the closest attempt at a comprehensive analysis. He explores how Wiesler's interactions with art allow him to identify with the artists whose lives differ from his own. However, Diamond (2008) does not give much attention to music. The most potent explanation Diamond (2008) provides regarding the role of music in *The Lives of Others* is that the Sonata reminds Wiesler to do the 'right' thing. The process by which music foments this transformation is missing. This paper seeks to differentiate itself from existing scholarship by focusing specifically on the role of music, rather than art more broadly, in catalyzing Wiesler's transformation. While Diamond acknowledges Wiesler's interactions with art, this paper delves deeper into the specific mechanisms by which music sparks a profound ideological and emotional shift. Furthermore, this paper not only engages with music as a narrative tool in the film but also considers its capacity to alter social and moral cognition. The aim is to explore whether the film's representation of music offers insight into music's broader potential to dissolve ideological conditioning and foster empathy, a phenomenon supported by research in other academic disciplines such as psychology and musicology. The paper seeks to answer the question: How does music catalyze Wiesler's psychological and political transformation? The paper will reference scholars, scientists, musicians, and writers to provide an interdisciplinary analysis of a scene that lasts only two minutes but transforms Wiesler and his perception of others.

Wiesler's interaction with music, specifically the *Sonata for a Good Man*, catalyzes his psychological and political transformation. It forces Wiesler to enter a liminal space, where the confines of ideology dissolve, facilitating a direct and uninterrupted encounter with the Self and the political Other. In this transcendent space, beyond the arms of a totalitarian regime, Wiesler steps out from his lonely cave to a place of connection and transformation.

The Confines of an Ideological Cave

In the film's early parts, Wiesler's selfhood is composed solely of East Germany's socialist ideology. For totalitarian regimes, the ideological alignment of the citizenry is critical (Márquez, 2016). Such regimes utilize all means to produce an "ideological monism," in which citizens yield to the state's desire for ideological control (Márquez, 2016, p. 39). While some academics argue that the totalitarian label is too excessive for East Germany, scholarly consensus suggests that East Germany fulfilled the totalitarian criteria (Fulbrook & Port, 2013). The Socialist Unity Party (SED) monopolized political power, exerting control over the economy, media, and cultural and social organizations (Fulbrook & Port, 2013). The party also promoted an official utopian ideology and

employed physical and psychological measures to maintain state repression (Fulbrook & Port, 2013). These characteristics underscore the totalitarian nature of East Germany, solidifying its classification under the scholarly consensus.

Wiesler represents a triumphant manifestation of the totalitarian state's desire for absolute ideological alignment. He bears the marks of a man drenched in ideology. The film begins inside a temporary detention center, a physical embodiment of the ideological confines that enclose Wiesler. They remind the viewer that no matter how far the film goes physically, the protagonist's mind lives inside these walls. The soldier instructs a detainee to address Wiesler as "Captain" (von Donersmarck, 2005, 00:00:52). In the interrogation room, Wiesler sits in his uniform at the head of the desk. Before the audience knows Wiesler's name, they know he is a man of authority and, therefore, a critical piece within the Stasi infrastructure. Introducing the room, the position, the uniform, and even the detainee before presenting Wiesler himself implies a distortion of identity. Rather than introducing the being before his identity markers, the film's sequencing gives these identity markers precedent. This introduction suggests that Wiesler is an East German soldier before he is anything else. The ideology takes precedence.

Wiesler's speech patterns solidify his radical ideological identification. Perceived identity is embedded in speech (Orvell et al., 2022). Personal pronouns can imply specific psychological orientation (Orvell et al., 2022). One of the first times Wiesler speaks, he asks the detainee, "What do you have to tell us? (von Donersmarck, 2005, 00:01:14-00:01:15). He then asks, "You think we imprison people on a whim? (von Donersmarck, 2005, 00:01:27-00:01:29). Wiesler, in these moments, identifies strongly with the "we" and the "us," suggesting the presence of a shared identity (Orvell et al., 2022). His sense of self rests with East Germany's political narrative. In these scenes, he is not simply Wiesler. He is a captain operating at the behest of the State.

Yuval Noah Harari (2018) claims humans are storytellers and story believers. Life's chaos forces one to search for meaning (Harari, 2018). Adhering to political, social, or religious ideologies contextualizes this chaos (Harari, 2018). Narratives, such as ideologies, provide individuals with purpose (Harari, 2018). The question, then, is not simply whether an individual ardently believes in a political ideology but the extent to which that ideology controls the individual. In Wiesler's case, that control is absolute. When "the state [is] meant to be total," someone like Wiesler does not have the liberty to exist outside ideological boundaries (Márquez, 2016, p. 40). An external doctrine dictates Wiesler's every movement, every action, and every statement.

Wiesler's intimate moments illustrate this high degree of state control. In the absence of duty, Wiesler is a carcass of a man. He has no one to return to, nothing to do, and nothing to believe in. He goes home to an empty and colourless space that lacks homeliness. He eats food not for enjoyment but for nourishment. His days consist of no hobbies or work outside his profession. Such scenes blend to paint an emotional and psychological void. Wiesler's reality coincides with the broader totalitarian goal, as the pursuit of a radically cohesive collective demands the dilution of the Self (Skya, 2009). Ultimately, Wiesler is nothing outside of his political identity. "The individual Wiesler [does] not exist" (Nystrom, 2014, p. 8).

Wiesler's Perception of Others in an Ideological Cave

Along with eroding his sense of self, Wiesler's submission to state ideology distorts his perception of others. Instead of engaging with people as complex individuals, he views them through the reductive lens of his ideological training. Wiesler's ideology begets binary thinking. Under the gaze of his piercing eyes, people become either traitors or supporters. He tells his students, "[y]our subjects are enemies of socialism," and materializes this instruction in his work (von Donnersmarck, 2005, 05:47-05:53). As he gazes down at Dreyman, he calculates that Dreyman is "an arrogant type, the kind I warn my students about" (von Donersmarck, 2005, 00:07:20-00:07:23). Before knowing anything about Dreyman, he places a reductive label on Dreyman's selfhood. Furthermore, the act of looking down with binoculars implies a constricted view. It illustrates that while Wiesler analyzes Dreyman and claims to have made a sound judgment, he does not truly see or know Dreyman. Wiesler's radically ideological outlook forces the individual to become an object of his ideological perception rather than exist as an entity in himself. In this way, Wiesler's constricted view transforms the person into the political Other, someone distinct, unfamiliar, and outside the scope of his understanding.

Wiesler's interaction with the detainee in the beginning portrays a similar dynamic. During the interrogation, he calls the man "prisoner number 227" (von Donersmarck, 2005, 00:01:32 – 00:01:42). Referencing the detainee by number rather than name separates the detainee from the element that makes him human. Such language strips the individual of a critical identity marker (McIntosh, 2021; Stollznow, 2008). Wiesler's participation in this dehumanization effort further illustrates his political Othering of individuals.

The Loss of the Self and Others in an Ideological Cave - A Lonely Existence

Isolated from the Self and from knowing the true reality of others, Wiesler exists in a state of loneliness. Loneliness is a critical element of totalitarian infrastructure (Arendt, 1973). Regimes institute organized loneliness by isolating people and instrumentalizing ideology (Arendt, 1973). Arendt (1973) asserts that "what makes loneliness so unbearable is the loss of one's own self which can be realized in solitude but confirmed in its identity only by the trusting and trustworthy company of ... equals" (p. 477). She believes this momentary feeling of loneliness could transform into a permanent state of being (Arendt, 1973). Wiesler's complete submission to the state ideology illustrates a permanent state of loneliness.

This loneliness becomes apparent when the film contrasts the liveliness of Dreyman's life with Weisler's void. Wiesler's bare walls contrast the colorful ensemble that is Dreyman's home. In one scene, the viewer watches Wiesler spend his days alone (von Donersmarck, 2005, 00:17:20 – 00:18:27). The shot then cuts back to Dreyman laughing and playing with the neighborhood kids (von Donersmarck, 2005, 00:18:27 – 00:19:00). Wiesler desperately searches for warmth in a sex worker, while Dreyman makes passionate love to his girlfriend. Dreyman serves as a foil character to demonstrate the loneliness that encompasses Wiesler's life.

Arendt (1973) asserts that loneliness was a mechanism through which totalitarian regimes inflicted assault on reality. This is because such regimes went beyond creating ardent followers. "The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi," Arendt says, "but people for whom fact and fiction… and the distinction between true and false… no longer exist" (p.474). Wiesler embodies this "ideal subject" (Arendt, 1973, p.474). Despite his ability to expertly rely on his senses to acquire details and facts, his lonely existence separates him from the reality of himself and the reality of others. In this sense, Wiesler is akin to a prisoner in Plato's cave. His selfhood and perception of others are like shadows on the wall. They may be reflections of truth, but reality in its totality remains far from his grasp. The prisoners will never be able to attain truth in the cave, just like Wiesler will not grasp the reality of the world and himself inside his ideologically constraining existence. Only by escaping his loneliness and stepping into the light will he be able to perceive reality.

Musical Trance

The *Sonata for a Good Man* pulls Wiesler from his lonely cave to a transcendent space. Art has this effect by forming an independent and fictitious world in the mind (Achebe, 1990; Jarvie, 1987).

It engages the senses in "imaginative identification" (Achebe, 1990, p.144). In this state, observers are not simply witnessing events but are immersed in them (Achebe, 1990; Jarvie, 1987). Music operates similarly. Historical work on the neurological impacts of music explored how certain pieces evoked strong emotions in listeners (Clarke, 2014; TEDx Talks, 2020). Contemporary literature built upon this work and concluded that characterizing the listener's experience as an emotional phenomenon is insufficient (Becker, 1994; Clarke, 2014). While listeners may feel sad, happy, or upset when listening to a piece of music, this explanation does not capture the almost divine experience that some listeners periodically report (Becker, 1994; Clarke, 2014). Music catalyzes a more comprehensive and complex shift in consciousness (Clarke, 2014; Gabrielsson, 2010). When a listener dwells in music, they can enter a different zone of existence. Gabrielsson (2010) attempted to record this transformative experience. His study involved 1000 participants over 20 years. Many of these participants reported feeling a change in perception-cognition after listening to an emotionally charged piece of music. They felt emotions in a heightened and mystical state. The music absorbed them into a different state of consciousness. In this state, "the world around disappear[ed], one dwell[ed] in one's world, inaccessible to others" (Gabrielsson, 2010, p.558).

The film illustrates visual references to Wiesler being in this trance state. A character like Wiesler, who remained stoic and rigid up to this point in the film, becomes visibly emotional as he listens to the piece. Wiesler looks spellbound, almost absorbed in the music. His body is present, but his mind is drifting. His gaze, which has always concentrated on the tasks ahead, now drifts into the distance. His expression softens, and his mouth hangs open. His eyes, usually dark and expressionless, fill with emotion. While the cave of ideology may physically confine Wiesler, when he listens to the *Sonata for a Good Man*, his mind wanders away from the ideological boundaries of the regime.

Finding the Self in a Musical Trance

Abraham Maslow (1954) characterizes this transcendent state as a "peak experience" and believes that it could aid the self-actualization process (p.165). When absorbed into a piece of music, an individual's ego momentarily dissolves (Maslow, 1954). The listener, separated from who they thought they were, can discover other elements of themselves, leading to revelations about identity (Maslow, 1954). Ultimately, listeners can find themselves in music by losing themselves in its emotional depth (Clarke, 2005; Clarke, 2011).

This momentary encounter with the Self can cause long-term effects on an individual's psyche. Eastern thought has been vocal about this process. Sufism, a mystic body within Islam, has maintained an acute focus on the metamorphic powers of music (Alam, 2020). This mystic body believes music is a conduit for spiritual awakening (Akhtar, n.d.; Alam, 2020; Avery, 2004; "Interview," 2023). The ancient Sufis believed that the soul was composed of sound (Alam, 2020; Avery, 2004). When listeners dwelled in music, they accessed a state that was untainted by worldly confines (Alam, 2020; Avery, 2004). This Self was inherently compassionate because it was closer to the divine source (Alam, 2020; Avery, 2004). Consequently, encountering this Self led to more compassionate and self-aware listeners (Alam, 2020; Avery, 2004).

Wiesler encounters an unfiltered version of himself in this transcendent and emotional space. The Sonata's sentimental undertone aids Wiesler's encounter. Jerska wrote the *Sonata for a Good Man*. He, like Wiesler, was suffering from loneliness (Taylor, 2011). He lost his sense of self after being blacklisted by the regime. The identity he clung to was lost (Taylor, 2011). The piece he composes in response to this loneliness carries the imprint of his disarray (Taylor, 2011). When Wiesler encounters Jerska's loneliness in the Sonata, it reminds him of his void. In this way, Wiesler encounters the Self in music, which is deserted and hidden beneath the political narratives of the regime.

The compassion Wiesler finds after listening to the Sonata is a testament to his encounter with the Self. After listening to this music, he begins acting in ways believed to be outside his political doctrine. Instead of interrogating the young boy he meets in the elevator about his father's political remarks, Wiesler ignores his comments. He later talks with Christa and persuades her to have confidence in her art. These small moments of kindness amplify when Wiesler begins to protect Dreyman and the other artists. He alters reports and even physically intervenes to protect Dreyman and Christa. His encounter with the Self catalyzes a shift from an ideologically confined individual to an individual acting closer to his compassionate Self.

Finding the Other in a Musical Trance

Scholarship on this musically induced tranced state suggests that it can also foment connections between people. Maslow (1954) believed this transcendent space caused a fusion of the observer and the observed. Listening to emotional pieces blurred the line between the listener's experiences and the experiences of others (Maslow, 1954). This blurring comes from music's capacity to tackle universal themes (Bellour, 2017). Experiences of grief, love, or anger are

ubiquitous. Weaving these themes into music reminds listeners of the struggles and joys that bind people (Bellour, 2017; Rabinowitch, 2015).

The *Sonata for a Good Man* is composed by Jerska, a man struggling with social isolation. When Dreyman plays the piece, he mourns Jerska. The layering of these emotions produces a connection between Dreyman and Wiesler. Wiesler listens to a dead man's expression of loneliness and Dreyman's longing for that friend. Wiesler, a man who has never before contended with the complexity of others, listens to a non-verbal expression of that complexity. In this way, he can foment a connection with Dreyman, someone he hastily characterized as an enemy. Music allows him to see Dreyman beyond the boundaries of the State.

Wiesler's interactions with Christa and the little boy in the elevator further illustrate his newfound ability to look beyond the ideologically oriented binary. Wiesler's ritualistic and interrogative tendencies disappear when the little boy blurts that his father opposes the Stasi. Wiesler visibly stops himself from inquiring about the boy's father. Instead, he asks the boy, "What's the name of your... ball?" (von Donersmarck, 2005, 00:55:40 – 00:55:48). Rather than resorting to seeing the boy in relation to the State, Wiesler adjusts his question to be more childlike and less antagonistic. For the first time, Wiesler perceives a boy as a boy rather than an extension or enemy of the State. The film further emphasizes Wiesler's cognitive shift in his interaction with Christa. When Christa lies to him at the bar, he tells her, "[y]ou weren't being yourself" (von Donnersmarck, 2005, 01:04:38-01:04:42). At this moment, Wiesler is observing her, but not at the behest of the State. His words suggest that he truly sees her. After listening to the Sonata and encountering the Other in the form of Dreyman, people regain their complexity and form. Wiesler's perception of others changes. People become slightly more human and less Other.

Conclusion

Contrary to Hempf's logic, Wiesler changes. To Hempf's fear, a simple melody aids in Wiesler's transformation. The film illustrates how Wiesler begins as a lonely agent in a deserted cave. Indoctrinated by the Stasi ideology, he remains isolated - separate from both the Self and those around him. As the film progresses, Wiesler becomes an increasingly compassionate character. Jerska's piece plays a critical role in this shift. As the literature suggests, the *Sonata for a Good Man* pulls Wiesler into a transcendent state, away from his ideological confines. In this state, he encounters both his deeper self and the humanity of others. While initially trapped in an ideological cave, Wiesler can make his way away from the dark into reality.

Centuries of writings have wrestled with the transformative capacity of music. It continues to dumbfound philosophers, poets, and musicians alike. Music, composed simply of notes, can be much more than the sum of its parts. It can express love between people, leave nations bewildered, be used to charge the public in protests, or aid soldiers in their chants for war. In Wiesler's case, a small and brief expression of grief changes the trajectory of his life and the lives of others.

The implications of this exploration extend beyond film analysis. Music's potential to dissolve ideological conditioning and foster empathy has significant social and political ramifications, particularly in ideologically polarized societies. As such, Wiesler's journey in *The Lives of Others* acts not just as a narrative of personal transformation but also as a commentary on the political potential of music. This analysis contributes to a deeper understanding of how art, especially music, can challenge rigid ideological systems, influence moral cognition, and foster human empathy, creating a space for broader societal shifts. As political tensions rise and ideological divides deepen, it becomes ever more essential to reflect on tools like music that can help foster understanding and bridge ideological gaps.

Hempf says that "[h]ope always dies last" (von Donersmarck, 2005, 00:16:41- 00:16:43). He is not wrong. Perhaps art keeps this hope alive. When the ideological and political corridors become constricting, art becomes the light that guides the prisoners away from their lonely cave, ushering them into reality.

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