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Feeling Trauma: A Proposal for a New Approach to the Study of Post-traumatic Cinema

Keywords:
cultural trauma; post-traumatic cinema; trauma in film; communist oppression; neurofilmology; empathic concern

Abstract
The article explores the representation of cultural trauma in cinema, challenging the common perception of film's inability to fully capture traumatic experiences. The author introduces an approach to trauma representation based on theories of empathy along with some postulates formulated in the field of neurofilmology. Using Franziska Stünkel's *The Last Execution* (2021) as a case study, the author examines the depiction of trauma stemming from oppression in East Germany. Methodology includes textual film analysis, viewer interviews, and physiological measurements, such as electrodermal activity and cortisol levels during film screenings. Findings reveal that *The Last Execution* evokes strong emotional responses, effectively influencing the viewers through sensory engagement and empathy. This interdisciplinary study contributes to understanding how post-traumatic cinema facilitates emotional and empathic experiences of trauma, underscoring its potential in addressing cultural memory within a broader context of prior research.

Introduction

The challenge of representation, or the paradoxical interplay between the presence and absence of experience, constitutes a recurring issue in trauma studies. Contributors to cultural trauma studies usually emphasize that *trauma cannot, in its totality, be represented*[1] or mimetically followed.[2] Scholars also argue that trauma can barely be translated.[3] As Tarja Laine puts it, trauma simultaneously resists and demands representation: *The reason for this is the dissociation of affect and representation that is experienced in trauma*.[4] As Andreas Hamburger points out, *the notion of irrepresentability of (social) trauma is reiterated like a mantra*.[5] Accordingly, psychoanalytic film theory, which focuses on the relation between the conscious and the unconscious, real and unreal experiences, and the discontinuity of time in the process of trauma's reenactment, has inspired several approaches to trauma in film studies.[6] Some scholars note that consequently, post-traumatic cinema creates a sense of confusion, disorientation, and repetition that aligns with the experience of trauma.[7] By the same token, filmmakers avail themselves of flashbacks as the central device for representing trauma in cinema,[8] along with other stylistic techniques typical of post-traumatic cinema, such as parallel editing, ellipses, repetitions, and proleptic flashes.[9] According to Julia Barbara Köhne, films that mirror the symptoms of trauma can fill the void of the amnesic absence of memory.[10] However, it remains unclear whether this is how film as a medium can resolve the problem of the dialectics of trauma.

In this article, rather than contributing to psychoanalytic film theory within trauma studies, I propose a different approach to the problem of trauma's translatability in the film medium, drawing from the postulates of neurofilmology. After the theoretical reflections, I will present the outcomes of an experimental pilot study with 10 participants watching *The Last Execution* (*Nahschuss*, dir. Franziska Stünkel, 2021), a 116-minute feature film that addresses oppression in the East German communist regime. In the study, I applied popular neuropsychological research methods: skin conductance and cortisol and alpha-amylase concentration in saliva, as well as subsequent one-on-one interviews after the screenings. I treat the pilot project as a contribution to further research on the perception of post-traumatic cinema. However, I also recognize its limitations and risks, which I will point out in the last section of this article.

The German trauma of communist oppression

The film I focus on exemplifies cinema that addresses the experience, impact, and coping mechanisms of individuals or communities who have gone through trauma. According to Joshua Hirsch, it is *a cinema that not only represents traumatic historical events but also attempts to embody and reproduce the trauma for the spectator through its form of narration*.[11] In the film, we follow Franz Walter, a scientist who first collaborates with the inhuman regime only to fall victim to it. Even though the film illustrates an individual's traumatic experience, I assert that it belongs to the category of cinema that explores cultural trauma, since it refers to a collec-

tive emotional and psychological experience. Franz serves as a symbolic character, representing the countless victims of executions, incarcerations, and brutal persecutions that defined daily life in the German Democratic Republic (GDR). On the other hand, the East German Ministry of State Security (*Ministerium für Staatssischerhiet*), or *Stasi* – the institution that Franz works for and later betrays – embodies ruthless state control and the violation of human rights. The film's creators, primarily director Franziska Stünkel, act as agents who can fill the gap between a traumatic event and its representation – to use Jeffrey Alexander's terms.[12] Such agents may reactivate the traumatic memories from the state of latency and make this experience familiar to a larger group of people.

As many countries in the Soviet bloc, GDR implemented state-ordered violence. Persecutions targeted both individuals and groups of people, thereby inflicting individual and collective traumas, as distinguished by Kai Erikson.[13] Methods of oppression comprised surveillance, wiretapping, tracking, blackmail, abductions, brutal interrogations, isolation, putting on trial with no chance of defence, and executions. Some of these methods resulted in what one can dub *insidious trauma*, which refers to the effects of oppression that *are not necessarily overtly violent or threatening to bodily well-being at the given moment but that do violence to the soul and spirit*.[14] This kind of trauma is not *eventful*, as Michael Rothberg would call it – it does not constitute one catastrophic event but many recurring events that create a traumatizing atmosphere.[15]

After 1990, the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) undertook several steps to come to terms with the communist regime that formed what Neil Smelser describes as the sociocultural context of the affected society.[16] Above all, the opening of the *Stasi* archives became the hallmark of German transitional justice. The motif of disclosing the files appears at the end of *The Lives of Others* (*Das Leben der Anderen*, dir. Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, 2006). Critics often consider this work the first German feature film to seriously deal with the legacy of the *Stasi*[17] after several road movies and comedies that expressed a specific nostalgia for the foregone era, popularly dubbed *Ostalgie*.[18] Although some films that addressed the *Stasi* persecution appeared soon after the political transition, they failed to reach their intended audience.[19] Filmmakers renewed their interest in the memory of communist oppression no later than the premiere of *The Lives of Others* and a "flood" of TV dramas in 2007 and 2008 that reached millions of German viewers,[20] along with other theatrically released films.[21] Despite the strong impression of realism and touching upon very painful memories of the GDR, these films spare the audience the details of the unfortunately successful implementation of the so-called "decomposition" (*Zersetzung*) – a strategy designed to break the spirit of an individual and erode human relationships, sometimes ending with the victims' death or an irreversible deterioration of their sanity.[22]

Against this backdrop, Franziska Stünkel's *The Last Execution* seems to offer no hope for a happy ending in the form of redemption or inner transformation. Based on the life of Werner Teske, executed in the GDR in 1981, *The Last Execution* follows Franz Walter (Lars Eidinger), a secret service agent drawn into a futile struggle against the oppressive system. Offered a professorship in exchange for aiding the GDR's World Cup preparations, Franz accepts and undertakes espio-

nage missions in the West with his colleague Dirk (Devid Striesow). However, as the moral ambiguity of his work becomes apparent, Franz grows disillusioned and plans his escape. Unwilling to release its grip, the regime arrests Franz for high treason, culminating in a devastating sentence: death.

Vittorio Gallese and Michele Guerra claim that *cinema is the art form that more than any other brings us face to face with situations similar to those of the real world*.[23] Furthermore, some historians like Robert Rosenstone and Robert Toplin argue that historical films emotionalize, personalize, and dramatize history, and they can *arouse emotions, stir curiosity, and prompt viewers to consider significant questions*.[24] I believe that *The Last Execution* serves as a perfect example of a historical fiction film that brings viewers face to face with a real trauma. My argument is that if a post-traumatic film can emotionalize history – or rather the memory of real traumatic events – it must invite the audience to engage with the story in a way that generates a series of negative emotions that can be evidenced empirically.

The Last Execution exhibits only a few characteristics of a typical non-realist post-traumatic film that disrupts a classical linear narrative.[25] The main story unfolds from Franz's perspective before his detainment, depicting his work as a *Stasi* agent and his private life with his fiancée and later wife, Corina (Luise Heyer). Prolepses that show Franz's incarceration and trial interrupt this narrative six times. The film opens with Franz being transferred to an unknown location, sitting behind bars, and suffering a panic attack. These unsettling flash-forwards prepare viewers for future events and underscore the imminent downfall of the protagonist. Besides these means, though, Stünkel does not introduce other non-linear narrative devices to mirror the effects of trauma.

When we take a closer look at the film's visual layer, we will notice that shades of brown, grey, and green dominate the setting, with the characters' clothing blending seamlessly into this palette and making them seem almost fused with the mise-en-scène. Even in scenes with high-key lighting – for example, when Corina and Franz explore their new flat or celebrate their wedding – a sepia-like toning lends the visuals an almost monochromatic quality. As a result, an underlying sadness imbues even the rare moments meant to convey the characters' joy. The brief happiness appears illusory. Two notable exceptions to this sombre colour scheme include the green-yellow budgerigar and the blue jumper Franz wears in prison. Only shortly before his death does Franz visually distinguish himself from the other characters.

Especially in the movie's second half, when the protagonist's defeat seems inevitable, Nikolai von Graevenitz's camera can no longer take its eye off Lars Eidinger's main character. As written in the press release, *the image becomes ever tighter, Franz's gaze ever more rushed*.[26] While the visual elements remain largely monotonous and subdued, the narrative exerts a powerful sensory influence, engaging the audience on deeply corporeal and emotional levels. By emphasizing the somatic dimension of the characters' experiences, the film intensifies viewers' immersion, plunging them into a nightmare-like atmosphere. Trauma emerges as the central theme, taking on a palpable, almost physical presence. This becomes particularly evident in the scenes that portray the pressure exerted on the protagonist, where close-ups focus on Franz's bodily reactions to unfolding events.

One striking event occurs after the suicide of Langfeld, a football player on whose case Franz and his superior work. Confronted with the sportsman's lifeless body, Franz vomits. Realizing that Langfeld failed to read his hidden message on the toilet paper, Franz throws up again. In other scenes, when the protagonist experiences excessive stress, we see or hear him sweat, sob, cry, scream, stammer, breathe heavily, tremble, or embrace his body. In such intimate moments, the camera adopts a subjective perspective, employing medium shots, close-ups, and extreme close-ups to intensify Franz's torment.

With a minimalist soundtrack and highly realistic, carefully staged sound, the film conveys the traumatic nature of the events through sound as much as through visuals. According to Michel Chion, who underscores the importance of sound in film, audiences *audio-view* cinema, as sound enhances the visual experience.[27] *The Last Execution* exemplifies this concept in the scene where the light in Franz's cell flickers on and off, accompanied by the buzzing of the bulb. Here, diegetic sound amplifies the disorienting effect of the visual, emphasizing the psychological toll of oppression. Two key moments when Franz plays music also highlight the significance of sound. Early in the film, music from a record player reflects Franz and Corina's excitement over their new flat. Much later, wary of the *Stasi* surveillance, Franz uses the record player to drown out their conversation. With a sparse and restrained soundtrack, the film enables viewers to audio-view Franz's descent into trauma, rendering his experience viscerally perceptible. Thus, constructed with both visual and auditory stylistic elements, the film's mood proves highly pessimistic. As I will show, it translates into the viewers' mood.

Feeling trauma

As Katalina Kopka points out, bodies play a crucial role in modern warfare, and some war films – for instance, *The Hurt Locker* (dir. Kathryn Bigelow, 2008) – depict the characters' bodies as a battlefield.[28] I argue that this concerns not only war dramas as examined by Kopka but also some representations of oppression in nondemocratic regimes. *The Last Execution* perfectly illustrates that the body becomes the first instance of brutal persecution, even if the character does not endure physical abuse. Therefore, this potential to elicit a strong emotional response made me engage with *The Last Execution* and treat it as an artwork that perfectly fits in the category of post-traumatic cinema. I asked the following question: if trauma cannot be fully represented, maybe it can be felt? Perhaps the realm of affects, emotional arousals, empathy, and sympathy could answer the dilemma of trauma's translatability. Thomas Elsaesser claims that film creates *prosthetic trauma*.[29] According to him, the mediated historical event influences the viewer in an emotional way that defies rational understanding. In his commentary on Elsaesser's contribution, Allen Meek adds: *The spectator is traumatized, not so much in a psychological sense as in a culturally mediated one*.[30]

Some reservations regarding vicariously "acquiring" psychological trauma while watching a traumatic event on screen seem justified. Studies on audience reactions to film excerpts depicting rape via the third-person perspective demonstrated that participants tolerated the trauma film well. They generally reported

low to moderate negative emotions and found the experience no worse than typical everyday stressors.[31] However, the study author was showing only a movie excerpt and not an entire full-length film that has a long story to tell and a specific, long-lasting mood to create. For the above reasons, I propose a new direction in post-traumatic cinema research, focusing on full-length fiction films and inviting discussion not only about how these films tell stories of trauma but also, more importantly, about how viewers perceive, feel, react, process, and remember these films. As Tamar Ashuri notes, *it is only when the pain is communicated to an audience that the trauma can be processed and the painful event comprehended*.[32] In this respect, I put forward the following central questions: What is the post-traumatic film's impact on the viewer? How should we define the viewer's experience of a post-traumatic film? Which categories of engagement in film – such as affective empathy, cognitive empathy, sympathy and antipathy, stress, or empathic concern – can best explain how viewers perceive a film dealing with trauma? How does the mood of a post-traumatic film translate to the viewers' mood? Only through scrutiny of conscious, controlled, and processed (cognitive) reactions and unconscious, uncontrolled, and unprocessed (affective) responses to the film can we grasp the specificity of this audiovisual medium in translating traumatic events into a comprehensive language.

When I speak of feeling trauma, my interest lies in three key areas. The first area involves the mechanism of empathy and sympathy that viewers feel toward characters. Joshua Oppenheimer, the author of two documentaries about the genocide in Indonesia in the 1960s, once said: *I do believe that empathy can be triggered by words, but what really triggers it is often the physical, or an imagining what would it be like to be that body, to be in that space, in that temperature, in that emotional state. And so, it is very important to me that cinema is a sensory and immersive medium, because I actually think that it is a terrible medium for words*.[33] For studying the mechanisms of empathy, one must focus on the film characters. Some scholars have demonstrated that viewers witness *the actions represented on-screen while internally acting out and simulating the intentional actions performed by a character*.[34] This can be explained by Gallese and Guerra's abovementioned theory, according to which cinema brings us very close to situations that happen in reality. As argued by Ed Tan, this extends to film characters as well, whom film viewers perceive as real people.[35] All in all, cinema creates an illusion of reality, where viewers temporarily accept the film's world and its people as real.

The second key area refers to the interaction between the film's mood and the viewer's emotional state. The analysis of the film's mood and the way it affects the viewer's mood should complement the examination of film characters, scenes, or sequences that might trigger emotional responses and engage the viewer empathically. Mood helps *examine the choices made by the director to provoke a particular response in the viewer*.[36] As Carl Plantinga contends, we can treat mood both *metaphorically to describe the affective "character" of a film* and literally as an actual human mood.[37] Thus, the analysis aims, first, to define the film's mood, understood as a set of stylistic means that might trigger emotions in viewers, and, second, to consider what mood can be expected to emerge in viewers. This corresponds to what Greg Smith dubs a *mood-cue approach*.[38] As I have already shown, *The Last Execution*

serves as an example of a post-traumatic film with a dense, gloomy, depressive, and pessimistic mood, which is very likely to strongly affect the viewers' mood.

Finally, the third key area pertains to embodied cognition, which suggests that viewers simulate and act out internally the intentional actions they see characters perform.[39] The area of interest lies in the brain-body relation, which *becomes the place where it is possible to re-discuss the viewer as a biological organism that reacts to very specific stimuli, as a body capable of establishing new intersubjective relationships, and eventually as a human being who can live a complete experience in front of a work of art*.[40] The theory of embodied cognition corresponds to the essential postulates of neurofilmology, whose representatives maintain that films engage sensory, emotional, and cognitive processes, making the film-watching experience a neurocognitive activity. In Adriano D'Aloia and Ruggero Eugeni's view, *neurofilmology focuses on the "viewer-as-organism," by investigating with both empirical and speculative epistemological tools the subject of audiovisual experience, postulated as embodied, embedded, enacted, extended, emerging, affective, and relational*.[41] D'Aloia and Eugeni propose to integrate two models that have been hitherto regarded as oppositional. The first one, the viewer-as-mind model, refers to theory of mind (often abbreviated to ToM)[42] and emphasizes cognitive processes related to both the perceptive and the emotional. The second one, the viewer-as-body model, centres around sensuous, affective, and motor processes. D'Aloia and Eugeni state that *the assumption of the "viewer-as-organism" model allows neurofilmology to overcome the opposition between the "viewer-as-mind" and "viewer-as-body" models*.[43] I think that cognitive and affective processes in the film experience do not exclude but rather complement each other, and the employment of the viewer-as-organism model can give us a deep insight into viewers' reactions to the screened film.

D'Aloia and Eugeni's theoretical model aligns with a consensus among scholars who utilize neuroscientific tools and agree that emotional responses to films can fall into three system categories: physiological, expressive, and subjective.[44] An emotion may cause the heart to flutter and the palms to sweat (physiological reaction). The eyes can widen (expressive reaction). Asked about their emotions, the viewer might perhaps say, "I was shocked" (subjective reaction). Hence, the active, rational meaning-making, combined with emotional experiences and bodily sensations, lies at the core of film perception. All bodily, emotional, and cognitive aspects of perception form a psychological whole. As Frank John Ninivaggi claims, when nonconscious emotions are expressed behaviourally, for example, by facial expressions, they are affects. When these are consciously identified and labelled with words, they are feelings.[45] A viewer must first experience a film somatically to elaborate this experience intellectually, create a coherent mental representation from this experience, and feel the emotion that belongs to it. To sum up this line of my argument, I propose the implementation of a methodology approved in neuropsychology and discussed in the neurocognitive theories[46] but rarely applied to full-length fiction films. Such a study would also respond to neurofilmology's call to integrate the phenomenological sensuous theory with the neuroscientific theory of embodied cognition.

Monika Suckfüll put into practice this modus operandi, analysing viewers' reactions to an animated short film *Father and Daughter* (dir. Michael Dudok

de Wit, Arjan Wilschut, 2000). Together with her team, Suckfüll studied the expressive, physiological, and subjective responses to a film with deeply moving content, using face observation, ECG and GSR, and interviews, respectively. Although the word "trauma" never appears in her publications containing the study results,[47] the film she selected does deal with trauma. Suckfüll says: *The central conflict … results from the father's leaving and the inner conflict of the daughter … is intensified as it becomes increasingly clear that she cannot reconcile herself with the loss of her father*.[48] I strongly believe that the story presented in this film is consistent with a traumatic experience. Moreover, the depiction of trauma involves repetitions that might be considered as acting out the trauma. Indeed, several times in her life, the daughter visits the place of her father's departure and waits for his return in vain. Notably, Suckfüll acknowledged her project's limitations, particularly the small sample size and the non-theatrical conditions of the film screenings. An ideal experiment would replicate a casual movie-watching experience, helping participants forget the lab setting.

Pilot study

I conducted my pilot study in October and November 2024 on a sample of 10 viewers of both genders. All were in their twenties. I asked each person to watch *The Last Execution* and then share their impressions of the film in the interviews. Meanwhile, the EDA (electrodermal activity) device monitored the uncontrolled somatic reactions of the viewers' bodies, tracking the changes in the test subjects' skin conductance.[49] Another method consisted in the measurement of two substances in the probands' saliva. The first substance, cortisol, often called the stress hormone, rises in response to stress. Above all, it functions as a measure of a long-term stress response and indicates how the body copes with ongoing stressors. The second one, alpha-amylase, is an enzyme linked to emotional states such as anxiety, fear, and excitement. Investigators sometimes use it in studies that explore emotional regulation and psychological health. Unlike cortisol, alpha-amylase tracks the real-time, immediate response and provides insight into the activation of the autonomic nervous system. Since cortisol levels reach their highest in the early morning, I carried out all experiments in the afternoon when the hormone levels gradually decrease. To have their concentration measured, I collected five saliva samples from each of the ten participants: one before the screening, one 15 minutes after its ending, and three during the screening, taken shortly after scenes that I identified as dramaturgically significant: in the 33rd minute, after Franz and Corina's wedding party, which constitutes the happiest moment in the entire story, in the 69th minute, after Franz finds Langfeld, the football player, dead in his bathtub, and in the 88th minute, after Franz's incarceration.

I asked each test subject to find a comfortable sitting position and connected them to two electrodes of the EDA equipment. I informed the viewers about the study aim, procedure, and distressing nature of the film. I also asked them to provide written consents and to fill out trauma history questionnaires – short self-reports that assess experiences of potentially traumatic events. After the

screening, I conducted interviews, asking the viewers what they were thinking, how they felt after the film, how they found the protagonist, with whom they could empathize, what the turning point in the narrative was according to them, which scene made the biggest impression on them, whether they hoped for a happy ending and when they gave up this hope, and finally, how depressed they felt on a scale of 1 to 10.

Let us look at the EDA experiment results for subject 1 (see Figure 1). In the graph, we see the EDA waveform with saliva collection markers – short moments of a break at the time of saliva sample collection. The signal amplitude is variable and we can notice cycles of increasing and decreasing conductance, indicating a cutaneous response to the stimuli. The peaks in the signal, given in microSiemens (μS), represent a sudden change in skin conductance, resulting from the activation of the autonomic nervous system. Furthermore, the experiment enables the assessment of the recovery time, defined as the time it takes the signal to return to its resting value after a peak. A short recovery time suggests a quick return to the resting state following the autonomic nervous system's activation, while longer recovery times may indicate more intense or sustained physiological responses.

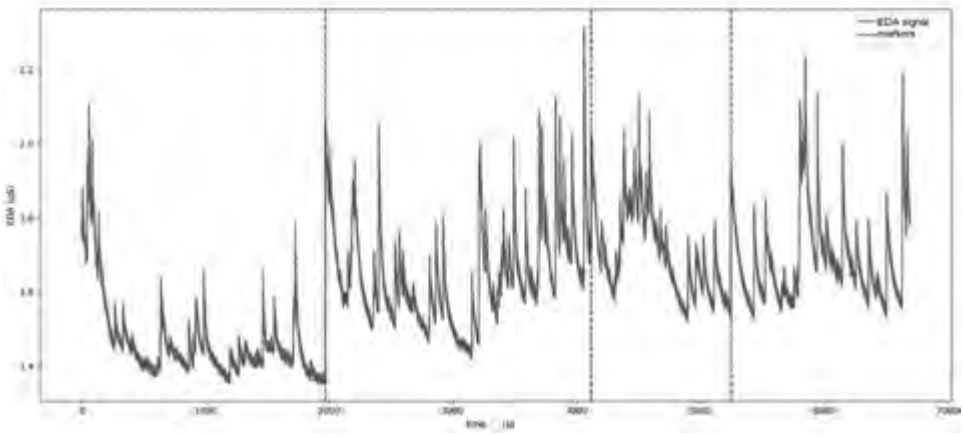

Fig. 1. EDA results with markers. Subject 1.

Each viewer has a unique nervous system and emotional makeup. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the experiment results vary. The graph reveals a distinct pattern of skin reaction for person 4 (see Figure 2). After the first peak at the very beginning, the value of the signal lowers and begins to increase only gradually. We can observe rapid signal changes at the same time points as in graph 1, however, the peaks' values prove lower. Contrary to subject 1, where we can see a recovery period after the last marker at the film's end, there is no recovery in the graph for subject 4. This allows us to assume that the viewer felt emotional tension until the very end of the film and even afterwards, as the study ended after the display of the first closing credits.

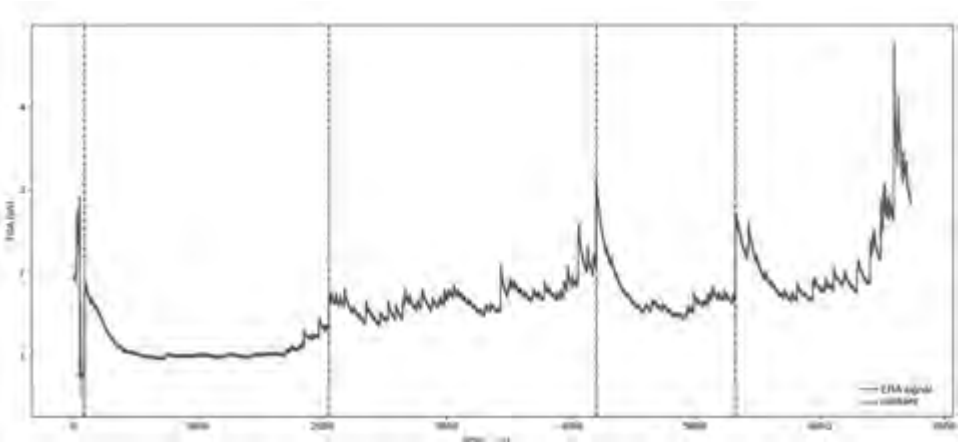

Fig. 2. EDA results with markers. Subject 4.

Each result requires individual interpretation, yet we can still draw general conclusions from the experiments. The juxtaposed graphs represent the nine experiments, with one subject excluded due to a likely electrode loosening. They display 5-minute intervals on the horizontal axis. Twenty-two measure points correspond to the duration of the experiment, covering the entire film and the first part of the end credits (22 points × 5 minutes = 110 minutes). One graph contains 25 points because the viewer chose to watch the film through the end credits (see Figure 3). Several graphs show local peaks midway through the measurement, around the 10th-15th measurement point, or the 50th-55th minute of the film. This suggests similar responses in this part of the experiment. In general, many changes in skin conductance become visible here, with either almost continuous increases or alternating increases and decreases in values. In graphs 1, 5, 6, and 9, we can see the peaks in a similar range of measurement points (around 10 to 15). Graph 2 stands out with a steeper rise later, after the 18th point, but some early peaks also occur around points 8-10. All graphs demonstrate relatively low values at the start of the experiment, likely reflecting the film's initial depiction of Franz's stable professional and personal life. Notably, graphs 2, 4, 5, 6, and 9 exhibit sharp peaks approximately 10-15 minutes before the film's end. These peaks correspond to the climactic sequence in which Franz is arrested, imprisoned, interrogated, abused, brought to a final meeting with Corina, sentenced to death, transferred to an unknown location, and executed.

We must interpret some peaks with caution, as they occur immediately after short breaks and saliva sampling. I hypothesize that, for some participants, the intermission and sample-taking – not the film itself – triggered negative emotions. All circles on the graphs mark these moments just before the breaks. The signal typically decreases shortly after the break, indicating that subsequent peaks again result from the film's content rather than external factors. Some graphs do not mark any breaks, suggesting no detectable signal change associated with the break.

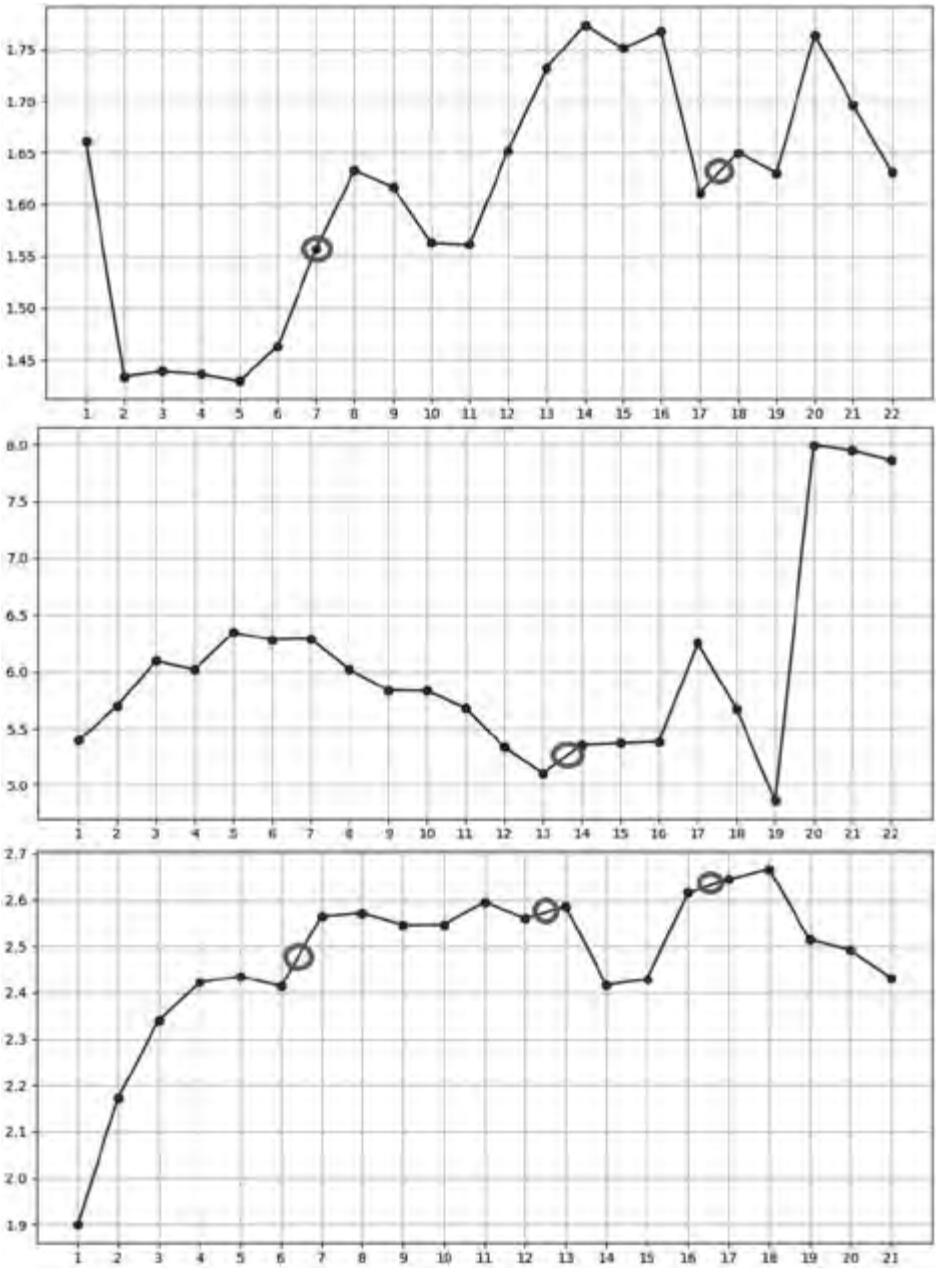

Fig. 3. Summary of the results of the EDA tests, with marked intervals after which there was a skin reaction (part 1).

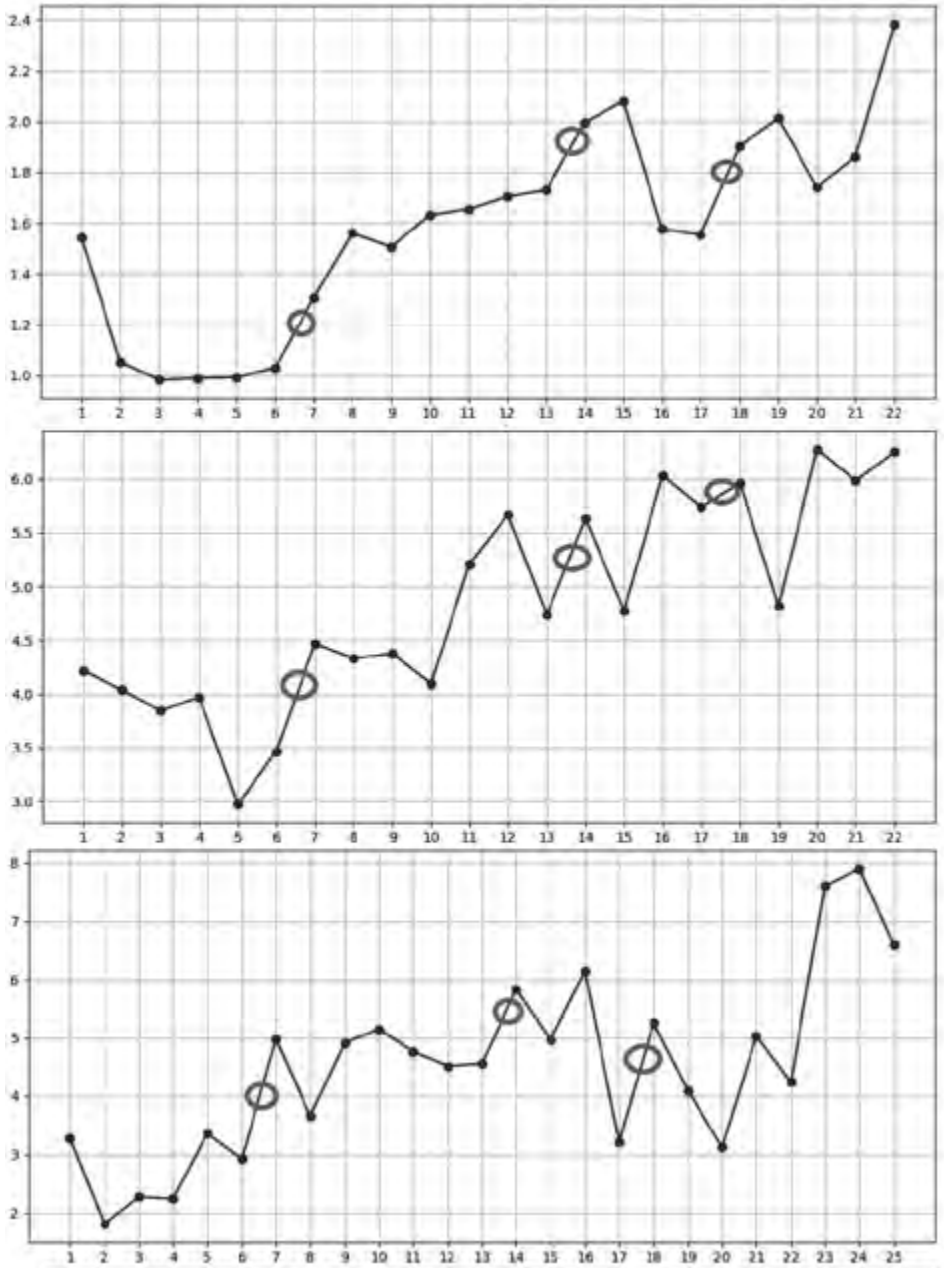

Fig. 3. Summary of the results of the EDA tests, with marked intervals after which there was a skin reaction (part 2).

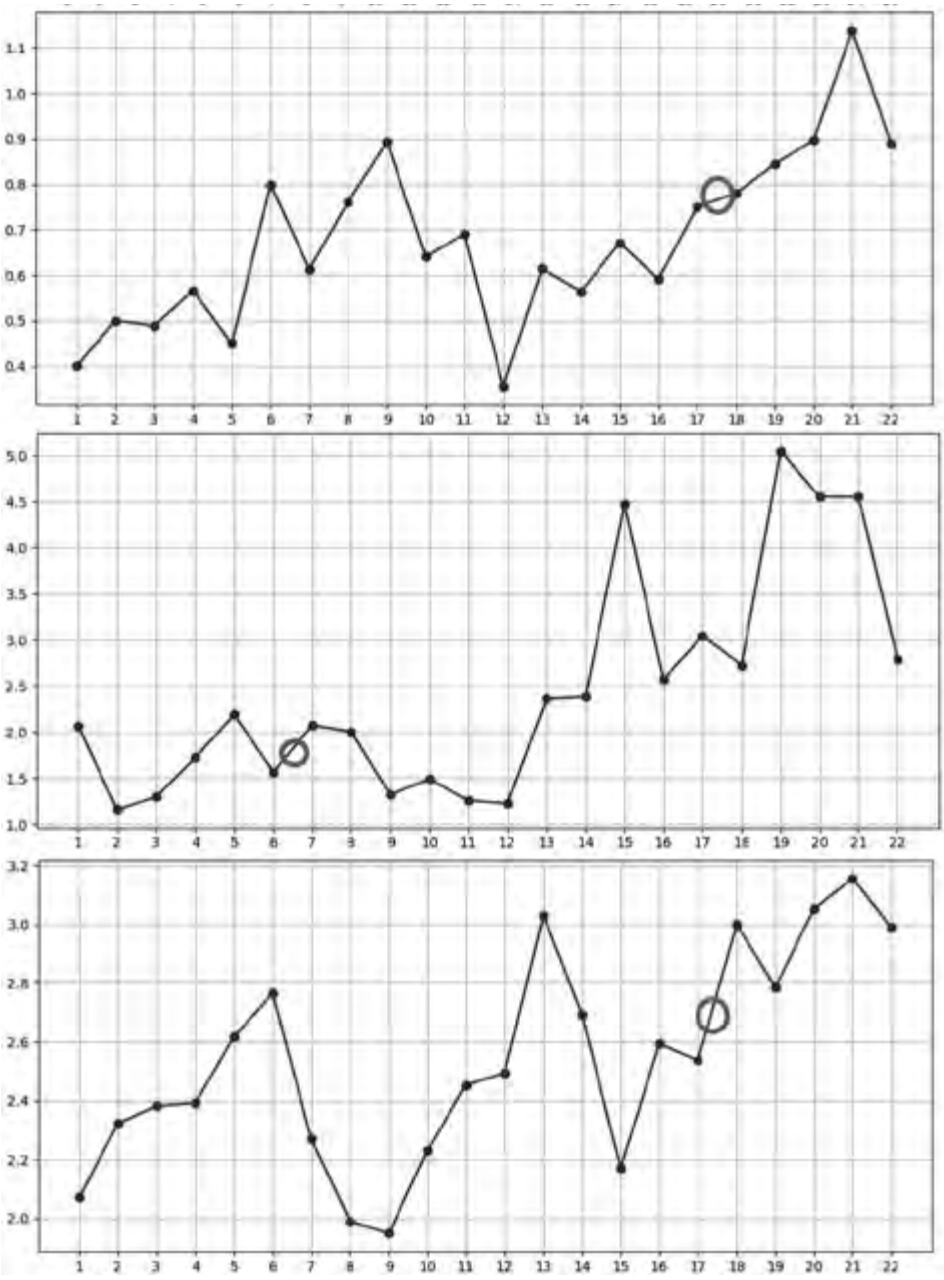

Fig. 3. Summary of the results of the EDA tests, with marked intervals after which there was a skin reaction (part 3).

The timelines in most graphs reflect the film's specific emotional organization. According to Nico Frijda – later expanded upon by Ed Tan[50] – one can distinguish the basic phases of such an organization in a classical film. The film, along with our emotional engagement, begins in a *balance phase*, when the protagonist's situation remains stable and emotions are relatively low. The second phase, *complication*, introduces an unexpected event that disrupts this balance, harming the protagonist and evoking negative emotional responses in the audience. This disruption ultimately resolves through positive events, leading to the *restoration of balance*, which brings feelings of relief and joy. Most graphs show only a few emotional reactions to the events during the first 30 minutes of the film, while stronger reactions appear after approximately 40 to 60 minutes. The peaks at the end of the experiment indicate that *The Last Execution* does not offer any restoration of balance. The events have a negative valence, leading to anger and depression rather than relief or joy, as confirmed by the interviews.

The cortisol analysis did not provide strong evidence for the emergence of stress during the experiment. In two participants, I noticed that the cortisol level steadily decreased during the screening, while in one case, it proved higher in the final sample, collected about 15 minutes after the film's end. For others, cortisol levels alternately increased and decreased or remained relatively stable, even though samples 3 and 4 were taken after disturbing scenes. For instance, in subject 10, cortisol peaked in the middle and dropped to its lowest level in the last sample. Additionally, five participants exhibited relatively high cortisol levels in the first samples, collected before the most disturbing scenes occurred.

Regarding alpha-amylase, it showed no significant increases during the screening. In most participants (four subjects), the highest alpha-amylase levels appeared in the third sample, while only two persons showed peak values after the screening ended. Moreover, in most cases, we can see a decrease in alpha--amylase after the peak, which suggests that stress may not have been the viewers' primary reaction while watching the film. A possible explanation lies in the role of pleasure experienced while engaging with an artwork. As evidenced by evolutionary psychologists, this very sense of pleasure underlies all forms of involvement with cultural artifacts.[51]

In addition to the previous methods, interviews provided data on cognitive processes of engaging with the film. Responses showed how *cognitive reflection*,[52] which relates to *higher-level empathy* – namely, conscious and controlled empathic processes[53] – followed unprocessed emotional arousal. When asked to assess their level of depression after the screening on a scale of 1 to 10, the viewers replied in a varied way, indicating 3 to 8 with a median value of 6.5. Requested to express their feelings in a detailed way, the participants said they felt "anger," "stress," and "sympathy" for Franz and Corina. They described being "overwhelmed by emotions," "terrified," "exhausted," "furious" because of the injustice, and "confirmed in the belief that capital punishment is wrong." They also felt a sense of relief that they did not live in the GDR. In light of Amy Coplan's arguments, these reactions do not qualify as empathetic because *they are not sufficiently accurate representations of target's situated psychological states*.[54] In other words, there is no affective matching between the viewer and the protagonist. Seeing fear, disgust, or desperation in the protagonist did not provoke the same emotional states among

the viewers, who reported anger or stress instead. For other scholars, such as Jacob Israelashvili, Disa Sauter, and Agneta Fischer,[55] such reactions reflect *empathic concern*, understood as feeling compassion for another person. I argue that the interviewees undoubtedly experienced what Peter Goldie labels *in-his-shoes perspective taking* – not imagining themselves as another person but imagining their own thoughts, feelings, and decisions if they were in that person's circumstances.[56] Furthermore, they clearly sympathized with Franz and hoped that he would succeed in escaping the GDR. The same applies to Corina, for whom most viewers expressed sympathy. This reported compassion for the characters aligns with Cynthia Hoffner's study, where *empathic concern was associated with less enjoyment of depictions in which characters suffer or are severely injured*.[57]

When asked about the most moving scene, four persons cited the last time Franz saw Corina (01:34:43-01:38:12). During the interrogation, the *Stasi* officer attempts to convince Franz of his wife's infidelity. In a carefully staged meeting between the two, it becomes evident that Franz and Corina still love each other. Rather than casting accusations, they remain silent and embrace before being brutally separated by the policemen (see Figure 4). Interestingly, only two interviewees identified the execution as the most moving scene and only one mentioned the scene with Langfeld's dead body (see Figure 5).

Fig. 4. Franz embraces his wife for the last time.
Still from *The Last Execution*.

Fig. 5. Franz vomits after seeing Langfeld's dead body.
Still from *The Last Execution*.

Fig. 6. Franz learns that the *Stasi* is going to fabricate an innocent woman's medical diagnosis. Still from *The Last Execution*.

Regarding the narrative's turning point, six persons pointed to the moment when the *Stasi* officials accept the fabrication of Langfeld's wife's cancer diagnosis and refer her for oncological therapy, although the woman is completely healthy (00:32:42-00:34:24). From then on, Franz begins to question his employer's operational methods. He even tries to contact Mrs. Langfeld but gives up on this idea after realizing that his colleagues are watching him. The meeting at the *Stasi* headquarters, where the inhumane steps against the Langfelds are announced, exemplifies what Carl Plantinga calls *a scene of empathy*.[58] Although Schulte, another officer, introduces the idea of falsifying the diagnosis, the camera, using the rack focus technique, quickly shifts from him to Franz's face, which gradually reveals disagreement with the proposed method (see Figure 6). This scene proved so significant that it caught the viewers' attention as a pivotal moment in the story.

Conclusion

As I aimed to demonstrate, *The Last Execution* personalizes and dramatizes history – it shows an entire range of the *Stasi*'s inhumane operational methods that resulted in the erosion of interhuman relations and the physical destruction of human lives. The story unfolds from the vantage point of Franz, who initially collaborates with the *Stasi* but decides to withdraw upon realizing the extent of the institution's actions. Based on textual film analysis, I propose that the film's specific style, along with its protagonist – a character with whom one can easily sympathize – invites viewers to engage emotionally and allows them to fathom the nature of a traumatic experience.

I endeavoured to substantiate my hypothesis with an experiment including 10 participants. The tests showed a strong emotional response to the film. The subjects reported feelings of anger at the sense of injustice toward the protagonist and sympathy for him and his wife. In their view, the most emotionally impactful scenes were designed to reveal the characters' emotional states through body language. These scenes of empathy enabled the viewers to connect with the characters' experiences and better understand their oppression. The analysis of skin conductance demonstrates that in the so-called complication phase of the

film emotional arousal proved significantly stronger than in the film's exposition. Several peaks in skin conductance measures during the film's finale that leads to Franz's death confirm the assumption that the film's emotional organization lacks a phase of balance restoration. In some cases, emotional arousal remained very high even at the film's end. However, the examination of cortisol and alpha-amylase indicates that the viewers did not necessarily feel stress during the screening. Thus, the experience transmitted during the screening is not stress as such, let alone trauma in general. Nevertheless, in the interviews following the screenings, the test subjects admitted feeling anger – or even fury – and sympathy for the protagonist, which means that they emotionally engaged with the story and developed the so-called empathetic concern.

The experiment certainly had some limitations. The EDA does not provide insight into which emotions trigger the arousal detected during the screening. While it measures the level of emotional arousal, it cannot differentiate between positive and negative emotions. In other words, different emotions can elicit similar physiological responses. For example, both fear and excitement can cause increased skin conductance and an accelerated heart rate. This became evident in my experiment as well, as one participant had increased skin conductance both when the protagonist appeared stark naked and when he was seeing his wife for the last time. Therefore, the EDA should be complemented with other methods that measure the viewers' physiological reactions, such as ECG,[59] as well as techniques that focus on expressive reactions, for instance eye-tracking. However, the latter only works for films in languages familiar to the test subjects, thus, the ones without subtitles. Other tools include face-reading devices that detect face muscle movements and analyse facial expressions. Face reading could help assess "lower-level" (preconscious and automatic) empathy processes in the viewers.

Due to the short duration of the project, I was able to experiment on a sample of only 10 people. Future experiments should undoubtedly involve larger and more inclusive samples, since a viewer's perception of a film results from their age, gender, place of residence, and education.[60] Furthermore, future experiments should supplement the procedure with a mood questionnaire filled out before and after the film, which will allow us to observe how the viewer's mood changes during the screening. Ultimately, the experiment should not conclude on the day of the screening. Participants should receive intrusion diaries and instructions on how to use them to record any intrusive memories of film scenes that might arise over the following week, as is common in the trauma film paradigm.[61] After one week, subjects could submit their diaries and participate in a follow-up interview.

In the study, I included participants who did not live in the GDR due to their young age. Ethical considerations constitute a primary concern in such research, especially when screening films with stressful or disturbing content. To minimize the risk of retraumatization, this research should exclude individuals with traumatic experiences similar to those depicted in the films. This can be achieved by using a trauma history questionnaire. Moreover, the proposed approach is interdisciplinary, requiring collaboration between experts in film studies and neuropsychology to interpret the results effectively and integrate them with prior textual film analyses. In the long term, focusing on multiple films that explore traumas of various kinds, represent various styles, and are made in various

countries seems like a valuable and worthwhile research investment. The proposed approach to post-traumatic cinema draws on empathy, sympathy, mood, affect, and emotion, offering a large set of empirical data. This, in turn, contributes to the discussion on vicarious trauma and witnessing – categories that prove essential for understanding historical traumas and empathizing with their victims in subsequent generations.

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[1] S. Joy, *The Traumatic Screen: The Films of Christopher Nolan*, Intellect, Bristol 2020, p. 36.

[2] J. B. Köhne, "Einleitung. Trauma und Film: Visualisierungen", in: *Trauma und Film: Inszenierungen eines Nicht-Repräsentierbaren*, ed. J. B. Köhne, Kulturverlag Kadmos, Berlin 2012, pp. 7-25.

[3] E. A. Kaplan, *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick 2005, p. 19; R. Lockhurst, *The Trauma Question*, Routledge, New York 2008, pp. 46, 79.

[4] T. Laine, Reframing *Trauma in Contemporary Fiction Film*, Lexington Books, Lanham 2023, p. 6.

[5] A. Hamburger, "Filming History, Filming Trauma: Relational Psychoanalysis of Cinematic Art in the Post-traumatic Void", in: *Screening the Scars: The Cinematic (In)visibility of Social Trauma*, ed. A. Hamburger, Karnac Books, Oxfordshire 2024, p. 72.

[6] See: A. Kaes, *Shell Shock Cinema: Weimar Culture and the Wounds of War*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2009; A. Plummer, *The British Trauma Film: Psychoanalysis and Popular British Cinema in the Immediate Aftermath of the Second World War*, Bloomsbury, London 2023.

[7] J. Hirsch, *Afterimage: Film, Trauma, and the Holocaust*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia 2004, pp. 98-99.

[8] R. Lockhurst, op. cit., p. 179.

[9] S. Joy, op. cit., p. 34.

[10] J. B. Köhne, "Trauma im Film – eine filmwissenschaftliche Differenzierung", *Trauma Kultur Gesellschaft* 2023, vol. 1, no. 4, pp. 30-31.

[11] J. Hirsch, op. cit., p. XI.

[12] J. Alexander, "Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma", in: *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, eds. J. Alexander, R. Eyerman, B. Giesen, N. J. Smelser, P. Sztompka, University of California Press, Berkeley 2004, p. 11.

[13] K. Erikson, *Everything in Its Path: Destruction of Community in the Buffalo Creek Flood*, Simon and Schuster, New York 1978, pp. 132-133.

[14] L. Brown, "Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma", in: *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. C. Caruth, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore – London 1995, p. 107.

[15] M. Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2009, pp. 136-147.

[16] N. J. Smelser, "Psychological Trauma and Cultural Trauma", in: *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, op. cit., p. 36.

[17] M. B. Stein, 'Stasi' with a Human Face? Ambiguity in 'Das Leben der Anderen', *German Studies Review* 2008, vol. 31, no. 3, p. 568.

[18] The term "Ostalgie" often refers to films such as *Sonnenallee* (dir. Leander Haußmann, 1999), *Good Bye, Lenin!* (dir. Wolfgang Becker, 2003), *Bornholmer Straße* (dir. Christian Schwochow, 2014), or *Stasikomödie* (dir. Leander Haußmann, 2022).

[19] These films are: *Der Tangospieler* (dir. Roland Gräf, 1991), *Der Verdacht* (dir. Frank Beyer, 1991), and *Abschied von Agnes* (dir. Michael Gwisdeck, 1994). See: D. Berghahn, "Remembering the 'Stasi' in a Fairy Tale of Redemption: Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's 'Das Leben der Anderen'", *Oxford German Studies* 2009, vol. 38, no. 3, p. 324.

[20] M.-E. O'Brien, *Post-Wall German Cinema and National History: Utopianism and Dissent*, Camden House, Rochester 2012, pp. 149-150.

[21] Prominent examples of such films include *Barbara* (dir. Christian Petzold, 2012), *Shores of Hope* (*Wir wollten aufs Meer*, dir. Toke Constantin Hebbeln, 2012), or the television mini-series *The Tower* (*Der Turm*, dir. Christian Schwochow, Das Erste, 2012).

[22] *The Lives of Others* sparked a long-lasting debate among historians and film scholars about the credibility of the film's script, especially the "redemption" of the *Stasi* agent and the degree of state control over an individual. Among numerous publications on this topic, see, for example: C. Dueck, "The Humanization of the 'Stasi' in 'Das Leben der Anderen'", *German Studies Review* 2008, vol. 31, no. 3, pp. 599-609.

[23] V. Gallese, M. Guerra, *The Empathic Screen: Cinema and Neuroscience*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2015, p. 45.

[24] R. B. Toplin, *Reel History: In Defense of Hollywood*, University Press of Kansas, Lawrence 2002, p. 1. See also: R. Rosenstone, *History on Film / Film on History*, Pearson Education, Harlow 2006.

[25] As Janet Walker puts it: *The stylistic and narrative modality of trauma cinema is nonrealist. Like traumatic memories that feature vivid bodily and visual sensation over "verbal narrative and context," these films are characterized by non-linearity, fragmentation, nonsynchronous sound, repetition, rapid editing and strange angles. And they approach the past through an unusual admixture of emotional affect, metonymic symbolism and cinematic flashbacks*. J. Walker, "Trauma Cinema: False Memories and True Experience", *Screen* 2001, vol. 42, no. 2, p. 214.

[26] "Nahschuss", *Deutsche Film- und Medienbewertung (FBW)*, https://www.fbw-filmbewertung.com/film/nahschuss (accessed: 15.02.2025).

[27] M. Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, Columbia University Press, New York 1994, pp. 3-6.

[28] K. Kopka, "Cultural Hauntings: Narrating Trauma in Contemporary Films about the Iraq War", *Ex-centric Narratives: Journal of Anglophone Literature, Culture and Media* 2018, no. 2, p. 110.

[29] T. Elsaesser, "Postmodernism as Mourning Work", *Screen* 2001, vol. 42, no. 2, p. 197.

[30] A. Meek, "Trauma and Cinema", in: *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Film Theory*, eds. E. Branigan, W. Buckland, Routledge, New York – London 2014, p. 486.

[31] N. Stirling, R. Nixon, M. Takarangi, "No More Than Discomfort: The Trauma Film Paradigm Meets Definitions of Minimal-Risk Research", *Ethics and Behavior* 2023, vol. 33, no. 1, pp. 1-17.

[32] T. Ashuri, "I Witness: Re-Presenting Trauma in and by Cinema", *The Communication Review* 2010, vol. 13, no. 3, p. 178.

[33] J. Oppenheimer, "Human – All Too Human: In Conversation with Joshua Oppenheimer", *Four by Three Magazine*, http://www.fourbythreemagazine.com/joshua-oppenheimer-interview.html, cited in: J. Eder, "Empathie und existentielle Gefühle im Film", in: *Empathie im Film: Perspektiven der Ästhetischen Theorie, Phänomenologie und Analytischen Philosophie*, eds. M. Hagener, I. V. Ferran, Transcript, Bielefeld 2017, p. 240.

[34] A. D'Aloia, "The Character's Body and the Viewer: Cinematic Empathy and Embodied Simulation in the Film Experience", in: *Embodied Cognition and Cinema*, eds. M. Coëgnarts, P. Kravanja, Leuven University Press, Leuven 2015, p. 191.

[35] E. Tan, *Emotion and the Structure of Narrative Film: Film as an Emotion Machine*, Routledge, New York – London 2011, p. 75.

[36] M. J. Ortiz, "Films and Embodied Metaphors of Emotion", in: *Embodied Cognition…* op. cit., p. 207.

[37] C. Plantinga, "The Affective Power of Movies", in: *Psychocinematics: Exploring Cognition at the Movies*, ed. A. P. Shimamura, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2013, p. 95.

[38] G. M. Smith, *Film Structure and the Emotion System*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2003, pp. 41-64.

[39] A. D'Aloia, op. cit., p. 191.

[40] V. Gallese, M. Guerra, "The Neuroscience of Film", *Projections: The Journal for Movies and Mind* 2022, vol. 16, no. 1, p. 3.

[41] A. D'Aloia, R. Eugeni, "Neurofilmology: An Introduction", *Cinéma and Cie: International Film Studies Journal* 2014, vol. XIV, no. 22-23, p. 9

[42] Theory of mind is a concept from psychology and cognitive science that describes a person's ability to recognize mental content such as beliefs, desires, emotions, or intentions in themselves and in other people.

[43] A. D'Aloia, R. Eugeni, op. cit., p. 20.
[44] M. Suckfüll, "Films That Move Us: Moments of Narrative Impact in an Animated Short Film", *Projections: The Journal for Movies and Mind* 2010, vol. 4, no. 2, pp. 41-63.
[45] F. J. Ninivaggi, *Making Sense of Emotion: Innovating Emotional Intelligence*, Rowman and Littlefield, Lanham 2017, p. 193.
[46] The Polish reader will find a complex overview of the neuroscientific methods used in film studies in an article published recently in this journal. See: E. Twardoch-Raś, "Neurogra w kino. Neuronaukowe perspektywy badania filmu", *Kwartalnik Filmowy* 2024, no. 117, pp. 29-52.
[47] M. Suckfüll, "Films That Move Us", op. cit., and eadem, "Emotion Regulation by Switching Between Modes of Reception", in: *Psychocinematics*, op. cit., pp. 314-336.
[48] Eadem, "Films That Move Us", op. cit., p. 44.
[49] The measurement of skin conductance or electrodermal activity involves measuring changes in the skin's electrical resistance according to the degree of hydration caused by sweating, which is controlled by the sympathetic nervous system. Such changes symptomatize experiencing emotions or a spontaneous response to certain stimuli.
[50] E. Tan, op. cit., pp. 59-61.
[51] D. M. Buss, *Evolutionary Psychology: The New Science of the Mind*, Routledge, New York 2016, p. 418.
[52] M. Suckfüll, "Films That Move Us", op. cit., p. 42.
[53] A. Coplan, P. Goldie, "Introduction", in: *Empathy: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives*, eds. A. Coplan, P. Goldie, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2011, p. XXXIII.
[54] A. Coplan, "Understanding Empathy: Its Features and Effects", in: *Empathy…* op. cit., p. 7.
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[56] P. Goldie, "Anti-Empathy", in: *Empathy…* op. cit., p. 302.
[57] C. Hoffner, "Affective Responses and Exposure to Frightening Films: The Role of Empathy and Different Types of Content", *Communication Research Reports* 2009, vol. 26, no. 4, p. 292.
[58] C. Plantinga, "The Scene of Empathy and the Human Face on Film", in: *Passionate Views: Film, Cognition, and Emotion*, eds. G. M. Smith, C. Plantinga, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1999, p. 239.
[59] I deliberately did not include EEG and fMRT. The application of the former is highly inconvenient for viewers watching a 120-minute film, and an experiment employing the latter resembles anything but an ordinary, casual experience of watching a movie.
[60] C. Gudehus, S. Anderson, D. Keller, "Understanding 'Hotel Rwanda': A Reception Study", *Memory Studies* 2010, vol. 3, no. 4, p. 349.
[61] Mardi J. Horowitz and Richard S. Lazarus pioneered the experimental model of intrusions generated in response to a laboratory stressor in the 1960s. This model is now called the "trauma film paradigm." Used by neuropsychologists, the paradigm involves participants who view film footage of stressful, potentially traumatic events, powerful enough to trigger intrusive memories of the film for days afterward. See: R. S. Lazarus, "A Laboratory Approach to the Dynamics of Psychological Stress", *American Psychologist* 1964, vol. 19, no. 6, pp. 400-411; M. J. Horowitz, "Psychic Trauma: Return of Images After a Stressful Film", *Archives of General Psychiatry* 1969, vol. 20, no. 5, pp. 552-559; and E. L. James, A. Lau-Zhu, I. A Clark, R. M. Visser, M. A. Hagenaars, E. A. Holmes, "The Trauma Film Paradigm as an Experimental Psychopathology Model of Psychological Trauma: Intrusive Memories and Beyond", *Clinical Psychology Review* 2016, vol. 47, pp. 106-142.

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Słowa kluczowe:
trauma kulturowa; kino posttraumatyczne; trauma w filmie; komunistyczny ucisk; neurofilmologia; empatyczna troska

Abstrakt

Jakub Gortat

Odczuwanie traumy. Propozycja nowego podejścia do badania kina posttraumatycznego

Autor bada reprezentację traumy kulturowej w kinie, kwestionując powszechne przekonanie o niezdolności filmu do pełnego uchwycenia traumatycznych doświadczeń. Wprowadza podejście do reprezentacji traumy wywiedzione z teorie empatii wraz z pewnymi postulatami sformułowanymi w dziedzinie neurofilmologii. Wykorzystując *Ostatnią egzekucję* (2021) Franziski Stünkel jako studium przypadku, autor analizuje przedstawienie traumy wynikającej z opresji w Niemczech Wschodnich. Metodologia obejmuje analizę tekstualną filmu, wywiady z widzami oraz pomiary wskaźników fizjologicznych, takich jak aktywność elektrodermalna i poziom kortyzolu podczas projekcji filmu. Wyniki pokazują, że *Ostatnia egzekucja* wywołuje silne reakcje emocjonalne, skutecznie oddziałując na widzów przez zaangażowanie sensoryczne i empatię. To interdyscyplinarne badanie przyczynia się do zrozumienia, w jaki sposób kino posttraumatyczne ułatwia emocjonalne i empatyczne doświadczanie traumy, podkreślając jego potencjał w zajmowaniu się pamięcią kulturową w szerszym kontekście wcześniejszych badań.