



Scott Durham

## *The Persistence of the Archive: The Documentary Fictions of Daniel Eisenberg*

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"...I am well aware," Michel Foucault famously said of his excavations of the historical archive, "that I have never written anything but fictions."<sup>1</sup> The fictions Foucault recreates in his archaeologies are those of knowledge itself. In weaving the relations of what is said to what is seen—and in providing the frame within which it is possible to speak or show the truth within a given archaeological formation—these fictions form its archive. It is thus that Gilles Deleuze can write, à propos of Foucault's remark: "But never has fiction produced such truth and reality."<sup>2</sup> The viewer of Daniel Eisenberg's film *Persistence: Film in 24 Absences/Presences/prospects* (1997) might be justified in inverting Deleuze's formula: "Never have truth and reality produced such fiction." For the documentary fragments, both historical and invented, of which this film is composed—images and voices excavated from distinct archaeological strata of the 20th Century's audiovisual history—appear before us as elements of a series of archives whose relations the viewer is called upon to imagine, in a multiplicity of provisional, overlapping or contending

fictions that provide their successive frames. Early in *Persistence*, the film Eisenberg shot in Berlin in 1991 and 1992 in the wake of the collapse of East German Stalinism, the Stasi archive—considered as at once the enabling frame for observing and recording everyday existence and as the mythic object of collective fantasy—appears as a privileged site for such archival fictions:

*"Subject M opens letters at desk. 10 Minutes. Telephone rings. Subject answers telephone, gets up from desk, paces, returns to desk. See attached for transcript of conversation with G. Subject becomes animated. An argument seems to be in progress. Subject gets up from desk, paces, returns to desk, 3 minutes. Subject places phone down, walks out of room to kitchen, makes a cup of coffee, three minutes. Talks to self. See attached transcript..."*

[...]

*"...Subject M returns to desk, begins to write, fourteen minutes. Subject M tears up paper and begins writing again, three minutes. Paces, sips coffee and begins to open mail, five minutes. M leaves room to toilet, two minutes...returns to room. Subject M returns to desk, begins to write. Somewhat agitated, subject scratches face, neck, scalp, three minutes. Subject walks to window, looks out three minutes..."*

The scene evoked in this description—an imagined excerpt, read in voice-over, from an unnamed subject's file in the Stasi's archives—could almost be a fragment of Beckett. There is, as in Beckett's plays, the limitation of the field of action to a narrow frame. There is the way in which the permutation of the limited set of gestures and acts of speech observable within the borders of that frame (sitting down and getting up, pacing and scratching, exiting and returning, reading and writing, talking on the phone and talking to oneself) make visible, through their very limitation, a form of life—a possible world.

But there is also our awareness (sharpened by the title that frames this sequence for the viewer: "The Rules of Dispassionate Observation") that the character of this world as such is inseparable from its relation to an observer or narrator, who, like some of those in Beckett, is for some unknown reason obligated to record them. Indeed, the fact that these otherwise insignificant words and gestures, seemingly culled more or less at random from an individual life, appear to us as potentially meaningful turns in large part on the fact that they are given to us as already documented: "The files," as the voice-over reminds us, "would have to be selected, formulated, possibly dictated to a secretary..."

<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault, "The History of Sexuality." Interviewer: Lucette Finas. In *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings: 1972-1977*, edited by Colin Gordon. Translated by Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham and Kate Soper (New York: Pantheon, 1980), p. 192.

<sup>2</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, trans. Seán Hand (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1988), p. 120.



Persistence, 1997

The documentation of the world imagined within this frame thus produces, at a stroke, the fiction of the larger frame in which we must place the existence of these documents: an archival fiction. This archival fiction—which begins with the assumption that there is nothing that can be done or said in a life, no matter how inconsequential, that is not subject to observation and documentation—calls upon us to imagine, not only the rooms where that life is lived, but the process of inscription by which the evidence of its existence is produced, the procedures according to which those documents are selected and preserved alongside those of other lives, and, finally, the space where such documents are assembled to be interpreted by a reader or viewer who, at the other end of this process, can oversee them only from a distance.

We are shown such a space near the end of *Persistence*: the suite of offices at Stasi headquarters formerly occupied by the GDR's last Minister for State Security, Erich Mielke, and his staff, offices which have now themselves been preserved as a museum. In the long takes and slow pans through which his camera surveys this space, Eisenberg, unlike the later film *The Lives of Others* (2006), chooses not to emphasize the novelistic and sensationalistic aspects of the espionage and surveillance once headquartered here. Eisenberg emphasizes instead the ordinariness of these conference rooms and offices, with their austere East German modern furniture, whose monotony

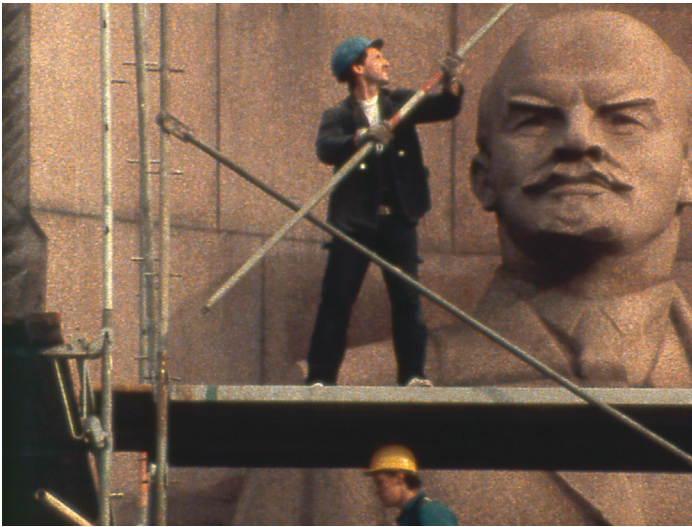
is only occasionally relieved by a plaster mask of Lenin or a potted plant.

Of course, we cannot help but be aware throughout of at least one extraordinary fact about this space, methodically explored by Eisenberg's camera: the fact that it was in these otherwise ordinary rooms that a vast archive of everyday existence at the service of political repression would presumably have been evaluated and overseen—aiming, in principle, at the surveillance of an entire society (including the life of the fictitious Subject M). But we are also aware that the dramas that might have unfolded in these offices when they were at the point of the confluence of political power and social knowledge will remain forever invisible to us. And this makes it all the more striking that this center of surveillance, now that its professional observers have left their posts, has been preserved for our own observation. The “archive of everyday observations” has itself become a museum, offered up for our own “disinterested observation,” even as we are reminded by the insistent ringing of a phone that there are no longer any observers left to answer it.

Of course, neither the functioning nor the effects of these two regimes of observation—that of the apparatus of surveillance on the one hand and that of its museum on the other—are reducible to one another. As a museum exhibit, Stasi headquarters, in an abrupt historical inversion, is presented to us for the first time as an observable

world. The rooms that frame the world in which Subject M has been observed, on the other hand, are never shown to us directly on screen, as a cinematic image. The voice-over reading of the documents describing M's life is juxtaposed instead with a series of documents from another archive, providing the frame for views of another nature. As we hear the narrative of M's movements, we are shown a visitor to an art museum, scrupulously observing a series of landscapes. This series of views culminates in a painting representing another observer, seen from behind, who is herself contemplating the view of a landscape through a half-open window. As it turns out, we will return to this visit to the art museum later in the film. A shot of this same museum visitor, taken from behind as he contemplates a landscape (a shot which rhymes with the earlier shot of the observer represented in the painting), will serve as the prelude to the sequence on Stasi headquarters.

What implications might we draw from these juxtapositions? If the rooms where Subject M was observed are never shown to us directly—if that moment of his life is never given as a cinematic image, but only described by the film's voice-over—it might be argued that it is because M's life, as an invention of the film, is fictive, whereas the space of this museum exhibit is an artifact of history which can appear before us as a visible and documentable reality. But this difference, between the invisibility of a

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fictive world and the visibility of a historical actuality, is perhaps less important than what both have in common: the fact that neither can exist except as an artifact of the archive, historical or fictive, in which it has been recorded and preserved. As with the views of landscapes preserved for our contemplation in museums, we have access to only those views of M's life that have been documented and selected by those assigned to observe him. This is the archival fiction that frames our view of Subject M: If this fragment of M's existence is to be preserved after the fall of the Stalinist regime, it can only be as an exhibit in a "museum of everyday observations" capable of outlasting the world of observer and observed alike.

The monuments of East German Stalinism, both visible and invisible, were being dismantled all around Eisenberg as he was shooting footage for *Persistence*. Of the film's sequences devoted to the disappearance of the GDR, one of the most striking images is one that, in the hands of another filmmaker, might well have been a mere cliché: the image of a colossal statue of Lenin as it is being taken down. Such images, from the toppling of the statue of Czar Alexander III in Eisenstein's *October* to that of the statue of Saddam Hussein as seen on CNN, have become emblematic of revolutions and "regime changes" of every sort, regardless of their particular political valence. For, in such cases, the overturning of a monument, as the figure

for the overthrow of a regime, allows us to imagine the transformation of a political or social order as a single punctual event that might take place before our eyes.

But Eisenberg approaches this familiar trope of films of revolution and counter-revolution from another angle, portraying the removal of this monument, not as an immediately graspable image, but as a laborious process of disassembly that unfolds slowly over the duration of the film. Early in *Persistence*, we see the statue still intact, although it is largely ignored by passers-by, except by a small group posing for a photograph in front of it. (Are these tourists, one wonders, or locals, aiming to preserve their image alongside this icon already condemned to disappear?) A bit later in the film, we see workers assembling scaffolding rod by rod, as they prepare to take down the colossus. A sparse and casual crowd looks on, the murmur of their conversations occasionally broken by the ring of hammers on metal as the scaffolding is assembled around the monument, as if it were the task of these workers to provide a last frame through which the towering figure of Lenin might be viewed. It is only very late in the film that we see this statue again, this time almost completely obscured by the structure that has grown up around it, its massive head having at long last been removed from its still-imposing torso. But within that provisional structure, which had to be constructed in order for his image to be dismantled, this relic of a half-unmade

social order still remains discernible. As with the abandoned Soviet air force base on which Eisenberg's camera also lingers—taking the time to register the full effect of its broken shells of helicopter cockpits and decaying jet engines piled up as if in some abandoned lumber yard of the Cold War—it will yet require a long and patient labor for its remains to be removed.

But if this is so for the GDR's statues and edifices, how much more is it the case for the less visible architecture created by the old order with which we began: the "archive of everyday observations" left behind by the Stasi? For the effects of that persistent archive turn less on the monuments visible from outside it than on the forms of observation by which the archive makes its subjects visible within its frames. No doubt the monumental scale of the enterprise, as with the statue, is a part of the Stasi's legend: "That the index alone for the files was 1.2 kilometers long, that the files themselves were 200 kilometers [...], that the buildings were so heavy and overloaded that they were sinking into the ground, that a water-pressure ballast system was needed to shore up the structures."

But as imposing as the edifice containing them might appear, the real power of these archives turns on the effects they continue to produce after the historical world they document has seemingly been erased from the landscape. These effects are first of all felt at an individual level, as when the arc

*Persistence, 1997*

of an individual life, seen retrospectively within the frame of this archival space, is reevaluated by the one who lived it.

We routinely open your mail, tap your phone, bug your apartment. You won't know when you'll be surrounded by "informal collaborators," some of them your closest friends. One day you'll find out that you yourself have a name-forked tongue, top-drawer, ivory tower... That you too are a collaborator, whether you know it or not... whether you like it or not...

But it is above all at the collective level that the effects of the archive outlive the institutions that gave rise to them: On the night of November 9<sup>th</sup> people barricaded themselves inside in order to protect the files...They immediately formed a citizen's committee with the express purpose of watching over the files until a time when their safety could be guaranteed.

People ate, slept, perhaps made love among the files. And from that moment on the files became a national obsession, providing a standard to which everyone was held. As before, everyone became enslaved by the files... though now for different, if equally dark purposes. Someone said, "Our obsession with the files reduced us to using the standards of the Stasi to judge ourselves, leaving it to them, once again, to decide who is with us and who is against us."

The voice-over recounts how a group of citizens, having made the commitment to protect the files that had documented the lives of a whole society, ironically creates something like an image of social life in miniature within the interstices of the archive itself. And if this image stays with us long after the film is over (even though, like the "views" of the life of Subject M, it is never shown to us directly), it is perhaps in part because the ultimate meaning of this commitment is ambiguous. Should this occupation of the files be interpreted as a symbolic act, even as a utopian image, as the detail of making love among the files seems to suggest? Are we witnessing a sort of "be-in" among the files, through which the collective enacts a new form of life in the space in which its old life had been recorded? Or is this occupation rather to be understood, as the voice-over suggests, as the symptom of a collective investment in the files as a privileged site of political and moral truth—an investment so deep-seated among those that had been observed that even the most ardent opponents of the regime find themselves unexpectedly unable to give it up? In either case, *Persistence* shows us how this archival fiction still haunts the ruins of East German Stalinism, weighing (to borrow Marx's phrase) "like a nightmare on the brains of the living"—the fiction of a life lived entirely within the space of its own archive.

There is a sense in which this image of a life within the Stasi archives can be said

to have imposed itself upon the filmmaker as the result of a historical contingency. It may be that, as Eisenberg worked on what would become *Persistence* in 1991-1992, the ways in which the old forms of life and evidence persisted in this moment of historical passage alongside and within the new—both as a documentary reality and as a collective representation or myth—became most immediately graspable in the realized fiction of a life completely circumscribed by the organization of archival space. It may also be that this archival fiction could only become fully visible as such once its frame had been broken by the historical crisis itself, and its fragments assembled alongside those of other archives, both real and virtual, haunting the German landscape. In any case, the Stasi files constitute only one of the multiple archaeological strata that are excavated by Eisenberg in *Persistence*. We have seen how the imagined observations recorded in the Stasi archives are juxtaposed with the "views" preserved within the art museum—an archival space which is itself framed by its relation to the museum that the Stasi headquarters has itself become. Elsewhere in the film, these various officially sanctioned archives are placed in relation to a broader field of documents and artifacts, all of which may be imagined as elements of an archive yet to be assembled, and which it is the task of the filmmaker to excavate and reconstruct.

A partial list of such elements would include the color footage shot by the Signal Corps



*Cooperation of Parts*, 1987

cameramen in the ruins of Berlin in 1945-1946, and those same ruins as re-imagined in Rossellini's roughly contemporaneous neorealist fiction, *Germany: Year Zero*. But it would also include the record Eisenberg himself creates of the traces of wartime and prewar life that remain inscribed on the landscape of Germany as it confronts another historical break, with the end of the Cold War. In this footage, *Persistence* revisits spaces laden with historical significance, such as the abandoned *Elisabethkirche* with which the film opens—a church which the voice-over tells us Hitler himself is said to have promised to rebuild for its loyal congregation, but the ruins of which had remained untouched and unacknowledged by Berliners since the war. It also would include, as if in counterpoint, the ruined synagogue, whose community was exterminated by the Nazis, which we see under reconstruction at the end of *Persistence*. These images resonate powerfully with the ruins of Rossellini's postwar Berlin, with which they are intercut, as well as with Eisenberg's own footage of the soon-to-be-dismantled monuments of a disappearing GDR.

But Eisenberg's camera also assiduously documents images and artifacts whose exhibition and narrative value is less obvious, such as the images of burnt out and abandoned Jewish shops, apparently unoccupied since the war, or the haunting images of vanished buildings whose traces

on surviving structures are made visible by the discerning eye of our cinematic archivist. In his treatment of the latter set of images, Eisenberg, as Jeffrey Skoller has remarked, makes visible the "ghostly outline" of an earlier stratum in the history of Berlin—a work he carries out with the vigilance and skill of a paleographer deciphering the underwriting of a palimpsest.<sup>3</sup>

*Persistence* may thus best be understood as an archive of archives, which at once constitutes a new archival space of its own and invites us to interrogate the relations between archival formations, and the narratives associated with them. In this, *Persistence* both returns to and reformulates the problems explored in the two previous films of Eisenberg's postwar trilogy, each of which has, as its organizing principle, a distinct archival fiction. *Displaced Person* (1981) stages the fictive constitution of the archive as such—an archive that, however, produces effects of truth only by weaving fictive relations between its documentary elements. There is no immediate historical relation between the newsreel images of Hitler's triumphant tour of Paris and the unattributed and unlocalized found footage of two boys on a bicycle, with which it is repeatedly intercut in this short film. If these two boys who gaze back at us from a vanished world—who were not filmed, as it

<sup>3</sup> Jeffrey Skoller, *Shadows, Specters and Shards: Making History in Avant-Garde Film* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2005), p. 84.

turns out, in wartime Paris, but in New York before the war—can nonetheless, through this juxtaposition, come implicitly to serve as figures for the innumerable refugees and deportees displaced by the war alluded to by Eisenberg's title, it is only because this document of their childhood has itself been "displaced" from its point of origin by the very cinematic archive in which their image is preserved.

In the next film of the trilogy, *Cooperation of Parts*, (1987) it is seemingly for his own origins that Eisenberg's camera searches, seeking to make visible the inaccessible past world of his parents. (Survivors of the Shoah and Soviet labor camps, his parents met as "displaced persons" in the aftermath of the war, making Eisenberg, in the most immediate biographical sense, a product of the war's catastrophes.<sup>4</sup>) The archival fiction of this film no longer foregrounds, as does *Displaced Person*, the constitution and articulation of archival space as such. The focus of *Cooperation of Parts* is, rather, on the attempt of the author/investigator to document an experience uncontainable within its archival frame, a documentary project indissociable from his desire to feel on his "own skin" the effects of a primal scene at once familial and historical. But the forms through which this pursuit of origins

<sup>4</sup> On the relationship of these films to his biography, see Alf Bold, "Displaced Persons: Dan Eisenberg Interviewed," *Millennium Film Journal* No. 27 (Winter 1993-94), pp. 48-63.



*Cooperation of Parts*, 1987

is documented, while making vividly felt the intensity of the documentarian's desire to resurrect an image of the past, seem nonetheless intended to foreground the way in which the pursuit of this desire reorients—and at times disorients—our experience of the present.

Perhaps most striking in this regard are the destabilizing effects of Eisenberg's erratic camera movements, as when the camera, in a sequence framed by the filmmaker's journey to Dachau, follows a floating piece of ash in its twisting descent, only to seek out, in a series of abrupt and disjointed close-ups, the place where it might have come down. In the last shots of this sequence, we seem almost on the verge of seeing, in footage that documents little more than patches of grass seen in extreme close-up, the last remains of the lives that had once been inscribed, "in calcium and phosphorus," on the earth that grass has overgrown. But like that piece of ash—which is only perceptible for the brief interval in which it drifts before becoming indistinguishable from the new background in which we must attempt to rediscover it—the image of the past appears to its present pursuer in *Cooperation of Parts*, not with the fixity and immobility of a document, but as a fleeting movement that our eye must pursue on the edge of the perceptible world. Because it emanates from an inaccessible past world, that image is unrecognizable to us in the present, appearing out of focus or out of kilter with our current frame of reference. As with the photographs of the

narrator's parents that should document that past—images which are only evoked by their descriptions in voice-over, as the virtual doubles of the documentary images of the present that appear in their place (as when the photograph of the mother parting with friends from a German train station in 1948 is described over contemporary footage of a train station in France)—the image of the past in *Cooperation of Parts* appears above all as a perturbation in the image of the present: as a latent or virtual image, that becomes visible only at the limits of what we are capable of seeing.

In *Persistence*, the third film of the trilogy, Eisenberg develops an archival fiction distinct from the other two: that of the historical crisis, in which one archaeological formation breaks apart and gives way to another. *Persistence* does not stage the constitution of the archive as such, as does *Displaced Person*, nor does it follow *Cooperation of Parts* in attempting to resurrect and document an experience that exceeds what is visible or articulable within the world we inhabit. And yet there is a sense in which this last archival fiction reframes and illuminates the others, by imagining a single space in which the ruins of multiple archaeological formations coexist: an archive of archives. In shattering the existing archival frame, the historical break makes visible new dimensions in its documentary elements as we follow their passage from one archaeological formation to the next. As we have seen, the dissolution of the GDR

and its system of surveillance does not only lay bare the archival frame underlying one form of social knowledge: it makes it possible for the filmmaker to excavate the multiplicity of archaeological strata that compose the German cultural landscape, and to see how (and with what effects) documents and images, having been dislodged from the ruins of one archive, find themselves, like the found images of *Displaced Person*, reassembled and reinterpreted within another. Conversely, with his ingenious appropriation of footage from *Germany Year Zero*—where the gaze of Rossellini's young Edmund, through the use of match-cutting, appears at various points in *Persistence* to stumble upon images of contemporary Germany, even as he explores the rubble of postwar Berlin—Eisenberg dramatizes in a different way the disorienting effect, so central to *Cooperation of Parts*, of moving beyond the limits of one's own historical frame.<sup>5</sup>

But in *Persistence*, unlike in the two preceding films, this abrupt leap ahead in time—and with it, the unexpected passage of the protagonist, without leaving the same space, between historical worlds—is pictured as the folding of one incomplete archival frame upon another. Edmund moves from the broken frames of the ruins of postwar Berlin (with its precarious skeletal structures as filmed by Rossellini and the

<sup>5</sup> On Eisenberg's use of this technique in *Persistence*, see Skoller, p. 88.

Signal Corps) to the provisional frames of the scaffolding shot by Eisenberg in post-GDR Berlin (within which the monument to Lenin is disassembled, and around which its abandoned synagogue is to be rebuilt.) When Edmund's gaze leads us, in its exploration of the layers of the city's history, across the gap between historical worlds, this leap in time is thus not imagined as a plunge into the unknown, but (as elsewhere in *Persistence*) as a series of deframings and reframings, in which the landscape we thought we knew is remapped from one historical break or crisis to the next, obliging us to imagine a new place for ourselves within it.

To imagine the leap from one world to another is not, in itself, to invoke the utopian promise of the novum. No doubt, as we have seen in Eisenberg's treatment of the Stasi archives, the dream of utopia is not excluded from this movement of reframing. But, when such a wish appears, it can only be formulated as a utopia of the archive, where the transformation of social relations is imagined through a reappropriation and reordering of its documents and monuments.

We are given a language for such a wish in the last sequence of the film. A group of adolescents casually climbs and leans upon a monument to Marx and Engels in what was once East Berlin, posing for the cameras of their friends as they take a moment to document their visit for some future archive. In the last shot, we read, scrawled in spray paint on the back of the monument, a comic post-Stalinist reinscription: "Next time, everything will be better."

This wish expressed only tentatively and self-mockingly, does not project a life beyond

the archive. Rather, like the new life of the collective occupying the Stasi archives, it flashes up in the space between its frames—in the gap between the monuments of the past and a future archive, where the meaning of those monuments will have been rewritten. In *Persistence*, it is thus not only the space of our historical disasters, but also the trajectory of our dreams, that assumes the forms of the archival fictions that envelop us. In the shadow of those fictions, we pass from document to document, from monument to monument, and from frame to frame, like the denizens of Borges's *Library of Babel*.

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