

Ash's Stasi File as a Script of Life

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I must explore not just a file but a life: the life of the person I was then. This is not the same thing as 'my life.' What we usually call 'my life' is the mental autobiography with which and by which we all live. What really happened is quite another matter.¹

When the files of a once Secret Security Service are released to its subjects of observation, they also engender unprecedented acts of autobiographical remembering. The fall of the Berlin Wall and German reunification on 3 October 1990 have led to the opening of the Stasi files in 1992. Consequently, many former data subjects who access their records are then prompted to write file-based autobiographies as a response to their readings and the remembering processes triggered thereafter.

The appellation "data subjects" refers to anyone who has been under the surveillance of the Stasi and whose personal information is kept on Stasi files. This term applies to German and foreign benefactors or victims of that system. The Stasi records are then granted unusual authority in the file-based autobiographies. Autobiographers assume that the files can give order and meaning to their life stories. Files have an author of their own, most commonly a hostile source. They are subject to biases from the part of the Stasi collaborators. Nevertheless, the former data subjects refer to

them in order to construct their file-based autobiographies. Scholars like Alison Lewis, Ash and others have viewed the opening of the Stasi files as an opportunity to clarify the identity of their informers and determine the influence the file might have exerted on their lives. This assumption directly relates to the primary purpose of the Stasi Files Act, in German, *Stasi-Unterlagengesetz* or StUG, documented in 1991 in the Federal Law Gazette. Article 1 (1) of the Stasi Files Act states that its first purpose and scope consist in

regulat[ing] the custody, preparation, administration and use of the records of the Ministry for State Security of the former German Democratic Republic and its preceding and succeeding organizations (State Security Service) [...] to facilitate individual access to personal data which the State Security Service has stored regarding him, so that he can clarify what influence the state security service has had on his personal destiny.

Some English translations suggest the word fate instead of destiny to designate the German word *Schicksal*. In those terms, the Stasi Files Act serves to “clarify one’s fate”: “This remarkably nonjuridical goal – expressed with the equally nonjuridical term *fate* – is based on the assumption that the Stasi files are capable of storing individual life stories.”²

Authorities regulating the files yet have to consider the new process of remembering that arises as autobiographers read their files. Therefore, this essay analyses why and how the file-based autobiographies contribute to autobiography theories, why recollection mechanisms are initiated by the file and why the personal memory becomes subservient to it. To answer these questions, I refer to the example of Timothy Garton Ash’s file-based autobiography *The File: A Personal History*. Ash is an English scholar, journalist, historian and professor who lived in Berlin in the 1980s in order to work on his doctoral dissertation. The Stasi opened a file on him due to his suspected, although imaginary, espionage activities.

I initially explain the implication of the file-based autobiographies as a new form of writing within the autobiographical theories. I develop this argument around Cornelia Vismann’s term “file-based autobiographies.” I elaborate on her concept and I also evaluate Smith’s understanding of the autobiographical writing process in order to situate Ash’s autobiographical work within that sub-genre. Afterwards, I consider a literary source, Proust’s autobiographical work, and psycho-analytical approaches such as Mace’s and Conway’s in order to analyse the remembering processes engaged by the Stasi files. By combining both areas of scholarship, I seek to establish a theoretical framework of autobiographical involuntary memories

in the context of Ash's file-based autobiography. In addition, I examine Ash's personal comments regarding the reasons why he considers that the human memory becomes dependent on the file. Roy Pascal's concept of "memory artist" and Jacques Derrida's definition of archives also help to elaborate further Ash's remembering experience. I conclude with a critical view on the different impacts of the files for a non-German data subject like Ash as opposed to a German citizen.

According to the Greek root of the word, autobiography means the life, *bio*, written, *graphie*, by oneself, *auto*.³ Following this first definition of the genre's name, several autobiographical theorists have attempted to define the recurring characteristics of this form of writing. In classical autobiographies, the authors write the story of their lives and emphasize major turning points and influences on their personal development. In this sense, the autobiographical writing represents an act of consciousness on one's own life, principally and primarily based on one's personal impressions and observations. Paradoxically, former data subjects refer to their biography written by someone else in a file in order to write their file-based autobiography. Their concept of *bio* focuses on the time during which they were under surveillance or on their impressions regarding the reading of their files.

Vismann represents the first theorist to coin the term file-based autobiographies.⁴ This appellation refers to the autobiographies written as a response to the Stasi files. They are initiated by an *Urszene*, the moment when the former data subjects read their record and respond to them. Those accounts are mediated by the files which become both a starting point and a writing tool for those new narratives. They exclude the usual autobiographical elements such as childhood, teenage years or major life achievements. Instead, according to Vismann, file-based autobiographies are written in counterstatement to the file or in an effort to reconcile file and memory.

The writing of the biography is prompted by a counterstatement: the authorial file, that is, the autobiographical book, is a denial of the inspected file. Written into the gaps and omissions of the inspected records, *The File* is not the one that was handed over but the revised one that was confronted and made to coincide with the subject's life story.⁵

I agree with Vismann that some file-based autobiographies are written as a denial of the Stasi records. However, in Ash's case, the act of writing is structured according to the reports contained in his Stasi file. File-based autobiographers distinguish themselves from classical ones especially with regards to the remembering and writing processes they engage in. In fact,

the autobiography theorists Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson specify a major tendency for autobiographical writing in comparison with biographies. I refer to her distinguishing criteria in order to argue that the writing and remembering processes activated in file-based autobiographies differ from those involved in classical autobiographies:

Relatively few biographers use their personal memories of their subject as reliable evidence, unless they had a personal relationship to the subject of the biography (as a relative, child, friend, or colleague). For life narrators [classical autobiographers], by contrast, personal memories are the[ir] primary archival source to support, supplement, or offer commentary on their idiosyncratic acts of remembering.⁶

In contrast to classical autobiographies, the file-based ones originate from and rely on the stories of others instead of the personal memories of the autobiographers. These authors re-enact the two moments of the autobiographical situation defined by Janet Varner Gunn. The life narrative is constructed "by the autobiographer who, in effect, is 'reading' his or her life and by the reader of the autobiographical [or biographical] text."⁷ Gunn's statement refers to traditional autobiographers who must observe themselves and their lives before writing. However, I can also apply her assumption to the authors of file-based autobiographies. They inspire themselves from the biography portrayed in their files. In fact, the Stasi records present a version of a personal story from the perspective of a third party. Former data subjects must then assemble those fragments of life in order to form their file-based autobiography.

They assimilate the memories of their informants as their own. They write their story according to the information contained in their files, as if they became a ghostwriter of someone else's perception of the past. The autobiographical act resembles a process of re-appropriating their life stories.⁸ It also provides them a chance to add their own side of their personal story thereafter. However, the act of remembering is initially mediated by an external storage medium instead of personal memories. This engagement with the past through the file distinguishes the file-based autobiography from other autobiographical genres.

It is not the artist, the autobiographer, who primarily twists around and distorts information about his personal life but it is rather the "work of art," or the piece of writing itself which plays with the autobiographer's memory. The file becomes the script of a life until the reader, the autobiographer himself, can no longer distinguish if what he remembers is voluntary or a consequence of reading his file. Therefore, the autobiographers' engage-

ment with the external storage medium looks distinct from classical autobiographical acts. Hence, I attempt to complement Vismann's definition of file-based autobiographies because I argue that the main difference between them and classical ones consists in the diverging remembering processes and especially in the role of the file to recall the past.

The action of remembering refers to the ability to recall an episode and to provide explicit information about it.⁹ The "autobiographical memory includes memories for specific experiences and memory for the personal facts of one's life."¹⁰ On one side, voluntary recalls refer to "instances when memories come to mind because they are either willed, intended, thought about, searched for, and so forth ...; voluntary memory appears to be our ability to call up our personal past on demand."¹¹ On the other side, "involuntary memory has been described in the modern literature as instances in which memories come to mind spontaneously, unintentionally, automatically, without effort, and so forth."¹² It can also be divided in two other main categories. The involuntary autobiographical memories refer to episodes that someone recalls without the intention to do so. In contrast, voluntary memories originate from an individual's conscious effort and intention to remember them.

Ash's initial example allows him to establish a connection between the notion of autobiographical involuntary memory and the file-based remembering processes. He defines his involuntary autobiographical remembering act as one initiated and mediated by his Stasi file. The record revives Ash's senses and plunges him into half-known and half-forgotten universes. He relates to his reading of a report from his file and he remembers experiencing everything, except one fact: his encounter with a woman.

I sit there, at the plastic-wood table, marvelling at this minutely detailed reconstruction of a day in my life and at the style that recalls a school exercise [...] I smell again that peculiar East Berlin smell, a compound of the smoke from old boilers burning compressed coal-dust briquettes, exhaust fumes [...] cheap East European cigarettes, damp boots and sweat. But one thing I simply can't remember: who was she, my Little Red Riding-Hood? Or not so little: 1.75-1.78 meters, that's nearly my height.¹³

Once Ash opens his file, its content revives and alters his memory. It is as if Ash was reading a novel in which he is the main protagonist. In this sense, the file represents a form of script for him. However, he cannot predict all the adventures of the main character. It seems as if he re-experienced all those situations for the first time again. All those feelings would not have been evoked, though, had he never read his file. This par-

ticular example allows Ash to classify his autobiographical memory into the subcategory of the involuntary autobiographical recalls.

The files stimulate the involuntary memory, which constitutes a type of memory triggered by objects, letters, official documents or pieces of evidence; it is activated by a sensation or something material. An involuntary memory spontaneously appears in an individual's mind. Once it is evoked, it forces an individual to remember the past, whether he wishes it or not. It serves to bring back to mind past events that might otherwise remain in complete oblivion.

The past is somewhere beyond the reach of the intellect, and unmistakably present in some material object or in the sensation which such an object arouses in us, though we have no idea which one it is. As for that object, it depends entirely on chance whether we come upon it before we die or whether we never encounter it.¹⁴

According to Ash, the file replaces the random objects that can spontaneously resuscitate memories. Ash identifies the memories evoked by his file as involuntary ones. In addition, he establishes similarities between them and those experienced by Marcel Proust as a result of tasting a pastry called Madeleine. The episode itself originates from Proust's autobiographical work *À la recherche du temps perdu* (*In Search of Lost Time*). Ash explains:

The Stasi's observation report, my diary entry: two versions of one day in a life. The 'object' described with the cold outward eye of the secret policeman, and my own subjective, abusive, emotional self-description. But what a gift to memory is a Stasi file. Far better than a Madeleine.¹⁵

In Proust's autobiographical work, the Madeleine allows the main character to remember his childhood after tasting a spoonful of Madeleine soaked into tea. His aunt used to give it to him in this manner when he was a young boy. Therefore, the pastry can remind him of the remote past; it repeats a moment of his childhood. Ash intentionally refers to the Madeleine as an object that stimulates sensations in the body and consequently evokes the forgotten past. He emphasizes that the Stasi file allows him to walk into the past instead of searching for random objects that could call back to mind memories. Instead of relying on personal recalls in order to write his autobiography, Ash refers to his biography on file.

In Ash's case, the file assumes the function of the Madeleine. However, even if Ash focuses on his literary experience, a note must also be said about the nature and characteristics of involuntary autobiographic

memories from a psychological perspective. The main reason for this approach consists in a further understanding of what authors like Ash imply by autobiographical involuntary memories in comparison with psychologists. Therefore, I define Ash's autobiographical involuntary memories based on both psycho-analytical and literary perspectives.

While theorists in the psychological field like Mace and others critically challenge Proust's concept of the involuntary memory in relation to the Madeleine, literary scholars like Ash seem to take it for granted. They tend to repeat the French concept of the pastry calling to mind the past and they avoid questioning it from a psychological perspective. It remains within a literary context.

In fact, Ash bases his comparison of the file and the Madeleine on a literature cliché. It corresponds to an initial misconception of the involuntary memories. Some "basic sensory cues (as in Proust's example) very rarely trigger involuntary memories."¹⁶ The Madeleine concept is too often falsely attributed as a leading example of involuntary memories. According to psychological studies on memory, "motivational and environmental factors interact to produce involuntary memories. Dorthe Berntsen describes such interactions as occurring between one's current life-situation (which is an orientation towards the past and the future, including one's goals and expectancies) and one's immediate situation (which is the moment when involuntary memories are produced)."¹⁷ Moreover, the memories called back by his file cannot be compared directly to those evoked by the Madeleine; they lack essential characteristics pertaining to Proust's example.

According to John H. Mace, six characteristics define Proustian involuntary memories: first, prior to its retrieval, the memory in question must seem to reside in the unconscious for an extended period of time; second, it relates to an event from the distant past; third, an involuntary memory depends greatly on a prompt; fourth, sensory cues typically activate this kind of memory; fifth, it is usually accompanied by a sense of "travelling back in time"¹⁸; and sixth, an intense joy feeling comes together with the involuntary memories.¹⁹ In Ash's case, however, the events only date from about ten years, not from a remote past. In addition, his involuntary memory does not depend on a sensory stimulus such as the Madeleine but rather on a written document. Ash does seem to relive the past. Furthermore, his literary encounter with his younger self seems to embarrass him more than to evoke a feeling of happiness. Nevertheless, Ash establishes a direct connection between the file and its influence on his involuntary autobiographical memory.

Ash's engagement with the external storage medium also emphasizes a new function of the Stasi files after their opening in 1992. In the file-based

autobiographical context, the human memory becomes subservient to the record although the document itself was never intended for public release. In Ash's case, the file impacts his visual memory. As he attempts to recall details of his friend, Ash no longer remembers if a memory belongs to the file or to his own memory. When he meets a woman described under the code name "Beret" in his file, Ash remarks: "I caught a glimpse of her, sometime later [...] She was still wearing her red beret. Or have I just imagined that final detail?"²⁰ His remarks about re-experiencing the forgotten past put in question the reliability of the human memory itself. The file contains unchanged information which constantly activates the involuntary memory. Therefore, the artificial memory, the file, subordinates the human mind.

Ash not only nourishes a feeling of dependency toward his file. Instead, he experiences a sense of disloyalty towards his own past because the archived documents acquire a higher importance than his mental archives, his own human memory. Ash admits: "I sit there, under Frau Schulz's inquisitive eye, sensing an awful disloyalty to my own past."²¹ This sense is directly produced by the file. The record blurs Ash's memory and models how his life was. As an "object of observation," once you read your file, you "start believing those things really happened to you or deliberately changed the way to remember or tell about them."²² The malleability of Ash's memory is described in archeological terms. The autobiographer implies that a file-based autobiography is always subject to the influence of the file upon his memory. Once opened, it inevitably affects his vision of the past:

As I race up the battered autobahn to Berlin, just as I used to all those years ago, I think back over this conversation: how a file opens the door to a vast sunken labyrinth of the forgotten past, but how, too, the very act of opening the door itself changes the buried artefacts, like an archaeologist letting in fresh air to a sealed Egyptian tomb. For these are not simply past experiences rediscovered in their original state. Even without the fresh light from a new document or another's recollection – the opened door – our memories decay or sharpen, mellow or sour, with the passage of time and the change of circumstances.²³

Ash's file-based autobiography conveys the idea that in fact, the file symbolizes more than a bridge to those half-forgotten episodes; it is rather a medium initiating and replacing memory. The recollection process resembles archaeological research: "A door opens, but another closes. There is no way back now to your own earlier memory of that person, that

event.”²⁴ The file not only represents a link to his past. In the writing process, it comes to life again. Ash seems to become dependent on it in order to narrate his life story. His file-based autobiography is then an imaginative reconstruction of the past revealed in his file, a “continuous remixing of memory and forgetting.”²⁵ It is as if his memory was an artist guided by the file.

The concept of the memory artist originates from the autobiographical theory advanced by Roy Pascal in the 1960s. Pascal argues: “Memory itself performs this shifting process, and is the most powerful agent in shaping the past according to the will of the writer: ‘memory is a great artist.’”²⁶ In contrast, Ash does not view the memory independently shifting memories and modifying his past recollections. Instead, he emphasizes the role of the file itself in reducing his lifetime memories into a life-illusion. Unless a former data subject can access other diary notes or personal memories, the entries of the file infiltrate his mind and shape his memories. That external storage medium also imposes meaning on life events recorded in it.

The file assumes a certain level of authority, and its power over memory recalls Jacques Derrida’s principle described in “archive fever.” Derrida explains that at the origin of the word “file,” those documents remained in the Greek *archeion*. Initially, it was a house, “une maison, un domicile, une adresse, la demeure des magistrats supérieurs, les *archontes*, ceux qui commandaient [...] Ils on le pouvoir *d’interpréter* les archives.”²⁷ Similarly, the Stasi files seem to impose their version of the past. Once the former data subjects read them, they tend to discern with difficulty between their own interpretation and the reality of autobiographical events. Ash represents one of the first autobiographers who attribute such authority to the files over his involuntary autobiographical remembering process.

The opening of one’s Stasi file can command new directions in one’s life. Its revelations engender unprecedented consequences. For the first time in history, individuals formerly under observation engage with the records of a former State Security Service with purposes diametrically opposed to its original ones: searching where their fate has been mediated by the file.

The effect of reading a file can be terrible. I think of the now famous case of Vera Wollenberger, a political activist from Werner Krättschell’s parish in Pankow, who discovered from reading her file that her husband, Knud, had been informing on her ever since they met.²⁸

The involuntary remembering process has enabled many of the former data subjects to alleviate their suspicions or open their eyes on unsus-

pected trust abuses. "Had the files not been opened, they might still be brother and brother, man and wife – their love enduring, a fortress sure upon the rock of lies."²⁹ However, the harm caused by the file depends from one individual to the next.

There exists a difference between the file's impact on foreign and German data subjects. Ash says: "I was not a victim of these informers, as many East Germans really were of theirs. They did me no serious damage. Yet, knowing how the system worked, it is a fair guess that they did harm others."³⁰ German data subjects who have lived under that system and who continue to live in Germany suffer most from the impact of the files. For many of them, the file has shaped their reputation or infringed their personal relationships. Furthermore, future employers and close relatives develop interest in their records. As a result, the file continues to exert an influence on the lives of former data subjects, especially when quotes are directly retrieved from the records whether they are accurate or not.

In contrast, the Stasi did not affect Ash because he lives outside of Germany. The existence of his file seems to evoke no interest in his future employers. Furthermore, he has no connection to the Stasi itself and any of his comments are taken as those of an outsider. He never collaborated for that organization. Ash's position as a foreigner allows him to reflect and write on the remembering processes engaged by the file without suffering from the file opening itself.

He attempts to teach his readers about the ways in which the human memory becomes subservient to the file once one reads it. In addition to triggering his involuntary memories, the file also functions as medium to structure the file-based autobiography. It serves both psycho-cognitive and literary purposes, although not necessarily the same ones of involuntary memories as understood in the field of psychology studies. This emerging genre of file-based autobiographies allows Ash and his readers to reflect on the new engagements with the record and on its effects both on the writing and remembering processes. This unprecedented archives opening initiates file encounters which subsequently contribute to studies in autobiography and autobiographical involuntary memory. The Stasi file transforms into "the mental autobiography with which and by which"³¹ Ash lives. It also forms part of his identity as a script of life.

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NOTES

- ¹ Timothy Garton Ash, *The File: A Personal History* (London: Harper Collins, 1997) 23.
- ² Cornelia Vismann, *Files. Law and Media Technology*, trans Dr. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008) 154.
- ³ Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf, *Autobiographie* (Weimar: J.M. Metzler, 2000) 8.
- ⁴ However, she initially elaborates this concept in German without labelling/labeling it and Dr. Winthrop-Young translates it into English for the first time.
- ⁵ Vismann, *Files. Law and Media Technology* 156.
- ⁶ Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, eds, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001) 6.
- ⁷ Janet Varner Gunn, *Autobiography: Toward a Poetics of Experience* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982) 8.
- ⁸ Alison Lewis, "Reading and Writing the Stasi File: On the Uses and Abuses of the File as (Auto)Biography", *German Life and Letters* 56.4 (2002) 377-97.
- ⁹ Martin A. Conway, *Autobiographical Memory. An Introduction* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1990) 3.
- ¹⁰ Conway, *Autobiographical Memory. An Introduction* 4.
- ¹¹ John H. Mace, ed, *Involuntary Memory* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007) 1.
- ¹² Mace, *Involuntary Memory* 2.
- ¹³ Ash, *The File: A Personal History* 10.
- ¹⁴ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed Hannah Arendt, trans Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969) 158.
- ¹⁵ Ash, *The File: A Personal History* 12.
- ¹⁶ Mace, *Involuntary Memory* 5.
- ¹⁷ Mace, *Involuntary Memory* 13. See also Dorthe Berntsen, "Involuntary Autobiographical Memories", *Applied Cognitive Psychology* 10 (1996) 435-54.
- ¹⁸ Mace, *Involuntary Memory* 26.
- ¹⁹ Mace, *Involuntary Memory* 26.
- ²⁰ Ash, *The File: A Personal History* 12.
- ²¹ Ash, *The File: A Personal History* 10.
- ²² Ash, *The File: A Personal History* 111.
- ²³ Ash, *The File: A Personal History* 96.
- ²⁴ Ash, *The File: A Personal History* 96.
- ²⁵ Ash, *The File: A Personal History* 221.

- ²⁶ Roy Pascal, *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1960) 70.
- ²⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Mal d'archive: Une impression freudienne* (Paris: Galilée, 1995) 13.
- ²⁸ Ash, *The File: A Personal History* 18.
- ²⁹ Ash, *The File: A Personal History* 18.
- ³⁰ Ash, *The File: A Personal History* 75.
- ³¹ Ash, *The File: A Personal History* 23.