THE LIVES OF OTHERS
Matthew H Bernstein
Film Quarterly; Fall 2007; 61, 1; ProQuest Direct Complete
pg. 30

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MATTHEW H. BERNSTEIN ON AN EMOTIVE SURVEILLANCE THRILLER SET IN COMMUNIST EAST GERMANY

Like Wolfgang Becker's *Goodbye, Lenin!* (2003), Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's Oscar-winning *The Lives of Others* (2005) dramatizes life in East Germany before and after the fall of the Berlin Wall; both films are examples of *Vergangenheitsbewaeltigung*, of coming to terms with Germany's past. Both delineate major ironies of life in the GDR. In Becker's film, the paradox revealed is that the fall of the Berlin Wall and the arrival of capitalism make life in reunified East Germany nearly identical to its former Communist existence. In *The Lives of Others*, the chief irony arises from the fact that two characters most devoted to the ideals of Communism—a state-sanctioned playwright and the Stasi agent assigned to spy on him—find themselves compelled by personal integrity to revolt against the state.

Indeed, von Donnersmarck has been at pains to differentiate his film from *Goodbye, Lenin!*, stating in the press kit that he did not wish to depict East German existence as "funny or moving." *Goodbye, Lenin!* depicted partly as farce a devoted son's determination to keep his ardently Communist, frail mother alive by sustaining the illusion that East Germany still existed after the wall came down. *The Lives of Others* traces the opposite trajectory: the tearing away of illusions ardently held by East Germans before the wall has fallen. In addition, *The Lives of Others* explores canonical themes of surveillance and voyeurism, using hierarchies of knowledge and recalling Hitchock's best thrillers and especially Coppola's *The Conversation* (1973).

As in so many thrillers, the two men at the center of *The Lives of Others*—Georg Dreyman (Sebastian Koch), the only East German dramatist read in the West, and the forlorn, solitary spy Hauptmann Gerd Wiesler (Ulrich Mühe, who died of cancer just this past summer)—share much in common. They both comprehend the lives of others, but in completely different ways. Dreyman's artistic and political success arises from his powers of empathy: "Put yourself in his shoes for a moment," he asks the all-powerful Culture Minister Hempf (Thomas Thieme), speaking of a beloved former theater director, the blacklisted but still devotedly Socialist Albert Jerska (Volkmar Kleinert). But Dreyman also defends the GDR and Stasi to his lover and star of his plays, Christa-Maria Sieland (Martina Gedeck). When discussing the government's denial of a permit to visit the West to their dissident journalist friend Paul Hauser (Hans-Uwe Bauer), Dreyman asks, "Would you let him go if you were in their [the government's] position?" Where Dreyman's generous spirit enables him, often to his own detriment, to recognize that everyone has their reasons, Wiesler simply spies on them and manipulates suspects into confessing their crimes.

Indeed, the opening sequence of *The Lives of Others* shows us how good Wiesler is at his job—and how good von Donnersmarck is at his. Wiesler interrogates a young father about his neighbors' flight to the West. We sympathize with the vulnerable "Prisoner 227" as Wiesler cruelly deprives him of sleep for forty hours, and responds to 227's repeated protests of innocence by threatening to arrest his wife and put his children "into state care." Their utter imbalance of power is compelling. Yet von Donnersmarck further intercuts this interrogation with Wiesler's class, where he trains future Stasi agents. As Wiesler plays the reel-to-reel tape recording of the interrogation, we cut back to the actual questioning (as in *The Conversation*). Wiesler stops the tape and explains to his students (and to us) the intricate details of Stasi operations. We agree with a student who calls this inhumane treatment. Yet as the interrogation unfolds, Prisoner 227 finally confesses that he aided the escape. The confession only reinforces the Stasi's belief that human beings can be neatly categorized and managed, in the manner of Pavlov, to ensure the state's dominance. (Wiesler's supervisor endorses a study of five types of artists and their response to Stasi abuse.) We are perhaps reminded of ruthlessly thorough Hollywood Nazis, such as von Scherbach (Otto Preminger) and his lieutenants

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Left to right: Sebastian Koch, Thomas Thime, and Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck during the filming of *The Lives of Others*.

Photo: Hagen Keller. © 2006 Sony Pictures Entertainment Inc.

in Billy Wilder's *Stalag 17* (1953), who anticipate and kill any American POWs who try to escape. In a later scene in *The Lives of Others*, a Stasi officer calls in a "graphologist," whose extensive knowledge of typewriter models—and which writers, East and West, use them—is simultaneously astonishing and funny. But art imitates life here. Von Donnersmarck's mother escaped (before his birth) to the West and consequently suffered long waits at the border to visit relatives in the GDR; Mühe claimed to have discovered after the fall of the wall that his wife, a member of his theater troupe, had informed on him to the Stasi.

Wiesler spies on Dreyman at the command of his immediate superior and former classmate, Oberstleutnant Anton Grubitz (Ulrich Tukor), chief of the Stasi's Culture Department, who takes the agent to Dreyman's latest play. Like characters in a Lubitsch society comedy, Wiesler and Grubnitz observe everyone—particularly Dreyman in his box seat, and bigwig Hempf in the orchestra—rather than the actors on stage. This is one recurring joke throughout *The Lives of Others*—in a film that depicts the power of art and artists to transform lives, the Stasi agents and government officials, for all their powers of surveillance, are utterly ignorant of and oblivious to the virtues of the arts and artists, and human nature. Wiesler's young assistant consistently misunderstands what Dreyman and Sieland say to each other in their most intimate moments—thinking, for example, that her promises of strength and fidelity to Dreyman refer to her determination to be a better housekeeper. (Still, he expresses delight in being assigned to monitor artists, who are more sexually active than priests and peace activists.)

Such ignorance and arrogance appear at all levels of the government. Hempf self-importantly interrupts a cast party to pay clichéd tributes to Dreyman and Siedel. He seems culturally deaf; we later realize he is jealous of Dreyman. Hempf is also a glutton, a bloated, Groszian caricature in a film that renders its other characters naturalistically. As Hempf

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subsequently discusses the artist's role in socialist society with Dreyman and commands him to concede that no blacklist exists in East Germany, he holds a huge chocolate pastry in his capacious hands just inches from his mouth, a detail highlighted as von Donnersmarck cuts to a reverse angle. We will see too much of this official sodden with power—including a true beauty-and-the-beast scene in which he virtually rapes Sieland in the capacious back seat of his constantly roving government limousine (really his office), having threatened her that if she does not submit, she will never act again. She submits, and he flatters himself that she wants him. Unlike Joseph and Maria Tura (Jack Benny and Carole Lombard) in Lubitsch's *To Be or Not To Be* (1942), Dreyman and Sieland cannot dance lightly around a totalitarian regime.

Grubitz and Kampf embody the ways in which East German officials deployed surveillance and repression to serve personal ends. Grubitz is an utter careerist. At Dreyman's play opening, he is flabbergasted when Wiesler finds the playwright worth spying on. (Wiesler immediately calls Dreyman "arrogant," but he also sees the playwright talking with a man later identified as the dissident journalist Hauser—another example of the countless, apt details—many apparent only after a second viewing—with which von Donnersmarck imbues his film.) But when Hempf asks Grubitz after the show if he thinks Dreyman is as "good" as he seems, Grubitz appropriates Wiesler's suspicions. Through an earlier dialogue exchange, we learn that Grubitz has plagiarized Wiesler's ideas before to rise in the ranks. Here, we momentarily enjoy the irony of Hempf's praise for Grubitz's false acuity, commenting that ordinary, mediocre men would think Dreyman beyond reproach—precisely Grubitz's view of Dreyman. Another irony is that Hempf is not truly suspicious, just anxious to get Dreyman out of the way.

So everything is in place for Wiesler to destroy Dreyman. The Stasi perfectly illustrate Foucault's proposition in *Discipline and Punish* that "the exercise of discipline presupposes a mechanism that coerces by means of observation." No wonder the film begins in 1984. But in *The Lives of Others* observation and coercion break down as both Dreyman and Wiesler revolt against the surveillance state. The two men are provoked by different events. The suicide of Jerska galvanizes the gullible, complacent playwright into researching and publishing an expose of suicide rates in East Germany for *Der Spiegel*, using a smuggled tiny typewriter with red ink which he hides under a removable doorsill in his apartment. More dramatically, Wiesler realizes that his latest assignment does not fulfill the state's ideals but only Grubitz's careerist goals and Hempf's lust for Siedel ("the loveliest pearl of the GDR," he calls her). When Wiesler discovers and reports to Grubitz Hempf's trysts with Sieland, Grubitz instructs Wiesler not to make any written record: "We're helping a committee member get a rival out of the way . . . Do you know what this could mean for my career? And for yours?" Wiesler retorts: "Is this why we joined the Stasi? . . . The Party's shield and sword?"

***Wiesler's transformation is the central piece of evidence in Dreyman's debate with Hempf: people can and do change. So do countries. That change—life in Eastern Berlin after the wall comes down—is shown in the coda of* The Lives of Others.**

Wiesler comes to realize all too well what this assignment means, because von Donnersmarck, with Koch and Gedeck's help, has created in Dreyman and Siedel an utterly engaging, well-intentioned, sympathetic (and yes, photogenic) romantic couple. Wiesler becomes enamored of their passionate, idealistic life of art and inspiration—he even steals Dreyman's volume of Brecht writings to peruse for himself. He is visibly moved by Dreyman's playing of a fictional piano piece (by composer Gabriel Yared), "Sonata for a Good Man." (Von Donnersmarck has identified Lenin's comment that listening to Beethoven's "Apassionata" would prevent him from completing the Russian Revolution—a comment which Dreyman repeats to Sieland after he plays the sonata—as the starting point of the film.) Wiesler gets so involved in other peoples's lives that he cannot do his job. From spying on Dreyman and Siedel, Wiesler slowly begins to intervene in their lives in ways they cannot know. He arranges for Dreyman to discover Siedel's trysts with Hempf and even personally accosts her later in a nearby bar—assuming the pose of one of her theater fans, her "audience," which of course he is in more ways than she thinks—to dissuade her from meeting Hempf again. Wiesler and Dreyman are now both (as Anthony Lane calls them) puppeteers: in Dreyman's case, creating lives and dialogue on stage from the wings, and in Wiesler's case, rearranging lives from the attic of Dreyman's apartment building. Von Donnersmarck constantly crosscuts between them with parallel camera movements or even graphic matches to visualize their similarities.

By the last third of the film, Wiesler goes so far as to cover for Dreyman, refusing to report that the playwright is writing his article (taking Grubitz's instructions to not report "everything" much further than Grubitz imagined). Instead, Wiesler maintains Dreyman's charade that he is drafting a play to celebrate the GDR's fortieth anniversary. Dreyman

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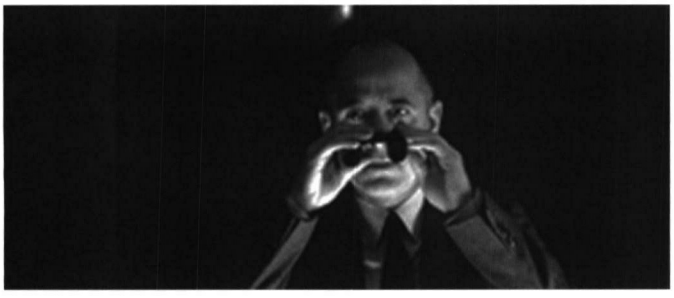
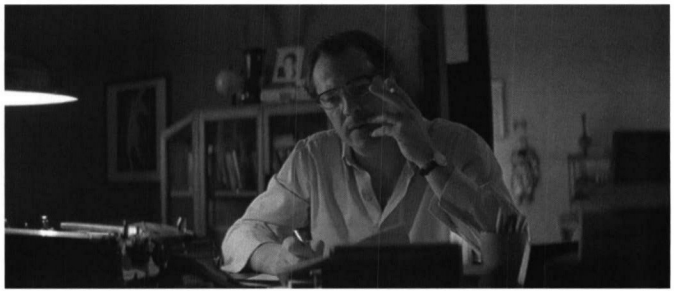
PARALLELS AND IRONIES IN *THE LIVES OF OTHERS*

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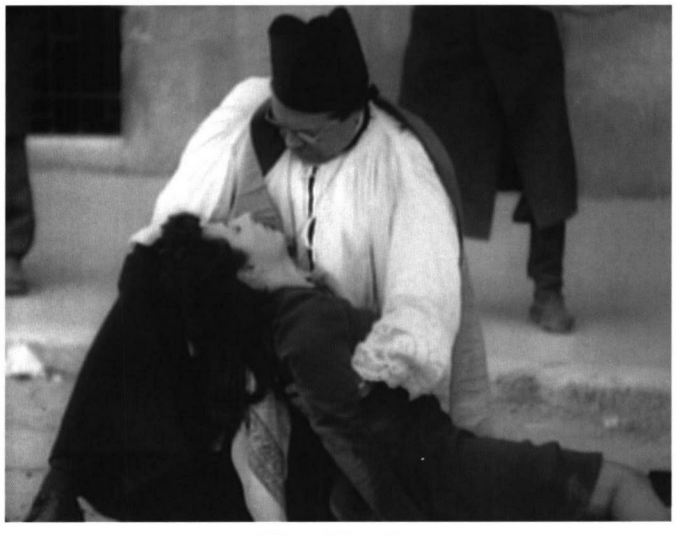

Echoes of *Open City* Top: © Wiedemann & Berg Filmproduktion. DVD: Buena Vista Home Entertainment (Germany) Bottom: © 1946 Mayer-Burstyn Inc. DVD: Arrow Films (U.K.)

for the first time is writing non-fiction; Weisler for the first time is writing utter fiction in his surveillance journals, creating scenes for a non-existent play. They have exchanged their genre specialties.

By this point, the Hitchcockian thrill of suspense in *The Lives of Others*, and the more complicated hierarchy of knowledge, is in full throttle. Wiesler even personally removes the incriminating typewriter from Dreyman's apartment before Grubitz can find it. Grubitz learns of its whereabouts from Siedel; he pulls her in for questioning, and she crumbles at the threat of losing her career and her supply of pills (Hempf wants her blacklisted for no longer sleeping with him). But not even Wiesler's extraordinary interventions can prevent Siedel—full of self-disgust after she has betrayed Dreyman over the article—from walking into the street to be hit by a truck. She has suffered the loss of hope that led Jerska to suicide, the very subject of Dreyman's piece. Siedel's death is the most surprising development in the entire film, and it registers as a genuinely sorrowful moment. It is as shocking in its way as the sudden killing of Pina (Anna Magnani) in Rossellini's *Open City* (1945), and just as ironic. Pina's fiancé is freed from Nazi capture in the very next scene. Siedel is unaware that Wiesler, their guardian angel, has nullified her betrayal by removing the typewriter. These echoes of Rossellini's film also connect the cinematic Stasi's ruthlessness to that of the cinematic Nazis; here they oppress their own citizens, rather than those of a former ally.

The character of Siedel is something of a stumbling block in the film; she is an insecure, pill-addicted actress who is willing to sleep with the Minister (and even Grubitz) to sustain her career. The film suggests all women are susceptible to Stasi collaboration via a subplot involving Dreyman's next-door neighbor, whom we see Wiesler deftly intimidate into silence after she accidentally sees his crew wiring Dreyman's apartment. With Siedel's multiple betrayals—sexual, political—she has far more to hide from Dreyman than he does from her. Is she simply a weak, selfish bourgeoise who wants her lover to wear ties? When Grubitz rewards her cooperation by slipping a vial of pills into her coat, I thought of another parallel with *Open City*'s all-controlling Nazi officers: the flighty Marina (Maria Michi) in *Open City*, who betrays her resistance fighter ex-lover Manfredi (Marcello Pagilero),

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thereby earning a dose of cocaine and the brief possession of a fur coat. But Sieland has a far stronger conscience. After each of her rendezvous with Hempf, and after her two interrogations in which she betrays Dreyman, she immediately goes into the shower to try to wash her sins away. She has just showered and is still in her bathrobe when she kills herself.

It is interesting to consider what *The Lives of Others* would look like had its heroine been less helpless. (Her opposite number might be Rachel Stein [Carice Van Houten], the Jewish, protean resistance fighter heroine of Paul Verhoeven's *Black Book* [2006], who also prostitutes herself—specifically sleeping with an SS commandant, the disillusioned Ludwig Muntze [Koch again] for the cause. Where Stein can play any role in the service of her cause—and with the threat of death hanging over her—Sieland seems incapable of pretense whenever she is off stage, in the face of losing her career.) As it is, Dreyman and his male friends never display Sieland's weaknesses—they remain upright throughout the film. Still, Sieland reminds Dreyman (and us) that he too is "in bed" with the party officials, the ultimate puppeteers.

Experts have objected that the film romanticizes Wiesler. Timothy Garton Ash, for example, writes in the *New York Review of Books* that although he had heard of Stasi agents growing disenchanted and even a very few protecting their marks, he found Wiesler's screen transformation implausible: "It would take more than the odd sonata and Brecht poem to thaw the driven puritan we are shown at the beginning." Certainly, von Donnersmarck's script follows a conventional treatment of character awakening and conversion to a more humane consciousness; indeed, much of the film's appeal resides in that change. But such criticisms ignore how carefully von Donnersmarck and Mühe (whose subtle, almost impassive performance is astonishing) portray progressive stages in Wiesler's transformation; it is hardly quick and facile. Early on, we see Wiesler in his desolate modern apartment (an unmotivated camera pan to his empty living room again echoes a comparable scene with Harry Caul [Gene Hackman] in Coppola's film) where he eats alone in front of the state-controlled news broadcast. (The entire color scheme of this very dark film contrasts the desaturated, sterile, dull hues of Wiesler's modern apartment and Stasi offices with the warmer colors of Dreyman's older Berlin apartment, with high ceilings and paneled walls.) After some time on his new assignment, Wiesler craves companionship. His sex with a house-calling prostitute is brief, and she immediately prepares to go to her next appointment. Suddenly, Wiesler's solitary existence, but also the precision of his operations—twenty minutes to wire Dreyman's flat; upbraiding his assistant for being four or five minutes late—boomerangs against him. He later even has cause to regret his aide's appearance (finally) on time for his shift—since it means Wiesler and we can no longer hear Dreyman continue to try to deter Sieland from meeting Hempf again.

Later still, a bouncing ball precedes a boy (recalling Hansl in *The Third Man* [1949]) into Wiesler's building elevator (another contrast with the playwright: we previously saw Dreyman play soccer with neighborhood kids). When the boy reveals that his father suspects Wiesler to be a Stasi agent and "a bad man," Wiesler instinctively demands to know the name of the child's ... ball. Wiesler must make a conscious effort to avoid seeking out "enemies" of the state. He later hears Dreyman and Hauser plan to test for surveillance in Dreyman's apartment by sneaking Hauser across the East-West Berlin border. The listening Wiesler instinctively calls the border authorities to report this scheme, but then hangs up, muttering under his breath, "Just this once, my friend." Old habits die hard. He even comes to Grubitz's office as if to inform on Dreyman (he holds a report in his hand), but changes his mind. By the time Wiesler is forced to quiz Sieland on the whereabouts of Dreyman's typewriter, the master interrogator who instructed his class on how to break down an "arrogant" enemy of the state, must now, under the suspicious eyes of Grubitz, subject the frail actress he admires and has protected to his best questioning techniques.

Most of all, Wiesler's transformation is the central piece of evidence in Dreyman's debate with Hempf: people can and do change. So do countries. That change—life in Eastern Berlin after the wall comes down—is shown in the coda of *The Lives of Others*. Dreyman, still in mourning for Sieland and no longer state-sponsored, has not written in years. He is shocked to learn from the deposed and unhappy Hempf that in fact he was under *total* surveillance. A visit to the Stasi archives, with its surveillance files now available to any citizen, enables Dreyman to realize that an Agent HGW/XX17 not only monitored his apartment, but actively protected him.

So the tables are turned briefly as Dreyman works to track Wiesler down, finding him as he walks desolately on his postman's rounds. Yet, rather than accost and personally thank Wiesler, Dreyman gets back in his cab and goes home. In the film's final scene, Wiesler discovers, in an empty mega-bookstore, that Dreyman has written a book, *Sonata for a Good Man*, which is dedicated "with gratitude" to "Agent HGW/XX17." For the first time in the film, the hierarchy of knowledge among the major characters is level; for the first time, Wiesler half-smiles.

Yet, this ending is somewhat surprising. We might wonder why Dreyman doesn't approach Wiesler and thank him

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Ulrich Mühe as Gerd Wiesler. Photo: Hagen Keller. © 2006 Sony Pictures Entertainment Inc.

personally for all his acts of kindness when he finds him. Perhaps it is because he recognizes that no words of gratitude would be adequate to the occasion. But is this resolution meant to suggest that Dreyman must maintain the voyeur's distance in order to overcome his writer's block and compose his tribute to—his "report" on—this good man? Or that the voyeur's distance is still necessary, after the GDR and Stasi are gone, for gratitude to thrive? More significantly, as Garton Ash suggests, labeling Wiesler a "good man" for his one instance of humane behavior minimizes our reckoning with the many cruel acts he previously and unthinkingly performed for the Stasi. It throws off kilter the moral scheme of the film.

Still, the resolution of *The Lives of Others* is intensely satisfying. We are able at last to relax, or to weep (if we have not already done so at Sieland's suicide). This is because von Donnersmarck has succeeded in realizing a harrowing portrayal of life in the dystopia that was the GDR and the "slippery slope" by which one bad man changes course. And if *The Lives of Others* adjudges Wiesler "a good man," it is also because, like Dreyman, von Donnersmarck has a generous capacity for empathy and forgiveness. That, too, is an undeniable source of this film's *Vergangenheitsbewaeltigung*, and its overwhelming impact.

MATTHEW H. BERNSTEIN is *Film Quarterly*'s Book Review Editor and currently chairs the Film Studies Department at Emory University.

ABSTRACT This essay explores the film allusions, plot turns, hierarchies of knowledge, and most of all the multiple ironies that contribute to the extraordinary impact of Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's surveillance thriller set in Communist East Germany.

KEYWORDS German cinema, surveillance, political thriller, von Donnersmarck, communism

CREDITS *Das Leben der Anderen.* Director, screenplay: Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck. Producers: Quirin Berg, Max Wiedemann. Director of photography: Hagen Bogdanski. Editor: Patricia Rommel. Music: Gabriel Yared, Stéphane Moucha. © [2006] Wiedemann & Berg Filmproduktion. DVD: Buena Vista Home Entertainment (Germany).

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