Directed and written by Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck
Produced by Quirin Berg and Max Wiedemann
Original Music by Stéphane Moucha and Gabriel Yared
Cinematography by Hagen Bogdanski
Film Editing by Patricia Rommel

Martina Gedeck...Christa-Maria Sieland
Ulrich Mühe...Hauptmann Gerd Wiesler
Sebastian Koch...Georg Dreyman
Ulrich Tukur..Oberstleutnant Anton Grubitz
Thomas Thieme...Minister Bruno Hempf
Hans-Uwe Bauer...Paul Hauser
Volkmar Kleinert...Albert Jerska
Matthias Brenner...Karl Wallner

Academy Awards, USA 2007 Oscar Best Foreign Language Film of the Year


**Florian Henckel von Donnersmark** (from Yahoo! Movies):

Standing at an imposing 6’8”, German-born director Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck loomed over the 2007 Academy Awards when he won the Best Foreign Film Oscar for his feature debut, “The Lives of Others” (2006), a stark and frightening thriller set in the world of the infamous Stasi, East Germany’s brutal intelligence agency, during the height of the Cold War.

Though born in Cologne, West Germany in 1973, von Donnersmarck journeyed often to the East to visit relatives who lived in constant fear of being spied on and interrogated by Stasi officers. Even his parents failed to escape their reach – both were on a list of suspected traitors to the Communist cause, and his mother was taken away for several hours, strip-searched and humiliated when von Donnersmarck was 8-years old. His father, a Lufthansa Airlines employee, later moved the family to New York City, where von Donnersmarck spent a majority of his childhood and learned to speak excellent English. The rest of his youth was divided between Berlin, Frankfurt and Brussels.

After learning to speak Russian in St. Petersburg when he was 18, von Donnersmarck journeyed to England to attend Oxford University, spending five years studying philosophy, politics and economics with the intention of becoming a novelist. In his last year, Sir Richard Attenborough was at the school, holding a rotating arts professorship. An essay contest was held and von Donnersmarck won. Chosen by the acclaimed actor-director to be a production intern on his film “In Love and War” (1996), a biography about Ernest Hemingway’s experiences as an ambulance driver during World War I, von Donnersmarck began attending Munich Film School where he was forced by his professor to develop 14 original film treatments in the first eight weeks. Von Donnersmarck hit a wall with treatment number 12, throwing him into a chasm of self-doubt over his life’s course.

As he sat listening to a Beethoven piano sonata, von Donnersmark was reminded of a conversation Vladimir Lenin had with Maxim Gorky about Beethoven’s “Appassionata.” Lenin told the author that he could not listen to the opera because it made him want to pet people’s heads and say nice things instead of smashing them to get his revolution. For von Donnersmark, the idea for “The Lives of Others” was born. He spent an hour and a half developing the basic outline of a story about a Stasi officer listening to the lives of two artists considered traitors to the Communist cause, then shelved it for a few years while he continued with film school and made several shorts – including a four-minute exercise on cinematic style called “Dobermann.” Instead of finishing school, however, von Donnersmarck left during his last year so he could begin researching the life and times of East Germany during the Stasi’s long stranglehold.

After a year and half, some of which was spent talking to both victims and the intelligence officers who tormented them, von Donnersmarck visited his uncle, an abbot at a 12 century Cistercian monastery, and spent a month writing the script. With a completed draft in hand, von Donnersmarck began to woo Germany’s top acting talent, including Ulrich Muhe, an East German stage actor who was a prime target of the Stasi. Muhe put von Donnersmarck through the wringer, interviewing the inexperienced director twice to make sure that he was up for the job. The director passed easily and began shooting the film on a $2 million budget, with Muhe portraying an expert interrogator and surveillance officer monitoring the apartment of a playwright (Sebastian Koch) and his actress lover (Martina Gedeck), both of whom are under suspicion for subversive activities. Over time, the Stasi officer becomes immersed in their lives, enamored by their love for art, literature and each other, forcing him to confront – and ultimately reject – his stolid life of ideology.

The film was released in Germany in March 2006, before making the international festival rounds, including the Cannes Film Festival, where Sony Pictures Classics landed the rights for North American distribution. Meanwhile, “The Lives of Others” began raking in the awards – the film earned numerous festival and critics awards, as well as a record seven German Film Awards, including for Best Film, Best Director and Best Screenplay. After winning three European Film Awards – including the top prize for Best European Film – “The Lives of Others” was recognized in the United States by the Hollywood Foreign Press with a 2006 Golden Globe Award for Best Foreign Language Film. Following a win in the Best Foreign Film category at the Independent Spirit Awards, von Donnersmark took home the Big One at the 79th Annual Academy Awards, winning the Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film – much to the surprise of many filmgoers, who believe “Pan’s Labyrinth” (2006) had it locked.

**From John O. Koehler, Stasi: The Untold Story of the East German Secret Police** (Westview):

Less than a month after German demonstrators began to tear down the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989, irate East German citizens...
stormed the Leipzig district office of the Ministry for State Security (MfS)—the Stasi, as it was more commonly called. Not a shot was fired, and there was no evidence of "street justice" as Stasi officers surrendered meekly and were peacefully led away. The following month, on January 15, hundreds of citizens sacked Stasi headquarters in Berlin. Again there was no bloodshed. The last bit of unfinished business was accomplished on May 31 when the Stasi radioed its agents in West Germany to fold their tents and come home.

The intelligence department of the Nationale Volksarmee (NVA), the People's Army, had done the same almost a week earlier, but with what its members thought was better style. Instead of sending the five-digit code groups that it had used for decades to message its spies in West Germany, the army group broadcast a male choir singing a children's ditty about a duck swimming on a lake. There was no doubt that the singing spymasters had been drowning their sorrow over losing the Cold War in schnapps. The giggling, word-slurring songsters repeated the refrain three times: "Dunk your little head in the water and lift your little tail." This was the signal to agents under deep cover that it was time to come home.

With extraordinary speed and political resolve, the divided nation was reunified a year later. The collapse of the despotic regime was total. It was a euphoric time for Germans, but reunification also produced a new national dilemma. Nazi war crimes were still being tried in West Germany, forty-six years after World War II. Suddenly the German government was faced with demands that the communist officials who had ordered, executed, and abetted crimes against their own people—crimes that were as brutal as those perpetrated by their Nazi predecessors—also be prosecuted.

The people of the former Deutsche Demokratische Republik (DDR), the German Democratic Republic, as the state had called itself for forty years, were clamoring for instant revenge. Their wrath was directed primarily against the country's communist rulers—the upper echelon of the Sozialistische Einheitspartei (SED), the Socialist Unity Party. The tens of thousands of second-echelon party functionaries who had enriched themselves at the expense of their co-citizens were also prime targets for retribution.

Particularly singled out were the former members of the Stasi, the East German secret police, who previously had considered themselves the "shield and sword" of the party. When the regime collapsed, the Stasi had 102,000 full-time officers and noncommissioned personnel on its rolls, including 11,000 members of the ministry's own special guards regiment. Between 1950 and 1989, a total of 274,000 persons served in the Stasi.

The people's ire was running equally strong against the regular Stasi informers, the inoffizielle Mitarbeiter (IMs). By 1995, 174,000 had been identified as IMs, or 2.5 percent of the total population between the ages of 18 and 60. Researchers were aghast when they found that about 10,000 IMs, or roughly 6 percent of the total, had not yet reached the age of 18. Since many records were destroyed, the exact number of IMs probably will never be determined; but 500,000 was cited as a realistic figure. Former Colonel Rainer Wiegand, who served in the Stasi counterintelligence directorate, estimated that the figure could go as high as 2 million, if occasional stool pigeons were included.

"The Stasi was much, much worse than the Gestapo, if you consider only the oppression of its own people," according to Simon Wiesenthal of Vienna, Austria, who has been hunting Nazi criminals for half a century. "The Gestapo had 40,000 officials watching a country of 80 million, while the Stasi employed 102,000 to control only 17 million." One might add that the Nazi terror lasted only twelve years, whereas the Stasi had four decades in which to perfect its machinery of oppression, espionage, and international terrorism and subversion.

To ensure that the people would become and remain submissive, East German communist leaders saturated their realm with more spies than had any other totalitarian government in recent history. The Soviet Union's KGB employed about 480,000 full-time agents to oversee a nation of 280 million, which means there was one agent per 5,830 citizens. Using Wiesenthal's figures for the Nazi Gestapo, there was one officer for 2,000 people. The ratio for the Stasi was one secret policeman per 166 East Germans. When the regular informers are added, these ratios become much higher: In the Stasi's case, there would have been at least one spy watching every 66 citizens! When one adds in the estimated numbers of part-time snoopers, the result is nothing short of monstrous: one informer per 6.5 citizens. It would not have been unreasonable to assume that at least one Stasi informer was present in any party of ten or twelve dinner guests.

THE STASI OCTOPUS

Like a giant octopus, the Stasi's tentacles probed every aspect of life. Full-time officers were posted to all major industrial plants. Without exception, one tenant in every apartment building was designated as a watchdog reporting to an area representative of the Volkspolizei (Vopo), the People's Police. In turn, the police officer was the Stasi's man. If a relative or friend came to stay overnight, it was reported. Schools, universities, and hospitals were infiltrated from top to bottom. German academe was shocked to learn that Heinrich Fink, professor of theology and vice chancellor at East Berlin's Humboldt University, had been a Stasi informer since 1968. After Fink's Stasi connections came to light, he was summarily fired. Doctors, lawyers, journalists, writers, actors, and sports figures were co-opted by Stasi officers, as were waiters and hotel personnel. Tapping about 100,000 telephone lines in West Germany and West Berlin around the clock was the job of 2,000 officers.

Stasi officers knew no limits and had no shame when it came to "protecting the party and the state." Churchmen, including high officials of both Protestant and Catholic denominations, were recruited en masse as secret informers. Their offices and professional circles were infested with eavesdropping devices. Even the director of Leipzig's famous Thomas Church choir, Hans-Joachim Rotch, was forced to resign when he was unmasked as a Spitzel, the people's pejorative for a Stasi informant.
Absolutely nothing was sacred to the secret police. Tiny holes were bored in apartment and hotel room walls through which Stasi agents filmed their “suspects” with special video cameras. Even bathrooms were penetrated by the communist voyeurs. Like the Nazi Gestapo, the Stasi was the sinister side of deutsche Gründlichkeit (German thoroughness).

After the Berlin wall came down, the victims of the DDR regime demanded immediate retribution. Ironically, their demands were countered by their fellow Germans in the West who, living in freedom, had diligently built einen demokratischen Rechtsstaat, a democratic state governed by the rule of law. The challenge of protecting the rights of both the victims and the accused was immense, given the emotions surrounding the issue. Government leaders and democratic politicians recognized that there could be no “quick fix” of communist injustices without jeopardizing the entire system of democratic jurisprudence. Moving too rapidly merely to satisfy the popular thirst for revenge might well have resulted in acquittals or mistrials. Intricate jurisdictional questions needed to be resolved with both alacrity and meticulousness. No German government could afford to allow a perpetrator to go free because of a judicial error. The political fallout from any such occurrence, especially in the East, could prove fatal to whatever political party occupied the chancellor’s office in Bonn at the time.

Politicians and legal scholars of the “old federal states,” or West Germany, counseled patience, pointing out that even the prosecution of Nazi criminals had not yet been completed. Before unification, Germans would speak of Vergangenheitsbewältigung ("coming to grips with the past") when they discussed dealing with Nazi crimes. In the reunited Germany, this word came to imply the communist past as well. The two were considered comparable especially in the area of human rights violations. Dealing with major Nazi crimes, however, was far less complicated for the Germans: Adolf Hitler and his Gestapo and Schutzstaffel (SS) chief, Heinrich Himmler, killed themselves, as did Luftwaffe chief and Vice Chancellor Hermann Göring, who also had been the first chief of the Gestapo. The victorious Allies prosecuted the rest of the top leadership at the International War Crimes Tribunal in Nürnberg. Twelve were hanged, three received life terms, four were sentenced to lesser terms of imprisonment (up to twenty years), and three were acquitted.

The cases of communist judges and prosecutors accused of Rechtsbeugung (perversion of justice) are more problematic. According to Franco Werkenthin, a Berlin legal expert charged with analyzing communist crimes for the German parliament, those sitting in judgment of many of the accused face a difficult task because of the general failure of German justice after World War II. Not a single judge or prosecutor who served the Nazi regime was brought to account for having perverted justice—even those who had handed down death sentences for infringements that in a democracy would have been considered relatively minor offenses. Werkenthin called this phenomenon die Jauche der Justiz, the cesspool of justice.

Of course, the crimes committed by the communists were not nearly as heinous as the Nazis’ extermination of the Jews, or the mass murders in Nazi-occupied territories. However, the communists’ brutal oppression of the nation by means including murder alongside legal execution put the SED leadership on a par with Hitler’s gang. In that sense, Walter Ulbricht or Erich Honecker (Ulbricht’s successor as the party’s secretary-general and head of state) and secret police chief Erich Mielke can justifiably be compared to Hitler and Himmler, respectively.

From The Evening Class.blogspot.com/2007/01/das-leben-der-anderen-lives-of.html
Michael Guillén. Das Leben der Anderen/ The Lives of Others—The Evening Class Interview with Florian Henckel Von Donnersmarck. Saturday, January 20, 2007 [before the Oscar nomination and win]

Florian Henckel Von Donnersmarck is a lean, tall, drink of wasser. Door lintels prove a hazardous proposition for this 6’9” fellow who arrived apologetically late to out interview at the Ritz Carlton, having had to wolf down lunch, a customary practice, I presume, on out-of-town press junkets. I didn’t mind waiting. His English was impeccable, his sense of humor intact, and his intelligence ready and willing to engage. After the usual introductions and niceties, we joked about how the success of The Lives of Others has brought us both to the Ritz Carlton. Otherwise, he joked, had the film not done so well he might have ended up in a youth hostel where I might not have been convinced to hook up with him.

Michael Guillén: So much has been written and said about The Lives of Others both in Europe and Stateside—and most of it quite favorable….What I wanted to explore with you this morning—not being a film critic myself—is some of the negative criticism the film has received, because I’m personally interested in how you refute your detractors.

Donnersmarck: Okay.

Guillén: One of your most eloquent opponents is Australian writer Anna Funder, author of the 2004 study Stasiland, who basically claims that the central premise of your film—that Stasi agent Capt. Gerd Wiesler (Ulrich Mühe) “turns” and changes for the good—is an absurd fiction that is morally weird.

Donnersmarck: I didn’t know that. When did she write that?

Guillén: She was quoted in Geoffrey Mac Nab’s article in The Independent earlier this month. Funder arms herself with the fact that former head of the Stasi File Authority, Joachim Gauck, has asserted that the records of the Stasi show no such thing ever happened. She suggests no self-respecting Stasi officer would have exhibited pity for his victims and points out that none have shown any remorse after the wall has fallen. She expresses reservations about what purpose is served by depicting
a Stasi officer who behaves honorably? She pointedly asks: “Of course a movie can give us psychological satisfactions that real life can’t—the happy end, or, as here, the change of heart. I think it is a terrific movie, but I am deeply uncomfortable about this rotten core. How would we feel about an equally terrific movie made in the early 1960s, which showed the change of heart, redemption and comeuppance of a Gestapo agent? whose interests does this serve?” How do you respond to Funder’s reservations?

Donnersmarck: There are many people who write about the Stasi who haven’t really researched it very thoroughly and who don’t know that much about it. Coming to look at this, it seems to me that she’s also one of these people who voice opinions before they’ve really looked into something. If she looked further into it, for example, she would see that precisely the man she’s quoting—Joachim Gauck—was one of the first people to actually write a large article over several pages about the film in Der Stern saying that—the caption above it, the title of the article was “This Is Exactly The Way Things Were”, Ja, so war es!—it was actually his very offices that gave me several documents of cases that had shocking similarities to what went on there. There was, for example, one case of a captain of the same rank as Wiesler, Werner Teske, who in 1981 just a few years before this film [was set] was caught by his superior looking into files that were none of his business. His superior said to him, the only way you can still save your position is by saying everything that’s on your mind and why you’ve been looking into [these files] and so on. They did this little court case against [Teske], which was actually tape-recorded, which the Gauk Archives found, and they gave me this tape recording of this trial. The Stasi had this crazy thing that they recorded everything! It was one of those weird things. It was like an obsession that they had. In this recording you [hear Teske] who, for some reason, took what his superior told him at face value. I don’t know. Maybe he just had to get out of his soul all his doubts and reservations about his job and about the system and about the things he found out about the file and how he was even thinking of somehow getting out of the country. Through all this material a very sympathetic character emerges who you can’t help but like, although I was surprised to find him quite naïve for a Stasi officer. After that, just from the material they got from this [trial], they condemned him to be executed. He was shot in the back of the head at short range in 1981; one of the last documented cases of a disloyal Stasi agent being assassinated. There was also another case actually that only came up quite recently that I didn’t even know [about] while I was researching the case. Have you heard of Wolf Biermann?

Guillén: The East German poet?

Donnersmarck: Exactly. He had several Stasi agents-many more than my fictitious writer Georg Dreymon—who were assigned to him. Der Spiegel wrote an article about this when they reported on this film because those documents had just become known. One of his Stasi agents was so impressed with Biermann’s character that he started writing poetry himself and founded a group of Stasi agents [laughs] and they would meet once a week and read each other their terrible poems, I mean really terrible stuff, but still they were trying to express true feeling because they were so inspired by Biermann! At the same time, I don’t even like to enumerate all the cases of those rare rare rare cases where Stasi agents betrayed their own system because I think that would, indeed, put the wrong stress. I’m only telling you this now because someone who should know better like Anna Funder is coming up with wrong facts. I don’t like to use that [material] because I don’t want to give the impression that, oh wow, the Stasi were actually the good guys, quite the contrary. Why I am telling the story of The Lives of Others is to show people how they could behave given such a situation. And these situations will arise again. You don’t have to have an absolute dictatorial system. It can be within the confines of school, or a hierarchical business organization, or whatever, that we will have the chance to display a similar kind of heroism—to put it simply—as [Wiesler] is displaying. It makes it too easy for people in criminal organizations like the Stasi or the Gestapo if you say that—once you’re a member of that group—that’s it, you’ve lost your humanity, you’re morally dead, it’s over, there’s no possibility for you to redeem yourself. You can always change your ways. It’s much harder when you’re in an organization like [the Stasi]], which is why a character like [Wiesler] deserves so much admiration. Which is also why I was pretty angry when people accused Steven Spielberg [of humanizing Nazis]. They said, “Look at all those millions of Germans who behaved like monsters and you choose the one good German, Schindler, to make the film about.” But I think that is still the right approach because it is exactly these people that we should be looking at and saying, “This is how you could behave and don’t you be forgetting that.” That’s important and it’s very shortsighted to consider that a “rotten core.”

Guillén: I’m glad you mention Wolf Biermann. I felt his write-up of your film for Die Welt, translated into English for Sign and Sight, was one of the most interesting in that he sat down with other dissidents to watch your film. He wrote, this was factually wrong and this was factually wrong and this was factually wrong, BUT...

Donnersmarck: They were pretty wrong about many of those facts, as well, though.

Guillén: Still, as a true poet, he was forgiving for what he saw to be your factual inaccuracies—whether you agree they were inaccurate or not—and caught the spirit of what you were trying to express. He felt The Lives of Others conveyed things to him that he never could have imagined “being real.” He even conceded—rather generously I thought—that, yes, “we are all addicted to evidence of people’s ability to change for the good.” That brings me, by contrast, to Scott Foundas’ review in the L.A. Weekly. I don’t know if you’ve read his review?

Donnersmarck: I’ve read that, yeah.

Guillén: Here we have a less obliging critique. I respect Scott Foundas and his writing, but, had several issues with this particular review, not the least of which—if I’m understanding him correctly—is his disdain for sentimentalized heroics as some throwaway technique of old Hollywood. Let alone his acrid view of the potential of human nature (he wrote you have “an unwavering belief in the essential goodness of mankind, despite so much evidence to the contrary”). Granted, that the dramatized heroism of Weisler in The Lives of Others seems to be in direct counterpoint to the pared-down aesthetics of the so-called Die Berliner Schule, do you feel that the heroism you represented in The Lives of Others is old style? Out of date? Sentimental revisionism?
Donnersmarck: I must say I find it more problematic if someone sees the film like Anna Funder who wrote Stasiland because I disagree with that fundamental view of mankind. Scott Foundas’ review was completely contradictory in itself because he claimed I was saying these people were just following orders—[“Remember those Stasi? They Weren’t So Bad After All”]—and that I looked at [those days] with “dewy-eyed nostalgia.” I remember that expression. That’s something no one has ever said. The idea that I was heroizing people who were just following orders. I was heroizing the one person who stopped following orders. That’s precisely what I’m doing. I’m doing the exact contrary of what Foundas is accusing me of. If you stop following orders, that may be the way out of that terrible misery. Now he says my next film will be about the people who were so great because they followed Hitler’s orders? That’s weird. I just thought that was very strange. But I know that type of critic very well. They see, “Oh no, everybody else is writing something positive about [this film]; I’m not going to be part of that herd. I’ll write something different! I’ll be original.” But that’s terrible because, at the end of the day, it’s not as if consensus is something necessarily bad. If that were the case, then a film like Godfather Pt. 2 would be a really bad film because everybody agrees that that’s a great film. I thought it was too bad if a critic writes a review out of some kind of weird vanity of wanting to be the only one going against the stream and ruining my Rotten Tomatoes score in the go…. [Laughs]

Guillén: well, I can appreciate if a critic doesn’t like something most others like and feels compelled to express his point of view—though it does seem a bit like unnecessarily butting your head against a wall—but, my main objection against the review was a felt one when Foundas wrote, “And judging by the film’s success in Germany and its enthusiastic reception at this year’s Telluride and Toronto film festivals, it’s a good bet that many moviegoers will feel similarly moved.” As if, again—like you’re saying—consensus is a dirty word. Such a posed distance between critic and audience seems hazardously petulant.

Donnersmarck: Having said that, I was treated as well by critics as anybody could possibly hope to be. I’d really almost put it in absolute terms that there’s not one single critic—certainly not in Europe, I don’t know about all the American ones (although my Rotten Tomatoes score is pretty good; that’s the only negative review I got, from Scott Foundas)—but, any really serious newspaper—the kind of newspaper that would be read by educated people—gave me incredibly positive reviews. Not one exception. Normally, and very often, they had several articles by let’s say a novelist or another filmmaker, or by a [bona fide] film critic, and they would explore it from different angles, or a third [angle] by a political [analyst]. Also, The Lives of Others did incredibly well at the European Film Awards, where you’re voted upon by your peers and filmmakers, so it would be wrong and distorting to say it’s an audience pleaser but critics consider me immoral or that the film has an immoral theme. That’s not the case at all. Some people take it like that, but fortunately they’re rare and I think that the people who like the film have better arguments than the people who don’t.

I don’t think that’s always the case. For example, I like Downfall. I thought it was a good film. I can understand very much the arguments of people who criticize it for certain things. That doesn’t change my opinion. I find that there were more attacks of Downfall than there were of [my film] but I found them slightly more founded and they’re the kind of [criticisms] that did make me think a little bit, whereas the attacks I’ve received on this film—which weren’t many—didn’t really make me think because they were not thought through to the end.

Guillén: The challenge of your film for me—moreso the first time I saw the film than the second (because I liked it better the second time than the first)—was that I was wrestling with the believability of Wiesler’s conversion the first time I saw The Lives of Others, but the second time I was more willing to accept it; I think because I appreciated the subtleties in Ulrich Mühe’s performance more and accepted his gradual change. So it seems to come down to this issue of whether it’s credible that someone can change like that and, clearly, you have stated that—in effect—they can. For me it returns to the satisfaction of believing they can. Actually Wiesler’s transformation reminded me of fireman Guy Montag’s transformation in Ray Bradbury’s Fahrenheit 451, cinematically rendered by Francois Truffaut. Are you familiar with the novel and the film?

Donnersmarck: I saw Truffaut’s Fahrenheit 451 as a kid so I don’t remember it completely but I think it was considerably less realistic in what it was trying to do. It considered itself more a parable, right? The entire production design, and the way it was acted, it was not something that was supposed to be directly believable. It was just to make you think. It was almost a cautionary tale. I don’t see The Lives of Others as a cautionary tale in that way.

Guillén: I guess the analogy I’m drawing is that, what precipitates the moral change in your character was the music and the emotional authenticity of the lives he was observing, much like literature kickstarted Montag’s transformation. Though it’s probably simplistic to presume that art alone could motivate such a change, and if I recall correctly Foundas likewise took objection to that.

Donnersmarck: I do think that it is believable that people would change even like that. I have seen people change. Even just the very thing that made me have the idea to write The Lives of Others can almost serve as proof that [change] could happen like that. That is, this quote from Lenin to his friend Maxim Gorky. I actually recently found the quote in the Russian original on
Wikiquotes. Do you know that page? They have the quote there in the Russian original. I only had the German book version of it but I spent two years in Russia so I always felt I should at some point find it in Russian. I always looked for it and I could never find that exact book and then suddenly I found it on Wikiquotes. Lenin said to his friend Maxim Gorky, “Beethoven’s Appasionata is my favorite piece of music but I’m not going to listen to it anymore because, if I do, it makes me want to stroke people’s heads and tell them nice, stupid things, and I have to smash those heads, smash them in without mercy, to bring my revolution to an end. So I’m just not going to listen to it anymore.” I thought that was a really amazing testament and tribute to the power of art. And art is only one of the things that makes my character change in The Lives of Others. It’s not just because of Brecht and Beethoven (or in The Lives of Others Gabriel Yared) that he changes. It’s also because he realizes his sacred mission is being used to satisfy a high politician’s sex urges; the arbitrary use of power. He sees that his true belief in this whole system actually makes him a bit of an alien among these people who are using it pragmatically and cynically. And that his friend, Lt. Grubitz (Ulrich Yukur), who was always a little bit less intelligent and a little less loyal than he was, is also having a bigger and better career.

Guillén: That’s actually what made Wiesler’s transformation more believable for me on the second viewing. The first time I was linking it more to the music and the eavesdropping. The second time it did seem to be more about a betrayal to his—as you call it—“sacred mission.” Maybe that’s why I went with it more the second time.

Donnersmarck: It’s like a mid-life crisis. We’ve probably all come close to experiencing something like that where everything seems to be pushing us into a direction of values different than the ones we’ve been embracing all our lives. A mid-life crisis is something that can actually happen. It’s the kind of thing that can make a Catholic priest who’s spent all his life obeying those rules suddenly go haywire. It’s also something that can make a mafia boss go soft and seek a therapist. Or which can make a father want to leave his family. But it’s never one single thing. It’s always an accumulation of things. That’s why I wanted the change in the film to actually start with the film. I wanted it to begin pretty much from the beginning and for there to never be an actual turning point because that is something that all the books on screenwriting say: if there’s any change in character, there has to be a clearly-identified turning point. Even the old Greeks would go on about that. But I think it’s wrong because, unless there’s a divine intervention, I don’t think things happen like Saul who turns into Paul from one day to the next. This day I’m killing Christians and the next day I am one. It doesn’t happen like that. I mean, sometimes it does happen like that. I know that from this whole born-again Christian thing. Suddenly they’ll tout some former Nazi or abortionist or something like that and say, “Now look! This person is now the greatest advocate of our cause and believes in Jesus Christ and embraced us.” Normally, about a year afterwards, they’re not talking about him anymore at all because he went back to his old life. When these things happen it’s like a dislocated joint; it’ll pop back in eventually.

If there’s something which you know has been pushing your door outs from all sides all the time, it would be very hard to change back. A thing which actually happened to Mikhail Gorbachev. This is someone whom, during my studies, I actually got to spend some time with. While I was studying at Oxford, he came there in 1993 to teach and—since I was one of the few students who spoke good Russian—I was in charge of leading him around town. He is someone who cried bitter tears at Stalin’s death, thinking this was the end of the world. And he ended up becoming the fiercest anti-Stalinist in history. That guy did undergo that kind of change. He was a real ideologue. But it didn’t happen from one day to the next. It did not. If Yuri Andropov hadn’t died so soon, I actually think he was on a similar path. These things do happen.

Guillén: Well, you could even seek precedent with Heraclitus and promote entantiodromia, which basically says that any stonily-based conviction contains its reversal. Something will always gradually become its opposite the more you go into it.

Donnersmarck: I’m not so familiar with that.

Guillén: I can speak from my own experience. I’ve worked my whole adult life in the legal field and finally reached a disjuncture where I felt there was something morally questionable about law enforcement.

Donnersmarck: [Laughs] I could see where you’d reach that.

Guillén: That was another thing that helped me relate to this film. I could see that such a change could happen because it happened to me. That’s why I’ve been so curious about the people who don’t like the film and how they seem to aim at the credibility, the authenticity, or the truth of Wiesler’s conversion. But even Wolf Biermann was so eloquent about how he understood your film when he said you can go through all the facts but they might not document the truth as well as a piece of fiction.

Donnersmarck: Thee great thing about fiction is fiction—when done well—is truer than fact. It’s truer than a true story. The word for fiction in German—dichtung—actually means density. It’s actually the same word. It’s the word for fiction and poetry at the same time. Of course you somehow have to make things more dense in fiction, you can make them more dense in fiction, ideally you do, and you’re encapsulating much more than the arbitrary qualities of a very dense reality. After seeing something like The Deerhunter, I’ve understood more about the Vietnam War, although of course that story is completely fictional, much more so than The Lives of Others, but still it captures the essence of something. Even for people who were in the Vietnam War and didn’t end up playing Russian roulette there, The Deerhunter still expressed something they felt. The same way the Vietnam veterans said The Deerhunter expressed what they felt, the great writers of East Germany—not just Biermann—wrote fantastic pieces about how The Lives of Others captured their experience in essence.

This is the beauty of fiction. A film like Dr. Zhivago makes me understand things about the Russian Revolution. Gone With the Wind makes me understand great aspects of what the people in the South were fighting for; it gives me a feel for that era, for the conflict of the times, and because it is so real, and so specific, and so true, has relevance for my present life today because—at the end of the day when you get to the true fundamental human emotions like love, fear, invasion of privacy and what that does to you—we can go to these [fictions] and we all know them from our lives. Tell me one person here in America who doesn’t know what it feels like to be under surveillance from the Stasi. We all know...
what it feels like. If you’ve had strict parents, you know what it feels like. If you’ve ever had an asshole boss, you know what it feels like. These are universal things. These are things that haven’t disappeared in Germany just with the disappearance of the Stasi and they’re in existence here [in the States] as well, although there never was a Stasi and this has always been a democratic country.

Donnersmarck—THE LIVES OF OTHERS—8

A Conversation with Writer-Director Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck


The first idea with the whole dramatic structure I had in about one evening,” states the filmmaker. “Then I researched for over one-and-a-half years before starting to write the actual screenplay, wanting to be sure I had all the details right. In a way, writing a good screenplay is all about the details, you have to make sure you are absorbing all of those correctly."...

“When somebody asks me what do you want people to go away thinking about your [work], I think they expect me to say things like, ‘communism is all evil’ or ‘constant surveillance is bad,’ but things like that are all secondary. What I really want people to go away thinking is that life is pretty interesting experience after all, and even because it is all just one crazy ride it is still better to take that life-ride than it is to kill yourself. [Life] is such a rich experience, it is so multifaceted, and the only way to find that out it to take the ride.”

As von Donnersmarck brings up the concept of voyeurism, I can’t help but wonder if he thinks a person can be a professional watcher of other people’s lives and not come away at least partially changed by what they’ve seen. “That’s interesting,” ponders the director. “I think it is possible somehow to forcefully shut off parts of your soul, but I also think it’s very risky. Wolf Biermann, who is this great European poet, found out from his Stasi files there was an officer monitoring him that was so impressed by his poems that he started writing poetry himself. He even founded this group of Stasi people who wrote poems and gathered once a week to read each other their terrible [poetry].”

We laugh for a moment about this before con Donnersmarck continues in a more serious tone of voice. “But in the same [vein] I think it also works in a quite terrible way. I have a friend who, in Germany, runs a charity that tries to combat child pornography on the internet. They have discovered that there is this crazy phenomenon that the policemen who investigate [this], just by searching for this material, become addicted to it and have to be changed to a different position after a few months. It’s a very strange thing, and what you live and [observe] in close proximity with will influence you, both in the good and in the bad.”

“I think that is why you have to be so very very careful with what you associate yourself with. I think there will always be some kind of osmosis which is why, strangely, I have almost no art in my house because I cannot afford the kind of art that I would want osmosis to be happening with. I would rather have a wall painted in a color that I find beautiful than to have osmosis going on between some piece of second rate art and me. I wouldn’t want that to influence me, so I’ll only start buying stuff when I can really afford the things that I like.”

This whole conversation can’t help but make me wonder what it is that does actually influence the filmmaker, a question which leads me to the subject of Francis Ford Coppola and The Conversation. “I did watch The Conversation before making the film,” answers von Donnersmarck, “but only after writing the screenplay.” A friend commented that I should watch [it] because Coppola has so many interesting ways of how you visually portray a listener and I did learn a little bit from [his] blocking (which I usually think is masterful, even in movies like Peggy Sue Got Married which the director doesn’t even like himself but I enjoy).”

“But, then, I tend to take Coppola very seriously as a master of this medium. That’s not to say I like everything. I’m not a huge fan of Apocalypse Now, but I do like The Godfather films quite a bit, and I like a few of his other [pictures], and I do like The Conversation quite a bit, but I can’t say that he or his movie were a big influence for me on this. I don’t know...what do you think has influenced me?”

Not used to being tested by my interview subjects, it’s now my turn to squeeze a bit in my seat, my Coach purse slipping from my shoulder and onto the floor unleashing a mess of note cards, makeup and jingling change for me to clean up in embarrassment. In-between his stifled giggles I mention how much The Lives of Others recalled for me some of the more intimately human works of Ingmar Bergman and Billy Wilder, how the picture has some of the same unavoidable cadences of The Conversation.

“That’s true, especially the Wilder comment,” answers von Donnersmarck. “I hadn’t thought of that. It is interesting; in a way I do feel a kinship with Billy Wilder. With him there is something very strange [in his films] about how he tries to explore moral questions, although you can feel through his whole way that he finds it incredibly hard to judge people. I’m just like that. I’m sure there would be some justification to judge people for whatever it is they do but I find it really hard to do so. I can understand so many extremes, an acceptance of human nature and the ability to find it funny, sad, and touching what it is that they do, and I think that is something which is also present in all of Wilder’s films.”

His answer brought up a few points I hadn’t even considered when I thought of the comparison, mainly the realization that, like Wilder’s best, von Donnersmarck’s picture refuses to judge its characters, letting the audience make up their own mind for themselves. “And I’m glad you say that,” responds the filmmaker immediately, “because that was very important to me. I always say when you enter a film, and I feel that someone is force-
feeling my moral position, it really irritates me. If I can feel the filmmaker’s judgment, and that is usually something you can feel within the first ten minutes, then I know I am not going to like the film. It’s really as simple as that.”

“At the end of the day, that particular film is only going to be a propaganda film. And it may be a propaganda film for all the right reasons, and I’m not disputing that, I’m just saying I’m not interested in propaganda for the right side anymore than I am interested in the opposite. When 9/11 happened, Bush sent people to Hollywood—I just read about this, I can’t say whether it really happened like this or not—to the studio heads and asked them to help him out and be on his side, have their films be all patriotic.”

“I tell you, had I been a studio head at that point I would have kicked him out of my office. I would have said, ‘It is in your fucking interest that we keep our full independence and just portray the world as we see it.’ That’s what democracy is all about. It’s not serving someone else’s propaganda interests. That is not how you create a healthy society, and it is certainly not what America is about.”

Realizing he’s starting to climb up upon a soap box, von Donnersmarck quickly turns his attention back towards the film. I didn’t want to make a propaganda film in that way, so I tried with every single character not to take [them] from the outside, tried not to ask myself how would a sophisticated ideologue interrogate a political prisoner, but rather to ask myself where is that character in me. Where is the part in me that would enjoy using my intelligence to exert power over someone else? When you ask yourself like that I think then the film starts becoming interesting because then it will be honest.”

“Did you ever read Carl Jung?” Once again von Donnersmarck puts me on the spot, forcing me to blushingly admit I dropped out of a psychology class right before we started reading him. Laughing, the director continues his thought. “He’s a really interesting philosopher, I think, and he had this philosophy that everything is contained within each one of us. That is it all in our souls; every virtue and every vice and every weakness and every inclination of whatever sort. There is a side rapist in all of us and there is a side messiah. We have it all there.”

“What we are and what we display to the world is what we choose to reveal. It is the artist, he states, who would go into those dark parts of the soul where normally you never shine any light, find that part and use it and display it in their art. And I think that holds true for writers. While writing something, I’m kind of acting out these parts in my head, and if I don’t take that from inside then it won’t be true. It just will not be true.”

All this begs the question, what is it about art that makes it so dangerous to those in power? “I think it is related to exactly that thing we were just talking about,” answers von Donnersmarck. “An authoritarian society, a totalitarian regime, will try and tell you which of those facets of your Jungian character you are going to display. They have a certain vision of how mankind should be, and this is what they try and force you to do.”

“Now comes the artist, putting you on a sort of virtual reality ride of the soul for the soul and then has you see that this [forced] reality is not what you are really about. There is no way you can

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from Wikipedia

Overview
The screenplay was published by Suhrkamp Verlag. Donnersmarck and Ulrich Mühe were successfully sued for libel for the book, in which Mühe asserted that his former wife informed on him while they were East German citizens through the six years of their marriage. In the film’s publicity material, Donnersmarck says that Mühe’s former wife denied the claims, although 254 pages’ worth of government records detailed her activities.

The organizers of the Berlin Film Festival refused to accept it as an official entry in 2006. The film succeeded in Germany despite a widespread contemporary reluctance in the country, particularly in its films, to confront the totalitarian excesses of the East German state.

The Lives of Others cost US$2 million and grossed more than $74 million worldwide as of November 2007.
Criticism

Slavoj Zizek, reviewing the film for *In These Times*, wrote that it softpedals the oppressiveness of the German Democratic Republic, as when a dissident confronts the minister of culture and doesn’t seem to face any consequences for it. Zizek also says the character of the playwright is simply too naive to be believable: “One cannot but recall here a witty formula of life under a hard Communist regime: Of the three features—personal honesty, sincere support of the regime and intelligence—it was possible to combine only two, never three [...] The problem with Dreyman is that he does combine all three features.”

Although the opening scene of the film is set in Hohenschönhausen prison, the movie could not be filmed there because Hubertus Knabe, the director of the memorial, refused to give von Donnersmarck permission. Knabe objected to “making the Stasi man into a hero” and tried to persuade von Donnersmarck to change the movie. Donnersmarck cited *Schindler’s List* as an example of such a plot development being possible. Knabe’s answer: “But that is exactly the difference. There was a Schindler. There was no Wiesler.” The East German dissident songwriter Wolf Biermann was guardedly enthusiastic about the film, writing in a March 2006 article in *Die Welt*: “The political tone is authentic, I was moved by the plot. But why? Perhaps I was just won over sentimentally, because of the seductive mass of details which look like they were lifted from my own past between the total ban of my work in 1965 and denaturalisation in 1976.”

Anna Funder, the author of a book about the Stasi (*Stasiland*), wrote in a review of the movie for *The Guardian* that it was not possible for a Stasi operative to have hidden much information from superiors because Stasi employees were watched and operated in teams, seldom if ever working alone. She noted that in his “Director’s statement”, Donnersmarck wrote, “More than anything else, *The Lives of Others* is a human drama about the ability of human beings to do the right thing, no matter how far they have gone down the wrong path.” Funder replied: “This is an uplifting thought. But what is more likely to save us from going down the wrong path again is recognising how human beings can be trained and forced into faceless systems of oppression, in which conscience is extinguished.” Nevertheless, Funder said, the movie is a “superb film” despite not being true to reality.

Just one more presentation in Buffalo Film Seminars XIV:

Dec 2 Stanley Kubrick 2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY 1968

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