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Author(s): DIANE CARSON

Source: *Journal of Film and Video*, Vol. 62, No. 1-2 (Spring/Summer 2010), pp. 13-22

Published by: University of Illinois Press on behalf of the University Film & Video Association

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/jfilmvideo.62.1-2.0013>

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# Learning from History in *The Lives of Others*: An Interview with Writer/Director Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck

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DIANE CARSON

AFTER THE FALL OF THE BERLIN WALL on 9 November 1989, previously guarded details about the repressive East German regime gradually became accessible. Most importantly, the passage of the 1991 *Stasi* Records Act permitted access to the most appalling and revealing files of the *Ministerium für Staatssicherheit* (MfS) [Ministry for State Security]. Called the *Stasi* (a nickname taken from *Staatssicherheit*), the East German secret police, from their headquarters in East Berlin, maintained an extensive surveillance network with agents and informants infiltrating virtually every aspect of public and private life.

A firsthand witness as a young, uncomprehending boy to the emotional impact of the *Stasi*, writer/director Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck remembered trips from his home in West Germany to visit relatives in East Berlin:

As a boy of eight, nine or ten, I found it interesting and exciting to feel the fear of adults. My parents were afraid when they crossed the border: they were both born in the East and thus were more closely controlled by the police. And our friends from East Germany were afraid when other people saw that they were speaking with us, Germans from the West. (Sony 8)

With his haunting memories as the catalyst, von Donnersmarck spent four years researching

events and then six weeks writing a preliminary screenplay while residing in a twelfth-century monk's cell in a Cistercian monastery in the Vienna Woods where his uncle was Abbot. From his recollections and his research, von Donnersmarck constructed the suspenseful, heart-breaking *Das Leben der Anderen* [The Lives of Others].

*The Lives of Others* begins and takes place primarily in 1984, ending in 1991 with an ironic twist and an overwhelming final scene with an earned, lasting impact. Von Donnersmarck eschews distracting adornment and what would be easy sensationalizing of *Stasi* activities. The film's understatement of the frightening incidents and of abhorrent behavior, and the actors' restraint in presenting their characters, cuts laser-like to the truth.

The story juxtaposes two self-deluded individuals: *Stasi* Captain Gerd Wiesler (Ulrich Mühe) and playwright Georg Dreyman (Sebastian Koch), the former blinded by his *Stasi* allegiance and the latter by the naïve belief that his personal life is immune to violation. In early scenes, Wiesler conscientiously performs his job as a *Stasi* surveillance expert and instructor in skillful interrogation interpretation. Disciplined and uncompromising, he shows visible distaste when a colleague arrives late for his stakeout shift. Wiesler's reaction reaffirms his character's initially inflexible attitudes and rigid ideology in a narrative that revolves entirely around surreptitious observation.

Wiesler is the lynchpin when former classmate Lieutenant Colonel Anton Grubitz (Ulrich Tukur), head of the State Security Culture De-

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DIANE CARSON is professor emerita at St. Louis Community College at Meramec. She has reviewed films for 25 years and continues to review and write with her most recent work on food in film.

partment, assigns him to supervise full-scale surveillance of Dreyman. Minister Bruno Hempf (Thomas Thieme) has initiated the investigation through comments to Grubitz that Dreyman is not, perhaps, as politically loyal to the Socialist Unity Party as some assume. However, Hempf's real motivation lies elsewhere, in his sexual interest in Dreyman's girlfriend, actress Christa-Maria Sieland (Martina Gedeck). Hempf's personal desire trumps ethical integrity. Ironically, Wiesler does soon learn of subversive activities by Dreyman and his activist friends. The suicide of their harassed friend, theater director Albert Jerska (Volkmar Kleinert), unofficially blacklisted by the GDR for seven years and unable to practice his profession, has energized their resistance.

But the surveillance began before Jerska's suicide, when the *Stasi* technical crew concealed microphones in several locations in Georg and Christa-Maria's apartment. Everything that transpires can be overheard by the *Stasi* team, who maintain 24-hour shifts from the attic of Dreyman's apartment building. What Wiesler hears and observes, involving both the activist writers and Hempf's interest, imperceptibly at first and decisively before long, impacts his commitment to German Democratic Republic (GDR) control of available literature and published writings. The conflict climaxes when Dreyman, writer/friend Paul Hauser (Hans-Uwe Bauer), and their cohorts devise a plan to pass Hauser, hiding Dreyman's article, through East German guards to the West for publication in the influential *Der Spiegel*. Dreyman's essay cites, in particular, suicide statistics that will embarrass the GDR by revealing censored information. Suspicious of surveillance, the activist group uses their attempt to slip this article to the West as a test of their own safety. Because of Wiesler's failure to report what he hears and because of his direct actions that, unbeknownst to them, aid their plan, Dreyman and friends succeed.

Throughout the progress of the oversight, Dreyman completely trusts and takes comfort in his relationship with Christa-Maria, oblivious to the blackmail and pressures pushing

her toward disastrous decisions to protect her career and her drugs. Christa-Maria's betrayal and subsequent willed death carry the most gut-wrenching blow for Georg and for the film's viewers. And there are, again, sobering, even shocking real-life parallels. From the founding of the *Stasi*, on 8 February 1950, with Soviet assistance and the Soviet MGB as its model until the demise of the *Stasi*, East German citizens could not trust even relatives and close friends. In a chilling parallel to Dreyman being spied on by his lover in *The Lives of Others*, the actor Ulrich Mühe, who plays Captain Wiesler, learned that during the 1980s Jenny Grollmann, his wife at the time, spied on him for the *Stasi*, working as a *Stasi* agent for ten years. Before she died of cancer in 2006, she sued Mühe to prevent him from publicizing his allegations against her. Equally ironic, Mühe worked briefly as a border guard at the Berlin Wall before success as a theater, film, and television actor. In 1989, before the Berlin Wall came down, he publicly denounced the East German Communist Party at a demonstration of half a million people in Berlin Alexanderplatz Square. He died, at age 54, on 22 July 2007, of stomach cancer.

In another poignant parallel, actor Volkmar Kleinert plays director Albert Jerska, the theater director who commits suicide. Early in Kleinert's professional life, the *Stasi* attempted to recruit Kleinert as an informant, threatening him with an end to his career if he refused. The tactics of intimidation failed. Kleinert refused; his career flourished nonetheless. The same cannot be said in the film for character Wiesler, whom Dreyman watches, in an affecting reversal, from a taxi.

The film concludes in 1991. Postman Wiesler pulls his mail cart down a city street as the camera tracks along his path. With his decision to save Dreyman, Wiesler knew his work for the *Stasi* was doomed, and yet he chose to take the incriminating typewriter hidden under a door-sill, thereby saving Dreyman's life. *Stasi* poetic justice finds Wiesler delivering letters, a stark contrast to his job to produce reliable reports. Another example of *Stasi* retaliation registers in another of the final scenes, in which Wiesler

is steaming envelopes open. Behind him, also opening letters, is the man who told a joke about the GDR leader Erich Honecker in the earlier cafeteria scene. Overheard and then confronted by Grubitz, he blanched upon seeing the attention he had drawn and attempted to avoid finishing his humorous story. Grubitz coerced him to continue, and the worker held his breath in cataclysmic fear until Grubitz laughed heartily himself. In this nicely understated moment at the end of the film, we notice him sitting in the row of workers and realize that the earlier transgression was not overlooked. And in the film's final, deeply touching moments, Wiesler purchases Dreyman's book dedicated to him. As Wiesler realizes that Dreyman knows what he did, restraint again prevails.

With a clear narrative purpose translated into complementary technical choices, von Donnersmarck increases the ideological and emotional impact of *The Lives of Others*. He decided that a pallet of desaturated browns, grays, and greens had to dominate the film, telling cinematographer Hagen Bogdanski that they must "create a world where you feel the only warmth comes from the people themselves" (Bosley 16). For their visual inspiration, Bogdanski and von Donnersmarck cite *Three Days of the Condor* (1975), *The Conversation* (1974), *The French Connection* (1971), *Harold & Maude* (1971), and *M\*A\*S\*H* (1970) (Bosley 17). Shot in anamorphic format without visual effects, with no handheld or Steadicam shots, and with analog technology even through the sound design, *The Lives of Others* foregrounds the acting. The ambience is enhanced by staging many scenes in actual locations, including the original file-card archives in the former *Stasi* headquarters, the only feature film ever allowed such access (Sony 9). Despite a short, thirty-five-day shoot, four years of research and meticulous preparation paid off.

On his promotional tour with the film and on his way to the Academy Awards, von Donnersmarck stopped in St. Louis.<sup>1</sup> During an hour-plus conversation, his thorough knowledge of film history, literature, art, and languages became immediately apparent. To cite just

one example, he moved to St. Petersburg and learned (and has taught) Russian so that he could read Russian literature in the original language. His answers to my questions about *The Lives of Others* provide insight into the film and can serve as a model for the thorough, thoughtful consideration that accompanies the finest film production.

dc: Was the sort of spying depicted in *The Lives of Others* going on all over Germany or, to the extent shown in the film, primarily in East Berlin? I have a hard time imagining it in smaller cities and villages.

FLORIAN HENCKEL VON DONNERSMARCK: I think you're right; however, the *Stasi* were there. In East Berlin it was easier; it would not be noticed as much. The *Stasi* were a little more obvious in the smaller towns. In fact, they had a strong presence, but they would be watching people who everybody knew would be targeted. They would probably not be doing as much wiretapping of apartments because it would have been too risky. The *Stasi* didn't want to be found out, of course. Generally, the artistic scene was concentrated in Berlin, so most of that kind of surveillance activity happened in Berlin.

And the *Stasi* normally worked with much larger teams than what I describe here, someone like dissident East German poet Wolf Biermann would have thirteen people just on his team to monitor and to watch him, just this one person because he was the most important poet.

dc: So one in fifty citizens served the *Stasi* in some capacity? I don't know how you begin to fathom a statistic like that. It takes the wind out of your sails. That means that if we're at a film or the theater or any gathering, if we were in East Germany, at least one out of every fifty would be *Stasi*.

FHD: In a cultural group like that, more than one. The government would feel that these are the kind of people who take culture seriously and probably have some weight in their respective environments, so we better have them under scrutiny. There'd probably

be three or four out of every fifty there. The thing is the informants wouldn't know who the other spies were, so that would be the best way for the *Stasi* to check if all their reports were accurate. They kept checking their agents by having other informants at the same event.

DC: I didn't even think about that.

FHD: Oh, yes, that was an important factor because it would be too easy for an informer to say anything which is why if an informer tells you, "I just wrote what they wanted to hear and something that wouldn't implicate anyone," that's not true. The *Stasi* would have other people who, if they wrote something that did implicate someone and the other agent didn't report the incriminating evidence, oh my god. That agent would be in serious trouble.

DC: Georg Dreyman and Captain Gerd Wiesler never talk to each other even in that dramatic penultimate scene when you think they might finally exchange words. Is that because they never would have encountered each other, or would that have been too much?

FHD: Sometimes people are on the same level spiritually but not materially. I wonder if those two could have become friends. Maybe not. I like that it was a buddy movie where the buddies never meet. That was what I devised for the film, almost like a story of two people who love each other but never meet. But in some way they meet on a spiritual plane.

DC: Most of the characters are middle-aged. I'm wondering why you chose this age for them?

FHD: I wanted them to be old enough for it to really mean something if they still change. If you have a 30-year-old or so who changes, would it really mean that much? If they're young, you get the impression they aren't fully formed yet. But if they're middle-aged, it is all the more heroic if they change.

There's one scene where the playwright Georg Dreyman says, "Oh, it looks like you're dressing it up for my fiftieth birthday, but I'm turning forty, am I not?" Many people have taken that to mean that he's really turning forty. I think it means that he's actually turning fifty, but he's just not wanting to acknowledge that fact. So I'd say they're all in their mid-forties to fifties. Georg's friend says to him, "Look, you'll be steam opening letters for the next twenty years." So that means, since their retirement age was sixty-five, that he must be about forty-five. I'd say mid-forties to fifties.

In this regard, the actor [Sebastian Koch] I ended up casting as the playwright was a little younger than the one I'd originally imagined. Sebastian, in reality, is now 43, and I'd wanted someone who looked more like 50, not 40. In fact, with Sebastian you could well imagine that he would be 40. But I decided to go with a great actor rather than one exactly the age I'd wanted.

DC: We don't see any women working as *Stasi*. Was it predominantly male?

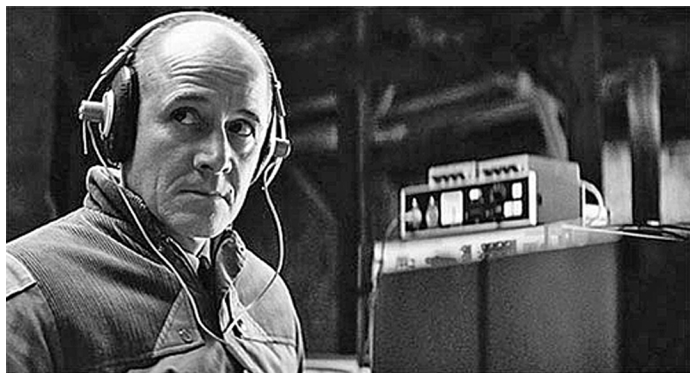


Photo 1: Ulrich Muehe  
as *Stasi* Captain  
Gerd Wiesler in  
*The Lives of Others*  
(2006).

FHD: There were women, but the *Stasi* was primarily male.

DC: Which leads me to ask why you made the motivating factor the sexual desire of Minister Bruno Hempf? The catalyst could have been political or some payback for a past wrong.

FHD: If there was some kind of political motivation, people would have felt, "Well, if you believe in the ideology, it can be justified." I wanted to show that the main problem with power is that once you give it to people, they can use it for whatever they want. It's arbitrary. The sexual desire shows how his use of power is completely arbitrary and has nothing to do with the cause. It is a reflection of his cynicism and opportunism. That's the problem, even if you were one of those people who believed that the basic idea of communism was right, that everybody should be equally well off and so on.

Now Karl Marx said that the phase of capitalism was called the dictatorship of the proletariat. He knew dictatorship was going to be something necessary. Now the essence of dictatorship is that once people are in power, they're not going to give it up. They're going to happily use that power for their own goals, and no leader is so illuminated that at some point he will just say, "Now look, we are wise enough as a people, here goes. Now I'll step aside."

The only person I know who ever did that is Zapata. Did you ever see Kazan's *Viva Zapata!*? He was a leader who said, "Now I'm becoming corrupt; I'm stepping down." But I wonder if that's not also a legend. I think it may well be. That's not one of my favorite Kazan films, but it didn't ring so true to me when I saw it. I didn't find it convincing.

DC: Is there any significance beyond the obvious Orwell allusion to beginning in 1984?

FHD: Well, more than with Orwell, it had to do with that fact that this was a period in the Soviet Union for the entire Eastern bloc that marked a return to something closely resembling Stalinism. That was just for a year during Konstantin Chernenko's rule as Communist

General Secretary. In March 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev came to power, and I didn't want to set the film during Gorbachev's reign. Although it took a while for his reforms to reach East Germany, people would already be feeling the perestroika and glasnost wind. I didn't want that to be the case.

Alternately, I could have set it earlier, but then people would have always felt that this was interesting historically. They would not have that feeling that this just happened twenty years ago. This is a period I remember well—we all remember 1984 well—and this was going on and, in my case, only a few miles from where I was living. In Europe it's been used a lot to show people what life under a dictatorship is like.

DC: It is amazing that this is in our lifetime. It's mind-boggling when you think about what you were doing while this went on. Let's talk about art direction. There's a puppet on the wall in Georg and Christa-Maria's apartment that we see behind Christa-Maria. I have a feeling you did a lot more of this that I missed.

FHD: The puppet is actually in her little room. Going through the potential props, however, I decided to go for larger-scale objects. I didn't want there to be very, very small objects. I wanted everything to be clear and for what I was saying to be recognizable. I believe that production design should not be something that has to be deciphered with the left side of the brain. So I don't put the puppet in there to mean that they're puppets of the system. If you enter a film like that, you're distracting the audience from what it ought to be thinking about.

I try to keep the art direction in broad strokes, large surface things. In the apartment, I have clearly visible posters, hopefully with a letter size that is really too small to read so you wouldn't be tempted to read it or so large that you can immediately see what it's about, not that in-between dangerous size.

Interviewing lots of production designers, I'd ask them how they'd go about designing a trailer that a family lived in. They would



say, “I can imagine these are people who, since they live in a trailer, would be fighting a lot and maybe at some point someone had thrown a cup of coffee.” That immediately for me is a “NO” because that is not how production design should work. If you’re in a scene and you see that little spot on the wall, maybe not consciously, even if it’s just subconsciously, the audience will be distracted from concentrating on what I want them to focus on. So I went for big surface things. In his room, I had almost only books. I wouldn’t have little trinkets lying around because they’re distracting.

Belgian artist Hergé draws and writes Tintin books. Hergé wrote what’s called a comic, but that’s the wrong word—it’s a graphic novel of Tintin in a South American military dictatorship called *Tintin and the Picaros* (1976). It’s very impressive that Hergé got to the essence of certain elements of the dictatorship just through the visuals without going into any details of the politics.

Andy Warhol and that whole pop art movement cite Hergé as one of their main influences. He is someone who discovered a certain way of drawing that, for example, everything, whether it’s a ship way in the background two miles away or the protagonist’s watch in the foreground, is drawn with the same thickness of pen. Hergé just draws the outlines and the inside is just color. The color on the object of the ship two miles away is with the same intensity, it’s not going to be washed out, as the object in the foreground. What it leads to is a very, very graphic image—it’s almost like you can look at it putting your eyes slightly out of focus and it will still have beautiful shapes that work together. You have to treat the objects in the background in the same way you treat the objects in the foreground. They have to work together.

DC: It sounds Fauvist like.

FHD: Well, it’s much more sophisticated than the Fauvists. Hergé is considered the greatest graphic artist in Belgium in the twentieth century, and that’s quite apart from the

storytelling—that’s just the graphic part of it—and it certainly was very, very influential. Andy Warhol did one of his portrait series on him, and in that way I think Andy Warhol’s art is quite powerful because he uses that insight of making everything graphic. That’s something I tried to do in *The Lives of Others*—not going into messy little, all too literal realism. That’s not saying it isn’t realist, but the thing is that any apartment will be full of slightly random objects. I took all of those out.

For example, take a typical desk if we shoot in an office. A few things would work really well like big movie posters. Now some production designers would think the tissues lying around and lots of individual objects on a table would work. You *could* have individual objects, but they’d have to be of the same type, and you’d have to understand immediately what it is. Otherwise, people would think, what is that? They’d see a trace of something, and if there’s just one word written, people would think, “Oh, we should understand what this is about.”

So you have to aim for a purity in your images to make sure that your production design is just that, design, that it conveys a feeling all together and that it not try and enter into competition for the left side of the brain with the main action, with the dialogue, with the plot development.

That is also why I used a very specific color scheme. I didn’t want people to enter into every new scene thinking, “Oh my gosh, what’s the next color that’s going to shock us that we’re going to have to get used to?” I wanted them to know, OK, get used to these colors, and that’s what you’re going to get from scene to scene, and it will help you flow through the whole thing.

This will actually help the audience accept unfamiliar things much more readily because you’re giving them something which is at least familiar from scene to scene. It will allow you to take the plot much further; it will allow you to be much more nuanced in the dialogue because there’s only so much

capacity you have while watching a scene. If you lose the first couple of seconds while trying to orient yourself in a new scene, if you lose that processing power, you will have lost what the first few moments of that scene is about, and you will either have lost the thread, or you will have missed some information. Or if the filmmaker is aware of this, he will have had to make the scene a little longer, thereby, in the sum, making the film a little unrhythmic and unmelodic.

So luckily my production designers Silke Buhr and Klaus Spielhagen were really game for that. Actually, this is used a lot in American cinema in the eighties. A film like *Raiders of the Lost Ark* has a very specific production design. It has specific colors: the yellow of the sand and the brown of the whip and Indy's hat and the red of the sunset. Those are the colors of that film. You don't get that much more. And that works; that really allows you to concentrate on that film.

If you see a film and you can recognize every tiny scene from it, or theoretically tell from a frame that it's from that film, you've already got something going. Now that leads many people to go for something overly artificial. I think that's a cheap way out. I don't want that; I think it should feel natural; it should be happening on a subconscious level, and films that I really like have that. *The Truman Show* is a beautifully designed film or pretty much anything by Christopher Nolan. He's a genius, and his films show that completely. If you see a frame from *[The] Prestige* or even just hear a sound bite, you know it's from that film because it's something special and specific and very deep. There are a few directors who can do that. Hitchcock was a master at that, his style as recognizable as that of Picasso, who is also so clear. Or Titian is so identifiable.

I think that's great when these directors become like painters in the very specific ways they express themselves only on so many more levels. A painter just has one level, namely the distribution of his paint and the texture and the colors. But we direc-

tors have so much more. I always pity artists working in other media because they only get to express themselves once; they only get to tell their story exactly one time. I get to tell it in six different media at the same time: I get to tell it through music, through lights, through words, through shapes and colors, and every aspect of sound. A novelist just has words.

DC: Your trick, though, is making it all coherent.

FHD: Yes, that's true, making it all coherent, and insisting on all those details, that everything is equally important. That, I think, is very important about film. If you say that some tiny aspect of the film is less important than any other aspect, you're lost. Your film will not be interesting; it will just be lost driftwood. I will spend a lot of time on the exact speed and font that is used for the end credits. That is important; it's really important. It's not because most people will have already left the cinema. It's part of the film; that means it's sacred territory. Everything has to be right. I remember when we went into the sound editing/mixing, they said, "There are a few days of pre-editing where you don't really have to be there." I said, "Are you crazy?!" The sound people said, "Well, look, most directors are not there." I said, "There will not be the tiniest cough, there will not be one single atmospheric sound, there will be nothing which I have not put there personally in the greatest detail. I don't want to leave anything to chance. Everything has to be channeled through me which has to do with the film. Everything. Everything."

As soon as you start prioritizing, to me you're no longer interesting as a director because you cannot prioritize. Everything is absolute top priority.

DC: Along those lines, you've made several comments about location shooting, how you thought it was important to shoot in significant places, and that you could still feel the spirit of the past. How did that factor into shooting?

FHD: Places store memories. You remember



those scenes in *The Da Vinci Code* that film critics destroyed? Do you remember the scene when characters run into Notre Dame in Paris? And suddenly you see these ghost-like images of crowning ceremonies for the king or the funeral of some king as they're running toward this beautiful church. What I thought was so beautiful is that this scene showed to me the inner perspective, how someone who really knows a lot about history will approach a place. It's almost like he can still feel these great moments in history resonating.

I feel like that in places. If I'm in the *Stasi* prison at Hohenschönhausen, somehow just being there and trying to sense what the suffering was like that the people lived through, that'll sometimes tell me more than books.

DC: I think locations and places are much more important in our lives than we realize.

FHD: Yes! The fact that I'm now living in Berlin, a city that has seen so much misery and caused so much suffering, that was the center of the Nazi party, the center of the Communist Party in the East, a place from which so much bad has come in a relatively short span of its important life, I can sense that there. It only became the German capital in 1871. That's one of the reasons I'm going to be so unhappy to leave that place. I moved back there because of this film, because I can research and shoot it better there. I don't think you can really make a film by saying, "Look, I'll do half a year pre-production." The fact that I was there over all the years before shooting meant that I already knew pretty much all the places I wanted to shoot the film. And the real preparation had happened well before that half a year.

DC: How much feedback do you get as you work on a film?

FHD: I think everybody has their team of people that they trust for advice. In my case, it's my brother with whom I'll discuss every detail of the story, one friend from film school with whom I hardly agree on any films but I really like his structural approach to films, and the father of an old school friend of mine.

DC: What coursework at the University of Television and Film Munich prepared you for making this, your first feature film?

FHD: I think you can encourage people to think about film, but I don't think you can teach film as such. You encourage students to try to find their own way. My class's Professor Wolfgang Langsfeld thought you should let people do what they want to do. This made him very unpopular with other people at the school and in the administration. Langsfeld said that you didn't have to get his approval for making films. You could go ahead and do them. But he always said, "Don't let anybody else have any power over your film. Do not go into a film if you do not have complete artistic control over every single aspect." That was his maxim. He was right. He encouraged people to be original and hated most when filmmakers were plagiarizing other people's stuff. He couldn't support that. And he encouraged people to make the film look as good as you possibly could.

This was very much the credo of the Munich film school, that you can communicate any artistic message looking good, and it will reach many more people than if it looked less appealing than it could. Look at the people who have emerged from that school. One of the first was Wim Wenders, and we were all taught by the same professor, and Wenders took that lesson to heart. His films are pretty stylish. One can think what one wants, but that is something you can never fault him on.

Langsfeld was an incredibly impatient guy. He got bored by things so quickly. He would not even read stories that I'd give him to the end because he always thought he'd seen everything and heard everything. That wasn't the worst thing to be confronted with all the time because, in a way, I agree with him. I would think while writing, "Let's make sure I find something that won't bore even him." It's a challenge because he was so impatient in a bad way, but I knew what had led to that: Reading so much that was pseudo-stuff so he wasn't open anymore to

read something real when it came his way. He'd been damaged; he was worn down. But I tried to do some backward engineering like I did living with my relatives in the East and trying to find out what they were afraid of. I tried to see from our professor just what had run this guy down so much, and I know just the kind of films that had run him down. I said, these are not the kind of films I want to make. It's a very tough job as a professor—to stay positive and open and believe that new talent can come along and be found when in 99 percent of cases the films aren't good. Before you start losing your faith in things, you have to stop. It's a terrible thing to see people become jaded. They cease being able to see people as individuals and start seeing them as groups when they are individuals.

But Langsfeld also wrote some books and edited a lot of books for American writers in Germany. For example, when Syd Field's screenplay book was edited in Germany, he cowrote the German edition with Syd Field. There are some things on which I don't agree with Langsfeld. He said a good way to learn dialogue is to hide a microphone under your lapel and go around and just record everybody, and then just transcribe it as a protocol on your computer. Then you'll see how people really talk, and that's how dialogue should be written, which is completely wrong. That just shows he wasn't a film practitioner. Dialogue in films is completely different from anything that would ever be spoken. The best text on film dialogue is Sol Stein's *Stein on Writing*. That has the best chapter that I know on dialogue. He even says that after you read his chapter on dialogue, you will know more than people learn in four years of film school, and it's true. Stein presents what the essence of dialogue is.

DC: I read your comments on the music by Gabriel Yared—how you wrote your dissertation on the music in *The Talented Mr. Ripley*. You said you didn't understand the film until you had the music to interpret and express the emotion of the moment that carries you along. But it's not overdone.

FHD: Gabriel Yared is a great composer. Brilliant, he's a major figure.

DC: *The Lives of Others* is dedicated to Christiane. Who is she?

FHD: Oh, yes, that's my wife. The real producer of that film is my wife, who supported me in every possible way for the five years it took me to make this film. It was a long journey, and with changing producers, people dropping out, and no distributor wanting it, the only person who always stood by me was my wife. The only person who never said, "You're crazy; drop this dream," although she was the one on whom it had the most negative impact because I wasn't working as an investment banker or whatever else.

DC: Finally, what is the current political climate in Berlin and elsewhere?

FHD: As long as there's power, there will be abuse of power. That's just how it is. The things I show in the film in some unfortunate way will always be relevant and will always be modern. So what we should do is not give individuals too much power and certainly not give the government too much power.

DC: That's great advice to conclude our interview.

## NOTE

1. In addition to receiving the 2006 Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film of the Year and the Golden Globe award for Best Foreign Language Film, *The Lives of Others* earned eleven nominations for the German Film Awards, more than any other film has received in its history. It won seven: Outstanding Feature Film, Best Direction and Best Screenplay for Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, Best Cinematography for Hagen Bogdanski, Best Performance by an Actor in a Leading Role for Ulrich Mühe as Captain Gerd Wiesler, Best Performance by an Actor in a Supporting Role for Ulrich Tukur as Lieutenant Colonel Anton Grubitz, and Best Production Design for Silke Buhr. It received nominations for Best Costume Design for Gabriele Binder, Best Editing for Patricia Rommel, Best Film Score for Stéphane Moucha and Gabriel Yared, and Best Sound for Hubertus Rath, Christoph von Schönburg, and Arno Wilms.

In addition to these achievements, *The Lives of Others* received the Independent Spirit Award for Best Foreign Film and several audience awards from film festivals in Denver, Copenhagen, Vancouver, and War-

saw to Rotterdam, Palm Springs, Portland (Oregon), and Montréal. For a complete list of its forty-two honors and nominations, see [Imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com/title/tto405094/awards) <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tto405094/awards>>. For more details on the film, go to the official home page for *The Lives of Others* at <<http://www.sonyclassics.com/thelivesofothers/>>. The DVD is also available with commentary by Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck and an interview with him.

#### FILMOGRAPHY

*Mitternacht* (Germany, 1997), Coproducer, codirector, cowriter, coeditor as Florian Henckel-Donnersmarck  
*Das Datum* [The Date] (Germany, 1998), Codirector as Florian Henckel-Donnersmarck

*Dobermann* [Doberman] (Germany, 1999, 4 minutes), Director, editor as Florian Henckel-Donnersmarck  
*Der Templer* [The Crusader] (Germany, 2002, 23 minutes) Codirector  
*Das Leben der Anderen* [The Lives of Others] (2006), Coproducer, director, writer

#### REFERENCES

Bosley, Rachael K. "Under Surveillance." *American Cinematographer* 88.3 (Mar. 2007): 16–20. Print.  
Sony Pictures Classics. Press booklet for *The Lives of Others*/*Das Leben der Anderen*, 2006. Print.