

CINEASTE

Between Principle and Feeling: An Interview with Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck

Author(s): John Esther and Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck

Source: *Cinéaste*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (SPRING 2007), pp. 40-42

Published by: Cineaste Publishers, Inc.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41690471>

Accessed: 09-12-2018 02:05 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Cineaste Publishers, Inc. is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Cinéaste*

Between Principle and Feeling:

An Interview with Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck

by John Esther

At an estimated six foot seven inches, writer-director Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck might be the tallest film director in the world. Since his debut film, *The Lives of Others*, won seven Lola Awards (Germany's Academy Awards) for best film, best director, best screenplay, best actor (Ulrich Mühe), best supporting actor (Ulrich Tukur), cinematography (Hagen Bogdanski), and production design (Silke Bühr), he certainly has been riding high. In addition to the *Lolas*, the film has received numerous other awards in Europe and it is the official German selection for the 2006 Academy Awards for Best Foreign Language Film. Considering it's a story about a bad German making good, it has a good chance. Academy members tend to consume that kind of cinematic cuisine by the course.

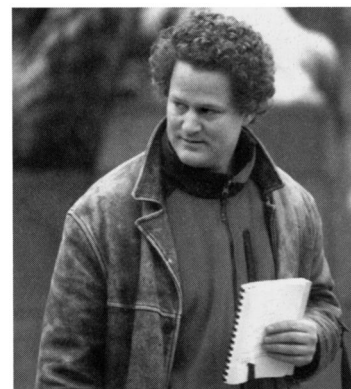
Set in East Germany (the German Democratic Republic) in 1984, *The Lives of Others* depicts an Orwellian society where the Ministry of State Security, known as the Stasi, watches over every perceived dissident like a hawk. Within this surveillance apparatus, there is no finer Stasi agent than Captain Gerd Wiesler (Mühe). Dedicated to the cause, one of Gerd's old chums, who now runs the Ministry's Culture Department, Lieutenant Colonel Anton Grubitz (Tukur) assigns Wiesler to watch over noted playwright, Georg Dreyman (Sebastian Koch), and his lover, the actress Christa-Maria Sieland (Martina Gedeck).

His mission is conducted under the pretense that Minister Bruno Hempf (Thomas Thieme) suspects Dreyman's loyalty to the SED, the ruling Socialist Unity Party. But the real motive behind "Operative Procedure" is the minister's need to do some operating on Christa-Maria between the sheets, the back of his limousine, or at a hotel. This is not a good start for such a principled man as Wiesler. He is disturbed by this abuse of power and, as he listens in on these artists and their artistic, musical friends, he begins to change into the unlikelyst of heroes.

Born in 1973 in Cologne, Germany, von Donnersmarck has lived in various countries in Europe and the United States. Once a trainee of Richard Attenborough (*Love and War*, 1997), it took him nine years to get his first feature made, during which time he directed several short films. We spoke with von Donnersmarck for Cineaste last November when he was in Los Angeles for the AFI Film Festival.—**John Esther**

Cineaste: What are your early memories of East Germany?

Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck: At the time this film is set I was eleven and living in West Berlin. We often visited my mother's relatives. She came over before the wall was built, but part of her family stayed over there, so we would visit East Germany very often. They would keep us at the border crossing for hours since they considered my mother a traitor to the cause because she left for the West. She was on a special Stasi list. The car would be taken apart. She would be strip-searched and humiliated in all kinds of ways. Then we would drive to see our relatives, who wanted to see us, but who at the same time we knew we were damaging by visiting them. It was very strange to feel fear in adults. Normally adults don't display fear to children, but here they did and that was quite an important experience for my brother and me.



Cineaste: Where were you when the Berlin Wall came down?

Von Donnersmarck: I was in Luxembourg for some reason. It really felt unreal. We were participating in a political simulation game in which we were enacting the European Council. I was sixteen. Suddenly the president of the council—also a student—went to the front and said, "Ladies and gentleman, I have something important to announce: the Berlin Wall has come down." We all thought it was part of this political game. "What does this mean? What kind of sick joke is this? Are we really supposed to simulate this?" So it took a while. Then everybody rushed out to watch TV for the day [Laughs].

Cineaste: Why did you want to make this film?

Von Donnersmarck: If you write fiction you know that you don't choose your topics. It's more like they choose you. You cannot rationally go about saying, "Oh, I'd like to write a book about gangs in Los Angeles." If that's something you really want to write, it will come to you.

Cineaste: What kind of political intentions did you have with the film?

Von Donnersmarck: I would say I had more psychological intentions than political ones. I really don't believe there is such a thing as politics. It's all about individuals. Take the collapse of the Soviet Union. No one anticipated that, but in 1985 Gorbachev, who saw things differently, came to power.

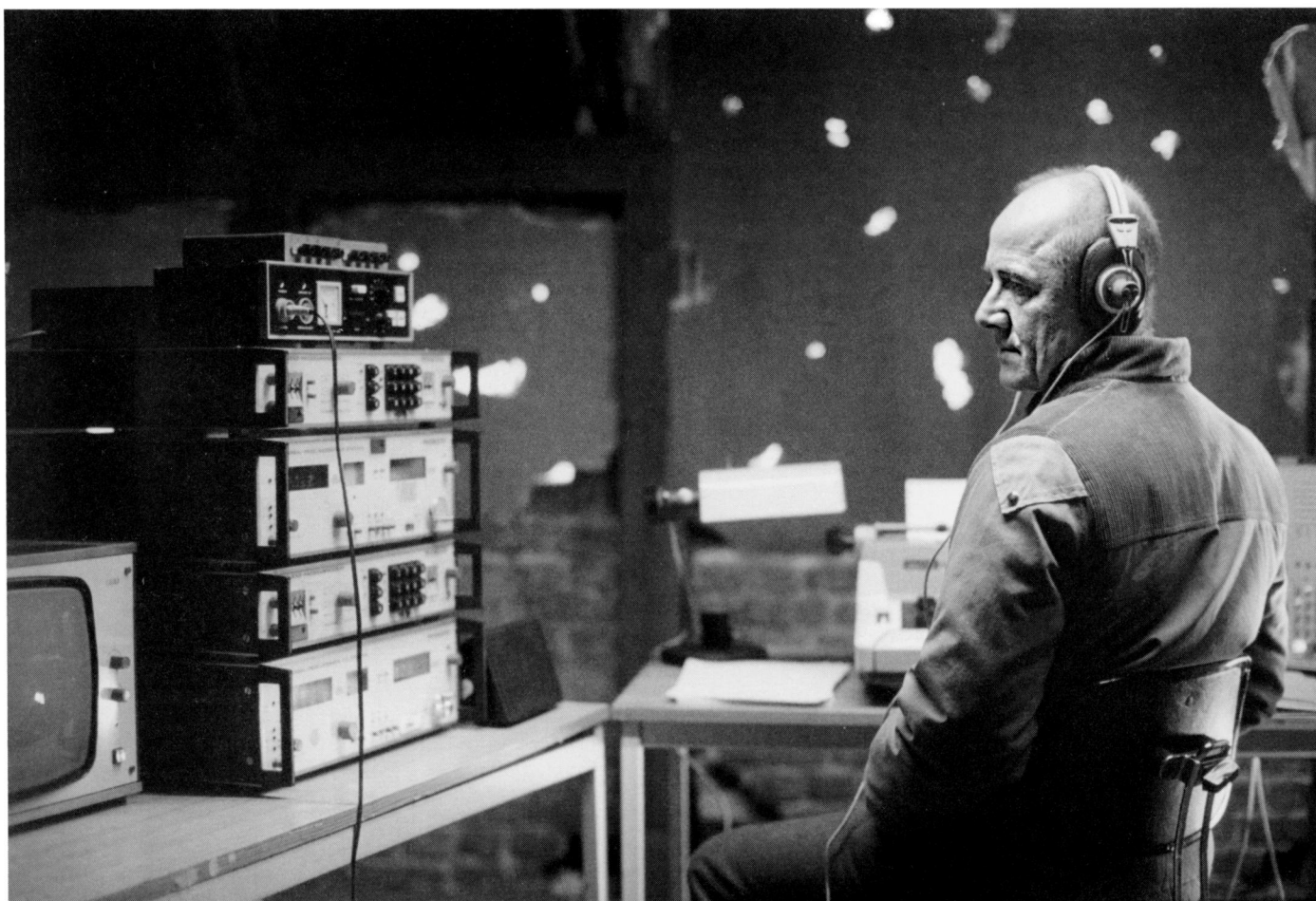
He didn't want things to continue as they were. You can't really analyze politics on a systems level. It's always about individuals that make the difference. So I tried to focus on individual psychology in the film. Rather than tell a political story, I show how people make the politics and how that affects people.

If you were looking for a political message, it'd be something like: people can change; try to strike some kind of balance in any moral or political decision between whether you're going to be a person of principle or a person of feeling. You have to strike a balance between principle and feeling. You can't just say, "Oh, on principle I do this and that," and not even pay attention to your feeling. But if you pay too much attention to your feelings and have no principles, you will be a lost soul. Strike a balance between Osama bin Laden and Casanova, between Vladimir Lenin and John Lennon.

Cineaste: What was it about this particular relationship that changed Captain Wiesler?

Von Donnersmarck: It's not specifically just that relationship. In all these screenplay books I read, they always said you need a specific turning point for the character. I'm always weary when people swing around in their political directions. People change when there's a continuous crisis. It's many things that push you in the same direction. On one hand, he realizes that his friend, who was always a little less intelligent and a little less loyal, is actually having a more successful career than he is. He also sees that something as sacred as a mission to uncover an enemy of the state is used to satisfy a high party functionary's testosterone level. This is not what he signed up for.

On the other hand, he realizes these enemies of the state are normal people with problems, kindness, pettiness, and everything else.



Stasi officer Gerd Wiesler (Ulrich Mühe) undergoes an on-the-job change of heart in Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's *The Lives of Others*.

Then there's the additional factor of him experiencing art, poetry, and music in a way he never has before. It's all of that together, throughout the entire film, that makes him an almost-accidental hero. He's not your knight in shining armor who fights for good.

Cineaste: Ulrich Mühe had a real-life experience with his wife, Jenny Grollmann, who spied on him. A book was about to come out about her dealings with the Stasi and she had an injunction issued to halt its publication. Now that she has passed away [in August 2000] how will that affect publication of the historical account?

Von Donnersmarck: It stays censored. Gregor Gysi, who used to be a lawyer for dissidents in Germany, has now developed a way of defending Stasi informants and employees. This sinister figure, who once was a lawyer for dissidents, has now betrayed them. They were eternally grateful to him for being a rogue lawyer who managed to get them only two years in prison. After they found out he had betrayed them, they said, "We're going to take you to court." And they did. He had this system where he found his former commanding officer with the Stasi and had him swear in court that he invented this entire file. These Stasi officers took an oath and they will defend their sources to their death. It makes complete sense that they would do so. They have nothing to lose by swearing to the constitution of the Federal Republic of Germany, which to them is a piece of shit anyway. They don't care about that. It's the constitution of the enemy.

First, Gregor Gysi was suing us. He actually called Mühe's wife and said, "We're going to sue them. You weren't an informer. You don't need to tell me. This 500-page file is a complete concoction. I will find your commanding officer and he will testify to that." Then

Der Spiegel [a German newspaper featured in the film] said, "We will find him first." And they sent their entire force—really powerful journalists—to find this guy. It took them three days, but by the time they got to this former officer, Gregor Gysi had already seen him. He told him exactly what to say in court. He said, "I invented all of this. I'm so sorry." The judge was impressed, which was ridiculous. Gysi owns one of the largest law firms in Germany and he is a member of parliament so he's untouchable. It's a very annoying thing and it cost us a lot of money because we had to pay damages. It makes me very angry but that's just how it is. [Laughs] You have to accept the world as it is. You can make films about it but you have to take it.

"I had more psychological intentions than political ones. I really don't believe here is such a thing as politics. It's all about individuals."

Cineaste: Which character do you identify with the most and why?

Von Donnersmarck: That's a good question. Probably all the characters, including the most vicious ones, are authentic

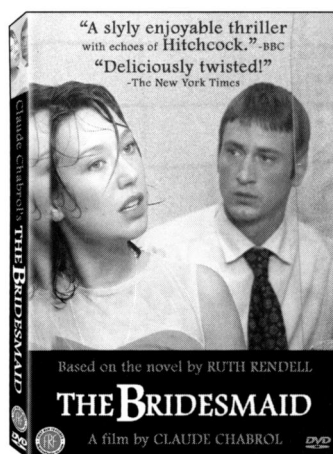
pieces of myself. If you don't take the characters within yourself, as a writer, then you're lost. It will seem artificial. It might be clever but it's not going to be good psychology. Everything is contained within you. I believe in that Jung theory that everything is there within your soul—every inclination, vice, virtue—and is within every single one of us. But what you are and what you're about is merely what you choose to display.

Cineaste: How do we deal with power and ideology?

Von Donnersmarck: We should give any government only a bare minimum of power. I am very much for the smallest government humanly possible; and I am very much for empowering the individual in every possible way, even if that means making sacrifices. Freedom comes at a price. Even in the U.S., people have



THE ART OF CINEMA Now Available on DVD



**"INSIDIOUSLY CHILLING!
CHABROL HAS NEVER SEEMED
MORE HITCHCOCKIAN."**

- BOSTON GLOBE

It's love at first sight when bridesmaid Senta falls into the life of handsome Philippe at the wedding of his younger sister. As their passion for one another intensifies, Philippe slowly discovers that Senta is shrouded in mystery. Then one day she asks Philippe to perform a terrible deed as proof of his love for her.

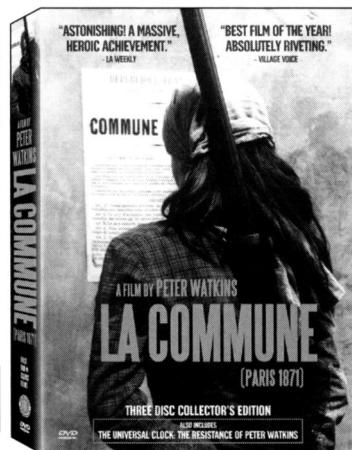
\$29.95 SAVE 35% \$19.32
110 minutes, color,
French w/English subtitles

**"BEST FILM OF THE YEAR!
ABSOLUTELY RIVETING!"**

- VILLAGE VOICE

This audacious masterpiece from acclaimed, controversial director Peter Watkins brings to life the Paris Commune of 1871 - the bloody uprising by the workers of Paris against their powerful national government. Also included is the feature documentary "The Universal Clock".

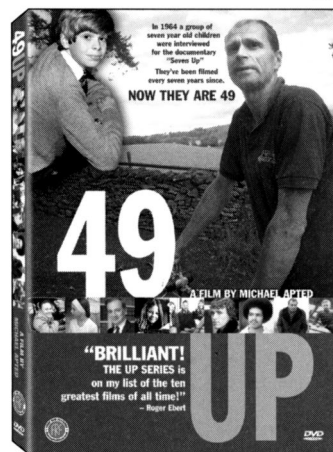
\$39.95 SAVE 35% \$25.77
354 min. on 3 discs, b/w & color



**"CINEMA'S LONGEST-
RUNNING AND MOST
FASCINATING EXPERIMENT'"**
- THE NEW YORK TIMES

Starting in 1964 with "Seven Up," the UP Series explores the evolving lives of 14 children from diverse backgrounds from all over England. Every seven years, renowned director Michael Apted has been back to talk to them. Now they are 49.

\$29.95 SAVE 35% \$19.32
134 minutes, b/w & color

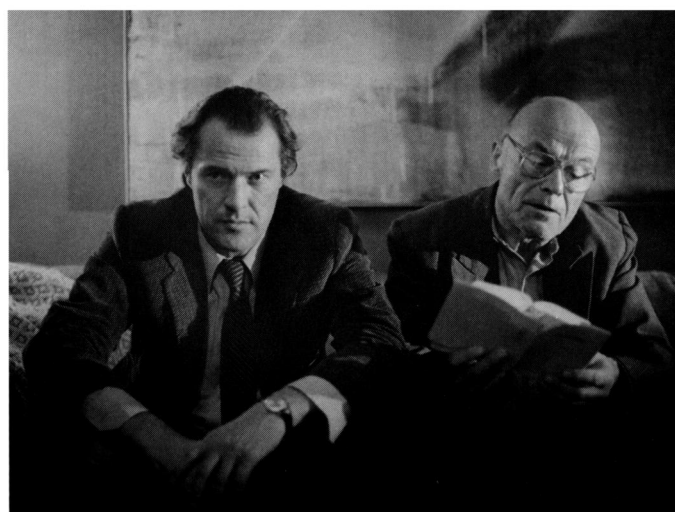


**ORDER ONLINE FROM THE SOURCE
AND SAVE 35%!**



Use Code "CINEASTE" (all caps) at checkout
www.firstrunfeatures.com

SIGN UP for our Newsletter & Save 50% off your next order!
Receive Exclusive Information about New Releases, Contests,
Private Sales, Special Screening Events and More!



Playwright Georg Dreyman (Sebastian Koch, left) and his blacklisted colleague Albert Jerska (Volkmar Kleinert) in *The Lives of Others*.

the power to wiretap your phone. Of course, that's going to make it easier to find out about any possible terrorist attacks. But for me that is too high of a price on liberty to gain that kind of security. In Germany the use of force is a complete monopoly for the government. Now, have we had great experiences with that in Germany—by trusting the government completely? Would we want to repeat that again? Americans are armed and there are accidental deaths but that may be a price you pay for freedom. Freedom always comes at a price but freedom is the highest good.

Ideology is just a word for people who put principle far over feeling. That's always a dangerous path to take. "If this music makes me feel a certain way than I'm not going to listen to that music any more because I don't want my feeling to have any importance in my decision. I only want my decisions to be made on the left side of the brain."

Cineaste: The film was shot in the former GDR. What was the esthetic behind that?

Von Donnersmarck: I don't want to present someone with two hours of communist drabness. I wanted to present it as beautifully as I honestly could. I tried to analyze what the visual tendencies were in East Germany. One thing I discovered is that they had different types of colors. I once talked to a chemist why that was and apparently in the Western world there are certain patented color chemicals that allow you to go for those bright, saturated colors that they didn't have in the East. One place on earth where you can still see that is in Cuba. So the production designer and I spent six months devising the visual world of this film. We saw there were more greens than blues, more orangey-brown colors than actual red. We decided to completely eliminate red and blue and just go with all the greens, grays, and browns and not do it in postproduction. We did not want to do anything digitally. Many people in the East felt the film was a complete resurrection of the GDR.

Cineaste: What do you think about interviews like this where you discuss your work? Do you think they serve the film or do you think the work should speak for itself?

Von Donnersmarck: The reason this film has been so successful in Germany was because it somehow attracted the right kind of journalists—those intellectual, artistic types of journalists. People in the U.S. are not going to see a film—just by their own free will—about the Stasi, without stars, in German, and read subtitles for two hours. But if you tell them to go see this film because you liked it for such and such reasons, then they will go. Especially with *Cineaste*, a publication for opinion leaders within a field, it's really important that you be able to ask me questions you feel you need answers to in order to present the film in the right way. I see that as absolutely key to the success of the film. ■

The Lives of Others is distributed by Sony Pictures Classics, 550 Madison Avenue, 8th Floor, New York, NY 10011, phone (212) 833-8844, www.sonyclassics.com.