



The Lives of Others (Germany, 2005)

AS/A2 Film and Media Study Guide

Dir. Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck

Written by Maggie Höffgen

The Lives of Others (Germany, 2005)

AS/A2 Film and Media Study Guide

Dir. Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck

Introduction

1. Curriculum References

WJEC A2 Film Studies:

The Lives of Others is suitable for the small-scale research project in FS4, where it can serve as the focus film. The reference to two other films could include works on the topic of surveillance, such as *The Conversation* (Coppola, 1974), or Cold War thrillers ("spy films"). Other reference films could be *Doctor Zhivago* (Lean, 1965) and *The Deer Hunter* (Cimino, 1978) (see also below). On the point of "the good man" you could think of *Casablanca* (Curtiz, 1942). Obvious points of comparison would be the social, historical and/or political context and the relationship between fact and fiction. A more oblique, but very interesting reference could be made to the institutional mode of cultural production, specifically looking at any film made by one of Hollywood's blacklisted film-makers in the McCarthy era. In FS5, World Cinema, Section A, the emerging New Wave of German Cinema could provide a focus of study, in Section B, *The Lives of Others* could be used for close textual study. In FS 6, Critical Studies, Section A, The Film Text and Spectator: Specialist Studies, the film could be used to analyse the powerful impact it has had on audiences, particularly those in living memory of the Socialist regime in East Germany.

AS/A2 Media Studies:

The Lives of Others is a contemporary film suitable for discussion in relation to media language and narrative or as the focus for critical research/independent study.

2. Themes

The film deals with political themes such as dictatorship and state surveillance, oppression, subversion and liberation, the power and importance of art, as well as with personal themes such as human strength, courage and frailty, subordination and emancipation, individual responsibility, redemption, and, last but not least, love.

Credits

The Lives of Others - Germany (2005)

Crew

Director/Screenplay
Producers

Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck
Quirin Berg

Max Wiedemann
Hagen Bogdanski
Silke Buhr

Cinematography
Set Design
Costumes
Make-up

Gabriele Binder
Annett Schulze
Sabine Schumann

Casting
Editing
Music

Simone Bär
Patricia Rommel
Gabriel Yared
Stéphane Moucha

Cast

Christa-Maria Sieland
Captain Gerd Wiesler
Georg Dreyman
Ltnt. Colonel Anton Grubitz
Minister Bruno Hempf
Paul Hauser
Albert Jerska
Karl Wallner

Martina Gedeck
Ulrich Mühe
Sebastian Koch
Ulrich Tukur
Thomas Thieme
Hans-Uwe Bauer
Volkmar Kleinert
Matthias Brenner

Release Date:
Released by:
Running Time:
Cert:

13 April 2007
Lionsgate
137 minutes
15



The Director



Image: Director Florian Henckel-Donnersmarck

Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck (aka Florian Henckel-Donnersmarck) was born in Cologne in 1973. He grew up in New York, Berlin, Frankfurt and Brussels, and is now living in Berlin. Before embarking on a career as filmmaker he studied Russian (in St. Petersburg), Political Science, Philosophy and Economics at Oxford University. He then went on to study directing at the Academy of Television and Film in Munich. At only 27 years of age he began working on *The Lives of Others*. Before that and while working on the film's screenplay he directed a number of short films which all won prizes. It is therefore not hard to see why he is already referred to as a "heavy-weight" in the industry. By the way, this is justified by his intellectual and creative as well as his physical stature!

The Film - The Lives of Others

1. Historical Background on the GDR (1949-1990)

After World War II Germany was divided into four "zones" which were occupied by the four Allies (USA, England, France, Soviet Union) respectively. The German Democratic Republic (GDR) was formed in 1949, under Soviet occupation, in the same year as the FRG, the Federal Republic of Germany, which was the larger, western part of the old Germany and was occupied by the Western Allies.

The GDR was a self-proclaimed "dictatorship of the proletariat", ruled by a single party, the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED). However, the GDR was part of the Eastern Bloc and as such always dependent on political developments in the Soviet Union. Many citizens of the GDR believed in the principles of socialism, and accepted the necessity of hardship and restrictions resulting from the development towards full-blown communism. However, there were also those who did not agree with the "real existing socialism" as found in the GDR, amongst them many cultural representatives. They were more or less outspoken in their criticism. Many fled or tried to "flee the republic", which was a punishable offence. In high-profile cases the state silenced such critical voices in their midst by forcing them out of the country ("Zwangsausbürgerung" = forced expatriation).

These "others" threatened the state in two ways: They made their opposition known, thus undermining the system directly, and they also exerted a fascination on many who still followed the party line, "poisoning" their thoughts and sowing doubt. This is why they became "others", i.e. "not part of the state". In order to keep its citizens under control and to be able to punish its enemies, the state spied on them through a system of extremely sophisticated surveillance. The Ministry of State Security (MfS), or "Stasi" ("Staatsicherheit), had an active involvement in the lives of those categorised as "others", in order to cow them, change them, imprison them, or force them to work for them as informants, as so-called "Unofficial Employees" - civilian informants (IMs = "Informelle Mitarbeiter"). About 100,000 full-time officers and somewhere between 250,000 and 500,000 civilian informants were employed by the MfS, to spy on a nation of 17 million in order to realise the SED's project of total surveillance of an entire society. Neighbour spied on neighbour, family and friends spied on each other. Meticulous files were compiled and kept on every single person under surveillance. *The Lives of Others* shows very well how all these mechanisms worked.

During the lifetime of the GDR already the term "Stasi" became synonymous with the SED dictatorship's secret apparatus of repression. After the collapse of the regime there was a heated debate as to whether the Stasi files should be made accessible to those affected by them. It was decided that access should be granted. Thousands of people were horrified to find proof of what they might have suspected before, namely that they had been spied on by friends, family, lovers. For many it was also a liberating experience. What do you think, should bygones be bygones, or would you support the argument that people have a right to know, to be able to close a chapter of their own personal history, to grieve?

Most of *The Lives of Others* is set in 1984, which was a particularly repressive year for the Eastern Bloc states. The main storyline of the film ends in 1985, on the day when Gorbachev's election is announced in the papers. From then on economic and political reforms were introduced in the Soviet Union, gradually affecting all its satellite states, including the GDR. With that in mind, when we see the newspaper headlines in the film we know it is not going to take very long for the regime to be toppled, for the Berlin Wall to fall and for the GDR to be dissolved.

2. The Starting Point

The Lives of Others is FHvD's first feature film. How is a West German film-maker qualified to make a film about the GDR? FHvD points out that he did not set out to make a film "about the GDR". Instead he came from quite a different angle: His starting point was a piece of classical music, Beethoven's "Moonlight Sonata" (*Mondschein-Sonate*), which he listened to one night during his student years. All of a sudden he remembered reading about Lenin who had said that that he could not listen to the "Appassionata" (another Beethoven sonata) because if he did he would never finish the revolution. Apparently the effect of the music on him was so strong that it made him want to "tell people sweet stupid things and caress their heads" instead of "smash in those heads mercilessly". FHvD began imagining what would have happened if Lenin had been forced to listen to the "Appassionata". And then the central image of a man with headphones, listening to beautiful music, formed in his head. The man was a "professional" listener; he was spying on an enemy who loves music. Thus the central figure of *The Lives of Others* was born. Within minutes the treatment for the film was written.

3. Research

It was one thing to create a framework for such an ambitious film, but quite another to flesh it out with a story and with historically accurate details. Altogether FHvD spent nearly four years on intensive research and on writing his screenplay.

FHvD's emotional access to the story comes from his own memories of living in West-Berlin at the age of 11. Both his parents originated from the east and had friends and family there. They visited the GDR quite regularly. As "traitors" to the system they must have been on some Stasi list. Therefore his mother was subjected to humiliating checks at the border. Once inside the GDR, the fear continued in their encounters with East German friends and relatives, who were afraid to be seen with them.

Much of the actual story was based on similar occurrences during the GDR, for example publications in the West German magazine "Der Spiegel" by anonymous SED officials. The Stasi was unable to find the author at the time. The GDR suicide statistics which the fictitious Dreyman writes about really were suppressed. Needless to say that the technical aspects of Stasi work which pervade the film were all carefully researched and are authentic.

"My research was quite extensive. I read the biographies of many great GDR writers and artists, talked to quite a few of them, and elements of their lives found their way into the characters and plot. I researched the GDR culture scene, politics and the Stasi for one and a half years before writing the first line of dialogue. I talked to Stasi officers and to their victims. ... The research was one big emotional and intellectual rollercoaster ride. All of these stories somehow influenced my film. I spent almost too much time with the realities. But in the end, I had reached a point where I knew that I would be able to create a fictional story that was somehow truer than a true story."

Of course, it is due to FHvD's enormous creative talent, psychological and philosophical insight and disciplined approach that he manages to weave the various elements of personal memory, historical facts, real-life stories, into a convincing story.

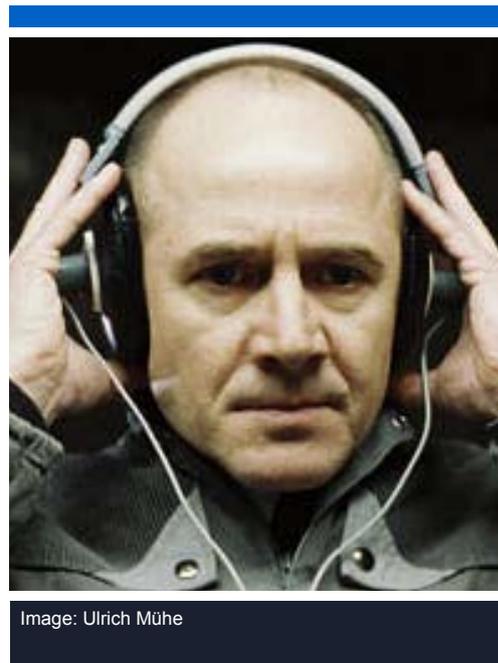


Image: Ulrich Mühe



4. Collaborators

Film-making is a collaborative effort. For *The Lives of Others*, some of its collaborators deserve particular mention: The actor Ulrich Mühe won the German Film Award as Best Actor in 2006 for his portrayal of Captain Gerd Wiesler. Born in 1953 in the GDR and acting first in theatre and then more and more in film, he brought with him first-hand experience of growing up and working in precisely the environment that is represented in *The Lives of Others*. And although he was on the side of the “others” in real life (i.e. spied upon by the Stasi) he found it a worthwhile experience to think himself into the role of a Stasi agent. He enriched the screenplay, which, he acknowledges, was already incredibly believable, with his own ideas, making it even more authentic.

The producers had so much trust in the film that they went an unusual way in search of a composer for the film score: They looked beyond Germany’s borders. At a very early stage the international film composer Gabriel Yared was given a translation of the script. Many conversations in Paris and London, where he lives, followed. Despite the fact that *The Lives of Others* had a very small budget compared to other films for which he has written the score, Yared agreed to do the project. The composer of the scores for *The English Patient*, for which he won an Oscar, and for *Cold Mountain*, which won him the British Academy Award, to name but two, has made an invaluable contribution to *The Lives of Others*.

Sebastian Koch, who plays Dreyman in the film, learnt to play the piano especially for his role. He was able to convince Yared that his “Sonata for a Good Man” had to be played more slowly than originally planned - not just for him to be able to cope with it, but also because he felt it sounded better played more slowly.

5. Context Within Contemporary German Cinema

There have been a number of feature films in Germany in recent years that address German history. The best-known amongst them are *Downfall* (Hirschbiegel, 2004) about the last few days of Hitler, and *Sophie Scholl - The Last Days* (Rothemund, 2005) about the most prominent member of a resistance group against Hitler. Both are serious accounts of horrific events. In the meantime the first German comedy about Hitler has also been made.

With regard to East German history, FHvD is not the first to make a film about it. *Sun Alley* (Haußmann, 1999) and *Goodbye Lenin!* (Becker, 2003) are comedies which belong to a wave of nostalgia for the old East. *Goodbye Lenin!* specifically has been termed a “symbolic funeral”. However, the liberating laughter that greeted these two comedies is not possible in *The Lives of Others*.

Both types of film, comedy and drama, are probably necessary to come to terms with recent German history.

Suggestions for discussions or research projects

Mise-en-Scène/Performance/Narrative

1. The film was shot mainly on original locations, e.g. the Central Office of the Stasi. Do you think original locations are important? If so, why?
2. Discuss the various ways in which colour coding/colour schemes are used to represent contrasts.
3. How, where and when is the connection between the character of Wiesler and Dreyman’s flat represented? Can you see a developing relationship between the character and the place?



4. At the beginning of the film we see Wiesler as a principled communist and Stasi officer. During his surveillance of Dreyman's flat he changes. However, this does not happen abruptly. Trace the stages of Wiesler's change, the questioning of his ideology, his growing involvement with "the lives of others".



5. Describe the character of Christa-Maria Sieland based on her behaviour in key scenes. In how far is her death justified?

6. Compare two scenes and describe their significance:

- The canteen scene, with Grubitz and the young Stasi employee joking about the Head of State Honecker
- The scene in the lift, where the little boy addresses Wiesler.

7. In a conversation with the director about his casting as Wiesler, Ulrich Mühe says that one of the questions that interested him about the role was: "For a large part of the film a man sits in an attic, listens to other people and is constantly moved. How do you act that?" FHvD answers: "Maybe you don't act it at all." After that Mühe agreed to take on the role. Select a couple of those scenes and analyse Mühe's figure, expression and movement in them.

Sound

8. Very complex sound editing has been used in this film. Can you pick out the various levels of diegetic, non-diegetic, onscreen and offscreen sound? Give some examples.

9. What is the symbolic significance of the "sonata for a good man"?

The Lives of Others, Audiences and Hollywood

10. It is perhaps obvious why the film struck such a chord with German audiences. But what could its interest be outside Germany?



11. What qualities of visual and aural style, narrative, genre won this film its Oscar? What do you think? It might also be worth comparing *The Lives of Others* with films that have won the Foreign Language Oscar in previous years.

12. We have had first-time directors win Oscars before. What consequences could this have on the recipient? Do you see any possible negative side to this?

13. What do you think: Why is Hollywood considering a remake of the film already?

Fact and Fiction

14. FHvD says: "I do believe that fiction can actually be richer in content than fact. But perhaps that is a very German thought. The German word for fiction and poetry is 'Dichtung', which actually means something like 'Density'." What do you think of the first sentence? And can you relate to the rest of this statement?

15. How do fact and fiction relate to each other in this film? FHvD says that "the film is historically true in the way that a film like *Doctor Zhivago* is true about the Russian Revolution, or that *The Deer Hunter* is true about the Vietnam War". It is a truthful account, but not a true story." You might like to watch *Doctor Zhivago* and *The Deer Hunter* and try to work out what similarities there might be between these three films.

16. Should narrative films get involved in politics? If yes, in what way? What are feature films good at, where are the limits?

Commented Bibliography

Understandably, Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck has received a lot of national and international press recently, especially after his Oscar win. This means that there are many references and interviews found on various websites, including among the better ones: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Florian_Henckel_von_Donnersmarck, and <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0405094/>

An article in Sight&Sound magazine of December 2006 (pp28-31) deals with the renaissance in contemporary German cinema which provides very useful background information and helps to put Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's work in context.

Sight and Sound magazine (May 07) carries articles on The Lives of Others, including a full review.

The Guardian Weekend magazine of 17 February, 2007, carried an article entitled "The Enemies of the State", which tells stories of ordinary East Germans and their Stasi files.

Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck has compiled a film book, which contains the full shooting script and plenty of background information, including interviews. Sadly it is only available in German: FHvD, *Das Leben der Anderen*, published by Suhrkamp, 2007.

Filmography

- | | |
|------|---|
| 2005 | <i>Das Leben der Anderen (The Lives of Others)</i>
director, writer, co-producer |
| 2001 | <i>Der Templer (The Crusader)</i>
co-director |
| 1999 | <i>Dobermann</i>
director, writer, producer |

Written by Maggie Höffgen, Freelance Film Lecturer
This Study Guide has been produced with the kind support of Lionsgate.

Cornerhouse is Greater Manchester's international centre for contemporary visual arts and cinema. To find out more about Cornerhouse Education please visit www.cornerhouse.org/education

Cornerhouse Education projects include Projector an annual programme of events for schools and colleges and also **exposures UK Student Film Festival**

LIONSGATE™

Cornerhouse Funders:



Study Notes designed by
Robot Monster Design
www.robotmonster.co.uk

CORNERHOUSE
MANCHESTER UK

Cornerhouse
70 Oxford Street
Manchester
M1 5NH

For more info on Cornerhouse Education see
www.cornerhouse.org