

Paul Cooke (Ed.)

***The Lives of Others* and Contemporary German Film**

Companions to Contemporary German Culture



Edited by

Michael Eskin · Karen Leeder · Christopher Young

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Paul Cooke (Ed.)

***The Lives of Others*
and Contemporary
German Film**

A Companion

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Paul Cooke

Introduction

The Lives of Others and Contemporary German Film

Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's *The Lives of Others* belongs to a small but growing number of recent German-language films that have caught the imagination of audiences around the world, bringing the nation's film industry a level of international attention it has not enjoyed since the early 1980s with the success of the New German Cinema. Set in 1984, and described in its critical reception, *inter alia*, as a melodrama, a heritage film and a spy thriller, the film offers the spectator a suitably Orwellian image of pre-unification life under East Germany's totalitarian regime. An internationally renowned GDR writer Georg Dreyman is placed under surveillance by the state's infamous security service, the Ministerium für Staatssicherheit (Ministry for State Security, commonly referred to as the MfS or Stasi), on the advice of a corrupt party official, Minister Bruno Hempf, who claims to suspect him of dissidence. This is an accusation which, at the start of the narrative at least, is entirely false, and we quickly realize that Hempf's real motivation is his lust for the writer's partner, the beautiful and talented actress Christa-Maria Sieland. During the surveillance operation, the controlling Stasi officer, Captain Gerd Wiesler, a man initially convinced of the GDR's status as the better of the two post-war German states and the need of his organization to protect it against Western counter-revolutionary forces, begins to lose faith in the ruling communist party's draconian understanding of its 'socialist' project. He is drawn, instead, to the humanistic artistic world that he discovers through eavesdropping on the couple from his surveillance suite above their apartment. As a result, rather than relaying to his superiors Dreyman's gradual turn to dissidence, he protects him, producing innocuous reports and even removing an incriminating typewriter from the man's flat which would have provided his Stasi colleagues with evidence that Dreyman was the author of an inflammatory essay published in the West. At the same time, we witness the psychological destruction and suicide of Sieland. Initially forced into an affair with the Minister to protect her career, she ultimately cooperates with the Stasi's investigation of her partner, working as one of the thousands of *Inoffizielle Mitarbeiter* (unofficial collaborators, commonly referred to as IM) employed by the organization, the guilt for which she cannot endure. For his part, Dreyman is entirely ignorant of the surveillance operation against him and the reasons for Sieland's death until after unification, at which point he requests access to his Stasi file. Reading the reports prepared by

Wiesler, he discovers the protection he received from the officer, subsequently uncovering the man's identity, whom he finds working now as a lowly distributor of advertising flyers. Dreyman chooses, however, not to make contact with him. Instead he simply dedicates his first post-GDR novel – and the first work he has written since Sieland's death – to HGW XX/7, Wiesler's Stasi code name, an action that signals to the former officer the writer's gratitude. Moreover, it is a gesture that signals to the spectator how both men can now draw a line under their respective pasts. In the immediate aftermath of unification, Dreyman, still suffering the trauma of his GDR experience, seemed to lose the ability to write. Publication of the novel two years later points to the rediscovery of his voice and with it his ability to imagine a future for himself in the unified country. Equally significant, Wiesler now knows that his good deed has been recognized, his contentment captured in the film's closing shot: a medium close-up of the man, his trouble-worn face breaking into a quiet smile as he buys a copy of the book.

The aim of the following collection of essays is twofold. First, it hopes to offer new insights into the film, examining some of the reasons behind its success, placing *The Lives of Others* within its wider historical, political, aesthetic and industrial context. However, as I shall discuss in this introductory chapter, the reception of the film generated a debate that went well beyond the merits, or otherwise, of this box-office hit, ranging from the political potential of the history film and the status of the GDR in the pre-history of the Berlin Republic in the first decade of the new millennium to the nature of film funding in Germany and the cultural value of popular cinema. Consequently, the volume also uses the film as a case study to take stock of the state of both German film and German film studies, highlighting some of the key fault lines at work in contemporary critical discourses. In so doing, it provides the various authors collected together here – many of whom have shaped academic and professional discussion of German cinema in recent years – with the opportunity to reflect on and further develop the debates to which the film spoke.

The Director, His Project and the Road to International Acclaim

Born in 1973 to an aristocratic family of Silesian expellees, Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck spent his childhood living in New York, Berlin, Frankfurt/Main and Brussels, his family moving with his father's postings as a senior manager for Lufthansa and giving him a native command of both English and German. After school he initially moved to St Petersburg to study Russian before taking up a

place at Oxford, where he studied politics, philosophy and economics and where, most importantly for his future career, he won an internship to work for Richard Attenborough on *In Love and War* (1996). From there he went to film school, studying at the Munich Academy for Television and Film, whose alumni include Wim Wenders, Bernd Eichinger and Roland Emmerich. At this point he had the initial idea for *The Lives of Others*. This came from an account he had read of a conversation between Maxim Gorky and Lenin, during which the Russian leader pointed to what he viewed to be the dangerously humanizing power of art. In the director's retelling of the conversation, Lenin suggested that he could not listen to Beethoven's *Appassionata* – his favourite piece of music – too often, as he feared it would prevent him from taking the necessary action to complete the revolution, making him want to whisper 'sweet, silly things' into the ears of those he should be prepared to destroy without compassion.¹ This became the story of a hard-line Stasi operative who mutates into a sensitive guardian angel through his exposure to poetry and music.

Although he had the idea for the film as a student, *The Lives of Others* had a long genesis, taking eight years to come to the screen, the director initially finding it difficult to secure the necessary financing. Nonetheless, after a slow start the project began to gain momentum and by the time it was scheduled for theatrical release in Germany on 23 March 2006 it seemed destined for success. By this point it had already received four Bavarian film awards. These were quickly followed by seven German Film Awards, three European Film Awards and dozens of other nominations and prizes, culminating in February 2007 in the award of an Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film. It also did well commercially, grossing over \$77 million worldwide, a figure that places it in the same commercial league as other recent German hits such as Wolfgang Becker's *Good Bye, Lenin!* (2003, \$79 million) and Oliver Hirschbiegel's *Der Untergang* (Downfall, 2003, \$92 million).² However, the success of *The Lives of Others* is, to some extent, more impressive than either of these films or, indeed, other recent German-language Oscar winners, Caroline Link's *Nirgendwo in Afrika* (Nowhere in Africa, 2001) and Stefan

¹ Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, 'Appassionata: Die Filmidee', in *Das Leben der anderen. Filmbuch* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2006), pp. 169–70 (p. 169). This is retold in more detail in von Donnersmarck's contribution to this volume, from where this translation is also taken. For a detailed discussion of the way von Donnersmarck uses this story in the film itself and how this compares to Lenin's original motivations see Jennifer Creech, 'A Few Good Men: Gender, Ideology, and Narrative Politics in *The Lives of Others* and *Good Bye, Lenin!*', *Women in German Yearbook. Feminist Studies in German Literature & Culture*, 25 (2009), 100–26 (p. 109–10), as well as Silberman's contribution to this volume.

² All figures taken from *Box Office Mojo* (<http://boxofficemojo.com/>).

Ruzowitzky's German-Austrian co-production *Die Fälscher* (The Counterfeiters, 2007). This was von Donnersmarck's debut feature, produced for a meagre \$2 million. Compare this to the \$8 million budget of *Nirgendwo in Afrika* or the \$15 million at Hirschbiegel's disposal. These are still modest sums by Hollywood's standards, but nonetheless of a different order to that available to von Donnersmarck. Moreover, one would not expect a low-budget project to attract a cast of such well known film and television actors, including Ulrich Mühle (*Der letzte Zeuge* [The Last Witness, Bernhard Stephan, 1998–2007]), Sebastian Koch (*Die Manns – Ein Jahrhundertroman* [The Manns – Novel of a Century, Heinrich Breloer, 2001]) and Martina Gedeck (*Bella Martha*, Sandra Nettelbeck, 2001), all of whom agreed to waive a large proportion of their fee to take part. Equally remarkable, the director managed to engage the composer Gabriel Yared – best known for his Oscar-winning work on Anthony Minghella's *The English Patient* (1996) – to write the soundtrack. He also clinched important deals with major distribution companies, including Walt Disney's Buena Vista International in Germany and Sony Pictures Classics in the US, as well as a prestigious contract with the publisher Suhrkamp for a book to accompany the film. Although well connected through his background and education, von Donnersmarck is himself a very resourceful man who, even at this early point in his career, was happy to approach established members of the industry, confident that he would be able to convince them of the value of his project.

His confidence, as well as his tenacity and energy, also stood him in good stead during the Oscar campaign, which played a hugely significant role in the commercial success of the film and in the subsequent development of the filmmaker's career. There are numerous reasons why *The Lives of Others* did well at the Academy Awards. Like both other post-unification German-language winners and the vast majority of nominations, this is a film that engages with the nation's problematic past, while conforming to mainstream genre conventions. As Georg Seeßlen notes, in order to be successful in this category, a 'film has to be "foreign enough," but must also not flout the aesthetic codes of the dream factory too flagrantly'.³ However, also important was Sony's carefully orchestrated promotion campaign. The film opened in Los Angeles for one week in December 2006 in order to qualify for the 'Critics' Awards', an important event that often indicates subsequent Oscar success. This was then followed by special screenings for critics and other key opinion-makers to create a word-of-mouth 'buzz' around the film. It did not go on general release in the US until February 2007, in the immediate run up to the ceremony, at which point von Donnersmarck was in the US,

3 Georg Seeßlen, 'So gewinnt man einen Auslands-Oscar', *Die Zeit*, 22 February 2007.

travelling the length and breadth of the country, giving up to twenty interviews a day, his fluency in English making him an easy guest for US talk-show hosts.⁴ This is a director who understands the modern film industry well and is very comfortable with the glitz of Hollywood.

Mapping the Contours of Success: the ‘Authenticity Debate’ and Beyond

Although the global success of *The Lives of Others* can be compared favourably with that of *Good Bye, Lenin!* or *Der Untergang*, unlike these other films, its success was largely international. It grossed over \$11 million in the US on its theatrical release, amounting to 14% of its total gross. This compares with \$4 million for *Goodbye, Lenin!* (5.1%) and \$5.5 million for *Der Untergang* (6%). In Germany, on the other hand, Becker and Hirschbiegel’s films earned \$41 million (9%) and \$39 million (16.5%) respectively, *The Lives of Others* only \$19 million (5%). By any usual measure of success for a German film, *The Lives of Others* did well domestically in terms of ticket sales. It achieved an audience of over 2 million during its theatrical release, a German film generally being deemed a hit if it sells more than a million tickets. Yet this is a long way short of *Good Bye, Lenin!*’s audience of 6.5 million. It is also far removed from the domestic success of Til Schweiger’s *Keinohrhasen* (Rabbit Without Ears, 2007, 6 million) or the monster hits of Michael ‘Bully’ Herbig, *Der Schuh des Manitu* (The Shoe of Manitu, 2001, 10.5 million) and *(T)Raumschiff Surprise – Periode 1* (Dreamship Surprise – Periode 1, 2004, 9 million).⁵

If one looked closely, this divergence in international and domestic reception could also be sensed in the prizes the film received. Von Donnersmarck received nominations and prizes at festivals around the world, but while the film did well at the German film awards, it was snubbed by Berlinale director Dieter Kosslick, who did not invite it to compete at the 2006 festival. Similarly, in its international press reception it was almost uniformly praised for its gripping, beautifully shot narrative, which ostensibly gave its audience an authentic and detailed presentation of the oppressive reality of life in the GDR. ‘It’s hard to believe that this is von

⁴ For a discussion of von Donnersmarck’s campaign to win the Oscar see Seeßlen, ‘So gewinnt man einen Auslands-Oscar’, Susan Vahabzadeh and Fritz Göttler, ‘Dabei sein ist längst nicht alles’, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 23 February 2007.

⁵ All ticket sales figures are taken from the Filmförderungsanstalt Filmhitlisten (<http://www.ffa.de/>).

Donnersmarck's first feature', David Ansen declares. 'His storytelling gifts have the novelistic richness of a seasoned master'.⁶ Peter Bradshaw was similarly effusive in his praise, describing it as an 'intensively crafted liberal tragedy' that provides an effective 'antidote to *Ostalgie*', the much discussed 'nostalgia for the days of the Berlin Wall', that had, Bradshaw suggests, so gripped the nation of late and was to be found most obviously in the success of Becker's *Good Bye, Lenin!*, a film that 'frankly, came close to indulging the shabby communist regime'. At last, it appeared, a German filmmaker was revealing the true face of the GDR and uncovering the inner workings of its most despised state organ.⁷ In Germany, however, its reception was far more mixed, sparking a major, and at times hugely vitriolic, debate. On the one hand, there were those who also saw the film as a corrective to *Ostalgie*, or to the 'Sun-Alley-ization of GDR memory', as Sebastian Handke puts it, here referring to that other key *Ostalgie* film, Leander Haußmann's coming-of-age teen comedy *Sonnenallee* (Sun Alley, 1999).⁸ Indeed, no less an authority on Stasi oppression than Wolf Biermann praised the film for its authentic image of the GDR, a remarkable achievement for a 'debut director who grew up in the West'.⁹ The film's ostensible quest for authenticity and painstaking attention to detail was repeatedly cited by those who praised it. It seemed that every aspect of the set was an accurate reconstruction of the period, down to the bugging devices installed in the writer's flat, as von Donnersmarck was at pains to point out in interviews he gave during the film's theatrical release.¹⁰ And, as he was also keen to mention in these same interviews, although he grew up in the West, he did have some first-hand experience of life in the GDR gained on family trips there as a child, underlining his 'right' to tell this kind of story.¹¹ The film's apparent authenticity, moreover, was a major reason behind the level of

6 David Ansen, 'A Waking Nightmare. Sex, spies und audiotape in corrupt East Germany', *Newsweek*, 12 February 2007. For an overview of the film's critical reception see Lu Seegers, 'Das Leben der Anderen oder der "richtige" Erinnerung an die DDR', in *Film und kulturelle Erinnerung. Pluri-mediale Konstellationen*, ed. by Astrid Erll and Stephanie Wodianka (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), pp. 21–52; Nick Hodgkin, 'Screening the Stasi: The Politics of Representation in Postunification Film', in *The GDR Remembered. Representations of the East German State since 1989*, ed. by Nick Hodgkin and Caroline Pearce (Rochester: Camden House, 2011), pp. 69–91 (pp. 78–84).

7 Peter Bradshaw, 'The Lives of Others', *The Guardian*, 13 April 2007.

8 Sebastian Handke, 'Die Wanzen sind echt: Kinodebatte über *Das Leben der Anderen*', *Tagespiegel*, 8 April 2007.

9 Christina Tilmann, 'Wer ist Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck?', *Tagesspiegel*, 25 February, 2007.

10 Handke, 'Die Wanzen sind echt'; Dieter Radow, 'Die innere Wiedervereinigung', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 12 April 2007.

11 Lars-Olav Beier, 'Endstation Hollywood', *Der Spiegel*, 12 February 2007.

official endorsement the film received.¹² Along with Biermann, the former and, then, current Federal Commissioner for the Stasi archives, Joachim Gauck and Marianne Birthler, were also effusive in their support. ‘Yes, that’s how it was!’, declared Gauck emphatically in *Stern* magazine, praising the film for its presentation of ‘authentic images, figures and events’.¹³ For the Federal Agency for Political Education, the film’s attention to detail also made it an ideal text for teaching school children about the oppressive reality of life in the East,¹⁴ and the positive reviews of the various film screenings specifically for children seemed to support its view, the organizers of such events precisely seeing the film as a way for the younger generation to gain a non-*Ostalgie*-tainted picture of the GDR.¹⁵

On the other hand, there were those who condemned the film precisely for its *lack* of authenticity. As Anna Funder notes in one of the few critical foreign reviews the film received, the Stasi would never have let a lone individual run an operation like this. Consequently, a single officer betraying the Stasi could never have had such a large impact on an operation, and this is not to mention the fact that there is little or no evidence that such conversions amongst members of the organization ever took place.¹⁶ Similarly Stefan Wolle, along with numerous other commentators in Germany, found various inaccuracies in its representation of the inner workings of the MfS, from the film’s incorrect use of titles in the way the characters address each other to the unlikelihood that a member of a party elite known for its prudish nature would, or could, order an expensive surveillance operation in order to have an affair.¹⁷

12 Peter Zander, ‘Im Ausland wird man immer zuerst auf Nazis angesprochen. Das nervt’, *Die Welt*, 21 March 2006.

13 Joachim Gauck, ‘*Das Leben der Anderen*: “Ja, so war es!”’, *Stern*, 25 March 2006.

14 Marianne Falck, *Filmheft. Das Leben der Anderen* (Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung: Bonn, 2006).

15 Torsten Harmsen, ‘Irgendwie geht’s um Stasi: 700 Schüler sehen auf Einladung Klaus Bögers *Das Leben der Anderen*’, *Berliner Zeitung*, 4 April 2006; Ingo Rössling, ‘Film und Diskussion: Enkel von Stasi-Opfer zeigt Flagge’, *Die Welt*, 29 March 2006.

16 Anna Funder, ‘Eyes without a Face’, *Sight and Sound*, 5/17 (2007), 16–20 (p. 18). It is interesting to note that, while the initial international press reception was very positive, there were some significant commentators, like Funder, with a particular interest in the former Eastern Bloc who were similarly critical in terms of the film’s historical accuracy, including Timothy Garton Ash, who was nonetheless very positive in terms of the film’s overall value (Timothy Garton Ash ‘The Stasi on Our Minds’, *New York Review of Books*, 31 May 2007) and Slavoj Žižek, who saw little very little of merit in the film. Slavoj Žižek, ‘The Dreams of Others’, *In these Times*, 18 May 2007 (<http://www.inthesetimes.com/article/3183/>).

17 Stefan Wolle, ‘Stasi mit menschlichem Antlitz’, *Deutschland Archiv*, 3 (2006), 497–99.

Others went far beyond pointing out specific historical inaccuracies to challenge the film's underlying ideological position. One of the most scathing appraisals in this regard came from Rüdiger Suchsland, who condemned the film as 'Disney's GDR-Melo[drama]', a reference to its distribution in Germany by Buena Vista. Suchsland is particularly contemptuous of both the film's official endorsement and its potential educational value:

This is one of those films that culture ministers like. A palatable melodrama, from the brown, dusty days of the GDR, seasoned with some sex and art, lots of horrible repression, some dead people, still more heartache, a few cold, evil perpetrators, lots and lots of German victims and a Saul who becomes a Paul. [... von Donnersmarck] presents the GDR so simplistically, clearly and unambiguously that one doesn't have to think about it much. One knows where one stands. He divides the past up into small, bite-sized, consumable pieces, into teaching units. School classes will be shown it until they can't stand it anymore.¹⁸

Of course the authorities liked the film, Suchsland suggests. Its straightforward melodramatic narrative allows a clear-cut reading of the past that requires no reflection. In similar vein, Gerhard Ehrlicher argues that the film 'trivializes the misdeeds of the State Security Service'.¹⁹ While Günter Jenschonnek goes further, suggesting provocatively that its ultimate aim is to turn Wiesler into 'a State Security Schindler', making a straight-edged perpetrator into a sensitive good person, then into a hero and finally into a pitiable victim.²⁰ Both its detractors and supporters make the point that *The Lives of Others* is a feature film and not a historical treatise. Indeed, this is a point von Donnersmarck himself increasingly made in response to some of the comments the film received about specific historical inaccuracies, while still insisting upon the overall authenticity of the film's depiction of the period.²¹ However, for its detractors this fundamental claim to authenticity meant that the film must, in fact, be judged not only aesthetically but also as history. In this regard, while the 'bugs' used in the film might well be 'real', its presentation of the workings of the Stasi are not and so cannot stand as a useful depiction of the period. Instead, Thomas Lindenberger, for example, argues that the Stasi is used as the backdrop for a classic 'exploitation film', designed primarily to attract international audiences.²²

¹⁸ Rüdiger Suchsland, 'Mundgerecht konsumierbare Vergangenheit', *Teleopolis*, 23 March 2006.

¹⁹ Gerhard Ehrlicher, 'Die Realität war eine andere', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 21 June 2006.

²⁰ Jenschonnek, 'Sehnsucht nach unpolitischen Märchen'.

²¹ Hodgin, 'Screening the Stasi', p. 79.

²² Thomas Lindenberger, 'Stasiploitation – Why Not? The Scriptwriter's Historical Creativity', *German Studies Review*, 31.3 (2008), pp. 557–66.

Others also argue that this was not the first film to address seriously the legacy of the Stasi, as some critics claimed, pointing to numerous documentaries and dramas that have presented the machinations of this organization since unification, including Volker Schlöndorff's *Die Stille nach dem Schuß* (The Legend of Rita, 2000), Connie Walter's *Wie Feuer und Flamme* (Never Mind the Wall, 2001) and Christian Klemke and Jan Lorenzen's *Das Ministerium für Staatssicherheit: Alltag einer Behörde* (The Ministry of State Security: The Daily Routine of an Agency, 2003).²³ Indeed, rather than marking a new stage in the historical representation of the GDR, both the film itself and elements of its reception could be seen as a throwback to the early 1990s when the role of the Stasi was central to discussions of the East German State, and German public life was regularly punctuated with scandals about the collaboration of public figures with the MfS, scandals that came to light as the miles of Stasi files accumulated in its forty years of existence were gradually worked through. In the wake of the *Wende* (the German term used to describe the collapse of the GDR), numerous figures were outed as IMs, from Lothar de Maizière, the GDR's only democratically elected President, to some of the country's most prominent cultural figures such as Christa Wolf and Heiner Müller, fuelling the impression that life in the GDR was like living in an Orwellian Big Brother state where, as Jürgen Habermas famously described it, a giant octopus-like organization stretched its tentacles through the whole of society, leaving no aspect of life free from its influence.²⁴ In recent years such scandals have become less frequent, although the film itself generated another one when Mühe made the claim that his former wife, the actress Jenny Gröllmann, had spied on him for the Stasi. This seemed further to point to the authenticity of the film, Gröllmann playing a version of 'Sieland' to Mühe's real-life 'Dreyman'.²⁵ However, any connection between the actual experience of the actors and the film's representation of history ultimately appeared to reside instead in the unreliability of the Stasi archive as an accurate record of the past, Gröllmann herself claiming that her

²³ See, for example, Seegers, 'Das Leben der Anderen oder der "richtige" Erinnerung an die DDR', p. 35.

²⁴ For further discussion see David Bathrick, *The Powers of Speech. The Politics of Culture in the GDR* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1995), p. 221.

²⁵ Seegers also notes that this was not the only way in which the film seemed to play to external Stasi debates, pointing to a demonstration just before its German premiere when 200 former Stasi officers protested against the manner in which the MfS was being characterized in the Stasi Prison Museum at Hohenschönhausen. Seegers, 'Das Leben der Anderen oder der "richtige" Erinnerung an die DDR', p. 34. The impact of these events on Mühe is further discussed in von Donnersmarck's contribution to this volume.

file was a fabrication by an ambitious Stasi officer.²⁶ Moreover, in relation to the way the film played into broader debates on the history of the GDR and its representation in contemporary German society, its supporters' claim that *The Lives of Others* was a corrective to *Ostalgie* ignored the fact that such nostalgia was at least partially a response to the very post-unification perception of the GDR as an Orwellian Stasi state we find in the film, where all activity was monitored and manipulated by the MfS, and where anything resembling a 'normal' life, as one might understand it in the West, was impossible. *Ostalgie*, with its fetishization of aspects of everyday life in the GDR was, for better or worse, in part a declaration of such normalcy.²⁷

Despite its subject matter and the claim that it was intent upon challenging the apparent revisionism of *Ostalgie*, for its detractors, the film trivialized the Stasi's crimes in its focus on a 'good' officer and so ultimately offered an equally revisionist image of the past. In this regard, *The Lives of Others* was also repeatedly condemned as a 'consensus film', a pejorative term used to describe much recent mainstream German cinema.²⁸ Coined by Eric Rentschler to define a wave of romantic comedies that enjoyed a good degree of domestic success during the 1990s, it suggested an approach to filmmaking far removed from the aesthetically challenging and politically abrasive work of the New German Cinema. These mainstream comedies instead appeared to present a self-congratulatory image of life in the recently united Germany.²⁹ Although hardly a romantic comedy, the term is used here to describe a film that was accused of wilfully misrepresenting the reality of the Stasi's activities, turning the past into an easily digestible melodrama, its straightforward narrative and comfortable mainstream aesthetic undermining any potential it might have as a useful intervention in debates on the legacy of the GDR. Returning for the moment to Suchsland's attack, it is revealing that he twice cites Fassbinder as a counterpoint to von Donnersmarck. For Suchsland, Fassbinder embodies a far more aesthetically and politi-

²⁶ Jennifer Creech points to the research carried out by Petra Weisenburger for her 2008 documentary on Gröllmann's life, *Ich will da sein* (I Want to Be There), where she came to this conclusion, also noting that there was no document containing Gröllmann's signature to prove that she had been an IM. Creech, 'A Few Good Men', p. 121.

²⁷ For further discussion see Paul Cooke, *Representing East Germany. From Colonization to Nostalgia* (Oxford: Berg, 2005).

²⁸ von Beier, 'Endstation Hollywood'; Katja Körte Bauer, 'Die feine Grenzlinie auf dem Weg zum Verra', *Stuttgarter Zeitung*, 27 February 2007.

²⁹ Eric Rentschler, 'From New German Cinema to the Post-Wall Cinema of Consensus', in *Cinema and Nation*, ed. by Mette Hjort and Scott Mckenzie (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 260–77.

cally interesting German film tradition, one that understands the self-reflexive, critical potential of melodrama, served up here as unreconstructed kitsch.³⁰

In response to the views of critics such as Suchsland, Günter Rohrbach, President of the German Film Academy, produced a similarly vitriolic attack in *Der Spiegel*, condemning these German feuilletonists as ‘autistic’, their invariable condemnation of mainstream German films revealing them to be out of touch with the cinema-going public. He questions what he views to be the patronizing implications of the term ‘consensus film’ as it is used by numerous critics in the German press. Instead, he celebrates the term and the role such films have played in the rediscovery of mainstream domestic cinema by German audiences; he goes on to question the purpose of those critics who seem to approach popular film with a preconceived resentment, unable to see any potential artistic merit in such work, however this might be defined.³¹ Von Donnersmarck, for his part, supported Rohrbach, taking on those who condemned his film as ‘consensual’, redefining the term positively:

If ‘consensus film’ is supposed to mean the same as ‘trivial’ or even ‘bad film’, then I want to make a lot more bad and trivial films in my career. What would those critics say of films like *Casablanca* or *Godfather Part II*? They must be the worst films of all time, for absolutely everyone thinks that they are good, and not – as in my case – almost everyone. I wish that *The Lives of Others* was much more of a consensus film!³²

For von Donnersmarck, it is possible to be ‘consensual’, in the sense of being popular with audiences and aesthetically mainstream, but to still have artistic credibility.

***The Lives of Others* and Contemporary German Film**

What began as a discussion of an individual film became a debate on the ethics of representing Germany’s problematic history as well as the type of film industry the country should support. In the rest of this volume these discussions are revisited, re-evaluated and extended, building on the growing body of scholarship that has emerged since the film’s initial reception while also taking into account later developments in von Donnersmarck’s own career as well as in the broader

³⁰ Suchsland, ‘Mundgerecht konsumierbare Vergangenheit’.

³¹ Günter Rohrbach, ‘Das Schmollen der Autisten’, *Der Spiegel*, 22 January 2007.

³² Quoted in Annette Maria Rupprecht, ‘Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck: XXL’, *German Film Quarterly*, 3 (2006), 16–17 (p. 17).

landscape of German film. Part I of the volume (*Making the Film*) focuses on the immediate production context, beginning with two contributions from people directly involved in the project. Chapter One is a lecture given by von Donnersmarck at the University of Cambridge, introduced by Christopher Young who organized the event. The director talks very personally about his approach to filmmaking and in particular his conceptualization of colour and music. Some of this account appears in the various interviews he gave during the film's initial release. However, the lecture format gives him the space to provide a far greater level of detail than is found elsewhere. Throughout, a sense of von Donnersmarck's tenacity dominates, born of the conviction he had of the value of his project and which helped him bring together a cast and crew of a calibre one would not expect for a debut director. At the same time, he addresses some of the key issues raised in the wider debate the film sparked, issues that will be explored throughout this volume. Not least, he revisits the question of historical authenticity and his right, as a Westerner, to tell this story, reflecting on the pressure he felt from the media to find a link in his own biography to the GDR. In Chapter Two Manfred Wilke addresses the issue of authenticity further, giving an account of his experience working as von Donnersmarck's historical consultant on the film. Wilke has spent his career analysing the workings of the SED dictatorship and was involved, during the 1990s, in the Federal Enquete Commissions on the official historical appraisal of the GDR period. He discusses the specific historical sources which fed into the narrative – including the historical evidence for the type of conversion we see in Wiesler – as well as the wider political and social realities of life in the GDR, particularly towards the end of the state's existence. Chapters Three and Four complement the accounts of these two direct participants. Randall Halle (Chapter Three) looks at the broader production context within which von Donnersmarck was operating as a debut feature-film director, examining the fault lines between, and asymmetries in, the experience of filmmakers from the former GDR and the Federal Republic, along with the specific cultural habitus of von Donnersmarck's training in Munich. Halle examines the unique place the director occupies within what he terms the postwall 'matrix of production', as well as the broader implications of von Donnersmarck's success for the rest of the industry and the challenge it presents more established filmmakers to achieve more with ever smaller budgets. Jaimey Fisher (Chapter Four) discusses the pivotal role played by Ulrich Mühe (Wiesler) in the success of the film, the importance of his contribution having already been highlighted in von Donnersmarck's lecture. Fisher looks at Mühe's participation in the film from the perspective of 'star studies', exploring the place of the actor's biography in the critical discourse that initially surrounded the film, offering a different perspective on the question of historical authenticity to that found in Wilke's chapter.

This he contextualizes within Mühe's entire oeuvre, and the way his star persona has a particular memorializing dimension either not found, or ignored, in discussions of stardom in Anglo-American star studies.

Fisher begins to move the discussion of the film beyond its initial production context, opening it up to reinterpretation from a range of theoretical and cultural perspectives. In Part II (Re-positioning the Film) this is developed further, the film being read in ways that re-evaluate and re-configure the initial debates it generated. Chapters Five and Six focus on issues of genre. On the one hand, Andrea Rinke continues the discussion of the specific contribution made by von Donnersmarck's cast, looking now at the way in which Martina Gedeck helped shape the character of Christa-Maria Sieland. Rinke brings out ambiguities in the character of Sieland ignored in much of the film's initial critical reception, exploring her complex place within the melodramatic economy of gender relations in the film and, in turn, the film's appeal to pathos. This, she argues, challenges any straightforwardly Manichean conceptualization of melodrama in the film, offering instead a more nuanced understanding of its presentation of power-relations than has often been acknowledged. David Bathrick, on the other hand, examines the film as the first post-89 Cold War spy film, a generic approach that he uses to re-evaluate the film's engagement with history in its form as well as narrative content. Bathrick continues the discussion begun by Wilke, returning to the historical record in his account of the way the Stasi carried out its surveillance operations. However, he quickly moves from the historical to the aesthetic, placing the film within a trajectory of film production that moves from James Bond to John Le Carré before landing on Roland Gräf's little discussed East German drama *Der Tango-spieler* (The Tango Player, 1991), produced by DEFA, the state's centralized film production company. In the process, Bathrick also develops aspects of Halle's chapter, contrasting approaches to coming to terms with the GDR past in contemporary (unified) German cinema against the approach that was beginning to emerge in GDR state-sponsored films produced just before DEFA was wound up in 1992.

In his lecture, von Donnersmarck is keen to highlight the literary nature of his screenplay and the efforts he went to in order to have it published by Suhrkamp. In Chapter Seven, Marc Silberman reflects further on the literary dimensions of von Donnersmarck's project, extending the volume's discussion of the film's initial production context to the publication context of the screenplay. At the same time, he explores the literary forms and allusions that permeate the film itself, from Lessing to Brecht, examining the ways in which the film's web of intertextuality both reflects and challenges the narrative's assumptions about the ethical power of literature and art. Throughout, Silberman highlights issues of intermediality, a major theme of much contemporary film criticism, looking at how the

translation of cultural forms across media point to the limits form places on representation. It is the question of translation that is key to Chapter Eight. Ian Thomas Fleishman examines translation as a function of real and metaphorical 'border crossing' in the film, specifically with regard to the transnational context of the film's consumption. For Fleishman, *The Lives of Others* seeks to create a bridge across geographical and temporal boundaries, translating the experience of life under the SED for audiences situated beyond Germany and after the GDR period. He teases out productive tensions in the film's self-conscious exploration of its own status as both a transnational and *postnational* cinematic text. Here he continues a discussion that spans Part II and III on the representational limits of film as a medium, as well as *The Lives of Others*' place within the canon of German national film culture.

Part III (Beyond the Film) broadens the volume's frame of reference still further, extending the exploration of the film's place within contemporary German culture and continuing the project of analyzing *The Lives of Others* using the wide range of tools available to contemporary film scholars but often not employed in the analysis of German cinema. At the same time we look at the way the film plays to current trends in German film production, while also re-evaluating the debate on the nature of this production that the film initially sparked. Lutz Koepnick revisits Fleishman's exploration of intermedial borders, along with the volume's discussion of the limits of cinematic representation, in his investigation of von Donnersmarck's soundscape. Developing the work of Michel Chion, in Chapter Nine, Koepnick positions the film's auditory field as a critically charged space which refuses the straightforward integration of sight and sound generally to be found in mainstream cinema. Specifically, Koepnick challenges the film's description as either an example of heritage or consensus cinema – two mainstays of the mainstream film industry in Germany. Instead, he argues that the complexity of von Donnersmarck's soundscape suggests ways that the film might be placed alongside the type of esoteric filmmaking generally considered to be its antithesis by many cultural commentators. Sabine Hake also looks at the film's location within broader trends in film production, returning to debates about German heritage cinema. Chapter Ten examines the role of production design and material culture in the film, analyzing its politics of representation. However, rather than evaluating the film's politics from the perspective of its presentation of GDR history, Hake's concern is the changing nature of representation in the digital age. That said, she does explore contemporary fascination for the material culture of pre-unification East and West Germany, so-called *Ostalgie* and *Westalgie*. This she examines as a manifestations of what Jonathan Bach has termed 'modernist nostalgia', a 'longing for longings once possible' but lost in the post-ideological Berlin Republic, where digital reproduction has the potential to sever

any indexical link with the material culture of the past. Chapter Eleven further explores the changing nature of cinematic representation, revisiting discussions begun by Bathrick on the film's place within international traditions of filmmaking, along with its use of genre. Paul Cooke investigates von Donnersmarck's engagement with the aesthetics and representational politics of the auteur-driven Hollywood Renaissance of the 1960s and 1970s. In particular, he explores von Donnersmarck's dialogue with Francis Ford Coppola's *The Conversation* (1974). The role of *The Conversation* as an intertext in von Donnersmarck's film has often been mentioned (not least in Koepnick's contribution to this volume). However, it has not until now been discussed in detail. This connection is then contrasted with the role of Hollywood in von Donnersmarck's second film, *The Tourist* (2010), looking at how the film reflects a broader shift in the relationship of many contemporary German filmmakers to this hegemonic film culture. Finally, in Chapter Twelve, Eric Rentschler draws the discussion of the film to a close by returning to the initial controversy it sparked on the nature of German national film production. He revisits his influential essay of 2000 'From New German Cinema to the Post-wall Cinema of Consensus', exploring, and challenging, the various ways notions of 'consensus' have shaped debates about contemporary German film culture in the decade since its publication. Complementing both Koepnick and Hake's chapters, this discussion he places alongside an examination of heritage cinema as it has come to be defined by cultural commentators across Europe. Rentschler opens up the term, exploring a variety of alternative conceptualizations of the heritage film, as well as film heritage, within the context of German film production. The chapter closes with an examination of *Jahrgang 45* (Born in '45, 1965), which Rentschler offers as a useful counterpoint to *The Lives of Others*, the volume again reminding us of the contribution DEFA made to German film history and the richness of its engagement with life in the GDR before and in the aftermath of unification.

Although each chapter offers a specific approach to the film and can be read in isolation, it is hoped that the volume will also be read as a whole, some of its key questions being debated across several of the contributions. Why was *The Lives of Others* such an international success? How does this success speak to the increasingly transnational modes of production, distribution and exhibition that define the global film industry today? How does this reflect its engagement with internationally understandable genre conventions and to what extent does this, in turn, highlight the shifting contours of mainstream and more avant-garde film production in Germany? What does this say about the limits of cinematic representation? How does the film engage with contemporary historical debates, and how were these considered during the production process itself? Who has the 'right' to represent the past, and how are we to understand the 'value' of film as

history? How does *The Lives of Others*, and its attempt to work through the legacy of the GDR, relate to the longer tradition of German *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (coming to terms with the past) of the Nazi period? Can a popular film text, and in particular the popular heritage film that has played such an important role in German national cinema's recent international visibility, offer new insight into the past? How do these films, with their identificatory narratives focussed on the emotional engagement of the spectator, compare with the often more explicitly self-reflexive, critical history films of the New German Cinema – films that in their day played an equally important role in the international success of filmmakers such as Fassbinder and Schlöndorff –, or the DEFA tradition and the representation of history on the GDR screen? Finally, how does the film's popular and academic reception engage the broader concerns of film studies generally, as well as German film studies in particular? What does its reception say about the state of the discipline and its increasing interdisciplinarity, drawing as it does on methodologies and thematic concerns from areas as varied as cognitive psychology, sociology, economics, literary studies, history, gender and star studies? These are some of the questions this volume attempts to answer.

I. Making the Film

Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck

CHAPTER ONE

Seeing a Film Before You Make It

Introduced by Christopher Young

Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck is a big name – especially when it appears in your inbox. In January 2008, I was thrilled to see it stretch across my computer screen when I opened my email and read Florian's acceptance of our invitation to come to the University of Cambridge to deliver the inaugural X-Changing Lecture on German culture. The event bore the name of the sponsors of the annual Oxford-Cambridge Boat Race, a company whose then CEO, David Andrews, wanted to express his fondness for and admiration of Germany with a generous donation for an occasional intellectual counterpart to the physical exertions on the Thames. The excitement around the various institutions supporting the lecture (the Department of German and Dutch, the Judge Business School and Pembroke College) that took place the following October and the turn-out of several hundred, spilling out into and filling the overflow room, were fitting testimony to von Donnersmarck's standing and the interest his debut feature film had generated in the UK and beyond.

As befitted the largely student audience, von Donnersmarck touched on the importance of his undergraduate and graduate careers in various countries. In general, he has been openly enthusiastic about his time at Oxford, particularly praising 'the visual self-containment of the city, and the fact that you live there within specific aesthetics, as if in a film'.¹ When introducing him in Cambridge I gained myself an easy laugh with the quip that three years in Oxford must have been the perfect preparation for depicting the drab and dreary world of the former East Germany. I had little sense that this casual remark struck at the heart of von Donnersmarck's cinematic vision, as his opening comments would soon go on to show.

The GDR, of course, was no joking matter either. But as Peter Schneider, author of the famous *Der Mauerspringer* (The Wall Jumper, 1984) and member of the jury that awarded von Donnersmarck the Deutscher Filmpreis, noted: 'For a long time, there was a tendency to portray the GDR as a state where no one really

¹ Annette Maria Rupprecht, 'Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck: XXL', *German Film Quarterly*, 3 (2006), 16–17 (p. 16).

suffered and the Stasi was regarded as something of a joke'.² *The Lives of Others* has frequently been read as a corrective to films such as *Sonnenallee* (Sun Alley, Leander Haußmann, 1999) and *Good Bye, Lenin!* (Wolfgang Becker, 2003) in its portrayal of the GDR's totalitarian reality and way the Stasi terrorized millions of East German citizens. It is certainly a masterful piece of filmmaking, one – as historian Timothy Garton Ash comments in the *New York Review of Books* – which 'uses the syntax and conventions of Hollywood to convey to the widest possible audience some part of the truth about life under the Stasi, and the larger truths that experience revealed about human nature. It mixes historical fact with the ingredients of a fast-paced thriller and love story'.³

Not everyone, however, would have awarded the film the Oscar. Not everyone would have wished the film to be made in the first place. Dr Hubertus Knabe, historian and director of the museum and memorial at the former Stasi prison in Hohenschönhausen, in fact, refused to allow filming to take place on his premises. Knabe and others such as Anna Funder (the author of *Stasiland*)⁴ expressed their concern about the moral relativism of the film, the creeping rehabilitation of the Stasi – and point to the lack of concrete examples of any East German officer undergoing the change of heart that Wiesler does in this film.⁵ This is certainly a view, and one that we have to take seriously, but it misses the point.

As a work of art, it is not the job of *The Lives of Others* to serve up answers, but to ask questions and explore solutions. It is important to ask these questions, because the GDR, a country into which 17 million Germans were born but that no longer exists, sits paradoxically between obsession and forgetting. On the one hand, continuities have meant that no other communist dictatorship has been opened up to such intense scrutiny as the GDR has by the Federal Republic. There is no, and nor is there ever likely to be, a KGB *The Lives of Others*. On the other, it is a sobering fact that, as recent research has shown, 50 percent of current school children living in the former East Germany today are ignorant of the fact that the GDR was a dictatorship. The figures are reminiscent of the late 1960s, when the Mitscherlichs wrote about the Federal Republic's inability to mourn.

In his recent book, *Cultural Amnesia. Notes in the Margin of My Time*, Clive James talks about Germany's role in the barbarism of the twentieth century and the danger of American cultural imperialism (themes that resonate with obvious questions about the content and style of a film like *The Lives of Others*): 'We

² Rupprecht, 'Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck: XXL', p. 16.

³ Timothy Garton Ash 'The Stasi on Our Minds', *New York Review of Books*, 31 May 2007.

⁴ Anna Funder, *Stasiland. Stories from Behind the Berlin Wall* (London: Granta, 2003).

⁵ Anna Funder, 'The Lives of Others', *Guardian*, 5 May 2007.



Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck at the University of Cambridge, 10 October 2008.

could, if we wished, do without remembering, and gain all the advantages of travelling light; but a deep instinct, not very different from love [again a *The Lives of Others* theme, CY], reminds us that the efficiency would be bought at the cost of emptiness'.⁶ It is important for Germany and the world in general that we do not pay that price. *The Lives of Others* – if the pun does not seem too cheap at a time of global austerity – keeps us solvent.

To quote once more from Garton Ash's review: 'The Germany in which this film was produced, in the early years of the twenty-first century, is one of the most free and civilized countries on earth. In this Germany, human rights and civil liberties are today more jealously and effectively protected (it pains me to say) than in traditional homelands of liberty such as Britain and the United States. In this good land, the professionalism of historians, the investigative skills of its journalists, the seriousness of its parliamentarians, the generosity of its funders, the idealism of its priests and moralists, the creative genius of its writers, and yes, the brilliance of its filmmakers have all combined to cement in the world's imagin-

⁶ Clive James, *Cultural Amnesia. Notes in the Margin of My Time* (London: Picador, 2007; corrected edition 2008), p. 7.

ation the most indelible association of Germany with evil. Yet without these efforts, Germany would never have become such a good land. In all the annals of human culture, has there ever been a more paradoxical achievement?’⁷

Art, of course, is the medium of paradox par excellence. It can hold opposites in creative tension that would corrode and destroy each other in reality, and – at its most optimistic – offer hope that the good and beautiful might overcome the malign and ugly. In his talk (given on 10 October 2008) – which is reproduced below with only minor editing to account for the transition from ex tempore delivery to the written page⁸ – von Donnersmarck outlines what can best be described as an aesthetics of artistic and human beauty as a response and challenge to political depravity. His achievement is altogether worthy of that good land Germany, but – as his talk clearly illustrates – his achievement is an eloquent reminder that being good and helping others in their own lives to be good requires the artist to strive at all times and without compromise for nothing but the very best.

Seeing a Film Before You Make It

The success or, let’s say, acceptance of *The Lives of Others* in England was particularly heart-warming, because I always found it hard to make myself understood in this country – even during the three years I spent at Oxford. It’s easy to look at somebody who’s 6’9 tall with a name that needs the cinema-scope format to fit it in, as somehow alien. I could never completely break through that, which I regretted, because I knew the fault was mine; and so I’m glad that I was able to reach out to this country through my film. I do feel that films, and art in general, can be a form of exchange – even between countries. It’s harder, for example, for two countries to go to war if, through a film, individuals have been able to be a person of the other nationality by identifying with the protagonist. That’s the true meaning of the word ‘identify’. You become ‘identical’ with that other person. You become him. Imagine spending two hours identifying with a character on screen, becoming a Stasi officer, and somehow developing sympathy for him. It’s much harder then to see even that character completely as an enemy. Film allows us to do that more than other art forms because we can combine so many things.

7 Garton Ash, ‘The Stasi on Our Minds’.

8 With thanks to Charlotte Lee for her transcription and to the managers of the Tiarks Fund in the Department of German and Dutch in the University of Cambridge for the small grant that supported it.

But at the beginning it was pretty hard to get the film shown in Britain. When Lionsgate first decided to distribute it, their big question was, ‘How are we going to get people in this country to go and see this? People are not really open to watching German films’. They went through the relatively short list of German films that had received some attention. There was *Downfall*, which was kind of successful; and *Goodbye Lenin!*, which a few people had seen; *Run Lola Run* wasn’t a particular success. You have to go back to *Das Boot* before you find a film that attracted a substantial number of viewers – and that was almost thirty years ago. But finally they had an idea: ‘We’ll just have to mask the fact that it’s a German film. Let’s not have any German words or names on the poster or even in the trailer’. (Quite something for a film that’s largely dialogue-based!) They didn’t go so far as to suggest we dub it: ‘In English, you only dub kung-fu and porn films, not normal fiction’, I was told. So they spent several weeks trying to edit the trailer without a single word of spoken German in it, to somehow trick people into thinking the film was not really that German after all [*HvD screens the trailer for the audience, showing that it does not contain a single spoken word. The audience laughs*]. You didn’t believe me, did you? Well, anyway, that’s what they did and it lured more people into the cinemas than any other German film, ever, in the UK.

I have been asked many questions about the film, but the three that recur most often are: first, what was your own experience of the GDR? Second, how did the idea for the film come about? And third, were you surprised by its success? Let me try and give you some honest responses to each of these.

I don’t think there’s a single journalist who hasn’t asked that first question, and I sometimes wonder if, when they meet Ang Lee, who made *Brokeback Mountain*, they always ask, ‘Are you gay? Are you a cowboy?’ It would be very depressing if you could only make films about your own experience, and in the first interviews I said, ‘I don’t really have much experience of the GDR, I just researched this and looked into that,’ but that’s not what journalists want to hear. So I just dug into the very few connections I had to East Germany and talked about those at length. But really, I only visited the GDR a few times as a child when I was eight or nine, when we were pretty much just driving through. I remember my brother and I used to wind the windows down, sing the old German song ‘Die Gedanken sind frei!’ (thoughts are free) and feel like real rebels. It made a definite impression on me that the people who lived there couldn’t leave the country – that would, of course, make an impression on any child. Maybe I picked up on a few atmospheric things at the time, but later that was not the most important part of it for me. I just sensed that this was material that would give a story an interesting visual and emotional background. That might sound a little superficial, but the visual texture of a film can be very important. Oxford, for instance, is such an incredibly beautiful place, but I remember when I visited Cambridge for the first