

REEL LIFE

The Comfort and Curse of Paranoia

Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck recently made his feature film debut as writer-director of *"The Lives of Others,"* a highly successful project that had consumed him for 5 years. Winner last month of the Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film, "Lives" is set in East Berlin, in 1984, 5 years before the fall of the communist German Democratic Republic (GDR). The story chillingly portrays life in a police state, where vast numbers of citizens are routinely surveilled. "It is not a true story," says von Donnersmarck, "but it is truthful." (von Donnersmarck—Florian from now on—spoke at the screening I attended.)

The Story of "Lives"

Georg Dreyman (Sebastian Koch) is a popular playwright, a darling of the regime (one of his books was a gift from Margot Honecker, the GDR leader's wife). A powerful minister, Bruno Hempf (Thomas Thieme), thinks Dreyman is too good to be true, a view shared by the drama's pivotal character, Stasi (GDR Secret Police) Captain Gerd Wiesler (Ulrich Mühe). These two persuade Wiesler's boss, Anton Grubitz (Ulrich Tukur), to have Wiesler initiate surveillance of Dreyman: 24/7-monitored microphones throughout his apartment, tapped phone, tailings around town, the works.

Wiesler soon realizes that Dreyman is in league with subversives and preparing an article exposing the high suicide rate among East German intellectuals—data long suppressed from public view—to be smuggled into West Berlin for publication in *Der Spiegel*. Then a curious thing happens. Wiesler—a fanatic GDR loyalist and ruthless interrogator—begins to falsify his surveillance reports to protect Dreyman. *Was gibt?*

Matters grow uglier after Dreyman's article is published, and its style points to him. Grubitz declares Wiesler incompetent and, under pressure from Minister Hempf, assumes control of the investigation. He finds a weak link in Dreyman's live-in lover, actress Christa-Maria Sieland (Martina Gedeck). Threatened with permanent loss of her career, Ms. Sieland cracks, telling Wiesler and Grubitz where Dreyman hides the untraceable typewriter used to type the article. But when Grubitz's men search, the typewriter has gone missing.

Dreyman survives intact, Wiesler is demoted but never suspected of treason, and Sieland commits suicide before realizing that Dreyman has been spared. Dreyman is so shattered that writer's block seizes him for years to come. He had always smugly assumed that he was beyond suspicion. Among other things, "Lives of Others" is a meditation on the recklessness of such nonchalance and the importance of vigilance, the protective value of paranoia, if you will, in a police state.

Florian's Perspective and Motives

The photography, editing, music, and production design in "Lives" are first rate. The

property manager, Florian explained, had himself been imprisoned by the Stasi, and he took special delight in procuring authentic Stasi equipment as props. The surpassing features of this film are its scintillating screenplay and sublime acting. Ulrich Mühe, whom Florian regards as the leading stage actor in Germany, won the Best European Actor prize at the European Film Awards 2006 and was named Best Actor at Germany's Lola Awards.



BY ROLAND
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Florian's parents came from East Germany to Cologne shortly before his birth in 1973. His mother, a devoted party member, continues to revere communist ideals, remaining what Florian calls a "salon communist." His father embraced the conservative democratic perspective in West Germany. "We had the cold war right in my house." He also described a visit to relatives in

East Berlin when he was a youngster. His mother was detained at the border for several hours. "My brother and I were amazed that someone as powerful as our mother could be strip searched in East Berlin." It was a lesson in the power of the regime that Florian did not forget.

I know of only one other serious film treatment of the GDR, the 2000 German fictional film by Oskar Roehler, *"No Place to Go,"* about a writer who lavished praise on the regime in her novels. The government in turn sponsored her frequent five-star trips to the West and her charge accounts at Parisian couture salons. Like Leni Riefenstahl in Hitler's Germany and Georg Dreyman in "Lives," she reaps the benefits of politically correct celebrity. The fall of the regime shatters her world; she seeks in vain to replace what she has lost. Finding no niche, she commits suicide. Bummer. That film found no home commercially. Small wonder when Florian was pressed by potential backers to rewrite his film into a comedy, like the 2003 international screwball hit, *"Good Bye Lenin!"* He resisted and finally found a backer willing to let him make the film on his terms.

Reality and Paranoia

We know that paranoid convictions are often reinforced by a "kernel of truth." The pathologically jealous patient, convinced of a spouse's infidelity, may have a mate whose glamour indeed attracts the attention of others, even though the partner is innocent. The guarded, icy conduct of a paranoid patient may be so off-putting to others as to provoke uneasiness in the patient's presence, further evidence, to the patient's eye, of the other's culpability.

We also know that, like many other

symptoms, paranoia can have protective, adaptive value. At the individual level, externalizing blame for personal adversity nicely absolves oneself. Powerful emotions of envy, jealousy, and hatred are transformed from personal pathology into righteous responses to the misanthropic conduct of others. The paranoid orientation can diminish other forms of psychic pain, like anxiety and depression. An old saw in our field says that persons with paranoid personalities are found in lawyers' offices, not psychiatrists'. In a police state, where anyone might be a spy or be spied upon, suspiciousness may be life-saving. But the price of paranoia—constant vigilance and fear—can be high.

The Politics of Paranoia

Paranoia as a societal characteristic can have collective advantages. An Australian study years ago showed that members of the least Westernized Aboriginal tribes—those inclined to battle with neighbors they perceived as causing their problems—reported lower rates of individual depression, anxiety, and psychosomatic symptoms than did members of pacified tribes that no longer saw their troubles as caused by outsiders. Fear of the "evil other" may bring cold comfort, but it is more tolerable for many than anxious realization of one's own society's shortcomings.

Canada and the United States have similarly high rates of private gun ownership, but homicides by gunshot are staggeringly



A surveillance assignment challenges the loyalties of East German Stasi Capt. Gerd Wiesler (Ulrich Mühe) in "The Lives of Others."

more common in America than in our northern neighbor. Michael Moore, in *"Bowling for Columbine,"* suggests that this difference is related to a tendency of Americans to be more fearful and distrusting of "others" than Canadians, who use guns for sport, not security, and he points to slavery as a significant source of American fearfulness.

Michael Bellesiles, in his controversial history of domestic gun ownership, *"Arming America: The Origins of a National Gun Culture,"* (New York: Knopf, 2000) gives weight to this idea, showing that as late as the 1830s, contrary to the notion popularized by the National Rifle Association, there were few gun owners among pioneers on the Western frontier. Widespread gun ownership was in fact primarily confined to the South, gener-

ated by whites' fears of slave breakouts.

Following the national malaise after U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam, several administrations have successfully refocused public attention on external enemies, for example, in the Reagan years (the Soviet Union as "Evil Empire"), and the presidencies of George H.W. Bush (Saddam Hussein) and George W. Bush (the "Axis of Evil" and the widened circle of Muslim fundamentalist terrorism after Sept. 11, 2001). Under Reagan and the first President Bush, such efforts arguably helped brighten the national mood.

Florian was asked if it seemed ironic that his GDR film comes at a time when the United States has compromised domestic civil liberties through passage of the USA Patriot Act and executive branch tactics like spying on telephone calls of ordinary citizens. The filmmaker smiled wryly, replying that the differences in conditions between the GDR and George W. Bush's America can easily be understood by noting that even to raise such a question publicly would have risked arrest and possibly worse in the GDR. But, he quickly added, many in Western Europe were surprised at how easily we Americans gave in to compromises of our civil liberties after Sept. 11, 2001.

Denouement: A Good Man

After the fall of the GDR, a museum was established in East Berlin devoted to the display of Stasi materials: interrogation methods, paraphernalia, and thousands of surveillance case files. Florian said that only 10% of those with files have reviewed them. Most, it would appear, prefer to forget painful memories of past tyranny. However, the rate of inquiries has doubled since his film was released!

Toward the end of the film, which skips ahead several years to the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall, Dreyman goes to the Stasi museum to review his file, some twenty volumes or more, and discovers Wiesler's identity. Dreyman even identifies Wiesler later on the street working now as a postman, though the writer makes no contact. Instead, concluding that it must have been this man who saved him, for the first time in years he now writes a novel entitled *"Sonata for a Good Man."* In the final scene, we see Wiesler pick up a copy in a bookstore, noting its dedication to a person identified only by a cryptic phrase—Wiesler's Stasi code name.

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