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**POLITICS IN F. H. VON DONNERSMARCK'S
*THE LIVES OF OTHERS***

20TH CENTURY POLITICAL THEORIES AND LITERATURE

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Written and directed by Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, *The Lives of Others* is a film about the erosion of borders: between the state and its citizens; social communities; and within individuals themselves. Set in the GDR in 1984, it follows the cycle of the transformation of soul, depicting subtle changes in the lives of the protagonists as they face the controversial themes of loyalty and unity in the framework of East Germany under a communism regime, the Dictatorship of the Proletariat. Opening with the contrastive forces of the Stasi network, interrogating yet another traitor of the political system, and the staged play produced by the German intelligentsia, prophesying the death of the same ideology through the symbolic death of the son of a heroine, i.e. the country, the film director interweaves two strands of political reactions (conformation to the majority trampled by socialism versus inherent, insuppressible yearning for liberation of individual lives and talents), building up the drama of the soul trapped in a cage of fabricated truths and statistics, enhancing the emotional effect with the powerful score written by Gabriel Yared that leaves a long lasting echo.

On the side of the state, a Stasi Captain Gerd Wiesler unfailingly fulfils his role of a secret agent, collecting evidence on his fellow citizens, following strict, mathematical procedures of incrimination and prosecution drilled at a Stasi University. His tasks are clear, his position is hierarchical and his success – statistical. Captain Wiesler accounts to his boss Colonel Grubitz who in turn reports to a state minister Bruno Hempf. No deviations from the protocol are imaginable, thus unforeseeable. On the side of the numbers in Stasi lists are the others – individual people with their particular stories gathered and brought to public attention by a group of artists, at the centre of which unfolds the private story of Georg Dreyman, a playwright, and his partner – actress Christa-Maria Sieland, symbolising the faithful spirit fighting for the liberation of the soul under torture.

‘The poet is the engineer of the soul,’ Minister Hempf quotes Stalin in the film episode (after Dreyman’s play, in which Christa has starred as Martha, seeing the death of Arthur – a hopeful future) referring to Dreyman’s talent and praising Christa’s beauty and performance as ‘the pearl of the GDR’ (*The Lives of Others*, 2006: 12’55”; 8’00”; 13’15”). His obsession with the actress and the sense of indestructible power, being at the top of the pyramid overseeing the all-engulfing people’s democracy, set in motion a chain of events that do let him smuggle the pearl from its shell only to realize that what he can hold is a cold spectre of his dying ambitions. Hempf’s abuse of power in order to vanquish a troublesome rival is an ironical portrayal of the dubious common goal of the nation – the Stasi goal ‘to know everything’ (and thus control), appearing on the screen before the spectators are drawn into the story. United in a spying network where none feels safe and, as journalist Paul Hauser reminds Georg Dreyman, ‘If you don’t take a stand, you’re not human!’ (ibid.: 32’50”), the protagonists of the unfolding drama

are left to face the inside enemy, lurking in the fleeting shadows of the psyche under the corruptive test of the political ideology that makes one question one's own values and ability to change.

V. I. Lenin stated that the only sphere through which 'class political consciousness can be brought to the workers [...] is the sphere of relationships between *all* the classes and strata and the state and the government, the sphere of interrelations between *all* classes' (1902: 167) and for that purpose he envisioned that '*all distinctions as between workers and intellectuals, and certainly distinctions of trade and profession, must be utterly obliterated* [with the help of] an organization [that] must [...] be not too extensive and as secret as possible...' (ibid.: 168). *The Lives of Others* depicts the realization of this dream that, with the help of the Stasi as the far-reaching tentacles of the government, proves Socialism to be indeed an instrument that alters the depths of the human soul, tying friends and neighbours, the Stasi and the government in a tight loop where it is hard to discern what role to play, which side to take, whom to trust and how to find a path that leads to spiritual survival. Repressed in daily choices, conscious of the hidden, yet ever present gaze of the Stasi, artists find freedom of expression on the stage where, as Wiesler observes to Christa, she is 'more who [she is]... than [offstage]' (*The Lives of Others*, 2006: 1:03'58"). Listening on in the lives of others, the Stasi Captain becomes immersed in their narrative, realizing the non-existence of his own private life; becoming a spectator, a mere witness of events, he begins to long to take an active part. Thus, borders between the real and the imaginary get blurred and disappear – everything is happening onstage, subjected only to conscience that plays in the background as the *Sonate vom Guten Menschen*, testing who has really listened to its quiet inner advice.

So, everyone is equal in facing the community of fear and despair that must be either surmounted, suppressed with pills or escaped from in a form of a political, spiritual or literal suicide. As none is free to be left alone and private space dissolves in the Stasi wires, art and politics invade the lives of everybody, disregarding the social strata, compelling to be artful and make painful choices where either way is a form of a sacrifice. At the funeral of his celebrated friend, former stage director Albert Jerska, gone from grief, Georg Dreyman concludes that the state has statistics on everything but suicide rate they call self-murder though 'it knows no bloodlust, or heated passion, it knows only death, the death of all hope' (ibid.: 1:07'58"). Torn apart by political surveillance, one way or another, life is a rape – the story of Christa-Maria Sieland, beloved yet abused by the system in which her career is set. Forced to submit to the Minister of Culture and later spy on her partner, she is driven to the brink of her strength and fails as culture and the state have failed her, fails as later falls the Berlin Wall when the tide of

individual pressure reaches the climax and eliminates the final border separating two halves of a whole.

Refusing to be restrained by fear, disbelieving the evil of others and seeking the good within, Georg Dreyman has touched a string that initiates Wiesler's conversion to his cause and reverberates through the whole Germany – in the East as in the West, helping him awaken the masses to the true statistics of their lives. Doing nothing but being faithful to his conviction and profession of portraying life as it is, Dreyman has evaded the claws of terror and traps of the scheming government officials. Loyal to his country, though not the system that has crippled it, he acts as an innocent child, believing the greater good of his family – the community and those he loves. And this innocent cognizance of having no other choice than being good, i. e. true to his soul, is what triggers the change in the Stasi Captain for whom loyalty is all. Reading B. Brecht and listening to the sonata of his soul, Wiesler finds courage to defy the system from within and defend what is right. So, as H. Marcuse has envisioned it, 'the intelligentsia has [served its] decisive preparatory function, [...] become the catalyst' (1967: 233) that through 'sensitivity and sensibility, creative imagination and play [as] forces of transformation' (ibid.: 232) has generated the qualitative leap in consciousness of those who were ready to respond to the calling.

Marking the end of one cycle and the beginning of a new one, F. H. von Donnersmarck closes the narrative frame of *The Lives of Others* with a re-staging of Dreyman's play, figuring in the beginning of the film, this time featuring an African actress, symbolic of liberation from slavery, in Christa's place, announcing the death of the former political regime. The loop is closed, the wall dividing the nation has been opened and so are Dreyman's eyes to both the lies that ruined and those that protected his life. Once more he meets Bruno Hempf – as lost to delusions as ever. The former minister still wears his pride unaware of his ironically heroic role in pressing Dreyman into instigating events that have eventually led to the downfall of what Hempf has always believed in. But Dreyman is no longer the same man. Tearing apart the covers hiding the secret wires and following threads of emerging truths, Georg Dreyman finally perceives how much his own unconscious, embodied in the shadow figure of Captain Wiesler, has protected him from realizing the full scope of danger he has actually been in so he could accomplish his task of illumination. Georg Dreyman wrote about the lives of others and became one of them in the fabricated report on his life written by Gerd Wiesler to whom he dedicates his next book *Die Sonate vom Guten Menschen*, attesting his completion of the cycle of transformation: through the red of the bloody death of Christa and the fallen communism, he has risen from the blackness of illusions to the enlightened future: 'HGW XX/7 gewidmet, in Dankbarkeit' (*The Lives of Others*, 2006: 2:11'38").

REFERENCES

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3. Marcuse, H. (1967) *Liberation from the Affluent Society*.