

The Lives of Others

A film built around the chilly, meticulous, and steadfast surveillance of a dramatist in East Berlin in 1984 (hint of Mr. Orwell?) by a severe officer of the vaunted spy agency Stasi (“Staats Sicherheitsdienst”)... could only be a real downer, right? A gloomy wallow in the communist past, or an exercise in deciphering obscure East bloc politics?

However, none of these is the case in *The Lives of Others* (in German, “Das Leben der Anderen”), though its bald story line is that of the opening sentence above. Yet it is precisely because its context appears so dismal that this contemporary German picture is suffused with genuine humanity.

The surveillance mentioned is undertaken on the successful playwright, Georg Dreyman (Sebastian Koch) by Captain Gerd Wiesler (Ulrich Mühe), ardent Stasi practitioner and trainer (“we are the Party’s sword and shield,” he intones) after a suggestion from Minister of Culture Hempf (Thomas Thieme). The Minister is interested in the playwright’s lover and muse, the actress Christa-Maria Sieland (Martina Gedeck, who played the lead in *Mostly Martha*). Wiesler suspects that, because the man is a literary lion in Berlin, he must be compromised. He has Dreyman’s apartment bugged to the max and undertakes the listening post himself, in a bare attic above the apartment.

Wiesler listens in on Dreyman and Sieland as well as their literary friends and academic colleagues; he purloins Dreyman’s copy of Brecht’s writings. The intense desire to “get something” on Dreyman is slowly mitigated by his voyeuristic involvement in this man’s life, a life so rich and smart compared to his own stolid, barren existence (no family, no friends, no amusements, a flat that looks like the inside of a fridge). The plot is neatly thickened by Wiesler’s affable and ambitious boss, Lt. Colonel Grubitz (Ulrich Tukur), who applies pressure on Wiesler while he himself is under pressure from Hempf, who, it happens, is having his own sordid affair with Christa-Maria

The ongoing surveillance itself, and Dreyman’s obliviousness of it along with Wiesler’s total awareness, make up the bulk of the film. It attains the form of a cat-and-mouse thriller, especially when the writer looks to hide a manuscript critical of the GDR, and the captain both senses this betrayal yet does not necessarily want to find the proof of it. The vulnerability of Fraulein Sieland, more willing to compromise, eventually undoes the couple, and a fast-forward coda—in the post-Wall era--sorts out, rather gently and very satisfyingly, the tangled lives of Wiesler and Dreyman.

The film is a wonderful imagining of the spy state, made by a thirty-something first-time director, Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, who was all of 16 when the Wall fell down. He has brilliantly recreated a dreary Berlin (no sign of its monuments or history) and contrasted it neatly with the warm, disheveled, and book-filled digs of Dreyman.

Other elements are worked out with great care. The music, by Gabriel Yared, keeps up the steady pressure with an insistent two-beat motif; the cinematography is as washed out as the regime itself and Wiesler’s grey carapace of a jacket. The script, also by the young director, is tight and neatly cryptic, with much unsaid yet all fully realized on the screen. The performances, led by the über-anal Mühe as Wiesler and the debonair (but clueless) Koch as Dreyman, are all dead-on and most are layered with complexity, like Gedeck’s very sensuous yet very compromised actress.

The Lives of Others is full of wonderful moments, ranging from the macabre, when Wiesler (note that “wiesel” in German means weasel), in instructor mode to his uncomfortable students, coolly outlines how to push an interrogation just too far, through the sardonic, as when Grubitz, in the Stasi lunchroom, menacingly toys with a police recruit who is telling a mild joke about the East German president, Erich Honecker, and finally to the pathetic, when Wiesler, after experiencing one of the most joyless sex scenes in movie history, pleads with a non-nonsense hooker to “just stay and talk with me.”

Some of this material may lose some nuance or punch from filmgoers not familiar with the context or vagaries of East German communism, but *The Lives of Others* doesn't really depend on such knowledge. It can be called, rather, an indelible study of the totalitarian state in the memorable tradition of “Brave New World”, “Animal Farm” and “1984.” It is, rightly, nominated for an Oscar as Best Foreign Language Film; don't be surprised if it wins a statuette...

(“Lives” is rated “R” for mature material.)

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