Suffocation: a death caused by asphyxiation, a lack of oxygen, an insufficient space for breathing, and, finally, the loss of breath itself. The brain, having become malnourished, dies—and the body soon follows. And yet, in Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck’s Academy Award-winning film *The Lives of Others*, the ability to access the spacious world of the imagination from which creation springs seems just as vital to the nourishment of a healthy mind as the ability to breathe. The increasingly intertwined lives of an East German playwright and the secret police agent who runs an around-the-clock espionage operation on him in the year 1984—an allusion to Orwell?—warns of the intimate ramifications of an oppressive regime. Political ideology that dictates morality and lifestyle deprives the mind of creative sustenance, causing damage akin to physical strangulation.

*The Lives of Others* begins with a lesson in deprivation. Gerd Wiesler, the devout officer of the infamous Stasi, the East German secret police, stands before a classroom of eager Socialists. Pausing the tape recorder that has been bellowing out the voice of “prisoner number 227,” Wiesler reminds his students that interrogation “takes patience. About forty hours’ worth,” before resuming the whirring magnetic strip. “I want to sleep,” prisoner 227 moans as the scene shifts to show the actual interrogation. He begs Wiesler, “Please let me sleep!” but the officer, poker-faced, merely stares at his subject, unmoved by his desperation. “Tell me again what you did on that day,” Wiesler orders, “Tell me again what you did on September 28th.” As the detainee’s head slumps to his shoulder in utter exhaustion, the camera pans back across the classroom of future interrogators.

“Please, just one hour . . .”

“Why keep him awake for so long?” a student interjects suddenly while the tape recorder continues to play. “It’s . . . inhuman.”

Deprivation is the mechanism through which the Stasi achieved their ultimate goal: to control the citizens of the German Democratic Republic, ensuring each citizen’s loyalty and subordination to the State. Deprivation,
Wiesler explains, reveals the innocence or guilt of a prisoner. An innocent man will become enraged as hours of his life are lost to wrongful interrogation, but a guilty man will begin to cry and beg—“he knows he’s there for a reason”—and his only hope of freedom lies in revealing the truth. Deprivation drives its victim to seek freedom. And yet, in oppressive totalitarian regimes, the freedom to live undetained and unharrassed requires the sacrifice of the less tangible freedom to create, question, and imagine.

Under the direction of high-ranking Minister Hempf, Wiesler embarks upon “Operation Lazlo,” a full-scale surveillance operation focused on the beloved playwright Georg Dreyman. Perched in the attic above the flat Dreyman shares with his lover Christa-Maria, Wiesler is an omniscient presence: the tiny microphones hidden beneath Dreyman’s electrical sockets and light switch panels relay the whispers of Georg and Christa-Maria through Wiesler’s steel-grey headphones, which match both his monochromatic suit and his expression. Donnersmarck’s varied array of point-of-view shots—from high in a corner as we watch Dreyman in the theater through the lens of Wiesler’s binoculars, or framed by the door as if we are creeping into the room—create the impression that we are also participants in Operation Lazlo, stealthy witnesses of an unsuspecting man’s most intimate moments. But as the loud clack of typewriter keys pierces the silence in which Wiesler lives as he makes each private moment of Dreyman’s life public, the camera focuses closely on each word, each single letter, that he punches out. The blank page holds the promise of Dreyman’s future; the black ink prescribes his fate.

When Wiesler realizes that Minister Hempf demanded the investigation of Dreyman’s loyalty not because of a substantiated suspicion but because of an infatuation with Christa-Maria, Wiesler’s perception of the party to which he is so fervently faithful begins to crack, and he reexamines Dreyman’s alleged treason. It is Hempf who is guilty of abusing his power for personal satisfaction; it is Wiesler’s supervisor, Grubitz, whose lust for power drives him to continue the operation despite evidently unsubstantiated claims, viewing the persecution of the famous playwright as an opportunity to advance his own political career. The “true patriot” is ultimately driven to commit treason to protect the innocence of a wrongfully persecuted man (Scott).

As Dreyman works ferociously at his typewriter each night on a secret exposé of the skyrocketing suicide rate in the GDR that is the result of creative limitation, Wiesler is also working through his own creative process. Instead of incriminating the playwright’s dissident behavior, Wiesler produces a legitimizing disguise: conversations about the exposé become—
according to Wiesler's reports—discussions of a play about Vladimir Lenin. To the outside world, both men adhere to the scripts written for them by the public, by the regime, but inside the walls of the dark apartment building, the pair rebel through creation.

We begin to revel in the contrast of Wiesler's cold, monochromatic appearance and the colorful, inventive world he simultaneously exists in. The latter is a world where he enjoys the copy of Bertolt Brecht's writings that he steals from Dreyman's flat, where he observes two lovers not with the accusatory stance of a government official but with the compassion of a fellow human being, watching another's life slowly unravel before him—a world where he commits the ultimate betrayal of the Party he serves. Wiesler's allegiance to the state becomes unbearable when it conflicts with his personal beliefs, and he is driven to seek a different kind of righteousness. In an oppressive society where everyone is a potential informer, neither instinct nor morality dictates our actions, but rather a nebulous threat of what will happen if we don't do our duty. When the ties that bind an adherent to his ideology begin to fray, though, the world constructed by rigid convictions begins to unravel as well. Indeed, as Wiesler's adherence to the regime dissolves, his fervent effort to disguise Dreyman's political dissent contributes to the development of a new reality: each word printed onto the bleach-white ream of paper is an act of subtle but proactive dissent against the regime. Each lie is a step towards Wiesler's redefinition of his personal morality, a step in his own pursuit of the truth.

Wiesler's ultimate rejection of the stringent confines of the GDR's authoritarian Socialist doctrine comes from an unexpected place: a sonata heard through his ever-present steel-grey headphones. The shrill ring of the telephone resounds in Dreyman's flat, and as Georg picks up the receiver, Wiesler does the same, his wire-tapping system allowing him to eavesdrop on Dreyman's private conversations. The caller informs Dreyman that a fellow artist and dear friend, suffering from a deep depression following his blacklisting, has hanged himself. Dreyman's searingly expressive face, the antithesis of the unreadable Gerd Wiesler, dissolves into grief, his furrowed brow and blank stare conveying shock, grief, and pain. Dreyman walks away from the telephone, oddly composed. He goes straight to the grand piano in his living room and picks up a sheet of music, a final birthday gift from the deceased, titled simply "Sonata for a Good Man." As his fingers stroke the keys, a romantic, haunting melody travels from the grand piano through the microphones hidden behind the light switch panels and finally reaches Wiesler. Trapped, unable to escape the shifting octaves of the sonata, Wiesler
listens, frozen, as the camera circles him. His face comes into view, his nor-
mally pursed lips relax, and his mouth slips open with sudden revelation. A
single tear falls down his cheek. “Can anyone who has heard this music,”
Dreyman asks Christa-Maria gently after pausing the intimate performance,
“I mean truly heard it, really be a bad person?”

After all, the soul absorbs what the mind cannot. Writing makes us ques-
tion ourselves instead of just observing. Art makes us look beyond the super-
ficial markings on the canvas and ponder instead the caress of each brush
stroke. And music overwhelms the body with a specific alchemy of sounds.
Donnersmarck suggests that art can challenge narrow frameworks of thought
and politics, can remind us that the world is not black and white, but beauti-
fully uncertain. There are no questions of loyalty, no impositions of thought,
just transient moments that evoke solitary contemplation. In an interview
with Charlie Rose, Donnersmarck reveals that the scene in which Dreyman
plays “Sonata for a Good Man” served as the centrifugal force, the sole inspira-
tion, for the entire film. The sonata was specially crafted by composer
Gabriel Yared after he was given Donnersmarck’s unique but provocative
challenge: “I want you to imagine that you have the possibility to travel back
in time to 1933 and to spend one-and-a-half minutes with Adolf Hitler before
he commits all of his atrocities,” Donnersmarck recalls telling the composer.
“Just play him something on the piano. . . . But it should somehow make him
realize that he should not do the things that he is going to do” (Rose). A real-
ization, demarcated by a single tear falling down the paralyzed face of the
man dressed in grey.

In his celebrated essay “The Power of the Powerless,” former Czech
President Václav Havel coins the term “post-totalitarianism” to describe a
system distinct but evolved from totalitarianism. Rather than being centered
on a single despot, the oppressive society perpetuates itself through bureau-
cracy and conformity. Ideology serves to disguise the true locus of power and
obscure the fear that holds the system together. The notion that an ideology
alone, even in the absence of a dictator, can so thoroughly force itself on the
people of a nation gives us a new lens through which to understand oppres-
sion. It forces us to ask what happens when individuals are left without the
option to explore the capacity of their own minds. In Doug Linder’s assess-
ment of the Nuremberg War trials, he writes that those in attendance who
expected “to find sadistic monsters [were] generally disappointed”; the for-
mer Nazis, despite being guilty of some of history’s most atrocious violations
of human rights, “never aspired to be villains” but simply “over-identified
with an ideological cause and suffered from a lack of imagination or empathy:
they couldn’t fully appreciate the human consequences of their career-moti-
vated decisions.” Ideology had imprisoned their minds to such an extent that imagination died alongside freedom—there was no separate space, no safe haven for honest reflection, for truth. In fact, it is through the imposition of imagination—Wiesler’s accidental experience of the haunting sonata—that the Stasi agent suddenly begins to recognize the dangerously human consequences of his professional ambition. Through music, Wiesler discovers a mental space outside doctrine. This space allows him to transform from an ideologue into a creator, and in his creative act of treason, he also restores Dreyman’s liberty to create. Once outside the doctrine, Wiesler recognizes the lies upon which the entire post-totalitarian system is based, and begins to reclaim his own mind and agency.

To subvert a system “thoroughly permeated with hypocrisy and lies,” Havel emphasizes the importance of cultivating “the independent life of society as an articulated expression of living within the truth”—no matter the cost. Havel, who spent five years of his life in the dark confines of Communist prisons and nearly two decades under close surveillance by the secret police, was chosen as post-Communist Czechoslovakia’s president after his exceptional leadership during the Velvet Revolution of 1989 (Bilefsky). Havel argues that the dictatorship in Czechoslovakia has “alienated itself completely from the social movements that gave birth to it” and that oppression under such a system is inevitable. Although Communism could not escape its own demons, Havel maintains that humankind has the special capacity to subvert and overcome flawed political systems. To live within the truth as defined by individual morality instead of by a collective utilitarianism is the “elementary starting point for every attempt made by people to oppose the alienating pressure of the system,” and should be the basis for every political action.

Ideaology “offers human beings the illusion of an identity, of dignity, and of morality,” and Havel argues that the communist ideology cannot be accepted only in part, that anyone who steps out of line “threatens it in its entirety.” Once a space is created from which we can recognize that such morality is illusory, both Havel and Donnersmarck seem to argue, dissent is inevitable. According to Havel, dissent’s inherent basis is “the service of truth, the truthful life, and the attempt to make room for the genuine aims of life.” Indeed, as Wiesler betrays his mission, he does so in an effort to make room for the genuine aims of life: freedom, art, music, love, and, most important, imagination. Imagination liberates the mind from the limitations of doctrine, and provides the space to create art that speaks only to the heart, to think and dream freely, without concern or doubt. Both Wiesler and Dreyman make the
conscious decision to rebel, to dissent in the name of justice and change, no matter how small. They choose to diverge from their assigned roles in perpetuating the regime. They choose truth.

The choice to strive for positive social change, even in a world that will likely always suffer from some degree of imperfection, will always be just that—a choice, a deliberate decision to dissent. The Lives of Others illustrates a world where institutionalized beliefs leave no room to strive for anything else. Donnersmarck’s bleak color palette, combined with the vast corruption and despair that prevails throughout the film, is suffocating. And yet, through transforming the most dutiful ideologue into a brilliant political dissident, the director reminds us that the fate of a totalitarian society is never carved in stone. Instead, within each individual there lies a choice: to hide behind the veil that covers “their own fallen existence, their trivialization, and their adaptation to the status quo” (Havel) or to step outside the doctrine, give the mind space to breathe, to create, and to embrace the truth at all costs.

WORKS CITED


