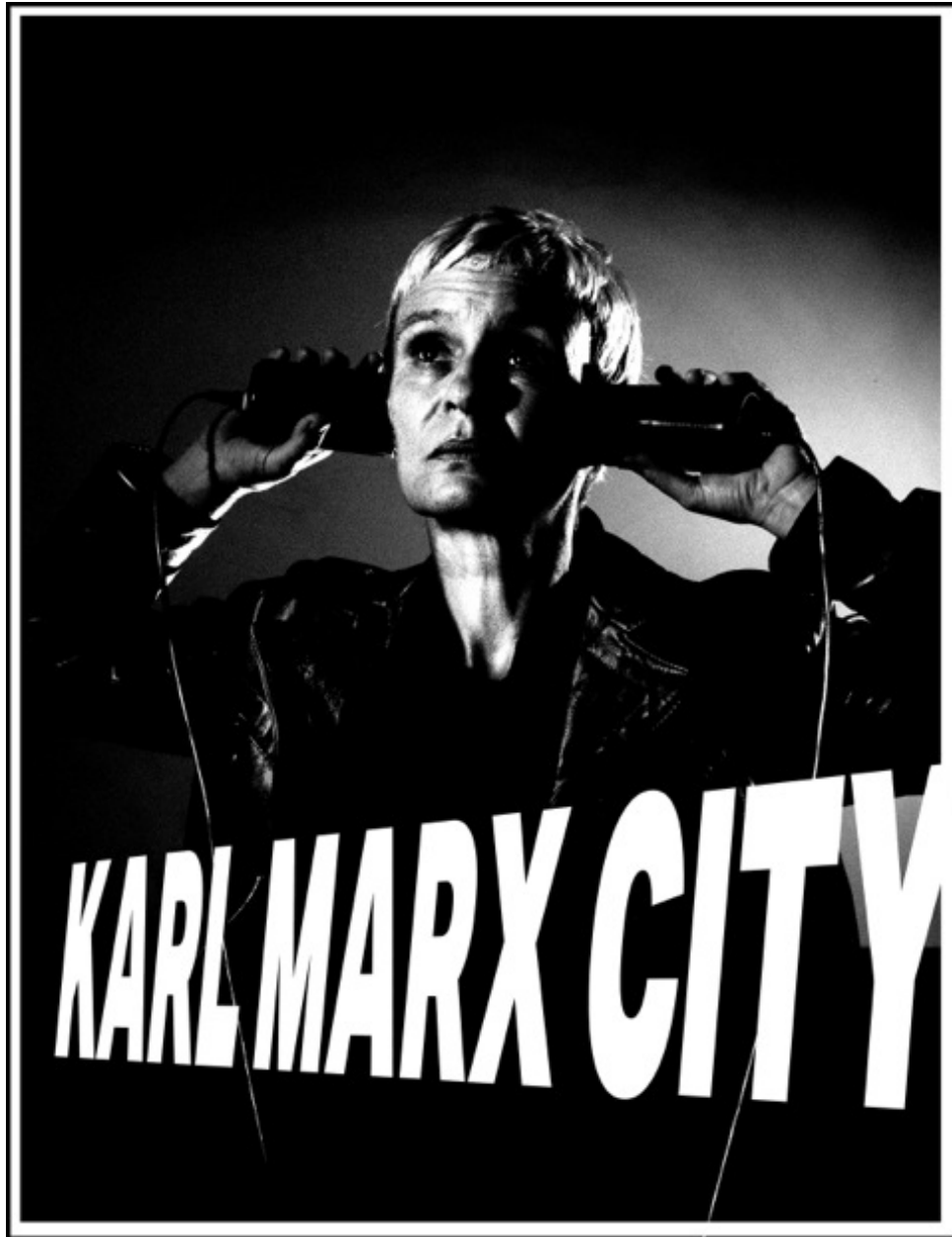


pepper&bones
presents



A film by Petra Epperlein & Michael Tucker

USA/Germany • 89 min. • 2016

Press contact:

Susan Norget Film Promotion

New York Office: 212-431-0090

Susan Norget, susan@norget.com, 917-833-3056

Keaton Kail, keaton@norget.com, 510-501-2914

Logline

Twenty-five years after the collapse of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), filmmaker Petra Epperlein returns to her hometown of Karl Marx City to find the truth about her late father's suicide and his rumored Stasi past.

Short Synopsis

Twenty-five years after the collapse of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), filmmaker Petra Epperlein returns to the proletarian Oz of her childhood to find the truth about her late father's suicide and his rumored Stasi past. Had he been an informant for the secret police? Was her childhood an elaborate fiction? As she looks for answers in the Stasi's extensive archives, she pulls back the curtain of her own *ostalgia* and enters the parallel world of the security state, seeing her former life through the lens of the oppressor. Reconstructing everyday GDR life through declassified Stasi surveillance footage, the past plays like dystopian science fiction, providing a chilling backdrop to interrogate the apparatus of control and the meaning of truth in a society where every action and thought was suspect.

Long Synopsis

Much like her GDR hometown, Karl Marx City, which was redacted from public memory after German reunification, Petra Epperlein's father erased himself. Right after the new year in 1999, he cleaned his car, burned all of his photographs and letters, and then took his own life near the house where she was raised.

But there were traces. Her mother, a woman unable to throw anything away, kept three typewritten letters sent to her father's West German boss in the early '90s. In each of them, an anonymous accuser denounces her father for being a party member and threatens to out him as a Stasi informant: the worst accusation an East German can suffer.

The Stasi, the GDR's Ministry for State Security, was the "shield and sword" of a ruling party that was well aware of the illegitimate nature of its power. This was, after all, a country living on one side of a wall erected—officially—not to keep the people *in*, but to keep the fascists *out*. Under the guise of combating reactionary forces, the apparatus implemented a policy of total surveillance.

Stasi chief Erich Mielke envisioned a state of total transparency—a nation of "Glass Men"—where the Stasi would always know "who is who" and power would be guaranteed not through violence, but by using surveillance as a means of control. Foucault called this the *panopticon gaze*, where the presence of surveillance is reinforced to a degree that the population comes to assume constant surveillance even when it is absent. In this way, East Germans lived in a state of anticipatory obedience, adjusting their actions and behaviors to accommodate the presence of an all-seeing state.

Every aspect of public and private life was under the threat of surveillance. To surveil a population of 17 million, the Stasi employed over 90,000 people and relied on network of nearly 200,000 informants or "unofficial collaborators" to provide prophylactic surveillance.

Was it possible that Epperlein's father—a man known to all for his fairness and generosity—had spied on those around him and reported to the Stasi? Did he take his own life because he was afraid that the truth would eventually come out and ruin him—like it had thousands of other East Germans who

informed on family, friends and co-workers? Was he an entirely different man than the father she knew and loved?

The only hope of finding the truth was to go to the source, the former Stasi headquarters in Berlin, where, immediately after the collapse of the GDR, the German people took custody of all the property—files, films, equipment—of the most feared and effective surveillance apparatus in history. Somewhere within 111 kilometers of files—many of them painstakingly reconstructed from 16,000 bags of shredded documents—was the truth about her father (or at least the Stasi’s version of the truth).

But there was something else: besides being obsessive cataloguers, notetakers and eavesdroppers, the Stasi were also exceptional cameramen, filming thousands of hours of footage of everyday GDR life, capturing a cinematic truth that rivals and subverts any documentary theory. This is reality unaware, free from ideological coercion of the subjects, we see life as it truly was. The films are at once home movies of a forgotten past and the b-roll of a dictatorship. Seen today without the filter of nostalgia, the projected past plays like dystopian science fiction and is at odds with personal recollection. Was it all *really* so grey?

East Germans often suffer a curious condition called “Ostalgia”—a nostalgia for all things East (“Ost,” in German) and the trappings of their defunct Communist society, no matter how failed it was. Part of it is a defensive reaction, but it’s also the desire to define their history and themselves beyond the shadow of oppression. *It wasn’t so bad* is a common refrain. *We lived normal lives* is another. Is this nostalgia or collective amnesia? Just like families keep secrets, societies create comfortable histories and lies to assuage feelings of guilt.

When Epperlein arrives in Karl Marx City to get answers about her father, the curtain is pulled back on the proletarian Oz of her childhood to reveal not only the dark mechanisms of control, but also the uncomfortable truth of complicity. Just how did a universally despised regime manage to maintain power and control for over 40 years and then, seemingly overnight, collapse? Perhaps there is more to this history than the simplistic notion of heroes and victims.

Who were the perpetrators? Was her father really one of *them*? Ironically, his Stasi file is the only evidence that can confirm or condemn his character, attesting not only to the power and the dangers of surveillance, but also to the toxic residue that it leaves behind.

Director's Statement (Petra Epperlein)

For obvious personal reasons, this was a difficult project to begin. While we sought answers about my father's life and suicide, our journey also took us back into a contentious chapter in German history, one that—unlike the Nazi past—the German public still hasn't come to terms with. Twenty-five years after the fall of the Wall, there has been no real attempt at national reconciliation, even while victims of the regime and Stasi perpetrators are often direct neighbors.

As we embarked on our journey back to KARL MARX CITY, Edward Snowden's revelations about the NSA were very much in the news and it seemed that every other article referenced the Stasi, bringing not only new urgency and relevance to our search, but also new questions about trust, privacy, freedom and the future.

It's easy to go down the rabbit hole of the subject of modern surveillance and come out sounding like a raving paranoid. However, for anyone who has lived under the gaze of surveillance in a dictatorship, the implications—and dangers—of our data driven future are chilling, no matter what its architects tell us. In 2009, when Google's Eric Schmidt was asked by CNBC if users could trust Google, he replied, "If you have something that you don't want anyone to know, maybe you shouldn't be doing it in the first place."

These words, spoken by a Silicon Valley techno-libertarian, reveal just how much our fundamental definition of privacy has changed in the age of social media, where the most observed are the most valued and personal validation come from publicizing the private. Who needs informants when we so readily inform on ourselves?

In this new cryptopticon, we have become the apparatus. It doesn't just watch us, it *is* us and every aspect of our public, private and social lives is mediated by a network that is controlled not by governments, but by corporations that entice users with "free" services that promise efficiency and convenience, while, in reality, they are simply brokers and aggregators of human behavior. *We* are the products and our behavior is the new currency.

Unchecked, we are in danger of enabling our own worst dystopian nightmare, where privacy is a luxury, not a right. If that sounds crazy, ponder for a moment that Facebook users have uploaded over 250 billion photographs of themselves, their families and their friends to a company that operates the most sophisticated facial recognition software in the world. I can only imagine what the "who is who" obsessed Stasi would have thought of a population that eagerly hits the streets armed with radio equipped cameras that capture, tag, map and broadcast their every encounter.

It's easy to fear the future, but I wouldn't trade it for the past. Just as we finished the film, the UK voted for the Brexit and Donald Trump was promising to "Make America Great Again." Nostalgia is a powerful thing, but does anyone really want to go back to a world of walls and closed borders?

Notes on the Filmmaking

The Good Man

It's essential to note that the most influential film about the legacy of the Stasi and the GDR is *THE LIVES OF OTHERS*, a film that features a "good" Stasi man, the likes of whom still hasn't been found in reality after 25 years of intensive Stasi research. In fact, former Stasi employees are notoriously defiant, fiercely loyal and often defensive to the point of threatening litigation against stories, books and films that defame their experience. Very few rank-and-file Stasi employees have gone on the record, fearing both public condemnation and the scorn of their former colleagues.

With that, the biggest surprise during filming came when Petra's childhood best friend revealed that her parents worked officially for the Stasi and (after weeks of lobbying) they both unexpectedly agreed to go on camera to tell their story after declaring that they had nothing else to lose. Their testimony—rendered in a middle class living room, puts the past in focus, as they talk about turning informants, arresting dissidents and their shame as they realized that the "class enemies" they were fighting were no different than their own children.

B-Roll of a Dictatorship

The heart of the film lies in the fact that the most reliable witness to everyday GDR life may be the Stasi apparatus itself, and we were fortunate to have access to thousands of hours of declassified surveillance recordings to pull from. Found footage is woven into every frame of the film, especially the audio.

Much of the score was sourced from Stasi propaganda films and the '80s synth of Stasi informational films served as an inspiration for composer Alex Kliment. Whenever possible, original Stasi recordings from bugs planted in interiors like prisons, apartments and offices were used in the mix and routine broadcast and telephone intercepts are used throughout. As Petra walks through locations, she is often hearing what the Stasi heard.

Likewise, Stasi surveillance films, which are often the only available documentary evidence of the period, have a part in the film, enabling us not only see the GDR through the eyes of the oppressor, but also to put a human face on the apparatus. At times, the Stasi's documentation of themselves borders on camp. In one particular color scene, a lone gunman comically seeks cover behind trees in a forest, immediately bringing *The Beastie Boys' Sabotage* video to mind. In another scene, taken from interrogation tapes, a detainee becomes distressed when a pack of dogs begins howling, a frightening reminder of the Stasi's mastery of human psychology. In yet another sequence, taken from an epic catalogue of footage focusing on foot traffic in a small village, it's easy to see how everything and everyone begins to look suspect when seen through the lens of surveillance.

The Stasi Archive

None of this would have been possible without the team that guided our research at the Stasi Archive in Berlin, which is an institution unique to the world. There, the entire contents of an intelligence agency is open to the public. With that comes a huge responsibility to protect the privacy of those in the files while giving the public the opportunity to understand the apparatus and the mechanisms of a dictatorship. In the age of WikiLeaks, document dumps, and the hacking of corporate and government sites, much can be learned from the Stasi Archive about how to balance the public's right to know and the individual's right to privacy.

The Filmmakers

Filmmakers Petra Epperlein and Michael Tucker, aka Pepper & Bones, are a husband-and-wife team who work between Berlin and New York. Epperlein was born in Karl Marx Stadt, GDR and began her professional life as an architect. Tucker was born in Honolulu, Hawaii and fell into camerawork after an accident on a factory trawler led him to pick up his first camera. They met in New York in 1994 and immediately began work on the THE LAST COWBOY—one of the earliest examples of digital film. Later travels took them to the African bush, the Australian outback, Cuba, and the Balkans until they stumbled upon their first documentary in the Iraq War. That film, GUNNER PALACE, premiered at Telluride and TIFF in 2004 and led them directly to their second feature, THE PRISONER OR: HOW I PLANNED TO KILL TONY BLAIR, which told the story of an Iraqi journalist seen arrested in GUNNER PALACE and later sent to Abu Ghraib. The film premiered at TIFF in 2006 and was later nominated for an Independent Spirit Award. In 2007, they captured the life of a German armored car salesman in BULLETPROOF SALESMAN against the backdrop of spiraling violence (and demand) in Iraq and Afghanistan. Returning to America in 2008, they followed the soldiers of GUNNER PALACE home in HOW TO FOLD A FLAG, which premiered at TIFF in 2009. One of the characters in that film led them to the world of MMA fighting in FIGHTVILLE. In 2013, their film THE FLAG, for CNN Films, looked at the symbols and icons of 9/11 America.

Glossary

Karl-Marx-Stadt (Karl Marx City) - the official name of what is now known as Chemnitz from 1953 until 1990.

The citizens of Karl Marx City, known for their proletarian creed, were also prized by the Stasi for their dutiful willingness to inform on their neighbors and coworkers, so much that their Stasi handlers gave them the unique designator of “GM” for “Good Man.”

The Stasi also operated a secret prison there (Kaßberg-Gefängnis) where 30,000 political prisoners were sold to West Germany for around 3 billion DM in hard currency, which the regime then used to purchase West products, including computer hardware.

The city once was an industrial center in Germany, famous for its textile industry and tool machine factories, nicknamed “the Manchester of Saxonia.” After the wall fell, many factories became redundant in the re-unified Germany and closed. Since then, Chemnitz has lost almost 25% of its population. In 2006, Chemnitz was reported to have the lowest birth rate in the world.

Erinnerungskultur - the culture of remembrance

Ostalgia - a form of nostalgia expressed by many former East Germans. Seeing the past through rose-colored glasses as a way to cope with the end of the life as they knew it and the perpetual feeling of being second-class citizens or losers in the re-unified Germany.

Staatsfeind - Enemy of the State. Anyone could instantly become an enemy of the state by simply being a little out of line with the official state doctrine: the punk for being a punk, the worker for telling a joke about the Party, the student for demanding freedom to travel to the West.

Stasi (short for STAATSSICHERHEIT, the German word for state security) - the secret police in the GDR. In the “Dictatorship of the Proletariat” the country was governed by the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED) for 40 years. Well aware of its illegitimate power, the Party built an enormous security apparatus to protect its position. The Ministry of State Security (MfS) or “Stasi” was the “shield and sword of the Party,” answerable only to the leadership of the SED. Approximately 91,000 full-time employees and about 189,000 unofficial collaborators were engaged in a regime of prophylactic surveillance against the GDR’s population of 17 million people. To know “who is who” at all times was essential to keep the regime in power.

Vergangenheitsbewältigung - the process of coming to terms with the past

Zersetzung - subversive measures, disintegration measures. The Stasi used many psychologically clever methods against enemies to destroy reputations, friendships, marriages and undermine opposition.

Credits

a pepper&bones film

written, directed and produced by Petra Epperlein and Michael Tucker

cinematography by Michael Tucker

audio recording by Petra Epperlein

sound design by Michael Tucker

edited by Petra Epperlein and Michael Tucker

sound mix by CJ DeGennaro

music by Alexander Kliment

executive producer Dana O'Keefe

featuring:

Matilda Tucker - the Voice

Christa Epperlein

Uwe Epperlein

Volker Epperlein

Dr. Udo Grashoff

Dr. Hubertus Knabe

Dr. Douglas Selvage

Dagmar Hovestädt

Lothar Raschker

Dr. Juliane Schütterle

Jana X. and her parents R. and S. X.

thank you:

Tom Bartholomäus

Rosemarie Dombrowski

Marion Epperlein

Tobias Hollitzer

Ronald Langhoff

Hans Eberhard Leupold

Jens Lippert and Henrik Seiler

Anne Mauritz and Gregor Noack

Jeannette Meentzen

Illiana van Meeteren

Denise Orzo and Joe Concra

Sabine Popp

Babette and Maik Reinhardt

Sandro Schmalfuß

Frank Schoenfeld and Birgit Wolther

Joan Tucker and Lana Weed

Jana Wolf

Federal Commissioner for the Records
of the State Security Service of the former
German Democratic Republic

Former Stasi Prison Berlin-Hohenschönhausen Memorial

Stiftung Deutsches Hygiene-Museum Dresden

Lern- und Gedenkort Kaßberg-Gefängnis Chemnitz

Gedenkstätte Museum in der “Runden Ecke” mit dem
Museum im Stasi-Bunker Leipzig

special thanks to:

Katrin Gajewski

Katrin Kaiser

Sylvia Kegel

Simone Külow

Karsten Schicht

Doris Stark

Oliver Strübing

Peggy Voß

Iris Winkler

distribution advisory services

Cinetic Media - Jason Ishikawa, Dana O’Keefe

Submarine Entertainment - Josh Braun

festival publicist - Susan Norget Film Promotion

many special thanks to:

Gudrum Wenzel

Stasi records, photos and video courtesy of BStU

© pepper&bones 2016