

Friedrich Dürrenmatt, The Assignment (1986)

swiss dramatist and novelist

begins like thriller: funeral of euro woman found dead near al-hakim ruin
but plot is bizarre-- diverges from traditional form to frustrate reader
who are culprits? does anyone get justice?

plot:

after funeral of tina von lambert, her husband, a psychiatrist
engages the filmmaker 'F' to find murderer
F goes to unnamed location in N. africa
where she interviews officials and films the murder site
also catches on camera the execution of an innocent man
condemned for the crime
officials (secret service) persuade her to track down real murderer
by impersonating tina. another woman plays F's part.
a danish journalist tips F. off to the notion that tina is still alive
-- real victim was another journalist, jyttta sörensen
f. gets picked up by vietnam vet who mans an observatory
... that is intended to surveill country's war with neighboring country
who is veteran? who is beast? real murderers of the two danes.

who is D? based on FD. he's a logician, has a telescope (15)
(D conjectures that all art is self-portrait (26))

historical moment of novel: arms race (MAD), cold war of mid-80s

lecture notes are from margaret scanlan, plotting terror

shot thru with irony: military industrial complex creates tautology
wars are fought to fuel industry

multinationals supercede national identity. it's just computers pitted against each other.

novel of the posthuman, postnational condition

The Assignment disrupts conventions of 'terrorist lit'

most of the books we've read follow 19th-c. realism

--govt officials, press, and terrorists all collaborate to construct terrorism accord to popular fiction

--terrorist is portrayed as the other, the outsider

how do we see this in the good terrorist?

--mad bombers, motivated by traumatic childhoods and personal failures

traditionally, there is little attempt to convey the details of the historical causes that motivate militancy

FD wants to show inadequacy of realism

--he also suggests that terrorists are 'half-creations of the unstable state' (taussig)

--they are represented in a way that legitimates the state's own violence

Terror and Taboo (Zulaika and Douglass)

terrorism denotes the 'terrorism discourse'

that is created and sustained by western govts, the media, and terrorist experts

this discourse pays enormous attention to bombings by revolutionary groups

while slighting the much larger incidence

of domestic violence or urban violence (in US).

disproportionate emphasis on the dangers of tm

discourages citizens of the democracies from criticizing

their govts' stockpiling of nuclear/bio weapons,

which,

the discourse tells us,

are to be feared mainly bc

the terrorists might get hold of them!

FD wants to expose the myths of tm, wants to show the complex reality that underlies the familiar stories.

how does he do this?

fragmentation of identity

thru this fragmentation FD shows a longing for order that

asserts itself in

--totalitarian politics

--fundamentalist religion

--documentary realism

all these disciplines depend on observation

how to distinguish bw victims and practitioners of terror?

FD doesn't give us conventional story of sinister islamic terrorists.

who are the actual killers? the two americans, polypheme and achilles

FD situates novella with regard to Islamic fundamentalism, but then contravenes our expectations:

58/ if anything, otto v. lambert is on side of militants

in this novel, tm is impossible to locate

--it is dispersed through state and society

again, how to distinguish bw victims and practitioners of terror?

nothing is what it seems...

--sörensen, not tina, is the first victim

--tina "returns from dead" (73)

--hard to decide whether brain-damaged vet is victim or terrorizer

--few names of ppl or places

--reader can't master the story

question what do you think the subtitle means?

we desire discipline and control, we want to be observed.

consider this passage (89) "freedom was the trap into which she was expected to flee"

german version has second subtitle: novelle in 24 sätzen (philosophical propositions, Iliad)

subversive suggestion: the classical (western) literature is terroristic.

question let's read the epigraph

this evokes the radical insecurity in our world

-- we move into a future at once unknowable and deeply determined

--human being reduced to a spider (short-lived pest)

question what kind of god can we have now?

19-20/ read passage (also part of 21)

Soren Kierkegaard (1813-55)

reacts to Hegel, precursor to existentialists

belief in the necessity— for each individual— of making a fully conscious, responsible choice among the alternatives that life offers

central question: how do I relate to God as an existing subject?

The starting point of Fear and Trembling is the story of Abraham and Isaac.

Abraham prepared to sacrifice Isaac in obedience to a higher duty

--this contravenes the laws of ethics.

Kierkegaard asks: can we imagine a situation

in which ethics can be suspended by a higher authority—i.e., by God...

when God himself must be

considered the essence of everything ethical?

This problem—

which Kierkegaard calls “the teleological suspension of the ethical”—

led him to the conclusion that faith is essentially paradoxical.

Like Either/Or, Fear and Trembling was an attack on the prevailing Hegelian philosophy, which employed grandiose historical perspectives

in which the individual was sucked up

as tracelessly as a grain of dust.

f. deciphers passage, then starts to identify with sørensen

77/ f is “helpless as a spider”
she comes to represent a certain kind of art--
documentary realism
-- but the premises of rm begin to explode for her
the day she films tina’s burial
50/ f is helplessly drawn to tina’s coat

when tina writes in her journal “I am being watched,” FD (and the character D)
articulate the relation of observation to identity

what was f’s original goal as a documentarist:

f. wanted to create “a total portrait of our planet” (5)

but f’s faith in representation is shaken by her reading of tina’s journal.

all the detail “crushes out” individuality by its “ruthless observation” (11)

this terroristic “ruthless observation” ends by destroying the identity it seeks to establish.

question:

FD sees a danger in realistic art and in the commonsense, consensus notion of reality. why?

35/ one example of this... film crew and police are aligned with each other.
both are organs of surveillance

FD, better than a political analyst,

shows the emotional and intellectual costs of 20th c. life...

when even tm can’t be counted on to correspond

to our conceptions of it.

Otto v Lambert’s insight that “Auschwitz... was not the work of terrorst but of state employees”
(58) is well supported in this novel.

Terrorists serve the need to believe that

there are centers of resistance against a well-established order...

yet as the novel demonstrates,
the very notion of a center is illusory

The new physical terror of computerized bombing
and the old one of rape (Iliad)
correspond to a condition in which
contemporary human beings live and move,
their identity fragmented by
new philosophical conceptions of memory
and the self
as well as by new technologies
that violate privacy.

surveillance-- intended to reduce nuclear war and tm-- are oppressive but desired.

question what is ironic end of novel?

f. is saved from achilles bc a camera crew rises up from desert to film her

at this juncture f. sees how endangered she was (124-25/ "she walked and walked...she was
being portrayed")

MIT OpenCourseWare
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

21G.061 Advanced Topics: Plotting Terror in European Culture
Spring 2004

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.