

# Through the Camera's Eye: An Analysis of Dürrenmatt's *Der Auftrag* . . .

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In his recent work, *Der Auftrag oder Vom Beobachten des Beobachters der Beobachter: Novelle in vierundzwanzig Sätzen* (1986),<sup>1</sup> as in his earlier works, Friedrich Dürrenmatt is sharply critical of many trends in modern technological society. The tone of the work is suggested by the introductory quotation from Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* to which Dürrenmatt refers on two further occasions in the novella: "What portends? What will the future bring? I do not know, I have no presentiment. When a spider hurls itself down from some fixed point consistently with its nature, it always sees before it only an empty space wherein it can find no foothold however much it sprawls. And so it is with me: always before me an empty space; what drives me forward is a consistency which lies behind me. This life is topsy-turvy and terrible, not to be endured."<sup>2</sup> This quotation expresses the atmosphere of despair, emptiness, and uncertainty that, despite Dürrenmatt's characteristic grotesque humor and his inventive twists in the plot, pervades the whole work. Dürrenmatt creates a world in which chance reigns, in which God (if He even exists) is a mere onlooker, and in which people, acutely sensing their insignificance, desperately search for meaning.

As the title indicates, the role of observing and being observed is central to the novella. Out of this, Dürrenmatt creates a powerful image of the alienation and the dehumanization that, he believes, people experience in the modern world. In this novella, everyone observes everyone else, and in turn everyone is observed by everyone else: there is no longer any freedom or privacy. Observation reaches into all aspects of life, from the domestic to the political, scientific and even the theological spheres. Observing, for Dürrenmatt, is an indication of callousness and inhumanity. As he remarks elsewhere, to want to be only an observer requires a certain inhumane hardness.<sup>3</sup> Even the genre

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<sup>1</sup>Friedrich Dürrenmatt, *Der Auftrag oder Vom Beobachten des Beobachters der Beobachter: Novelle in vierundzwanzig Sätzen* (*The Mission or Of the Observing of the Observer of the Observers: Novella in Twenty-four Sentences*; Zürich: Diogenes, 1986).

<sup>2</sup>Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, trans. David F. Swenson and Lillian Marvin Swenson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1944) I: 19. From his early years, Dürrenmatt was interested in Kierkegaard. He was supposed to write a dissertation on "Kierkegaard and the Tragic"; see Timo Tiusanen, *Dürrenmatt: A Study in Plays, Prose, Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977) 53, 436. See also Peter Spycher, *Friedrich Dürrenmatt: Das erzählerische Werk* (Frauenfeld: Huber, 1972) 17.

<sup>3</sup>Friedrich Dürrenmatt, "Monstervortrag über Gerechtigkeit und Recht, nebst einem helvetischen Zwischenspiel: Eine kleine Dramaturgie der Politik" (1969), *Werkausgabe in 30 Bänden* (Zürich: Dürrenmatt's *Der Auftrag*. . .

that Dürrenmatt chooses for his work, that of the suspenseful detective novel, stresses the focus on observation, since in the classic detective novel the detective observes the facts coolly, and logically searches for clues.<sup>4</sup>

In his depiction of the marriage of Tina and Otto von Lambert, Dürrenmatt explores the effect of observing and being observed on human relationships. The novella opens with the burial of Tina who supposedly has been raped and murdered, a crime that has not been solved. Her corpse, which has been badly mauled by jackals, has been found in the Al-Hakim ruins in the desert of M. (The description of M. suggests Morocco but, by refusing to give the country a specific name, Dürrenmatt implies that the events could happen anywhere.) The psychiatrist, Otto von Lambert, has the coffin containing the corpse airlifted by helicopter over the Mediterranean and the Alps, dangling from a cable, and lowered into the grave, a grotesque funeral that the protagonist F. and her film team record. Von Lambert gives F. the mission of reconstructing on film the last days of Tina's life, a film that he intends to show to the prosecutor's office and at professional meetings. Von Lambert holds himself responsible for Tina's death since he believes that she fled from home after reading his case notes about her depression. In these notes, he does not treat her as a woman but as a psychiatric object, devoid of all human qualities. He has turned her into an abstraction, a trend symptomatic of our age which has become, according to Dürrenmatt, an age of abstraction.<sup>5</sup> As her diary shows, Tina is also guilty of such merciless observation. It is as if she has observed her husband under a microscope with increasing magnification, an observation that has stripped him of all individuality. As the logician D. remarks, observing leads to an objectification of people. This marriage, which is typical of many marriages in Dürrenmatt's works,<sup>6</sup> has, however, an untypical happy end since it is discovered that the wrong corpse has been buried and that Tina is still alive.

The observing and being observed that characterizes Otto and Tina von Lambert's relationship is, however, no isolated case, as the logician D. argues. In his house in the mountains, he tells F., he has a telescope. Whenever he looks through the telescope, he sees people looking at him with binoculars.

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genes, 1960) 27: 39. With the exception of *Der Auftrag*, all future references to Dürrenmatt's works are taken from the *Werkausgabe* and will be indicated only by volume and page number.

<sup>4</sup>Like *Das Versprechen* (1958; *The Pledge*), *Der Auftrag* (1986; *The Mission*) is also a requiem for the detective novel. It supports the views expressed by the police commandant in *Das Versprechen* that, unlike the detective novel, real crimes cannot be solved with logic. Dürrenmatt's reworking of the genre indicates his conviction of the importance of reason in the modern world; see, for example, Flora Sotiraki, *Friedrich Dürrenmatt als Kritiker seiner Zeit* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1983) 41; and Günter Waldmann's article "Requiem auf die Vernunft: Dürrenmatts christlicher Kriminalroman," *Pädagogische Provinz* 15 (1961) 376-84.

<sup>5</sup>Friedrich Dürrenmatt, "Vom Sinn der Dichtung in unserer Zeit" (1956), in *Werkausgabe* 26: 64.

<sup>6</sup>See, for example, such marriages as Romulus's to Julia in *Romulus der Große* (1948/1949; *Romulus the Great*) and Anastasia's to Mississippi in *Die Ehe des Herrn Mississippi* (1950; *The Marriage of Mr. Mississippi*).

When they realize that he is watching them, they hurriedly turn away: those observing have themselves become the observed. Being caught in the act of observing leads to aggression and humiliation, and some of the people throw stones at D.'s house in revenge. From this experience, D. generalizes that today man is an observed person. People become suspicious of the state which likewise is suspicious of them and observes them with increasingly sophisticated devices. In despair, people try to flee from being observed.

Dürrenmatt explores observation on the state level when F. and her team go to M. to try to reconstruct what happened to Tina. Everywhere they go they are accompanied by the police and filmed by other cameramen. Dürrenmatt shows the insanity of present-day politics in his depiction of this corrupt and brutal system that callously tortures people for its own political ends.<sup>7</sup> The two characters who represent the state in this work are both in positions in which observation plays a key role—in the police and in the secret service. The fat police chief, who resembles Göring, is locked in a power struggle, filled with Machiavellian intrigues, with the "sanfter Schönling" (the gentle little beautiful one) who turns out to be the ruthless head of the secret service. Both use the case of Tina and manipulate F. to gain power and topple the government, although they fail and are later executed. The head of the secret service listens to every conversation of the police chief (there are "bugs" everywhere) and watches everything that he does, although the police chief is unaware that he is being observed—he does not even know who the head of the secret service is. This state, which not only watches its own citizens but also the members of its own government, is itself watched by others: the country is filled with spies from all nations.<sup>8</sup>

In this novella, even war is waged only to be observed, a sharp criticism of the senselessness of war which Dürrenmatt has called on other occasions a reckless crime and a great stupidity.<sup>9</sup> As the cameraman Polyphem tells it, this state relies on the strange mixture of tourism and war for its economic health. For many years, a war that has lost all political meaning has been fought over an insignificant piece of desert, inhabited only by a few bedouins and desert fleas. The war is conducted solely to test the weapons of the arms-producing countries, to observe how these weapons function. This is emphasized towards the end of the novella when Polyphem drives F. to a tank graveyard where the mad Achilles intends to rape and murder her. In addition to the tanks, there are burnt-out floodlight poles, built to illuminate the battle, proof that the battle was staged only to be observed.

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<sup>7</sup>See, Friedrich Dürrenmatt, "Das Schicksal der Menschen" (1950) 28: 15.

<sup>8</sup>The atmosphere of spying and suspicion reminds one of Dürrenmatt's *Der Sturz* (1971; *The Fall*).

<sup>9</sup>Friedrich Dürrenmatt, "Das Schicksal der Menschen" 15, and "Tschechoslowakei 1968" (1968) 28: 38.

Throughout the novella, Dürrenmatt sharply criticizes modern technology for dehumanizing people—and he focuses in particular on the technologies that enable people to observe each other. Initially man has used machines as a prosthesis.<sup>10</sup> Now, however, man himself has become the prosthesis of the machine, and ultimately discardable, an indication of the topsy-turvy world referred to in the quotation from Kierkegaard. Polyphem tells F. that the state launches satellites equipped with computer-controlled cameras to spy on other satellites, likewise equipped with computer-controlled cameras which in turn are watched by other computers. At this point, the individual is fully eliminated. Polyphem himself has been replaced by an automatic video camera. To be observed, Polyphem remarks, is bad enough, but to be observed not by a person but by a computer is worse, a mistrust of the computer that Dürrenmatt expresses in other works.<sup>11</sup>

In this work, the camera in particular expresses the detachment and alienation of people from each other. Most of the characters in the work are connected to the camera. F. is a filmmaker; Polyphem and Björn Olsen are cameramen; Jytte Sörensen (the real corpse) was a television journalist; and there are cameramen everywhere who film F. as she is filming. Those who are not cameramen, like Otto von Lambert and the police chief, want to be filmed. F. has the idea of putting together a complete portrait of our planet by creating a whole out of chance scenes, a satirical reference to Dürrenmatt's *Portrait eines Planeten* (1970; *Portrait of a Planet*), an idea that she later abandons since she begins to mistrust the camera's ability to capture reality. The characters even use film to explain the real world. When F. is alone in the run-down hotel in the desolate mountains, it seems to her as if she is in an unreal film. Dürrenmatt sometimes uses analogies to people to describe the film. When Björn Olsen is killed in the explosion, his films burst out of their tin cans and look like intestines (82).

In his preface to Bernhard Wicki's book *Zwei Gramm Licht*, Dürrenmatt compares the camera to the human eye. The human eye is fleeting, forgetful, and can be deceived. It sees only what it wants to see and suppresses everything else. It cannot see anything that occurs too swiftly. In contrast, the camera can capture the most fleeting moment. It documents and is incorruptible: it penetrates everything.<sup>12</sup> This is the view that Polyphem—who is so called because, like the Cyclops, he views the world through one eye, the eye of the camera—presents. In his underground observation station, there is a wild confusion of films and the walls are covered with single photographs. Polyphem argues that only the camera can capture reality objectively and aseptically without any feelings that lead to distortion. Without the camera, the experi-

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<sup>10</sup>See, Friedrich Dürrenmatt, "Vorwort zum Buch von Bernhard Wicki *Zwei Gramm Licht*" (1960) 26: 154.

<sup>11</sup>Friedrich Dürrenmatt, "Erzählung vom CERN" (1976) 28: 143-44.

<sup>12</sup>Vorwort zum Buch von Bernhard Wicki *Zwei Gramm Licht*" 157.

ence slips away and becomes just memory, and, like all memories, falsified fiction. Polyphem even believes that the film itself is deceptive since it conjures up a sequence out of single pictures. For this reason, he cuts up his films into single pictures which are for him crystallized reality.

Dürrenmatt is, however, critical of the camera. Polyphem's method of cutting his films into isolated pictures is indicative of a world which, Dürrenmatt believes, has lost the sense of the total picture and has declined into many pictures,<sup>13</sup> a world that has become a series of unrelated, meaningless images. Elsewhere, Dürrenmatt defines the camera as the eye of the human saurian that stares at us coldly and glassily.<sup>14</sup> This glassy, cold stare is typical of many of the cameramen in this work. With the exception of F., they are characterized by their complete detachment from the events they are filming, no matter how much suffering and death they are recording. The most striking example of such detachment is Polyphem himself. F. sees photographs that Polyphem has taken of a burning armored vehicle with a man caught in the turret and burned to death. Polyphem goes beyond such callous observation, however, to actually stage events to film. He blows up Björn Olsen's van because he wants to film the explosion. This is a tragic and terrible accident, he comments, but thanks to the camera it is immortalized. Polyphem also stages Jytte Sörensen's death, partly to satisfy the lust of the mad Achilles whom he normally keeps sedated with Valium, but partly because he wants to capture the murder on film. Even at the end, when Achilles is killed by the police, Polyphem continues filming Achilles whose body is being torn apart by shots. Polyphem is utterly divorced from all feelings, from any sense of humaneness, compassion, or morality. Like Dürrenmatt, F. criticizes Polyphem's views of depicting reality. Since he stages the events he films, he does not record reality, as he claims, but only his twisted perception of reality.

In this vicious circle of observing and being observed, people feel helpless and insignificant, the playthings of powers that they do not understand.<sup>15</sup> They feel at a loss in a hostile and threatening world, a world in which peace is maintained only by atomic and hydrogen bombs.<sup>16</sup> In this world of technology, chance reigns supreme. The logician D. notes that should the arms race unleash an atomic firebrand because of some blunder, this would be nothing more than a senseless manifestation that the earth was once inhabited. It would be a firework that nobody would notice. The world, according to Dürrenmatt's apocalyptic view, is one that can be destroyed by some technical

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<sup>13</sup>"Vom Sinn der Dichtung in unserer Zeit" 64.

<sup>14</sup>"Vorwort zum Buch von Bernhard Wicki *Zwei Gramm Licht*" 156.

<sup>15</sup>"Vom Sinn der Dichtung in unserer Zeit" 64.

<sup>16</sup>See, for example, "Vom Sinn der Dichtung in unserer Zeit" 63.

short circuit, by an explosion in an atomic bomb factory caused by an absent-minded technician.<sup>17</sup>

In the world of the novella, a world made up of unconnected fragments, even people have lost their sense of wholeness, of identity, and have themselves become in effect like Polyphem's cut-up films. The logician D. argues that nobody is identical with himself; at each moment in time a person is different. F. reflects that this would mean that there are no whole selves. What one calls the self is only a collection of innumerable past selves, a collection of experiences, memories, and roles, a self that constantly shifts, a self that cannot be captured, as she previously thought, on film. It is also a self that cannot communicate effectively with others. The logician D., for example, gives lectures that nobody can understand. This inability to communicate with others reinforces people's sense of isolation, their sense of estrangement from one another.

People's feeling of isolation is made more acute in the world as Dürrenmatt portrays it because "there does not seem to exist a divine power which will either help or hinder."<sup>18</sup> As D. remarks, a personal god who observes each person, a god who rules the world, a god who is a father, has become unthinkable. The only god who is now possible is god as an abstract principle, a philosophical and literary construct, created to conjure up some meaning in a monstrous whole. Polyphem echoes this view. If God exists, then he is the pure spirit of pure observing without the possibility of becoming involved, rather like Allah in Dürrenmatt's "Monstervortrag über Gerechtigkeit und Recht" ("Huge Speech on Justice and on Law").

Dürrenmatt explores people's response to this hostile and threatening world, in which people feel as if they are trapped in a labyrinth, an image that he uses in the novella. Although people flee from being observed, they also *want* to be observed. If people are not observed they feel unimportant and meaningless. People film each other out of fear of their insignificance in a universe, filled with millions of Milky Ways, exploding stars, and collapsing suns, a universe that contains billions of absurd, populated planets like ours, hopelessly separated from each other by enormous distances. Even countries want to be observed. They want to be spied upon, and therefore stage events such as the arms race to ensure that they will be observed, to ensure that they will be considered important.

The desire to be observed, to feel significant, explains for D. the current trend towards religious and political fundamentalism. Since people cannot bear not being observed, they flee into the notion of a personal god or a similarly metaphysically founded party who or which observes them. From this they

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<sup>17</sup>Friedrich Dürrenmatt, *Die Panne: Eine noch mögliche Geschichte* (1955; *A Dangerous Game*) 20: 39.

<sup>18</sup>Walter Kohn, "Life and Death of an Uncivilized Civilization," in *Friedrich Dürrenmatt: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Bodo Fritzen and Heimy F. Taylor (Normal, IL: Applied Literature Press, 1979) 54.

derive the right to ensure that others observe the commands of god or the party. D. sees this as people's attempt to thrust on an unobserved mankind some meaning. Man, he comments, cannot live without meaning.

Another response to the dehumanization characteristic of the world as Dürrenmatt sees it is that of the mad Achilles, a former professor of Greek who is so called because he quotes Homer even when he is killing people in air raids in Vietnam or strangling women; a particularly grotesque use of culture. Achilles protests against the automation of war. He feels like a coward, a non-person, in his plane which he terms a flying computer. He kills people by pushing buttons and never comes face to face with his victims. Yet his protest against the inhumanity of modern warfare does not make him protest for peace. Instead, he argues for war filled with hatred and fear in which man becomes an animal and tears apart his enemy. Killing should be filled with hatred, he argues. People should fight like the real Achilles fought at Troy. For Achilles, two possibilities are open to man. He can either become a soulless machine, a camera, a computer, much like Polyphem has become, or an animal. Achilles opts for the latter. He longs to do something really criminal; he longs to become an animal and rape and strangle women, a wish that he later fulfills after he has become severely wounded in an air raid over Vietnam. F.'s behavior when she is faced with death appears to support Achilles's division of people into animals or soulless machines. When she fights for life, she herself becomes a predator, at one with the man who would rape and murder her, at one with the terrible stupidity of the world (130).

Unlike his earlier works in which, despite the gloom, flickers of hope appear because of courageous individuals like Romulus in *Romulus the Great* or Akki in *An Angel Comes to Babylon*, Dürrenmatt offers little hope for change, for any improvement in mankind's condition in this work. More than ever he sees his role here as a diagnostician rather than a therapist.<sup>19</sup> In light of the quotation from Kierkegaard that the world is a terrible place and not to be endured, the concluding words by D., who tells F. after she arrives back home that she has been lucky, are particularly grotesque, a happy end that does not often happen in Dürrenmatt's works.<sup>20</sup> Elsewhere, Dürrenmatt has commented that it is good to know how far the branch on which we are sitting is sawn through.<sup>21</sup> In this work, the branch on which we are sitting is about to fall.

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<sup>19</sup>Friedrich Dürrenmatt, "Tschechoslowakei 1968" 36.

<sup>20</sup>Jürgen Manthey, "Beobachtete Beobachter," rev. of *Der Auftrag*, by Friedrich Dürrenmatt, *Die Zeit* 12 Dec. 1986: 27.

<sup>21</sup>Friedrich Dürrenmatt, "*Heller als tausend Sonnen: Zu einem Buch von Robert Jungk*" (1956) 28: 20.