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Dirty Hands: *Die Andere Frau*

The enduring image of Margarethe von Trotta's remarkable film *Die Andere Frau* (*The Other Woman*) is of two women confronting each other across a table in the stark visiting room of a prison. The one who rivets us is the prisoner herself, haggard and unbeautiful, with a lined face, a spiteful tongue, and a flashing eye. She (Vera) is of course the other woman, and to those who speak of The Other as the bearer of qualities unwelcome in polite society this prisoner will seem all the more compelling in that she embodies such attributes so literally and expressively. She is civility's antithesis, taunting the well-dressed woman (Ivonne) opposite her who richly radiates civility itself.

Like *Das Leben der Anderen* (*The Lives of Others*), which its title evokes, *Die Andere Frau* looks back to the era of a divided Germany, with the notorious Stasi keeping watch over East Germany and both penetrating and poisoning the lives of its citizens. The immediate inspiration for *Die Andere Frau* seems to have been a certain Project Romeo conducted by the Stasi to exploit targeted women by identifying and playing on their weaknesses. In the film one such Romeo—Ivonne's husband, a Stasi agent—ingratiates himself to a single mother (Vera) working as a clerk in the Bonn Foreign Office, readily persuades her to supply him with secret documents by posing as

a scientist “working for world peace,” and to seal the deception goes through a charade of marrying her, making him the actual if not exactly legal husband of two women. For some six years he shuttles back and forth between two households. That the man (Stefan to Ivonne, Peter to Vera) got this sordid assignment because he could humor Vera’s wish for a father for her young daughter suggests both the ruthlessness of the Stasi and the depth of his own complicity and corruption. As the film opens, Ivonne, having received a letter from Vera exposing the entire sham,¹ journeys to a prison to lay eyes on the party who shared a husband with her—“the other woman”—and is now nearing the end of her five-year sentence. Ivonne enters wearing an Armani scarf, Vera a shabby tee-shirt outlining her drooping breasts: a contrast that illustrates all too plainly the double standard that has convicted Vera of a crime against the state while allowing Peter/Stefan, her deceiver and accomplice, not only to go free but thrive.

Though highly regarded in Germany where it was shown on television, *Die Andere Frau* has not been released in the United States. Subscribers to the distinguished American journal *Salmagundi*, however, received a DVD of the film with the Fall 2009/Winter 2010 issue, devoted in part to a discussion of the works of Margarethe von Trotta as well as a colloquy with the director and Barbara Sukowa, the acclaimed actress who plays Vera Glaubitz (and the also-imprisoned Rosa Luxemburg, title character of another von Trotta film). Barbara Sukowa is shown in several solo photographs in von Trotta roles as well as two photographs with the director in which each seems aglow in the other’s presence, a portrait of partnership. Barbara Auer, the actress who plays the bourgeois Ivonne Schumacher—well dressed, well housed, well

meaning—is absent from the panel discussion, appears in no solo photographs, and is not shown with the director, much as the figure of Ivonne is theatrically overpowered by the uncivil Vera within the film itself. (Barbara Sukowa deems Vera the film’s “great role.”)² The omission of Barbara Auer unintentionally reproduces the film’s partiality toward Vera, who wears the authority of suffering as Ivonne does not and mocks Ivonne as living in a house of lies. Guided by the film’s leanings, we credit Vera with the superior truth—the authenticity—of one who has pierced the falsity of bourgeois existence and suffers for what she has seen and done. Her very name, Vera, suggests “truth.”

In Lionel Trilling’s study *Sincerity and Authenticity*, the second upstages the first more or less as the robust Vera does Ivonne.³ If sincerity conforms words with thoughts and deeds with words, the bolder, more compelling ideal of authenticity throws into question the very conventions of social existence, perhaps including sincerity itself. In the film not only does Vera take an outsider’s view of the conventions of good society (never does she apologize to Ivonne for taking up with her husband—far from it), but her rawness, unpredictability and spirit of antagonism reflect sharply on the bourgeois woman sitting across from her in the visiting room. Quite in accordance with Trilling’s definition of authenticity as “a polemical concept, fulfilling its nature by dealing aggressively with received and habitual opinion,”⁴ Vera as we meet her in prison attacks, mocks, accuses (at one point declaring that she too was beautiful and intelligent till Stefan/Peter destroyed her). Not only does she compare the loveliness of Ivonne’s skin with the roughness and lost tone of her own, but she rubs in the contrast between

Ivonne's metaphorically clean hands and her own dirty ones. And this sort of virtually allegorical binarism sets the pattern of the women's relationship. One is civil, sincere, law-abiding, uses cosmetics, wears Armani, lives in a dream house, bore her children within marriage; the other is rude, vengeful and changeful, contemptuous of the law, without make-up, confined in a prison and before that an apartment, denied not only privilege but (so she claims) justice, her child fatherless. In other words, *Die Andere Frau* plays strongly on a paradoxical prejudice in favor of what is not well looked upon—and in favor of the authentic, understood as an antagonistic force that exposes the fictions and lies in which the world lives.

While he does not depict our culture's valuation of the authentic as a prejudice, Trilling does refer to "the *firmly entrenched belief* that beneath the appearance of every human phenomenon there lies concealed a discrepant actuality and that intellectual, practical, and (not least) moral advantage is to be gained by forcibly bringing it to light."⁵ Those who searched the Stasi archives to bring to light just what it did to the fabric of human life in East Germany have put this belief to good use. By the end of *Die Andere Frau* Ivonne has learned, similarly, that her own domestic life has been and continues to be built on lies. Her husband not only led a double life in the days of the Stasi but remains to this hour a double-dealer and incorrigible liar, and the house in the Netherlands where they now live—a lovely place, its entrance ringed with flowers, and with a yacht, a sort of waterborne castle, moored only feet away—owes its charms to tainted money. A vivid image of the mirage world she has inhabited is the gorgeous shrubbery Stefan/Peter has hidden in the garage, the better to surprise her with a fully

appointed greenhouse. That bit of Eden too turns out to be the product of dirty money. The bourgeois ideal of a private life sheltered from the world's nastiness, the ideal to which Stefan/Peter seems to expect her to dedicate her existence, is thus exposed as a cynical fraud. How can this well-intending woman live up to the principle of sincerity if her very marriage is a falsehood and her affluence defiled? If authenticity not only differs from sincerity (as being less decorous and affirmative) but casts doubt on its ideals and conventions, the rough-edged Vera goads Ivonne into the recognition that for ten years and more her life has concealed a hideous "discrepant" reality.

By the virtuosity of Barbara Sukowa's performance, the lines Vera is favored with, and the skill with which the script exploits our belief in the authenticity of the subversive,⁶ *Die Andere Frau* steers us toward the sort of anti-bourgeois conclusions I have sketched. But these are strictly one-sided, as the film itself seems to recognize somewhere in its consciousness. The fact is that Vera spied for five years on behalf of a uniquely detestable totalitarian state—and not only this, but her espionage led to the death of two people. This incidental detail comes up twice in the film but is never followed up in any way, as if the blood costs of the heroine's deeds were something to be technically acknowledged but not thought through. Who were the two and what happened to them? How did Vera contribute to their fate? Like Vera, who while admitting the two deaths holds Peter to blame (so much for her image of fearless honesty), the film shuts its eyes to these realities it nevertheless cannot completely erase. While tracing Stefan's money to its sordid source, it does not trace the actual consequences of Vera's work for the Stasi even though the entire plot is predicated on

it. That Vera did not really know what she was doing only means that she herself was living in a dream world. That with the unification of Germany Peter got away scot-free while she was sent to prison is indeed an injustice, but one that hardly exonerates her own crimes. Indeed, five years seems like a light sentence for one who not only committed treason but enabled, wittingly or not, two political murders.⁷

Nowhere in the *Salmagundi* discussion—not by the panelists, not by the director (who at one point speaks for a “German generation . . . who won’t accept anything less than the whole truth”),⁸ not by Barbara Sukowa—are these murders mentioned.

If Vera is not in fact the voice of a superior truth and is not more sinned against than sinning (though she apparently considers herself both), neither is Ivonne imprisoned in false consciousness and a false way of life. The floating Xanadu acquired so mysteriously by her husband, and now bearing her name, means nothing to her. What she wants from Stefan is to be told the truth, not to be swaddled in luxuries, and it is when she learns irrefutably that he continues to lie—that he is an incurable liar—that the tale reaches its turning point. Although boldness in the film seems to belong to the more dynamic Vera, it is Ivonne who seeks out the truth by visiting the other woman in the first place and standing her many assaults. The opening frames of *Die Andere Frau* show Ivonne heading for the prison on a ferry—an image that establishes the prison’s distance from the terra firma of her daily life—and on this leap into the unknown everything else in the film depends. It is the representative of bourgeois society, then, not the Dostoevskian outcast, who sets events in motion. Can this be the same woman so lost to reality that she has no idea of what it is that her husband of twenty years

actually does, how he earns his pay? Or can there ever have been such a woman? How is it that this film, self-evidently a work of art, nevertheless invests a spy for East Germany with the mystique of authenticity while asking us to believe that Ivonne, demonstrating both decency and courage before our eyes, has been in a drugged sleep all the years of her married life? It seems the film is so committed to the doctrine of the falsity of bourgeois existence and the authenticity of the Other that it portrays Ivonne as living in make-believe and Vera as baring the truth, when the truth is that Vera herself is living in make-believe—refusing to recognize the blood on her hands. In the first scene between the two women, after taunting Ivonne with the possibility that she might be talking to a murderer and being asked if she is in fact a murderer, Vera answers resolutely, “No.” Just as she once credited the fairy tale that her husband was a scientist working for world peace, so, even now, she cannot face what she has actually done. When Ivonne later confronts her with the stark, undeniable fact of the two murders, she snaps.⁹

Margarethe von Trotta went on to make a film about Hannah Arendt in the period from 1961 to 1965—“the Eichmann years,” as she calls them. It was Arendt’s report on the Eichmann trial that immortalized the phrase “the banality of evil,” and by the end of *Die Andere Frau* the viewer realizes that Stefan/Peter is a study in exactly that. He weeps with sincerity, he lies, he vows that it pained him to share the other woman’s bed, that he was merely following orders, and that all he ever desired was Ivonne’s happiness and love, and all the while, behind the scenes, he is even now blackmailing a former Stasi associate and investing the spoils in the finer things of life.

Actor and director have hit upon an interpretation of “the banality of evil” at once free, subtle, and wholly convincing.¹⁰ Why is it that the director has been better served by this notion of evil than by the dialectic of opposites (bourgeois / Other; conventional / transgressive) that governs the film as a whole? Perhaps because the “banality of evil” is not a full-blown theory so much as an observation. Von Trotta quotes Hannah Arendt as saying of evil that “It has no depth, and therefore has nothing demonic about it,”¹¹ which leaves open the question of what attributes evil *may* possess. Enter Stefan/Peter, a man whose image of the good life seems to come from a magazine and whose very emotions have grown spurious in the course of his history of lying. The dialectical schema is more like a fixed idea or a worldview and more heavily fortified with theory.¹²

Instead of the banality we might speak of the untheatricality of evil. But so too may good be untheatrical. Let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth. Plato, it is said, concluded that “the artist cannot represent or celebrate the good, but only what is daemonic and fantastic and extreme; whereas truth is quiet and sober and confined,”¹³ an insight that survives to this day in the dictum that the artistic portrayal of good risks being flat. Working against the figure of Ivonne, then, in addition to the suspicion surrounding the bourgeois way of life and the dialectic that makes the Other so much more compelling than its positive counterpart, is the advantage that the charismatic Vera enjoys over one as “quiet and sober” as Ivonne. At the end of the film, as the women combine forces to bring Stefan/Peter down, it is Vera who draws him into an incriminating conversation. In an earlier scene she was shown raising her wedding

dress to reveal a frilly garter; now she raises a pant leg to bare a microphone. Once again she is passing secret information. Ivonne looks on.

¹ As an adult Margarethe von Trotta herself received a letter from an older sister she did not know she had, though she claims to have subconsciously divined her existence. The letter to Ivonne from Vera's daughter establishes a sort of non-biological sisterhood between the two women—or the possibility of such a thing, realized by the end of the film. *Salmagundi* 164-165 (Fall 2009-Winter 2010): 132-33.

² *Salmagundi*: 147.

³ For the argument that Vera is “genuine” (that is, authentic) because she has struggled, while Ivonne has simply settled into her prescribed identity as a middle-class wife, see *Salmagundi*: 154.

⁴ Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), p. 94.

⁵ Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, p. 142; emphasis added.

⁶ On this fixed belief, see Michael André Bernstein, *Bitter Carnival: Ressentiment and the Abject Hero* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), e.g. p. 7: “Flaunting one’s contempt for the constraints of normative, prosaic life and finding a kind of liberation in the kinship between oneself and a mythologized image of the underground and the outlaw is a thoroughly familiar gambit.” When the *Salmagundi* panelists speak of “emancipation,” they do not mean something as straightforward, as prosaic, as the liberation of East Germany with the fall of the Berlin wall.

⁷ In this context Trilling’s reminder of the root meaning of “authentic” is chilling: “*Authenteo*: to have full power over; also, to commit a murder, even a self-murderer, a suicide” (p. 131). Vera attempts suicide.

⁸ *Salmagundi*: 164.

⁹ In connection with her sham wedding Vera confessed to committing treason and was absolved by the “priest,” actually a Stasi confederate of Peter’s.

¹⁰ The director has said of Peter/Stefan, “In my film right to the end [he] is betraying and so it becomes his second nature. And at the end, even if he would like to be truthful he can’t do it” (*Salmagundi*: 146). Evil is a creature of its own habits.

¹¹ *Salmagundi*: 119.

¹² The play of opposites in *Die Andere Frau* has a textbook quality. It is the fact that Peter/Stefan married his two wives, one legal, one illegal, on the same date that leads to his undoing.

¹³ Iris Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics* (London: Penguin, 1999), p. 443. On von Trotta’s sense of the difficulty of portraying a good German in the time of Hitler, see the *Salmagundi*: 150.