

Review of *Hannah Arendt* (2012)
Directed by Margarethe von Trotta
by David Mertz

(based, in part, on interviews with Pam Katz and Margarethe von Trotta)

According to Hollywood conventions, biopics—perhaps all the more so ones whose titles are their subjects—are permitted to follow one of two tropes, or optionally to make both gestures at once. Some filmic biographies are merely hagiographies; this is not necessarily a bad thing, some subjects really do warrant plain praise, either because of who they are or because of the salutary politics of doing so. Brian Helgeland's 2013 biography of Jackie Robinson, *42*, fell into this category and was reasonable in what it did. Socialist Realism retains its virtues.

Many other biographies in film strive to show the dark or conflicted life and thoughts of their subjects—musicians and painters especially, by convention and perhaps reality, struggle with drug addiction, failed relationships, difficult childhoods, and so on. And yet they overcome these obstacles to achieve artistic greatness. Or, at the most sinister end of this spectrum, biographical subjects are persons of infamy rather than of fame, and it is their negative quality that compels our interest. For example, real-life serial killers have been well and horrifyingly portrayed in John McNaughton's 1990 *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* and Patty Jenkins' 2003 *Monster*.

Margarethe von Trotta thoroughly eschews both of these filmic biographic conventions in her presentation of important intellectual figures, both in her 1986 *Rosa Luxemburg* and in 2012's *Hannah Arendt*. In part, von Trotta's approach might seem to flow entirely from her selection of serious, engaged, and political thinkers. However, I do not think the seriousness and intellectual import of portrayed subjects suffices alone to evade a stylistic familiarity. For example, Ron Howard's 2001 *A Beautiful Mind* showed the personal struggle of John Nash with schizophrenia, and his contrasting greatness in mathematical discoveries. In a somewhat similar pattern, David Cronenberg's 2011 *A Dangerous Method* showed the eminently political and transformative writings of Carl Jung, Sigmund Freud, Sabina Spielrein—and to an extent Otto Gross—but filtered through the personal conflicts and struggles amongst them (arguably, Cronenberg's 1991 *Naked Lunch* did something similar for writer William S. Burroughs).

Von Trotta does something nearly unique with *Hannah Arendt* in making the process of thought itself the compelling central motif, in a manner that recapitulates Arendt's own focus on the process of thought as a starting point of a philosophical system. As a framing device, the film covers only the few years in the early 1960s in which Arendt was writing *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, though a variety of the phrases and comments she gives in the film are excerpted, appropriately, from her posthumous *Life of the Mind*. The framing of the current film also contrasts with that of von Trotta's earlier *Rosa Luxemburg* inasmuch as the latter generally takes on the whole of Luxemburg's adult life, and generally in a

conventional chronological manner. While to my own mind, Luxemburg, despite her early murder, was the more profound thinker, von Trotta's biography of Luxemburg falls closer to the "greatness through struggle" trope.

While *Hannah Arendt* has great appeal to those of us steeped in the history of Western philosophy, its appeal is by no means confined to residents of ivory towers. Without either dumbing down the material nor assuming a background philosophical knowledge, von Trotta lets the audience wrestle with the same intellectual problems that Arendt herself did during this process, including letting many of Arendt's critics—many of whom were friends and colleagues—argue against Arendt's views.

Moreover, as much as I am characterizing the film in terms of its intellectual gestures and debates, the presentation as film narrative is engaging, and at many times quite wryly funny. A process of thought is depicted in the film, but it is done by depicting a few years of a life filled with friendships disrupted, maintained, and reclaimed, with an authentically portrayed and touching death of a mentor, with conflicts and back-biting in university employment, with a marriage both tender and challenging, with political debates over justice and society, and with a fascinating glimpse into a certain moment of New York social history. There are a number of very good films which have followed characters—fictional writers, professors, and so on—whose life events are less eventful than those Arendt experienced in these years; and many of these films present a compelling character narrative on that alone, even though the ideas and works they created remain purely notional within those fictional narratives. As a biographical subject, Arendt's life has fascinating twists and turns in itself, and the portrayal of these is both engagingly written and meticulously acted by the film's cast.

Without really risking any spoilers since the events in Arendt's life are both well-known historically and outlined in all the promotional material for the film, the story ark of the film is as follows. In an initial scene, Mossad and Shin Bet operatives capture Adolf Eichmann in 1960, in Argentina, where he had fled with false documents provided by the Vatican. Some framing scenes show Arendt (Barbara Sukowa) and her coterie of New York intellectuals, including long-time friend Mary McCarthy (Janet McTeer) and husband Heinrich Blücher (Alex Milberg), and in conversation we are provided the Jewish Arendt's backstory of having fled Nazi Germany to France where she married Blücher, her brief youthful alignment with Zionist groups in Germany, her internment and escape from a camp in France after its occupation, and her affair with her professor, well-known philosopher (and Nazi party member) Martin Heidegger (Klaus Pohl). The dialogue cowritten by von Trotta and screenwriter Pam Katz is both crisp and natural, and avoids falling into the easy trap of sounding overly expository—notwithstanding the obvious obligation of the script to accomplish such.

In a cutaway scene, members of the editorial staff of *The New Yorker* discuss hiring Arendt to cover Eichmann's trial in Israel, in which a composite character "Francis Wells" (Megan Gay) gets to deliver a delightful and prophetic line to Editor-in-Chief William Shawn (Nicolas Wooseson; though with perhaps a missed opportunity missed to cast Shawn's son,

Wallace as his father): “Philosophers don’t make deadlines.” Clearly with the setup, both film convention and actual history dictate Arendt attending the trial as a *New Yorker* reporter. In Israel, Arendt both follows the trial testimony—both of Eichmann and of various of his “victims”—and also connects again with friends and colleagues who have moved to Israel and remained Zionist in conviction. These scenes use archival footage of Eichmann himself, as well as of the testimony of various Jews who survived camps and persecution.

A key point in discussion among the characters, with Blücher often acting as the “conscience of the film” in my reading, involves questions of the legitimacy of the trial, the surrounding legal process and framework, and of the direct culpability of Eichmann in the crimes to which he was a bureaucrat. For example, Blücher at one point objects to the process with the comment “You can’t put history on trial. You can only try one man.” Indeed Arendt’s observation within the film, and in reality within her resulting book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* is that almost none of the testimony spoke to specific actions by Eichmann himself—hence my earlier scare quotes, which are philosophically Arendt’s around “victims.”

Upon return to New York, after delays and effort characteristic of a philosopher, Arendt eventually completes her commissioned book-length notes on the trial, which were published both in serialized form in *The New Yorker* and subsequently, with slight modification, as perhaps her most known book. The publication of her notes on Eichmann’s trial led to a great deal of vilification and outrage at Arendt, whose conclusions were both that Eichmann himself rather than holding any animosity towards Jews simply “did not think” and followed his orders, and even more controversially that without some degree of tacit participation of many Jews in the the process of genocide, for narrow relative personal advantage, the outcome would not have been nearly as bad. Many people acted without grand design, nor even any real intelligence, malice, or ability. In Arendt’s characterization in the film, “Once the trains were in motion his work was done. [...] He’s a bureaucrat. [There was a] huge difference between the unspeakable horror of the deeds and the mediocrity of the man.”

Perhaps the greatest problem faced by von Trotta as a filmmaker was in how effectively to present the moments of interiority that are essential to the story of the film. These years saw many large and dramatic external events in Arendt’s life, and in those of the people around her. At the same time, much of what needed to be presented was her process of articulating her famous concept of the “banality of evil” (and related analyses). The fact that Sukowa is such an amazing and expressive actor certainly helps in this task, but the problem remains. One truly lovely device that von Trotta used was to show Arendt in her New York study, surrounded by piles of transcripts from the trial, with many voices of those who testified echoing in ghostly fragments. What we hear is not full statements by any one, but it is enough to have a sense of one victim, as it fades into the testimony of another. What becomes depicted is Arendt’s internalization of the meanings of these comments into her own synthetic picture, but it doesn’t have the common flat-footedness of simply narrating a single document by a voice-over by its writer.

The only breaks in *Hannah Arendt* from a generally linear and chronological narrative of the few years it occupies are several past scenes of the young Arendt's relationship (played by Freiderike Becht), both as a university student and lover of Heidegger. The precise relationship of Heidegger to Nazism is a matter of philosophical and historical contention. Some philosophers and historians—most famously, Chilean historian Victor Farías (with whom I personally concur)—see Heidegger's philosophy itself as essentially infused with the viewpoint of National Socialism, while others see his never-renounced party membership and administrative complicity as merely personal failings of the man. One thing that is certainly emphasized within the film is the contrast between Eichmann who "didn't think" and Heidegger who is held by Arendt as both a profound thinker, but also a philosopher who placed the process of thought at the center of the content of his philosophy. That is, all philosophers obviously value thinking by occupation, but not all treat "thinking about thought" as their fundamental concept, as Heidegger—and Arendt—did.

A point that seems positively to shout out to me as viewer is a contrast between the type and degree of culpability in the actions of Eichmann versus Heidegger. While the filmmakers do not do so directly, to me Heidegger stands as far more profoundly evil in this picture. Moreover, the fact that Arendt both enacted a degree of reconciliation with Heidegger after the war—shown briefly in the film—and continued to treat his ideas centrally in her own thought constituted both a "tragic flaw" in her personally and a weakness in the philosophical analyses she conducted.

The conclusion of the film is conducted in the manner of a number of films that deal with dramatic and intellectual controversies. Following a great deal of criticism for her work and concepts, the conclusion is a seven minute speech outlining the ideas developed in this work before a group of students and faculty at a fictionalized composite of the various universities she taught and lectured at, which effectively ties together most of the themes and ideas addressed throughout the film. This speech was convincingly written by von Trotta, but especially by co-screenwriter Pam Katz, based on a variety of publications by Arendt—some in fact dating from years later than the events portrayed—but maintaining a stylistic integrity that very much resembles Arendt's. This effective conclusion both answers the questions of the prior 2 hours and leaves us, as it should, with far more that we as audience should hope to answer ourselves.

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