

# Hannah Arendt: Margarethe von Trotta's film revisits debate over Eichmann trial

By Fred Mazelis and Stefan Steinberg  
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*Directed by Margarethe von Trotta, written by von Trotta and Pam Katz*

Hannah Arendt's director Margarethe von Trotta has a long history in German filmmaking. Born in 1942, von Trotta first acted in films of the "New German Cinema," including a number of works by Rainer Werner Fassbinder in the early 1970s. In 1975, she co-directed *The Lost Honor of Katharina Blum* (based on the novel by Heinrich Böll), a moving, disturbing study of state repression and media complicity in West Germany, with her husband at the time, Volker Schlöndorff.

Launching a solo career as a filmmaker in 1977, von Trotta first made her mark with *Marianne and Juliane* (1981), about two sisters, one of whom is an anarchist and dies in unexplained fashion behind bars. The film was rooted in the history of the Red Army Faction (Baader-Meinhof), the German anarchist group that carried out numerous arson attacks, bank robberies and killings in the 1970s.

Von Trotta's most important film to date is her fine film biography of the Polish-German revolutionary Marxist, *Rosa Luxemburg* (1986). More than a quarter of a century after her brilliant portrayal of Luxemburg, German actress Barbara Sukowa (one of the best of her generation) delivers another impressive performance as Hannah Arendt.

Arendt was born to a cultured and assimilated German Jewish family. She lived in Germany throughout the Weimar period, and studied under and had a love affair in the 1920s with Martin Heidegger, the German philosopher who notoriously supported the Nazis after they came to power. Arendt fled to Paris in 1933. After internment at a detention camp in France following the Nazi occupation and the installation of the Vichy regime in 1940, she escaped and emigrated to the United States in 1941.

In the post-World War II period, Arendt taught at Princeton, New York's New School for Social Research and elsewhere. Much of her intellectual energy was directed toward her writing, and *The Origins of Totalitarianism* brought her a certain degree of fame.

This was the height of the Cold War, and Arendt's discussion of totalitarianism meshed with efforts to associate Communism and fascism. Although her anti-Marxist credentials were indisputable, Arendt was no right-winger herself, traveling in liberal academic and intellectual circles. Her second husband, Heinrich Blücher, was a former German Communist. Her best friend was writer Mary McCarthy, who had been briefly associated with Trotskyism in the late 1930s.

Von Trotta has chosen to focus her film on a relatively brief but important period in Arendt's life, from approximately 1960 through 1963. With her reports on the Eichmann trial, Arendt became a very public figure, provoking vitriolic denunciations from the Zionist establishment, and raising questions about the history and the nature of the Nazi Holocaust.

The film sets the stage for this historic controversy with an opening scene depicting the abduction of Adolf Eichmann, one of the few top Nazi leaders who remained at large. At the same time, we soon see the chain-smoking Arendt among her circle of close friends, including McCarthy (Janet McTeer), in her spacious apartment on New York's

Upper West Side. Friendly but heated debates take place as intellectual sparks fly at cocktail parties hosted by Blücher (Axel Milberg) and Arendt.

When headlines report the kidnapping of Eichmann by Israeli agents in May 1960, followed by his secret transfer to Israel, Arendt conceives the idea of covering the trial and contacts William Shawn (Nicholas Woodeson), the long-time editor of the *New Yorker*, offering to write a series of articles for the magazine.

Arendt begins her assignment with serious doubts, as shown through conversations with her husband and in cocktail party debate with friends and colleagues. Despite her own support for the state of Israel, she questions the conception of a show trial, in which Eichmann is to be used as a symbol of Nazi domination and to buttress the Zionist claim to represent and defend the Jewish people as whole. Arendt sees the Holocaust as a crime against humanity, not only the Jewish people.

The film goes on to present the events in chronological sequence for the most part. The trial itself is effectively depicted through original black-and-white footage. Arendt watches from the pressroom, another realistic touch given the fact that, as a heavy smoker, she spent most of her time there.

As she observes, Arendt comes to several conclusions. She is struck by Eichmann's testimony, by what director von Trotta sums up as his mediocrity, obedience and inability to think for himself. These traits, Arendt concludes, combined with his organizational skills, made possible his role in organizing the transport of millions of people to the gas chambers at Auschwitz and elsewhere. She coins the phrase "banality of evil" to characterize the bureaucratic mentality and mind of the Nazi leader.

At the same time, Arendt is shocked by testimony at the trial about the cooperation of leaders of the Judenräte, the Jewish councils set up by the Nazis in occupied territories, cooperation that smoothed the organization of the transports to the death camps.

When Arendt's articles finally appear, they provoke denunciations from many quarters, including the Zionist establishment, but also many of her closest friends. Lionel Trilling, the Columbia University intellectual and leading light of *Partisan Review*, is offended. The much younger Norman Podhoretz, then the vociferously Zionist editor of *Commentary* magazine and just beginning the trajectory that would see him transformed from anti-communist liberal into leading neoconservative loudmouth and supporter of the extreme right, is outraged.

More painful to Arendt than these criticisms are the reactions from some of her oldest friends. Hans Jonas (Ulrich Noethen), a fellow German refugee who taught with her at the New School, breaks relations with her. Arendt travels to Israel to see the gravely ill Kurt Blumenfeld (Michael Degen), another lifelong friend. Blumenfeld turns his back on her.

The film closes with Arendt publicly defending her characterization of Eichmann. Ostracized by her colleagues at the New School and pressured to give up her teaching duties, Arendt refuses. Addressing a lecture hall

filled with students and faculty, Arendt-Sukowa speaks for a full eight minutes explaining that the only antidote to the “banality of evil” is critical thought on the part of the enlightened individual.

Arendt, a stubborn individualist, cut across the political aims of the Zionists, above all the claim that only the state of Israel could speak on behalf of Jews everywhere, and that Israel was the only hope for the survival of the Jewish people. She certainly deserves to be defended against all the attacks on her as a “self-hating Jew.”

At the same time, Arendt’s whole method led her to conclusions that only strengthened her enemies, enabling them to pose more effectively as opponents of Nazism. Later evidence has demonstrated what should have been quite clear to Arendt at the time. Despite his play-acting during the trial, Eichmann was no naïve and obedient bureaucrat, but a vicious anti-Semite who threw himself into the work of the Final Solution and boasted about the number of Jews whose murder he had organized.

Rather than placing Eichmann in any historical context, Arendt relied simply on her impressions of his trial testimony, substituting a kind of quasi-psychological approach for a serious analysis. History has shown that seemingly minor or mediocre figures can rise rapidly to positions of enormous power under definite historical conditions, as shown so profoundly by Leon Trotsky in his analysis of the role of Stalin.

As far as the Jewish councils, here too Arendt relied on an ahistorical approach that examined the actions of the Jewish leaders abstracted from world events. While many of these leaders represented more privileged sections of the Jewish population, they also faced violent intimidation and threats to their lives. The actions of some reflected their hatred and contempt of the masses of Jewish workers and the poor, but that was by no means always the case, and some no doubt hoped to save at least some of the Jewish population.

The film is unable to genuinely explore and explain these issues. There is much that is interesting and gripping, including Sukowa’s masterful performance, the footage of the Eichmann trial itself and the effective use of German, Hebrew and English to provide an accurate and occasionally engrossing picture of the world in which Arendt moved.

Nevertheless, the film overall is relatively dull and stolid. The actors do their jobs, especially Sukowa and Milberg as Blücher. The historical context (and the energy it would generate) is missing, however. The brief flashbacks between Arendt and Heidegger (Klaus Pohl) are particularly stiff and ineffective. There is something too literal, muted and narrow about this story, which focuses on Arendt’s trials and tribulations, but not on the issues that her life and career raise.

A key to the film’s problems is contained in von Trotta’s comments included in her notes on the film’s preparation. The director explains that Arendt’s “quest to understand people and the world...made me feel overwhelmingly drawn to her.” She goes on to explain, however, that Arendt “continued to believe in the power of the individual to withstand the cruel force of history.”

Von Trotta describes Eichmann as follows: “His duty, as he himself insisted, was to be faithful to his oath to obey the orders of his superiors. In this blind allegiance, Eichmann surrendered one of the main characteristics that distinguishes human beings from all other species: the ability to think for himself. The film shows Arendt as a political theorist and independent thinker set against her precise opposite: the submissive bureaucrat who does not think at all, and instead chooses to be an enthusiastic subordinate.”

As an explanation of the Holocaust this is almost absurd. If only Eichmann had thought about his actions, the mass murder could have been prevented!

Left entirely out of the film, and Arendt’s work, is the history in Germany from 1918 to 1933 of missed revolutionary opportunities, and later, betrayals of the working class carried out by Stalinism and social democracy that alone made Hitler’s rise to power possible.

In the context of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the ideological campaign that declares that socialism is dead, von Trotta seems to have changed her attitude toward the history of the twentieth century. In fact, she now favorably counterposes Arendt to Rosa Luxemburg. She explains, “In 1983 I wanted to make a film about Rosa Luxemburg, because I was convinced that she was the most important woman and thinker of the last century.... But now, as we begin the 21st century, Arendt is an even more important figure.”

Arendt’s conception, now praised by von Trotta as appropriate to our century, leads directly to the most pessimistic and false conclusion, that humanity, in the form of “ordinary people,” is to blame for fascism. Von Trotta quotes Richard Bernstein along these lines, declaring that “For Arendt the most intractable moral questions arose not from the Nazis’ behavior, but from the behavior of ordinary respectable persons,” and von Trotta adds, “This is the main point, in my opinion.”

Arendt’s “banality of evil” theory is not entirely without insight, insofar as it implied that the worst crimes against humanity were not necessarily carried out by the most obvious “monsters.” Indeed, the twentieth century demonstrated that average people could endorse or engage in such behavior. The point is to understand how this takes place—how, for instance, sections of the ruined and desperate middle classes in Germany were won or submitted themselves to the Nazi cause, how they were pitted against the working class, and also how this outcome was not inevitable.

In any case, this concept of “banality” did not apply to Eichmann, whose responsibility was minimized by Arendt, as she separated his actions and the Holocaust itself from the social and historical conditions that produced it, above all the struggle of contending classes and the crisis of the capitalist system. The lesson to be drawn from the “banality of evil” is not that the isolated thinking individual can change history apart from the role of masses of people, but rather that revolutionary theory and leadership are urgently needed to defend humanity through the struggle for socialism.

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