

FILM REVIEW:

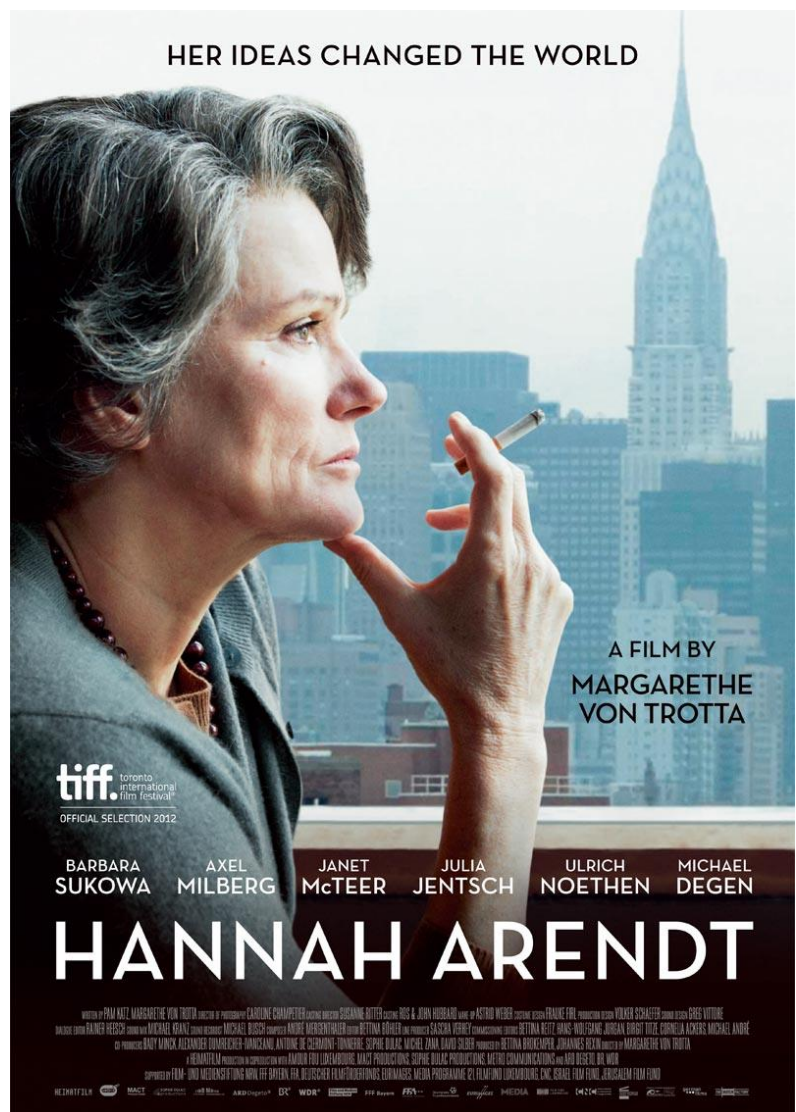
Hannah Arendt and the “Banality of Evil”

By Raymond Barglow

At the end of the Second World War in 1945, Nazi war criminal Adolph Eichmann escaped to Argentina. There he was discovered by Israeli intelligence agents who kidnapped him in 1961 and flew him to Israel to be tried for genocide against the Jewish people.

Hannah Arendt (1906-1975), a German-born Jewish political theorist and journalist who emigrated to America in 1941, was commissioned by the *New Yorker* to attend the Eichmann trial and write about it for the magazine.

Her report sparked a controversy about what she called “the banality of evil” that today, half a century later, remains unresolved. This controversy, which split apart Arendt’s circle of family and friends, stands at the heart of this film.





1906. Hannah Arendt is born in Hanover Germany. Although her German Jewish parents are active in the reformist wing of the Social Democratic Party, her mother admires Rosa Luxemburg.

1924-1928. During her university years, Arendt studies with the philosophers Karl Jaspers and Martin Heidegger.

1933. Hannah Arendt, doing research in Berlin on anti-Semitism, is arrested by the Gestapo. Escapes and flees to Paris.

1940. Interned in a camp in Southern France, she escapes again.

1941. Emigrates to the U.S., where she becomes a journalist and university professor.

1961-1963. Attends Eichmann trial and publishes her controversial report.

Eichmann had been a high-level administrator in the Third Reich, responsible for organizing the transport of millions of Jews to death camps. In the Jerusalem courtroom he was placed inside a bullet-proof glass cage for his own protection and subjected to a trial that went on for fourteen months. The proceedings were televised and exposed the man and his crimes to an international audience.

The prosecution's evidence included the testimony of Jewish survivors who described their death camp experiences in horrifying detail. While she was moved by these eye-witness accounts, Arendt took exception to the political messaging that the trial broadcast to the world. She believed that Israeli leaders such as Prime Minister Ben Gurion meant to use the trial to expose, through the example of Eichmann, a fanatical antisemitism that had motivated the Nazis and that continued to endanger Israel; hence Eichmann had to be tried and judged as a heartless and relentless murderer of Jews specifically, not as a perpetrator of "crimes against humanity" that victimized homosexuals, gypsies, Communists and socialists as well.

It was this narrative that Arendt, as she sat in the courtroom and witnessed the proceedings, found herself disagreeing with. But her counter-narrative seemed to many of those who

followed the trial to disrespect the Jewish victims of the Holocaust and to exonerate their executioners. In fact, her report on the Eichmann trial unleashed an international debate. Whereas the court made Eichmann out to be a depraved monster, Arendt regarded him instead as “terribly and terrifyingly normal.”



The glass cage surrounding Eichmann served Arendt as, so to speak, a lens through which to view humankind. When she coined the phrase “the banality of evil,” she wasn’t referring only to war crimes, but also to the everyday complicities and evasions that enable social injustice and cruelty.

In director Magaretha van Trotta’s cinematic presentation of this dispute, she draws outstanding performances from her lead actress Barbara Sukowa, who is compelling as Arendt, and from the German actors playing her close friends Hans Jonas and Kurt Blumenfeld. Sukowa wonderfully conveys those paradoxical qualities of Arendt that were well-known to her friends: warmth and kindness on the one hand, and on the other a fierce independence and confidence in her own judgment that sometimes estranged her from others.

The film represents both Jonas and Blumenfeld as bitterly critical of Arendt’s opinion that Eichmann was merely a “conformist” with no strong anti-Semitic convictions. They were further offended by what they perceived as her shifting of blame from Eichmann to the Jewish people themselves, when she wrote that Jewish community councils in Europe cooperated with

the Nazis in implementing the "Final Solution." Arendt goes so far as to say, "To a Jew this role of the Jewish leaders in the destruction of their own people is undoubtedly the darkest chapter of the whole dark story." Jonas and Blumenfeld found such remarks preposterous, even antisemitic, and at odds with Arendt's own personal history.

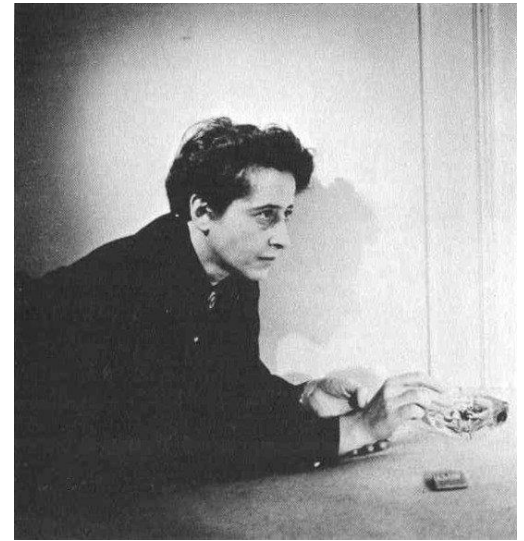
Like Arendt, Jonas and Blumenfeld were German Jews who had escaped the Nazi regime during the 1930s. Jonas and Arendt had become close friends in the 1920s when they both were students of the German philosopher Martin Heidegger, who would go on to collaborate with the Nazis in the 1930s. Arendt became romantically involved with Heidegger, and the film makes much of their tumultuous relationship. Hans Jonas taught at the New School in New York and wrote about ethics and religion. His reflections on caring for the earth and its future influenced the German Green Party in the 1980s. Kurt Blumenfeld, who had been Arendt's political mentor and friend during the pre-war years in Germany, was a charismatic Zionist activist and public speaker who went to Palestine in 1933.

Jonas and Blumenfeld repudiated what they took to be Arendt's misunderstanding of the aims of the Eichmann trial and her willingness to explain away the crimes of an accused Nazi leader. The film gives a voice to both sides of this dispute, although Arendt's perspective is more fully elaborated. Since the cinematic subject of the film is Hanna Arendt, this favoritism is appropriate. Still, the audience receives a somewhat one-sided view of the contested issues. The film exaggerates, moreover, the isolation and danger to Arendt that resulted from the controversy. This is most evident in a scene that shows Israeli intelligence agents confronting Arendt walking on a country road and urging her not to publish her report on the Eichmann trial—an incident that the director fabricated.

Indeed, Israeli leaders were incensed by Arendt's report. The trial's chief prosecutor, Gideon Hausner, visited the United States to speak against Arendt's views. Fierce repudiation came also from outside Israel, at the hands of critics like Nahum Goldmann, President of the World Jewish Congress. The American Jewish Congress vehemently attacked Arendt's views, and the Anti-Defamation League condemned Arendt's book as itself "evil." Norman Podhoretz, editor of Commentary, wrote that Arendt's portrait of Eichmann "violates everything we know about the Nature of Man.... No person could have joined the Nazi Party, let alone the S.S., who was not at the very least a vicious anti-Semite ..." And in 1965, Jacob Robinson, who had advised the prosecution during the Eichmann trial, published a scholarly 400-page refutation of Arendt's views.

Arendt's interpretation of the Eichmann trial was all the more baffling to her friends and colleagues because it seemed so distant from her work in decades past on behalf of Zionist causes. In her youth Arendt had admired the idealism and courage of fervent Zionists like Blumenfeld, and she too had endorsed the project of creating a Jewish homeland in Palestine.

But as time went on and the Zionist project culminated in the creation of a Jewish state that excluded its Arab population from full citizenship, her reservations about this particular way of fulfilling the promise of Zionism amplified. Along with Jewish spokespersons such as the philosopher Martin Buber and the reform rabbi Judah Magnes, she anticipated that the establishment of Israel as a religious state might rule out peaceful coexistence between the new nation and its Palestinian population and Arab neighbors. "I am not against Israel in principle," she insisted, "I am against certain important Israeli policies."



In the 1940s, Arendt supported the creation of a Jewish homeland as an inclusive, bi-national "federated state" governed by "Jewish-Arab community councils." This proposal struck many Zionists and anti-Zionists alike as naïve and unrealistic, given the long-standing and deep antagonisms between these two peoples.

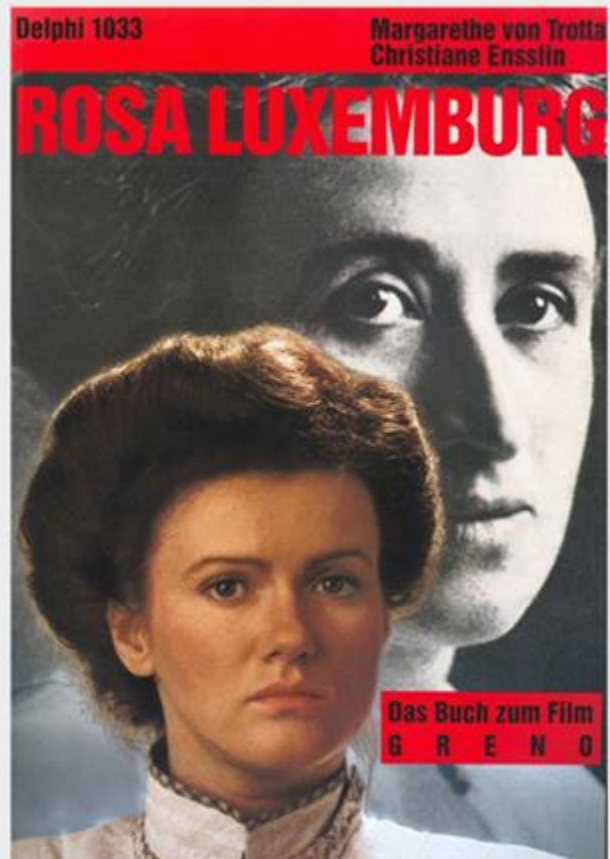
Still, Arendt was prescient in recognizing the dangers to Israel of unceasing violent conflict with the Arab world and of a siege mentality within Israel itself. In Arendt's view, Israel's reliance upon military force to defeating Palestinian resistance was more likely to exacerbate the conflict than to bring about a peaceful resolution.

Barbara Sukowa, who enacts the role of Hannah Arendt, has starred in four previous films directed by Van Trotta, including "Vision: From the Life of Hildegard van Bingen"(2009) and "Rosa Luxemburg" (1985). These films feature women who challenge the prevailing ideologies of their time.

Arendt identified with Luxemburg, the Jewish Marxist revolutionary who was murdered in Berlin in 1919. In formulating her account of totalitarianism, Arendt drew upon Luxemburg's analysis of the roles of militarism, nationalism, and imperialism in promoting violence and defeating democratic mass movements.

"Freedom is always the freedom of the one who thinks otherwise."

-- Rosa Luxemburg



The controversy following publication of Arendt's report on the Jerusalem trial might have subsided if it had not re-awakened an older, perennial dispute within Judaism about what is more important: the safety and flourishing of the Jewish people or the creation of a more humane and just world.

Since Biblical times, facing oppression or even extermination, Jews have been compelled to "look after our own" in order to survive. This preoccupation with self-protection led to the creation of Israel, a homeland for the Jewish people, in 1948, but this came about at the expense of Palestine's Arab inhabitants.

Coexisting with this inward-looking, survivalist mentality has always been another, wider Jewish identification, universal in its scope, that reaches out to the "Other" – the oppressed and marginalized and fallen of all lands. Torah has it that the Jewish people is to be a "light unto the nations," remembering that "you shall love the stranger as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt."

Conflict between these two traditions within Judaism drives the plot forward in van Trotta's film. Along with Kurt Blumenfeld and Hans Jonas, another friend of Arendt, the Jewish Kabbalah scholar and Zionist Gershom Scholem, repudiated her report on the trial of Eichmann, finding its tone "heartless," "malicious," and contemptuous. In a letter to Arendt in 1963, he wrote that "In the Jewish tradition there is a concept, hard to define and yet concrete enough, which we know as *Ahabath Israel*, or 'Love for the Jewish people.' In you, dear Hannah, as in so many intellectuals who came from the German left, I find no trace of this."

Arendt wrote back to Scholem, "How right you are that I have no such love, and for two reasons: first, I have never in my life "loved" some nation or collective — not the German, French or American nation, or the working class, or anything of that kind. Indeed I love 'only' my friends and am quite incapable of any other kind of love."

Identification with a nation, culture, or faith is for Arendt not a foundation for love:

"this kind of love for the Jews would seem suspect to me, since I'm Jewish myself.... We would both agree that patriotism is impossible without constant opposition and critique. In this entire affair I can confess to you one thing: the injustice committed by my own people naturally provokes me more than injustice done by others."

The historical disputes within Judaism influenced the interpretations that were given to the Eichmann trial in 1961. Whereas the prosecution was intent on demonstrating that Eichmann manifested an antisemitic hatred to which Jewish communities had been subjected for many centuries, Arendt perceived Eichmann as emblematic of a new kind of evil that arises in modern, bureaucratic societies and whose targets are not only Jews.

The director of this film, although clearly sympathetic to Arendt's perspective, steps back from endorsement of any single interpretation of the trial, choosing instead to have the trial proceedings speak for themselves: rather than having an actor enact the role of Eichmann, van Trotta has inserted actual televised footage of the trial. Hence, the film audience confronts the same question that divided observers of the proceedings: who is this man, Adolph Eichmann? Can we make sense of his motives? And how typical were such motives among Nazis who planned and carried out the "Final Solution"?

The prosecutors at the trial in Jerusalem set out to establish malevolent intent on the part of Eichmann, but Arendt found no trace of such criminal motivation in the man. Indeed, given the massive human suffering and death for which he was responsible, Eichmann seemed to many observers, not only to Arendt, remarkably bland and ordinary – the very model of the faceless, unemotional bureaucrat. By his own account, he had been merely a “cog in the machine,” obediently carrying out the orders of his superiors.

Arendt’s appraisal of Eichmann seemed to her critics to accept naively and mistakenly this picture of the man and his motivations. They pointed out the historical record of Eichmann’s antisemitism, his full embrace of Nazi ideology, and the evidence for his personal as well as official cruelty and sadism.

Arendt’s account of Eichmann was not, however, oblivious to the considerations that the prosecution detailed. She rejected the excuses for this behavior that Eichmann gave, regarded him as guilty, and agreed with the court’s death penalty verdict.

Defenders of Arendt have pointed out, moreover, that when she described Eichmann as “thoughtless,” she meant that he did not deliberate in any critical way about his own actions and their consequences, and was incapable of thinking from the standpoint of another person. Hence Eichmann might have been “thoughtless,” in the sense Arendt intended, *and* a doctrinaire antisemite. Being an unquestioning, model bureaucrat – “neither perverted nor sadistic,” as Arendt described Eichmann -- is compatible with being a zealous ideologue.

Recent Information about Eichmann

Since the publication of Arendt’s “Eichmann in Jerusalem” in 1963, a great deal of information has come to light that was not available to Arendt at that time. In an interview done in 1960 with ex-Nazi Willem Stassen in Argentina, Eichmann regretted that he had not exterminated even more Jews, “I could have done more and should have done more.” Additional evidence that has come to light over the past several decades paints a quite different picture of Eichmann than he presented to the Jerusalem court in 1961. These and other relevant documents are analyzed by German researcher Bettina Stangneth in her book *Eichmann vor Jerusalem*. We know today that Eichmann was an enthusiastic and relentless advocate of the extermination of the Jewish people. But that doesn’t entirely invalidate Arendt’s view of him as an obedient bureaucrat, since unswerving, aggressive anti-Semitism was official Nazi policy and nearly universally accepted within the German culture that gave to Eichmann an identity and a job.

Arendt had herself – in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, published in 1951, a decade before the Eichmann trial – linked bureaucratic action to ideological conviction. She argued there that during the Third Reich, for example, ideology had enabled totalitarianism by encouraging blind nationalism, suspicion of the designated “other,” and militarism.

Even if Arendt misjudged Eichmann’s character, she clearly identified a feature of 20th-century state-sanctioned violence with her telling phrase “the banality of evil.” What Arendt explains to us, writes criminologist Daniel Maier-Katkin, is that “When the devil comes to negotiate for our souls, he brings attractive gifts and rationalizations, and is more likely to be wearing a business suit or uniform of national pride than a fiery cape.”

The On-going Debate about the "Banality of Evil"

Since Arendt's remarks on the "banality of evil" fifty years ago, her thesis has been "confirmed" or "refuted" any number of times. The obedience studies done by social psychologists Stanley Milgram and Philip Zimbardo in the 1960s and '70s attested to the readiness of ordinary human subjects to impose, in the absence of any pre-existing motivation to do harm, intense suffering on others when given authorization to do so. Two historical studies -- Christopher Browning's *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (1992) and Daniel Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (1996) -- renewed the debate on this subject. Browning found that the soldiers of Police Reserve Unit 101 -- ordinary working-class men from Hamburg who massacred many thousands of Jews in German-occupied Poland -- were not fanatical anti-Semites but carried out their assignments because they were told to do so and because their peers were conforming also. Goldhagen, however, insisted that hundreds of thousands of Germans -- more than were official members of the S. S. or the Nazi Party -- deliberately and energetically set out to persecute and murder Jews. "The German perpetrators ... were assenting mass executioners, men and women who, true to their own eliminationist antisemitic beliefs, faithful to their cultural antisemitic credo, considered the slaughter to be just."

Unshakeable ideological conviction results from such "gifts and rationalizations": one builds a certain self-justifying story for one's actions and illustrates that story with compelling images and stereotypes about a black-and-white world. In her report on the trial of Eichmann, Arendt wrote of a self-serving fiction or "tape" that played over and over again in his mind, "and it was this taped memory that showed itself to be proof against reason and argument and information and insight of any kind," and that allowed the man to square his policy decisions with his conscience.

The trial of Eichmann presented in stark terms one man's repudiation of ethical constraint, while also showcasing, through the testimony of more than one hundred witnesses, most of whom were concentration camp survivors, the genocidal crimes of the Third Reich. It may be true, as Arendt alleged, that the trial served particular political aims -- that it was used by leaders of Israel to present their justification for Israeli policies in a world perceived as incorrigibly hostile. Director van Trotta says, though, that she respects the wish of the trial organizers to remind the world of the Holocaust. "I understand Ben-Gurion more than she [Arendt] did. I am German, not Jewish. I understood ... because in our country, the younger people of my generation didn't know anything, and our parents didn't tell us."

Van Trotta's film on Arendt and "the banality of evil" does not attempt, however, to evaluate a larger claim, namely that the Holocaust vindicates the Zionist aim to build a Jewish homeland in Palestine. Arendt had embraced the Zionist project early on, but became sharply critical when the conflict between Palestinians and Jews remained belligerent and cruel following the establishment of the Israeli state in 1948. In Arendt's eyes, the Eichmann trial served as a political instrument used by Ben-Gurion to convey Zionist ideology and frame Israel's treatment of Palestinians within a narrative of ubiquitous antisemitism. Her warnings, which were voiced also by some other trial observers, about Israel's impact on the Palestinian population turned out to be prophetic, anticipating ceaseless violence and moral compromise.

Today the narratives told on both sides continue to promote an unremitting hostility that stymies efforts to make peace. As Rabbi Michael Lerner has pointed out, both sides “embraced nationalist rhetoric Both sides were traumatized by their own history, and by outrageous acts of violence perpetrated by the other.”



Palestinian school wrecked by an Israeli bomb



Three Israelis killed by a Hamas rocket attack

At the same time, though, the recognition that ordinary people will, *under certain conditions*, commit horrendous acts opens the possibility of historical transformation. In his article, “Arendt's Banality of Evil Thesis and the Arab-Israeli Conflict,” Israeli political theorist Yaron Ezrahi submits that

If both Israelis and Palestinians were able to attribute the acts of violence and crimes committed by each side against the other as related to particular circumstances rather than to essential character traits, they could more easily focus on manageable changes The ability to recognize that even terrorists are humans who were turned by religion, ideology, and suffering into suicide bombers or that trigger-happy Israeli soldiers are themselves victims of prejudice, brainwashing, improper education, and distorting emotional manipulation, is a first step.

But that first step toward peace is the most difficult one! It's blocked by the stories people tell about the monstrous wrongs they have suffered, casting all the blame on the other side. In her *Denktagebuch*, the diary Arendt wrote upon returning to Germany in 1950, she said that reconciliation does *not* require that we no longer condemn certain actions of the past. What we can do is recast our memories and our fears within a wider context of understanding that remains true to the history, in all of its complexity and terribleness, but that can imagine and move toward a better future. No longer enclosed within self-justifying narratives, we might find an honest, hopeful way forward.