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Hannah Arendt's thought brought to screen in fascinating film

Sr. Rose Pacatte | May. 25, 2013

Director Margarethe von Trotta, whose numinous 2009 film, "Vision," told the life story of St. Hildegard of Bingen, has taken on the story of another influential woman, the philosopher and political theorist Hannah Arendt (1906-75).

"Hannah Arendt" opens in New York in 1960 where Arendt (Barbara Sukowa), a German émigré and secular Jew, writes and teaches at a university. When the Mossad, the Israeli intelligence agency, captures the Nazi officer Adolf Eichmann and takes him clandestinely to Jerusalem to stand trial, Arendt, who has a strong philosophical interest in totalitarianism, discusses with her husband, Heinrich (Axel Milberg), about asking William Shawn (Nicholas Woodeson), the editor of *The New Yorker*, to send her to cover the impending trial for the magazine. Shawn hesitates because, as his assistant notes, "philosophers don't make deadlines." But he agrees and Arendt sets out for Israel in 1961.

The film centers around Arendt's coverage of the trial for the magazine and her classroom lectures dealing with the controversies the articles stir up upon her return.

Arendt is stunned when she learns that the defendant will be kept in a glass "cage" during the trial (to protect him) and questions the legitimacy of Israel's jurisdiction to try a man for crimes not committed there, indeed committed before Israel was even a country. She thought that the court's only interest was to adhere to the demands of justice for murders committed by Eichmann, but the trial was more complicated than that because of his role as a bureaucrat who, by compartmentalizing his conscience, facilitated the "Final Solution" and the deaths of millions. So the court was confronted with a crime it could not find in a law book and the likes of a criminal it had never before seen. Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion was determined to put on a show trial and witness after witness told of Nazi atrocities committed on them and their families while Eichmann held out, and never waivered, that he had never killed anyone.

Still, according to Arendt, the court "had to define a man on trial for his deeds" because it was not possible to try a system or ideology.

Arendt's reports in *The New Yorker* distinguished between the radical evil of an ideology and the banal evil of a bureaucrat who followed the law. Arendt's readers could not grasp the complexities she was trying to highlight and they accused her of taking Eichmann's side. Controversies increased when the trial raised the issue of Jewish leaders who had worked with the Gestapo during World War II and perhaps facilitated the deaths of Jews. Arendt reported on this, but her readers interpreted it to mean she blamed the Jewish people for their own deaths.

Eichmann, the organizer of Jewish deportations and the death camps, held fast to his defense that he had only "obeyed orders." As Arendt explains to her class in New York after the trial, "He insisted on renouncing his personal guilt ? had done nothing on his own initiative." In short, Eichmann chose not to think. He went along with the crowd.

As a philosopher who had studied under Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), with whom she had an intense love affair, Arendt's writings focused on how a person's ability to think is what makes him or her human and a member of society. Her views on surrendering one's critical thinking abilities to others is central to the conclusions she drew from the trial, which she saw as "the totality of the moral collapse the Nazis caused in reputable European society."

Few people, even in academia, understood her single-minded philosopher's approach to reporting on and assessing the complexities she saw surrounding the Eichmann trial. Arendt lashes out against her critics, many of whom were close friends, saying that character assassinations are not arguments, that "to understand is the responsibility of any person trying to put pen to paper on this subject" because "trying to understand is not the same as forgiveness."

In the final lecture scene in the film Arendt responds to Eichmann's insistence that he was just doing his job and that he personally killed no one. "The greatest evil in the world is the evil committed by nobody," she said. "Evil committed by men without motive or conviction, without a wicked heart or demonic words ? is what I call the 'banality of evil.' "

"Hannah Arendt," co-written by von Trotta and Pam Katz, is not a full-scale biopic, though there are flashbacks to Arendt's life as a student. Dialogue fills in the details of her brief internment in a French prison camp. The film flows easily from English to German (English subtitles provided), though Sukowa's German-accented English takes a little getting used to. Her performance is just right. Von Trotta and Sukowa, who also played Hildegard, make a formidable team in these stories about strong, influential women.

The script seems largely based on Hannah Arendt's book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, which includes, with some edits by Arendt, the articles published in *The New Yorker*. First published in 1963 in the United States, the book was not published in Israel until 2000. I discovered that a 2006 edition of the book, with an introduction by Amos Elon, makes an excellent companion to filling in questions von Trotta's film raises.

Another important American intellectual of that era, Mary McCarthy (Janet McTeer), is Arendt's good friend. They enjoy discussions about love and relationships. McTeer seems awkward but fits my image of the novelist and critic. Though Arendt loses her male friends and colleagues in the controversies following *The New Yorker* series, her husband stands by her. The film ends as it begins: Arendt smoking a cigarette, thinking.

I found the film fascinating, though its lecture style may not appeal to some. The inclusion of archival footage of Eichmann's trial is chilling as he professes innocence in the deaths of 6 million people. But if you are like me and you remember Eichmann's capture and trial on television (I was too young to appreciate *The New Yorker*), this film, and the profound questions it evokes about evil and human responsibility, the legitimacy of torture and jurisdiction in this era of warfare as normal life, as well as horrific episodes of genocide in the late 20th and early 21st century with people doing little or nothing to stop them, will be well worth your time.

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