

Rose-tinted lens

Hannah Arendt, dir. Margarethe von Trotta, Zeitgeist Films, New York, 2012, 113 minutes.

Standing before a firing squad, in Margarethe von Trotta's 1986 biopic *Rosa Luxemburg*, Luxemburg is taken in flashback to an image of herself as a child refusing to go to bed, intent on seeing the petals of a rose unfurl before her. A gun cracks, but no bullets are fired. It is when death is not expected that Luxemburg is to be killed: a rifle butt knocks her unconscious at the base of a flight of crimson-coloured steps, whose intimation of waves of blood is soon to be repeated as ripples on the moonlit Landwehr canal, whilst the film's protagonist sinks to its floor. This was the moment Hannah Arendt described as having 'initiated the death dance in postwar Germany'. It passes into the opening of von Trotta's latest biopic, *Hannah Arendt*.

Arendt's first appearance is in a shot of Manhattan, the night's darkness pierced with the electric light of its skyscrapers: smoking, *thinking*, lights off, with books piled before her and a pair of empty Sabbath candlesticks facing the towers behind, miming their posture. Next, the same living room basked in morning light: Arendt's personal chatter with Mary McCarthy breaking the film's ominous start. The significance of this scene is easy to miss: young Rosa's stubborn rose has reappeared, on the coffee table beside McCarthy; a dominating vase full of roses, even, unfurled yet no longer quite red in colour. Pink, pale, bunched in a heavy white clay vase, spewing from its top. The anaemia of the revolutionary rose perhaps, or rather, more convincingly, its fusion with the resistant 'white rose' of Sophie Scholl's contemporaries on 'Rose Street', which von Trotta made the subject of *Rosenstraße* (2003). The choice of actors in *Hannah Arendt* provokes connections to this historical backdrop: Arendt (the film's mature version) is played by the same actor who played Rosa Luxemburg in von Trotta's 1986 biopic, and her personal assistant starred as Sophie Scholl in Marc Rothermund's well-known 2005 (theatre) production. The script – much of which is a collage of Arendt's published writings and correspondence – also draws on such references. McCarthy makes the point of describing Arendt's husband, philosopher Heinrich Blücher, as 'one of those passionate ex-Communists from Berlin' who 'followed Rosa Luxemburg to the end'. (True, at least

the latter part.) The pink rose, feminine hybrid of red and white, symbol of both and neither revolution and/nor resistance, is the subject of *Hannah Arendt*.

Von Trotta is astute in having looked to Arendt as the topic to succeed her films on Luxemburg and the Rosenstraße rebellion. In the early 1950s Arendt had written: 'In a largely moral, but not only moral, sense one might say that it is still the ghost of Rosa Luxemburg who haunts the consciences of the ex-Communists of the older generation.' Arendt's figuring of Luxemburg as someone who haunts consciences is repeated in the guise of the Scholls in her *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963), where Arendt describes how only the actions of the Scholl siblings, in distributing anti-Nazi leaflets, publicly manifested the otherwise 'mute' opposition to the Nazis of those isolated Germans who retained a sense of 'conscience' – specifically *conscience* – through the era. If the women-led demonstrations against the deportation of the city's remaining Jews, on Rosenstraße in 1943, had been discovered by historians whilst Arendt was still alive, she would have surely amended her judgement that *only* the Scholls publicly manifested the 'other Germany's' conscience during the Nazi era. Arendt offers von Trotta a certain way of comprehending a meeting point between such distinct figures of recent German history, besides their political ambitions: as bearers of private consciences turned public.

Arendt herself attempted to manifest such a public conscience throughout her adult life. After assisting refugees in the 1930s, she used her pen to campaign on a variety of matters relating to German and Jewish issues, notably within the pages of magazines rather than academic journals. If, as Agnes Heller has argued, Arendt's works should be read as forms of political intervention, then *Hannah Arendt* is based on the intervention she is today best known for: her critical report, published in the *New Yorker*, on the 1960–62 Israeli trial of SS Lieutenant Colonel Adolf Eichmann, coordinator of the First, Second and Final Solution to Nazi Germany's 'Jewish Problem'. Before the unfortunate term 'Holocaust' had been coined, the Eichmann trial catapulted into mainstream public consciousness the notion that the (European) Jewish experience of the war had been

one of genocide. Arendt in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* was scathing of the prosecution, who, under the direction of then-prime minister David Ben-Gurion and on the assumed authority of the murdered 6 million, intended to try Eichmann as the embodiment of the anti-Jewish spirit that would eternally stalk world Jewry. Though she supported Israel's extrajudicial capture of him, and, unlike Martin Buber, Primo Levi, Walter Kaufman and other Jewish writers, his execution, she rallied against what she saw as the generalization of his responsibility beyond that for which there was evidence (his first-hand murder of a Jewish child, for instance). So, too, she drew a continuum between the German Jewish leadership's 'realpolitik' approach to anti-Semitism, which, she argued, led to their ruinous negotiations with the Nazis in the early 1930s, and the Israeli prosecution's conviction of anti-Semitism's ubiquitous and generalized nature outside of Israel: both were expressions of a 'dangerous inability of the Jews to distinguish between friend and foe'.

If the text is to be read as an intervention, then *Eichmann* was an attempt to undermine the Israeli



state's pedagogical intention to, as described in her opening pages, 'show Israelis what it meant to live among non-Jews, to convince them that only in Israel could a Jew be safe and live and honourable life'. It was with great foresight that Arendt attempted to derail at its outset a discourse which would grow, as today, to set Israel into a seemingly intractable war footing. Over forty years later a speaker of the Israeli parliament would write:

Israel accentuates and perpetuates the confrontational philosophy that is summed up in the phrase, 'the entire world is against us.' I often have the uneasy feeling that Israel will not know how to live without conflict. An Israel of peace and tranquility, free of sudden outbreaks of ecstasy, melancholy, and hysteria will simply not be. In the arena of war, the Shoah is the main generator that feeds

the mentalities of confrontation and catastrophic Zionism. (Avraham Burg, *The Holocaust Is Over*, 2010)

Arendt's apprehension of such catastrophic Zionism, then being born, is perhaps today more pertinent than ever. As such, it is lamentable that von Trotta's *Hannah Arendt*, basing itself on the Eichmann period, effectively skirts around all questions concerning Israel's relation to the Shoah. Instead, it represents only the ad hominem 'self-hating Jew' attacks against her.

Early in the film, Arendt is shown gazing at the walls of old Jerusalem beside friend and Zionist Kurt Blumenfeld, before remarking in Hebrew *Yerushalayim ahuvatchah* (Jerusalem, your love), for which on his deathbed Blumenfeld replies (in the words of Gershom Scholem's famous letter) that Arendt has love for neither Israel nor her own (the Jewish) people. Similarly Arendt's main interlocutor of the film, Hans Jonas, accuses her of blaming the Jewish people for their own destruction. Whilst such accusations did form much of the content of the 'Eichmann controversy' in the 1960s, they were, as much then as

now, distractions from the politics of the book, which revolved around undermining the prosecution's generalizations by emphasizing the particularity of history. In order to undermine the prosecution's reduction of the Jewish experience under the Nazis (and in the Diaspora in general) to simple Jewish victimhood and non-Jewish persecution, she emphasized, for instance, non-Jewish confrontations with the Nazis and their sheltering of Jews, the Jewish leadership's betrayal of their constituents through failing to warn them of the Nazi's murderous intentions, and the 'collaboration' of the Nazi-appointed *Judenrat* (Jewish Police) in the murder of countless more Jews than would have otherwise been killed. Although in the years since *Eichmann's* publication Holocaust scholarship has contested a number of Arendt's facts, viewing their accuracy as products of the text having been written in the initial years of the discipline, without a basis in historical detail *Eichmann* would be unrecognizable: no longer an intervention into the Israeli state's politically motivated discursive generalizations. Such it is within *Hannah Arendt*, where unfortunately von Trotta has missed the opportunity to convey the force of argument expressed figuratively by Arendt's title '*Eichmann in Jerusalem*': the Shoah within the Israeli state.

Hannah Arendt is more a film about the book's subtitle: the banality of evil. Adolf Eichmann himself is for all intents and purposes a marginal character, a subplot, the representation of someone, anyone, who is 'simply unable to think', fodder for the *dybbuk* who possessed the killers of Luxemburg, the Nazis of *Rosenstraße*. Although Eichmann's appearance solely by means of televised court recordings, rather than by actors, gives him a certain historical specificity, the effect is to imbue him with an exceptional ghost-like quality, which is only affirmed by von Trotta's comment that an actor 'couldn't be as mediocre as the real Eichmann', as though Eichmann were some singular monster of mediocrity from an ineffable realm. When von Trotta has Arendt assert that *Eichmann ist kein Mephisto*, what is being referred to is his lacking the mental activity to be an evil of such sorts, his special powers of what Arendt called *Gedankenlosigkeit* ('thoughtlessness' or 'brainlessness'). In real life, many sympathetic writers, especially Mary McCarthy, did emphasize the thoughtless banality of evil as the major political discovery of the book. For them, it was an apt description of a tendency towards which the modern human condition is geared. Yet abstracting *Gedankenlosigkeit* away from the particular subject of the book scrapes against Arendt's method entirely. For Arendt it was imperative that *Eichmann* be read not as a 'theory' of evil but a 'report' on a specific, present man, a distinction derived from her renunciation of philosophical 'thinking', in the Kantian sense of cognition through ideas (absent objects), in favour of what was for her the properly political faculty of *judgement* – the mediated cognition of a particular, present object.

Though judgement is referred to, it is assumed that thinking – as the supposed negation of *Gedankenlosigkeit* – inherently leads to moral judgements. For example, in Arendt's final lecture in the film

Eichmann utterly surrendered that single most defining human quality, that of being able to think. And consequently, he was no longer capable of making moral judgements. This inability to think created the possibility for many ordinary men to commit evil deeds on a gigantic scale, the likes of which had never been seen before.

This was not really the case for Arendt. Thinking, the pursuit of philosophy, was for Arendt strife-filled, 'a dangerous and resultless enterprise', which led almost all philosophers since Plato (bar Kant) to tyranny when invoked in the political sphere. Philosophical thinking, whilst true in relation to ahistorical universals, lacks the judgement formed

in relation to the particularity of history, which restrains us from creating and enforcing 'new' values that, lacking historical reference, invariably simply negate the old. Thinking tends to engender topsy-turvy 'nihilisms' such as that of Hitler and Stalin's totalitarianisms, which 'non-thinkers' like Eichmann would rigidly follow. Though *Eichmann* is a report on the catastrophic yet law-abiding actions engendered by one man's non-thinking, it places him in the context of a normative background whereby all 'normal' values and laws were reversed. Thinking comes with a warning for Arendt: it does not necessarily lead to moral judgements; in fact, on the contrary, it has led to systems of norms which are precisely immoral. Only a certain kind of thinking may lead to moral judgements, but this distinction is fudged by what is essentially the fatal error of the film: the lack of distinction between Arendt's method of analysing the Nazi Eichmann and the philosophical methodology of a certain other former Nazi, Martin Heidegger.

Thoughtless

Heidegger teaches Arendt how to think: this is his role in the movie. It is after a mid-film flashback to a youthful encounter with him at Freiburg – in which Heidegger (somewhat pre-emptively) states the four verses of 'What is Called Thinking' ('Thinking does not bring knowledge...'), in which he defines man as a 'thinking being', and in which he acknowledges young Hannah's request to 'think with' him, before responding that thinking is a 'solitary occupation' (and going upstairs with her) – that Arendt, smoking, has an epiphany concerning the Israeli prosecution's description of Eichmann as an 'idiot' who 'did not think' (*nicht mitgedacht*). She begins an intense writing spree before, by nightfall, reading out the crux of the banality of evil thesis to her assistant: 'Evil we have learned is something demonic: it embodies Satan. With the best will in the world we cannot detect any evil or demonic depth in Eichmann; he was simply unable to think.' A photograph of Heidegger, who never took any interest in Arendt's own writings, watches over from the desk behind.

The mature Arendt meets Heidegger to challenge him over his involvement with the Nazi Party, which is impressively underplayed throughout the film. Only the event of his Rectoral Address is touched upon. Swatting away her suggestion that she 'felt a heart throb' on reading the speech, her disbelief at his acting like such an 'idiot', Heidegger refers, in the vein of his apologia, to 'slanders' and personal

difficulties before (having quoted St Augustine to her on love) explaining in her embrace that he hopes to learn more about politics, 'so as not to omit any thinking'. She replies: 'Why don't you make a public statement?', as though hearing the word 'thinking' she realizes his failure was only one of publicity. The landscape through which Heidegger leads Arendt during this hapless interrogation, in which, effectively, the Jew absolves the ex-Nazi, is worth noting: an overgrown forest path, a *Holzwege*, Heidegger's title for his collection of essays covering the Nazi era, published in 1950, the same year as the pair's real-life reconciliation. Towards the end of the film Arendt wanders through an American *Holzwege*, piles of cut wood to her side, contemplating the Eichmann case as though she were walking alongside her master, as if his 'thinking' helped clear paths in the woods of history. Yet for the real Arendt, Heidegger, unlike her, remained a 'thinker', and this professional engagement drew him towards becoming a Nazi when the historical occasion emerged, as she put to him at his eightieth birthday commemoration:

We who wish to honor the thinkers, even if our own residence lies in the midst of the world, can hardly help finding it striking and perhaps exasperating that Plato and Heidegger, when they entered into human affairs, turned to tyrants and Führers. This should be imputed not just to the circumstances of the times and even less to preformed character, but rather to what the French call a *déformation professionnelle*.

Despite in real life separating herself from philosophy to reside politically 'in the midst of the world', in the closing lecture of the movie Arendt concedes: 'It is true, I have considered these questions in a philosophical way.' The first person to admonish such a way (such a *Holzwege*) of approaching a matter like the trial of Eichmann would have been Arendt herself.

In opposition to the tyrannically orientated 'thinking' of Heidegger and the philosophers, Arendt drew on a sharply distinguished non-professional mode of thinking, 'ever present' and geared towards actualizing that 'most political of abilities', judgement. The activity of judging particular objects follows in lieu of a form of thinking which activates the 'silent dialogue' of consciousness and purges unexamined opinions – Eichmann's belief in the Führer as much as Heidegger's – triggering action and a sense of conscience rather than the subsumption of present objects under general theoretical constructs.

In *Hannah Arendt* McCarthy quotes to Arendt what was for her the Platonic root of such non-professional thinking, *Im shtumen dialog mit mir selbst* (In the silent dialogue with myself), and continues: 'I am alone'. Loneliness, as distinct from the solitariness of Heidegger, is what only a scholar would know, as Arendt described the condition of such a dissenting figure. Yet McCarthy says this after having advised Arendt to confront her critics in a way that absolutely repeats Arendt's plea to Heidegger to clear his own name from the very scene prior to this: 'Speak publicly about this, expose the hypocrisy, force them into a real discussion.' This in a context in which Arendt's main interlocutor, Hans Jonas, is jointly scathing of her views on Eichmann and her relationship to Heidegger. The effect, if not the point, is to establish Arendt's isolation as symmetrical to Heidegger's. If we, the audience as jury, are directed to champion Arendt's theory of evil, then equally we are to vindicate Heidegger for whatever it was that he had done in those war years. It seems as though Arendt and with her Heidegger are to be interpreted as both theorists and martyrs of conscience, in line with and explaining the thread of von Trotta's previous films. One can only imagine what Rosa Luxemburg would have thought of being bedfellows with the likes of Professor Heidegger.

Von Trotta neglects an aspect of Arendt's method that was fundamental to her work, *Eichmann* especially: distinction. Instead of representing Arendt's political and judicious distinction of particular actors and events in the Eichmann trial, and consequent intervention into Israeli politics, it subsumes Eichmann wholly under a general theory of the banality of evil. It makes a soup of her relation to Heidegger, blending the differences in their approaches into imperceptibility to such an extent that ultimately it seems as though, perversely, Heidegger himself was behind her critique of the totalitarian mindset. What a shame Karl Jaspers is absent from the film, having been in real life the other member of what was for Arendt a filial triangle, who refused to reconcile with Heidegger after the war. (Arendt was passed to Jaspers for doctoral supervision by Heidegger.) As it stands, in all likelihood unwittingly, von Trotta has succeeded in portraying Hannah Arendt as just another subject of the blurry world of totalitarianism which she depicted in the last footnote of her address to Heidegger: 'a realm in which ideas, like cloud formations, easily and effortlessly pass and blend onto one another'.

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