



## A Woman Like Us? : On Margarethe von Trotta's "Hannah Arendt"

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[Essay]

## A Woman Like Us?

On Margarethe von Trotta's "Hannah Arendt"

Kei Hiruta<sup>\*</sup>

### Abstract

This essay critically reviews the film "Hannah Arendt" by Margarethe von Trotta. It argues that the generally favourable reception of the biopic crucially depends on the depiction of Arendt as a "woman like us," or a woman to whom the audience can directly relate. I show that the film portrays the heroine as a woman of integrity with considerable imperfection, who (like many of us) struggles to overcome both internal and external obstacles to become herself. This is an alluring picture. However, it is vulnerable to two major objections. First, the film's depiction of Arendt ignores much of what her contemporaries said about her. Second, the portrait of Arendt as a woman like us fails to capture her extraordinary qualities: the qualities that separate her from us.

"See the major motion picture Hannah Arendt." So says the awkward sticker we find on copies of Arendt's books on sale on both sides of the Atlantic today. Premiered in autumn 2012, "Hannah Arendt," by the German director Margarethe von Trotta, has earned the well-deserved title of a "major" motion picture. Not only has it brought a considerable number of people to the cinema across the world. The film has also been much and overall favourably discussed in the media; it has been described as "groundbreaking" in *New Statesman*, "extremely vivid" in *Der Spiegel*, "absorbing" in the *Los Angeles Times*, and "remarkably successful" in the *Hollywood Reporter*.<sup>1</sup> Of course, "Hannah Arendt" is not a Spider-man or a Harry Potter. It does not yield billions of dollars; nor will it ever be an essential ingredient of global pop culture. But it has turned out to be as popular as a philosopher's biopic can reasonably be expected, and one wonders how the popularity relates to its underlying quality. Has the film proved popular simply because it is entertaining, or because it manages to convey something important in an accessible and appealing manner?

Arguably the most economical way of highlighting the central features of

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<sup>\*</sup> Junior Research Fellow, Wolfson College, University of Oxford. Wolfson College, Linton Road, Oxford, OX2 6UD. Email: kei.hiruta@philosophy.ox.ac.uk

<sup>1</sup> Filar (2013); Schmitter (2013); Linden (2013); Young (2012).

the biopic is to compare it with another Arendt-inspired film, “The Specialist, Portrait of a Modern Criminal,” directed by the Israeli filmmaker Eyal Sivan. Released in 1999, “The Specialist” like its German cousin adapts themes from Arendt’s 1963 book *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, which is based on her controversial reports for the *New Yorker* magazine on the trial of the SS official Adolf Eichmann. Yet the two films could scarcely be more different. The main character of “The Specialist” is Eichmann; that of “Hannah Arendt” is Arendt. The former is produced solely from footage recorded in 1961 at the Eichmann trial, whereas the latter mainly relies on actors and actresses to reconstruct the world in which Arendt lived and worked. “The Specialist” exclusively focuses on what took place inside the Israeli court, whereas much of “Hannah Arendt” is devoted to what happened before and after the trial – to Arendt’s decision to volunteer to act as a trial reporter, to her struggle to articulate what she thought about the criminal and the trial, and to the intense controversy following the publication of her reports.

Beneath those specific differences lie two profoundly different angles from which to view the woman-philosopher’s life and work. Simply put, Trotta’s primary interest is in Hannah Arendt in flesh and blood, whereas Sivan’s is in her ideas. The former’s ambition is to offer a particular understanding of Arendt’s life and personality. The latter’s is to give an interpretation of a set of arguments advanced in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. And this “The Specialist” does very well. The figure of Eichmann that unequivocally emerges in the film is a nervous and over-diligent and yet ordinary and dull bureaucrat. He seems like someone we encounter in our neighbourhood, for example in post offices or in corporate meeting rooms. The subtitle of the film is well chosen. It is a “portrait” of a nameless, unspecified “modern criminal” and not of the singular criminal called Adolf Eichmann. The frightening idea with which the film leaves the viewer is the pervasiveness of evil. One is compelled to wonder if there is an Eichmann in each and every one of us, including those who want to say to themselves: “*I would never take part in man’s inhumanity to man.*”

This is by no means an uncontroversial reading of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, and we may debate interpretive issues such as whether Sivan reads too much Foucault’s critique of modernity into Arendt’s analysis of evil. However, the relevant point here is not the accuracy of Sivan’s interpretation but the very fact that he advances a strong interpretation of Arendt’s highly complex work. This is a matter of interest because “Hannah Arendt” does not offer a comparably strong

interpretation. The words that the German director puts into the mouth of her main character are often faithful reproduction of Arendt's own words, and Trotta does relatively little to indicate how those words ought to be understood. In fact, while her decision to adapt Arendt's life and work into a film is a controversial one, the director overall plays it safe once she made that decision. It focuses on the most famous episode in the life of the philosopher, namely, the Eichmann controversy. Similarly, it features in two best-known images of Arendt: the middle-aged, chain-smoking German-Jewish émigré intellectual in New York City, and the delicate and rather naïve young woman in interwar Germany, attracted to and seduced by her teacher Martin Heidegger, who joined the Nazi Party in 1933. Trotta's risk-averse approach has certainly contributed to the generally warm reception of the biopic. However, there is a degree of irony in her risk-averseness, for while her interest in Arendt partly stems from the latter's fearless originality, the director herself is too sensible to risk her work to be seen as an outrageous misrepresentation of the all-too-famous public intellectual. For better or worse, Trotta's depiction of Arendt crucially differs from Arendt's depiction of Eichmann.

One may contest my characterisation of Trotta's approach as risk-averse and prefer to call it "open-minded." The film in fact portrays not only Arendt but also her critics to introduce several ways in which the philosopher and her work have been challenged. For example, it shows the figure of Norman Podhoretz, editor of *Commentary Magazine*, to illustrate how an attack on her work sometimes merged with an attack on her personality.<sup>2</sup> Such willingness to represent diverse views may appear to be in accordance with the teaching of the thinker to whom the biopic is devoted. After all, one of Arendt's original ideas advanced in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and elsewhere is the danger of "thoughtlessness" or the inability to think. According to Arendt, the principal problem with evil people like Eichmann is that they fail to think about the true significance of their behaviour, about how their dutiful compliance with orders and expectations may end up in complicity with an unspeakable crime. If such moral significance of thinking is a part of what the film aims to capture, one may argue, it is only appropriate that the director should invite each viewer to think for herself about the meaning of Arendt's words, instead of insisting on a single, supposedly "correct" interpretation. I disagree. To think is not merely to

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<sup>2</sup> Podhoretz's scathing essay (Podhoretz 1963) is mentioned in the biopic.

keep pondering; it is to form ones' *own* opinion as well as to consider relevant facts and weigh other people's opinions. "The Specialist" thinks hard in this sense. "Hannah Arendt" falters.

But to say that "Hannah Arendt" does not take a strong interpretive stance on Arendt's *work* is perhaps beside the point because, as I mentioned, the focus of the film is not on her ideas but on *her*. This is indeed where the biopic gets interesting, for it does offer a particular, and alluring picture of Hannah Arendt the person. The picture is first and foremost that of a woman of integrity. Trotta's Arendt refuses to yield to external pressure, is ready to speak up when she must, and is willing to defend herself even when doing so may result in a painful loss. This in itself is an attractive picture; and considering the unfair pressure to which women are so often subjected in our still male-dominated world, Trotta's portrait of the woman of integrity is of special appeal to the female audience. But the director has a further trick to boost the appeal, and that is to portray Arendt as a woman (of integrity) with considerable imperfection. On screen is a vulnerable woman. She worries, cries and doubts herself, as well as thinks, writes, debates, lectures and publishes. She needs a partner and friends, home and community. She also kisses, hugs and gossips, showing the capacity for enjoying what John Stuart Mill called "lower" pleasures, such as bodily and sensual ones, as distinct from "higher," presumably more reflective ones.<sup>3</sup> Arendt's may have been one of the greatest minds of the last century but she was, the film suggests, a woman and human being *like us*.

Of course, she was not *just that*, and Trotta's Arendt differs from most of us in that she does not let her fear, anxiety and insecurity get in the way. Furthermore, she does not let herself be compromised by her unsympathetic colleagues, by her friends-turned-enemies, or even by abusive letters wishing her death or calling her a "Nazi whore." These do bother her, as their present-day cousins in the form of abusive tweets and emails bother the recipients of hatred today. Yet she ultimately overcomes both external and internal obstacles to publicly, courageously and eloquently defend herself in a packed lecture theatre at the climactic scene near the end of the biopic. The central virtue animating the film is authenticity. On screen is an inspiring figure to encourage the viewer to be honest with herself and follow her conscience regardless of consequences. It is only logical that the final dialogue, between

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<sup>3</sup> Mill (1861), chapter 2, paragraphs 4–8.

Arendt and her husband, Heinrich Blücher, begins with the latter's question, "Would you have written about the trial if you'd known what would happen?" Her answer, of course, is: "Yes. I would have written about it." The woman's life exemplifies what it means to become oneself.

Alluring though it is, to portray Arendt as a "woman like us" begs two important questions. One concerns truth: was she *really* like us? Did she *really* have so much fear, anxiety and insecurity as Trotta would like us to believe? The issue will not be conclusively settled, as many of those who knew her are no longer with us and, even if they were, they would surely disagree over what she had been like. However, it is worth noting that the biopic brushes aside the charge most widely and persistently levelled against Arendt's undoubtedly strong personality: arrogance. This very term is mentioned twice in the film, but on neither occasion do we get the impression that the accusation is serious or credible. The film does not show that the accusers include highly respectable figures such as Raymond Aron, Isaiah Berlin, Gershom Scholem, Hugh Trevor-Roper, Ralph Ellison and Walter Laqueur.<sup>4</sup> Instead, it lets Arendt's colleagues Thomas Miller and Hans Jonas represent the accusers, and then portrays the former as a man of no significance and the latter as an embittered figure incapable of impartial judgement. Meanwhile, the director rather eagerly ascribes other negative traits to her heroine, especially stereotypically "feminine" ones such as insecurity and vulnerability, although these are not usually considered to characterise the woman-philosopher's personality. One wonders if Trotta's Arendt actually has less to do with the historical Arendt than with millions of contemporary women to whom the director wishes to deliver *her* message.

The other question concerns a kind of disrespect that Trotta's depiction of the philosopher entails. If one wants to portray Arendt as a woman like us, one *must* downgrade her extraordinary qualities, personal or intellectual. Most of us are (by definition) ordinary and in consequence cannot relate to an extraordinary person in a straightforward manner. But the film tries hard to encourage the

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<sup>4</sup> Aron (1993, p. 367) detects in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* "a tone of haughty superiority regarding things and men." Berlin (Berlin and Lukes 1998, pp. 107–8), Scholem (Arendt and Scholem 1964, p. 52) and Trevor-Roper (1963) criticise the author of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* for arrogantly passing judgement on the victims of the Holocaust. Ralph Ellison (1964, p. 108) observes "the Olympian authority" characterising Arendt's essay "Reflections on Little Rock." And, reviewing Arendt's correspondence, Walter Laqueur (1998, p. 494) notes "the conceit and the contempt which she exhibited all along."

viewer to directly relate to the main character. This explains the existence of several awkward scenes, including the following dialogue between Arendt and Blücher. Seeing her husband quietly leaving the couple's apartment, Arendt chases him to say:

Arendt: "How can you leave me like that? No hug, no kiss?"

Blücher: "Never disturb a great philosopher when they're thinking."

Arendt: "But they can't think without kisses."

What Trotta fails to appreciate is Arendt's genius. The latter was not an ordinary woman who happened to be a famous philosopher. She was one of a kind, endowed with the gift to come up with ideas to penetrate into the heart of the matter, which lesser minds armed with more up-to-date information and more sophisticated methods are seldom able to reach. Consider her discussion of evil by way of illustration. In recent years, there has been a debate as to whether contemporary historians have greater evidence than Arendt to analyse Eichmann's psychology and behaviour. Some believe the new materials that have become available in the past half-century render Arendt's analysis indefensible; others argue that the essentials, if not the details, of the materials were known to her.<sup>5</sup> While the debate is a matter of historical interest, it should be distinguished from the *theoretical* issue concerning the validity of Arendt's general thesis on evil; for even if she was fundamentally wrong about Eichmann, her argument that one does not need to be an extraordinarily evil person to commit an extraordinarily evil deed conveys an invaluable insight. Her theoretical thesis transcends the context in which it emerged.

The same goes with Arendt's discussion of politics, power, violence and so on. True, it was events and crises of *her* time that aroused her interest in these concepts. As her keen interest in the Eichmann trial drove her to explore the nature of evil, her curiosity about rebellious youth inspired her to reflect on power and violence, and her fascination with the leak of the Pentagon Papers drove her to consider the role of lying in politics.<sup>6</sup> However, despite her immersion in contemporary events, her discussion has proved to be more than a contribution to the then on-going debates. It has stood the test of time in a way

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<sup>5</sup> Arendt's critics on this issue include Cesarani (2004); Lipstadt (2011); and Lilla (2013). Roger Berkowitz has been the most vocal of Arendt's supporters. See Berkowitz (2013a) and (2013b).

<sup>6</sup> See Arendt's essays "On Violence" and "Lying in Politics," in Arendt (1972).

most work in political theory does not, precisely because it contains enduring insights into what lies beyond the horizons of our existing modes of thought and action, then and now. This, and not her integrity, is what unbridgeably separates her from us. But precisely because it *separates* her from us, it is not and must not be shown in the film that portrays Arendt as a woman *like us*. Her extraordinariness must be trimmed, her brilliance dimmed, and her genius banalized.

Not everyone agrees with my assessment of Arendt. According to Norman Stone's recent book, for example, Arendt "lectured in the style of the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer lion," but she had no "content," merely "building castles of long words with an air of having something of vast importance to convey, which none of the audience afterwards could remember."<sup>7</sup> The British historian's tone of dismissal is notable, but the allegation that Arendt's work is shallow and superficial is hardly original.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, as she herself was aware, Arendt has never been a respected figure in the community of academic philosophers.<sup>9</sup> Nor has she ever ceased to be "one of the great *outsiders* of twentieth-century political thought," as a perceptive reader of her work observed more than two decades ago.<sup>10</sup> Those who insist on Arendt's genius in the face of those and other critical views cannot rely on Trotta's film, which ultimately chooses to present the heroine as an ordinary woman. We can only hope that the biopic will draw new readers to Arendt's own work, so that they will have the opportunity to appreciate her extraordinary mind by themselves. Now the major motion picture is available on DVD, we should perhaps put an awkward sticker on each copy: "Read Hannah Arendt's books."

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<sup>7</sup> Stone (2010), p. 236.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Hampshire (1978), p. 26; and Jahanbegloo (1992), pp. 81–85.

<sup>9</sup> Arendt (1994), p. 1.

<sup>10</sup> Canovan (1992), p. 1, emphasis added.

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