

Seeing Hearing Thinking: Introducing the *differences* Dossier on Margarethe von Trotta's *Hannah Arendt*

*T*he opening credits to Margarethe von Trotta's 2012 film *Hannah Arendt* appear against a black background accompanied by a subliminal sound that we might think to identify as the chirping of crickets. We see nothing, but, if we recognize the sound, we assume we are in the country. The black screen gives way to a light that approaches us head-on from a distance; after a moment we can identify the expanding headlight of a train, truck, or bus. The vague image is itself highly overdetermined as a kind of return or *revenant*: if it is a train, the suggestion is Auschwitz, or in any event the return of some kind of Holocaust-associated element or memory. The menacing image and vehicle that approaches us turn out to be a vaguely marked bus on a country road. As the headlights fill the screen, the bus halts; the door opens, and, as the camera angle switches to the side of the bus, a silhouette of a figure steps off onto the road. This is Adolf Eichmann, and we are about to witness an efficient and largely silent reenactment of his kidnapping by Mossad/Shin Bet agents in the San Fernando suburb of Buenos Aires in May 1960. The flashlight that Eichmann drops to the ground provides a

portentous segue to the second scene and the cigarette that Hannah Arendt now lights as she lies down on the couch in her dark New York apartment.

The scene switches abruptly to daylight in the same apartment and to the conversation between Hannah Arendt and Mary McCarthy that Ariella Azoulay and Bonnie Honig both refer to in the essays that follow here. Pamela Katz, the film's screenwriter, tells us of the decision to focus the film on the Eichmann trial and the controversy around Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, published in 1963 as a series of articles for the *New Yorker* and then as a book. Having witnessed the initial staging of the trial story with the kidnapping in Argentina, we now overhear a personal conversation about the private foils of men. "Either you are willing to take men as they are or you must live alone," Arendt instructs McCarthy. "I don't throw my friends away so quickly," she admonishes, a phrase both light and, again, portentous, especially for the viewer who already wonders how the film will address the question of Arendt's pre- and postwar relationship with Martin Heidegger. The cut to the next scene shows Arendt, the following morning, learning of Eichmann's capture from the *New York Times* headline "Israel Seizes Nazi Chief." The telescoping of the biopic into three central years of Arendt's life as a thinker is thus offset by the film's ambition to engage her public and private worlds, two spheres that she herself consistently strove to keep apart from each other.

The Eichmann kidnapping soon becomes the subject of the animated conversation at a gathering in the same apartment. The conversation takes place mostly in German, with Arendt's husband Heinrich Blücher and Hans Jonas as the main antagonists. Blücher pronounces both the Eichmann kidnapping and his planned trial in Jerusalem illegal, while Jonas asserts the "sacred right"—*das heilige Recht*—of the Israeli state to try him. The film is revealed now not only as bilingual but also as uncannily sensitive to those interstices of the language of a generation of German Jewish émigrés that Inge Deutschkron called *Emigranto*. The film's Hannah Arendt thinks in German; she speaks also in English, and writes, during these years, almost exclusively in English. The film's Mary McCarthy—who complains in the first party scene about her exclusion from German—remains excluded from Arendt's and the film's thinking sphere and is thus relevant only to the personal story. Arendt's organization of her intimate life remains opaque to the film's McCarthy, just as the film's McCarthy shows no engagement with the Arendtian argument about Eichmann that begins to claim the film's center, beyond the willingness to defend it absolutely on the basis of friendship and personal loyalty.

Their friendship does allow McCarthy to correct Arendt's English. When Arendt tries out the expression "when the ships are down," McCarthy swoops in with the correction: "*Chips*, Hannah, *chips*, not *ships*!"—underscoring proleptically the phrase that will clinch Arendt's redemptive address at film's end (as staged, fictitiously, in a New School lecture hall). Though it might not be unexpected for the film to sculpt the language of intimacy when Hannah and Heinrich speak German, its mastery of the simultaneous pathos and pleasure of the back-and-forth German-English traffic of émigrés—a predicament by no means limited to well-known thinkers, of course—constitutes one of the film's special delights. The literal language of emigration thus tracks and represents the protagonists' flexibility and their love of thinking, precisely that love of thinking that sets them apart from those whose incapacity to think renders them incapable of using language beyond the wholesale intonation of clichés. The subtle awkwardnesses of *Emigranto* make all language sensitive to the pain of exile. The alienation of language becomes its reinvention through thought, while linguistic smugness becomes potentially indistinguishable from the incapacity to think.

Hannah Arendt's sensitivity to the contrapuntalities of language in the experience of exile suggests that we *hear* thinking through the liveliness of language. Intellectuality, even in its most arrogant manifestations, does not prevent or mask the anxiety of living in a new language. Von Trotta's Arendt speaks from multiple levels of anxiety when she explains that her need to answer all the hostile letters she has received on the publication of the *New Yorker* essays on the trial has two motives: she needs to engage people whom she has hurt, and she wants to avoid at all costs the need to pack her bags once again. In 1961, even the most secure and most grateful émigrés living in the United States retained memories not only of their European expulsion but also of the Army-McCarthy hearings of the early 1950s and their multiple threats to political speech and diversity—in other words, to the modes of self-disclosure and argument that Arendt placed at the core of the life of the *polis*.

This linguistic dimension and its quick pace may go past us too quickly, more quickly than the visual pleasure the film affords in its contemplation of Barbara Sukowa/Hannah Arendt's face. Sukowa, who has spent many years in New York, has a much lighter accent in English than the one she honed for the film. Indeed, in a short question period following the New York premiere, she recalled the work it took for her consistently to say "sinking" instead of "thinking." In shooting the final redemptive address,

she somewhat coyly recalled, she “snuck” in a single “th” sound into one of the utterances of the word “thinking,” just for dramatic effect.

The film’s effort and success in *seeing* thinking may be more evident than in hearing it. In one of her published diary entries, von Trotta records her hesitation about making the film at all: “I can’t figure out how to make a film about a philosopher, can’t imagine how to show a person in the act of thinking.”¹ Speech rhythms are rapid, while the camera lingers patiently on Sukowa/Arendt’s introspective face. We see her first on the couch, as Honig observes. The camera’s attachment to her face intensifies during the trial scenes, as historical footage of the actual Eichmann is placed into shot/countershot sequences with Arendt’s diagnostic gaze as we the film’s viewers also now look into her face. The (cigarette) smoke literally clears in front of her: a language/image cliché, if subtly deployed, from which the film does not shy away. Neither does the film shy away from close-ups, as Sukowa/Arendt sits and smokes in the pressroom, leering at the face of Eichmann. As he testifies, we see her formulating the assertion of Eichmann as a “nobody.” That diagnosis, so crucial to the argument of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, accumulates in response to Eichmann’s clichés of language. Arendt laughs here: laughter, she wrote, is “a form of sovereignty (see “Eichmann”).

The tinderbox that started the war against Hannah Arendt came, as Adi Ophir reviews, from two assertions in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. The first is the argument that the cooperation between the Nazi occupiers and the Jewish Councils, or *Judenräte*, significantly increased the numbers of the genocide. The second point involves the book’s subtitle: the banality of evil. In the text, the phrase appears only at the end, modified as the “fear-some, word-and-thought defying *banality of evil*” (252). Arendt diagnosed Eichmann’s banality through his language, and especially the cliché-saturated speech that he showed throughout the trial and in which he shaped his (carefully rehearsed) final words at the gallows. Von Trotta transmits Arendt’s diagnosis through her devotion to Sukowa/Arendt’s face and her portrayal of Arendt’s contempt for the banality of Eichmann as revealed through his speech.

As Ophir points out, *Hannah Arendt*, the film, sews into conversation several important quotations from *Eichmann in Jerusalem* as well as from documented personal memories of Arendt’s interlocutors. The collaboration of the *Judenräte* as the “darkest chapter” for the Jews is the most crucial. Arendt’s friendship with her onetime Zionist youth leader Kurt Blumenfeld is highlighted, and, as many have observed, the film’s rendition of their final and wrenching conversation involves a transposition from

Arendt's correspondence with Gershom Scholem. In this key exchange from mid-1963, Scholem—who does not appear in the film—accused Arendt of a “lack of love of the Jewish people.”² The film uses Arendt's assertion that she would find a love of a people impossible, but it omits the reason: namely, that this abstraction would necessarily include the love of herself.

The film's focus on the Eichmann trial as the paradigmatic episode not only in Arendt's life but in her thinking necessarily places other issues into relief. To an extent, it relieves the plot of the vexed relationship with Martin Heidegger, both of the pressure to explore their brief affair during her student days and of the possibility of taking on the difficult philosophical issue of “what is thinking” for both and each of them. With some economy, the film shows that Arendt went to Heidegger to learn how to think. It flags the intellectual and the (reversed?) romantic apprenticeship with minimal embarrassment. It cites, via a transposition, the question of Arendt's postwar loyalty to Heidegger as an example that “some things are bigger than a single person.” Here, the film quotes a disclosure transmitted by Arendt's niece, Edna Brocke, from a postwar conversation that apparently took place at the Marbach train station on the way to visit Heidegger. Von Trotta cites the disclosure in her published conversation with Martin Wiebel, observing, “Apparently Hannah had three photographs on her desk: Heinrich Blücher, Martin Heidegger, and a picture of her mother. We left out the mother; she doesn't appear in the film. Heidegger we couldn't leave out. From him she learned *thinking*, and since the film is primarily about thinking, we had to show her connection to him” (58). Understandably, the film shies away from the most essential speculation that its own plot economy makes possible, namely, that Arendt's own philosophical trial of Eichmann became also her vicarious trial of Heidegger—Heidegger as the figure most important to her who in the end and with profound irony evinced the incapacity to think.

Since the film allows some of Arendt's key written statements to be intoned through Barbara Sukowa's voice, readers who go back to the texts may find corroborations that would have been rewarding to hear spoken. Such speculation is not to criticize the film's choices or its economy, but rather to imagine the extended pleasure of hearing texts transposed into voice. One example: Arendt's italicized summary assertion, in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, that “politically speaking, [. . .] under conditions of terror most people will comply but *some people will not* [. . .] and no more can be reasonably be asked, for this planet to remain a place fit for human habitation” (233). Another emerges from the exchange with Scholem, in which Arendt

refers to her own Jewishness as a historical fact: “To be a Jew belongs for me to the indisputable facts of my life, and I have never had the wish to change or disclaim facts of this kind” (Letter 466).

An assertion such as this last one reveals two equally basic aspects of Arendt’s thinking that have remained underengaged in the scholarship, namely, its secularity and its *sui generis* historicism. The three parts of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, one can recall here, construct a historical genealogy from anti-Semitism through imperialism to totalitarianism. Each one of these massive modern ideologies enables its successor without predetermining it. The argument is thus informed, indeed driven, by a high degree of contingency. Perhaps the work’s most surprising move emerges toward the end of the analysis of anti-Semitism, at the point I would call Arendt’s unexpected Burkean moment. Because the formation of the nation-state system left the Jews without a co-categorical nation-state, they found themselves politically unprotected when the only protective umbrella turned out in fact to be the nation-state itself. This position hints at the shape of Arendt’s own Zionism as a political necessity rather than as a cultural destiny. The modern state as guarantor of political protection has nothing to do with the constitution of a sacred community—another point of separation of Arendt’s Zionism from the dominant Israeli discourse to which end David Ben Gurion deployed the Eichmann trial. This context—unaddressed in the film—does make possible the film’s correct assertion that the crimes against the Jews constituted at the same time a crime against humanity. In *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Arendt did make a point of noting that the verdict against Eichmann took into account his crimes against non-Jewish victims, including Poles, Slovenes, and Gypsies (245).

As Wiebel has observed, Arendt’s objection to the demonization of Eichmann was closely connected to her objection to the theatricality of the trial itself (33). As a theorist of the *polis*, Arendt took theatricality seriously and honored it as the mode of self-disclosure and mutual engagement that together made political negotiation possible. The actors in such a scenario speak with agency; performances become performatives. No such energy exists in a show trial, the label Arendt attaches to the Eichmann trial.

What the literature around the Arendt/Eichmann question seems not to have engaged is the fact that demonization is a category of the sacred. In refusing to demonize, Arendt insists on treating evil as a phenomenon of the secular world. This in itself is a very difficult thing to do. The desacralization of evil unhinges it from any kind of cosmological order, opening the possibility of its banality.

The banality of evil has nothing to do with triviality. Upholding this key distinction—the fact that Arendt’s accusation of banality is in no way an accusation of triviality—might have defanged much of the objection to her position. More elusively perhaps, but just as important, the banality of evil has nothing to do with the sacred. Here, Arendt’s trope is perhaps at its most provocative. In its fundamental secularity, Arendt’s argument poses a challenge to the received assumption that evil forms an aspect or epiphenomenon of the sacred—with the divine and the demonic as its two aspects. This received assumption may also comprise a *desired* assumption, as the recognition of extreme evil devoid of a demonic context is perhaps all the more terrifying. The secular world, whether understood as coincidental with the modern world or not, has had a difficult time dealing with evil, as distinct from violence or harm or even genocide.⁵ Ophir may be right in asserting that Arendt “fail[ed] to understand that she has crossed the line separating critique from sacrilege” (109). On the other hand, she may have understood so implicitly, thereby insisting on that trespass exactly. Equally crucial is Ophir’s companion point that *Eichmann in Jerusalem* appeared at the moment when its secularizing argument collided with the new sacrality, in Israel and in the United States, that now framed and enclosed Holocaust discourse.

Arendt described Eichmann’s evil as “radical” but subsequently changed her mind about the conceptual possibility of the radicality of evil. This mind change is recorded in the film but again displaced from its actual context within the correspondence with Scholem. “I changed my mind,” she wrote in English in her famous letter of July 24, 1963, continuing with no punctuation or other break in German: “*und spreche nicht mehr vom radikal Bösen* [and no longer speak of radical evil]” (470). Rather, she asserts, evil can only be extreme, but never radical. Evil has no depth, and nothing demonic. “It can lay waste to the entire world, precisely because it spreads like a fungus on the surface. Only the good can be deep and radical.”

Karl Jaspers, Arendt’s Heidelberg *Doktorvater* and lifelong correspondent, is, along with Scholem, the film’s other major absent, ventriloquized figure. Jaspers’s early career was in psychiatry with an emphasis on the study of paranoia. His concern for Arendt’s well-being in the context of the Eichmann furor, his worry that she may have been pursuing a repetition of persecution, is displaced in the film onto the person of Charlotte Beradt, a psychoanalyst and close friend of Arendt’s and Blücher’s with whom Blücher, the film suggests, was having an affair during the Eichmann period. This last fact adds some additional awkwardness to the displaced words and to

their authority, to be sure. Jaspers/Beradt's concern does address the possibility, brought out by Honig, of Arendt "on the couch"—or perhaps, rather, of Arendt's disdain for the psychoanalytic couch and her possible tendency to symptomatize via the repetition compulsion of persecution.⁴

When Hannah Arendt collected a series of intellectual and political portraits under the title *Men in Dark Times* (1970), she conflated a gendered plural with a universal in a manner completely ordinary for the time. She would likely have implicitly translated "men" back into German as *Menschen* rather than as *Männer*, leaning on a distinction in German that cannot be duplicated in English. (Of course, she also wrote, deliberately and consciously, about women—about Rosa Luxemburg and Isak Dinesen in *Men in Dark Times* and about Rahel Varnhagen in her early full-length biography.) The film *Hannah Arendt's* double-tracking of Arendt on *Menschen* and on *Männer*—in other words, its attention to the registers of the political and the personal, in Katz's terms—etches a deliberate dialectic between human relations and gender relations. In any case, Katz and von Trotta's contributions neither answer (nor are they responsible for answering) the question that Azoulay puts to them, namely, whether in crafting the film they had tense conversations about tracking the public and the private aspects of Hannah Arendt's persona. When the film's Hannah Arendt delivers to Mary McCarthy the alternative of living "without men," she implicitly slips from the personal to the political and from the gendered to the universal, opening the possibility of contradicting her basic principle of worldliness as the impossibility of choosing with whom to share the planet. The counterpoint created by these dimensions—the way they remain both separate and linked—is flagged by Azoulay's point about *thinking* as the prime Arendtian value. Thinking means worldly thinking; it presupposes living in the world with others, about whom we think, among other things. Freedom, for Arendt, is only possible within the embrace of the world and its inhabitants, without exclusion. And the worldly does indeed function as an implicit synonym of the secular. Arendt's "love of the world" closely approximates Max Weber's category of the worldly as the engine of secularization. Thinking with others reinscribes the category of the citizen of the world as it was invented in the Enlightenment, but now as a necessary value and tool in a world that has known fascism and come to understand it precisely as the destruction of the public sphere as well as of significant sets of personal relations.

The materials collected here are revised versions of informal interventions from a roundtable hosted by the Cogut Center for the Humanities at Brown University on January 31, 2014, following a screening of Margarethe von Trotta's film *Hannah Arendt*. The roundtable was moderated by Ted Bogosian with the participation of Ariella Azoulay, Bonnie Honig, Pamela Katz, Adi Ophir, and Michael Steinberg.

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Notes

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| 1 | Entry dated Dec. 19, 2002, in Wiebel 89. This and subsequent translations from the German in Wiebel are mine. | 3 | See Neiman. |
| 2 | See Arendt's letter to Scholem of July 24, 1963, in <i>The Jewish Writings</i> 466. | 4 | On the film's Jaspers/Beradt displacement, see von Trotta's diary note of May 19, 2010, in Wiebel 119. |

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