Hannah Arendt: Why Now?

Holly Jordan, Virginia Tech (hajordan@vt.edu)

Abstract: This essay-in-brief comes from a wish to understand *Hannah Arendt* as a film, as a biography of Arendt herself, and as a message to a 21st century audience. It looks at four main issues: Arendt's own Jewish practice, the place of Arab and non-German Jews (both in Arendt's life and work and in the film itself), the function (and problems) of the bureaucrat, and the funding for the film itself. Ultimately, it seeks to ask questions regarding the film itself, and why it was made [now].

Keywords: BANALITY OF EVIL, DAVID BEN-GURION, EICHMANN IN JERUSALEM, HANNAH ARENDT (FILM), ISRAEL, JUDAISM, ZIONISM

Introduction

I come to *Hannah Arendt* with multiple, often conflicting, identities: that of a Jewish-American, of a scholar and professor of Judaism, not to mention a researcher on religion, political conflict, and the Arab-Israeli Conflict, specifically. So, for what are obvious reasons, this film, in the best and worst possible ways, touched on several nerves. Rather than try to conduct a critique of the film as a whole or somehow find *Hannah Arendt*'s place within Arendt's *oeuvre*, which many before me have done, I instead have decided to bring out four key points from the film that were particularly salient for me: Arendt's own Jewish practice, the place of Arab and non-German Jews (both in Arendt's life and work and in the film itself), the function (and problems) of the bureaucrat, and the funding for the film itself.[i] All of these points lead me to one question: Why now? Why make *Hannah Arendt* now? Is it simply because it is the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*? Or is it because Arendt's critique of the bureaucrat, Zionism, and the Jewish State hold particular value now, fifty years later, when many of her fears have become actualized and we are no closer to peace than when she visited Jerusalem?

Arendt's Judaism

Arendt was culturally, if not religiously, Jewish. In *Hannah Arendt*, you can see this immediately within her home; there are none of the tchotchkes associated with Judaism on the shelves, no *mezuzot* on the doors. Even in Jerusalem, Arendt maintains her Western, secular appearance and does not dress as traditionally as the other women with whom she interacts.[ii] Had the directors chosen to engage in a bit of revisionism, making Arendt seem more "Jewish," it would not be that shocking (one need only watch to watch the recent *Saving Mr. Banks* to capture my

meaning). There was a moment where the director or the producers to make a choice, to Judaize Arendt into a different Juda*ism*, but, thankfully, they did not. But the film pulled no punches in showing Arendt as others perceived her (and how she described herself) and maintaining her secularity.

This is very much in keeping with the primary source material for this book, namely *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (along, of course, with her letters from the period). While Arendt made no attempts to hide her own Judaism—as is seen in the film, her status as a Jew was public knowledge, as seen by the public outcry about her articles in *The New Yorker*, in which she was lambasted for turning her back on her people —she does not ask questions or make her analysis *from her own Jewish perspective*. In fact, there is a decided lack of ethnography where one might expect it in *Eichmann.* Other than her constant sarcasm throughout *Eichmann*, which Amos Elon refers to as "inexcusably flippant" and "often self-defeating."[iii] in his *Introduction* to the 2006 Penguin Edition of *Eichmann*, Arendt's Jewish voice is remarkably silent throughout the book.

And yet, according to Elon, ""*Eichmann in Jerusalem* was an intensely personal work [for Arendt]. The writing helped give her relief from a heavy burden. As she wrote Mary McCarthy, it was a '*cura posterior,'* the delayed cure of a pain that weighed upon her as a Jew, a former Zionist, and a former German."[iv] At critical points, the Jewish Arendt's voice bleeds through obliquely, yet even then, it is distanced behind the title of "Jew." In referring to the culpability of the Judenräte in the Nazis' ability to efficiently collect Jews within its empire, she states, "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" (emphasis added).[v] This section of *Eichmann* is what landed her in hot—dare I say boiling?—water, namely for not having enough, according to Gershom Scholem, *ahavat Israel* (love of Israel). And yet, she hid behind her language. She could have said "As a Jew" or "To *this* Jew," but she chose not to. This is the closest we get in the original manuscript to her Jewish feelings on Eichmann and the Holocaust, surprising given how personal this project was for her.

Arab and Non-German Jews

Arendt is known for believing that German Judaism was the best Judaism, remarking that it was lucky for Eichmann to have three German Jewish judges in Israel, who she called the "best of German Jewry."[vi] She stated to Karl Jaspers once that the Israeli police force "gives me the creeps, speaks only Hebrew, and looks Arabic. Some downright brutal types among them."[vii] According to Elon, "Reasonable Israelis, in Arendt's eyes, were the *yekkes*, German-speaking immigrants from Germany and Austria, including her own relatives and old friends from Freiburg, Heidelberg, and Berlin."[viii] This, in comparison to her championing the rights of Arab Palestinians, seems strange.[ix]

And yet, on some level, her views are not all that surprising. There was a decided hierarchy of Jews in Germany and Europe. She explains in *Eichmann* that

> "[t]he categories had been accepted without protest by German Jewry from the very beginning. And the acceptance of privileged categories—German Jews against Polish Jews, war veterans and decorated Jews against ordinary Jews, families whose ancestors were German-born as against recently naturalized citizens, etc.—had been the beginning of the moral collapse of respectable Jewish society.[x]

So on one level, Arendt understands that the preexisting hierarchy of ethnic Judaisms is problematic, but, as a product of German Jewry, still retains some of these notions herself.

We learn through the film the film that Arendt never quite forgave Germany for letting her down as a German, yet she remained inseparable from Germany in culture. The film portrays this subtly; while she passes Arab Jews and Eastern European Jews in the streets of Jerusalem, she does not interact with them. All of her Jewish friends are German Jews and she argues with them from the point of view of German continental philosophy. The film did an excellent job keeping this reality in place, in spite of the fact that it makes Arendt look less than favorable to non-German Jews.

Bureaucrats

The status of the bureaucrat comes up often in the film, as in Arendt's work, and has definite applicability to discussions of the modern Israeli state. Part of Arendt's arguments for the *banality of evil* are the bureaucratic persona of figures like Eichmann—dedicated pencil-pushers who just followed orders. I will go out on a controversial limb here and say that these arguments are fascinating when one considers some of the more contentious policies of the Israeli government with regard to border control and settlements in the West Bank. Many of these policies, which Arendt herself cautioned against, could be seen as being able to be perpetuated by a banality within the bureaucracy of Israel. Groups like J Street represent American Jews against the policies of occupation in the West Bank and Gaza, and there are many op-ed writers within Israel who speak out often against Israeli treatment of Palestinians, yet these policies continue.

When Arendt criticizes Israel's right to even try Eichmann, her colleague Kurt Blumenfeld responds, "be a little patient with us," implying that Israel is a new state bound to make some mistakes. But how long is too long to remain being patient? At what point does "be a little patient with us" become a crutch for not having to take a closer look at divisive policies? If nothing else, this film spurs the audience toward reevaluating the current state of affairs in Israel through Arendt's lens. It leads the viewer to ask of the lawmakers and political leaders of Israel, "how much damage are you doing by not being mindful?" And, how much closer to peace would we be if we were less patient?

Why Now?

According to Heinrich Blücher, "history more than one man" was on trial during the Eichmann trial. It is with this point of view of history rather than the individual that I do wonder why this film was made. Two Jewish film funds, the Israel Film Fund (a 501c3 nonprofit) and The Jerusalem Film and Television Fund (under the auspices of the Jerusalem Development Authority, a joint venture between the Israeli Government and the Jerusalem Municipality), partially sponsored the film. Surprising, given the book *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, along with much of Arendt's work, had not been translated into Hebrew until the 1990s. While never boycotting her work in the same way as the American Jewish community, Israel has had an ambiguous relationship with Arendt's work. To have organizations so closely tied to the Israeli government fund this film shows that on some level, thoughts on *Eichmann* are changing within the Israeli Jewish community.

While the audience is naturally pulled toward supporting Arendt, both through Barbara Sukowa's stunning performance and the weight of Arendt's words herself, the negative responses to her work in the film far outweigh the positives. Arendt's rousing defense of her work before the students and faculty of the New School at the end of the film leaves the audience thinking the film will have a positive dénouement, yet the mood is ruined by her dear friend and colleague Hans Jonas not being convinced and disowning her. The film ends as it began, Arendt alone in her apartment, listlessly smoking a cigarette, isolated with her thoughts.

Hannah Arendt begs the question "why *now*?" Was it to redeem Arendt's reputation amongst a new generation of Jews? Or was it to teach a new generation why Arendt's views were dangerous to the Israeli state? While the audience is naturally pulled toward supporting Arendt, both through Barbara Sukowa's stunning performance and the weight of Arendt's words herself, the negative responses to her work in the film far outweigh the positives. Arendt's rousing defense of her work before the students and faculty of the New School at the end of the film leaves the audience thinking the film will have a positive dénouement, yet the mood is ruined by her dear friend and colleague Hans Jonas not being convinced and disowning her. The film ends as it began, Arendt alone in her apartment, listlessly smoking a cigarette, isolated with her thoughts.

Conclusion

With the almost aporic ending of the film, it is clear that it was intended to tell *some* lesson. And this is particularly notable when one revisits the Eichmann trial itself. As Arendt explains, the courtroom in which the trial was held was spectacular in nature, almost inviting one to witness the proceedings as if watching a play. She states, "clearly, this courtroom is not a bad place for the show trial David Ben-Gurion, Prime Minister of Israel, had in mind when he decided to have Eichmann kidnaped in Argentina and brought to the District Court of Jerusalem to stand trial for his role in the 'final solution of the Jewish Question.'"[xi] This "show trial" was held

to tell a particular story to a particular audience: the youth and the non-European Jews of Israel.

Adding to former Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion's motivations, Arendt states, "[The audience] was now supposed to consist of Israelis, of those who were too young to know the story or, as in the case of Oriental Jews, had never been told it. The trial was supposed to show them what it meant to live among non-Jews, to convince them that only in Israel could a Jew be safe and live an honorable life."[xii] But, as Arendt remarks, by the second week of the trial, most of the audience consisted not of young and non-European Jews, but rather European survivors of the Holocaust—the very people that would be most antagonistic toward her criticisms. In fact, characters throughout *Hannah Arendt* ask why Arendt is asking questions about things best laid to rest, but why question her? Simply because the questions make them (and us) uncomfortable? Or is it that we still have not solved the problem of the banality of evil? The good news is, fifty years later, regardless of why the film was made, we are still asking the questions Arendt's work inspires.

Notes

i The ideas that became this paper originally appeared both in two blog posts and in a presentation and panel discussion as part of the "Hannah Arendt in Jerusalem: The Banality of Evil and the Politics of Responsibility" at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, November 2013. Special thanks to Scott Nelson and François Debrix for putting together the panel that led to this article as well as to the editors of *SPECTRA* for launching this special issue. See Holly A. Jordan, "Hannah Arendt (Film): A Personal Review," *Holly Jordan: Blog* (2013): http://hollyjordan.net/2013/11/19/hannah-arendt-film-a-personal-review/; ""Hannah Arendt" – Why Now?," *Holly Jordan: Blog* (2013): http://hollyjordan.net/2013/11/20/hannah-arendt-why-now/.

ii Notably, in the first *sentence* of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, she does remark about the "bareheaded" German judges presiding over the case (indicating that they did not wear kippot/yarmulkes, the headcovering of traditional male Jews. Little details like this give us a glimpse into some of Arendt's perception filters. See Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 3.

iii Amos Elon, "Introduction: The Excommunication of Hannah Arendt," in *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), xvii.

iv "Introduction: The Excommunication of Hannah Arendt," in *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), ix.

v Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 117.

vi Elon, "The Excommunication of Hannah Arendt," xviii.

vii "The Excommunication of Hannah Arendt," xvii.

viii "The Excommunication of Hannah Arendt," xviii.

ix Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 13.
x *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 131.
xi *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 5.
xii *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 8.