Hannah Arendt

Stories make the world and stories limit it. Those who favor tales that support their identities and advance their ends while shunning or censoring all others maintain a fixed horizon—unless the unexpected breaks through those boundaries. For others, stories bring all kinds of people, situations and knowledge into view—until events that have no precedent leave them in the dark, unable to grasp what has happened.

Telling stories of unprecedented events and, in doing so, seeking to understand them was a central concern of Hannah Arendt. "The quest for meaning," she wrote, "... is in no way different from men's need to tell the story of some happening they witnessed." For her, the happening whose meaning she needed to grasp, above all, was totalitarianism and genocide. "The most important thing for me," Arendt told an interviewer, "is to understand."

Many fail to understand her. Arendt's work does not fall into traditional categories. She wrote histories of revolution and of totalitarianism, but she was not a historian. She wrote about politics and forms of government but was not a political scientist. She studied philosophy and refused to call herself a philosopher. Instead, Arendt is widely regarded as the preeminent political thinker of the 20th century. She was a storyteller as well, who once spoke of her work as "my old-fashioned storytelling."

One story she told and the way she told it roused a hornet's nest of controversy. The attacks that her account of the trial of Adolph Eichmann stirred up did long-lasting damage to her reputation.

"This is the first time in fifty years," said Sandra Luft, in 2013, "when it is possible to have civil discourse about Hannah Arendt." With that hopeful remark, Luft, a
professor of humanities at San Francisco State University, opened a discussion of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* at a synagogue in Berkeley.

What increased the odds for civil discourse was a feature film. Directed by Margarethe von Trotta, *Hannah Arendt* dramatizes the controversy concerning Arendt's report on the Eichmann trial, which was originally published in five issues of *The New Yorker* in 1963. Before the night of the discussion, Luft had circulated passages from the book and recommended that congregants view the film. Civil discourse did occur, and that meeting launched a reading group that has met monthly ever since to discuss Arendt's work.

During those fifty years between the Eichmann book and the biographical film, I experienced hostility directed at Arendt that ruled out conversation. Once, invited to a *shabbat* dinner at the home of the rabbi of my girlfriend at the time, I mentioned that I was a graduate student in the Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago and that I had come there to study with Arendt. The rabbi's response was so vitriolic that there was no rescuing the evening. Many years later, in Jerusalem, I browsed through a bookstore that seemed congenial. It had books in English as well as Hebrew. Upstairs, I found a couch and comfortable chairs facing a whiteboard: a place for meetings and conversation. The bookseller followed me upstairs and offered me a cup of coffee. I asked if he had any of Hannah Arendt's books. His face twisted into a grimace of contempt: "You mean Heidegger's girlfriend?" What a shame, I thought, that a Jewish bookstore would disdain a writer whose essays on Zionism include a prescient analysis of the challenges Israel has faced ever since its founding; whose book *The Origins of Totalitarianism* examines Hitler and Stalin's unprecedented form of tyranny; a writer
whose "literary existence," she once said, had "the Jewish question as the focal point of my historical and political thinking."

Reporting on the Eichmann trial was for Arendt a sequel to the study of totalitarianism, for it filled a gap in her understanding. "I would never be able to forgive myself," she wrote her former professor and life-long friend Karl Jaspers, "if I didn't go and look at this walking disaster face to face in all his bizarre vacuousness, without the mediation of the printed word. Don't forget how early I left Germany and how little of all this I really experienced directly."

Several aspects of Arendt's report triggered the assault on her reputation. One was her criticism of the trial. In a letter to Jaspers, Arendt defended Israel's right to put Eichmann on trial, even though to do so, its agents kidnapped the Nazi in Buenos Aires; even though Israel did not exist at the time of Eichmann's service to the German death-machine; even though there was no law on the books commensurate to his crime, which Arendt considered not just a crime against the Jewish people but a crime against humanity. She did not, however, approve of a show trial which, instead of judging Eichmann for his deeds, turned him into a symbol of the Holocaust and put history on trial, allowing many days of testimony that failed to mention him at all. She insisted that judgment be based on the specific acts of the accused. That conviction accounts for Arendt's response to the German reporter who, after a harrowing day of testimony, approached her and buried his face on her shoulder. "Ach, Hannah," he cried, "we are all guilty!" She pulled back and stared at the man. "And you?" she demanded, "What did you do?"
A second controversial aspect of her report, which von Trotta's film emphasizes, involves an issue hardly mentioned in the trial. To Jaspers, Arendt expressed her concern that Eichmann's defense would reveal "to what a huge degree the Jews helped organize their own destruction. That is, of course, the naked truth, but this truth, if it is not really explained, could stir up more anti-Semitism than ten kidnappings." The fact that Jewish leaders provided information the Nazis needed, as documented in Raul Hillberg's *The Destruction of the European Jews*, had to be acknowledged, Arendt thought. Not only would withholding those facts provide ammunition to those who would challenge her account, not including them would prevent her readers from understanding what happened. So she reported: "The Jewish Council of Elders were informed by Eichmann or his men of how many Jews were needed to fill each train, and they made out the list of deportees. The Jews registered, filled out innumerable forms, answered pages and pages of questionnaires regarding their property so that it could be seized more easily; then they assembled at the collection points and boarded the trains." To Arendt, as 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." These sentences were to be widely and often willfully misinterpreted, as if Arendt, rather than clarifying what actually happened, were defending Eichmann, and as if the assistance Jewish leaders gave the Nazis were worse than the Holocaust itself.

Adding to the outrage was Arendt's account of Eichmann's character, or lack thereof—his "bizarre vacuousness." But that was what she encountered when she watched him face to face and when she read the transcript of his interrogation, which, incongruously, made her laugh. Here was a man whose mind was crammed with clichés
and self-fabricated stock phrases. "The longer one listened to him," Arendt wrote, "the more obvious it became that his inability to speak was closely connected with an inability to think, namely to think from the standpoint of somebody else." What struck her so funny as she read the text of his police examination is that Eichmann talked "in the tone of someone who was sure of finding 'normal, human' sympathy for a hard-luck story." He seemed oblivious of context, incapable of relating to the reality of his situation.

The astonishing discrepancy between the mediocrity of the man and the monstrosity of his deeds made Arendt question the common and comforting notion that evil-doers are far from normal. On the contrary, evil emerges not from demonic depths but from shallow subservience. Eichmann was a bureaucrat, and bureaucracy she would later define as "rule by Nobody." The discovery that the accused was not the villain people expected to hold responsible for the Holocaust, that instead he was a man who had no sense of responsibility at all, Arendt underscored with the subtitle of her book "A Report on the Banality of Evil." Not only did this conclusion deny that a modern-day Pharaoh or Haman is to blame for the tragedy of the Jews, it had the horrifying implication that ordinary people can do extraordinary harm even in the absence of tyranny or totalitarian rule.

The rejection of Arendt's report was strong and widespread. "Funny: you said to me once that I tell people the truth so naively," Jaspers wrote her as the controversy over *Eichmann in Jerusalem* raged. "Now you have far exceeded me in that naïveté."

Margarethe von Trotta's film dramatizes that controversy in various ways, ranging from the stack of hate mail Arendt received to confrontations with colleagues and the end of friendships. Not every scene portrayed in *Hannah Arendt* actually occurred, but as
Albert Camus wrote, "Fiction is the lie through which we tell the truth." Other scenes and facts about the Eichmann episode that the film does not include are well documented in Arendt's correspondence and additional sources.

A propaganda war, including a defamation campaign against Arendt, broke out even before the last of the *New Yorker* articles appeared in print. Leading the charge was the Anti-Defamation League. The ADL sent a letter to rabbis telling them to preach against Arendt; and it circulated a bulletin outlining the book's controversial statements, a memorandum detailing its factual errors, and an article maligning Arendt, along with the recommendation that reviewers take these sources into account. One regional Jewish newspaper that rose to the occasion headlined its article, "Self-Hating Jewess Writes Pro-Eichmann Series." "The Jewish community is up in arms," Hans Morgenthau wrote Arendt, describing a meeting held by Hillel House at City College of New York. "Reality has protruded into the protective armor of illusion and the result is psychological havoc."

Arendt originally dismissed the controversy as a tempest in a teacup, advising her husband, Heinrich Blücher, in a letter from Europe, "that one shouldn't pay any attention to it." But four months later, after returning home, she wrote Jaspers, "I'm amazed and never expected anything like this, and I can see, too, that it's downright dangerous. (People are resorting to any means to destroy my reputation. They have spent weeks trying to find something in my past that they can hang on me. They finally gave up, but are going at it differently now.) If I had known this would happen, I probably would have done precisely what I did do."

Arendt's book about the Eichmann trial put her on trial. Arendt's description of his character made her a character in stories told by her adversaries. Although she never
anticipated this drama, Arendt was well aware of the part she played. Indeed, in an essay about Jewish character types, she defined it. "The Jew as Pariah: A Hidden Tradition" describes Bernard Lazare, a French writer in the era of the Dreyfus Affair, as a "conscious pariah." Lazare, she wrote, made a "heroic effort to bring the Jewish question openly into the arena of politics." Arendt, in her writings about Zionism prior to the establishment of Israel, called for direct political engagement between Jews and Arabs, and she opposed the essentialization of antisemitism and Jewish victimhood, as if Jews, unlike every other people, "were not history-makers but history-sufferers, preserving a kind of eternal identity of goodness whose monotony was disturbed only by the equally monotonous chronicle of persecutions and pogroms." Arendt's account of the Eichmann trial, which upset the unquestioned assumptions of Jewish goodness and Gentile fiendishness, made her the conscious pariah of her time.

A documentary film could not have done justice to the story of Arendt, the Eichmann trial, and the ensuing controversy. Little video of Arendt exists, and what does shows her only as a public person, being interviewed and lecturing. Although she made a sharp distinction between public and private, rejecting the feminist assertion that the personal is political, one needs a sense of Arendt as a private person to understand this episode. And fortunately, the acting of Barbara Sukowa in a well researched and well imagined feature film reveals the humanity of a demonized writer. We see Arendt as a hausfrau chopping cabbage; a hostess who argues passionately with her closest friends; a woman whose loving husband is an independent thinker like herself; a smoker whose cigarette glow pierces the night like the headlight on a train of thought.
Seeing Arendt as a person takes the Eichmann book beyond the pages it is printed on and puts it into the context of her life. One of the distinctions Arendt made divided thinking from feeling. Everyone's emotions, she maintained, are alike, just like inner organs. It is by speaking their minds, especially in a public space, that people show who they uniquely are. However, by portraying Arendt's emotions, the film *Hannah Arendt* helps us understand her public persona. A quality of the Eichmann book that alienated many readers is her use of irony, sarcasm, and paradox—a style Norman Podhoretz, in his *Commentary* review, called "the perversity of brilliance." In the film, he claims she is "all cleverness and no feeling." But a dramatic dialogue between Arendt and Blücher suggests the depth of emotion the book conceals. Blücher worries that Arendt's feelings could overwhelm her when facing the Holocaust at the Eichmann trial. He has reason for concern. Arendt recalls being imprisoned in Gurs, the detention camp in France from which she managed to escape before Eichmann transported its inhabitants to a death camp. Arendt encouraged the women who were her fellow prisoners. Then "one evening, I suddenly lost my courage. I was so tired. So tired I wanted to leave the world I so loved." Characteristically, when, later in the film, she speaks to her students about Gurs, Arendt is ironic, saying the Jews' enemies sent them to concentration camps, their friends to detention camps. But seeing her in this imagined scene with Blücher, we have a sense of the depths of despair Arendt literally came to terms with in writing *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Her style, which appears to lack emotion, helped Arendt master the subject emotionally as well as factually. As she admitted in a letter to her friend, the novelist Mary McCarthy, "I wrote this book in a curious state of euphoria. And ever since I did it, I feel—after twenty years—light-hearted about the whole matter."
Arendt wrote an essay, "Truth and Politics," in response to "the so-called controversy after the publication of Eichmann in Jerusalem." In it, she addresses "the question of whether it is always legitimate to tell the truth." Arendt concludes that "the political function of the storyteller—historian or novelist—is to teach acceptance of things as they are. Out of that acceptance, which can also be called truthfulness, arises the faculty of judgment." A narrator's truthfulness has a liberating effect. "To the extent that the teller of factual truth is also a storyteller, he brings about that 'reconciliation with reality' which Hegel . . . understood as the ultimate goal of all philosophical thought." Yet reconciliation with the reality exposed at the Eichmann trial does not mean Arendt mastered the past itself. "We can no more master the past than we can undo it," she wrote the year before Eichmann was captured in Argentina. "But we can reconcile ourselves to it."

The fact that it took a work of dramatic art to disclose otherwise unknowable aspects of her life would not have surprised Arendt at all. She was well aware that one needs imagination to grasp reality. "Imagination alone," she wrote, "enables us to see things in their proper perspective." And she was aware that she herself could not obtain a "proper perspective" regarding her own life. "What the storyteller narrates must necessarily be hidden from the actor himself," she maintained, "at least as long as he is in the act or caught in its consequences, because to him the meaningfulness of his act is not in the story that follows." Only when an action "has come to an end and become a story susceptible to narration" can its meaning appear.

Arendt was not particularly interested in film as a mode of storytelling, but she had high regard for the revelatory power of drama. That was due in part to the public space
that theater establishes. There people may come together to witness representations of what interests them as citizens of the world. When spectators within a theater experience what is on stage as if it were real, they suspend judgment until the story has played out to the end. Their ability to judge arises out of the acceptance of what has happened.

Beyond theater as a forum, the structure and content of dramatic representation mattered to Arendt. What audiences see on the stage of that public space are characters who act, who disclose who they are. Action is a central theme in Arendt's writings, for it embodies two fundamental aspects of the human condition as she describes it: natality, the fact that each generation and potentially each person brings something new into the world; and plurality, the multiplicity of people within the world. The disclosure of character, the plurality into which one acts, and the unpredictability of the outcome are the stuff of drama. And it is through dramatic storytelling that the evanescence of action, which has no permanent result in itself, is preserved for posterity. Arendt considered theater "the political art par excellence; only there is the political sphere of human life transposed into art. By the same token, it is the only art whose sole subject is man in his relationship with others."

A playwright of the German Enlightenment, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, influenced Arendt's thinking about human relationships. In 1959, on accepting the Lessing Prize of the Free City of Hamburg, Arendt said that for Lessing, friendship has political importance; for it concerns "the common world, which remains 'inhuman' in a very literal sense unless it is constantly talked about by human beings"; unless it becomes "the object of discourse." The common world, unlike the realm philosophers like Plato inhabit, has no room for the truth, for that would mean an end to discourse and to friendship. Instead,
when people speak *their* truth, the result is a multiplicity of opinions, and those views, along with their stories, illuminate the world.

Like Lessing, instead of seeking "in the warmth of intimacy the substitute for that light and illumination which only the public realm can cast," Arendt and her friends discussed public affairs, and they did so with confidence that the bonds of friendship could withstand their differences of opinion. In his eulogy at her funeral service at Riverside Memorial Chapel in New York City in 1975, Hans Jonas spoke of Arendt's "genius for friendship." Regarding her passion for discourse, he said, "She liked, of course, to be right and on occasion could be quite formidably contentious; but she did not believe, as she confided to me, that 'truth' is to be had for us these days. She believed, instead, in the incessant, always temporary trying for that face of it which the present condition happens to turn toward us. Thinking through is its own reward, for we will be more understanding after than we were before. We will have more light, and still not have 'the truth.'"

In view of the importance of friendship for Arendt, the movie's depiction of conflict with Jonas and other close friends over the Eichmann book is both painful and problematic. Kurt Blumenfeld, whom she had known since she was twenty and he forty-two, was a leader of the Zionist Organization of Germany and Arendt's "mentor in politics" before he emigrated to Israel in 1933. The film depicts him greeting her warmly when she arrives to cover the trial; and, in a deathbed scene, it dramatizes his break with her over *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, which he never read but learned about second-hand. Arendt did know that he was outraged, and she evidently convinced him that at least one of the critics hostile to her was an idiot. What transpired between them on her last visit
was, to her mind, an entirely private matter. However, an obituary writer did suggest they had a falling out; and for screenwriters with a poetic license, that scene is fair game.

Although Jonas could never agree with Arendt about the responsibility of Jewish leaders for aiding the Holocaust, they did remain friends, even though, according to her biographer Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, they broke off communications for more than a year after he read the Eichmann book. The classroom scene in which Jonas angrily tells her he wants nothing more to do with "Heidegger's favorite student" could have occurred—they both taught at the New School in New York City—but probably did not. In any case, it dramatizes the clash between Arendt's passion for discourse and her genius for friendship. Each friend she lost diminished the world, but understanding that world required honest argument between diverse and sometimes divergent opinions.

Drama enlarges our understanding of Arendt. But it is the documentary portion of the film, its archival footage of the Eichmann trial, that vindicates Arendt's depiction of the accused. It seems as clear as the sight of Eichmann shielded by the glass cage in the courtroom that he shielded himself from reality and factuality by self-deception, lies, and stupidity. We observe a bespectacled, balding man blinking and twisting his lips as he hears testimony. We listen to his bureaucratic explanations: "I received the matter for its immediate processing." "I can only say that those records were not the authority of Department 4B4." We can only agree with Arendt when, to an Israeli friend, she declares, "Eichmann is no Mephisto."

Yet Eichmann as a character, both in Arendt's book and von Trotta's film, does not reveal the extent to which Eichmann the man was aware of what he did. The German scholar Bettina Stangneth found tapes made in Argentina by a Nazi sympathizer for
whom Eichmann played a different role than he did in the trial. Eichmann regretted not having "exterminated the enemy" completely. He boasts that he would have been satisfied to have "killed 10.3 million Jews." He acknowledges being a bureaucrat. "But joined to this cautious bureaucrat was a fanatical fighter for the freedom of the Blut I descend from."

In his essay about Arendt & Eichmann, Mark r argued that she should have written "a book on what she called 'the strange interdependence of thoughtlessness and evil' in modern bureaucratic society" instead of tying her thesis about "the banality of evil" to the story of Eichmann. "No one would have been offended," he said. Yet Arendt's thesis arose from her experience of Eichmann and for her was not entirely separable from it. "I have always believed," she wrote, "that no matter how abstract our theories may sound or how consistent our arguments appear, there are incidents and stories behind them which, at least for ourselves, contain as in a nutshell the full meaning of whatever we have to say." Prior to the Eichmann trial, Arendt had thought in terms of "radical evil." Seeing him in court and reading the interrogation transcripts made her recognize that regardless of the destructive depth of evil deeds, those who do evil may be shockingly shallow. But Eichmann now appears to have been both a fanatic and a functionary, hardly a banal figure.

Lilla's point has the value of exposing a weakness of Arendt's "old-fashioned storytelling" as well as of its cinematic counterpart. Arendt's thesis is widely known because she presented it through a particular story. However, the defendant in a trial, like the protagonist of a play or of a film, can only be a character, without the full complexity of a human being.
Inevitably, then, von Trotta's *Hannah Arendt* does not reveal an important aspect of Arendt's life and thought. Arendt's reflections about the relationship between thinking, judgment, and morality that the trial engendered ran deeper than her report on Eichmann. Yet even granting the limitations of film as a medium for conveying ideas as well as the complexity of a real person, those reflections could have been dramatized to an extent through the relationship between Arendt and Martin Heidegger.

Heidegger, who served the Nazis in an entirely different and far less consequential capacity than Eichmann, was a great thinker. The fact that he and Arendt became lovers when she, at eighteen, was his student, has been sensationalized; and she is criticized for honoring him after the war in spite of the fact that Heidegger joined the Nazi party and became rector of Freiburg University during the Third Reich. The film does not fall into the traps of overemphasizing the love affair or of reducing the philosopher to his foolish embrace of Hitler's regime. It shows that Arendt came to Freiburg to study with Heidegger, who, at thirty-five, was a renowned professor, in order to learn how to think. It reveals her shock on seeing a newspaper article about his collaboration with the Nazis. And it portrays her, in a postwar meeting, rebuffing his romantic overtures and suggesting he make a public apology. But that scene misses a point that could have exposed the difference between Arendt's mode of thinking and Heidegger's and that would have shown the influence of the Eichmann trial on themes that preoccupied her subsequently.

When Arendt met Heidegger, rumor had it that "Thinking has come to life again; the cultural treasures of the past, believed to be dead, are being made to speak." The screenplay could have had Arendt ask the philosopher why was he so idiotic as to have
allied himself with Hitler. What was he thinking? Such a scene would have confronted the audience with a paradox: How was it that Heidegger, who was known for his depth as a thinker, and Eichmann, whose shallowness stemmed from his failure to think, both contributed to, without taking responsibility for, the deeds of the Third Reich?

A clue to the resemblance between the latter's thoughtlessness and the former's profundity appears in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* when Arendt characterizes Eichmann's "inability to think, namely to think from the standpoint of somebody else." Many philosophers, living in their own minds apart from the plurality of everyday life, have lacked that ability. Writing about Heidegger to commemorate his eightieth birthday, Arendt addressed the inadequacy of philosophy to understand politics, a void that she, in her work, strove to fill. "We who wish to honor the thinkers, even if our own residence lies in the middle 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 professionelle*. For the attraction to the tyrannical can be demonstrated theoretically in many of the great thinkers (Kant is the great exception)."

The ability to think from the standpoint of others and then to make judgments from a frame of reference that goes beyond any one standpoint, including one's own, is an antidote both to the philosophers' abstraction in the realm of ideas and to the thoughtless acquiescence people commonly have to what everybody around them does and believes in. It is this combination of independent thinking and impartial judging that Arendt applied to her task of understanding the formidable storms that blew through her times.
She did this in the absence both of a tradition within which to work and of illumination from the public realm. Instead, she found herself in the dark, quoting Bertolt Brecht: "Truly, I live in dark times." What brought that darkness were events of Arendt's lifetime, which included total war, totalitarianism, and genocide. Along with these calamities came the collapse of any credible frame of reference that might have enabled one to interpret them, from religious authority—the death of God that Nietzsche announced—to Hegel's idea, which Marx turned upside down, that world history is the unfolding of Spirit. How could one come to terms with the unpredictable uniqueness of the events that lacerated the twentieth century? Arendt faced the dilemma that Tocqueville described a century earlier: "Since the past has ceased to throw its light onto the future, the mind of man wanders in obscurity."

The one passage in Heidegger's writings that Arendt asked me, as her student, to read contains the sentence: "The light of the public obscures everything." ("Das Licht der Offenlichkeit verdunkelt alles.") She said that what ruins everything for him is "the world, that which is public, and the only salvation is the 'self'". For Heidegger, "the They," or mass mind, spoils the encounter between Dasein (being there) and Being that was fundamental to his philosophy. For Arendt, the sentence raised a different issue. She believed that without people's willingness to enter the public sphere and disclose who they are, there can be no freedom, understanding, or humanity. This is a venture, she said in an interview, in which "one exposes oneself to the light of the public as a person." To do that requires "a trust in what is human for all people."

Totalitarian rule destroys all places where people may speak and act freely. Yet even in a democracy where we have the ability to express ourselves freely, the light of
the public obscures quite a lot. Hannah Arendt cast a beacon of clarity through America's darkness. And the way she did it was instructive.

As a teacher and writer, Arendt followed no model of thinking, researching, or reporting. She preferred Lessing's notion of "Selbstdenken—独立思考 for oneself," or, as she liked to put it, "thinking without a bannister." Rather than work within the fields of philosophy, political science, or history, Arendt uniquely blended inquiry, information, analysis, quotations, ideas, and stories. It was by crafting narratives incorporating the insights of artists as well as facts and reflections that she sought to understand the subjects that concerned her.

In public as well as in her writings, Arendt came to terms with her times by defining what was new, finding the roots of the new in its antecedents, and refining worn-out words into clear conceptual tools. Her love of poetry animated this activity. Language was her instrument, and in using it, she sought Confucian lucidity through "the rectification of names."

I first saw Arendt on a panel at the Theatre of Ideas in New York City, in December, 1967. The subject was the legitimacy of violence as a political act, a timely topic in light of the protest over the Vietnam War. She began characteristically by making a distinction: "Power and violence are not the same. Power is inherent in all politics, and all government rests on power. . . . Generally speaking, violence always rises out of impotence. It is the hope of those who have no power to find a substitute for it—and this hope, I think, is in vain. Violence can destroy power, but it can never replace it." That distinction threw light on the war itself as well as on the dispute over how to protest the war, for by rejecting "the common and erroneous equation of power and violence,"
one perceives "the superiority of the power of the guerrillas [the Vietcong] to an enormous and disastrous display of violence." Having the largest military in the world did not make the United States the most powerful country, as the nation would learn to its sorrow.

Arendt would later say that what the United States sought to achieve through the violence of the war "was neither power nor profit. Nor was it even influence in the world in order to serve particular, tangible interests for the sake of which prestige, an image of the 'greatest power in the world,' was needed and purposefully used. The goal was now the image itself, as is manifest in the very language of the problem-solvers, with their 'scenarios' and 'audiences,' borrowed from the theater." The release of the Pentagon Papers by Daniel Ellsberg exposed the fact that the officials in charge of the war knew it could not be won and that they lied systematically to the public. This was a war to maintain credibility at home as the world's most powerful country and to win "minds and hearts" abroad. Complementing and perpetuating violence in Southeast Asia was systematic deception of the public, with the aid of the media, and also of officials, as soldiers reported body counts fabricated to advance careers. Factual truth was the war's first casualty and continual victim, while false stories in lieu of reality were its product and goal. In a situation like this, observed Roger Berkowitz, "when fictional constructions of reality—the very stories and legends that give our world meaning—harden into ideologies and certainties that obscure reality," Arendt regarded thinking as a political responsibility.

The controversy over the Vietnam War and the ways to oppose it, whether through violent protest or civil disobedience, gave contemporary relevance to the inquiry Arendt
began when she looked at the walking disaster of the Holocaust face to face. The movie concludes by putting these words on the screen: "The problem of evil became the fundamental subject for Hannah Arendt. She was still struggling with it at the time of her death." Actually, at that time, Arendt was writing a trilogy, *The Life of the Mind*, and she had completed the first two books: *Thinking* and *Willing*. The title page for the third was in her typewriter when she died: *Judging*. The immediate impulse for her "preoccupation with mental activities," she wrote in the introduction, "came from my attending the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem."

In this unfinished work, which Mary McCarthy edited, Arendt digs toward the experiential roots of concepts for a person's mental powers. What is thinking? How is thinking or the absence of thought related to good judgment on the one hand, acquiescence in and alliance with evil on the other?

Even though the final Heidegger scene fails to raise these questions, filmmaker Margarethe von Trotta knows well that this was the problem Arendt wrestled with until her last breath. Words appearing briefly on the screen to close out the story of the movie, a reference to "the problem of evil," only suggest the depth of Arendt's post-Eichmann inquiry. But if ever a screenplay had a footnote, it is this one, written by von Trotta and Pam Katz. In an early scene that shows a lively dispute between friends at Arendt and Blücher's apartment in New York City, Arendt says "when the ships are down," and Mary McCarthy corrects her. This is a set-up for the climactic scene in which Arendt, explaining what she means by "the banality of evil" to students at the New School, ends her passionate speech with "when the chips are down." That pay-off refers to a passage in
an essay that anticipates what Arendt might have concluded about thinking and judging had she lived to complete *The Life of the Mind*:

When everybody is swept away unthinkingly by what everybody else does and believes in, those who think are drawn out of hiding because their refusal to join is conspicuous and thereby becomes a kind of action. The purging effect of thinking, Socrates midwifery, that brings out the implications of unexamined opinions and thereby destroys them—values, doctrines, theories, and even convictions—is political by implication. For this destruction has a liberating effect on another human faculty, the faculty of judgment, which one may call, with some justification, the most political of man's mental abilities. It is the faculty to judge particulars without subsuming them under those general rules which can be taught and learned until they grow into habits that can be replaced by other habits and rules.

The faculty of judging particulars (as Kant discovered it), the ability to say, "this is wrong," "this is beautiful," etc., is not the same as the faculty of thinking. Thinking deals with invisibles, with representations of things that are absent; judging always concerns particulars and things close at hand. But the two are interrelated in a way similar to the way consciousness and conscience are interconnected. If thinking, the two-in-one of the soundless dialogue, actualizes the difference within our identity as given in consciousness and thereby results in conscience as its by-product, then judging, the by-product of the liberating effect of thinking, realizes thinking, makes it manifest in the world of appearances, where I am never alone and much too busy to be able to think. The manifestation of the wind of thought is no knowledge; it is the ability to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly. And this indeed may prevent catastrophes, at least for myself, in the rare moments when the chips are down.

The kind of thinking Arendt described and exemplified, the two-in-one dialogue that enables a person to represent internally the standpoints of others, is a prerequisite not just for conscience, which preserves the ability to live with oneself. It makes understanding points of view beyond one's own possible. This ability is crucial for participation in civil society as well as for the art of storytelling.

When an honest exchange of views occurs, minds open up and thinking comes to life. That, for Arendt, was pleasure. "Gladness, not sadness, is talkative," she wrote, "and truly human dialogue differs from mere talk or even discussion in that it is entirely
permeated by pleasure in the other person and what he says." A sad consequence of the Eichmann controversy, which made "truly human dialogue" about Hannah Arendt difficult if not impossible for many people over a long period of time, has been a lack of civil discourse especially with regard to the matters that concerned her and that persist in new forms in our times.

Another kind of pleasure comes from the type of judging that Kant described and Arendt had in mind: the esthetic judgment of the spectator. It is a matter of taste: I think this is beautiful. I think this is wrong. Conventional rules and general standards do not mold the judging of particular things by a liberated mind.

What we judge as spectators are the enduring works and places that constitute the world and also the ephemeral actions that occur between people within the world. It is to remember and understand the human drama that we tell stories. The stories that filmmakers, historians, reporters, and raconteurs tell become subjects for discourse, subject to debate. True stories do not provide the truth. They do, nonetheless, offer reconciliation with reality and liberation from the shackles of the past; admiration for those who have the courage to exercise their freedom; and stimulus for new stories about what has happened and the way things are.