



**VITA ACTIVA: THE SPIRIT OF HANNAH ARENDT** was screened by Kino Ken recently at the 2016 Carnegie Mellon International Film Festival in Oakland, Pennsylvania. Here is his review of that documentary.

9 of a possible 20 points

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Germany / Israel / Switzerland / United States 2015 color and black-and-white  
 125 minutes Intuitive Pictures Inc. / AU Films (Ada Ushpiz Films) / Go2Films / SRC / WDR /  
 Arte / SVT / RTS / Channel 8 / Fernehbueiro / Claims Conference Producers: Ina Fichman and  
 Ada Ushpiz

**Key: \*indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance**

**Points:**

- 0 Direction: Ada Ushpiz**
  - 0 Editing: Hadas Ayalon**
  - 1 Camera: German Gutierrez, Philippe Lavalette, Itai Ne'eman**
  - 1 Lighting**
  - 1 Interviewees:**
    - Music: John Wilson**
    - Narration Writer: Ada Ushpiz**
  - 2 Research**
  - 1 Locations**
  - 1 Sound: Michael Lambert (Sound Design), Jose Garcia-Lozano, Amos Zipori,  
 Misha Spector, Eli Bein**
    - Voice of Hannah Arendt: Alison Darcy**
  - 0 Creativity**
  - 2 Insightfulness**
- 9 total points**

A strange blend of dramatically read letters and archival film footage, **VITA ACTIVA: THE SPIRIT OF HANNAH ARENDT** attempts to use that unpromising format to present the life and philosophy of Hannah Arendt.

Born in Germany in 1906, Hannah lost her father at an early age. She was consequently raised primarily by her mother. A situation far from unique to the Weimar Republic. This may have caused her to seek father substitutes as an adult, first attaching herself to Martin Heidegger in 1924, a professor some seventeen years her senior at the University of Marburg.

Intellectual friendship developed quickly into parallel romantic relationship, untenable and furtive due to Heidegger's prior marriage with a Protestant and his Jesuit Catholic upbringing. Hannah's tutor-lover soon relocated himself to Freiburg, meanwhile dispatching Arendt to Heidelberg. She was recommended to former student Karl Jaspers, then already a professor, about six years senior in age to Heidegger. Jaspers at that time taught essentially a blending of the younger man's philosophy with insights from Dane Søren Kierkegaard's Christian existentialism, a conjunction Jewish Hannah likely found more congenial than Martin's essentially atheistic principles.

With the rise of Nazi power in the early 1930s, that young woman felt increasingly dissociated from German politics and Heidegger's zeal for national revival. She correctly perceived her homeland was headed for disaster, discriminating publicly against minorities, championing violent action to counter leftist political agitation within labor unions, often instigated by Jewish Communists. As a freethinker espousing the virtues of human diversity, a position reinforced by communications with Jaspers, Hannah's own sympathies tilted towards Marxism.

When Heidegger became rector of Freiburg University, agreeing with dismissal of Jewish academicians there and pledging himself to adherence with Nazi policies, a division opened wider between two prominent ex-students and their former mentor. Arendt seems to have even considered Martin a potential murderer of Jews, not an unreasonable assumption at that point. She was appalled at his dissociation from her friend Edmund Husserl, a Jew whose efforts to insure Heidegger as his successor in the philosophy department at Freiburg had been instrumental at landing the younger man an academic position there. Arendt and Husserl must have felt utterly betrayed.

In 1929, Arendt married Gunther Stern, a cousin of Walter Benjamin. They would divorce in 1937.

Leaving Germany in 1933 after her arrest by police, Hannah emigrated with her spouse to Czechoslovakia, then travelled on to Geneva, Switzerland. There she worked for the League of Nations, allowing her to put political theories into affirmative action. Her next move brought her to Paris, then cultural capital of Europe.

During this French period, she participated in the activities of Youth Aliyah, an organization removing Jewish children from endangered Eastern European communities and resettling them in British Palestine.

In 1940, Hannah married a second time. New husband Heinrich Blücher was a Marxist, formerly active in the Spartacus Communist movement in Germany.

This pair of political radicals was arrested soon after their wedding and interned in Gurs, a concentration camp located in southwestern France. After escaping from there, the couple came with Hannah's mother to the United States in 1941. They were enabled to do this through the assistance of Hiram Bingham, who provided falsified identification papers, and Varian Fry, who managed transportation scheduling and funding.

After resettlement in the New World, Hannah held a succession of teaching positions at Northwestern University, the University of Chicago, Columbia, Princeton, the University of California at Berkeley, and the New School of Social Research in New York City. She published a number of critical philosophical works after World War II, the most important probably being *The Origins of Totalitarianism* in 1951, *The Human Condition* in 1958, "On Revolution" in 1963, "On Violence" in 1970, and *Crises of the Republic* in 1972.

But her most controversial book appeared in 1963, a collection of Hannah's articles posted to *The New Yorker* magazine from the trial of Adolph Eichmann in Jerusalem. Titled *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report On the Banality of Evil*, it severed two of her longest friendships, alienating Gershom Scholem and Kurt Blumenfeld, neither of whom could tolerate criticisms of Jewish Council Elders and seeming apologies for Eichmann's behavior found there. The publication's polarizing phrase "the banality of evil" reportedly had been suggested by Hannah's husband as a means of instigating debate. What it actually did was incite savage personal attacks against the author, absurdly charging her with anti-Semitism and self-loathing.

For the above biographical details, the reviewer is indebted to Clayton Dillard's review of this film in his April 4, 2016 posting at [www.slantmagazine.com](http://www.slantmagazine.com), Doris Toumarkine's review of April 6, 2016 at [www.filmjournal.com](http://www.filmjournal.com), Isa Freeling's review of April 5, 2016 at [www.huffingtonpost.com/isa-freeling](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/isa-freeling), A. O Scott's review of April 5, 2016 at [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com), Kenneth Turan's review of April 28, 2016 at [www.latimes.com/entertainment](http://www.latimes.com/entertainment), and [www.biography.com](http://www.biography.com).

Director Ada Ushpiz's narration follows the life of its protagonist in chronological order, inserting where relevant excerpts from Hannah Arendt's letters and writings. She hinges the film primarily on the heroine's lifelong love-hate relationship with Heidigger, relating it to themes of parental loss, betrayal, statelessness, forgiveness, guilt, and estrangement. Just as Hannah and Martin keep attracting and repelling, so too their thinking harmonizes and diverges over time, creating a pattern which finds an analogy in attempts to preserve German culture despite its rejection of Hannah and Jewish colleagues as constructive thinkers.

Though the issue is skirted here, Hannah's lifelong fascination with an author who could deliver twelve complete lectures about philosophy without once mentioning any contribution by a woman to philosophical thought is a paradox worthy of examination. Heidegger's emphasis on male nouns and pronouns must have been equally aggravating. While these preceptors did accept women in the role of students, both apparently dismissed any notion of ever themselves learning from them. Inconceivable. Yet Hannah held them in what appeared to be awe, as well as affection, even to the extent of preparing a defense for Heidegger to permit his de-Nazification after World War II.

Karl Jaspers was less disposed to reconciliation. Heidegger never acknowledged any feeling of guilt about his Nazi sympathies. While Arendt extended forgiveness anyway, her Heidelberg instructor instead argued against granting it.

From a Christian theological perspective, his actions were more appropriate, for it is impossible to pardon someone who refuses to declare repentance first. Without confession of wrongdoing, there can be no true atonement. Jaspers, unlike Arendt, was unwilling to accept a sham of convenience allowing Heidegger to resume his academic career unhindered.

Arendt's loyalty to freedom of the mind is contrasted with scenes of persecution displaying intolerance directed against all perceived as different from an imposed governmental standard. From her Holocaust experience, she determined to defend as a priority the establishment of certain uncompromisable human rights. This was due partly to a sense of outsider status as a Jew, a condition aggravated by rampant anti-Semitism in her native land.

So why didn't she completely repudiate Eichmann's attempts to shield himself from retributory justice by claiming a lack of authority over his actions, actions which led to extermination of thousands of human lives? If death camps and incinerations of hypothetical political opponents weren't heinous enough to qualify as extraordinarily evil, what was?

In Arendt's opinion, simply the results of what could be termed "group think." Collective propaganda, disguised as patriotic fervor, not only justified genocide. It also camouflaged reluctance to think independently, allowing citizens to eliminate any need for personal reflection or responsibility.

The tendency to adopt political morality as defined by a ruling party in lieu of personal judgment Arendt viewed as the greatest crime and failing of her century. Eliminating individual responsibility for actions paved the way to prejudice, torture, mass persecution, forced annexation of land, large-scale deportations, compulsory roundups of dissidents, war, and elevation of survival instincts to overriding status.

Fear of power and punishment dominated all discussion and conduct. Suspicion of the unusual, the foreign, the imperfect, the unhealthy, and death directed actions. A code of conduct became more important than actual treatment people accorded each other, justifying a wide range of civic lawbreaking. Group allegiance superseded loyalty to family, friends, and colleagues.

Which led members of the ruling party to believe themselves invulnerable, meritorious, predestined to succeed in whatever pursuits they chose. Choice itself became a monopoly exclusive to power brokers. Resisters had to flee or die.

Documentary shots reveal willingness of individuals to adopt whatever policies their government selected as their own. They reveled in doing so, as can be seen by Nazi army officers impersonating Jews. These disgusting charades were not only permitted in Hitler's Germany. They were positively encouraged as a way of scapegoating, placing all blame for social shortcomings on minorities ill equipped to challenge such substitution.

Arendt's comments on such occurrences and their influence upon her thinking are related through readings of correspondence with fellow philosophers, a strategy which wears out its welcome long before the film concludes. Employment of trained actors to quote luminaries only gets in the way of any profound interpretation or investigation of texts. Since no biography of Heidigger, Jaspers, or even Hannah's first husband is incorporated into the narrative, words lack sufficient context for clear application. Too many events depicted show merely effects rather than causes, leaving viewers still mystified about how a supposedly progressive Christian nation could sink so quickly to abysmal barbarism. Darwinism unfettered, perhaps?

Editing is hampered by total reliance on spoken texts, requiring scenes to begin and end when they do. This pits visual flow against slower speech, resulting in disharmony while spawning impatience in audiences. There's too little insight, too much sheer verbiage. In some instances, verbal content spars against juxtaposed pictorial drama, irony of the former proving less compelling than the latter's unsophisticated directness.

Failure to follow interwoven threads of three major lives ultimately causes the substance of the film to fall short of what was intended. Arendt frequently operated in the shadow of two male mentors, Jaspers and Heidigger, appropriating heavily from their ideas. This isn't shown, probably because the director approached her subject from a predetermined, unswerving feminist slant. What results is more tantalizing than filling, especially since interviews with less controversial friends and defensive relatives occupy the bulk of screen time between readings of letters.

However, as inducement to read more thoroughly writings of three illustrious intellectual figures (Arendt, Jaspers, and Heidigger), VITA ACTIVA works much better. For that reason alone, it's worth a viewing. As documentary drama, this production is a mediocrity, though honorably and adequately researched.

The facts themselves are fascinating. Their framing here is not.

VITA ACTIVA: THE SPIRIT OF HANNAH ARENDT is appropriate viewing only for individuals mature enough to understand implications of the Holocaust and Nazism. Those too young for formal introduction to philosophical reasoning, namely pre-collegiate youths, should postpone watching until later years.

