Devastating irony? Hannah Arendt and Harry Mulisch on the Eichmann Trial
by Joop Berding


There are texts that ‘move’ people. This is certainly the case with the two books that I will discuss in this presentation: Hannah Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (Arendt 2006) and *Criminal Case 40/61, the Trial of Adolf Eichmann* by Harry Mulisch (2005). This has everything to do with the topic of both books – i.e. the question how an individual’s responsibility is to be judged with regard to one of the greatest and incomprehensible disasters mankind ever has had to deal with, the Holocaust or Shoah. But another question also arises, i.e. if this disaster is indeed unspeakable, what literary means remain for anyone who wants to write about it? For now I am mainly occupied with the second question. For it is clear that the literary style used by both authors has in many ways contributed to the impact of their works, and also to the controversy that arose, and goes on, more than fifty years after they were first published. That style, I would contend, is a devastating irony.

Background

First, let me give a sketch of the historical backgrounds. During the Nuremburg trials after the Second World War Eichmann’s name came up a few times but did not lead to action (although it is sometimes contended that Eichmann’s name was not mentioned at all or only casually, this is convincingly proved faulty by Stangneth 2014). In spite of many investigations Eichmann was never located, although recent research reveals that already in 1952 the German Secret Service knew or might have known of his whereabouts (Stangneth 2014; cf. Neiman 2014). Eventually the Mossad found out that Eichmann had lived for some time in Argentina, under a false name (‘Ricardo Klement’), and had a minor job at an office after some failures to start his own company. After meticulous research and surveillance Israeli secret agents on May 11, 1960 succeeded in capturing and abducting Eichmann near

---

1 This is a translated and substantially expanded version of an article that was originally published in the Dutch magazine *Inkt!* in 2010.

2 I wish to thank Ms Kitty Saal and Mrs M. Mathijsen-Verkooijen of the Harry Mulisch Huis and the University of Amsterdam for their hospitality, and letting me read the integral typescript of Mulisch’s *Criminal Case 40/61.*
his home in Buenos Aires (Harel 1997; Bascombe 2009). He was flown to Israel and put in prison. There he was to be tried before an Israeli court, and to be held accountable for his deeds, more precisely his involvement in the *Endlösung*, the so called ‘definitive solution of the Jewish question’. The Israeli way of dealing with Eichmann was questioned from the beginning. Why did this trial take place before an Israeli and not an international court of law, and second, what exactly had been Eichmann’s position, function and responsibility within the Third Reich? The answers to these questions have a lot to do with the historical situation regarding the State of Israel (instituted in 1949) and the awareness of scale and impact of the Holocaust, which at the time had only just begun. It seemed that Israel wanted to show to the world that the Jews were still ‘around’ and they were determined to hunt down Nazis everywhere in the world. At the same time it seemed that Israel wanted to tell its own people, and the world, the story of the near destruction of the Jews all at once (as a form of ‘education’, as both Arendt and Mulisch, and others, see it). To what deeds Eichmann himself was exactly accountable seemed of minor relevance. The trial dragged on, the dead penalty was called for, Eichmann appealed to the Supreme Court, and finally on May 31, 1962 he was hanged, his corpse incinerated. Only a few hours later his ashes were scattered across the ocean. In retrospect one can say that in a sense from that moment on the world, and the Jews in the first place, were free to deal with the Holocaust.

**Arendt and Mulisch**

The German-American-Jewish political thinker\(^3\) Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) and the Dutch author and journalist Harry Mulisch\(^4\) (1927-2010) played a major role in these events. In 1941 Arendt had escaped from occupied France, via Lisbon to the United States and had established herself as editor (at Schocken Books), and later on as author, teacher and professor. When not involved in ‘worldly’ activities she, with her husband, Heinrich Blücher, and a few friends, the author Mary McCarthy among others, led a somewhat secluded life in New York.\(^5\) The journal *The New Yorker* send her, on her request, as a journalist to the Eichmann trial. She read all of the then available records of the trial, including transcripts of the interviews the Israeli chief of police Av. Lesner had conducted with the prisoner, and she

---

\(^3\) Following Arendt in her interview in Gaus (2013, 3-4) I will not define her as a philosopher.

\(^4\) Mulisch was half Jewish, a fact that plays a role in some of his major literary works.

\(^5\) In *Hannah Arendt*, Margarethe von Trotta’s ‘biopic’ scenes from this domestic life are presented, with what I’d like to call ‘a touch of romance’.
attended the first days in the Court Hall. In 1963\textsuperscript{6} her reports were put together in a book, \textit{Eichmann in Jerusalem} (Arendt 2006).

Harry Mulisch was, in 1961, still a ‘promising’ author, though several of his novels had had a good reception and won several prizes in his native country, the Netherlands. The journal \textit{Elsevier’s Magazine} send him, on his own request to Jerusalem. His book with reports was published in 1962 (so a year before Arendt’s), under the title \textit{Criminal Case 40/61} (Mulisch 2005). The scope of his reports, and of the book, is broader than the case itself: Mulisch writes about this wanderings through Jerusalem, about excursions he made to the remnants of Eichmann’s office in Berlin, and he went to Warsaw and Auschwitz.\textsuperscript{7}

The parallel reading of both author’s works on the Eichmann trial I propose seems more than appropriate. Not only do both books discuss the same theme but they are also characterized by the same ‘tone’, i.e. literary style. Moreover, Arendt in her book refers to Mulisch’s work and acknowledges that he, as one of the very few, has understood her perspective on both the trial and the person of Eichmann (Arendt 2006, 282).

\textbf{Arendt: Eichmann in Jerusalem}

From the beginning Arendt was critical towards the State of Israel and its intentions with regard to this trial. The builder of its location, the House of the People, Arendt says, ‘had a theater in mind’, and she considered it ‘not a bad place for [this] show trial’ (Arendt 2006, 4). The journalists who attended the trial were supposed to see ‘a spectacle as sensational as the Nuremburg trials’ (Arendt 2006, 6). But it degenerated in ‘a rudderless ship tossed about on the waves’ (Arendt 2006, 9), especially, says Arendt, because the judge appeared unable to get a grip on the publicity machine of the prosecutor and the State. Eichmann declared himself ‘not guilty in the sense of the indictment’ (‘im Sinne der Anklage nicht schuldig’) on all fifteen counts of the charge. What he had done where only crimes in retrospect, he had always been ‘a law-abiding citizen’, he stated, and had only acted according to the commandment of the Leader (the ‘Führerbefehl’). ‘He “personally” never had anything whatever against Jews …’ (Arendt 2006, 26). But he emphasized how tough it had been for him to obey orders, and spoke about ‘the burden of responsibility and of importance that weighed supposedly on those who had to execute orders’, has Arendt (2006, 27) say.

\textsuperscript{6} Arendt only began compiling the articles for her book one and a half year after the trial, as she was immersed in finishing \textit{On Revolution} which also appeared in 1963.

\textsuperscript{7} During the trial, Arendt also wrote on other topics related to it, but she did this primarily in letters to her husband (see Köhler 1999, 518ff).
Eichmann, and here we have a first and typical example of her ironic way of reporting. Of course, Arendt adds, Eichmann did not really say this, but this is the way he thought.

In Jerusalem prison Eichmann wrote his autobiography which, according to Arendt, is a maze of stereotypes or clichés: his difficulties as a youngster, how he was fired, how already in 1932 he joined the Nazi party, the NSDAP, and later the SS. Arendt comes to the conclusion that Eichmann wants to give his audience the impression that he was just ‘a typical member of the lower middle classes’ (a ‘Kleinbürger’), while in reality he is the ‘declassé son of a solid middle-class family’ (Arendt 2006, 31). With a lot of detail (and detail is very important, cp. Neiman 2014) Arendt relates how Eichmann after 1935 became an ‘expert’ in the field of Judaism. His boss was Richard Heydrich, the man who in January 1942 organized the Wannsee Conference, to inform representatives of other parts of the Reich of the ‘Führerbefehl’ on the ‘final solution’ (cf Roseman 2003). In Eichmann, he had an able secretary, who provided ample preparatory documents in which he, to the convenience of both his boss and his other fellow-Nazis had calculated the number of Jews to be ‘extracted’ from the European countries. All in all they numbered a mere eleven million. Eichmann taught himself some Hebrew (‘a smattering of Hebrew’, Arendt calls it, ‘not a very difficult accomplishment’; Arendt 2006, 41; cp. Stangneth 2014, 24-25) and actually immersed himself in the history of Judaism and Zionism. Eichmann became the perfect bureaucrat who with fanatical precision organized the transports of Jews to the East. Exactly once he took the independent decision to cancel a transport, and Arendt concludes thus: ‘[Eichmann] had a conscience, and his conscience functioned in the expected way for about four weeks, whereupon it began to function the other way around’ (Arendt 2006, 95). And this it did, even when in July 1944 the end of the Third Reich was inescapable: then against the direct order of Himmler, he put half a million Hungarian Jews on transport. But there were no means of transport left and they had to walk. There were virtually no survivors.

Arendt quotes one of Eichmann’s statements during the trial: ‘Officialese [Amtssprache] is my only language’ (Arendt 2006, 48). He dealt in platitudes, the same phrases and clichés. Eichmann’s inability to speak, Arendt says (2006, 49), ‘was closely connected with an

---

8 Stangneth (2014) shows that this is only one of the (many) texts that Eichmann wrote, and that he strategically stressed certain points, changed dates or left events out of these different narratives.
inability to think, namely, to think from the standpoint of somebody else.\(^9\) No communication was possible with him, not because he lied but because he was surrounded by the most reliable of all safeguards against the words and the presence of others, and hence against reality as such’ (Arendt 2006, 49; emph. in or.).\(^{10}\)

This is the core of Arendt’s view of this criminal, and it is precisely this determination of ‘thoughtlessness’\(^{11}\) - not the ‘monstrosity’ of Eichmann that Israel wanted to show the world – that brings her at the end of the penultimate chapter to describe the whole thing as ‘the lesson of the fearsome, word-and-thought-defying banality of evil’ (Arendt 2006, 252; emph. in or.).

Would Arendt herself have suspected that precisely this sentence, these three words in a report of over 300 pages would sort the effect it had? Because it was this sentence\(^{12}\) that made people, good friends of hers, to discontinue their friendships of decades, it lead to active campaigning against her book and her person, and made a French magazine put the question ‘Hannah Arendt: est-elle une Nazie?’ on its cover. According to David Cesarani, Eichmann’s biographer (2005) more than 200 books and articles have appeared that deal with the controversy Arendt’s report raised. More than ten years later this figure has been raised further\(^{13}\), and the controversy rages on until today. Arendt herself did not understand that this phrase, this metaphor, was as badly misunderstood as it was in her view. To her the crimes committed by Eichmann – the attempt to eradicate the Jewish people - involved the end of human plurality (cf Arendt 1959), and for her this was by no means a ‘banal’ affair. It was to her the man himself who was banal, the man who succeeded in mistreating even the philosophy of Kant (his categorical imperative) in a banal way; the man who said moments before his execution, that he was a ‘believer in God’, which in Nazi-rhetoric implied the non-existence of an after-life. ‘Long live Germany, long live Argentina, long live Austria. I will

---

\(^9\) The part of this sentence ‘namely, to think from the standpoint of somebody else’ is important. Stangneth (2014, 268) excludes it from her considerations of Arendt’s statement on Eichmann’s ‘thinking’, and thereby distorts the essence of it.

\(^{10}\) Arendt’s protest against what might be called the ‘betrayal’ of language has a forerunner in Montaigne, who said: ‘Our intelligence being by no other way communicable to one another but by a particular word, he who falsifies that betrays public society’ (Montaigne, Essays, II. XVIII).

\(^{11}\) Again, one may wonder if Eichmann really was ‘thoughtless’, and the doer of ‘thoughtless’ evil. An alternative view might be that he was ‘thoughtful’ evil in the flesh.

\(^{12}\) I am aware that besides Arendt’s wording of the banality of evil there are other aspects of her report that caused (her) great trouble, esp. her presentation of the material regarding the position of the so called Jewish Councils in Nazi-occupied countries (cp. Robin, 2015).

\(^{13}\) Stangneth (2015) estimates that by now over 800 books have been published on Eichmann.
never forget them’ (Arendt 2006, 252; emph. in or.), those were allegedly his last words. For Arendt he was all cliché in the flesh.

**Mulisch: Criminal case 40/61**

Unlike Hannah Arendt Harry Mulisch describes in his report the judgment and the execution of Eichmann already in the first chapter,¹⁴ ‘The verdict and the execution. 3/26/61’. Mulisch also points to Eichmann’s thoughtlessness, which from the very start he describes in the following ironic way: ‘Not only did Eichmann not know what he was doing when he transported his victims by the hundred [sic] of thousands to the gas chambers; in a sense he did not even know that he was doing something’ (Mulisch 2005, 4; emph. in or.). Listening to Eichmann speaking brings Mulisch to the conclusion that he was ‘a wickedly unreal person, alienated from himself’ (Mulisch 2005, 5). To demonstrate the multi-faceted, multi-layered, distorted personality of Eichmann, Mulish engineered a photo trick in which the face of Eichmann was divided in half and the mirrored halves were pasted together. Thus arose three Eichmanns, the ‘real’; the ‘barbaric, twisted mug of the mass murderer’, and finally the ‘human’ Eichmann. This last one is the one who witnesses what number two does. And it is at the same time according to Mulisch the most enigmatic (Mulisch 2005, 9-15). In a likewise fashion as Arendt, Mulisch discusses the ‘difficult’ life of Eichmann as a youngster, and uses all of his powers of irony in the description of the supposed correlation between these difficulties and his later deeds as a Nazi: ‘He is said to have had no friends, preferring solitary reading. This is supposed to help explain the mass murder. But it is also said that he was the leader of a youth gang that beat up Jewish boys. This, too, is supposed to explain the mass murder’ (Mulisch 2005, 17). Early in his career, he learned to ‘drink and to have sex, two things that kept him busy for the rest of his life’, and in addition to these two he ‘got to know two kinds of people … : Jews and Nazis’ (Mulisch 2005, 18). Nevertheless he taught himself, ‘being an ‘idealistic’, Hebrew, and confesses that had he been a Jew he would have developed to a fanatical Zionist. Mulisch says: ‘The frightening part is that he means it’ (Mulisch 2005, 22).

Similarly to Arendt, Mulisch experiences the trial as a play and as an exercise in pedagogy: ‘the greatest public lesson in world history’ (Mulisch 2005, 35). Also for Mulisch, Eichmann

---

¹⁴ In the Dutch edition. In the English edition, Mulisch’s short foreword is chapter 1. Like Arendt Mulisch also read the transcripts from the interviews of Eichmann by Lessner.
is no monster, he ‘turns out to be human: a somewhat grubby man with a cold, wearing glasses’ (Mulisch 2005, 37). Other media reported on his eyes as ‘snake eyes’, or ‘a gas chamber’, but Mulisch has another interpretation: his eyes are ‘soft and somewhat velvety, which is only more horrifying’. Like in the pictures he has multiple faces: an ‘inexplicably merciless face, sending shivers up my spine - a smattered face, simultaneously evoking strong pity’ (Mulisch 2005, 37). Eichmann is ‘a lonely, dying man’, ‘he has become a disease’ (Mulisch 2005, 37). In later stages of the trial his face will become even more ruinous; it is in constant motion, and is sometimes ‘cramped into a horrendous grimace’ (Mulisch 2005, 131).

Gradually, during the process a different picture unfolds. Eichmann as a civil servant would have obeyed anybody in power. That is for Mulisch the core of the uniqueness of Eichmann. Because, says Eichmann in Mulisch’s report, ‘I obeyed. Whatever they might have ordered me to do, I would have obeyed. Certainly, I would have obeyed. I did obey. I obeyed - I cannot escape from my skin…’ (Mulisch 2005, 111). Mulisch responds to this ‘confession’ with a bout of irony: ‘If not Adolf Hitler but Albert Schweitzer had been the Reich’s Chancellor in those years, and if Eichmann had received an order to transport all sick blacks to modern hospitals, then he would have carried out that order without fail … He is less a criminal than he is someone capable of anything’ (Mulisch 2005, 111-112). The order preceded everything else, is ‘in effect eternally’ (Mulisch 2005, 112), but when the giver of orders was no longer among the living, Eichmann made a 180 degree turn and became a peaceful citizen in Argentina. The difference between Eichmann and a machine is that the latter is put together, the former conceived (Mulisch 2005, 115). His capabilities for adaptation are miraculous: during the interrogations in Israel not a cross word passed his lips. Mulisch concludes: ‘This extremely useful, absolutely uncorrupted, highly dangerous man is the precise opposite of a “rebel”. (…) He is a machine that is good for anything. He is the right man in the right place. He is the ideal of psycho-technology’ (Mulisch 2006, 119). Like Arendt, Mulisch notices Eichmann’s use of language, or rather as Arendt calls it, his struggle with the German language and his inability to control this, the endless phrases-within-phrases that bring Mulisch to a concluding remark: ‘This way of speaking is

15 Stangneth (2014, 222) denies this. She repudiates the statement made by nazi-hunter Simon Wiesenthal that ‘Eichmann would have persecuted red-haired or blue-eyed people with the same commitment if someone had ordered him to’ (ibid.). The crucial reason, for Stangneth, ‘that Eichmann was so receptive to the totalitarian system was that he was already in thrall to totalitarian thought’ (ibid.).
Fascism’ (Mulisch 2005, 127; emph. in or).\(^\text{16}\)

Mulisch was a self-proclaimed ‘real reporter’ (Mulisch 2005, 133) in Jerusalem, and he is proud of a scoop: reading Eichmann's biography he wrote during his imprisonment: 200 pages. ‘Everything is correct time wise’, says Mulisch, ‘but there is not a word of truth’ (Mulisch 2005, 134).\(^\text{17}\) Eichmann wrote this text like a machine, like a crazed machine without operator: ‘Hungary 1944 shows this’. In June 1944, going against his superiors, Eichmann ordered the Jewish leader in Budapest, Brand, to fly to the Allies to negotiate ‘the most insane offer in world history’: the exchange of one million Jews for ten thousand trucks (Mulisch 2005, 137). This ‘deal’ failed, and ultimately, says Mulisch, the man who least deserved it was made a ‘myth’ (Mulisch 2005, 142).

**Conclusion: devastating irony?**

Not only Arendt, but Mulisch as well has been criticized for the ‘tone’ of his reports. He was accused of identifying too much with the subject, and wasn’t he a half-Jew himself? He discusses these matters at the end of his book. Mulisch does not see himself as a journalist but as a writer; he himself asked to be send to Jerusalem to report on the trial (which he has in common with Arendt). Eichmann, he says, ‘has cured me of many things: of indignation without obligation, for example, but also of much carefreeness. He has also taught me a certain vigilance: my eyes have opened a little wider. I see him, myself, as well as others, in a brighter light. (…) This is where speechlessness begins’ (Mulisch 2005, 159; emph. in or.).

Mulisch and Arendt both had to deal with ‘language destruction’. Was the irony, the devastating irony used by them, the only weapon left for these reporters? And to what extent does this obscure the still penetrating question about evil in the world? (cp. Neiman 2004)

The Eichmann trial left a number of questions unanswered, such as the question who

---

\(^{16}\) In the Dutch edition, contrary to the English one, Mulisch quotes Eichmann in German. For this he excuses himself in a foreword (in the English edition this is chapter 1): ‘Where possible quotations are in German, for in Dutch they are no longer what they are: dangerous. For those who cannot read German, one of the most important entrances to criminal case 40/61 will in this way remain closed – maybe that makes them fortunate’ (Mulisch 2005, 1). In the typescript, page 98, Mulisch comes back to this: ‘in order to make this clear I will have to cite even more in German, I am sorry, but I will not translate it – in Dutch it would not be anymore what it is: dangerous. It has advantages to write in Dutch’ (translation by me, JB). This sentence is crossed out, and does not appear in both the Dutch and the English editions (English ed., page 99, after the sentence ‘He knew’).

\(^{17}\) From Stangneth’s (2014) recent extensive investigation of many (but perhaps still not all) of the (auto-biographical) documents Eichmann wrote in the different phases of his life we may conclude that lying is the thread of his life-story.
Eichmann ‘really’ was. If he was not a ‘monster’ but a boring servant, then what does this mean for the chance of repetition of his behavior?\textsuperscript{18} Exactly this question made Arendt immerse herself in ideas and practices of thinking, and their history, which resulted in part 1 of her \textit{Life of the mind} (Arendt 1978). There every trace of irony is gone, replaced by serious philosophical investigation. And Mulisch? He decided he didn’t want to be reporter after all, but continued his impressive literary output, including masterpieces like \textit{The assault} (Mulisch 1986) and \textit{The Discovery of Heaven} (Mulisch 2011) and, much, much later, \textit{Siegfried} (Mulisch 2004). In much of his work the Second world war is present. In one instance he even said: ‘It’s not that I have “experienced” the Second world war: I \textit{am} that war’.\textsuperscript{19} Irony for Mulisch became ‘self-irony’, the only way to fight off the outside world. The impact of both author’s work about Eichmann continues to date - but that’s a different matter for another time and another place.

\textit{References}

Neiman S. (2014). Filosofie, geen geschiedenis. [Philosophy, not history] In \textit{Afgezien van de feiten} [Apart from the facts] (pp. 39-66). Amsterdam: Boom. [This is the translated version of the Philip B. Hallie Keynote Lecture ‘Philosophy Not History: Reading Eichmann in Jerusalem’, international conference ‘Exercising Judgment in

\textsuperscript{18} Arendt categorically rejects the idea that there might be ‘an Eichmann in every one of us’, as some commentators of her work (and also that of Stanley Milgram) would have it (see Hill 1979, 308).

\textsuperscript{19} It must be pointed out that this is a quote from a work of fiction: \textit{De pupil} [The pupil] of 1987.

Media

Eichmann on Trial in Jerusalem - https://www.youtube.com/user/EichmannTrialEN

Author

Dr. JWA (Joop) Berding (1954) works as a lecturer and researcher at the Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences / School of Social Work & Research Centre for Urban Talent. His major interests are philosophy, theory and practice of education on which he has published extensively.
Email: j.w.a.berding@hr.nl
Website: www.joopberding.nl