

Jelisaveta Blagojević

Faculty of Media and Communications, Singidunum University, Belgrade, Serbia

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7744-8036>

Incidents of Life as Orientations: On Thought, Experience, and the Banality of Evil

Abstract: This article revisits Hannah Arendt's notion of the banality of evil by situating it within the contemporary digital condition and its transnational infrastructures of governance. In an era shaped by automated systems that operate across political, cultural, and territorial borders, the question of responsibility can no longer be addressed within the framework of bounded communities or national public spheres alone.

Departing from Arendt's understanding of thinking as interruption, judgment, and world-building, the article argues that what is at stake today marks the disappearance of the world itself, rather than merely an erosion of morality—the collapse of the space of appearance in which action, responsibility, and plurality can take place across shared political spaces.

Through a dialogue with Arendt, Katerina Kolozova, and Ernst Bloch, the text examines how automation and algorithmic rationality radicalize the logic of thoughtlessness by rendering thinking structurally unnecessary. The continuity between totalitarian administration and contemporary digital governance is traced not through ideology, but through forms of functional coordination that displace judgment and accountability.

Against this background, the article conceptualizes thinking as a fragile political practice capable of reopening a shared world precisely where collaborations, translations, and responsibilities must take place beyond established borders. Thinking, in this sense, becomes the minimal condition for political cooperation, judgment, and *amor mundi* in an age of seamless systems and automated perception.

Keywords: Hannah Arendt; banality of evil; thinking; worldliness; automation; judgment; political philosophy.

Thinking as interruption

To think means to remain faithful to what interrupts. In a world increasingly organized through transnational systems of administration, communication, and automation, political life unfolds across borders that are no longer simply territorial or institutional. Decision-making processes, technical infrastructures, and regimes of visibility operate through forms of coordination that bypass traditional publics while nevertheless producing shared consequences. To think under such conditions means

to confront a political space that is simultaneously global and fragmented, common in its effects yet increasingly deprived of a world in which responsibility could appear. Thought does not begin in clarity but in confusion, in the unease of something that does not fit, that refuses to settle. The gesture of thought is not resolution but endurance. It is not a flight from experience but the act of staying inside it long enough for sense to appear. In this way, thinking is not a movement forward but a suspension, a pause—what Arendt calls the interval between past and future, between what has been and what has not yet come. To think is to preserve that interval against the forces that would abolish it. Bureaucracy, totalitarianism, and now automation all seek to remove the pause, to make life seamless, uninterrupted, smooth. But the world appears only in interruption. Meaning arises only where continuity breaks.

The incidents of life—those unpredictable ruptures that expose our vulnerability—constitute the truth of the world rather than deviations from it. They orient us precisely because they disorient. They are what remains of the world when systems fail, when the grid flickers, when the language of functionality falls silent.

What remains in such moments is not merely a rupture but a trace. Ernst Bloch names this persistence *Spur*—a fragment, a remainder that has escaped incorporation, something not yet reconciled with the logic of the given world. Traces are not promises and not meanings; they are residues of experience that resist closure. They appear where functionality falters, where the world hesitates, leaving behind signs that something other than repetition was once possible. In this sense, incidents of life are not only interruptions but traces of a world that refuses to disappear entirely.

Traces, automation, and the logic of function

In Arendt's writing, the political begins there: in the space opened by appearance, in the encounter with others who also appear. Yet totalitarianism destroys this in-between. It annihilates plurality by converting it into function, by reducing human action to mechanical repetition. It annihilates the very possibility of communication itself. The public sphere, that fragile space of shared visibility, collapses into monologue. In such conditions, speech ceases to be addressed to anyone; it becomes a mere repetition of slogans, empty of relation. What is destroyed, therefore, is not only plurality but the condition for judgment—the very capacity of the self to appear before itself as another. The collapse of the in-between leads to the collapse of the self. The destruction of the public sphere becomes the destruction of personality, of conscience, of the inner dialogue that sustains thought.

Bloch's reflections on traces help articulate this destruction more precisely. Totalitarianism does not only silence speech; it erases the traces through which subjectivity forms itself. Personality, in this sense, is not a fixed interiority but a sedimentation of encounters, gestures, and memories—of traces left by the world within us. When the public sphere collapses, these traces lose their space of articulation. The self becomes empty of residue, reduced to function, deprived of the material that a judgment could emerge from.

Eichmann was, in Arendt words, “terrifyingly normal”. His crimes emerged not from ideology but from his inability to think, to ask what he was doing.

Today, this condition persists, translated into another register. The old bureaucratic chains of command have been replaced by networks, databases, and codes. The command no longer comes from a person but from a system. It does not require belief, only participation. Power has become impersonal, procedural, and distributed. We are no longer ordered to obey; we are optimized to comply. The algorithm does not command—it suggests. It does not punish—it predicts. Yet its suggestions shape our choices more effectively than coercion ever could. The new obedience is voluntary because it is imperceptible. It feels like freedom while producing conformity. In this transformation, the figure of Eichmann returns as a ghost. Not as a historical actor but as a structural principle: the disappearance of responsibility behind the logic of function. “I obeyed orders” becomes “I followed data.” The moral numbness that Arendt once diagnosed has become infrastructural. We do not obey anyone, yet we are governed by everything.

To think in such a world is to commit an error, to reintroduce friction where smoothness is demanded. Thinking slows the process; it interrupts efficiency. It creates what bureaucracy and technology most fear: delay. Arendt once said that thinking has no purpose. It does not serve life; it interrupts it. That uselessness, in our present order, is revolutionary. The automaton—Katerina Kolozova’s name for the subject reduced to function—embodies this predicament. The automaton acts without beginning, moves without direction, repeats without memory. It is not that the automaton has no will, but that will has been replaced by syntax. One executes, and the execution becomes life itself. This repetition does not produce difference; it merely sustains continuity. It is a movement without event, a circulation without encounter, in which nothing truly happens because nothing interrupts the course of function.

In *The Cut of the Real*, Kolozova describes the moment when the automaton breaks: when the real interrupts repetition. This interruption is not simply the return of experience as content, but the disruption of a repetition that had eliminated difference itself. The cut introduces asymmetry into a closed circuit; it fractures the smoothness of execution and forces what was merely functioning to confront what cannot be absorbed. What appears in this moment is not experience as accumulation, but experience as disturbance—as exposure to something that resists integration.

Arendt would call this thinking—not because thinking supplies knowledge, but because it introduces distance. Thinking suspends the automatic flow of action and opens a pause in which judgment becomes possible. This pause is the space where one can ask what one is doing, where execution is no longer self-justifying, and where conscience can emerge as an inner dialogue rather than an external rule. In both Arendt and Kolozova, interruption functions as an ethical event: the moment in which responsibility becomes thinkable.

Without interruption, there is no subject, no responsibility, no world. The automaton without a cut does not merely obey; it persists. It carries totalitarian logic to

completion not through terror, but through seamless functionality. In this sense, the automaton without interruption is totalitarianism realized: the perfect, uninterrupted functioning of meaninglessness.

This is where the digital condition perfects what totalitarianism could only approximate. Automation achieves what ideology could not—it removes the human entirely. It produces a world that functions without anyone in it. The machine does not forget or forgive, it merely processes. What was once a political danger has become a technological ideal: seamless, immediate, and unthinking.

Arendt's phrase *Denken ohne Geländer*—thinking without handrails—speaks directly to this condition. It describes a world in which traditional supports—religion, authority, ideology—have collapsed, and yet thought must go on. To think without handrails is to move through uncertainty without substituting it for false certainty. It is to accept fragility as the condition of freedom. But this exposure, which Arendt calls the courage of thinking, is almost impossible to sustain today. We live in architectures of reassurance: dashboards, metrics, predictions. Everything must be certain, visible, measurable. Thought, by contrast, moves in the dark. It has no proof, only attention.

When Arendt wrote that thinking has a “two-in-one” structure—the dialogue of the self with itself—she did not mean solitude in the psychological sense. She meant the ability to be interrupted by oneself, to become two rather than one, to suspend the immediacy of one's own movement. This inner differentiation is not a retreat from the world but its precondition. In this sense, thinking is the original plural act: it institutes within the self the distance that makes plurality possible.

Thinking is therefore not only the reopening of an interval but the creation of space—a space structured like the public realm. The pause introduced by thought expands into a space of appearance in which positions can be taken, addressed, and judged. What is rehearsed in the two-in-one dialogue is the grammar of the public world: speaking to and before others, holding oneself accountable to perspectives that one cannot fully coincide with.

In this way, thinking becomes the political act par excellence. It does not replace action, but it generates the spatial condition in which action can appear as meaningful and responsible. The totalitarian dream, whether bureaucratic or algorithmic, is the dream of unity—of a single motion, a single process, a single logic without gaps. Thinking opposes this not by confrontation but by differentiation: by producing dissonance, by reintroducing otherness within the self, and thus reopening the world as a shared, public space rather than a closed system.

Worldlessness and the conditions of thought

The loss of the world begins quietly. Not with catastrophe, but with gradual substitution—relations replaced by connections, that is, by forms of linkage that do not presuppose mutual exposure or responsibility. Relations, in Arendt's sense, arise through appearance: they require that individuals risk themselves before others in

speech and action. Connections, by contrast, merely transmit signals. They link without binding, enable contact without encounter, and sustain circulation without creating a shared space of meaning.

Presence is thus replaced by visibility, and appearance by data. What is visible does not necessarily appear; it does not address anyone nor does it call for response. The world, in Arendt's sense, is not nature but the space between us: the fragile field of commonness that arises whenever we speak, act, or think together. It is not given; it must be made and continually maintained. It exists only in the gestures that keep it open.

Totalitarianism destroyed the world by annihilating this in-between, isolating individuals into loneliness and depriving them of the space in which they could appear to one another. Digital systems perfect this isolation by rendering it social. We are constantly connected, yet rarely exposed; permanently addressed by systems, but seldom addressed by others. We exchange information, we signal availability, we upload traces of ourselves—but we rarely appear as speaking and acting beings. The world thus becomes a field of functions, and we become its users rather than its participants.

This is what Arendt feared most: that the earth might remain populated, yet uninhabited—that human beings would survive, but the world would vanish. A world without worldliness is not empty; it is overcrowded with objects and signals that mean nothing. It is not silence, but noise that prevents hearing. The political consequence of this condition is not domination, but desensitization and disorientation. It is not terror but indifference that sustains the machinery. When everything becomes predictable, nothing matters. The imagination shrinks until it can no longer picture another. Judgment disappears because the other disappears from view.

Imagination, for Arendt, is the faculty that allows us to go visiting, to think in the place of another. It concerns displacement rather than empathy or identification: the capacity to suspend one's own standpoint in order to consider how the world appears from elsewhere. In this sense, imagination is the condition of judgment. Judgment does not result from rules or norms; it emerges from the ability to relate particulars to a world shared with others. Without imagination, there can be no such judgment, because there is no standpoint beyond the immediacy of one's own position. And without judgment, responsibility loses its ground, becoming either obedience or arbitrary decision.

In a world increasingly organized by automated perception, this faculty becomes structurally marginalized. Imagination is rendered superfluous not because it disappears, but because it is no longer required. We are not invited to form a view; we are presented with a view already formed. We are not asked to imagine how things might appear to others; we are provided with images optimized for instant recognition. What replaces imagination is not another reflective faculty, but the immediacy of visual capture.

Seeing, under such conditions, is no longer a practice of orientation but a mode of consumption. The faculty of seeing-with-others—of testing one's judgment against

a plurality of perspectives—is replaced by continuous exposure to images that demand no response. Plurality is thus preserved as display, but emptied of its political force. What remains is visibility without appearance, circulation without address, perception without judgment.

It is here that the “banality of evil” reappears—not as repetition of history, but as repetition of structure. Evil becomes banal when there is no world in which it could be judged. It loses its weight because nothing interrupts it. The bureaucratic clerk and the algorithmic process share this innocence: both act without encountering anyone. This is not the evil of intention but the evil of indifference, a structure in which nothing is personal, yet everything is affected. The suffering of others becomes a signal among signals, absorbed into the feed. Tragedy circulates without consequence.

Arendt’s notion of worldliness was never nostalgic. It aimed to sustain the condition of appearing. To love the world, she wrote, is to accept responsibility for it, not because it is good but because it exists. *Amor mundi* is the act of staying in relation when relation becomes unbearable. To think is to practice this love: to hold the world in attention even as it collapses into noise. Thought reintroduces depth where everything is surface, relation where everything is connection, judgment where everything is automatic.

The digital condition radicalizes the question of thinking not because it attacks thought directly, but because it renders it unnecessary. What is negated is not thinking as such, but the need for it. Automation does not forbid reflection; it replaces it with procedures that simulate decision, judgment, and anticipation in advance.

Automation eliminates reflection by absorbing its functions. Prediction stands in for judgment, optimization for deliberation, calculation for responsibility. Decisions are no longer expected from subjects who hesitate and consider, but from systems designed to respond without interruption. In this sense, the digital condition does not simply suppress thinking—it reorganizes the world so that thinking appears redundant.

Algorithms replace judgment with correlation. We are surrounded by systems that act faster than thought, predict before we decide, and optimize before we desire. In such a world, thinking is not just unnecessary—it is an error. Yet it is precisely as error that thinking becomes political. Arendt’s *Denken ohne Geländer* is not a style; it is a stance—a willingness to err, to lose orientation, to think without guarantees. To think without handrails is to renounce the safety of frameworks, to stand in exposure. It is the opposite of optimization. The risk of such thinking is not failure, but solitude. To think means to dwell in the interval where the world is no longer certain and the new one has not yet appeared. Arendt called this interval the space of freedom. Freedom, for her, is not exhausted by the freedom to choose among given options. Choice presupposes a framework already in place; it operates within a horizon that has been defined in advance. What Arendt insists on is a more fragile and more demanding freedom: the freedom to begin, to introduce something into the world that was not already contained within its existing structures.

Beginning names the capacity to interrupt necessity, to suspend what appears inevitable, and to open a space in which alternatives can first become thinkable. It is the freedom not merely to select, but to initiate—to set something into motion without guarantees of outcome. Every act of thinking participates in this freedom insofar as it refuses to accept the given as final. Thinking does not decide in advance what meaning will be, but it asserts, tentatively and precariously, that meaning can still be made.

The bureaucrat could not begin; he could only continue. The algorithm cannot begin; it can only repeat. Thinking, then, is the only beginning left to us. It does not repair the world, but it makes it thinkable again. In *Politics of Unthinkable: Introduction into Nonfascist Life*, I wrote that this is not the limit of thought, but its substance. This claim does not posit the unthinkable as an external darkness opposed to thinking, but as something immanent to it. The unthinkable names the element within thought that resists stabilization, the remainder that cannot be absorbed into concept, rule, or closure. It is not what lies beyond thought, but what interrupts it from within—what prevents thinking from becoming system, doctrine, or identity.

The task of thought is therefore not to overcome the unthinkable, but to remain with it, to endure what cannot be reconciled. What gives the unthinkable its substance is precisely this resistance: the fact that thinking encounters, again and again, something that cannot be resolved without eliminating its own ethical force. The unthinkable persists as the site where thought confronts its own impossibility—not as failure, but as condition.

To think is to touch that impossibility without turning away, without seeking premature reconciliation. It is to allow thought to be affected by what it cannot master, and yet to continue thinking nonetheless. In this sense, the unthinkable is not the negation of meaning, but the fragile ground on which meaning remains exposed, unfinished, and accountable.

Arendt's evil was banal precisely because it lacked this encounter. Eichmann never faced the unthinkable; he merely continued. His obedience was the refusal of difficulty. He replaced conscience with procedure, judgment with efficiency. Today, that refusal has been automated. We live in a world where procedure replaces meaning in advance, where even conscience has been externalized as policy.

In such a landscape, the ethical cannot rely on norms. It must rely on attention. Thinking becomes ethical not because it knows what is right, but because it refuses to look away. It insists on remaining with the incident, the interruption, the trace of the real.

Arendt's "two-in-one" dialogue of thinking implies precisely this: that the self must become plural, must stage within itself the presence of others. In thinking, one speaks to oneself as to another, creating the minimal model of the political. This, too, has been lost in the world of immediacy. We no longer pause to address ourselves; we react, respond, perform. We do not converse; we update.

To think today, therefore, is to reintroduce latency, to slow down the reflex to speak, to restore the possibility of silence as the precondition of sense. Silence, for Arendt, was never emptiness. It was the space in which language could still mean something.

In this sense, thinking becomes a kind of resistance that is neither loud nor militant. It is a resistance of slowness, of listening, of nonparticipation in the acceleration of nothingness. It does not seek to produce truth but to preserve the capacity for truth to appear.

Kolozova's automaton and Arendt's thinker meet in this fragile gesture: the cut of the real that interrupts functioning. The real is not an event or revelation; it is the pain of exposure, the sense that something resists assimilation. Both thinkers defend this resistance as the minimal ethics of the subject. To be real is to be interrupted.

The automaton cannot endure this interruption; it seeks repair, restoration, continuity. Thinking, by contrast, dwells within it. It lingers in disorientation, not because it enjoys suffering, but because it recognizes that meaning appears only through fracture.

Arendt's *Denken ohne Geländer* therefore becomes the emblem of human vulnerability. To think without support is to admit that we have no ground other than ??? we share, and that this world is fragile, contingent, perishable. The task is not to transcend it, but to care for it.

The disappearance of the world—the worldlessness Arendt warned about—is not a metaphysical loss, nor is it primarily an ethical one. It is a political loss. What disappears is not value, but the space in which action can appear before others and thus become meaningful at all. Worldlessness names the destruction of the space of appearance in which words and deeds can be seen, heard, and judged.

When that space collapses, actions no longer take place before anyone. They are no longer exposed to plurality, nor oriented toward a shared world. Responsibility, in such conditions, does not vanish because individuals become immoral, but because the political stage on which responsibility could be enacted has disintegrated. Judgment loses its ground not for ethical reasons, but because the world that would sustain judgment as a public practice has disappeared.

To restore that space is therefore not an ethical task in the narrow sense, but a political one. And it is the task of thinking—not because thinking replaces action, but because thinking alone can reopen the space in which action may once again appear. Thinking preserves and reconstitutes the world by holding open the interval where appearance, plurality, and judgment can take place.

This opening is not grand or heroic. It happens in small gestures: in listening, in hesitation, in the refusal to let the obvious remain obvious. It happens wherever we resist being automated.

To think, then, is to keep the possibility of the world alive. It is to make space again for others to appear. It is to remember that freedom is not an attribute of the self but of the between—the interval that connects and separates us.

What remains of philosophy, after the collapse of metaphysical certainties and the triumph of systems, is this minimal act: to hold the world open. The philosopher, if she still exists, is no longer the guardian of truth but the keeper of space. Her work is not to decide but to maintain the conditions under which decisions could still make sense.

Thinking as political courage means staying with the difficulty of the world

without retreating into cynicism or faith. It means acknowledging that the world may be unworthy of love and yet loving it nonetheless. *Amor mundi* is endurance rather than optimism. It is the fragile joy of continuing to care.

When Arendt wrote that the world is what lies between us, she meant that it is neither mine nor yours—it is the distance that connects. To love the world, then, is to love distance itself, to accept that we are never one, that the space of misunderstanding is what keeps us human.

This love, like thinking, is without guarantees. It does not repair what is broken, but it refuses to abandon it. It is the quiet practice of attention, the faith that the world can still appear if we hold it long enough in thought.

In the age of automation, where thought is unnecessary and feeling is simulated, to think becomes the last form of intimacy. It is the touch that does not consume, the gaze that does not capture, the care that does not claim.

To think means to stay exposed—to remain interruptible, open, unfinished. It is to move without handrails and yet without despair, to walk through the ruins of meaning without seeking shelter in illusion.

Arendt wrote that only thinking can prepare us for judgment, but that it cannot guarantee it. Thinking, she said, does not secure virtue; it only prevents evil from becoming banal. The difference is immense. Thinking does not save; it delays. It interrupts the smooth flow of destruction. It creates time—time in which conscience can return, in which the world can appear again.

This is the political function of thought today: to slow the world down enough that it might be felt again.

The incidents of life—those sudden ruptures that reorient us—remain our only handrails. They are not the guarantees of meaning but its reminders. They call us back to what resists assimilation, to the fragility of experience.

To think is to respond to those incidents with fidelity, to stay inside their unease, to let them teach us orientation again. It is to remember that the task of thought is not to conquer but to accompany—to hold open what would otherwise close, to keep alive the world's interval of meaning.

The banality of evil persists wherever this interval collapses, wherever function replaces reflection, wherever thought becomes unnecessary. Against that collapse, there is no program, no system, no method. There is only the fragile practice of thinking itself.

It is slow practice, often invisible, almost private, and yet it is what prevents disappearance. Thinking is resistance as presence rather than rebellion, as remaining. It is the refusal to vanish with the world.

To think is to continue appearing—to stand in the fragile space between self and world, between solitude and plurality, between despair and endurance. It is to love the world enough to stay with it even when it cannot be loved.

And perhaps that is all that remains of politics: to think so that the world, for one more moment, does not disappear.

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