

# Historical Memory and Political Violence

## An Interview with Eyal Sivan

by Gary Crowdus



If a competition were held to determine Israel's most controversial filmmaker, a number of names would surely be in the running—including Avi Mograbi, Amos Gitai, and Simone Bitton—but the odds-on favorite would be Eyal Sivan. As the documentary filmmaker has readily acknowledged, "For every person who loves me there are ten who hate me; for every person who supports me there are ten who accuse me." Over the last twenty-five years, Sivan has made more than a dozen films exploring the abuse of historical memory, in particular the memory of Jewish persecution and its use to justify current Israeli government policy. As Sivan has described his position, "I am not anti-Jewish or anti-Israel; I am anti-Zionist." By that, as his films demonstrate, Sivan means that it is not Judaism or even the Israeli national identity that he opposes but Zionism, a colonialist plan for an exclusively Jewish state, which involves the disenfranchisement and even ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian population and the expropriation of their land in pursuit of the biblical promise of a "Greater Israel."

Sivan has never been shy about declaring the anti-Zionist perspective that informs his work, but it has been the tendency of most of his critics, whether in Israel or abroad, to either conflate or confuse his anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism, which has led to vitriolic personal attacks against him and created the overwrought, often preposterous controversies that surround his films. The political and historical critique found in Sivan's films is essentially no different from that found in the work of many fellow Israelis, including historians such as Ilan Pappé, Avi Shlaim, and Tom Segev; journalists such as Gideon Levy, Amira Hass, and the late Tanya Reinhart; or scholars such as Shlomo Sand, Israel Finkelstein, Ella Shohat, or Nurit Peled-Elhanan.<sup>1</sup> One suspects that Sivan looms as a bigger target for slanderous public attacks and abusive media campaigns because, as a filmmaker, his work has the potential to reach a larger audience than that accessible to authors, journalists, or scholars.

Born in Haifa in 1964 to Jewish immigrant parents from Uruguay, Sivan grew up in Jerusalem in an Israel contending with the political consequences of 1967's Six-Day War, including the internationally condemned Occupation of the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem. After avoiding military service in 1982 during the first Lebanon War, and working briefly as a fashion photographer, Sivan moved to Paris in 1985, a self-imposed exile during which he nevertheless continued to develop his critical perspective on contemporary Israeli society. A chance encounter with a producer in Paris soon led to his return to Israel, where he made his first documentary, *Aqabat Jaber: Passing Through* (1987), about a Palestinian refugee camp, for which he won the *Cinéma du Réel International Documentary Film Festival's* Grand Prize at the Pompidou Center in Paris.

Sivan's second film was a highly personal project, since it was inspired by his own experience in the Israeli school system. *Izkor: Slaves of Memory* (1990) was filmed during April, a month that includes the annual national observances of Pesach (Passover), Holo-

caust Remembrance Day, Memorial Day, and Independence Day. In the film, each of these ceremonies is seen through the eyes of several students and their families, interspersed with classroom scenes in a kindergarten, a primary school, and a high school, plus commentary by author and educator Yeshayahu Leibowitz (1903–1994), a noted Israeli social critic who excoriates the Israeli educational system as one that inculcates "slavery of the mind, in which submission to authority is presented as the essence of humanism and of Judaism."

From kindergarteners being instructed about Jewish slavery in ancient Egypt and playacting scenes of the biblical Exodus, and primary school students being mercilessly drilled by their teacher for a public presentation on Holocaust Memorial Day ("Your reading is terrible. Put your heart in it!"), to high school students on the verge of compulsory military service learning about the Holocaust through an emotionally moving visit to the Yad Vashem Museum, *Izkor* offers the viewer a disquieting sense of the intensely ideological role of the Israeli educational system. In this regard, Sivan's film echoes Leibowitz's criticisms that Israel's schools, rather than provide their students with a non-Zionist Jewish perspective that would be far more meaningful for their lives in contemporary Israel, instead emphasize a two-thousand-year history of anti-Semitic persecutions, climaxing with the Holocaust, suggesting that this horrific history of victimization of the Jews thereby relieves Israel of any responsibility for its actions against others. In a specific reference to the dangerous consequences of Israel's role as an occupying power since the Six-Day War, Leibowitz paraphrases the nineteenth-century Austrian writer Franz Grillparzer's warning about "the path that leads from humanity via nationalism to bestiality," and how such hypernationalism, if unchecked, will lead to the destruction of Israel.

The themes of national and military obedience versus humanist responsibility implicit in *Izkor* come explicitly to the fore in *The Specialist* (1999), a documentary on Israel's 1961 trial of Nazi officer Adolf Eichmann. Unlike previous documentaries made on that historic trial, all of which had drawn upon the same limited selection of footage originally made available to filmmakers worldwide, Sivan and his coauthor Rony Brauman (former President of the NGO Doctors Without Borders) negotiated access to 360 hours of footage stored at the Steven Spielberg Jewish Film Archive at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem (nearly a third of the five hundred hours of trial footage recorded by American filmmaker Leo Hurwitz had deteriorated so badly that it could not be screened, much less salvaged).

As Sivan explains below, the film was initially inspired by comments made by Leibowitz about issues of obedience and responsibility raised in the Eichmann trial, but *The Specialist* also borrows much of its critical perspective from Hannah Arendt's controversial 1963 book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. Sivan and Brauman were not interested in making the umpteenth conventional historical film about the Eichmann trial or the Holocaust, but conceived of *The Specialist* as

**Israel's most controversial filmmaker discusses why his films have generated such vitriolic personal attacks and explains his belief that documentary filmmaking is not a practice but an attitude toward dealing with reality.**



Eyal Sivan's first documentary, *Aqabat Jaber: Passing Through* (1987), documented the lives of Palestinian refugees in a desolate region of the Jordan Valley, an area that as a child he saw as "empty huts in the middle of the desert," which his family drove by on their way to Jericho.

"an essay on responsibility and disobedience" that would say something about our modern world, in particular the potential—using the example of Germany as an industrial civilization taken to its criminal extremes—of "democratic" societies as breeding grounds for totalitarianism. As Sivan explained the cinematic nature of their project: "The Specialist is not the Eichmann trial. It's a film made from the archives of the Eichmann trial... a restaging of archive material."

The Specialist was generally well received on its initial release, and it wasn't until 2005, some six years later, that controversy was initiated by Hillel Tryster, the former Director of the Spielberg Jewish Film Archive, with his article in *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies*, which attacked the film for "fraud, forgery and falsification" on the basis of its editorial "distortions," and called for a ban on its exhibition in Israel.<sup>2</sup> Apart from Tryster's surprisingly naïve notions of what constitutes a documentary, it seems evident that what most agitated him was that *The Specialist* deviated from the original aim of the proceedings as a Zionist show trial (largely engineered from behind the scenes by Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion) emphasizing Holocaust survivor testimony rather than an examination of the bureaucratic role of Eichmann as a specialist cog in the Nazi machinery of extermination, and preferring to focus on Jewish suffering rather than a more broadly conceived effort to render justice for crimes against humanity. The Specialist also uncomfortably raised the complicitous role of the Jewish Councils, and the film's extended scenes of the interrogation of Eichmann, challenging his defense of having merely obeyed orders, likewise had troubling moral implications for present-day Israeli viewers.

Indeed, had *The Specialist* simply perpetuated the authorized national memory of the trial, one doubts that Tryster (who only a few years earlier had praised the taboo-breaking Sivan, in an upbeat *Jerusalem Post* review of *Izkor*, as "Well-deserving of mention in the same breath as [Marcel] Ophüls") would have been so upset over documentary filmmaking techniques, which served as a smokescreen for what was essentially a disagreement about the politically correct representation of Israeli collective memory.<sup>3</sup> It was precisely because "the memory of the Eichmann trial had replaced history," Sivan explained, that he and his coauthor decided their cinematic version of the trial would deemphasize the usual parade of witnesses and focus on Eichmann's testimony in order to turn his own defense against him. "The Spielberg

Archive has an old ideological approach," Sivan retorted, "according to which memory is more important than history. It's more important to them to show the witnesses than to discuss the past."

By 2005, when Sivan was responding to Tryster's trumped-up charges of historical falsification (a critique one suspects might have been at least partially generated by Tryster's defensiveness about Sivan's claim that the Spielberg Archive had mishandled the storage of the Eichmann trial footage), the filmmaker had become quite used to defending his work from critics, especially since a year or so earlier he had become embroiled in an even more impassioned dispute over *Route 181: Fragments of a Journey in Palestine-Israel* (2003), a documentary Sivan codirected with Palestinian filmmaker Michel Khleifi.

During the summer of 2002, Sivan and Khleifi traveled the entire length of Israel, from Hanania (formerly the Palestinian village of Nabis Yunis) in the south to the Galilee in the north, using a historical map to follow the border established by the UN in 1947 in its Resolution 181, which partitioned Palestine into two states, a boundary that was quickly forgotten after the 1948 War. In the resulting three-part, four-and-a-half-hour political road movie, the filmmakers made numerous stops along the way, most often at Israeli towns built over the ruins of former Arab villages, engaging both Israeli (Ashkenazi and Sephardic) Jews and Palestinians, not to mention IDF soldiers at checkpoints, in provocative and often revealing conversations about their nation's violent history and belligerent perceptions of present reality.

There's no denying the film's polemical edge—this is no Israeli Tourism Board promo film—since its inherently critical view of contemporary Israel is that of a deeply troubled society born out of events in 1947–1948 that one side saw as a war of independence and the other experienced as a "catastrophe." *Route 181* raises many highly contentious historical issues, so individual response to the film will depend upon the political perspective and degree of passion each viewer brings to it.

Even allowing for the spirited differences of opinion generated by any film dealing with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the ugly controversy that erupted around *Route 181* in France, especially the personal attacks on Sivan, was shocking. The documentary was broadcast on the Arte cable network in November 2003 and, not surprisingly, generated complaints from a number of individual viewers and pro-Israel organizations. During a radio interview days later, French author and university



professor Alain Finkielkraut attacked Route 181 as “an incitement to hate,” a film he claimed called for the murder of Jews, and accused Sivan of being a “Jewish anti-Semite.” Finkielkraut’s statements were merely the latest in a series of such public attacks on Sivan in France. Earlier that year, for example, Sivan had received a death threat when an envelope containing a .22 caliber bullet, along with a note explaining that “The next bullet will not come in the mail,” was sent to his Paris home.

In February 2004, eleven French intellectuals and filmmakers published an open letter, which claimed that by presenting controversial historical issues Route 181 “poisoned” the political discussion of the Israel-Palestinian conflict. This protest did not prevent the *Cinéma du Réel* documentary festival from screening Route 181 the following month at the Pompidou Center, but a second screening of the film, scheduled for the closing day of the event, was abruptly cancelled. A statement signed by representatives of the Ministry of Culture, the Pompidou Center, and the Public Information Library explained that they made their decision because the “intense emotion” created by the film might encourage anti-Semitic statements or actions in France, and the additional screening presented a risk to “public order” (it is possible that the authorities had received threats of violence from right-wing extremists of the Jewish Defense League and Betar, the Zionist Youth Movement, both of which had previously been engaged in violent protests in Paris).

This sort of intimidation—something we’ve also frequently seen in America—was scrutinized a few months later by journalist Dominique Vidal in his *Le Monde Diplomatique* article, “Les pompiers pyromanes de l’antisémitisme” (The Pyromaniac Firemen of Anti-Semitism), which explained how such “intellectual terrorism” by French-Jewish intellectuals, Israeli government, and pro-Israel organizations routinely uses charges of anti-Semitism as a means to blackmail and silence anyone critical of Israeli government policy. It is a practice, he argued, that only fuels the evil it claims to be fighting by trivializing true anti-Semitism.

Sivan’s 2010 documentary, *Jaffa, the Orange’s Clockwork* (the title is a playful reference to Stanley Kubrick’s *A Clockwork Orange*) portrays an earlier historical period characterized by a more cooperative relationship between Arabs and Jews. The film uses an impressive array of archival materials to chronicle the history, from the mid nineteenth century to the present day, of the world-famous Jaffa orange—at one time an international brand second only in international public awareness to Coca-Cola and, along with the Uzi sub-machine gun, one of Israel’s most successful exports, particularly from the Fifties to the Seventies, when nearly five million boxes of Jaffa oranges were shipped each year.

*Jaffa* is Sivan’s most visually compelling documentary to date, the result of exhaustive archival research that unearthed rarely seen photos and footage, tourism and propaganda films, stereopticon slides, paintings, advertising art, postcard imagery, and propaganda posters, complemented throughout with commentary by Israeli and Palestinian historians, writers, art critics, former growers and exporters, and military and government officials. Although *Jaffa* functions as a compelling visual portrayal of the development of Israel as a colonialist settler society (in one contemporary interview, an elderly Palestinian recounts how after the 1948 War, he worked as an employee on land he had previously owned), the fond reminiscences of both Palestinians and Jews of a prewar period when both communities lived and worked together harmoniously can be seen not only as nostalgia but also, ideally, as a tantalizing indication of a potential future for the region.

Although it’s too early to know what sort of dispute might be generated by Sivan’s latest documentary, *Common State: Potential Conversation* [1], it seems likely, by disrupting the tired discourse of the decades-long “peace process,” to be a film that will either enrage or inspire those on both sides of the conflict. The two-state solution, which calls for the establishment of an independent Palestinian state coexisting peacefully alongside the State of Israel, has long been favored as the only possible solution to the ongoing crisis. Despite the many contentious issues to be resolved in such a settlement—the definition of borders, the possible return of Palestinian refugees, the status of Jerusalem, the situation of Arab residents in Israel, etc.—the one-state solution, which would essentially spell the end of Israel as a Jewish state, seems an even more impossible dream as long as Israel is ruled by Zionist ideologues inspired by the biblical promise of a “Greater Israel.”

Although a number of politicians and writers representing both nationalisms—including Tony Judt, Ali Abunimah, Moshe Arens, Azmi Bishara, Reuven Rivlin, and Rashid Khalidi—have argued that a single state is the increasingly de facto situation on the ground, Sivan’s documentary, consisting of two hours of paired talking heads (Palestinians on one side of the screen, Israelis on the other), is to the best of our knowledge the first film to seriously explore this issue. Since so much of the film’s discussion comes off as eminently reasonable, with mutual respect expressed by speakers from both communities, one hopes that *Common State* will get worldwide distribution. It’s precisely the sort of cinematic vehicle for some of the more advanced and realistic thinking on this seemingly intractable conflict that just might serve, should any political leaders be prepared to listen, to break the logjam of international diplomacy.

Although most of the films made by Sivan deal directly with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict—as an Israeli filmmaker with a highly developed sense of civic engagement, he considers Israel-Palestine as his “natural laboratory”—he has also made films examining related issues in other countries, such as political violence and genocide in Rwanda and Burundi and political repression under the Stasi in East Germany. To any dispassionate viewer, however, even his films on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or the Holocaust broach larger issues—including collective memory, nationalism, historical representation, genocide, victimology, and political crimes—that go beyond regional concerns. Sivan is a serious scholar in his field. He is

the editor of *South Cinema Notebooks*, a journal of cinema and political criticism at the Sapir Academic College in Israel, and a member of the editorial board of *De l’autre côté*, a French journal of social and political studies, and of *La Fabrique Publishers* in Paris. He is the coauthor with Rony Brauman of *Eloge de la désobéissance* and with Eric Hazan of *Un Etat commun: Entre le Jourdain et la mer*, both of which expand on the themes explored in these films. His writings and lectures draw upon a wide variety of seminal thinkers, including Yeshayahu Leibowitz, Walter Benjamin, Edward Said, Tzvetan Todorov, Arnaud Meyer, Hannah Arendt, and Alfred Grosser, among many others.

Although I had previously seen *Route 181*, I was able to see for the first time the other films discussed above in March of this year at the Thessaloniki Documentary Festival, which hosted a Tribute to Eyal Sivan. In between his master class on documentary filmmaking, Q&A sessions following screenings, and press conferences, Sivan found time to sit down with us to discuss his films, his approach to documentary filmmaking, and the controversies his work has generated.—Gary Crowds



Eyal Sivan during production of *Jaffa, the Orange’s Clockwork* (photo by Erez Miller).

**Cineaste:** *Izkor* is a remarkable portrait of the Israeli educational system, but the sort of indoctrination in nationalist mythology that you criticize goes on in every country. What do you believe distinguishes the Israeli experience?

**Eyal Sivan:** First of all, it involves the formation of a group out of a population that essentially is not a group. This propagation of nationalism, as you say, is no different from that attempted in other multicultural societies. We're also talking about the appropriation of memory, specifically of Jewish memory, within the system, but toward what aim? It's not just the aim of building a common Israel—although it's common to the Jews, of course. It also involves the effort to authorize what I call a permissive attitude toward historical memory. It's a system that creates in young Israelis the sense that we *were* victims, we *are* victims, and we *will be* victims, and in the name of this we have a license and a moral credit. This is something specific to Israel.

**Cineaste:** You were born and raised in Israel, so you must have gone through the same educational system. How did you escape its worst influences? Was there a particular moment or experience for you that initiated a process of critical thinking?

**Sivan:** My parents divorced when I was very young. It was a very rare situation at that time. I remember that Eytan Fox—who also went on to become a filmmaker—and I were the only two kids in school with divorced parents. We were in the same class in the same school and lived in the same neighborhood. When you find yourself in a situation of exclusion, either you become depressed, or, if your character is a little more egocentric, like mine, you vindicate yourself by saying, "I'm not like others." That's the honest answer.

In addition to my permanent attempt not to be like others, I found an alternative family through some friends who were Oriental Jews. Suddenly I discovered that they spoke Arabic at home. I grew up in a South American family, so we were *already* different, and we had the same inside/outside relationship. Inside the home we spoke Spanish and outside the home we spoke Hebrew. All those factors are important when you're growing up.

You ask if there was a particular moment that was crucial. Actually, there were two moments. We lived in a neighborhood called French Hill in northeastern East Jerusalem, an area occupied during the Six Day War in 1967 and later annexed to Jerusalem. It so happened that I had a strong sense of curiosity. Eytan Fox described it well when he gave an interview to an American newspaper. He was asked whether he had Arab friends as a kid. "No, not at all," he said, "but my friend Eyal Sivan, when we were kids, he would go to the adjoining Palestinian village of Issawiya, which *nobody* was doing." Again, this is related to the sense of wanting to be different, and there is just a moment when you connect with this in a critical way.

The other important moment was when I was supposed to go into the army—in 1982, just two months after the massacre of Palestinian refugees in Sabra and Chatila in Lebanon—which marked a definitive break for me.

**Cineaste:** How did you avoid military service, which is usually compulsory in Israel? Did they simply consider you too much of a troublemaker?



The intensely nationalistic basis of the Israeli educational system is the focus of Eyal Sivan's *Izkor: Slaves of Memory* (1990) (photo courtesy of Momento Films).

**Sivan:** I actually prepared for it a year before. I started seeing a psychiatrist, talking about suicidal tendencies. I prepared for the moment very carefully in order to bring them to the conclusion that I was someone they should consider "not kosher for service."

**Cineaste:** It's been more than twenty years since you made *Izkor*. If you had been able to make a series of 7 Up-style documentaries, what do you think you might have discovered?

**Sivan:** Some of the kids later got in touch with me. Oshik, the twelve-year-old boy, became a theater actor. His fourteen-year-old sister, Keren, who said it's good to die for your country, is living in a settlement in the West Bank. In fact, each student in the film presents a portrait of their future. A lot of them said they were very influenced by the period of five weeks that we spent together.

**Cineaste:** Your approach in the documentary is not a Frederick Wiseman, fly-on-the-wall observational one. You play an interventionist role. You obviously selected the kids you wanted to profile, and you posed some fairly challenging questions to them, as well as to one of the principal teachers, who seemed to know you.

**Sivan:** Yes, she was one of my teachers years before. She knew me because she had kicked me out of that school. I wrote the film through my experience there. I even had a portrait in mind of the family I wanted to profile—a family from North Africa that didn't have a direct relation to the Holocaust.

**Cineaste:** What sort of reforms of the educational system do you think would better serve Israeli youth?

**Sivan:** First of all, the representation of the Jewish experience should not be reduced to the European experience, which is, of course, apocalyptic, especially if you just tell it as a series of persecutions. What is completely absent is the reality of Jews within the Muslim-Arab world, which is a different experience from that of the Jews of Europe.

**Cineaste:** The whole Ashkenazi-Sephardic divide...

**Sivan:** We *are* in the Middle East, but this is a story we're not telling. There should also be a separation between church and state, a Jewish *denationalized* education. I believe deeply that the notion of decolonization is not just for the Palestinians, it's the Israelis who have to be decolonized mentally. The present Israeli educational system is one that perpetuates a monolithic "us versus them" mentality, a binary situation, which makes a universal vision impossible.

**Cineaste:** What sort of influence did *Izkor* have? Has the educational system changed since then, for better or worse?

**Sivan:** *Izkor* was a shock when it was first presented in 1990, during a period before we started to speak about the abuse of memory. The film was forbidden at the time by Shulamit Aloni, the Minister of Education for the left-wing government of Rabin, under the pretext that it was filmed in a school without authorization. Today, *Izkor* is a film that is screened regularly and it's often shown in teachers' schools. But the present Israeli educational system is much clearer and more open about its goals. The Minister of Education today says that each Israeli pupil should adopt the grave of a fallen soldier or somebody killed in a terrorist attack. All Israeli pupils should visit Jerusalem and Hebron, where they should raise the flag





A composite courtroom photo pits prosecutor Gideon Hausner against defendant Adolf Eichmann in the Jerusalem courtroom for Eyal Sivan's compilation documentary, *The Specialist: Portrait of a Modern Criminal* (photo courtesy of Memento Films).

and sing patriotic hymns. This sort of thing didn't exist before. The educational system today is really about the fortification of Jewish Israeli nationalistic identity.

**Cineaste:** What sort of impact has there been on Israeli society in general or the educational system in particular by the recent archaeological discoveries of Israel Finkelstein, which he documented in *The Bible Unearthed*<sup>4</sup> and *The Quest for the Historical Israel or the historiographical writings of Shlomo Sand in books such as The Invention of the Jewish People? These books essentially disprove many of the biblical myths on which Israeli nationalism is based.*

**Sivan:** Sand's book in Hebrew was titled *How and Why the Jewish People Were Invented*, which is much more provocative than the English title. It was published by a small publishing house, an academic press, but it was quite a success. But has it changed anything? No. All his work, all his research, has it had any influence? No, because the myth is not interested in the reality. You know, just like the fiction film is not interested in the documentary. [Laughs]

**Cineaste:** So these books are consigned to the margins of public discourse, mainly academics are familiar with them, and maybe they'll be reviewed in Haaretz.

**Sivan:** Exactly, they're ignored. But the earlier school of New Historians<sup>5</sup> did achieve something. The revisionist histories of the 1948 War were extremely important. At the same time, it's often interesting to see the reaction. The documentary records unearthed by these historians revealed the use of the word Nakba, which is Arabic for catastrophe. The Knesset recently passed the Nakba Law forbidding commemoration of the Nakba. This sort of thing creates a permanent paradox in which there is a bigger and bigger gap between historical consciousness and the national projection of that consciousness. Israel is a place that inspires so many documentaries!

Every year I give a seminar at the Sapir Academic College in Ashkelon, near Sderot, in the south of Israel, called "History, Memory, Cinema." I'm now doing a case study of 1948 and the representation of Palestine. My students have come from high school, then the army, and sometimes they've traveled overseas. In this seminar, they're discovering that history is something built up through a narrative, and they ask, "So, what, they lied to us?"

**Cineaste:** Let's discuss *The Specialist*. How would you define your critical aim in making this documentary? Several earlier films have used this same footage, right?

**Sivan:** Lots of films have used footage from the trial but not *this* footage. For many years, a selection of only seventy hours of footage of the trial, which had originally been shot by American filmmaker Leo Hurwitz, was prepared in Israel and made available to television stations and filmmakers, but then the other material disappeared. The seventy or so hours of footage selected basically consisted of the survivors speaking and only one shot of Eichmann saying, "Not guilty." None of the material was ever restored or enhanced, so

when we were granted access to all the original material by the Steven Spielberg Jewish Film Archive in Jerusalem, the first thing we had to do was to remaster it, because it was all two-inch NTSC videotape, which was the first video shot outside of a studio. The video recording of the trial by Capital Cities Broadcasting was an important media event.

**Cineaste:** How much footage did you have access to and what percentage of it did you finally use?

**Sivan:** I had access to 360 hours of video and 600 hours of sound because the sound was also recorded for radio. In fact, I used the radio sound in order to have better quality for the video. We reduced the 360 hours of footage to about twenty percent, or seventy hours, which focuses on the notion of Eichmann as a specialist and his environment. First of all, though, I had to arrange the chronology of the footage. It was a mess, there was no catalog, and I actually prepared the first catalog of all the Eichmann trial footage. By the way, I tried to offer this catalog to the Spielberg Film Archives, as a way to pay a smaller license fee, but they weren't interested. They sent us a letter saying, "Your catalog is useful only for filmmakers."

**Cineaste:** Your documentary seems to share much of the critical perspective of Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, which you acknowledge in the credits, in that the Eichmann trial was essentially a show trial organized by Israel as a nation-building exercise. Would you say that is accurate?

**Sivan:** Our film is based on and inspired by Hannah Arendt's concept of the expert, her idea of the terrifying ordinary man. We follow Arendt in terms of her focus on Eichmann as a specialized bureaucrat, her critique of the Israeli justice system and the trial as Zionism judging Nazis, as well as her ideas about responsibility. I find much of Arendt's book interesting intellectually, but it's not my voice.

In a way, *The Specialist* derived from an earlier documentary, which likewise grew out of conversations between Rony Brauman and myself, called *Itgaber, He Will Overcome*, which is three hours of interviews with the philosopher and author Yeshayahu Leibowitz. Among other things, he talks about obedience and disobedience, and he referred to the example of Eichmann. So, yes, in *The Specialist* we follow Arendt, but more on the notions of obedience and responsibility and less on her critique of the trial as a show trial.

In that regard, I've obtained one of the last interviews that Leo Hurwitz did, speaking to Susan Slyomovics, about the shooting of the Eichmann film. I made a short film out of that interview, and I would like to make a book with a DVD out of it. In the interview, Hurwitz makes some very strong statements about Israel and Zionism, including his discovery of the discrimination against Oriental Jews in Israel. About the Eichmann trial, for example, he says, "I came to Israel because it represented the opportunity to hear what a

fascist would say in his defense but the Israelis were not interested in that. They were only interested in Jewish suffering.” Hurwitz also explained that he had an assistant cameraperson who happened to belong to the Israeli Communist Party, and they refused to let him into the court.

**Cineaste:** *Speaking of notions of obedience and responsibility, one of the things that struck me is that The Specialist is another example of how a historical film is never merely a historical film. As Eichmann is being interrogated about the consequences of his actions, in response to his defense that he was simply following orders, I couldn't help but think of the contemporary parallel of IDF officers or soldiers active in the Occupied Territories.*

**Sivan:** That's been intentional from the very beginning of my work, starting with *Izkor*. It would be a total denial to say that we're not thinking through analogies. Making comparisons through analogies doesn't mean, however, that they're the same thing. Of course not. But the question of responsibility and obedience is a universal question. We always hear, “Oh, don't compare.” But Nazism is specific and at the same time exemplary.

In 1990, when I was shooting *Izkor* in Israel, I interviewed Dan Almagor, a poet and writer who was responsible for writing the texts for all the official national ceremonies. During the First Intifada, he wrote a poem, which ended with the lines, “Generals, stop beating the kids, prepare yourselves. One day, you will find yourself in the glass booth.” It's not about saying that the IDF are Nazis but the question of responsibility is one that extends from the American Army to the Israeli Army.

**Cineaste:** *Nevertheless, how many reviewers didn't discuss that aspect of The Specialist?*

**Sivan:** Lots of reviewers in Israel because they didn't dare to. In many countries, in fact, people didn't dare to broach that issue.

**Cineaste:** *What specific criteria went into your selection of the footage that you used, and how you decided to structure your narrative or critical argument?*

**Sivan:** First of all, we wanted to reduce the trial to discussions of what concerned Eichmann's field of responsibility—his administrative responsibility, not his moral responsibility—because the trial is about anti-Semitism and the Holocaust. That is why the Jewish Council is part of our film, because that was under his administrative responsibility. Since we focused on Eichmann's prerogatives and responsibilities, our film shows a completely different trial than what most viewers are familiar with.

We also wanted to show Eichmann's rise within the system. The film starts with him in the early Thirties and it goes to 1944 and Nuremberg. We open the film with the seventh session of the trial, not the very beginning, and the ontological or ethical consideration is that the sequences of the film are constructed from extracts of the trial footage. Within the extracts, there is no moment such as that seen in the film, with a witness speaking and Eichmann suddenly standing up to answer. These shots exist in the footage but the only way to know it is not a direct continuity is to refer to the catalog we prepared.

**Cineaste:** *I gather that Hillel Tryster, the Director of the Spielberg Jewish Film Archive, criticized the film precisely for such noncontinuity in the editing.*

**Sivan:** What's interesting is that it took him six years to see all the footage and to formulate his critique. Of course, his basic, starting criticism was that I am an anti-Zionist and therefore I made the film from that perspective. The real question is how did he know that I didn't always have continuity in the editing? As I explained, I prepared a very precise catalog of all the trial footage, and by so doing organized it into a continuity. In other words, I created the baseline from which my film could be criticized and I could be challenged. It took them years to create their own catalog of the material. I believe there is a difference, however, between the archiving institution, which should maintain the footage and the reference catalog, and filmmakers, who can do whatever they want with the footage.

**Cineaste:** *The Specialist has a very unusual sound design.*

**Sivan:** It was a very expensive production, almost two million euros, and technically it was a near-impossible challenge. Today it would have cost almost nothing. Regarding the preparation of the soundtrack, we decided that the entire film should appear as if it was happening from the virtual point of view of the spectator.

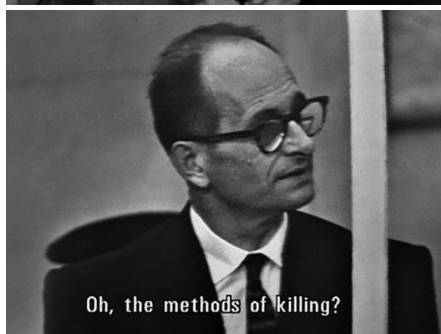
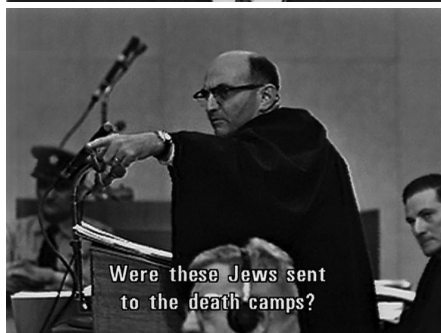
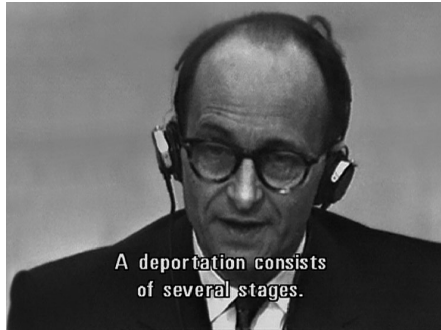
**Cineaste:** *There seemed to be four to five different cameras used to film the trial.*

**Sivan:** Originally there were four cameras, but I used footage from only three. One camera was in a fixed position looking down over the court—that's a camera position but it's impossible that it would be the viewpoint of a spectator. The soundtrack is built from several different layers. The first layer is the direct sound of the video, and, as I told you, I actually synchronized the radio recordings from several different microphones. On the left I had Eichmann, in the center the judges, and on the right the witnesses. Another sound layer is the public itself. The audience consisted of a core of sixty to seventy people—breathing, sighing, gasping, saying “shh,” laughing sometimes, and so on—so when you're sitting in the cinema where a digital 35mm print is screened, this is what you hear, as if you're sitting among the spectators in the courtroom.

Another layer of sound is all the foleys.<sup>6</sup> Every moment in the entire 122-minute film is expressed in sound—Eichmann moving, the pen writing, the judges entering. This is something not usually done in documentaries but which is usual in fiction films. Playing over all this in a continuous layer is the sound of a glass harmonica, a fantastic seventeenth-century instrument that was rumored to drive people mad. It consists of

glass bowls that you rub with a wet finger to produce a tone. So our filmic “text” occurs within that carefully structured sound environment—someone described it as an “opera”—which is why work on the sound design and sound edit started very early, along with the editing of the image.

**Cineaste:** *How did your collaboration with Palestinian filmmaker Michel Khleifi come about for Route 181 and what was the benefit of an Israeli-Palestinian filmmaking team?*



Scenes of the interrogation of Eichmann in *The Specialist: Portrait of a Modern Criminal*.





The Palestinian barber, who recounts Jewish massacres of Palestinian civilians during the 1948 War, in *Route 181*.

**Sivan:** We are friends. We have known each other since the Nineties. I was very impressed with Michel's work—*Fertile Memory*, *Wedding in Galilee*, and especially an absolutely amazing short film called *Ma'loul Celebrates Its Destruction*.<sup>7</sup> We first met when *Izkor* was shown at the Marseille International Documentary Film Festival. Michel was on the jury, and he was fighting for me to get the Grand Prize, so we became very close friends. But in 1995, shortly after the Oslo Accords, and just after I had made *Aqabat Jaber: Peace with No Return?*, we were both in crisis and had stopped making films. During the period of the Oslo Accords, in the early Nineties, both Michel and I were offered quite a lot of money to make "peace films," but we refused. Then came the terrifying period of 2000 and the Second Intifada. I was shooting footage in Israel but I really didn't know what I was doing, only that I wanted to do something. Michael was in the same situation. We met in Nazareth at one of the demonstrations and started to talk.

We continued to talk and one day, when I was in Paris and Michel was in Brussels, we discussed again the question of what we might do during this horrible period. So our idea was, "Let's travel in our land." By collaborating on a film, we would not only be able to go anywhere, everywhere, but we could also rely on the languages and confusions between us to experience both sides of the conflict. At one point during our ongoing conversations, Michel had said to me, "Stop being so Israeli," and I responded, "Stop being so Palestinian." Our discovery of those attitudes led to the realization that by reducing our Israelianness and Palestinianness, we could discover something else, so it was an unusual experience. At one point, Michel also said, "We can do what the politicians didn't, because we will finish this together." Politicians would say, "If we don't achieve anything in negotiations, we will just go back to the status quo." You can imagine—with two egos and two very different filmmakers—sometimes we had some really tough moments. But throughout the shooting, there was this commitment that we will continue until the end, that we can do this together, and not as a double voice but as a combined voice. *Route 181* is not a film in which there is an Israeli point of view and a Palestinian point of view.

**Cineaste:** *I can't distinguish between your off-camera voices well enough, but there were a few moments when it seemed very clear that it was you who was speaking, such as when you dress down the young Israeli soldier at a checkpoint who repeatedly yells at you, "Hey, hey, hey..."*

**Sivan:** Yes, the meaning of that scene is that I am capable of doing that, but in all the other scenes our voices are combined. In some scenes, because the Israelis couldn't imagine that an Arab could be a film director, and, upon hearing Michel's accented Hebrew, they figured, "Oh, he's an Oriental Jew," so all the Oriental Jews preferred to speak to Michel rather than to me, because they recognize me as Ashkenazi. So there were always these possibilities of confusion.

**Cineaste:** *So both of you speak Hebrew and Arabic.*

**Sivan:** Yes.



Israel's "separation wall," then under construction, is a continual visual presence through all three parts of the journey in *Route 181*.

**Cineaste:** *Route 181 came in for some remarkable criticisms, especially in France. The writer Alain Finkielkraut described the film as an incitement to murder Jews, and Claude Lanzmann accused you of plagiarizing Shoah because your film includes a scene with a Palestinian barber.*

**Sivan:** Their response was crazy, delirious. In 2004, I sued Finkielkraut for libel<sup>8</sup> because he accused me of being one of the chief perpetrators of Jewish anti-Semitism in France and said that in the film I was calling for the murder of Jews. He also charged that the film conflated Israel's 1948 War of Independence with the Holocaust and that, in so doing, I was sewing swastikas on Jewish blazers while claiming the yellow star for myself! It was such an ugly discussion. Claude Lanzmann, who was a defense witness for Finkielkraut, wanted to put me on trial for plagiarism, and I answered jokingly in a newspaper that Lanzmann had plagiarized the Jewish barber from Chaplin's *The Great Dictator*.

**Cineaste:** *I understand that Bernard-Henri Levy also protested the film.*

**Sivan:** There was a petition signed by eleven intellectuals, including Levy, which asked the French Minister of Culture and the director of the Pompidou Center to prohibit the screening of *Route 181*. The petition was signed by Levy as well as Philippe Sollers and Julia Kristeva and filmmakers such as Noémie Lvkovsky and Arnaud Desplechin. For the first time since the Algerian War, the French Minister of Culture banned the screening of a film.<sup>9</sup>

**Cineaste:** *Was Route 181 subsequently shown in Paris?*

**Sivan:** Yes, it was later shown a lot, but at the time we lost the chance for a wider theatrical release because only one cinema in Paris screened the film. All the others were afraid. That wouldn't happen in America or even in Israel. France is hysterical about this issue. In fact, France is highly anti-Semitic in the sense that they still believe in this mythology of the absolute power of the Jews. That's why it's enough when someone like Levy or Lanzmann protests or says something critical.

In 2006, I moved to London because my life in Paris was ruined. The only country where I'm never invited to speak at a university, a symposium, or a cultural center is France. The Jewish Museum in Paris, for example, last year organized a huge exhibition on the fiftieth anniversary of the Eichmann trial, including a symposium on all the films made about the trial, but I wasn't invited and *The Specialist* wasn't screened in the retrospective they curated.

**Cineaste:** *What sort of reception did Route 181 get in the United States and Israel?*

**Sivan:** In America, we had good reviews and *Cabinet*, a New York art magazine, transcribed and translated the Finkielkraut trial and posted it on their Website. In Israel, there was a campaign against me based on the attacks against me in France, but, at the same time, *Route 181* opened the academic year of Sapir College, with a screening and a debate with important people, something that couldn't happen in France.

**Cineaste:** *It seemed that your strategy with the film was to engage local people in casual conversation at each site that you visited.*

**Sivan:** We were traveling, we had a map and cameras, so people were curious and would ask, “What are you doing?” We would say, “We are making a film on the partition line,” and the conversation started from there. It began with casual conversation, as you say, and it was in that way that we found the barber. We were sitting in a restaurant, having lunch, with our cameras on the floor, and the waiter asked, “What are you doing?” We said, “We’re traveling, making a film on the events of 1947 and 1948.” He said, “You know, the barber in the shop next door was a witness to a local massacre. You should talk to him.” So I said, “Michel, you’re going to get a haircut!” And so it’s Michel sitting in the chair, interviewing the barber while he was getting a haircut.

**Cineaste:** *The film is ten years old and the separation wall has now been completed. What changes have occurred along “Route 181” since then?*

**Sivan:** The difference is that the separation between the two societies is much stronger, the segregation is very clear today, and the destruction of the landscape has been substantial. You have Jewish settlers burning Palestinian orchards and a very strong capitalism has developed in Israel. You see it in the construction of bypass roads, bridges, and tunnels as the settlements continue to develop. Today you can travel from Tel Aviv to a settlement in Ariel, inside the Occupied Territories, where there is a university, and you don’t even feel as if you’ve crossed any border whatsoever. It’s just one agglomeration that goes from the beach in Tel Aviv to inside the West Bank.

**Cineaste:** *Jaffa, the Orange’s Clockwork reflects some amazing archival research. Where did you locate the footage?*

**Sivan:** We used American and British archives a lot because most of the work in branding the Jaffa orange was done by foreign companies. We also used archives in Israel, a few French archives, and private collections in the Arab world because there is a big problem of archiving Arab visual material.

I discovered many things in making the film. I really wanted to make a visual history because of that famous sentence, “A land without people for a people without land.” My concept was, “An image without a land for a land without an image.” In other words, by creating and imposing an image, you create an image of Palestine. What’s interesting is that there is nostalgia about the period among both Palestinians and Israelis, but at the same time it’s an unknown history, a vanished history. A historian in the film explains how this history involved both nationalisms but they later mutually denied something that was common.

Some of my leftist-Marxist friends criticized the film, saying, “Come on, what you’re actually saying is that capitalism is good.” But it was right-wing Israelis who worked with Arabs to make this business successful. The Palestinians were the growers and the Jews, who had the contacts in Europe and abroad, were the exporters.

**Cineaste:** *I got a kick out of the samples of Orientalist advertising imagery in Jaffa. It’s a shame Edward Said is not around to see the film. He would have loved it.*

**Sivan:** I would say the film couldn’t have existed without Said. It’s almost applied theory.

**Cineaste:** *I also enjoyed the newsreels, with Soviet-style cinematography, showing the happy young Israeli agricultural workers dancing on their lunch hour. Today we can look at those films and laugh, and yet at the time they were enormously effective as propaganda in establishing a positive image of Israel as a country where Jews were making the desert bloom.*

**Sivan:** Absolutely. Another thing I discovered in making *Jaffa* is the very strong link—which seems to be even more important today—between the Protestant evangelistic movement and the invention of the cinematic image. I wasn’t aware, for example, that within the Anglican Church the debate with Darwin over evolution led to the creation of the image of Palestine. The first filmmakers traveled to Palestine to prove the truth of what is written in the Bible. Those were the Anglican British who traveled to Palestine, but upon their arrival they discovered that, alas, the text is the text and the land is the land, so they had to find a way to photograph the land to make it accommodate the biblical text. Their images of Palestine, with the camels and oranges and all the rest, is a projection. That’s why I say it’s the notion of a land without an image for an image without a land, the image of the Bible land.

**Cineaste:** *I was surprised by Common State because I didn’t know anything about it beforehand and I was more or less expecting a debate about the two-state solution. Instead, the film revealed that almost all the participants, whether Palestinian or Israeli, whether on the left or on the right, shared common assumptions about the desirability of a single state. There were a few nuances but not a lot of disagreement. In fact, the overall level of the discussion, in addition to being informed and very intelligent, reflected a lot of common sense. In the Q&A session after the screening, you explained that your aim with the film was to provide a forum, a vehicle, for voices usually marginalized in this debate.*

**Sivan:** It’s an attempt to put on the table as a viable option the idea of one state. In the context of the American discourse, the only solution proposed is two states, and the political question that is asked and therefore imposed is, “Are you for a Palestinian state or not?” As if we had only two choices. I’m for putting on the table a third possibility, one increasingly being raised by the current reality, which is the common state. Those proposing the two-state solution insist it is the only solution because otherwise there is a risk of one state. If you contend that one state is possible, they say, “Oh, that’s a utopia.” They have to decide whether it’s a utopia or a risk. If it’s utopia, it cannot be a risk.

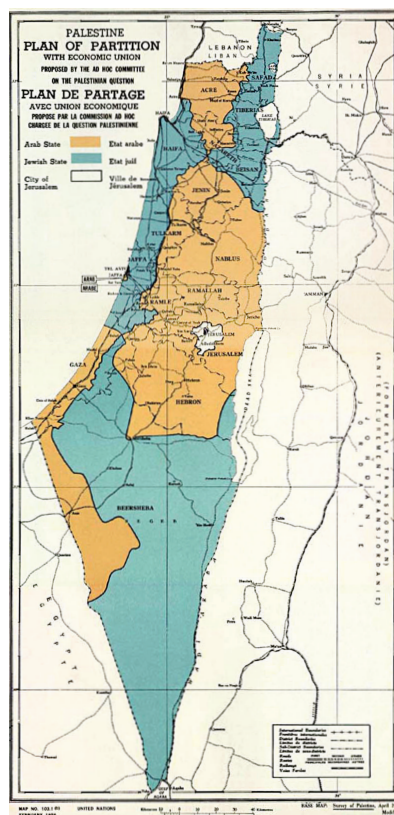
“Common state” has a double meaning. It’s not called the one-state solution, but a common state, in the double English meaning of *common*—an ordinary state, which is common to Jews and Arabs. It’s not an extreme or crazy option but, as you say, a common-sense option.

**Cineaste:** *I found much of the film’s discussion to be bracing, absolutely refreshing, especially given how tired this debate has become. In fact, the film might serve to shatter some stereotypes, such as the notion that all Palestinians want to “drive the Jews into the sea.” Several of the Palestinian speakers seemed remarkably sensitive to Jewish concerns. The words “esteem” and “respect” were often used in a discussion of Jewish rights.*

**Sivan:** Yes, the idea of shattering stereotypes was part of our aim with the film. It includes Palestinians representing the entire range of Palestinian discourse, including people from Gaza, as well as some Israelis, like the two settlers in the film who are for a common state, and who will drive the peaceniks mad.

**Cineaste:** *Even Meron Benvenisti, the former Deputy Mayor of Jerusalem, who describes himself as politically “left of the left,” was surprisingly progressive on this issue.*

**Sivan:** Yes, when you hear his views, or you hear Palestinians speaking about the rights of Jews, it does upset stereotypes and disrupts the conventional discourse. I think that is why we need what you call this “refreshing” moment,



Map of the UN’s original partition plan as followed throughout *Route 181*.



because it's a conflict that's losing its interest for many people while at the same time we know to what extent it is influencing international politics. The discussion of the two-state solution is déjà vu, which of course generates the permanent response of, "Yes, we've already heard that."

**Cineaste:** *Nevertheless, given the religious zealotry that seems to permeate the upper echelons of the Israeli Government, a common-state solution seems to have little if any chance of gaining any serious political traction.*

**Sivan:** This is the paradox. The more settlements there are, for example, the more we are approaching the common state. Why? Because the big difference between America and Israel is that our "Indians" are alive. I mean, we are not settling an empty land, and you cannot think in terms of both settlement and separation. You can think about settlement and segregation but you cannot think about settlement and separation. In 1948, there were expulsions of the Palestinians and today, from the West Bank to Jerusalem, this is what we're still trying to do. You cannot say, "I'm settling, I will annex this territory and make it mine" and at the same time say, "I will separate." The Israeli Government has to cope with the fact that they are annexing all of Palestine but at the same time building an apartheid system. It's the apartheid logic that broke South African apartheid itself and this is what's going on today. The current situation of nonnegotiation is even better than permanent negotiation, which is the big game of the peacenik left. I believe this is the reality we are facing and the question is whether we can democratize it or not. The establishment of two states will lead to defiance by the settlers and will threaten the Palestinians in Israel (Israeli Arabs), just as the partition of 1947 created the war in 1948.

**Cineaste:** *You mentioned apartheid. Has Israel reached its South Africa moment? Do you support the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement?*

**Sivan:** I think Israel will reach its South Africa moment when people begin to understand that Israel and the Occupied Territories are not two separate entities. The Occupied Territories, as Gideon Levy says in the film, are part and parcel of Israel. There has been only a very short period without the Occupation, between 1966—the end of the military role imposed on the North in 1948—and 1967, when the West Bank and Gaza were occupied, so we're talking about an Occupation of forty-five years for a state that has existed for sixty-four years. Israel has existed longer *with* the Occupation than *without* the Occupation. When people understand that there is

**"My role is one of reviewing, of what I call historical revision, the possibility of creating a new vision out of a review of the past. Or, in the words, of Walter Benjamin, to 'brush history against the grain.'"**

one Israel, inside which there are five million people without rights, the South Africa situation starts when the Palestinian struggle becomes nonviolent. We are starting to face this now, with the BDS movement, and with nonviolent demonstrations. Maybe the next step will be when Palestinians say, "We just want to be citizens of Israel. You don't want to give us independence? Then give us citizenship."

The BDS movement has a big problem, though, in deciding what it wants to achieve and when it will stop. We're boycotting and divesting and making sanctions for what? For the end of the Occupation? For the right of return for the refugees? For one state? This may seem a paradox but I support the BDS movement—I've even said this on Al Jazeera, although many of my Palestinian and Arab friends are not happy about it—because it offers a chance to the Israelis. The Israeli government is not respecting international law, so put pressure on them. The boycott was a big chance given to the whites in South Africa.

**Cineaste:** *What sort of response to the film in Israel are you hoping for?*

**Sivan:** Unfortunately, I'm sure that when an announcement is made that *Common State* is scheduled to be shown, there will be a press campaign against the film aimed at limiting its exhibition and distribution. [*Common State* was screened in June at the Cinema South Film Festival at Sderot in Israel, and won the Julian Mer-Kahmis Documentary Prize. It will open theatrically throughout Israel in October.] The film is called *Common State: Potential Conversation* [1], so I have

built a *Common State* Website, and I would like for young Palestinian and Israeli filmmakers to go out and film new segments, which they could upload, so we can create a common, ongoing conversation.

**Cineaste:** *You've often been described as a "dissident" Israeli filmmaker. Do you agree with that description? How would you define your role as a filmmaker?*

**Sivan:** I don't like the word dissident, first because it came out of a description of Amos Gitai, Avi Mograbi, and me as dissident filmmakers. I like Avi Mograbi and his films very much, but I'm not proud to be linked with Amos Gitai—but that's another issue and I don't want to get into it. Second, I think it's unfair to dissidents. Dissidents take risks but we are not taking risks. I won't be sent to Siberia. I don't even have the same problems that Palestinian filmmakers have. So I prefer the notion of opponent or, if you wish, a radical opponent.

As for how I see my role, it's first of all one of reviewing, of what



History professor Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin comments on the Israeli advertising campaign for Jaffa oranges in *Jaffa, the Orange's Clockwork*.



Advertising imagery with an Orientalist touch for the Jaffa orange brand in *Jaffa, the Orange's Clockwork*.

I call historical revision, the possibility of creating a new vision out of a review of the past. Or, in the words of Walter Benjamin, to “brush history against the grain.” This involves taking and reworking material from the archives in order to articulate our history, which is also a *potential* history. It’s not just about the past, it’s a revision and rearticulation. As the Israeli poet Haim Gouri says in *Jaffa*, the memory of these images is not just nostalgia but can become a “memory ticket” to the future.

The making of *Common State* involves more of a political role. If mainstream thinking on an issue represents only one point of view, we can propose another point of view. It’s about articulating something that I call, maybe pretentiously, a political-ethical discourse that can free us from identity politics and perhaps the possibility to see in a new way things we are sure we already know. I take seriously this role of reviewing and revisioning and I am conscious in particular of the historical idea of the archive—what archive can be used, what archive is missing. The question of the archive is important because I think we have to be archiving in order to rearchive, since there will come a time when we will have to construct our common archive.

In my master class here at Thessaloniki, I tried to explain that for me documentary is not just a practice, it is also an attitude. It’s about dealing with reality, which is something I’ve learned from making documentaries. You cannot ignore facts on the ground. It’s impossible. You can deviate from them, you can manipulate them, but you cannot ignore them. Other disciplines are involved—history, sociology, ethics, and so on—but in making documentaries we propose a practice of using reality. If everyone is looking at a particular subject or issue from a particular vantage point, maybe we should move a little over to the side and look at it from another viewpoint. This is what I call the attitude.

**Cineaste:** *Does any of the funding for your films come from Israeli government sources?*

**Sivan:** No, never. I learned long ago from the Dutch documentary filmmaker Johan van der Keuken that the best thing is to “take a little from a lot of sources.” I am fortunate in that a number of television channels and foundations have over the years followed and supported my work. I’m not against taking Israeli money but I have never received Israeli money for any of my films. Interestingly enough, however, the principal producer of *Jaffa* is an Israeli company, Trabelsi Productions, a fantastic, very courageous production company.

I’ll tell you a little story about *Jaffa*, by the way, which you’ll find amusing. My big thing has always been how I won’t be recuperated by Israeli funding sources because my cinema is too complicated. Nevertheless, I lived in Israel for a long time before leaving to live in Paris. I returned to Israel in 2007 when there was a competition to select a film to be made to celebrate the sixtieth anniversary of the founding of the State of Israel. Channel 8 television, the Jerusalem Cinematheque, and the Rabinovitch Fund put some money together and announced that they wanted an archival documentary film made for the sixtieth anniversary. Osnat Trabelsi, the producer, contacted me and said, “Why don’t you propose a film?” I told her, “You know, I have this script that I wrote years ago and then set aside. It’s called *Jaffa*.” She said, “Let’s go for it.” So we submitted our proposal and, the first time that I ever asked for money from Israeli sources, the commission decided that *Jaffa* was the best script submitted.



Left, Hassan Jabareen, Director of the Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel and right, Gideon Levy, columnist for *Haaretz*, contribute to the dialog in Eyal Sivan’s new feature documentary, *Common State: Potential Conversation* [1].

From the moment the announcement was made, however, a press campaign was launched that eventually caused the commission to cancel the grant. One article in *Ma’ariv* was headlined “From Independence to Suicide” and another in *Haaretz* was headlined “Anti-Zionist Israeli to Direct Movie for Israel’s Sixtieth Birthday.” There was another fund that later offered to produce the film, but finally I said to them, “I don’t want your money; keep it,” because this horrible press

campaign essentially destroyed any possibility of an Israeli audience watching the film, although if they had they likely would have said, “Why was there such a controversy?”

**Cineaste:** *Are you working on any projects now?*

**Sivan:** I’m working on an online project at the moment, which will be launched at the Berlin Documentary Forum in June 2012, and I’ll be making a film constructed out of that site. It concerns the historical timeline that Godard proposes in his films about Jews, Muslims, Palestine, etc., and about the controversy surrounding Godard as an anti-Semite, which I processed from all 163 films by Godard. I’m also working on a project with Ilan Pappé, interviewing Zionist veterans of the 1948 War. ■

#### End Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Sivan has explained the political nature of his cinematic efforts in “Never Again: Again and Again: When Memory Serves Political Violence,” available on his Website at [www.eyalsivan.info](http://www.eyalsivan.info).

<sup>2</sup> Tryster’s article, “Eyal Sivan Eichmann [sic], lies and videotape,” can be found on Sivan’s Website.

<sup>3</sup> A video of Sivan’s discussion of *The Specialist* at a 2009 UCLA conference on “Filming the Eichmann Trial” is available at [www.international.ucla.edu/cnes/conferences/eichmann-trial](http://www.international.ucla.edu/cnes/conferences/eichmann-trial).

<sup>4</sup> *The Bible Unearthed: The Making of a Religion*, a four-part video series based on the book by Israel Finkelstein and Neil Silberman, which examines how much of the Bible is myth and how much is history, is available in a DVD edition from First Run Features, [www.firstrunfeatures.com](http://www.firstrunfeatures.com).

<sup>5</sup> The “New Historian” movement includes historians such as Hillel Cohen, Baruch Kimmerling, Benny Morris, Ilan Pappé, Tom Segev, and Avi Shlaim, among others, who, having benefited from access to Israeli military and government archives declassified in the late Seventies, have written numerous books challenging traditional versions of Israeli history, in particular accounts of the 1948 War.

<sup>6</sup> “Foleys” is a film production term for sound effects—such as the sound of footsteps, doors slamming, glass breaking, etc.—recorded separately by a Foley artist and added to the film soundtrack in postproduction.

<sup>7</sup> *Ma’loul Celebrates Its Destruction* is available as an “extra” on Kino Video’s DVD of Michel Khleifi’s *Wedding in Galilee*.

<sup>8</sup> A transcript of what came to be known as “The Barber Trial” is available online at <http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/26/sivanintro.php>. Sivan’s lawsuit was finally dismissed by the judge, who ruled that Finkielkraut’s comments reflected a legitimate political disagreement and thus did not constitute libel under French law. The dispute had serious personal consequences for Sivan, since Arte decided not to commission any future documentaries from him and he lost his media studies teaching position in the French Ministry of Education. He is currently associate professor at the School of Arts and Digital Industries at the University of East London and at the School of Sound and Screen Arts at the Sapir Academic College in Israel.

<sup>9</sup> During our interview, Sivan did not mention that the decision to cancel the screening of *Route 181* at the Pompidou Center was protested by another open letter, this one signed by more than three hundred French intellectuals and filmmakers, including Ariel Dorfman, Jean-Luc Godard, and Tzvetan Todorov, as well as various film associations, including the Association des cinéastes documentaristes.

**Distribution Source:** All of Eyal Sivan’s films are available on all-region DVDs with English (and other language) subtitles, and bonus features, from his company, Memento Films, [www.memento-films.com](http://www.memento-films.com). A one-hour version of *Aqabat Jaber: Passing Through* is also available in the United States from The Cinema Guild, [www.cinemaguild.com](http://www.cinemaguild.com).



Copyright of Cineaste is the property of Cineaste and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.