

Actuality of Banality: Eyal Sivan's *The Specialist* in Context

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Some forty years after the publication of Hannah Arendt's controversial book *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, the Israeli-born filmmaker Eyal Sivan released his documentary film *The Specialist*, explicitly referring to Arendt's work. Sivan took archive footage filmed in 1961, during the trial of Nazi criminal Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem, and edited it to present a cinematic articulation of Arendt's book. The film discusses the fundamental flaws in the way the trial was conducted as well as the nature of Eichmann's crimes.

This article analyzes Sivan's use of narrative, editing, visual, and auditory stylistic devices to expose the way the trial was used by the Zionist movement and to challenge its active role within Zionist collective memory. If interpreted as part of a more general post-Zionist artistic and intellectual production, *The Specialist* could be understood as deconstructing the accused / accuser dichotomy, and suggesting that the accusers and their contemporary heirs might themselves be guilty of some of the charges made against the defendant.

The Nazi criminal Adolf Eichmann was caught on May 11, 1960 by three Mossad agents while alighting from a bus, returning from a working day in Buenos Aires, Argentina. The Eichmann trial began in Jerusalem eleven months later; it lasted eight months and resulted in the death sentence. Eichmann was hanged on May 31, 1962, after his appeal was denied. Hannah Arendt, a German-born philosopher sent by *The New Yorker* to review the trial, published her book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, which was based on her remarks from the trial, in 1963. The Hebrew

translation of this book, however, was completed only in 2000, a year after the appearance of *The Specialist*, a film by the Israeli filmmaker Eyal Sivan, which was inspired by *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Raising some controversial questions about the conducting of the trial and the judicial decisions, the book ignited an emotional debate. The Jewish philosopher's skepticism regarding the common description of Eichmann as a blood-thirsty antisemitic monster, and her criticism of the decision to hold the trial in Jerusalem, earned her many opponents among her own people. Thus, for instance, Gershom Scholem, the prominent Kabbalah scholar, denounced Arendt as "heartless," "malicious," and lacking in "love of the Jewish people." The controversy around the book is evidently the main cause for the 40 years' delay in its translation.

However, I do not enter here the bitter controversy regarding Arendt's view, as it belongs within the context of the historical or the judicial discourse. This article, rather, discusses two main issues in regard to Sivan's film. I shall present first Arendt's main arguments concerning Eichmann's trial, followed by a discussion of the way they are cinematically articulated and elaborated in *The Specialist*. In light of this approach, I shall stress the linkage between the film and the book's translation and the historic-ideological conditions under which both appeared.

Banal Murderous Specialism as a Universal Crime

In Arendt's view, the basic fault of the trial was its ideological oversight of the horrifying essence of Eichmann's crime. Arendt repeatedly stresses that Eichmann was primarily a criminal against humanity, and not only an enemy of the Jewish people. She claims that his main motivation, which had driven him through his murderous career, was not that of pure antisemitism, but a mixture of obedience, dullness, and a desire to satisfy his supervisors. She contends that Eichmann's arbitrary path was guided not by hatred of Jews but by the banal ambition of a mediocre man.

Although Arendt frequently disputes the judges' opinion, it is worth noting that she agrees with the death sentence imposed on Eichmann. Although she tends to accept Eichmann's claim that he only obeyed orders and did not independently set them, she argues that since he could have avoided his mission without any risk to himself, and because he made no effort to mitigate the harm he caused, he deserved the death penalty.¹

¹Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), pp. 278–279. Citations to this reference will appear in the text.

Arendt illustrates Eichmann's banal mode of thought through analysis of his surprising declaration that "he had lived his whole life according to Kant's moral precepts, and especially according to Kantian definition of duty" (pp. 135–136). When asked by Judge Raveh for the meaning of this statement, Eichmann surprisingly came up with an approximately correct definition of the categorical imperative: "I meant by my remark about Kant that the principle of my will must always be such that it can become the principle of general laws" (p. 136).

Arendt argues that, although distorted, Eichmann's reliance upon Kant is highly illustrative: Kant maintained that a rational subject who complies with the categorical imperative must "[a]ct only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law."² Arendt notes that this distorted formula of the imperative is equivalent to that of Hans Frank, the Nazi governor-general of Poland: "Act in such a way that the Führer, if he knew your action, would approve it" (p. 136). She claims that this view—"that to be law-abiding means not merely to obey the laws but to act as though one were the legislator of the law that one obeys"—was common in Germany in those days (p. 137). Instead of adhering to his own "practical reason," exceeding the current local law and acting in accordance with principles that are appropriate to be the principles of the universal law, Eichmann interpreted his blind obedience to the Nazi law as an exemplary implementation of the categorical imperative. Thus, the Kantian argument in favor of identification with the *idea* that the law is based upon was twisted and replaced with identification with the *person* that stands behind the law.

According to Arendt, this mode of thought guided Eichmann's administrative obedience, which caused the death of millions. In her view, it was this banality of evil—and not an uncontrollable antisemitic hatred—that drove Eichmann to commit his horrible crimes, out of respect for the law. That law commonly stated as "Thou shalt not kill" was replaced in Hitler's Germany with the demand "Thou shalt kill" (p. 150).

Arendt considers Eichmann's frequent use of dull clichés as another expression of his banality of thought. She claims that the common feature of those clichés was not their antisemitic nature, but their ability to elicit a sense of elation in Eichmann. Once he declared, "I will jump into my grave laughing, because the fact that I have the death of five million Jews . . . on my conscience

²Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Lewis W. Beck, ed. Robert P. Wolff (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merill, 1969), p. 44.

gives me extraordinary satisfaction” (p. 46), and on another occasion he stated, “I shall gladly hang myself in public as a warning example for all anti-Semites on this earth” (p. 54), apparently without noting the acute contradiction between these two proclamations.

The judges found Eichmann to be a kind of cunning liar, a clever felon who pretended to be a fool, using hollow phrases in an attempt to cover up the crimes he had committed in full awareness of their moral meaning. Arendt finds the judges’ view in regard to his clever slyness to have been faulty, considering his ludicrousness, his obsessive use of infuriating clichés, and the damage he caused himself due to his inability to recall certain crucial facts that could have helped him in handling the accusations with which he was faced (p. 49).

Trying Eichmann in Jerusalem

Arendt criticizes those who denied Israel’s right to judge Eichmann on its own territory by claiming that Eichmann’s activities had taken place throughout occupied Europe and thus should be under the jurisdiction of an international court. “Once the Jews had a territory of their own, the State of Israel, they obviously had as much right to sit in judgment on the crimes committed against their people as the Poles had to judge crimes committed in Poland” (p. 259), she claims. Despite its legitimacy, however, Arendt maintains that the decision to hold the trial in Jerusalem, and some of the judicial conclusions, denied the universal principle of justice in the name of the local Zionist justice. She strongly criticizes the Israeli court for missing what she defines as the essence of Eichmann’s crimes. In her view, the Eichmann trial should have been grounded on the understanding that the Nazi crimes against the Jewish people were primarily a crime against humanity.

The Nazi regime clearly persecuted the Jews out of a deliberate policy of extermination of entire populations. Nevertheless, Arendt notes that the Nazi “administrative massacres” were focused not only on entire nations or races but also on German groups of the physically and mentally disabled, or patients determined as “incurably ill” (p. 288). She strongly maintains that the attempt to eliminate entire populations should be considered not merely as an extremely severe case of murder, but as a new type of crime. “It is an attack upon human diversity as such, that is, upon a characteristic of the ‘human status’ without which the very words ‘mankind’ or ‘humanity’ would be devoid of meaning,” she claims (pp. 268–269). In her view, the Holocaust was in effect a Nazi crime against humanity that “was perpetrated upon the body of the Jewish people” (p. 269). And since the new crime violated not only the inner political balance, but also the international order, only an international tribunal would have been appropriate to apply the rigor of the law (p. 269).

In Arendt's view, the decision to hold the trial in Israel was based on the Jewish people's concept of their own history. They conceived the Nazi crime not as an unprecedented type of genocide, but as a recent and most dreadful stage in the continuum of persecutions that the Jews have suffered since the early days of their history. Arendt claims that the fact that the Eichmann trial was set in this context is the main source for its injustices:

This misunderstanding, almost inevitable if we consider not only the facts of Jewish history but also, and more important, the current Jewish historical self-understanding, is actually at the root of all the failures and shortcomings of the Jerusalem trial. None of the participants ever arrived at a clear understanding of the actual horror of Auschwitz, which is of a different nature from all the atrocities of the past, because it appeared to prosecution and judges alike as not much more than the most horrible pogrom in Jewish history. (p. 267)

Thus, in Arendt's view the contextualization of Eichmann's crimes within the history of antisemitic persecutions was not only judicially flawed, but also damaging. Trying these crimes before a tribunal that represented one nation only, "minimized" their monstrous nature and reduced the ability to present them as a general concern for mankind as a whole. It constituted the missing of an opportunity to establish the sentence for Eichmann's crimes as an international precedent that could hopefully prevent future similar crimes (pp. 272–273).

In examining the reasons for this failure, Arendt blames Ben-Gurion for "invisibly stage-managing the proceedings" (pp. 4–5) according to his own current interests. In her opinion, the prominent Zionist leader had sought to design the Eichmann trial as a show-trial in which antisemitism as a whole would be brought to justice. He wished to exploit political benefits by emphasizing the connections between the Nazis and certain Arab rulers, conceived by him as the contemporary avatar of the eternal oppressor of the Jews (p. 10).

Although the judges in general managed to resist the external pressure and did not follow the attempts of the prosecution to portray Eichmann as a "perverted sadist," Arendt claims that nevertheless they were finally found "conspicuously helpless" when they were confronted with the inevitable task of "understanding the criminal whom they had come to judge" (p. 276). In her view, it was precisely the *normality* of Eichmann that should have been stressed by the tribunal as the source and the prominent characteristic of his crimes, and also as an important factor in the decision regarding his sentence. She claims that facing the inclination of the prosecution to present Eichmann from the idiosyncratic Jewish perspective as an antisemitic abnormal phenomenon who willingly took part in the most horrible of pogroms, it was the

highest duty of this court to recognize him rather as a *universal* criminal of a new type, and to sentence him as such. Because such a criminal, who blatantly obeys illegal orders under circumstances that make it impossible for him to know or feel that he is doing wrong, poses a risk not only to the Jewish people but also to the whole of mankind,

[t]he trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal. From the viewpoint of our legal institutions and our moral standards of judgment, this normality was much more terrifying than all the atrocities put together. (p. 276)

However, as for the sentence handed down, Arendt rejects Eichmann's claim of diminished guilt in that his role had been an accident and that almost anybody could have taken his place. "[E]ven if eighty million Germans had done as you did, this was not an excuse," writes Arendt and adds: "In politics obedience and support are the same." Carrying out a policy of mass murder is equivalent to the active support of this crime, which should be penalized by death (pp. 278–279).

Narrative Vertigo as Subversion of the Zionist Chronology

Some forty years after *Eichmann in Jerusalem* saw light, it was adapted by Eyal Sivan, an Israeli filmmaker who lives in Paris, as the basis for his film *The Specialist*. Sivan, who is also known for his decisive moral critique on the Zionist ideology and practice, explicitly mentions Arendt's controversial book as a source of inspiration in the credits of the film. In fact, in *The Specialist* Sivan uses cinematic-linguistic tactics of deconstruction and reconstruction to give Arendt's claims a filmic articulation.

This film disassembles both the conventional narrative structure of cinematic and television courtroom texts, and the specific structure of the Eichmann trial. He avoids the narrative device of adhering to the chronology and the dramas of the trial, which is common in fact-based or fictive courtroom dramas and documentaries (e.g., the chronological documentaries about Eichmann trial: *Verdict for Tomorrow* [1961] and *The Trial of Adolf Eichmann* [1997]; fact-based courtroom dramas regarding the Holocaust such as *Nuremberg* [2000] and *Mishpat Kastner* aka *The Kastner Trial* [1994]; trial documentaries such as *Brother's Keeper* [1992] and *Un coupable idéal* aka *Murder on a Sunday Morning* [2001]; and other well-known features like *Accused* [1988], *A Few Good Men* [1992], *Philadelphia* [1993] and *Amistad* [1998]). Such a narrative choice enables the filmmaker to exploit fully the dramatic potential that is naturally embodied in a structure of the trial: a gradual exposure

of information, progressive build-up of tension, and an impressive dramatic and moral conclusion.

Rather than exploiting these “dramatic treasures,” however, Sivan chooses to present a prominently disrupted and incomplete chronology of Eichmann’s trial. The original order of the trial was as follows:

1) Reading of the Indictment—Eichmann trial begins (April 11, 1961); 2) The prosecution pleads its case and summons witnesses; 2) The defense presents its case and examines the accused; 3) Eichmann is cross-examined by the prosecution; 4) The defense attorney, Dr. Robert Servatius, briefly reexamines the accused; 5) Eichmann is examined by the judges; 6) Summations; 7) After four months, the court reassembles for pronouncement of the judgment (December 11, 1961); 8) The death sentence is pronounced (December 15, 1961).³

Sivan was presumably aware of the order of the trial, but his narrative outstandingly denies its logic. The film opens with the seventh session and concludes with a sequence taken from Eichmann’s cross-examination in Session 95 (13 July 1961) out of 121. Shots that were taken during later sessions (e.g., 97, 106) are intercut in the course of the film. Examination of a randomly picked series of scenes located towards the end of the film illustrates Sivan’s denial of the logic of the trial. Following are the sessions ordered according to the sequence of these scenes, which document them: session 95 (Eichmann’s cross-examination); sessions 51–52 (testimony of Pinhas Freudiger); session 106 (examination of Eichmann by Judge Raveh); session 93 (Eichmann’s cross-examination); session 87 (examination of Eichmann by his defense attorney); session 95 (Eichmann’s cross-examination).

This distorted chronology occurs not only at the level of entire scenes but also on the editorial scale within the scene. The editing sometimes violates the chronological ordering by juxtaposing fragments from different stages of the trial. Sivan was recently blamed by Hillel Tryster, the director of Steven Spielberg’s Jewish Film Archive, for “fraud, forgery and falsification” due to a series of editorial “distortions.” According to Tryster, the original footage of the trial was manipulatively edited by Sivan in a way that insults the witnesses and is unfaithful to the testimonies. He notes some examples: the artificial juxtaposition of Hausner’s question about the absence of resistance in the extermination camps with the silence of the witness Avraham Lindwasser that

³For the complete transcripts and comprehensive data on Eichmann trial browse: <http://www.nizkor.org/hweb/people/e/eichmann-adolf/transcripts/Sessions/>. The following data about dates of the sessions and their order relies upon this source.

was taken from another testimony; the artificial insertion of audience laughter into several shots; and the elliptical editing that led to the distortion of the testimony of Pinhas Freudiger, a leader of the Orthodox community in Hungary.⁴ Regardless of the moral aspects of these editorial choices, it is clear that Sivan intentionally denies the original order of the trial.

Moreover, the last stages of the trial—the pronouncement of judgment and the death sentence—are completely absent in the film, as are other relevant events such as the appeal to the Supreme Court of Israel and the execution (nor are these facts mentioned in any way). The absence of such important events, which are used as significant dramatic elements in the conventional courtroom drama, clearly violates the common narrative pattern of representation of trials in film and television. Sivan’s “relinquishing” these dramatic climaxes is certainly not accidental. He chooses this way in order to manifest his resistance to the logic that the Zionist concept of the trial is based upon.

In addition to distortion of the chronology of the trial, the film also creates a sort of “historical vertigo” by avoiding relevant information regarding Israeli and international public opinion about the case and omission of the specific dates for its opening and the conclusion. Indications of time are presented in the film only once: three signs noting May 8, 1961 (session 30), June 7 (session 68–69), and July 14 (session 97) are shown successively, seemingly arbitrarily located in the film. At this point Sivan uses the sound-bridge device: the sound from the successive shot of a testimony invades the shot of the last time-mark. Importantly, the date mentioned on the last slide and the date of this actual testimony do not fit. Mr. Georges Wellers gave his testimony on May 9, 1961, while in session 97, held on July 14, 1961, Eichmann was cross-examined on a completely different issue. The juxtaposition of these three different time markers in such a deceptive manner and the fact that they are sole and isolated, invert their original function: instead of clearly indicating the location of the trial events on the historical timeline, they contribute nothing to the understanding of the context or even harm it, and thus ironically serve as signs of disorientation.

This historical decontextualization is a cinematic device used by Sivan to offend against the Zionist interpretation, which considers the Eichmann trial as a paragon of justice in terms of the right finally gained by the Jews to sentence to death one of their antisemitic deadly foes. By concealing the historical context of the trial, Sivan reduces the ability to present it as part of

⁴Daniel Berman and Haim Levinson, “Mispat Eichmann—Girsat Habama’i,” *Kol Hazman* (29 September 2004): 23–24.

the successive time-line outlined by Zionism. He disrupts its patriotic moral meaning as a Zionist lesson of history, as decisive evidence that only a Jewish justice that is supported by the power of a Jewish State can finally effectively fight against the ancient phenomenon of antisemitism. Just as Arendt rejects the context attributed by the Zionist state to Eichmann's crimes within the history of antisemitism, so too does Sivan deny the context of the whole trial in the Zionist super-narrative.

The Trial as a Play Whose End is Known

The series of testimonies of hundreds of prosecution witnesses (90 of whom were Holocaust survivors who had been held in Nazi captivity), unfolding their tales of horror, lasted 62 sessions—more than half of the total number of sessions. A large portion of the testimonies was not directly concerned with Eichmann or with the activities he had been involved in. The prosecution presented these testimonies as background material that was gradually assembling to form a “general picture.” The judges were uncomfortable with the long discussions about matters that had no direct connection with the crimes of the accused, but they did not halt the emotional testimonies out of understandable humane considerations. However, the presiding judge, Moshe Landau, did rebuke the Attorney General several times, reminding him that “we are not drawing pictures here” (p. 120). Landau concluded the testimony of the witness Abba Kovner⁵ with another admonition to the prosecution:

We have heard shocking things here, in the language of a poet, but I maintain that in many parts of this evidence we have strayed far from the subject of this trial. . . . It is your [Hausner's] task to prepare the witness, to explain matters to him, and to eliminate everything that is not relevant to the trial. . . . I regret that I have to make these remarks, after the conclusion of evidence such as this.⁶

Arendt describes the atmosphere in this phase of the testimony as one of “a mass meeting, at which speaker after speaker does his best to arouse the audience” (p. 121). Although she claims that all in all the trial never totally descended into a theatre play, she argues that it was designed by the Israeli authorities as a moral spectacle:

Whoever planned this auditorium in the newly built Beth Ha'am, the House of the People . . . had a theater in mind, complete with orchestra and gallery,

⁵Abba Kovner (1918–1987) was a poet and writer and a commander of the Partisan underground organization in the Vilna ghetto.

⁶Session 27, 4 May 1961.

with proscenium and stage, and with side doors for the actors' entrance. Clearly, this courtroom is not a bad place for the show trial David Ben-Gurion, Prime Minister of Israel, had in mind when he decided to have Eichmann kidnapped. . . . (p. 4)

In this performance Eichmann was supposed to play the well-defined role that had been designated for him by the Zionist leadership. That expectation stemmed from the anticipation that the trial would encourage Jews to recognize the value of Zionism, and also raise an international sense of guilt (or, as Ben-Gurion put it: "We want the nations of the world to know . . . and they should be ashamed" [p. 10]).

Arendt maintains that Hausner's attempts to present Eichmann as a monstrous offspring of the ancient antisemitic dynasty of Pharaoh in Egypt and Haman the Agagite were not only pathetic but also judicially flawed:

[I]t was clearly at cross-purposes with putting Eichmann on trial, suggesting that perhaps he was only an innocent executor of some mysteriously foreordained destiny or, for that matter, even of anti-Semitism, which perhaps was necessary to blaze the trial of "the bloodstained road traveled by this people" to fulfill its destiny. (p. 19)

However, as mentioned earlier, it was not only the prosecution's perceived faults or the negation of the right of the accused to be judged only for his own crimes that bothered Arendt. It was mainly the attempts to contextualize Eichmann's case exclusively within the Zionist super-narrative—attempts that were served by the performative characteristics of the trial—that concerned the Jewish philosopher. In her view, the inclination to turn the trial into a Zionist show-trial thwarted the chance of ever getting to the roots of the universal nature and severity of Eichmann's crimes.

Sivan fully adopts Arendt's insight and expends considerable efforts on critically exposing the ostentatious aspects of the trial. This trend is manifested early in the opening credits of the film. The names of the trial's key figures are presented in the same manner as movie stars' names are presented beside their roles: "**Adolf Eichmann**—The Accused," "**Robert Servatius**—Defense Attorney," "**Gideon Hausner**—Attorney General," etc. This sequence is concluded with the credit "In Film by Rony Brauman and Eyal Sivan," as if Eichmann, the attorneys, and the judges all belonged to Sivan's cast.

The sequence that follows the opening credits shows a montage of a series of Hausner's extroverted body gestures and theatrical hand movements. Arendt does not hide her aversion to Hausner's style of litigation. She defines his opening address as "bad history and cheap rhetoric" (p. 19) and criticizes his behavior in the trial:

The latter's [Ben-Gurion's] rule, as Mr. Hausner is not slow in demonstrating, is permissive; it permits the prosecutor to give press-conferences and interviews for television during the trial . . . and even "spontaneous" outbursts to reporters in the court building—he is sick of cross-examining Eichmann who answers all questions with lies; it permits frequent side glances into the audience, and the theatrics of more than ordinary vanity, which finally achieves its triumph in the White House with a compliment on "a job well done" by the President of the United States. (p. 6)

The "condensed theatrical montage" of Hausner in the opening sequence of *The Specialist* clearly echoes Arendt's criticism about the style of the Attorney General. By giving filmic manifestation to her claim, Sivan stresses another aspect of the showiness of the trial.

The emphasis on the performative characteristics of the Eichmann trial is a consistent thread running through the film, articulated in varied cinematic expressions. Thus, for instance, considerable technological efforts were invested in creating a digital image of the reflection of the trial audience on the glass-walls of the booth in which Eichmann was placed during the trial.⁷ These efforts indicate the importance of a key-element of a show trial—the constant presence of an audience—in the eyes of the filmmakers.

Throughout the film a great deal of attention is paid to the technical preparations towards the court sessions: it presents a meticulous depiction of the setting up of the microphones, the arrangement of documents in court, the entry of the judges, etc. The accompaniment of these images by the disharmonious sounds of musical instruments being tuned serves to create an analogy between the courtroom and the concert hall—the preparations for the judicial session are paralleled with the preparations for a musical show.

The sound-effect of sonic feedback is also associated with the technical preparations for a public performance. When Eichmann describes the operations of Section IVB4, the mobile killing units, Hausner impatiently asks him to talk for once without "all the documents and books." Reprimanded, Eichmann apologizes and sits down to the vocal accompaniment of a prominent dissonant feedback. In the spirit of Arendt's viewpoint, this sound-effect can be interpreted as a sonic metaphor. The sonic feedback is an irritating tone caused by a recursive process in which an input sound that is received by the receiver is amplified, received, and amplified again by the same receiver, and so forth. In light of Arendt's view that the Eichmann trial was designed to convict an accused who had been convicted in advance, one may indicate an analogy

⁷Amit Breuer, "Baderekh El Haspetzialist," *Cinematheque* (1999): 7.

between the trial and the sonic feedback. The trial serves as an amplifier to the voices of the accusers—the Zionist authorities. It is designed to receive and amplify their accusations, but in doing so the Zionist show-trial exceeds its aim to the extent of dissonance.

In another sequence near the end of the first hour of the film, several testimonies of Holocaust survivors in the trial are juxtaposed successively while the images are visually reframed and intentionally garbled. These visual effects serve to produce the effect of an old television broadcast, and consequently present the testimonies in the context of a mass media performance. In emphasizing the formal aspects of this sequence at the expense of its content, Sivan echoes Arendt's claim about the preference of the Zionist exemplary value for "drawing the general picture" at the expense of judicial interests.

The filmed testimonies are thematically categorized according to the filmmaker's view as follows: witnesses take their place on the witness stand; setting up the microphones; oaths on the witness stand; discussions about the transports; introduction of Holocaust objects: yellow Stars of David, shoes, documents etc; description of the crimes committed by the S.S.; stories about meetings with Eichmann; witnesses in difficult moments: evidence on nightmares, emotional outbursts, and weeping. The sequence concludes with the aforementioned rebuke of Hausner by Judge Landau: "In many parts of this evidence we have strayed far from the subject of this trial." Similarly to Arendt, Sivan finds Landau's rebuke an appropriate summation to this sequence of testimonies, stressing its irrelevancy to the case. But Sivan also gives this claim a filmic manifestation: by thematically categorizing the testimonies he critically emphasizes their role as links in the argumentation chain of the prosecution. He fragments them and stresses their common rhetoric characteristics at the expense of their unique content as he draws the outlines of the "general picture"—a picture that found favor neither with Arendt nor with the judges.

As in the case of his narrative choices, Sivan again adopts a strategy of avoiding emotional immersion in the drama of the horrifying Holocaust testimonies in favor of formation of a "critical distance." This estrangement enables examination of the rhetoric function of the testimonies, regardless of their powerful emotional load. He also uses this strategy in an earlier sequence, which presents the screening in the courtroom of footage documenting dreadful Nazi crimes. Sivan is focused on the way the horror is presented—the act of the screening—and not on the horror itself. The screen in the dark courtroom is not shot frontally and the footage is not edited into the film as one might expect. The dreadful images, accompanied by Hausner's commentary, are barely seen, reflected on the glass walls of Eichmann's booth or shot by a camera, which is set almost perpendicularly to the screen surface.

Thus, inspired by Arendt, Sivan critically directs our attention to the performative aspects of the prosecution's actions rather than an emotional focus on their content. His refusal of the drama—not a trivial choice for a filmmaker—is also a protest against the dramatic interpretation given to this trial in the Zionist super-narrative. Sivan rather emphasizes the dissonances resulted from the bias to set the trial as a public account of antisemitism from time immemorial. His consistent exposure of the performative characteristics of the trial is in line with Arendt's argument that to a great extent the trial was a fore-designed show with a known end and lesson, which dissonantly echo the Zionist perspective of Eichmann's crimes and disregard other crucial meanings. Thus, Sivan reflects Arendt's criticism of the setting of Eichmann's case exclusively in the antisemitic context as the source for the inability of the tribunal to fulfill its high duty and get at the of the universal essence of the crimes of the accused.

The Bureaucratic Obsession

Sivan seems to fully adopt Arendt's claim that Eichmann committed his dreadful crimes out of a banal normality, which is actually "much more terrifying than all atrocities put together" (p. 276). He cinematically portrays him as a pedantic clerk whose obsession with detail is a threatening normality. While Hausner is reciting numbers and letters mentioning the units of the Nazi extermination apparatus, Eichmann is shown punctiliously writing down the details. Hausner's voice becomes a monotonic echo, which is replaced with the amplified sound of a pen writing. The frame is also visually distorted. These effects repeat later in the film when Hausner indicates the origin and destination of the transport trains, and in another scene when Eichmann leaves his cell and uses a wall map in an attempt to answer the questions of the Attorney General. By cinematically manipulating the documented moments of Eichmann's "reunion" with details and lists, Sivan illustrates Eichmann's enthusiasm for registration and administration—his "bureaucratic obsession." By systematically distorting the sound and the image at these moments, he signs them as special events for Eichmann, who expresses his obsession with bureaucratic details, a truly horrifying normality.

Arendt finds this obsession to be at the root of Eichmann's murderous efficiency. Combined with his blind obedience it comprises the essence of banal evil. Loyal to his distorted interpretation of the Kantian categorical imperative, the pedantic bureaucrat suppresses any sign of individual conscience, devoting himself totally to his faith in law and authority. In one scene Eichmann is asked about his responsibility for orders that bear his signature on a document of section IVB4. "It is a common bureaucratic formulation," says Eich-



Photo by Israeli Government Press Office

mann, “my signature has nothing to do with the person Eichmann.” According to Arendt, Eichmann sought to conceal himself under a mountain of bureaucracy in order to escape his deserved punishment for his responsibility for the crimes committed under his authority (p. 290). The film cinematically expresses this idea: Eichmann’s words are heard once again as his figure gradually fades out from the glass cell, leaving behind a desk with documents and two guards with a frozen expression.

Arendt’s central argument about the subjugation of the individual conscience at the service of the authorities is echoed in a sequence in which the judges question Eichmann about the func-

tioning of his conscience during the war. They were interested in his statement according to which, at the Wannsee Conference (in which the Nazis planned the “final solution”—a program for extermination of the Jews in Europe), he said that he felt like Pontius Pilate washing his hands in innocence due to his understanding that he had only to follow the instructions set by his supervisors. When asked by Judge Raveh whether this statement was a form of mental reservation, Eichmann slowly stretched his neck, and wordlessly stared at the judge with a puzzled expression. This moment of embarrassment, selected and emphasized by Sivan, clearly reflects Arendt’s claim about the nature of Eichmann’s banal evil. The prolonged shot of his close-up is accompanied by intensifying dramatic music and is set by the editing as the conclusion to the long scene prior to it. Facing an authority that demands that he use his individual conscience and deny orders given by another authority, Eichmann is bewildered and silent. “Who was he to judge?” asks Arendt in the spirit of Eichmann’s bureaucratic faith and ironically adds, “Well, he was neither the first nor the last to be ruined by modesty” (p. 114).

Sivan’s refusal to accept the common Zionist version of the ending of the Eichmann affair is a cinematic protest against the way in which this affair was processed into the Zionist super-narrative. The pronouncement of the death

sentence and the execution of Eichmann are replaced with a fragment from his cross-examination in which he describes the ideas he wishes to express in a book he would like to publish after the trial is concluded.⁸ He will state that he considers the extermination of the Jews to be “one of the most heinous crimes in the history of mankind,” but in the meantime he will also claim exemption from responsibility and punishment since he was only a clerk bound by his oath. “I was suited to fulfilling my duties at a desk,” says Eichmann to the judges, and the film seemingly complies with him: it ends up with an image of Eichmann sitting in his glass booth while his surroundings are gradually erased. A visual effect makes the guards, the microphones, the tables, and finally the booth itself disappear. The booth table turns into a desk and Eichmann, “freed” from the position of the accused, is seated at it. For the first and only time in the film, the monochrome style is replaced with a multicolored image, and rhythmical music suddenly emerges.

The surprising vivid ending of the film stands in stark contrast with the manner in which the conclusion of the Eichmann affair is usually presented. By avoiding the insertion of a reminder of Eichmann’s execution as a final element in the film, Sivan denies the Zionist lesson of this affair, in the spirit of Arendt’s critique. In Sivan’s narrative the criminal, as an analogy to his crime, is not hanged but continues to sit behind the desk. Thus, the death sentence did not kill this new type of bureaucratic criminal. The tribunal has missed the opportunity to set an international precedent and therefore the crime is still alive and threatening.

The Context of Decontextualization

In light of Sivan’s filmic and intellectual route, one can find no difficulty in identifying what he considered a current source of banal evil. *The Specialist* was created within the cultural post-Zionist climate that was formed in the last two decades of the 20th century. This intellectual atmosphere gave rise to a variety of studies that subvert the Zionist super-narrative and reveal the less savory aspects of Zionist activity, especially regarding its contact with the native Palestinians, Jewish immigrants from Muslim countries, and Holocaust survivors.⁹

⁸Eichmann completed the book before he was executed, and it was published in German.

⁹These ideas are expressed in the writings of historians and sociologists such as Baruch Kimmerling, Ilan Pappé, Sami Shalom Chetrit, Tom Segev, Uri Ram, and Benny Morris.

Inspired by the insights of post-modernism, deconstruction, and post-colonial studies, the local post-Zionist debate also expresses the increasing international intellectual interest in the ways in which the identity of “the Other” is structured as part of the process of the formation of a collective identity. The bequest of the super-narrative in the minds of individuals is an essential practice needed for the crystallization of such an identity. Thus, the post-Zionist critic, who doubts the legitimacy of Israel as a Jewish State, seeks to deconstruct the Zionist ethos, to emphasize the patronizing, racial, and chauvinist characteristics of the Zionist discourse, and to reveal the ways in which the identity of “the Other” is constructed in order to maintain the hegemony of the dominant social group served by this narrative.

The post-Zionist thinkers also criticize the conventional Zionist portrayal of Israel as a society that has been jointly experiencing a process of consolidation, united under a coherent collective identity and guided by a common historical mission. The Zionist super-narrative, which plays a decisive role in the attempts to form such an identity and define the national historical end, is therefore a favorable target for the post-Zionists. These thinkers focus their critical spotlight on “the rifts and instabilities in Israeli culture and society—the relations between men and women, Ashkenazim and Sephardim, Jews and Arabs.”¹⁰ They also deny what they define as the “false teleology”—the Zionist inclination to present Jewish history as a preparatory step towards the establishment of Israel, its ultimate end:

By and large, most of the secular historiography produced by Jews in Israel, or in the pre-sovereign Jewish community in Palestine, leads to the statist “Zionist solution” of the Jewish question. A commodified version of the entire span of Jewish history, including the Holocaust, is recruited in order to lead the consumer of historiography to this one inevitable conclusion to the exclusion of any alternatives.¹¹

As a post-Zionist critic, Sivan seeks to discharge the “teleologic” Zionist narrative from its valued merits—linearity and coherency. In his earlier film *Izkor: Slaves of Memory* (1991) he critically exposes and examines the ways in

The latter has made a substantial contribution to the post-Zionist corpus, although he has lately expressed his commitment to Zionism.

¹⁰David R. Adler, “Post-Zionism: Toward a Working Definition,” *Response*, No. 66 (1996): 10.

¹¹Baruch Kimmerling, “Academic Historiography Caught in the Cross-Fire,” *History & Memory*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (1995): 52.

which the Zionist education system immerses the experience of her trainees in overflow of collective memories assembled by the Zionist super-narrative. In *The Specialist* Sivan turns his filmic criticism toward a highly significant element in the Zionist collective memory. Following Arendt, he suggests an alternative interpretation to the Eichmann affair, presenting it as an organized ideological performance of Zionism rather than a just trial. Moreover, in fragmenting and reassembling the order of the trial events, avoiding elementary information about its context, and denying the dramatic merits embodied in the plot of this affair from a Zionist perspective, Sivan subverts the logic that stands behind the formulation of the Eichmann affair into the Zionist super-narrative. The sabotage in the cause-and-effect chain, which stands in the basis of the Zionist historic plot of this event, thwarts the coherent presentation of the trial as an ultimate triumph of the Jews, finally gaining the power to bring their bitter antisemitic enemy to justice under the auspices of the new-born Jewish state. Thus, Sivan performs his post-Zionist deconstruction on an organ of a most sacred Israeli cow—the Holocaust as perceived in the eyes of Zionism.

But Sivan criticism does not settle for an attempt to shatter the logic of the Zionist super-narrative. In his recent film, *Route 181: Fragments of a Journey in Palestine-Israel* (2004), made with the Palestinian filmmaker Michel Khleifi, he deliberately raises the possibility that a current incarnation of banal evil can be found in the Israeli army. The pair of filmmakers travel the border contours mapped out by the 1947 United Nations' Resolution 181 and meet a philosophical Israeli soldier at a checkpoint, who confesses his love of Kafka. Sivan asks him whether he has read *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and the soldier replies that he has not. The filmmaker then summarizes some of Arendt's main ideas for the benefit of the polite soldier.

In light of Sivan's view on the Eichmann case and his proclaimed political view, the comparison between the Israeli soldiers and the Nazis comes as no surprise. This comparison has been raised in many versions by both Israeli and non-Israeli moralists, such as Yeshayahu Leibowitz and recently the Nobel-Prize winning Portuguese author, José Saramago. The reaction evoked by this comparison, shared also by left-wing Israelis who strongly oppose the occupation, virtually displaced it from the canonical discourse in Israel, placing it almost under taboo. It is exactly this decisive objection of the accusers to the violation of the exclusivity of their ultimate accused's crimes that bothers Sivan. In his view, the refusal to recognize the universal essence of Eichmann's crimes is clearly connected to the denial of the possibility that some of this banal evil may finally stick to his victims.

Filmography

Accused. Jonathan Kaplan, 1988.

Amistad. Steven Spielberg, 1998.

Brother's Keeper. Joe Berlinger and Bruce Sinofsky, 1992.

Un Coupable Idéal aka Murder on a Sunday Morning. Jean-Xavier de Lestrade (2001).

A Few Good Men. Rob Reiner, 1992.

Mishpat Kastner aka The Kastner Trial. Uri Barbash, 1994.

Nuremberg. Simoneau Yves, 2000.

Philadelphia. Jonathan Demme, 1993.

Route 181: Fragments of a Journey in Palestine-Israel. Eyal Sivan and Michel Khleifi, 2004.

Un Spécialiste, Portrait d'un Criminel Moderne aka The Specialist. Eyal Sivan, 1999.

The Trial of Adolf Eichmann. Daniel B. Polin (producer), 1997.

Verdict for Tomorrow. Leo Hurwitz, 1961.