The Nation.

Final Cut on Final Solution?

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Since you presumably know the basics about the Holocaust--if you don't, I would suggest that a movie review is no place to learn them--I will jump to the main question about *The Specialist*, a new documentary that focuses on the trial of Adolf Eichmann. What can we gather from this film that isn't in the books?

The answer lies in the way *The Specialist* was made. It is based exclusively on footage shot at the trial, which began on April 11, 1961, continued through sentencing on December 15 and was videotaped in its entirety. Such comprehensiveness was unusual but not surprising. Having organized an event that was, in the most sober sense of the term, a show trial, the Israeli government made a complete record of what was shown, which was nothing less than the full scope and logistics of the Holocaust.

To carry out the videotaping, the government hired Leo Hurwitz, an American whose professional credentials were impeccable and also distinctly left-wing. (A one-time member of the Film and Photo League, Hurwitz had collaborated on pictures such as *Native Land*.) He placed four concealed cameras in the courtroom and connected them to a control booth, where he could give instructions to the camera operators and edit in real time from the feeds. The result was some 500 hours of videotape--an invaluable historic document, which the Israelis almost immediately abandoned.

Not only were the tapes left to deteriorate in an uncatalogued heap, with the rights to them sold piecemeal--a frequent fate of film and television footage--but the material was eventually made inaccessible. When the young Israeli filmmaker Eyal Sivan learned of the tapes in 1991 and asked to see them, he was informed that this footage didn't exist.

This wasn't a complete lie. When Sivan and writer Rony Brauman at last got their hands on the tapes, they estimated that a third of the footage had decayed so badly that it could no longer be viewed. Even so, I wonder if something beyond mere bureaucratic incompetence was at work in the general disappearance. During these years, the Israeli government had been holding on to another document from the trial: Eichmann's memoirs, an 1,100-page manuscript composed in jail. Knowing that written material can be quoted, misquoted, excerpted, paraphrased, recombined, framed and reframed, the Israelis decided to lock up the manuscript. They did not allow it to emerge until the last of February 2000, as evidence to be used by the historian Deborah Lipstadt against the Holocaust denier David Irving. Given that the Israelis were so cautious with Eichmann's memoirs, I would guess they felt just as uneasy about the uses to which the videotapes might be put. Such materials, too, can be framed and reframed, and with far more force than the written word, since people think of moving images as objective.

But in *The Specialist*, Sivan and Brauman make no pretense of objectivity. They are sophisticated people; as a filmmaker, Sivan has been concerned with the politics of memory and with the Israelis' attempts to write the Palestinians out of history, while Brauman, as a past chair of Médecins Sans Frontières, knows

something about the relationship between relief efforts and the news media. The two filmmakers seem to have noticed the irony inherent in the "complete record" of the Eichmann trial, which is not complete at all but rather the semi-rotted remains of whatever Leo Hurwitz selected from whatever could be seen from four distinct viewpoints. It might have been possible to conceal how these materials, with their blind spots and damage, fall short of the implied goal, which is omniscience. Instead, Sivan and Brauman have chosen this very inadequacy as their theme.

On the one hand, in a movement toward greater coherence, they have departed from the sequence of the hearings to construct a chronology of Eichmann's role in the Holocaust. The film takes you fairly smoothly from the 1930s, when Eichmann became a "specialist" in the forced emigration of Jews, to 1945 and the conclusion of his work in sending Jews, Gypsies, Poles and other undesirables to the death camps. On the other hand, the filmmakers have worked against this coherence by choosing for our attention everything in the hearings that was flawed and faltering, as if to make us see how a trial, or a history, is formed from a mass of fallibilities.

So here's what you can gather from *The Specialist*: Eichmann wipes clean a pair of eyeglasses and then tries to put them on, forgetting that he is already wearing a pair. While waiting for a translation to come through his headphones, he pulls his mouth leftward in a grimace. Answering a question, he rises and snaps to attention, then sits, rises again to answer, sits, rises again. "How did he look?" the prosecutor asks a witness, who is meant to place Eichmann at the scene of a massacre, only to receive the brusque reply, "He looks better than he ought to." A man in the audience begins to shout and is ejected. A judge expels a puff of air. Another judge, having just watched film footage of Auschwitz, covers his face with his hands. When the lead prosecutor, Gideon Hausner, is rebuked for introducing extraneous evidence, he responds by accusing judge Moshe Landau of not understanding the case. More shouts from the audience; more people ejected. Eichmann, sifting through piles of documents, stands in his glass booth and talks and talks and talks and talks, while different security guards appear and disappear behind him. What was his role at the Wannsee Conference? He merely wrote up the minutes, he says. Hausner, with more anger than forensic sarcasm requires, rounds on him and shouts, "Were you an SS lieutenant colonel or a stenographer?"

"It was German bureaucratic language," Eichmann snaps with a waspishness of his own, when asked at another point about an order he had signed. "'I' doesn't mean Eichmann. I wasn't writing private letters." As if to test this proposition, the filmmakers have his image fade away.

The Specialist is more or less a compilation of such breakdowns and missteps, their indecorum emphasized by a multitude of manipulations of image and sound. (The filmmakers have even placed the ghostly faces of spectators and witnesses--digital "reflections"--on the surface of Eichmann's glass booth.) Were I to make up an overall meaning for these pictures, I would be stepping in it myself. And so I will--because a respect for human mess is something else to be gathered from this film.

Eichmann had no respect for mess. The most efficient of men, he placed all his faith in meaning rather than facts. "Meaning," in his case, was his sworn duty as an officer; "facts," both human and mechanical, were mere instruments to be pushed around. *The Specialist*, in its very materials, resists this impulse to resolve away the particular. It resists the impulse as found in Eichmann himself; and it resists the impulse as expressed in the trial, which was less concerned with judging an individual than with using him for a larger purpose.

Am I establishing a moral equivalence? God forbid. There is a saving grace to be found in the trial, as Sivan and Brauman show in the remarkable sequence they choose as their climax. Late in the film, the judges, bypassing both the prosecutor and the Hebrew language, are moved to question Eichmann directly, in German. They don't try to make a point; they apparently have nothing to prove. They want to know *him*, the person whose "I" was supposedly irrelevant. How had he managed to go on, if he felt repugnance at his orders, as he claims? Is he testifying to some form of mental reservation? "I don't have to reveal my conscience," he complains; but when pressed, he replies, "It's possible to have a conscious split state."

For a moment, the specialist has become human, to the great interest of the men assigned to judge him. And then, being Eichmann, he blows it. "Remorse," he says, "is for little children."

The Specialist, distributed by Kino International, is on view in New York at Film Forum through April 25.

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When Billy Wilder defined alcoholism for the movies in *The Lost Weekend*, a New York drunk was a man who attended the opera, spoke in high-flown phrases and had German Expressionist visions of bats. Now, several decades later, *28 Days* gives us the contemporary definition: a woman who rocks out, blurts one-liners and has fuzzy-video visions of her mom.

Yes, manners have declined. But I'll say this for *28 Days*: The drunk is Sandra Bullock, who's enjoying her first good role in years, and the director is Betty Thomas, who learned long ago at The Second City how to alternate good, vulgar gags with moments of pathos. She and Bullock know how to sell shtick (as when our heroine has to clean the toilet at the rehab center), and they know how to sell emotion (as when Bullock is tempted to reveal herself to the hunky guy in her therapy group).

The strong and varied supporting cast includes Viggo Mortensen (a star baseball pitcher when not bottomed out), Azura Skye (a teenager addicted to heroin and soap operas), the smooth-talking Dominic West (Bullock's boyfriend and enabler), Alan Tudyk (a gay German performance artist, who may have been thrown into the mix as the filmmakers' tribute to Billy Wilder) and, in a stroke of casting genius, Steve Buscemi as the rehab counselor. In a world where Buscemi is the figure of reason, who needs bats?