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FILM REVIEW

War Criminal in a Glass Box: Eichmann Trial 40 Years Later

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By ELVIS MITCHELL

A new documentary, "The Specialist," comes at an interesting time in the culture. The producer and director, Eyal Sivan, has compiled and assembled black-and-white footage of the trial of the SS officer and war criminal Adolf Eichmann, and his film is the grimmest possible precursor to the occasionally frivolous "Court TV," which plays on the current fascination with watching the judicial process grind exceedingly slow, and exceedingly fine.

This year brings the 40th anniversary of Eichmann's capture; the trial opened in Jerusalem a year later, in 1961. "The Specialist" is an amazing document, if only for the spectacle of watching Eichmann, seated in a glass box with two armed guards, take in the trial. The box exaggerates Eichmann's own natural remove, and as he primly cleans his eyeglasses, it is hard to separate his demeanor from his appearance: the sharp features, the thin, almost lipless mouth that suggests the horrifying stereotype of dispassionate cruelty.



Kino International

Adolf Eichmann, chief architect of Hitler's "final solution," on trial in Jerusalem in 1961.

Mr. Sivan and his co-writer, Rony Brauman, have sifted through 350 hours of tape shot by the American documentary filmmaker Leo T. Hurwitz, who was commissioned to film the trial, and found the most dramatic footage. A scene in which the courtroom is darkened and film evidence of atrocities is projected is both low-key and unsettling. Reflections of those atrocities play across Eichmann's box, and he stares ahead in detachment, peering through the shadows, as the images are described by the prosecutor: "A dead man on an electrified fence."

Eichmann emerges as a different kind of "Specialist": the title

refers to his self-proclaimed "expertise" at "emigration." His attempts to explain his position -- he calls himself "weak and powerless" and actually utters the line "I'll simply obey orders," which might seem worthy of a laugh if it weren't so repugnant -- are delivered in the same deadpan he uses throughout.

Mr. Sivan's editor, Audrey Maurion, must deserve some credit as well. The "Specialist" filmmaking team shows the prosecutors, led by the cool Israeli attorney general, Gideon Hausner, whose expression is bemused contempt whenever Eichmann speaks, make their case with a startling lack of courtroom theatrics. As the horrors pile up, their dignity in the face of Eichmann's cold lies seems admirable, even as roiling stereo effects thunder on the soundtrack to create an aural current of discord. There is enough drama here that "The Specialist" doesn't require any extra emphasis. (Another minor quibble: the subtitles are sometimes hard to see against the black-and-white background.)

When Hausner, addressing the judges, says that Eichmann "was born human but lived like a beast in the jungle" and proves this truth, point by point, the movie succeeds on much quieter -- and more frightening -- terms.

THE SPECIALIST

Produced and directed by Eyal Sivan; written (in English, Hebrew, German and French, with English subtitles) by Rony Brauman and Mrcq. Sivan; archival footage by Leo T. Hurwitz; edited by Audrey Maurion; music by Yves Robert, Krishna Levy, Beatrice Thiriet and Jean-Michel Levy, and "Russian Dance" by Tom Waits; released by Kino International. At the Film Forum, 209 West Houston Street, South Village. Running time: 128 minutes. This film is not rated.

WITH: Adolf Eichmann, Moshe Landau, Benjamin Halevy, Gideon Hausner and Robert Servatius.

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