

In *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Paul Ricoeur writes about how society tends to overly remember certain historical events, while others remain almost forgotten. Major historical events such as the Holocaust occupy the forefront of the collective consciousness, he writes, while other profound moments such as the Armenian genocide, the McCarthy era, and France's role in North Africa are far more remote. According to Ricoeur, reconsidering the ethical ramifications of modern events is key to deepening our understanding of how collective memory is shaped.

Born in Haifa, Israel, Eyal Sivan started working as a filmmaker in the 1980s and 1990s. The study of memory had become a dominant paradigm in those days, and both the nature of memory processes and the uses of memories to achieve social goals were being widely studied. We need to take this into consideration to understand Sivan's mainly documentary practice, because a constant desire to determine what is worth remembering lies at the heart of this. Although he left his country very early, he grew up in a place where memory was considered a weapon, and even a vaccine. It justified violence.

'Framing Perpetrators' is part of a larger conceptual and practical framework drawn from a critical reflection on the humanistic tradition of documentary practices. According to Sivan, it functions as a proposal for a visual media show as well as an experimental production laboratory. It aims to frame the figure of 'the perpetrator' beyond geographies, cultures, political regimes, historical events, and faith. In his studio in Paris, we spoke about the notions of 're-archiving' and 'revisiting', and how Sivan is consciously disrupting the representations of political power through his cinematographic body of work. He questions the absence of the perpetrator's figure in the moving image tradition in order to rethink perpetrators' regimes of justification and their representation of crime, suffering, and political evil.

Suzanne Wallinga: Your ongoing project *Towards a Common Archive* aims to expose the history of atrocities perpetrated by the Israeli regime, which began in 1948 and continue to this day. It is a collection of cross-referenced testimonies by both victims and perpetrators. How do you explain the strong effect resulting from the remediation of certain events that had already been documented?

Eyal Sivan: My work gives rise to violent reactions, not just critical reviews. I think this has to do with the fact that I deliver a critique of humanism through my practice. Humanism is related to the constituency of regimes of justification. It also deals with the invention of otherness. It's about separation, not integration. I'm not a humanist. The period after Adolf Eichmann's trial in Jerusalem in 1961 invoked a moment in history that was defined by Annette Wieviorka as 'the era of the witness'. I would rather call it 'the era of the victim'. Through my work, I argue that the witness – the victim – becomes a screen on which the most important figure is projected: the perpetrator. If we think about the existing archives and collections, we need to understand that there are interviews with all of the survivors of the Holocaust, and that we have lots of testimonies by Auschwitz survivors, but we don't have a single collection of testimonies by train drivers. Through the event of the Eichmann trial, we discovered that there is no contradiction between the figures of perpetrator and victim. They are complimentary. Talking

about victimization is, first of all, about redeeming the voice of the perpetrator. And, to an even greater degree, it's not about the silence of the Zionist actors in the Palestinian ethnic cleansing, it's about the fact that they were not being asked. It's about the silence of the interrogators. It's also about our silence – the filmmakers, the mediators, etcetera.

SW: Could you elaborate on the way you question the constituency of regimes of justification in your work?

ES: Being a victim grants permission – it's the constituency of the act of justification. The permission that Israelis are granted comes from suffering: because you suffered, it's allowed. Even if you're the grandson of a victim, you're innocent, because you are a victim. By the way, it's the same the other way around, that when you're the son or daughter of a perpetrator, you will have to deal with being a perpetrator yourself. There is a perspective that they continue to be perpetrators. In my view, there is no difference between regarding the Jews as underdogs and regarding Jews as figures of absolute innocence. Let's leave the ideological element aside, and come back to the question of regimes of justification. I'm interested in this subject because of personal experience. I grew up with people who, at the age of eighteen, became criminals. I'm from the generation that fought in the Lebanese war in 1982. I'm from the generation that repressed the Palestinian uprising in 1987. People my age obeyed the order to break the bones, the hands,

and the legs of Palestinians. I'm not interested in the psychology of the perpetrator. In 1987, when I was looking at the images of the first Palestinian uprising, I saw my friends, my generation, behaving like evil humans, and I wondered what gives you the justification to do this, to perform acts of aggression and violence. My answer would have been because of the collective memory. There is no visual difference between genocide and a massacre – it becomes different through language, through the justification and the intention. The image of a pile of bodies stays the same. Regimes of justification are acted out between passivity and positivity. Justification does not come after the act – it is the self-explanation that permits, that allows the action. It comes before the act. Language is fundamental to this process, and has proven to be an important element in my work as well. Let's think about the etymology of the perpetrator. The perpetrator is the one who acts, who does. Perpetrator comes from the word pater, paternal, the one who protects, the one who is the father. It is a hierarchical position, first of all; it is a position that in politics we call 'realpolitik'.

SW: You are consciously disrupting the representations of political power – can we speak of a certain strategy that runs through your work?

ES: We have to review the answer to the question on three different levels. First, there is the so-called tradition, which is not discussed

that much today but which underlies the whole practice of documentary filmmaking – that is, the notion of truth and of objectivity. And the terror of truth and objectivity, I would say. Even in the most critical arenas, the tradition of the documentary has not been discarded. I'm always tackling this question.

Second, there is a boundary I'm dealing with, between iconoclasm and profanation. As Giorgio Agamben explains, profanation means taking something that belongs to the gods and bringing it to the people. All my work is about profanation. Profanation means that there can be a relationship to the sacred, the holy. It so happens that Europe, the West, believes itself to be secular but is not secular at all. And if there is a holiness in the Western world, it has to do with the holiness of the memory of the Holocaust, the holiness of the Jewish victim, and I see myself as being in the position of profaning this holiness. If I would do the same kind of work with the images of football games, nobody would care. But my work touches the very heart of the European question, and is working through practice within this dynamic between objectivity – truth – 'truthness'.

Third. I'm touching the heart of the European contradiction itself, and this is a matter of attitude. I refuse the graveness, the dominant approach for how you're supposed to speak about a very sad history. There is something about the permanent iconoclasm of freedom. My secularism is about total respect for religion and beliefs, but it's not about transforming objects into holy

material. And here we are talking about holy material, about sacred material. Profanation and iconoclasm is a strategy, it is a position. There is a desire to establish political-aesthetical projects.

SW: You collaborated with the students from the master's programme on a short film: *Revisit*. Can you tell me more about this film and about how the notion of revisiting and re-visioning is important to documentary practices?

ES: 'Re-visioning' is a fundamental notion for me, and the re-visioning of history is at the core of my work. To review is to look at something from a new angle. For *Revisit*, we worked at the level of interpretation. The students interviewed tourists queuing for the Anne Frank House, asking them about their memories of the atrocities from the Second World War. They recorded all the clichés people mentioned related to the memory of Anne Frank's persona and the war: 'It's horrible', 'It's such a sad story', 'We must remember, so we won't let it happen again', etcetera.

When I think about memory, I wonder what is forgotten. I started wondering what Camp Westerbork is like today. So I went to their website, and there I was surprised to find photos of Commander Albert Konrad Gemmeker at home with his wife, reading a book, sitting with the dog, etcetera. His house is not a *lieu de memoire* ('site of memory'), though, as is Anne Frank's. So the students went to Westerbork to film Gemmeker's house, which today is abandoned, and not a tourist site.

When the students were shooting there, workers were building a dome to preserve the house for future conservation. But sixty years ago, no one would have thought that his house would be a place to remember. The material from the shoot and Gemmeker's photos were juxtaposed with the audiorecordings from the Anne Frank House. By doing this, the students were revisiting a specific moment of memory and history and were challenged to take a critical look at the notion of the icon of the victim, in this case Anne Frank. It was interesting that Gemmeker himself was also an amateur filmmaker, who staged himself in the photos. Perpetrating is about performing.

SW: Which critical models do you find relevant for the appreciation of your work? How do you contextualize your practice?

ES: With my first film, I started following the classical path of documentary filmmaking – my first film was about Palestinian refugees. It meant that I was the Israeli, voicing the other. And at the same time creating the other. But my second film, *Slaves of Memory*, offered a view on the Israeli educational system, which is centred around creating a national memory in order to justify the present and the future through the past. And to justify committing crimes through the remembering of crimes. A few years later I worked on the Eichmann trial project, which deals with the fact that the memory of the Eichmann trial is completely structured through the figure of the victim. My

practice echoes the work of Tzvetan Todorov, and in particular his 1995 essay 'The Abuses of Memory'. In this text, he seeks to examine the memory of historical injustices by exploring our desire to have been victimized in the past. He uses a distinction between 'literal' and 'exemplary' memory – literal memory establishes continuity between who you were and who you are now, whereas exemplary memory has to do with processes of analogy and generalization – the past becomes a principle from which action in the present may be derived. According to Todorov, Jewish memory takes the form of literal memory, and cannot reach beyond itself; it is self-referential and antithetical to justice. Two figures I'm really interested in with regard to the use of the archive – I don't like to speak about the use of the archive because it's contradictory to what I've already said, and I'm talking about re-archiving – are Farun Harocky and Marcel Ophüls, and Ophüls' works like *The Memory of Justice*. I see both a theoretical and a practical relationship to their work. It's all about de-framing and reframing. This brings into

consideration the realization that the archive is a completely different idea than the notion of storage – the archive is a narrative – it's not that the archive has a narrative, even the institutional archive; it is a narrative. And this means that when we talk about the archive as a narrative, we're talking about deconstruction and reconstruction. In archival terms, de-archiving and re-archiving as a permanent dynamic. This dynamic approach is vital to understanding an archive. Lots of material from the Eichmann trial disappeared; it wasn't used, and nobody seemed to care about it. So, if we accept the idea of the archive – which is not a question of the past, but is instead important for the future – the question is, What does it mean to archive oblivions? What does it mean to deal with the hidden, the ignored, and the forgotten? For me, this meant that working with archival material created a space for opportunity; it is a place to articulate. It all refers back to Walter Benjamin and his postulate that the past is not in the past, but that the past is in the present.

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Eyal Sivan is an Israeli documentary filmmaker and theoretician based in Paris. Born in Haifa, Israel, he grew up in Jerusalem. He is Reader (Associate Professor) in Media Production at the School of Arts and Digital Industries (ADI) at the University of East London (UEL). For several years, he co-directed their Master of Arts (MA) programme in Film, Video, and New Media. Sivan has directed more than fifteen political documentary works, which received international awards, and produced many others. Among his most famous works are *Common State*, *Potential conversation* [1] (2012), *Jaffa*, *The Orange's Clockwork* (2009), *I Love You All*, *Aus Liebe Zum Volk* (co-directed with Audrey Maurion) (2004), *Route 181*, *Fragments Of A Journey In Palestine-Israel* (co-directed with Michel Khleifi) (2003), and *The Specialist*, *Portrait Of A Modern Criminal* (1999). He has received numerous prestigious awards for his cinematographic body of work.

Suzanne Wallinga

Suzanne Wallinga is an independent curator and researcher. She is a frequent guest lecturer at several Dutch academies, universities, and postgraduate programmes, including the Master's Degree Programme in Film at the Netherlands Film and Television Academy.

The Master's Degree Programme in Film offers a select group of filmmakers and media artists the opportunity for further personal development within an investigative, highly demanding, and internationally orientated setting. The two-year programme is increasingly developing into an artistic research and development programme. Sivan's residency was supported by the Art Practice and Development research group in collaboration with the institutes at the Amsterdam School of the Arts.