

A common state solution

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INTERVIEW: The Israeli filmmaker, Eyal Sivan, prefers to make films about perpetrators, rather than victims. In his most recent film, *Common State*, he advocates a one-state solution for Israel. DOX met him in Thessaloniki. By Truls Lie.

It's March in Greece. The world famous Israeli filmmaker Eyal Sivan is attending the Thessaloniki Documentary Festival, which is showing a retrospective of his many films. Along with Amos Gitai and Avi Mograbi, Sivan is known as a dissident among Israeli filmmakers. He tells DOX that he wants to provoke with his films, to get people to react. Sivan is used to opposition, but for each person who supports him, there are ten who criticise him. Many hate the free-speaking filmmaker from Israel's upper middle class. He has received a bullet in the mail with the message "next time, it'll be one of these". When a director friend of his lost his life making a pro-Palestinian film, he started to fear for his safety and that of his family. But he tolerates accusations and hate-filled comments because, as festival director, Dimitri Eipides, writes in the Thessaloniki festival catalogue: "He dares to show the other side – the Palestinian side – as something less one-dimensional than the word 'enemy', to talk about Israel beyond the usual ideological construct of the chosen people or victimhood; to reveal the propaganda machine..."

Sivan thrives at the film editing table with old archive footage, although it has ruined his back, necessitated surgery and a daily exercise regime. He describes his work as a battlefield: "When you are in the middle of a battle, you don't ask yourself if you are tired, or haven't eaten enough." This is confirmed by a phone call from his wife during our interview with him – in which she insists that he has to stop working and come home. But there are other journalists waiting in the hallway here in Thessaloniki.

Sivan grew up in Jerusalem with Zionist parents but moved to Paris in his twenties. He has made more than ten controversial documentaries and continues to make his mark through essays and as the editor of the political journal *South Cinema Notebooks*. His films are principally about the perpetrators – he believes victim films show only the consequences, not the causes. His aim is to leave his audiences uneasy. In his first film, *Agabat-Jaber* from 1987, about some Palestinians in a refugee camp, he found that the film virtually just confirmed the audience's desire to be empathetic humanists. Such films tend to hide the perpetrator. Since then he has wanted to disturb audiences with films like *The Specialist: Portrait of a Modern Criminal* (1999). *The Specialist* deals with the Israeli court case of Adolf Eichmann, the Nazi bureaucrat who organised the transportation of Jews to the concentration camps. Sivan claims the legal procedure was political, and emphasizes this in his manipulation of some of the copious archive footage. He found most of the archives hidden in an old lavatory. Sivan creatively edits into the film a "reflection" of the audience in the defendant's glass cage and also places a judge in the same sequence. He also comments to DOX

that the six-month-long court case could have lasted three days, hadn't it been for the Israeli's desire to give "evil" a face.

Sivan usually investigates what is omitted when history is written: so how come the Israeli intelligence only apprehended Eichmann in 1960 when they knew about him as early as 1955? 50 years ago this month, they hung Eichmann – the only execution carried out in Israel under civil law. So did Israel make political use of this court case to write its own history?

For his film *Shoah* (1985), Claude Lanzmann, another Jewish filmmaker, compiled a collection of witness statements on the annihilation of the Jews. Lanzmann chose not to use archive material since this was often derived from propaganda films, but also because such old clips could have a distancing effect. He also rejected the modern, dramatic staging seen in *Holocaust* (1978) and *Schindler's List* (1993), which he described as obscene because to his mind the incomprehensible should not be depicted through the consolation offered by the survivors. *Shoah* was to be about death itself, with interviews conducted forty years later at the actual crime scenes with those who had lived up close to this mechanism of death. He calls his film a meticulously constructed "fictionalization of reality".

What role do Jewish or Muslim testimonies play in our memory? Who is deserving of our sympathy and compassion? Only the Jews? Only the Palestinians? Lanzmann has verbally attacked Eyal Sivan, referring to Sivan's *Route 181: Fragments of a Journey in Palestine-Israel* (2004), he said: "I think that he mocks the Palestinians, he has no compassion for them. It is a bad film, fastidious, irritating, Holocaust-denying, profoundly immoral, and dishonest. He neglects to say that on [...] the day that the state of Israel was created, five Arab armies invaded the country, and there were 6,000 deaths among the 600,000 Israelis that made up the country." The French philosopher, Alan Finkelkraut, has called Sivan "a self-hating Jew".

Sivan himself tells DOX: "It's a struggle between Zionism and non-Zionism. I think there are many ways of making cinema, not just one. Lanzmann thinks of Israel in terms of fiction, I think of Israel in terms of reality."

In *Jaffa, The Orange's Clockwork* (2009) Sivan, in contrast to Lanzmann, uses archive film to analyse images of the Palestinians who were forcefully driven out of Jaffa. Only 3000 remained out of the 180,000 who worked in the orange groves there. The film shows old photographs depicting the Palestinians as more barbaric than the Jews and Jaffa as a desolate "primitive place, waiting for modernity to come and save it ... Come and conquer me!"

Jaffa is the world's most famous brand after Coca-Cola, a symbol of Israel as a modern, fruitful country – counterfeited in the name of nationalism. For the Palestinians, the orange brand now symbolises a lost homeland. As is said in the film "the scent of your oranges" symbolises a return to Jaffa.

But what can Jaffa's past tell us about the future of Palestine? The answer may lie in the film, when an old Palestinian says that in Jaffa, you were not allowed to refer to others as Muslims,

Jews or Christians.

Sivan believes the current collaborators in Israel are those who avoid criticising: "When you come from an apartheid state, from the white upper class, with complete freedom to criticise, if you, as an intellectual or an artist do not take the opportunity to criticise – it's pure collaboration." Sivan criticises the image of Israel as the victim because it "legitimises" the attacks on the Palestinians.

Israeli nationalism and victimhood are also in the spotlight in the film *Izkor – Slaves of Memory* (1990), in which Sivan examines what the myth of the "chosen people" and Israel's ideology about the enemy is doing to the country's young school children.

— You refer to Hannah Arendt, Walter Benjamin and Michel Foucault; do you find engagement in ethics and philosophy?

— No, it's reading reality, answers Sivan.

— How come you're still working in Israel? What drives you to work so hard for political change?

— You have a memory that you were born out of Auschwitz; it's your perspective, but also the idea that the only thing you can go back to is Auschwitz. Everything in Israel is done to go inside an apocalyptic vision – you don't have a vision of life, but of destruction. Of course, expansion, more settlements, all those things done for over 50 years is rubbish. The only thing that will save the Jewish community in the Arab world is to integrate, to be a part.

— It's a completely apocalyptic vision, because Israel and the Israeli society don't give an open future for its youth. It's the future of the paranoiac; he needs to be persecuted in order to be right. All now for 60 years Israel has built the idea that "they want our destruction, our disappearance." We're talking about a nation that has almost 200 nuclear bombs. If you think about Iran and Israel today... it's about suicide.

— Israel represents a moral credit of six million corpses facing Europe. But the interest today of the state of Israel is to keep Auschwitz as the centre of attention. That we are all victims, we were victims, we are victims, we will be victims.

— The notion of memory sometimes confuses. Memory is first of all getting over with forgetting, memory and oblivion go together. The processes of oblivion are something necessary to overcome memory. Memory is not good or bad. It can be the most horrible weapon, as we see how our memory is used by Israel for example. Sometimes there is a need to forget. There is no duty of memory. The victim has a right to forget. If there is a duty of memory, it is on the side of the perpetrator. Sometimes forgetting is a catharsis, putting the past in the past, so the past won't influence the present. Or else we are stuck with fights that are no longer based on the real reality.

Is Sivan a political filmmaker then? I ask him: — Yes, I don't know what a non-political filmmaker is. Often those are the most political filmmakers; they are saying "oh, I am not doing politics".

Sivan fights for a one-state solution in Israel, in contrast to most positions in politics about the Middle-East. He believes the two-state policy is wrong: — Since 1937 we have said to the

Palestine question: "partition!", 75 years. Everybody says this is the good solution. Come on, if it was such a good solution, how is it possible with 75 years with no solution?

In Sivan's new film *Common State – Conversations* (2011) he lets 25 intellectuals, activists, academics, Jew and Arabs discuss the one-state solution. On a screen that is divided in two, the English subtitles make it look as though they are talking to one another, even though proceedings are in Hebrew and Arabic. Let me repeat some of the arguments presented in the film: "In the 1100's, 97 percent of Jews spoke Arabic as a native tongue"; "I have Jewish as well as Palestinian culture in me"; "My best friend is Palestinian, our conversation flows and is religious"; "No colonist has ever given away anything voluntarily"; "We need an ethical coexistence"; "We have to accept that we live in an Arab region"; "Equal treatment and the right to return home is central, the rest are footnotes"; "The two thirds who live in diasporas must also have a right to decide"; and "We have to respect one another as equal partners, with a willingness to share".

Sivan thinks the multicultural route should be taken: — The problem is not to have an identity, French, Arab etc, but to have one unique identity. Not to accept multiplicity, to refuse it. This is exactly what power can play with. If you are one, you are obviously against something. If you are many, it is more complicated for you.

— How do you see a one-state solution falling into place, by international force?

— Absolutely. I think it will have to be something that has to be imposed by force. That the world will understand that the Israel-Palestinian conflict is not a regional conflict. It is the crystallisation or the colourisation of the East-West conflict. If the West wants to stop this conflict, it should take the responsibility for the space of Palestine-Israel. I see it first as the end of the occupation. How? By an international force.

— There must be only one army, one police. Today we have militia, of the settlers, the Palestinian forces. We will have two languages, mixed schools not as today where they are separated. And first of all, kids together in the kindergarden.

— In a common state, the government can only have members who are committed to this solution. Equal citizenship. The occupation must be abolished.

Sivan ends by telling me – as a Norwegian – that there is a need for a new Oslo Agreement: — There has to be a new Oslo Agreement that has to be about one space that has to be shared, and not partition between the two. I think the old Oslo Agreement was the most unjust and unfair thing, but it had other advantages. In that moment it shifted mentality, which shows if you bring a proposal that is new, you can shift mentality. This is what is left from what we have from Oslo. What followed from Oslo was a catastrophe. Why? Because the Israelis were not honest. They didn't come with an idea of how to build togetherness. They came with the idea of how we will separate.

— After all, Norway did more than other European countries did, they just shouldn't have pretended that it was a negotiation between equal partners. Over the last 30 years, the USA has

behaved like a third party, but they are part of the conflict. With their neutrality, countries like Norway, Switzerland and Finland could have a whole different kind of power.