

The Desk Murderer and the Corporate Executive: (Re)concretizing the “Banality of Evil” in The Specialist and The Himmler Project

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Immediately after World War II, when the question of culpability for National Socialist (NS) crimes was first posed, the preponderance of guilt was assigned to Adolf Hitler and the most prominent members of the Nazis' elite leadership.¹ In the mind of the German public, institutions such as the SS and the Gestapo had long been treated as *the* criminal organizations, while the Wehrmacht and many other Nazi collaborators remained shielded from accusations of guilt. A limited circle of perpetrators was demonized, but in reality the perpetrators did not conform to clichés. The vilification fulfilled a concrete function: depictions of this sort “were doubtless a means of creating distance, one that enabled the broad majority of the public to establish a gap between themselves and highly visible perpetrators, and thus to relativize their own, less spectacular complicity.”²

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1. See, e.g., Gerhard Paul, ed., *Die Täter der Shoah: Fanatische Nationalsozialisten oder ganz normale Deutsche?* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2002).

2. Margit Reiter, “Vaterbilder und Mutterbilder: Geschlechtsspezifische Zuschreibungen von Täterschaft und Schuld in der NS-Nachfolgegeneration,” in *Scham und Schuld: Geschlechter(sub)texte der Shoah*, ed. Maja Figge, Konstanze Hanitzsch, and Nadine Teuber (Bielefeld: transcript, 2010), 63.

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With the passage of time, research on National Socialism initiated a process of differentiation. In his groundbreaking study Raul Hilberg analyzed the attempted extermination of the Jews as an administrative process that involved a broad spectrum of society, each serving as cogs in a bureaucratic machinery.³ Alongside those persons Hilberg describes as the “technocrats of destruction,” ordinary Germans have, at least since the 1990s, stood in the sightlines of perpetrator research. Here one could list studies by Christopher R. Browning about Reserve Police Battalion 101, Daniel Goldhagen’s research for his book *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*, and the much-discussed exhibition on the crimes of the Wehrmacht organized by Hannes Heer and Klaus Naumann.⁴ More recently, female perpetrators have come under investigation, and the gender-specific ascription of perpetrator characteristics has been scrutinized.⁵

While historical research has long presupposed a differentiated view of perpetrators, the discourse in film, literature, and the press is still dominated by clichéd perpetrator images that stem from the postwar era. Stories are frequently told from the victim’s perspective, which makes it easy to stand at a distance from perpetrators. In general, this position abets the tendency toward exoneration and leaves the inner perspective of the perpetrator unexplored. Even Oliver Hirschbiegel’s feature film *Downfall* (2004) treats matters this way. Despite the glimpse it offers into the *Führerbunker* shortly before the end of the war, it is most concerned with looking into the eyes of the leading Nazi elite and of Bruno Ganz’s Hitler.⁶

Adopting the perpetrator’s perspective still seems unusual today. The debate over Jonathan Littell’s novel *The Kindly Ones* (2006), which told its story from the perspective of an SS mass murderer, demonstrates the risks of such an approach.⁷ Romuald Karmakar has also ascertained that it is funda-

3. See Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, 3rd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), esp. 1075, 1104. Hilberg uses the phrase “technocrats of destruction” on p. 1076.

4. On the Wehrmacht exhibition, see Hannes Heer and Klaus Naumann, eds., *Vernichtungskrieg: Verbrechen der Wehrmacht 1941 bis 1944* (Frankfurt am Main: Zweitausendeins, 1997).

5. See Figge, Hanitzsch, and Teuber, *Scham und Schuld*. See also Kathrin Kompisch, *Täterinnen: Frauen im Nationalsozialismus* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2008).

6. On this aspect of *Downfall*, see Johannes von Moltke, “Sympathy for the Devil: Cinema, History, and the Politics of Emotion,” *New German Critique*, no. 102 (2007): 17–43; and Elisabeth Krimmer, “More War Stories: *Stalingrad* and *Downfall*,” in *The Collapse of the Conventional: German Film and Its Politics at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Jaimey Fisher and Brad Prager (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010), 81–108.

7. See Peter-André Alt, *Ästhetik des Bösen* (Munich: Beck, 2010), 496ff. See also Birgit Dalke, “Nuda Veritas? Zum Effekt des Pornographischen in Jonathan Littells Roman *Les Bienveillantes*,” in Figge, Hanitzsch, and Teuber, *Scham und Schuld*, 301–17.

mentally easier to identify with the victims, but his films are concerned with various types of perpetrators: “If anything the public is prepared to think itself into the role of the victim. To take on the role of the perpetrator is more challenging. But we need the willingness to do it, otherwise we won’t move forward. . . . Until now this perspective has simply been suppressed, and this suppression has an effect on how stories are permitted to be told.”⁸ In interviews Karmakar has repeatedly emphasized how important it is to take on another perspective besides that of the victim. If the victim’s account is meaningful in order for the consequences of the crime to be depicted, then the perpetrator’s account is central to comprehending the crime itself. Thus several aspects have to be attended to: in addition to investigating perpetrators’ motives, personality structures should also be accounted for. Interesting in this regard is not only *what* the perpetrator says but *how* the perpetrator says it. Rhetoric, gestures, and mimicry allow for subtexts to emerge that are precisely as meaningful for understanding the crime as they are for illuminating the complex power structures in which the perpetrators functioned and became entangled. Only in this way can a differentiated image emerge that works against demonization and admits contradictions.

Even though Heinrich Himmler and Adolf Eichmann occupied two very different positions within the NS power hierarchy, they are immediately thought of as among the most prominent NS perpetrators. Himmler as Reichsführer-SS and chief of the German police was answerable for the Holocaust and numerous war crimes, while Eichmann, as specialist officer for Jewish Affairs and as transportation administrator, was responsible for ensuring that the deportation of European Jews and the Romani people to the extermination camps in the east went smoothly. Next to Hitler, Eichmann and Himmler represent, for Harry Mulisch, who reported in 1961 on the Eichmann trial for the Dutch magazine *Elseviers Weekblad*, two categories of murderers to

8. See “Dem Täter eine Chance: Ein Zeit-Gespräch mit dem Filmregisseur Romuald Karmakar,” *Die Zeit*, June 29, 2000, www.zeit.de/2000/27/Dem_Taeter_eine_Chance. In his monograph Tobias Ebbrecht describes Karmakar’s outsider position, with its focus on various types of German cinematic perpetrators, as follows: “Karmakar’s films offer no moral point of orientation; they reject the safety of a detached position. On the one hand, they call for a distanced gaze from the familiar, and on the other, they create a proximity—you would prefer to look away and not see things so directly. . . . Karmakar looks, in his films, where others want to look away. Whether it deals with soldiers, mercenaries, or foreign legionnaires, Nazi perpetrators and German criminals, Islamist preachers, or the abysses of the everyday world, which, in contemporary German cinema, generally disappear behind neoromantic viewpoints or into forms of naturalism.” See Ebbrecht, *Bilder hinter den Worten—Über Romuald Karmakar* (Berlin: Verbrecher, 2010), 30.

whom a prototypical status could be attributed.⁹ If the first category consists solely of Hitler himself, then Himmler is “a prime example” of the second one: “the believer.”¹⁰ Himmler not only believed everything Hitler said but also believed in the NS ideology and “in the most childish by-products of the *Weltanschauung*, such as the ‘Nordic’ mythology, and . . . in astrology. Without Hitler he would have ‘detested the Jews’ at most.” Thus Himmler “in no way resembled the colorful lasciviousness of the classic mass murderers, but in everything he resembled the manager of the sanitation department—for he never killed ‘people.’”¹¹

Eichmann stands for the third and last category. In contrast with Himmler, Eichmann believed neither in Hitler nor in the NS ideology. Rather, as Mulisch detailed in his trial report *Criminal Case 40/61, the Trial of Adolf Eichmann*, he simply carried out abstract orders. As Eichmann stated during the trial, “When we receive an order, we automatically click our heels together and say, ‘Yes Sir.’”¹² The perfidious part was that Eichmann obeyed orders that “he knew to be false. He would never have given such orders himself, he says (no doubt truthfully), but since he was in a position of *receiving* them, he had to obey them. From this opinion ‘an order’ emerges as something larger than the one giving it and the one receiving it.”¹³ Eichmann too was less possessed by the idea of exterminating the Jews, as Mulisch states, but much more by “the order.” “An order is an order” was the motto in accord with which Eichmann lived and worked.

Similar to Hitler in *Downfall*, both Himmler, the “believer,” and Eichmann, the “follower of orders,” have fallen under renewed scrutiny. For this reason, two extraordinary perpetrator portraits have emerged. They have created interesting lines of connection to contemporary power and hierarchical structures that are either manufactured by corporations or found in political, bureaucratic, and even religious institutions. Karmakar’s *Himmler Project*

9. Arendt praised Mulisch’s reporting alongside the work of Robert Pendorf, noting that few publications contained more than a rehashed version of the case, and “among them are two accounts of the trial that often come to conclusions astonishingly similar to my own. . . . These are Robert Pendorf’s *Mörder und Ermordete. Eichmann und die Judenpolitik des Dritten Reiches*, which also takes into account the role of the Jewish Councils in the Final Solution; [and] *Strafsache 40/61* by the Dutch correspondent Harry Mulisch . . . , who is almost the only writer on the subject to put the person of the defendant at the center of his report and whose evaluation of Eichmann coincides with my own on some essential points.” See Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin, 1994), 281–82.

10. Harry Mulisch, *Criminal Case 40/61, the Trial of Adolf Eichmann: An Eyewitness Account*, trans. Robert Naborn (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 108.

11. *Ibid.*, 108, 109.

12. *Ibid.*, 113.

13. *Ibid.*, 111.

(2000) concretizes—or *reconcretizes*—the first of Himmler’s notorious Posen speeches from 1943. Presented in the city of Posen (Poznań), the speech is, in the film, read dryly by the actor Manfred Zapatka and deftly reverse-projected onto the present. *The Specialist—Portrait of a Modern Criminal* (1999), by Eyal Sivan and Rony Brauman, takes a new look at the Eichmann trial with recourse to Hannah Arendt’s reporting, which first appeared in the *New Yorker* in 1961 and was published as a book in 1963 under the title *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*.¹⁴

As distinct as the two films might at first glance appear—one is focused on Himmler’s concrete annunciations and speech patterns, and the other works predominantly with footage taken at the Eichmann trial—both turn on similar questions. Their uninhibited treatment of their respective archival materials permits the recognition of an aesthetic approach that blurs the boundaries between authenticity and fiction, documentary and feature film, and past and present. When it comes to *The Himmler Project* and *The Specialist*, the usual parameters that define documentary film no longer apply. Both inhabit an idiosyncratic middle terrain and do not admit any easy genre definitions. In terms of form and content they are vexing in multiple ways, and for this reason they raise more questions than they answer. In particular, the unconventional, alienating, and abstract treatment of archival material enables otherwise well-known perpetrators to appear in a new light and allows the question of their current relevance to emerge again. In Eichmann and Himmler one finds perpetrators who can hardly be viewed as historical figures and seen from a safe distance; here they appear as prototypes who could now or at any time resurface, whether as bureaucratic desk murderers or as corporate executives.

Sivan and Brauman’s Specialist

The Eichmann trial garnered massive worldwide attention in 1961. It was what today would be referred to as a media spectacle, with detailed reports via television, radio, and print from Israel. In the end, the Eichmann trial was, second only to that of the major war criminals before the International Military Tribunal in Nuremberg, the most closely observed postwar trial against a

14. Here one should mention Margarethe von Trotta’s feature film *Hannah Arendt* (2012), which like Sivan and Brauman’s film relies on archival material from the Eichmann trial to offer the viewer insight into Arendt’s frame of reference. In particular, von Trotta includes the initial plea from the prosecutor as well as the first public glimpse of Eichmann in his “glass cage.” These are shots that Sivan and Brauman make central to their film. Von Trotta’s film is, however, concerned less with deconstructing and questioning those images as such than with using them to create an atmosphere of authenticity.

leading representative of the NS extermination machinery.¹⁵ In advance of the trial, Eichmann's arrest by the Israeli secret service in Argentina and his abduction to Israel were widely discussed, and the issue of whether he should be brought before the Israeli court was contested. Many observers, Arendt included, would have preferred to see him brought before an international court, and they saw the trial as a tool misused to advance national aims. Arendt even referred to the trial as a "show trial" staged by Israeli prime minister David Ben-Gurion. For her, Ben-Gurion was the "invisible stage manager," who, although he remained far from the proceedings, was present in the voice of Gideon Hausner, the senior public prosecutor.¹⁶

Arendt fails to mention in her report one thing that supports her thesis: shortly before the trial Ben-Gurion had personally seen to it that the proceedings would be completely documented with the latest recording technology. In the courtroom, originally designed to be a theater, video cameras were hidden behind four partitions during the nine-month trial, and they were pointed at the accused, the judges, the prosecutor, and the witnesses. For the filming, the American documentarian Leo Hurwitz determined "which images from which cameras would be recorded on two-inch magnetic tape."¹⁷ Five hundred hours of material was produced in this way. After the trial, the material was deemed no longer useful; it slipped away and was forgotten.¹⁸ Only "the mov-

15. On the Nuremberg major war crimes trials of 1945–46, see thought-provoking contributions by Irmela von der Lühe, Anneke de Rudder, and Christine Bartlitz under the heading "Nürnberg und die Folgen: Männer vor Gericht," in *"Bestien" und "Befehlsempfänger": Frauen und Männer in NS-Prozessen nach 1945*, ed. Ulrike Weckel and Edgar Wolfrum (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 2003), 25–37, 38–65, 66–91.

16. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 4, 5.

17. Ruth Beckermann, "Haus der Gerechtigkeit: Eyal Sivans Eichmann Film *Ein Spezialist*," *Meteor* 5 (1999): 94. Hurwitz's film, *Verdict for Tomorrow* (1961), is twenty-eight minutes long and is held at the Steven Spielberg Jewish Film Archive in Jerusalem.

18. The archival material vanished over the years, but not completely. Stuart Liebman notes: "After Eichmann was hanged on May 31, 1962, no one seems to have given much thought to the questions of who was to preserve the videotapes and how they should do so. Eventually, they ended up in the archives of Hebrew University, but they were ultimately transferred to the newly established Steven Spielberg archive when it was formed in the late 1970s. Some sixty-six hours of the most sensational footage was culled, and made available to filmmakers and historians. These excerpts have subsequently been put to use in about a dozen later documentaries, most notably *Witnesses to the Holocaust: The Trial of Adolf Eichmann* (produced by the Jewish Museum in New York in 1987 and now distributed by Lorimar Home Video) and in PBS's *The Trial of Eichmann*." See Liebman, "If This Be a Man . . . : Eichmann on Trial in *The Specialist*," *Cineaste* 27, no. 2 (2002): 40–42. On the handling and preservation of the archival material, see also the opinion of Stewart Tryster, who takes a position different from that of Eyal Sivan, in "Der wahre Spezialist: Eyal Sivans Filmcollage zum Eichmann-Prozess," *Einsicht 05. Bulletin des Fritz Bauer Instituts. Adolf Eichmann vor Gericht. Der Prozess in Jerusalem* (2011): 48–54. See also www.fritz-bauer-institut.de/fileadmin/user_upload/uploads/FBI/einsicht/Einsicht-05.pdf.

ing testimony of some Holocaust victims” and “a couple scenes featuring the accused” were shown, and the remaining footage gathered dust in archives.¹⁹

Thirty years later Eyal Sivan, an Israeli filmmaker living in Frankfurt am Main, stumbled across the material while researching another project in the Steven Spielberg Jewish Film Archive in Jerusalem. He immediately recognized that, as an effort to completely document a war crime, the material was one of a kind. In the Nuremberg trials, for example, only a “few filmic outtakes were shot, and subsequently such proceedings were generally subject to court imposed bans against filming.”²⁰ Of the 500 hours of trial footage, 350 was preserved. From the remaining material Sivan and Brauman, together with the editor Audrey Maurion, assembled a two-hour film, which, in its structure and narrative style, closely adhered to the material in Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. For this reason Darcy C. Buerkle views it not as a documentary about the Eichmann trial but as “a film about the complicated spectatorship of that trial with Arendt’s specular relationship to it as point of departure.”²¹

The desired proximity to Arendt’s trial report becomes recognizable at many places in the film. The opening credits explicitly reference the text, and the film’s progression of sequences reproduces a similarly theatrical rendering of the trial that Arendt strove for in her book. *The Specialist* hones this strategy even further as it highlights the machinery of staging and eventually reaches a critical metalevel. As in Arendt’s work, the focus remains on Eichmann. The witness statements, along with the testimony on the Jewish Councils—the *Judenräte*—which during the trial was allotted more time than was expected and which commanded most of the attention, here slip into the background. The film in this way visually depicts what Arendt already tried to grasp with her concept “banality of evil”: the contradiction between, on the one hand, the petit bourgeois mediocrity of a man like Eichmann, and on the other, our knowledge of the magnitude of the Nazis’ crimes.

The film’s fascination with Eichmann, the bureaucratic desk murderer, whose individual insinuations about the position of the Jewish Councils

19. Carlos Widmann, “Zerstörer des Volkes,” *Der Spiegel*, February 15, 1999. The precise details have been subject to some debate between the filmmakers and the archive, as pointed out by Darcy Buerkle. For background, Buerkle directs readers to Stuart Klawans, “Final Cut on Final Solution,” *Nation*, May 8, 2000, 50–52, and the follow-up letter exchange titled “Eichmann-Trial Videotapes,” *Nation*, June 12, 2000, 2. See Buerkle, “Affect in the Archive: Arendt, Eichmann and *The Specialist*,” in *Visualizing the Holocaust: Documents, Aesthetics, Memory*, ed. David Bathrick, Brad Prager, and Michael D. Richardson (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2008), 234n4.

20. Beckermann, “Haus der Gerechtigkeit,” 94.

21. Buerkle, “Affect in the Archive,” 222.

during the war were thoroughly contested, could certainly have contributed to how *The Specialist* met with a critical fate not unlike that of Arendt's own trial reporting.²² Along with the criticism that the film held too tightly to Arendt's thesis, most critics assailed the filmmaker's manipulation of archival material.²³ Stuart Liebman, for example, concludes that "most often, the gimmicks are more distracting than meaningful. Collectively, these strategies create errors of balance and perspective, tact and judgment."²⁴ Thomas Klingenmaier, writing for the *Stuttgarter Zeitung*, points out the dangers that, in his opinion, went along with an overly strong reworking of the original material, and in this he reproduces the criticism advanced by the Spielberg archives:

Because the material already for technical reasons required extensive post-processing, and because the filmmakers already had a firm conception of what the images were supposed to show, they have, in their reworking, far overshot the mark. Their cuts, dissolves, and atmospheric collages are so intrusive that the documentary material quickly starts to resemble game pieces. Worse still, the filmmakers themselves intrude into the images: the computer gives us camera movements where none existed, and it turns the trial observers into a reflection in Eichmann's glass booth so that the accused can be directly confronted by his victims. It plays right into the hands of those who would not wish to acknowledge these documents, those who want to declare all history propaganda written by the victors, and those who stroll about all the more brazenly while the witnesses die out, declaring that the visual material from that time could have been manufactured by image-counterfeiting machinery.²⁵

Klingenmaier's critique about the apparent fabrication of the images overlooks the fact that hardly any other documentary films thematize the repurposing and rearrangement of the images to the extent that *A Specialist* does.²⁶ The filmmakers' practices of reworking are, right from the start, marked via a

22. One indication of an Israeli lack of enthusiasm for Arendt's thesis is that the book was not published in Hebrew translation until 2000.

23. For criticism that it followed Arendt's text too closely, see Vivian Liska, "Die Versuchung der Bilder und der Anspruch des Denkens: Hannah Arendts *Eichmann in Jerusalem* und Rony Braumans und Eyal Sivans *Un Spécialiste*," *KulturPoetik: Zeitschrift für kulturgeschichtliche Literaturwissenschaft* 2, no. 1 (2002): 68–81.

24. See Liebman, "If This Be a Man . . .," 40–42.

25. Thomas Klingenmaier, "Ein Spezialist: Fatale Montagen," *Stuttgarter Zeitung*, September 11, 2001, content.stuttgarter-zeitung.de/stz/page/358347_0_1381_-filmkritik-stuttgarter-zeitung-ein-spezialist.html.

26. See Rony Brauman and Eyal Sivan, *Éloge de la désobéissance: À propos d'un spécialiste Adolf Eichmann* (Paris: Pommier, 1999). See especially the chapter "Vérité et montage."

contrast with unrestored raw footage. Technologically bold choices including slow and fast motion call attention to consciously made modifications. Moreover, the film does not hide the use of digital restoration and special effects to reshape some sequences. The images are indeed, as Klingensmaier himself correctly observes, given more contrast and depth through digital alteration. In some sequences camera motion comes from editing shots together, and the images of the public were superimposed on Eichmann's glass booth. Even the sound, derived from excerpts of an Israeli radio broadcast, was amplified in some scenes, or sounds were edited such that they overlap and interfere with one another. Beyond that, all the camera movements were also sound synchronized: the repeated fadeout of the images in particular can be read as an indication of that. Because it does not result in coherent or closed sequences that might have existed in the archive, *The Specialist* is more akin to collage. Most blatant is the obvious manipulation at the film's conclusion, as Eichmann, sitting at his desk, is disconnected piece by piece from the various frames of meaning, so that, in the end, only he remains there, now depicted as a modern bureaucratic desk murderer who could be sitting there today, in any company or institution by another name (fig. 1).

The gradual removal of the individual framing elements, including the courtroom, the guard personnel, and the glass booth, as well as the zoom in on Eichmann, exhibit Sivan and Brauman's filmic principles. Unlike conventional television documentaries by producers such as Guido Knopp²⁷—which, mainly through a commentator's apparently objective voice, present rearrangements of archival material—Sivan and Brauman's film is precisely about revealing these frames and the interpretations bound up with them. That these interpretations principally concern us as spectators—with our ideas, our knowledge, and our projections—is again deftly emphasized by the filmmakers during the film; again and again they project the witnesses from the time of the trial onto Eichmann's glass booth. In this way the contemporaneous gaze at Eichmann moves critically into the center, and we, as cinema spectators, are forced back into our roles. Our contemporary gaze at the old archival images emerges at the midpoint of the reflection and is critically called into question.

Sivan once commented on his principal technique: "All of the images come from the archive, none of the images can be found in the archive in that way."²⁸ As provocative as Sivan's statement may seem, it gets at the heart of his

27. Knopp's numerous television films and miniseries include *Hitlers Frauen und Marlene* (2001), *Hitlers Krieger* (1998), and *Das Ende 1945* (1995).

28. From a television interview with a French TV station, included as an extra on the French edition of the DVD.

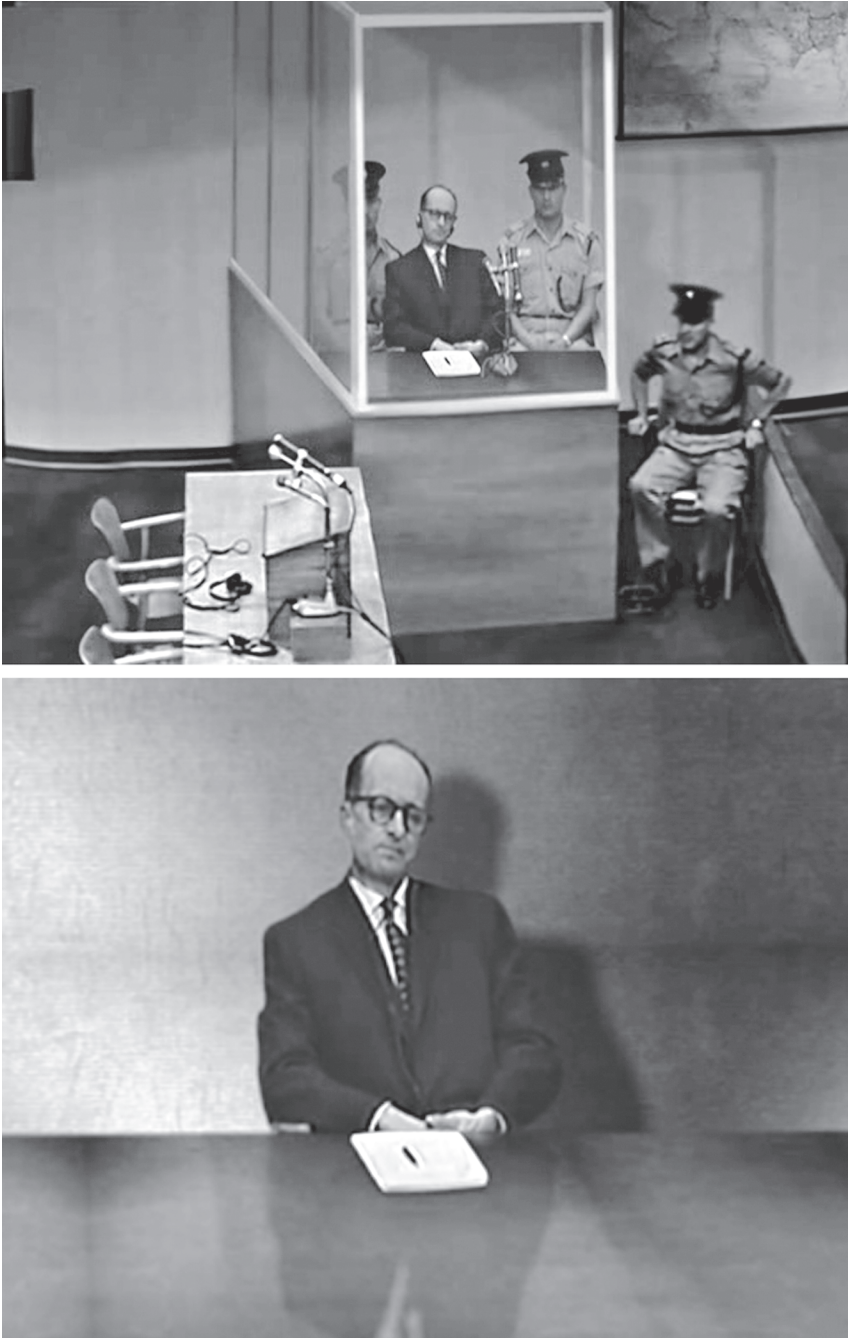


Figure 1. Eichmann, sitting at his desk, is disconnected piece by piece from the objects around him in *The Specialist—Portrait of a Modern Criminal* (*Un spécialiste, portrait d'un criminel moderne*, 1999). Directed by Eyal Sivan and Rony Brauman. Produced by Momento! and France 2 Cinéma

image philosophy, which he later explored and practiced in films such as *For Love of the People* (*Aus Liebe zum Volk*, 2004) together with Maurion, his editor. Sivan and Maurion partake of an outspoken mistrust of images, which is why Sivan's films raise questions about images' constructedness. The film spectator should ask: What do the images show? Can one believe them? Who is standing behind the camera? What is taking place beyond the frame? For whom were such images made? And, how do we position ourselves relative to them?

Sivan manages to keep these questions ever present in *The Specialist* by putting the archival images in other and newer contexts, now alienated, altered, and thus open to being seen and reseen. "Everything has already been filmed, one must simply look at it again. See it again and observe it again, and that means: film it yet again."²⁹ Sivan explains further:

The image as a discursively instrumentalized object first acquires meaning in a particular context. This is even truer for archival images, which initially insist on general validity but are then released from the temporal and spatial context in which and for which they were created. With *The Specialist* we have removed ourselves from the chronology of the Eichmann trial in order to acquire a new dramaturgy and a new perspective. It was about the bureaucratic crime and about defining the role of the "specialist for problem solving" from our current standpoint. Moreover, it was extremely important to stop dealing with [Eichmann] as the canonical icon of "absolute evil" [*mal absolu*]. In that way two elements clashed with one another: the (conceptualized) knowledge of Nazi crimes and the ordinary reporting of an employee who was completely disconnected from social reality and from the consequences of his actions. The filmic protagonist who emerges from this unifies both the fiction about him and the undeniable power of his real existence.³⁰

The permanent clash between our knowledge of the magnitude of the Nazi crimes and the performance of petit bourgeois mediocrity on Eichmann's part supplies the film with its tension. Already at the beginning of *The Specialist* the contrast between "absolute evil" and the "banality of evil" is introduced as a dominant theme. After the leading characters of the trial are introduced in the titles, as in a fictional courtroom drama, the film begins with the following scene: Hausner paints, with outsized gestures, a portrait of Eichmann as a

29. Quotation from the press packet accompanying the DVD of Eyal Sivan and Audrey Maurion's *Aus Liebe zum Volk* (D/F, 2004; zero film/ARCAPIX/rbb).

30. Ibid.

fiend and as an animal, until—in the shot that immediately follows—Eichmann is shown for the first time from the front in his glass booth. He is a reedy, unassuming figure. He polishes his glasses and seems concerned with dusting off the desk in front of him. The image of the small employee, an accountant of death, and the “pedantic presence of the salesman” stand in clear contrast to Hausner’s perpetrator image. Eichmann is no monster, and he does not embody absolute evil, seeming instead harmless (and even “banal”). He is the prototypical “invisible perpetrator,” as the cultural theorist Christina von Braun once wrote, whose misdeed consists not only of having acted as a cog in the machine but, much more, of finding the desire to surrender his will and to submerge himself in collective thinking.³¹

To better understand the desire for invisibility and the desire to abandon the individual will that drives Eichmann, the film stays close to its protagonist: his body language and tics, including the gentle twitch of the eye or of the corner of the mouth, are just as much objects of interest as his staccato way of speaking, his bureaucratic word choice, his preference for abstraction, his tendency toward aphorisms, his assiduousness, his deference to authority, his inclination toward mechanistic repetition, and his style of turning that little glass booth in the shortest imaginable time into an orderly little office.

And beyond that, his pen takes on, for all intents and purposes, the role of a tool, a work implement: again and again Eichmann is shown busily handling that pen. The unpleasant scratching of his writing implement is, at times, laid over the images as an additional audio track. The banality of evil thus enters into it—as already described in Arendt’s trial report—as a phenomenon impossible to overlook. He appears this way without commentary, and not as the object of an accusatory finger. The film dissects and focuses, and the archival images of Eichmann *indicate*, with all their authenticity. Eichmann is, as Arendt pointed out, neither Iago nor Macbeth, presented in diabolical depth, but someone who, “to put the matter colloquially, *never realized what he was doing*.” That such a thoughtlessness of this sort can, as Arendt notes, “wreak more havoc than all the evil instincts taken together which, perhaps, are inherent in man—that was, in fact, the lesson one could learn in Jerusalem,” and that is the painful lesson of *The Specialist*.³² “The film shows that there is no

31. Christina von Braun, “Die unterschiedlichen Geschlechtercodierungen bei NS-Tätern und -Täterinnen unter medienhistorischer Perspektive,” in Weckel and Wolfrum, “*Bestien*” und “*Befehlsempfänger*,” 250–65.

32. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 287, 288.

personified evil, that the unthinkable becomes possible, because people allow for a separation between themselves as a person and that which they do, particularly in their function, their position, their career.”³³

Karmakar: The Himmler Project

Karmakar’s *Himmler Project* premiered at the Berlin film festival in 2000 and was honored with 3sat’s 2001 documentary film prize as well as the 2002 Adolf Grimme Prize. In contrast with *The Specialist*, the critics responded positively. But here, as well, the manipulation of the historical sources was pursued in an aesthetically idiosyncratic way. *The Himmler Project* relies on a simple idea: that the “images can arise from behind the words, even in the absence of the corresponding scenes.”³⁴ Karmakar has pursued this idea in many of his films, especially in the form of the chamber play,³⁵ as, for example, in his prizewinning film *The Deathmaker (Der Totmacher, 1995)*, which featured Götz George as Fritz Haarmann, a serial murderer given to monologues.³⁶ In *The Himmler Project* Karmakar advances this idea by filming Zapotka reading Himmler’s Posner Speech aloud in a sound studio without additional commentary and at its full length.

The more-than-three-hour speech, which Himmler delivered on October 4, 1943, before 92 (out of 376) high-ranking SS generals, including Obergruppenführer, Gruppenführer, and Brigadeführer, belongs among the most-cited sources of National Socialism and is, in the words of Joachim C. Fest, one of the most disturbing testimonials to the German language.³⁷ In the Nuremberg trials of 1945–46, the speech was “an important document in the indictment, was attached protocol of the international military tribunal (IMT), and made publicly available.”³⁸ Although the speech itself can be termed “a rare example of Nazi self-revelation,” even today, very few are familiar with its complete text.³⁹ Only excerpts are widely known, such as, for example, that

33. See Dirk Schneider, “Ein Spezialist,” *filmtext.com*, www.filmtext.com/start.jsp/mode=2&fett=S&archiv=13.

34. See “Dem Täter eine Chance.”

35. See Ebbrecht, *Bilder hinter den Worten*, 15ff.

36. On Karmakar, see also Olaf Möller and Michael Omasta, eds., *Romuald Karmakar* (Vienna: Synema—Gesellschaft für Film und Medien, 2010).

37. See Joachim C. Fest’s introduction in *Heinrich Himmler: Geheimreden 1933 bis 1945 und andere Ansprachen*, ed. Bradley Smith and Agnes Peterson (Frankfurt am Main: Propyläen, 1974), 13.

38. See Klaus Fieberg, “Das Himmler-Projekt,” *Praxis Geschichte* 16, no. 1 (2003): 27.

39. Margrit Frölich, “Perpetrator Research through the Camera Lens: Nazis and Their Crimes in the Films of Romuald Karmakar,” *New German Critique*, no. 102 (2007): 78.

Himmler aimed to speak “in complete openness” about the “eradication [*Ausrottung*] of the Jewish people.”⁴⁰

The document is repeatedly introduced as central to NS extermination policies, but the selective familiarity with only individual passages, often invoked without knowing the context of the speech, motivated Karmakar. As he indicated in an interview with Alexander Kluge, he wanted to reconcretize (*re-konkretisieren*) the speech.⁴¹ Although the speech was secret, it was, on Himmler’s instruction, recorded on two wax phonograph records. “Afterward, a transcription of the recording was made, which was then reedited by Himmler,” and strict reading instructions were passed along to the absent generals.⁴² In the film Zapatka reads the speech in its unburnished form. Karmakar includes all the linguistic roughness, the slips of the tongue, and the run-on sentences from the original. Zapatka reads the complete text in ordinary clothing, in front of a monochrome set and with a neutral manner of speech. He in no way attempts to imitate Himmler’s tone but instead reads dryly, unmoved and sober; he strikes no poses and makes no faces. He does not copy Himmler but “interprets the text as an actor.”⁴³ The spoken language should in this way be delivered such that a contemporary “spectator can follow along with the speech.”⁴⁴ He walks a fine line, avoiding acting, on the one hand, and simple reading, on the other. Zapatka’s verbal slips in reading (and thus his forced repetitions) were also not left out of the film. Precisely in spots like these, one senses Zapatka’s struggles with the text, his irritations, and his resistance. The actor is filmed tenaciously working the text up and down, readily viewed from a slightly low angle by four cameras adjusted for close-ups and wide shots. For Karmakar, it was about “communicating errors.” He studies the perpetrator with the camera to break through “the protective barrier [*Reizschutz*] of images we have made from our stereotypes of evil.”⁴⁵

40. The text of the speech is available online. See “Heinrich Himmler, Posener Rede vom 04.10.1943 (Volltext),” www.nationalsozialismus.de/dokumente/heinrich-himmler-posener-rede-vom-04-10-1943-volltext.

41. The conversation with Alexander Kluge is an extra on the DVD *Romuald Karmakar: Das Himmler-Projekt. Manfred Zapatka und die Rede Heinrich Himmlers bei der SS-Gruppenführertagung in Posen am 4. Oktober 1943* (Germany, 2000; absolut MEDIEN). The interview was first broadcast on television on SAT 1 on July 16, 2000. Kluge and Karmakar conducted the conversation in February 2000 during the Berlin Film Festival.

42. Fieberg, “Das Himmler-Projekt,” 27.

43. Matthias R. Entref, “Rekonstruktion des Entsetzens,” *Berliner Morgenpost*, February 19, 2000.

44. See “Dem Täter eine Chance.”

45. Ebbrecht, *Bilder hinter den Worten*, 45, 59.

Now and again Zapatka looks directly into the camera, especially when the historical spectator's reactions, such as laughter, applause, and signs of agreement, are superimposed in the form of titles. At these points, historical viewers and contemporary audiences meld in complex ways. "The film brings its spectators in certain perspective into the position of the perpetrators—an audience of murderers, desk-murderers, and accessories."⁴⁶ *The Himmler Project* is, for this reason, a disquieting film. It is "not a usual film. It is much more a three-hour installation" that challenges the audience by including them in it.⁴⁷ In this respect Zapatka's direct gaze into the camera is especially interesting: it is, in this film, *reflexive* in the sense meant by Christian Metz:

As a rising tide flowing into the estuary of a river, the look intercepts the lens and elevates me; the beam leaving the eyes of the character *bounces back* [*remonte*] (and stops midway) the ordinary flow that issues from the projection device, as well as the gaze of the spectator, which is trained on the screen: it is held somewhat similarly to the immobilization of a precarious seesaw, where both sides hang in the air at midheight. The camera gaze introduces an inversion [*retournement*] that takes the innocence away from the lens and permits another, reverse line of emphasis.⁴⁸

Such breaks and caesuras enter into the three-hour film through the direct look into the camera as well as through its simple image and sound variations. Karmakar repeatedly puts the filmic dispositive on display, illuminating the film's constructed nature and allowing that constructedness to emerge.

Already at the film's beginning the totality of the image's setting is incorporated into the picture. Zapatka steps for a brief moment out from behind the podium, and the camera, which is shooting him from in front of the dais, becomes visible. The studio set, the offscreen space, and the space of the audience are, for a moment, made perceptible as such (fig. 2). This happens precisely at the point at which Himmler had briefly interrupted his address out of concern that the soup cook might be listening to his otherwise secret speech

46. Rainer Rother, "Holocaust und Popularkultur: Mehr Verunsicherung tut gut," *Die Welt*, January 30, 2001, www.welt.de/print-welt/article430788/Holocaust-und-Popularkultur-Mehr-Verunsicherung-tut-gut.html.

47. Christiane Peitz, "Himmler-Projekt—warum dieser Geschichtsfilm ins Kino gehört," *Der Tagesspiegel*, January 3, 2001, www.tagesspiegel.de/kultur/himmler-projekt-warum-dieser-geschichtsfilm-ins-kino-gehoert/190742.html.

48. Christian Metz, *L'énonciation impersonnelle, ou le site du film* (Paris: Méridiens Klincksieck, 1991), 40.



Figure 2. The offscreen space is made momentarily perceptible in *The Himmler Project* (*Das Himmler-Projekt*, 2000). Directed by Romuald Karmakar. Produced by Pantera Film

via an air duct. Himmler insists that the duct be covered up with a mattress before he continues speaking.

Strategies of concealment and unconcealment connected with the National Socialists' absurdly contradictory desires both to keep things secret and to dominate everything are subtly reflected on the film's aesthetic level. As Tobias Ebbrecht correctly observes:

The speech itself is a paradox: on the one hand, it is staged as a secret speech, which is conceived only for a small circle of elite leaders; on the other hand, it was decked out with an aura of everlastingness and monumentalization. It shows how the anti-Semitic Nazi ideology was concealed in pseudorationality, and it also makes clear how *The Himmler Project* attempts to break through the self-historicization of the Nazi movement that a film like *Downfall* reproduces, more or less voluntarily.⁴⁹

Karmakar's filmic method can in fact be called counterdirectional (*gegenläufig*) to what contemporary feature films or docudramas about the Nazi era strive for. Differently from Ganz in *Downfall*, Zapatka is not supposed to be playing an authentic Himmler but is instead transposing the speech

49. Ebbrecht, *Bilder hinter den Worten*, 63.

from that time into today such that the words, the sentences, and the internal logic that drive the speech all come into the foreground.⁵⁰ The media and art critic Boris Groys asserts in his review that the film

shows how one can convincingly make the hero [*der Held*] present, without fostering the illusion at one and the same time that we have bridged historical time and been able to eliminate distance. Himmler, played by Manfred Zapatka, is to us in this way immediately present. His speech is transposed into the contemporary context without thematizing historical distance. Instead of forcing the actor to put himself into another time and then make that present for us, Karmakar had Himmler and his speech transposed into our time and turned into a hero [*Held*] for our own age.⁵¹

Through Zapatka's style of reading the spectators hear Himmler's text uncensored and unironically. "Himmler is thus transformed into a typical speech maker of today, one accompanied by the characteristic resources of public rhetoric, like, for example, a glass of water."⁵² Past and present merge idiosyncratically. Himmler becomes a "hero" (pace Groys) of the present, while the audience in the cinema occupies the position of the historical observer.

Reducing the idiosyncratic character of *The Himmler Project* down to one point, the film critic Susanne Weingarten writes:

It is not a filmic reproduction based on a source. You cannot reproduce a speech in this way. It is not a monster that we see; it is an actor. I also do not know, in truth, why we would say this is a documentary film. It is staged from A to Z. It is my opinion that it is a mixed form, and—what is more—a very unusual one. We don't see the Himmler speech, and we don't really hear the speech. A speech is bound to a speaker, to a time, to a place, to a socio-cultural context, to a voice, and to rhetorical strategies. All of that is absent here. In principle we have the restaging of a text; that is, it is an extremely mediated means of handling this source.⁵³

50. Frölich also takes note of this: "With its radical minimalism, *The Himmler Project* stands in diametric opposition to mainstream illusionist cinema, which, in its devotion to the 'intimacy of "plausible detail,"' produces an opulent visual panopticon of the Nazi regime. While popular narrative cinema sets great store by historicizing and psychologizing (see Bruno Ganz as Hitler), Karmakar concentrates on analytic reconstruction" ("Perpetrator Research through the Camera Lens," 77).

51. Boris Groys, "Ein Held unserer Zeit," in *Groysaufnahme: Philosophische Gedanken zum Kino* (Cologne: Schnitt—der Filmverlag, 2007), 50.

52. Ibid.

53. Susanne Weingarten, "Keine Abfilmung einer Quelle," quoted in Fieberg, "Das Himmler-Projekt," 34.

This “extremely mediated means of handling this source” is what enables the spectator to “read” the content of Himmler’s speech for the first time. Because Karmakar allows the speech to be read in its total length, it becomes clear how grueling, vexing, and difficult it is for us to listen to it today. It raises questions about the listeners at the time: about their reactions, their cognizance, and their complicity. Beyond that, it also becomes clear that the speech, as presented in other contexts, is very much shortened and only partially represented. Himmler devotes two minutes to the extermination of the Jews. The Holocaust and the justification of the “eradication of the Jews” are for Himmler only a side concern, one that is, only after 110 minutes, briefly referred to. As Karmakar puts it, “One has to make this confusing experience available to everyone who wants knowledge of it.”⁵⁴

Similarly surprising are the primitive structures of legitimation threaded throughout the whole speech. Through omitting the usual Nazi clichés like the death’s-head uniform, the jarring voices, and the spirited gestures, the “spiritual [*geistig*] essence of racist barbarism” moves into the foreground.⁵⁵ In endless sentences Himmler swears loyalty to his SS order, rages against the “Russians,” demands a boundless brutalization in the advances against the “non-Germanic-Slavic human animals,” sketches unbearable images of the enemy, ranks all peoples—from the Slavs to the Italians to the Americans—in his racist categories, digresses at great length about a broadly drawn new racial order, and bemoans the fate of “respectable” Germans: “To have made it through this [the extermination of the Jews] and to have remained respectable—this has toughened us.” He renders a harsh judgment against the corrupt structures in his own ranks, alluding to their debauched bureaucratic habits. He makes “work, work, work!” into his guiding principle, and he holds ostensible German virtues like fidelity, obedience, gallantry, honesty, and forthrightness up high for those who care to work against degeneration on behalf of the next generation and for those who dream of a greater German empire. *The Himmler Project* thereby grants those born later (those of the next generation) precise “insight into the National Socialist system of delusion between extermination and redemption—and it shows again, with complete contemporaneity, the uncanny combination of fanaticism and instrumental reason, of absolute quasi-religious blessedness of the order of which they were a part, and the most enlightened plan-rationality.”⁵⁶ On the level of content, the mixture of

54. *Das Himmler-Projekt*, in *Lexikon der “Vergangenheitsbewältigung” in Deutschland: Debatten- und Diskursgeschichte des Nationalsozialismus nach 1945*, ed. Torben Fischer and Matthias N. Lorenz (Bielefeld: transcript, 2007), 336.

55. Josef Lederle, “Das Himmler-Projekt,” *film dienst* 54, no. 18 (2001): 31.

56. Reinhard Von Mohr, “Das Innere des Wahns,” *Der Spiegel* 44 (2001): 196.

ethos, rhetorical intelligence, and ideological displacement is most vexing “because it characterizes Himmler neither as a monster nor as a criminal, rather as a managing director of a large race-based corporation, one with high moral standards.”⁵⁷

The real shock comes at the end of Karmakar’s film. In the credits the biographies of SS men are reconstructed, with particular emphasis on their careers after 1945. The whereabouts of many could not be determined, but thirty-eight of the ninety-two who were present remained members of the social elite, at least into the 1980s. One of the former SS generals became the mayor of Prien am Chiemsee, while another was, as the credits laconically inform us, a “leader of a global corporation” in Bonn. Again the film shows horrible continuities and looms clearly over the present. “Karmakar means to shock us with the proximity. . . . He enables a close examination of how, in times of crisis, a certain work ethic is conjured up, by which even today every major corporation sets value.”⁵⁸

Both films appear to be characterized by their success in abstracting from archival material, meaningfully *de-* and *reconcretizing* the “banality of evil.” They achieve this through similar aesthetic processes. The filmic dispositive enables this just as much as the films’ treatment of their archival material, which is shaped through its re- and deconstruction. Beyond that, both films partake of a method of dissection insofar as they actively listen to the perpetrators, observing them and letting them speak and operate, thus permitting the transmission of errors, fissures, and gaps. Sivan and Brauman as well as Karmakar produce a gray zone between fact and fiction, perpetrator and victim, past and present, which puts the viewers in a critical position. Himmler and Eichmann are, in their respective films, no longer merely perpetrator types who once existed in the distant past and from whom one can easily distance oneself; they are instead thinkable in our present world. They exist and can reemerge—whether as assiduous bureaucratic desk murderers or as corporate executives with a corresponding work ethic. The films’ directors manage to depict what Zygmunt Bauman once summed up in the following way: “The most frightening news brought about by the Holocaust and what we learned of its perpetrators was not the likelihood that ‘this’ could be done to us, but the idea that we could do it.”⁵⁹

57. Lederle, “Das Himmler-Projekt,” 31.

58. Peitz, *Der Tagesspiegel*.

59. Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 152.

