

The celebrated Israeli documentary filmmaker Eyal Sivan has joined the master's programme at the Netherlands Film and Television Academy, with the aim of examining film research methodology and its potential in education.

History and counter history: theory through cinematic practice

By Mieke Bernink

A glass cubicle, guards on either side and – behind a small desk inside the cubicle – sits a middle-aged man. He organises his desk neatly: papers to the right, a pencil and a second pair of glasses to the left. Then he sits down, back straight, and listens...

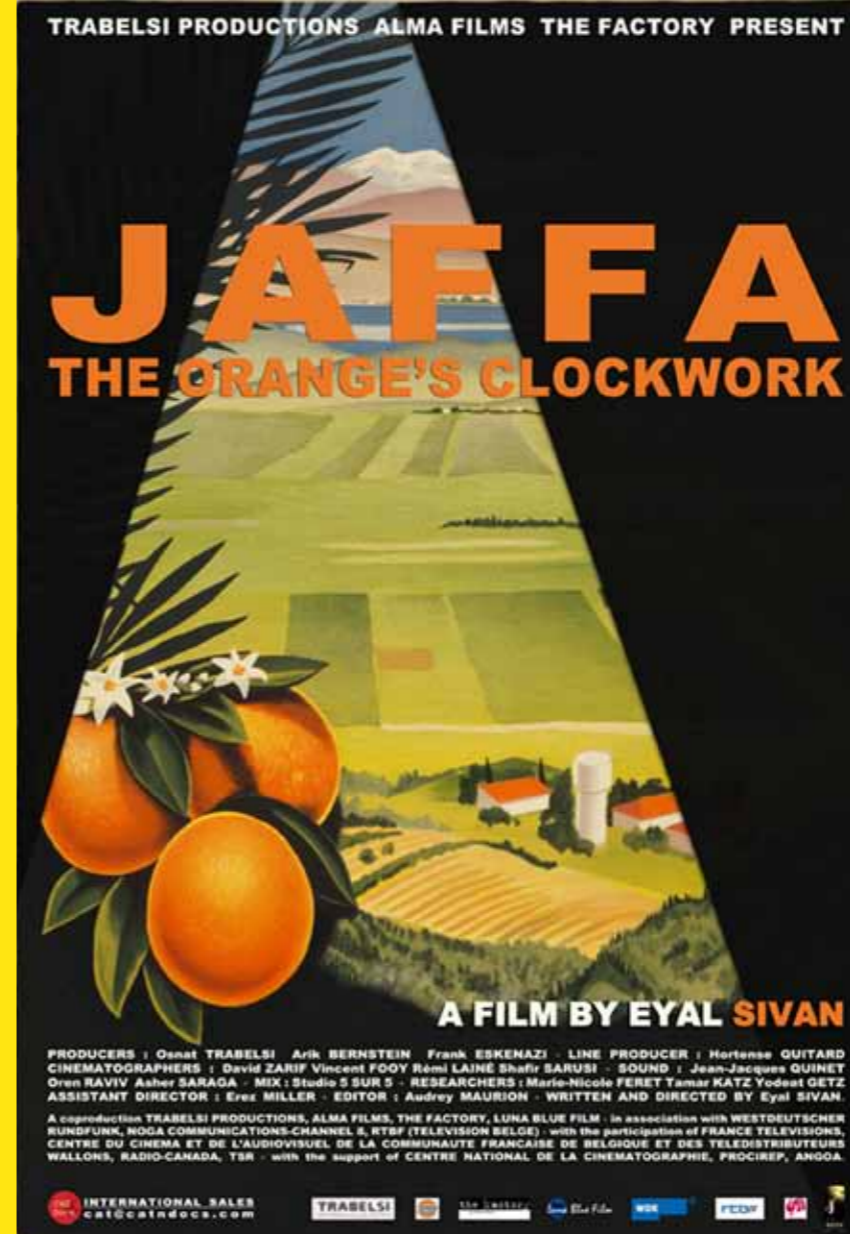
The man in the glass cubicle is Adolf Eichmann; the setting, the courtroom in Jerusalem where his trial took place from April to August 1961. The image is from one of the early scenes in Eyal Sivan's film *The Specialist – Portrait of a Modern Criminal* (1999). He used original recordings of the trial to make *The Specialist*, editing the video and audio to create a cinematic essay on 'the banality of evil', taking Hannah Arendt's book of this title as his analytical starting point. Eyal Sivan was Artist in Residence at the master's programme at the Netherlands Film and Television Academy from early November to mid-December 2012.

Like his previous and subsequent films, *The Specialist* was highly controversial. Born in Haifa (Israel, 1964) but living in Paris, Sivan was denounced as a fraud and a forger because of the liberties he took in editing the original footage. By disregarding the chronology of the footage, by connecting moments with audio that was originally unconnected with those moments, and by omitting time markers, Sivan argues that the Eichmann trial served not only the goal of trying the man responsible for the extermination programme but also the goals of Zionist propaganda.

The deconstruction of Zionist propaganda and the relevance of this phenomenon for understanding the Israeli-Palestinian

conflict is a recurring theme in Sivan's work, which has been screened at many international festivals and received many awards. In 2009 Sivan made his most recent film *Jaffa, The Orange's Clockwork*, another analysis of the way in which Zionist ideology and mythology took shape. This time it was the turn of the myth that the Jews/Israelis 'made the desert bloom', with the symbol of that myth being the Jaffa orange. The film shows not only that there was already a booming orange industry in the village of Jaffa before the arrival of the Jews (and that for a while afterwards Palestinians and Jews worked together harmoniously in this industry) but also how the 'Jaffa orange', once brutally appropriated by the Israelis, became the spearhead of the Zionist propaganda machine. By analysing documentary material, artistic and political imagery, Sivan's film deconstructs the myth that there was nothing in the country before the Jews came to Palestine, and it offers a perspective on a past and a possible future collaboration between Israelis and Palestinians.

'The deconstruction of Zionist propaganda is a recurring theme in Sivan's work'



'Eyal Sivan uses documentary practice to challenge historical memory'

Eyal Sivan's ongoing interest in, as he describes it, 'the visual and narrative modalities of political crime in colonial and postcolonial contexts,' has led him to reflect critically on the traditional modes of documentary making and its way of '(hi)story telling'. He uses his documentary practice to challenge historical memory and the figure of the witness. Both as a filmmaker and as an academic lecturer at universities around the world, Sivan explores notions of history and story, montage and historical timeline, archive and archival material, and witnessing and memory. For Sivan, practice and theory (or reflection) are closely connected. This makes him an ideal Artist in Residence for a master's degree programme that is increasingly developing towards an artistic research programme. It is the media practice itself that forms both the start and end points of Sivan's view on the relationship between theory and practice. It's from the project itself – whether it's a documentary or not – that the need for academic or theoretical knowledge arises and it's in that same project that it needs to 'work'. Indeed, Sivan describes the content and goal of his residency at the Film Academy as, 'Theory through (media) practice'. Having started in November Sivan worked until mid-December with master students on three of his current projects.

'Perpetrators' is an exhibition on 'the representation of the perpetrator', and Sivan wants to develop its conceptual and practical outline with the students. 'Montage Interdit' is a multi-format, or cross-media, project investigating the power of montage, particularly in Jean-Luc Godard's films. And in '1948 Common Archive For Palestine', Sivan worked with the students on new media practices that need to be invented

'to inject meaning into digital narrating,' or analyse and balance the avalanche of 'witness' videos on the Internet. The residency programme for the students included seminars and workshops with guests, as well as individual tutoring sessions on the students' own research topics. There were also public discussions of issues relevant to Sivan's work and residency, in collaboration with the Media Fund.

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