

“Izkor: Slaves of Memory” Screening & Discussion with Filmmaker Eyal Sivan

Kahlan Al-Radhi

Institute of Social Research and Cultural Studies
National Yang Ming Chiao Tung University

This report captures the essence of the event, detailing the presentations, discussions, and key takeaways from the screening of Eyal Sivan's documentary *“Izkor: Slaves of Memory.”* It serves as a comprehensive overview for those interested in the themes of memory, conflict, and justice within the context of the Israeli-Palestinian situation. The distinguished filmmaker and theoretician Eyal Sivan shared his insights on the collective memory and psyche of Israeli society, where he was born and raised.

Context and Themes: Memory and Manipulation

Norman Finkelstein's quote, “I do not want to get into the heads of Israelis,” sets a provocative tone for examining the extreme racism and violence against Palestinians perpetuated by the Israeli state. This context underscores the pressing need to understand the underlying reasons for such animosity and the guiltless perpetration of violence, including the mass killing of children and women in Palestine.

In Israel, the phrase “Never again” serves as a powerful mantra, deeply influencing the national psyche. This pervasive atmosphere of fear and remembrance is meticulously crafted through state-driven narratives. The documentary “Izkor: Slaves of Memory” provides a critical lens into how these narratives are embedded in Israeli society, from early childhood education to military service, creating what Sivan terms the “dictatorship of the memory.”

Eyal Sivan's Perspective

Eyal Sivan, an Israeli Jew born in Haifa, is renowned for his critical stance on Israeli colonial expansion and his empathy towards the Palestinian plight. His works consistently challenge the mainstream Israeli narrative and provoke critical reflection on the nation's treatment of Palestinians. Throughout his career, Sivan has vocally criticized Zionism and the Israeli government's policies towards Palestinians. His stance has made him a contentious figure in Israeli society, often facing hostility for his views. Despite this, he continues to advocate for peaceful coexistence between Israelis and Palestinians through his films, writings, and public appearances.

Through his documentary, Sivan explores how historical memory is manipulated to serve political ends, fostering a culture of fear and perpetuating cycles of violence.

Analysis of “Izkor: Slaves of Memory”

The film, made over three decades ago, remains a vital piece in understanding the present-day dynamics of Israeli society. It illustrates how collective memory is instilled in citizens from a young age, shaping their perceptions and actions. Sivan follows the journey of Israelis as they grow, documenting real-time events, rituals, and ceremonies that reinforce a state-sanctioned version of history.

“Izkor: Slaves of Memory” meticulously examines the role of education in shaping collective memory. From kindergartens to high schools, Israeli educators instill a narrative of historical suffering and victimhood. Students are taught to chant phrases like “We are no longer slaves, we are free people!” after Moses’ exodus from Egypt, embedding a deep-seated identification with historical trauma and a justification for contemporary actions against Palestinians.

Sivan argues that memory, when manipulated, transforms from a tool for justice and remembrance into a mechanism of control. This “memory vaccine” against perceived threats perpetuates a cycle of violence justified as self-defense. The film reveals how such manipulation fosters a collective mindset where every act of aggression is seen as a necessary measure for survival.

Introduction by Hanh T. L. Nguyen

Hanh T. L. Nguyen, a PhD candidate at the Institute of Social Research and Cultural Studies at National Yang Ming Chiao Tung University in Taiwan and an editorial board member of the Conflict, Justice, and Decolonization project, moderated the event. She expressed gratitude to the International Center for Cultural Studies and its director, Professor Joyce Liu, for their support. Hanh highlighted previous events, such as the screening of short documentaries by Palestinian filmmakers and a symposium on the Palestine-Israel issue, emphasizing the event’s goal of fostering empathy and compassion for those affected by the ongoing conflict.

Opening remarks by Director of ICCS, Professor Joyce C. H. Liu

Professor Joyce C. H. Liu underscored the student-led nature of the event, framing it as part of a broader global movement against militarized and colonial occupations. She spoke about the historical and ongoing struggles of the Palestinian people and the international community’s role in opposing these injustices. Professor Liu called for an end to the colonial occupation and militarization in Gaza and Palestine, urging a return to justice and peace for the Palestinian people. She referenced current global actions and protests, drawing parallels to historical opposition to war and emphasizing the need for a collective response to these issues.

Introduction of Eyal Sivan

Hanh then introduced Eyal Sivan, detailing his background as a Jewish-Israeli filmmaker born in Haifa and raised in Jerusalem. Sivan is known for his controversial yet critically acclaimed films that address the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, documentary filmmaking ethics, and the political use of memory. Eyal Sivan’s work highlights the contradiction between Israel’s self-image as a nation of “victims and heroes”, and its downplaying of its actions as “cowards and perpetrators”. He uses his films to critique the Israeli government’s policies towards Palestinians and advocate for the Palestinian cause.

Eyal Sivan’s Introduction to the Documentary

Eyal Sivan expressed his gratitude for the opportunity to present his film and thanked the organizers for their support. He provided context for “Izkor: Slaves of Memory,” explaining its focus on Israeli education, from Passover to Independence Day, and how these events shape the collective memory and psyche of Israelis. Sivan discussed the instrumentalization of memory by the state, creating a mindset that justifies ongoing violence and occupation.

Sivan emphasized the film's relevance to both historical and current events, noting its ongoing significance in understanding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He highlighted the need to question how a people who have suffered historically can inflict suffering on others, a central theme of his documentary.

Screening and Eyal Sivan's Talk

The film “Izkor: Slaves of Memory” was then screened, followed by a talk and Q&A session with Eyal Sivan. Participants engaged in a lively discussion, exploring the themes presented in the film and their implications for understanding the current situation in Gaza and the occupied territories.

The discussion section began with Sivan's speech. He emphasized the central theme of his film, “Izkor: Slaves of Memory” by discussing the concept of memory, highlighting its role in shaping collective behavior and its political use in Israeli society. Sivan argued that memory, whether individual or collective, is not merely about opposing oblivion but involves a dynamic interplay between preservation and erasure. He explained that in Israel, collective memory often creates a dichotomy of ‘us’ and ‘them,’ framing Israelis as perpetual victims and heroes, while Palestinians are seen as oppressors. This division, he suggested, is politically exploited to justify ongoing state violence and oppression.

He referenced the work of thinkers like Hannah Arendt and Tzvetan Todorov to support his points. Arendt's notion that victimhood does not absolve one from all actions, and Todorov's concept of the ‘abuse of memory’—where past injustices are used to justify current actions—were pivotal to his argument. Sivan stressed that this manipulation of memory transforms it from a tool for justice into a means of perpetuating conflict.

Sivan also touched on the broader implications of this dynamic, noting that the Israeli self-image as eternal victims leads to a justification of any state violence as self-defense. He warned about the dangerous potential of Israel's self-destructive path, particularly given its nuclear capabilities, which he referred to as the “Samson Option.”

Q&A Session

Eyal's talk was followed by a highly lively and fruitful discussion with the audience. The moderator started the Q&A session by asking whether the exploitation of memory for political ends is unique to Israel. Sivan responded by noting that this tactic is common in many nations, citing examples from Kurdish and Serbian histories. However, he pointed out that Israel's situation is unique due to its widespread international perception as an untouchable victim.

A participant, Carl-Juan Liu, raised a point about the need for practical solutions to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, emphasizing peaceful coexistence. Sivan responded by underscoring the

importance of addressing the root cause—colonialism—and the necessity of a decolonization process to achieve true equality and peace.

Lucy's Question on Nationalism: Eyal's talk was followed by a highly lively and fruitful discussion with the audience. The moderator started the Q&A session by asking whether the exploitation of memory for political ends is unique to Israel. Sivan responded by noting that this tactic is common in many nations, citing examples from Kurdish and Serbian histories. However, he pointed out that Israel's situation is unique due to its widespread international perception as an untouchable victim.

Jonathan's Inquiry on Israel's Military Service and its Impact: Jonathan, another participant, raised a question about the cultural and social impacts of mandatory military service in Israel. He was curious about how Israel might differ today if military service were not compulsory. The speaker emphasized that the military is integral to Israeli society, functioning as a continuation of the educational system and a melting pot for Israeli identity. He discussed the entanglement of the military with various aspects of Israeli life, including economics, technology, and culture.

Jonathan also asked about the effects on children who know they must serve in the military after high school. The speaker explained that military service is presented not as a choice but as a natural progression, akin to attending primary school. The military is portrayed as offering various benefits, including career opportunities in fields like music and journalism, which are closely tied to military experience. The military's appeal to young Israelis includes the excitement of operating advanced military equipment, reinforcing a sense of nationalism and duty.

Comment by the Moderator: Hanh noted that the transition from high school to military service in Israel resembles a graduation ceremony, where loyalty to the state and obedience to commanders are pledged. She observed that Israeli education aims to raise children to be soldiers and nationalists, a point also highlighted in the film by both Eyal and the scholar Leibowitz.

Heatwave's Question on Religious Perspectives: Heatwave asked about the Jewish perspective on Jesus as the Messiah and how it relates to the treatment of Palestinians. The speaker clarified that the film focused on secular Israeli education and did not delve into religious teachings. He explained that while the Bible plays a role in justifying Zionism, the Messiah concept varies within Judaism. Secular Zionists often use the Bible for historical justification, while religious Jews see the Messiah's arrival as a future event. The speaker also touched on the support for Zionism from fundamentalist evangelistic Christians, who believe in a messianic prophecy involving a great war.

Stephen Chan's Question on Prevalence of Alternative Views: Stephen Chan inquired about the prevalence of views opposing militarization among Israeli Jews and the current status of a young man featured in the film who expressed dissent. The speaker acknowledged that such views are rare and often come from those already on the fringes of society. He distinguished between the majority Zionist perspective among Israeli Jews and the diverse viewpoints within the broader Jewish community. The young man from the film is now an artist and climate activist, maintaining his outsider stance.

Yushi's Comment: Yushi responded to a question by Jonathan, emphasizing the distinction between Israeli Jews and the broader Jewish population.

Alain Brossat's Questions: Alain posed two questions. The first question addressed Eyal, asking if the film could be made today given current restrictions on filmmakers in Israel. Eyal explained that increased regulations and media caution make such a project difficult, although modern open-source media could offer alternative ways to articulate similar points. The second question to Hanh, the moderator, related to comparisons with socialist education in Vietnam. Hanh noted that while there are similarities in the indoctrination of state narratives, the level of militarization and extremism depicted in the film appears more intense than in Vietnam.

Conclusion

"Izkor: Slaves of Memory" is a profound documentary that remains as relevant today as it was thirty years ago. Eyal Sivan's critical examination of how collective memory is manipulated to justify ongoing violence provides a crucial perspective on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The film urges viewers to question the narratives they are taught and to seek a deeper understanding of the forces shaping their beliefs and actions.

By documenting the educational and societal processes that reinforce a state-sanctioned memory, Sivan's work challenges us to reflect on the power of memory and its role in perpetuating conflict. His call for awareness and empathy towards Palestinians serves as a poignant reminder of the film's enduring relevance in understanding the complexities of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It offers a comprehensive overview for anyone interested in the intersection of memory, education, and political manipulation.

The event successfully highlighted the enduring relevance of "Izkor: Slaves of Memory" and Eyal Sivan's critical perspective on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Through the screening and subsequent fruitful discussion, attendees gained a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between memory, education, and political narratives in shaping societal attitudes and actions. The event fostered a sense of empathy and compassion, reinforcing the importance of seeking justice and peace for all affected individuals.

Event Information

Event Title: Into the heads of Israel: "Izkor: Slaves of Memory", Screening & Disucssion with Filmmaker Eyal Sivan

Speaker: Eyal Sivan, DOcumentary filmmaker and theoretician based in Paris, France

Moderator: Hanh T. L. Nguyen, Ph.D. candidate, Institute of Social Research and Cultural Studies, NYCU

Organizer:

International Center for Cultural Studies, National Yang Ming Chiao Tung University
Conflict, Justice, Decolonization: Asia in Transition in the 21st Century

Date: May 13, 2024

Time: 14:00 - 17:00 (Taiwan Standard Time, GMT+8)

Venue: Online (via Zoom meeting)

Link to video of the event:

<https://cjdproject.web.nycu.edu.tw/2024/06/25/izkor-slaves-of-memory-screening-discussion-with-filmmaker-eyal-sivan/>