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Brief encounters: documentary visits to an imagined Israel

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BOOK REVIEW

Brief encounters: documentary visits to an imagined Israel, by Ohad Landesman, Albany, NY, State University of New York Press, 2026, 255 pp., $US125.00 (hardback), ISBN 9798855806649, $US37.95 (Paperback), ISBN 9798855806656

Brief Encounters is the latest, and long-awaited book by Ohad Landesman. Born of a considerable research programme and focus, Landesman has worked away at this project for some time, presenting the work in progress at conferences and seminars, measuring a careful development of what has turned out to be a fine and important work of scholarship that makes a significant contribution to documentary studies. It is a measure of the care that Landesman has given to realising this book that he has spent time in archives and with the films themselves and the many other interrelated films, filmmakers and scholars.

The book considers the films made by important international non-Israeli filmmaking figures Pier Paolo Pasolini, Chris Marker, the Maysles Brothers, Jules Dassin, Susan Sontag, Claude Lanzmann and Chantal Akerman in Israel in the 1960s and 70s. Many of these films, including Marker's *Description d'un combat* [*Description of a Struggle*] (1961), Sontag's *Promised Lands* (1974) and Akerman's *Là-Bas* [*Down There*] (2006), are known to film scholars, while others such as Pasolini's *Sopralluoghi in Palestina* [*Scouting for Locations in Palestine*] (1965), Lanzmann's *Porquoi Israel* [*Israel Why*] (1973) and Dassin's *Survival 1967* (1967) are less known, let alone written about.

In a book with sizeable, thoroughgoing chapters, the opening chapter, following a careful accounting for the travelogue, one of the most underappreciated documentary modes, Landesman fashions a fascinating argument born of his considerable powers of scholarship: that the various imagined Israels that the filmmakers set out to realise on film are illusive, impossible or non-existent. *Brief Encounters* utilises W.J.T. Mitchell's landmark essay 'Holy Landscape: Israel, Palestine, and the American Wilderness' as the basis from which to launch his exploration, divining in each story of production, each historical context, and in the final film and its after affects, a tale of dissatisfaction (Mitchell 2000). For Mitchell, we need to be attentive to the 'selectiveness of memory and history that is brought to the holy landscape' (195).

He writes,

> Indeed, the holy landscape is an elaborately wrought image, but its truth is not to be found either in myths or memories that can be so straightforwardly dug up from the depths and laid open to view. One has to ask: Whose myths? Whose memories? What was erased, rendered invisible in order that this landscape might present the face it does? How does this face betray the signs of contestation and struggle between rival myths, disparate memories? (Mitchell 2000, 195)

Mitchell's somewhat rancorous critical accounting for the Holy Land, motivates Landesman's argument, in concert with Edward Said's notion of 'imaginative geography' and the nineteenth century travel literature concerned with Palestine, that 'the elusiveness of Israel/Palestine as a destination that resists compartmentalisation by visitors … is the inevitable result of an epistemological dissonance between how Israel/Palestine is imagined from afar and how it is experienced in reality' (18). Of course, as Landesman emphasises and, where his contribution to the accounting for these films within each director's oeuvre excels, is that 'the

mere fact that of being dislocated with a wilful unknowing allows for such a film to displace onto the Israeli landscape the filmmaker-visitor's own mental landscape' (18). As the various tales of the intentions and dislocations emerge, the best intentions of the filmmakers recede into the landscape as mirage. This opening chapter on the travelogue concludes with a case study of the extraordinary *Départ de Jérusalem en chemin de fer* [*Leaving Jerusalem by Railway*] (1897) from the Lumiere Brothers, which marks an early example of what Landesman describes as an 'ambivalence about the imperial gaze' in the context of 'the first Zionist Congress in Basel … as an origin moment of Zionism's and cinema's long-term interweaving' (50).

'Marker, Pasoloni, and the Narrative of Disillusionment' is the title of the second chapter, examining *Description of a Struggle* and *Scouting for Locations in Palestine* emphasising the extraordinary tales of the development of these two films conditioning the resulting works. Marker was commissioned to make the film in Israel following the invitation from Wim and Lia van Leer, two Israeli film culture afficionados, who had seen *Letter from Siberia* (1957) at the Moscow Film Festival. Marker's initial trip to Israel to scout for images and ideas is positioned by Landesman, in relation to his work for *Petit Planet* and the heady world of Les Lettres Nouvelles and semiotics, and his ongoing interest in photography in tandem with written narration. This informs the reading of *Description of a Struggle*, as well as the shifts in Israeli society that occurred, as early as 1957, when 'Israel [was] rapidly changing and beginning to abandon its early signs' (65). For Landesman, Marker's leftist affiliations and essayist mode, condition the expectations he placed on infant Israeli society, creating tensions between his expectations and the weight of the holocaust, between his pro-Zionist politics, common amongst left-wing activists of the era, and what Landesman offers as Marker's prophetic voice: 'from the perspective of the present,' Landesman writes, 'Marker appears to foreshadow the military occupation that would become a tragic reality only seven years after his visit … ' (70).

Similarly, Pasolini's *Scouting for Locations in Palestine* mirrors Marker's experience of disillusionment, although the two films are quite different. Pasolini has a sketch-like quality that Laura Rascaroli describes as that of 'a notebook film' (Rascaroli 2009). That Pasolini was searching for ancient biblical landscapes in which to film what became *Il Vangelo secondo Matteo* [*The Gospel According to St Matthew*] (1964) immediately displays the disjunction and the 'disillusionment' of the chapter's title. That Israel presented a more modern vision of itself than what Pasolini had hoped for, ironically relocating the production to Calabria in Italy, as Landesman writes, 'a region that feels suspended in time and evokes a version of Palestine that in his [Pasolini's] eyes, no longer existed' (77). Pasolini's reiteration of the method of *Scouting for Locations in Palestine* in *Appunti per un film sull'India* [*Notes Towards a Film on India*] (1968) and *Appunti per un'Orestiade Africana* [*Notes Toward an African Orestes*] (1970) alongside some other footage, was ultimately intended to form a larger, unrealised project entitled *Notes for a Poem on the Third World*, indicating the provisional, essayistic tone of these films. For Landesman, *Scouting for Locations in Palestine* is instructive, indicating Pasolini's divergence from Marker's idealism, relying on his disappointment with the images he creates as an interventionist revolutionary Marxist, 'uncertain about the aims and implications of Zionism', as Landesman tells us (78).

Chapter 3, on *A Journey to Jerusalem* (1967) by Michael Mindlin Jr. (shot by The Maysles), *Survival 1967* by Jules Dassin and Susan Sontag's *Promised Lands*, concerns these films made between the Six-Day War (1967) and the Yom Kippur War (1973), conflicts that Landesman elegantly describes as having 'dramatized the nation's existence while underscoring its fragility' (95). *A Journey to Jerusalem* follows the 1967 tour of Israel by Leonard Bernstein in a personality-centred celebration of the new nation, following the Six-day war. This euphoric

documentary exudes what Landesman describes as 'naïve optimism and unapologetic triumphalism' following Israel's victory over Egypt, Jordan and Syria and others in its use of an observational style characteristic of much of the filmmaker's work. This is contrasted with Sontag's 1973 visit documented in *Promised Lands*, a film presenting an increasingly militarised society turning in on itself, conveyed by a hybrid of news reportage and anthropological essay, which reflects the disorientation and moral uncertainty of the post-1973 moment. *Dassin's Survival 1967*, according to Landesman, 'conveys both of these moods', in its uneven and dislocated tone, diverging from a clear voice that cohere a vision of Israel from outside (86). In these three films, Landesman locates three very different contexts and historical circumstances which shape their production.

Chapter 4, 'Lanzmann and Akerman: Traveling in a State of Internal Exile', compares and contrasts two very different films, examining first the travelogue mode of *Pourquoi, Israel*, and then the essay/diary mode of *Là-bas*. For Landesman, 'the two films navigate the complex intersections of identity, exile and artistic expression, while also engaging with various forms of personal deterritorialization' (143). Drawing on Hamis Naficy's notion of accented cinema enables Landesman to fold into this chapter concepts of exile and diaspora to be conveyed in the aesthetic strategies these films employ. Lanzmann's film commences his eventual trilogy on Jewish history and identity, which continued with the masterpiece *Shoah* (1985) and the later *Tsabal* (1994). Landesman describes Lanzmann's journey into filmmaking from journalism with *Les Temps Modernes* and *Le Monde*. For Landesman, the title of the film *Pourquoi, Israel*, written without a question mark, is an 'assertive and persuasive defense of Israel's legitimacy', somewhat a controversial statement for Lanzmann, a renowned French intellectual from leftist circles (149). In an intricate comparison Landesman undertakes a close analysis of *Tsabal* in order to best set up his approach to *Pourquoi, Israel,* pointing to the latter film's limitations stemming from how Lanzmann's inability to understand his own personal investment, something which is less apparent in *Tsabal*.

Là-bas is characterised by Landesman as 'making a film about the refusal to make a film about Israel'. That the film was shot as a project while Akerman was a visiting lecturer at The Steve Tisch School of Film and Television, Tel Aviv University from which Landesman himself hails, provides an important cultural avenue for this discussion. Some of the best and most important scholarship on Akerman, Marker and Lanzmann – including work by Anat Zanger, the recently deceased Régine-Mihal Friedman and Landesman himself – has emerged from this vibrant and sophisticated university, whose intellectual community has clearly enriched the scholarship underpinning this book. Akerman's film is richly described by Landesman in terms of an internal travelogue or an 'anti-travelogue', confined as it is, mostly, to an apartment in Tel Aviv, detailing the focus on Akerman herself, as outsider both to Israel and to herself as a Belgian Jew in a static yet revealing self-portrait.

In his brief Afterword, Landesman appends a discussion of Jean Luc Godard's engagement with Israel and Palestine though his role in the Dziga Vertov Group with Jean-Pierre Gorin and later Anne-Marie Miéville, particularly on *Ici et ailleurs* [*Here and Elsewhere*] (1976). The film's attempt to document to Palestinian struggle echoes aspects of Pasolini's and Akerman's films. Landesman also considers a later invitation from the Tel Aviv Student Film Festival that Godard did not take up. Landesman points to the 'lost opportunity' of Godard's hope to scout locations for his *Filme socialisme* (2010) which never materialised. In this Afterword, Landesman further explores the complex issue of representations of Israel from the outside which, in the case of the filmmakers who populate the book, adopt an essayistic travelogue mode to embrace the swirling contradictions and ideological inconsistencies they encounter in Israel and, above all, in their own relationship to it. Their films also explore the tensions between the imagined and the real that Mitchell examines in his seminal article. Landesman's

sophisticated exploration of these films and filmmakers, ever mindful of these 'messy realities of geopolitical strife' as they might inform the rendering of contemporary Israel and the Occupied Territories, in news and social media, is a tremendous and important contribution to historical film criticism at its very best.

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