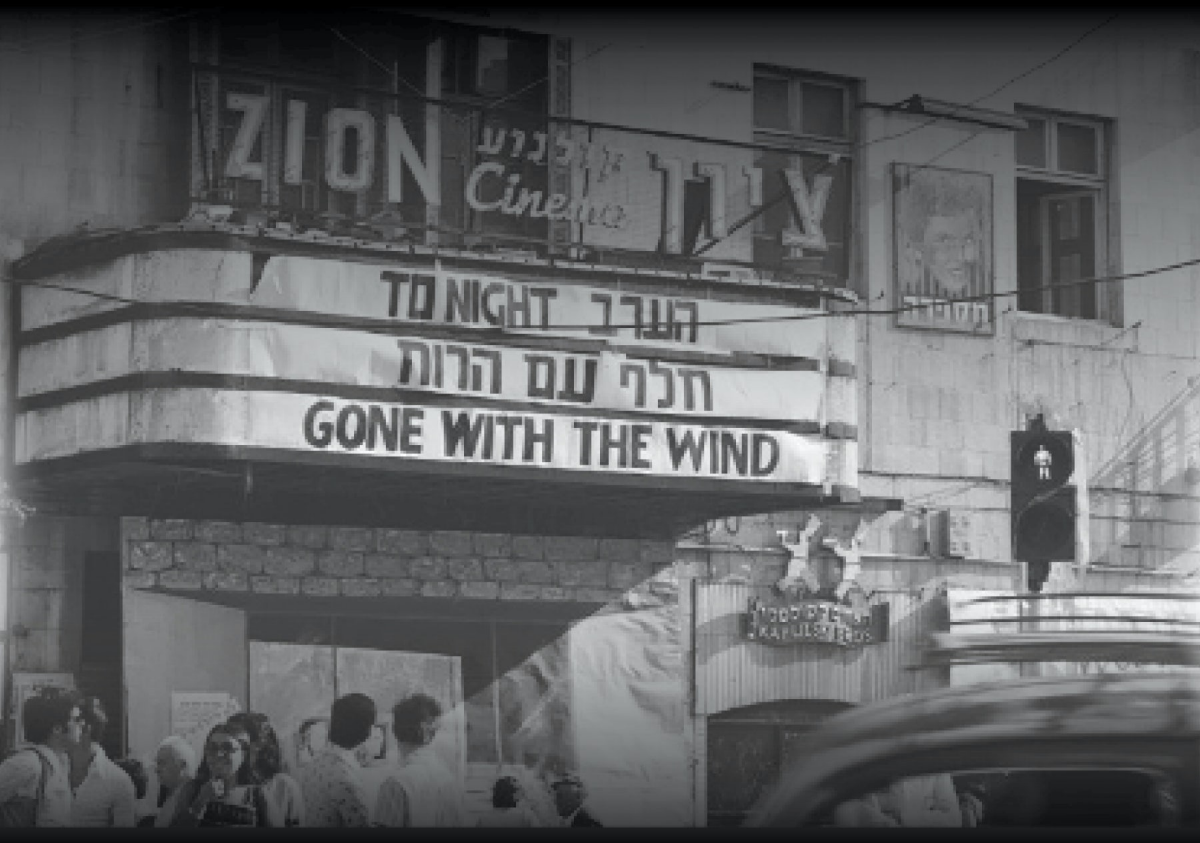
CASTING A GIANT SHADOW

The Transnational Shaping of Israeli Cinema



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MOMENTS OF INNOCENCE AND FRACTURE

Fantasy and Reality in Two Documentary Visits to Israel

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In this chapter, I consider two documentaries, made by renowned non-Israeli artists, that focus on Israel: Chris Marker's *Description of a Struggle* (1960) and Susan Sontag's *Promised Lands* (1974). Appearing while the hegemonic narrative still held a powerful sway in Israeli society, these films offer a critical perspective of the Zionist project that appears to be ahead of its time. Today, when filmmaking frequently focuses on exposing the mythic history of the Israeli national narrative, revisiting these documentaries allows us to see a precursor to this contemporary trend. By exploring the gaps between what Marker and Sontag had hoped to see and the reality they encountered, one can reveal the early cracks beginning to appear in the monolithic narrative of Israeli cinema. Thus, in revisiting these films, we not only encounter the gaps created between the initial filmmakers' expectations and what was actually documented in the final projects but also the vast historical changes that Israel has gone through between the original moments of documentation and this contemporary viewing moment.

Even though they are set in Israel and deal with its foundational myths, Marker and Sontag's films have not been discussed as part of studies of Israeli cinema. This may undoubtedly be explained due to the fact that

the filmmakers are not Israeli, that their perspective on Israel is inflected by "foreign" concerns that make it incompatible with Israeli national discourses prevalent at the time, and that their films have been made according to some transnational aesthetic influences. While not dismissing these dimensions in this chapter, I do argue, in the spirit of this anthology, that they do not offer sufficient grounds for excluding these works from Israeli cinema. Rather, by enforcing an overly restrictive national paradigm on Israeli cinema, one misses the opportunity of fruitfully exploring the nature of its dialogue with *Description of a Struggle* and *Promised Lands*—and by extension, providing a more nuanced understanding of this cinema's transnational dimension. Redressing this gap, the following chapter will contrastingly profess the importance of these documentaries to Israeli film scholarship on the basis of how they serve as transnational extensions to the cultivation of a national Israeli cinema.

In their manifesto for transnational documentaries, written almost twenty years ago, John Zimmerman and Patricia Hess wanted "to reclaim the term transnational in order to radicalize it"[1] and to begin an investigation "into how the transnational functions within and around concepts of the national, the regional and the local."[2] While addressing more contemporary documentaries than Sontag and Marker's, Hess and Zimmerman's polemical ideas become relevant to the discussion here, as they show how "old theoretical categories linking documentary practice to the nation have changed dramatically in the post-cold war and transnationalized cultural economy; they have been reorganized, reconceptualized, rearranged, remade, rewired."[3] Drawing on this thinking, I explore the problematics of considering the nation in essentialist terms.

Yet the very term *transnationalism* may be viewed as problematic, as Deborah Shaw has argued, since *transnational cinema* has become "a catch-all [that] is inadequate to deal with the complexities of categorising both actual films and industrial practices."[4] One therefore needs to tread lightly in its use, inspecting its various aspects so as to clearly map out its complex operation, as well as its relationship with the national, in the space of certain texts. Using Shaw's typology of "categories of the transnational" as guide, I will show how *Description of a Struggle* and *Promised Lands* are both films that are made by transnational directors "who work and seek funding in a range of national contexts;"[5] these directors display "transnational influences" emerging from filmic traditions in European and American cinema of the 1960s;[6] they use "transnational modes of narration" by

employing local and international modes of address;[7] and they expand the notion of "exilic and diasporic filmmaking"[8] by offering the removed gaze of tourists, who have personal stakes in the location they visit.[9]

Utopian Dreams and Daunting Awakenings in *Description of a Struggle*

In 1957, Wim and Lia Van Leer, pioneers of film culture in Israel and founders of the country's cine-club movement, visited the Moscow Film Festival, the first to include Israeli films in its program. One film in the festival stood out among the rest and impressed them deeply: the essayistic travelogue *Letter from Siberia* (1957), made by the French filmmaker Chris Marker. With a little help from his friend, writer and literary critic Yakov Malkin,[10] Wim Van Leer approached Marker directly and asked him if he would be interested in visiting Israel and making a similar travelogue there. Such an essayistic production made by a filmmaker as promising as Marker, so believed the Van Leers, would finally unleash documentary filmmaking in Israel from the propagandistic and didactic shackles that dominated the early heroic period in Israeli cinema during the 1950s. It would also expose it, so they envisioned, to transnational influence in both aesthetic and thematic ways. Marker agreed, but with only one condition: complete artistic freedom. He refused to show the film or consult with anyone else about it before it was done. Marker, who was also a passionate and talented photographer, came to Israel in 1959 for a pre-shooting visit devoted solely to location hunting. Touring Israel on a Vespa given to him by the Van Leers—"following the footsteps of Jesus on a scooter,"[11] as one *Cahiers* critic observed—Marker took between 800 and 1,000 still photographs, which would later form the basis of a future treatment for his film.[12]

Marker returned to Paris after this visit and wrote a script based on both these photos and a short story given to him by the Van Leers, Franz Kafka's first published piece of writing, "Description of a Struggle" (1909).[13] The finished script, the result of a meeting between a written diary, still photography, and a literary piece of writing, accumulates fragmented notes that read as if written by a tourist in a foreign country.[14] A few months later, Marker came back to Israel for a four-week shooting period, an experience that took place while Otto Preminger was there shooting *Exodus* (1960), a film that would later become a monumental Zionist epic. Marker went back to the same places he had visited a few months earlier and looked for the

same subjects of which he had previously taken photos. The result, *Description d'un combat* (*Description of a Struggle*), is an essayistic travelogue that evolved and materialized out of those photographs, an assemblage of postcards from the edge.[15] In one particular sequence, for example, Marker revisits a street market where he finds the subjects from his previous trip and hands them their photos. Within a reflexive sequence about photography and its relation to cinema, the subjects' gaze is returned to Marker twice: once in the making of each photo and later in the moment of gratitude.

Description of a Struggle meditates on the circumstances that have led to the establishment of Israel and the different paradoxes that define the state's existence. Watching it, however, one cannot help but wonder about the reasons that made Marker travel all the way to Israel and capture the early stages of a young state barely approaching bar-mitzvah age. What was it in Israel that grabbed his attention and interest at the end of the 1950s? *Description of a Struggle* belongs to what is now considered to be the lost period in Marker's work, "orphaned from the back catalogue if not disowned by its creator"[16]—an era in his oeuvre that is bracketed between *Letter from Siberia* and *La Jetée* in 1962, the year that Marker himself regards as his "year zero" in filmmaking.[17] In much of the work he made during that period, his ideological position remains elusive. Marker's trip to Israel occurred amid an artistic phase in his own life, when he traveled to several countries experiencing important moments of transformation and engaged cinematically in ideological national building, including China under Maoism, explored in his short film *Sunday in Peking* (1956); the Soviet-promoted Five-Year Plan for industrialization and electrification, which served as the background for *Letter from Siberia* (1957); and Cuba's attempt to consolidate Castro's revolution, portrayed in his *¡Cuba Sí!* (1961). These travelogues consider the utopian dream of building a new society, which serves as a recurring theme in his early cinematic work. Israel's inclusion in this series can thus be seen in light of Marker's interest in ideology and utopianism as it crosses through nations. This personal investment in the project adds another layer of meaning that should be considered vis-à-vis the fact that the film was initially recruited by the Van Leers. Providing a cinematic glance at the process of Israel's establishment was also in line with Marker's own political views as a leftist humanist and may have been a gesture of solidarity with the fledgling state. While it is tempting to identify the Orientalist impulse in this film—after all, images of pre-occupation Israel carry the scent of an exotic locale—Marker's conscious decision to employ the

epistolary and essayistic narration mode is probably meant to resist such colonial observation of the colorful and primitive. In fact, in all of Marker's early travelogues, which consist of nuanced narration, a collage of postcard imagery, and a good sense of critical distance, one can easily trace the major tropes and strategies of his later essayistic rhetoric in film.

Marker, who worked as an editor in *Les Lettres nouvelles*, the same company that published Roland Barthes's *Mythologies* two years prior to *Description of a Struggle*, embraces semiology as the dominant methodology in the film. It opens with still shots of land and water, after which the first images we see are of rusted and burned tanks in the desert. "This land speaks to you in signs," the voice-over calmly declares, introducing a long enterprise of decrypting dynamic signifiers.[18] Israel becomes a semiotic text that Marker attempts to decode, its identity read as "an accumulation of signs, marks of the multiple conflicts that have carved out its twelve years of existence as a nation."[19] Images of people, places, even animals, sometimes plucked from their original context, speak mutable meanings. The narration, working on the level of unexpected connotation rather than denotation, tries to instigate associations rather than fix meanings. Such a perspective of the semiotician working to invite contemplation rather than to impose didacticism is emblematic of the European essayistic tradition with which Marker was identified. The contrast between this open aesthetic and the simplistic structure of the heroic cinema in Israel at the time may admittedly lead us to define Marker's film as imposing on the Israeli nation a foreign influence. Yet to the extent that it was foreign, the film's rhetoric of intellectual meditation would nevertheless influence the groundbreaking work of Israeli filmmaker David Perlov, especially his essayistic city symphony *In Jerusalem* (1963),[20] as well as help bring about a modernist trend within Israeli cinema. Further complicating its foreignness, Marker decided to produce three versions for the film with a different language of narration in each one: Hebrew, French, and English. Such a multilingual form is important not only because *Description of a Struggle* is one of the few Marker films in which the narration is made in a local language, but also because such a practice was not entirely an anomaly in Israeli cinema at the time. Meir Levin's *The Illegals* (1948), a film about Jewish illegal immigration prior to the establishment of Israel as a state, came out with three versions of narration, as well: English, French, and Hebrew. Larry Frisch's *Amud Ha'Esh* (1959), made eleven years later and dealing with Israel's war for independence, was also released to theaters in both English and Hebrew

versions. Considering further these transnational modes may help us re-evaluate the burgeoning film industry in Israel and go beyond the scholarly dominant idea that the heroic cinema of the state's early years was entirely nationalistic in its essence.

There is a tension that Marker constantly builds in the film between a traumatic past and a utopian present. Admiring its process of creation and worrying about its future at the same time, Marker reveals hope that Israel would realize its need to become an unusual and exemplary nation. Such a tension is formally built into the film by using the typical Markerian montage, which French critic André Bazin described, in relation to *Letter from Siberia*, as "horizontal," where "a given image does not refer to the one that preceded it or the one that will follow, but rather it refers laterally, in some way, to what is said . . . montage is made from the ear to the eye."[21] Marker is searching for the signs that show contradictions inherent in the new nation state. He looks, for example, at how ultra-Orthodox Jews live in a religious enclave that is reminiscent of Jewish existence in Europe prior to the establishment of the state—"the sweet little ghosts of the ghettos," the narration recognizes, "who are still present in Mea Shearim, where Jewish destiny is frozen." Later in the film, he shows how the dome shape of the synagogue is shared by Hebrew University's planetarium, indicating how religion lives alongside science. Marker even looks for images that attest to the imminent disruption of nationalistic utopia, like the ruins of a deserted Arab village or the disgraceful conditions of transit camps. Marker's interpretation of objects rests on "a moment of defamiliarization" in which he pulls objects from their everyday context and spotlights their significance from multiple angles, both real and imagined.[22]

Settlements blossom out of the desert, signaling for Marker how Israel is rapidly changing and abandoning its early signs. The early history of pioneer workers makes way for a developing modernity, and socialist utopia is placed next to capitalist development. Marker is fascinated by the kibbutz as a collective experience that fosters an alternative to capitalist economics and devotes a lengthy sequence for observing the members in Manara gathering for collective decision-making. Rachel Rabin, sister of Israel's late prime minister Yitzhak Rabin and a good friend of the Van Leers, is shown here leading a voting process where all decisions are taken by common consent. Marker's empathic look at what he regards as "an absolute form of democracy" is simultaneously worrisome: "Isolated in their own country, isolated from the social states," he asks, "how long will their purity last?"

The kibbutz encapsulates for Marker an essential paradox in the existence of Israel: How will its socialist ideals face the reality of the ever-growing capitalist system?

Marker, who worked with Alain Resnais on *Night and Fog* (1955) five years before visiting Israel and cowrote its script with Holocaust survivor Jean Cayrol, looks for similar signs of the ways in which the past is engraving itself on the surface of things. He wants to capture signs that attest to the tragic trauma of the Holocaust and its pain on the collective psyche of the nation, thus zooming in on numbers tattooed on the young survivors' arms or listening carefully to the different languages heard on the streets (including Yiddish, German, Hungarian). Closer to the end of the film, he decides to include extensive footage from Levin's *The Illegals*, the aforementioned early Zionist film that chronicles the harrowing events of the illegal Jewish immigration during the British Mandate period. It shows how one ship, named *Without Fear*, was violently rerouted to Cyprus and refused entrance to Israel. As these images appear, Marker's tone becomes more didactic and displeased, and the word *we* is carefully used to point a blaming finger toward Europe: "Survivors of the camps, orphans of the camps, born in the camps, crashed by the camps they ran away from us, Germany, with our crimes, France, with our indifference, and when they turned to England, were dragged back to the camps." Unlike Resnais, though, who is looking mostly into the past in *Night and Fog*, Marker is placing the past within the continuous present and offering a realistic challenge for the future.

This penultimate sequence is only a necessary prelude to the final and memorable scene, which questions how the Holocaust trauma is going to shape the country's future struggle for existence, define its character, and justify its legitimacy. Marker visits the painting workshop of Phyllis Malkin and focuses on a twelve-year-old girl, as old as the country itself. The swan-like long-necked girl keeps herself busy drawing on a canvas, never really turning her head away from it. Such innocent and banal activity poses, according to Marker, a big question mark about the imminent future of Israel. That girl, who "would never be Anne Frank" and therefore not a victim, as the voice-over clarifies, belongs to a group of kids who were "born without fear"; thus she becomes "a sign of the miracle of Israel's creation," as Lupton remarks. "We must look at the girl until we lose our sense of what she means, like a word repeated over and over again."[23] "Look at her," the narrator asks us. "There she is. Like Israel . . . A vision that defeats the eye,

as words endlessly repeated. Amongst all the wondrous things, most wondrous is her being there, like a cygnet, a signal, a sign." What was the girl drawing on the canvas, wonders Israeli filmmaker Dan Geva in his own film, *Description of a Memory* (2007), a loving homage to Marker's documentary. Perhaps therein may lie the key to understanding why Marker chose her of all the other signs he encountered along the way as an instigator for his prophetic warning. Never mind the fact (or perhaps mind it very much) that this little girl is now a grown woman who decided not to live in Israel but reside as an artist in London, Marker sees her as a sign emblematic not only for conserving the past but also for avoiding the infliction of further injustice, because injustice weighs heavier in the land of Israel than elsewhere. "To become a nation like other nations implies the right to selfishness, to blindness, to vanity," the voice-over concludes, "but the entire history of Israel protests in advance against force that is nothing but force. Force and power are not in themselves anything but signs. The worst injustice weighing on Israel is perhaps its not having the right to be unjust."

Description of a Struggle was screened in Israel in 1961 for four weeks, at the same time as when Adolf Eichmann was being tried in the country. While national attention was mostly focused on the trial, the film was well received as an artistic achievement and attracted a local audience of slightly less than twenty thousand people. There seems to be a common yet unfounded belief that in 1967, following the eruption of the Six-Day War and Israel's invasion of the Occupied Territories, Marker became disillusioned by the situation, viewing his film as no longer relevant and asking for it to be withdrawn from circulation. In fact, while its belated US premiere occurred at the 1982 New York Film Festival, where it was shown as part of a double bill along with its original source of inspiration, *Letter from Siberia*, and generated a hostile reception that was partly due to Israel's invasion of Lebanon that year, Marker did attend two special screenings of the film in both Tel Aviv and London in honor of Wim Van Leer's death in 1992, suggesting that he had not completely disowned the film after all.

Recording the Pain of Others: Political Dissonance and Experimental Sound in *Promised Lands*

While Susan Sontag was mostly known for writing novels, short stories, plays, and especially essays on culture, photography, and film, she worked behind a camera four times during her lifetime. About this rather uneasy

experience, which never ceased to outrage many critics, Sontag confessed: "Making movies is accompanied by anxiety, struggle, claustrophobia, exhaustion and euphoria."[24] Her films were not shown to the public very often, and there is hardly anything significant written on them in scholarship. Sontag's first two cinematic endeavors, *Duet for Cannibals* (1969) and *Brother Carl* (1971), were Ingmar-Bergman-type dramas in the Swedish language, while her fourth one, *A Trip Without a Guide* (1983), was based on a short story she wrote that takes place in Venice. *Promised Lands* (1974), her third film and the only documentary she ever made, is a small-scale production that took her to Israel during the immediate aftermath of the Yom Kippur War (1973). Sontag considered it her most personal film, in part because she was emotionally invested in the materials she was looking to find in Israel as a Jewish intellectual and because her immediate family collaborated on the project. *Promised Lands* was produced by the French actress Nicole Stephanie, who was, at the time, Sontag's girlfriend, while David Reif, Sontag's son from an early marriage, served as its assistant director. The film grapples with issues Sontag was intellectually obsessed with around the time she penned her celebrated anthology of essays, *On Photography*, which would be published four years later (1977). The documentary *Promised Lands* marks, I believe, a critical moment in Sontag's thinking about images and power that would later converge into a more full-fledged theory in the book, a monumental scholarly work that stresses the medium's acquisitive, objectifying effects. Such a personal and intellectual interest in filming Israel complicates further the question of national cinema by injecting an internal dimension of the auteur's desires into the template of external characteristics that may define Israeli cinema.

Given the filming's proximity to the Yom Kippur War and the psychic devastation of its events on the Israeli public, Sontag had picked a peculiar time to stroll the streets of Jerusalem and cross the deserts of Sinai: her visit took place twenty days after fighting began, and the conflict was still ongoing. Considering this is the same woman who entered Hanoi in the midst of the Vietnam War in 1968 and directed a play in besieged Sarajevo in 1993, such timing may not appear too surprising and attests, if nothing else, to her intellectual interest in understanding the practice of documenting war. Perhaps she also wanted to use the images from her trip to Israel as a specific case study for a much broader universal reflection about the absurdity of war, of any war. This resonates with what I have outlined earlier as Marker's ongoing interest in exploring the utopian dimension of

socialist states and further extends the transnational realm in which both films could be situated.

For seven weeks of shooting, with a small crew and indescribable bravery, Sontag documented a young militarist country confronted by an unexpected crisis and guided by paranoia and fear. She entered the fresh battlefields and drove around the state to closely examine the ways in which Israeli citizens responded to the war. Sontag captured harrowing images of burned tanks and corpses of soldiers surrounded by dried blood and swarming flies in the desert, never shying away from the immediate traces of trauma. Back in 1973, official documentation of the war in Israel was rather clean, censored, and devoid of any catastrophic imagery. Depiction of suffering, pain, or death—of both Israelis and the Arab enemy—was never provided on television or on the radio. Because war in Israel and any other conflict in the Middle East were not covered exhaustively by the media during the 1970s, Sontag could still sneak in as an unprofessional reporter to document the horror. Such a privilege would clearly change dramatically in the years to come, when "the terms for allowing the use of cameras at the front for non-military purposes," as Sontag clarifies in her last published book, "have become much stricter."[25]

The horrific images Sontag captured in Israel now seem closely tied to her developing understanding of photography. Read retrospectively, they illustrate her ongoing struggle with the ethical responsibility a photographer may carry toward horror and suffering in the world and a viewer's relationship toward the abundance of images dealing with it. "Every piece of art made on any war that is not showing the appalling concreteness of destruction and death," she writes, "is a dangerous lie."[26] *Promised Lands* is a film that should also be reevaluated in light of Sontag's late writings, especially *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), written thirty years after her visit to Israel. In it, she revisits the similar dilemmas about war photography and arrives at some modified conclusions. About the value of shock photography in war, she writes: "Look, the photographs say, *this* is what it's like. This is what war *does*. And *that*, that is what it does, too. War tears, rends. War rips open, eviscerates. War scorches. War dismembers. War *ruins*."[27]

Sontag takes this obsession with the evidentiary quality of photographs, an essence that derives from their indexical ties with reality, further toward the level of sound in film. She uses two different strategies of sonic representations throughout *Promised Lands*: diegetic sound that provides evidence and an essayistic voice that opens her film for a rhetoric of questioning and

contemplation. She aims at once, as Paul Arthur once phrased it, toward concrete facts and inward toward mercurial reflection, where an "argument must proceed from one person's set of assumptions, a particular framework of consciousness, rather than from a transparent, collective 'We.'"[28] Sontag's understanding of film sound as providing indexical evidence correlates with her understanding of photographs as not merely statements about the world but pieces of it, "miniatures of reality that anyone can make or acquire."[29] Accordingly, Sontag builds a sonic landscape that is composed of unrelated audial elements recorded on location (prayers, running footsteps, radar beeps, machine-gun fire, or radio broadcasts) and edited in rhythmic juxtaposition to abstract images of deserted battlefields, graveyards, supermarkets, open landscapes, and clichéd icons of Israeli folklore. The soundtrack is restless and projects anxiety: radio broadcasts are put on top of interviews, explosions and gunshots intrude on mourning ceremonies, Arab singing is contrasted with Western pop music, and Muslim and Jewish prayers are heard simultaneously. Sontag forces us to listen to everything that the unsolvable political conflict constitutes in Israel and creates a synthesis that digs further and deeper; she accumulates audial traces, scars of the painful daily reality after the war: the rituals of mourning, the physical pain of wounded soldiers, and the mental trauma of Israeli citizens. She records the social fracture of a country confronted by its most dreadful nightmare—forces that work toward its destruction.

At the same time, exploiting the film camera's revelatory powers was not the only function of documentary Sontag had in mind. In fact, she chose not to call her film a documentary at all, because she believed it was too narrow a term to accurately reflect its analytical and dialectical rhetoric. She writes about her own film by mentioning instead the poem, the essay, and the lamentation as "possible literary analogues" to it.[30] "To interpret is to impoverish, to deplete the world—in order to set up a shadow world of 'meanings.' It is to turn *the* world into *this* world. ('This world'! This world, as if there were any other)," Sontag writes in her essay "Against Interpretation" (1966).[31] In an attempt to distinguish between a work of fiction and a documentary, Michael Renov uses similar terms to explain that "fiction is oriented towards *a* world," while "non-fiction towards *the world*."[32] Such an epistemological distinction may help us better understand why Sontag's resistance toward the conventional form of documentary took her en route to the meditative essay film, where she was looking for open ruminations and not clear interpretations. It is here that Sontag, like Marker, arrives in Israel

with film language tools that derive from her experience with the essayistic in her literary writings; yet the cinematic environment she encountered in Israel over a decade after Marker's visit was one where her foreign aesthetic was no longer foreign (Perlov's *In Jerusalem* being one major precedent of the essayistic in Israeli cinema), subsequently undercutting her film's position as "external influence."[33]

Promised Lands expands on this reluctance toward didacticism and eschews talking heads or any use of expository narration. Since Sontag did not know much about the complex ethnic texture of the young State of Israel and was not really familiar with the subtle differences between economic classes, cultural dialects, and political groups in the country, she cleverly played with the perspective of an outsider. As an American Jew who visits Israel, Sontag refuses to let her Jewishness get in the way and "comes across not so much as a director, but as a tourist in her own subject."[34] While she excludes any explicit reference to her own voice in this travelogue, her poetically insinuated critical outlook, expressed through the prism of a visitor, becomes the existing testament by which her carefully reserved view of Israel can be judged. It is here that Sontag attests quite clearly to her desire not to surrender to an Orientalist impulse and simply enforce a foreigner's viewpoint on Israel but to own up to the fluidity of perspective of a visitor who nevertheless has a vested interest in "knowing" the place she visits and consequently has to negotiate the actual and supposed gaps between foreignness and indigeneity.

Accordingly, such personal confusion is performed through the film's main strategy of sound dialectics, where Sontag's voice is perhaps obfuscated but still elegantly coded into the contrast between two distinct male voices that ruminate thoughtfully from both sides of the political arc: Yuval Ne'eman, an internationally renowned nuclear physicist, speaks about the roots of anti-Semitism and Arab hatred toward the Jewish people, while Yoram Kaniuk, a well-known writer, liberally pontificates about Palestinian rights and the country's dangerous shift from its socialist roots to an American-style commercial culture.[35] The deliberations of those two men run intermittently through the course of the film, underscoring the "deepening divisions within Jewish thought over the very question of Palestinian sovereignty."[36] Sontag, who was influenced by the ideas of Marxist dialectics, surrenders completely to this Hegelian structure of reasoning and produces a rhetorical drama around these opposing voices, each representing a partial truth.

The pairing of those voices together exposes the patriarchal underbelly of *Promised Lands*, as its mode of argumentation remains trapped within a Jewish male perspective. There are no interviews with women, and only a few women appear in the film; this elision resonates with Sontag's subsequent claims, made in 2003, that "war is a man's game" and the "killing machine has a gender, and it is male."[37] Also missing from this documentary is a nuanced representation of Palestinians. Excluding one individual shot, where Palestinians are shown crossing the Allenby intersection through Jordan, and not accounting Kaniuk's vocal explanation of their suffering, their existence in the film remains "shadowy and abstract."[38] For a film that seeks to undermine the young Israeli state's narrative of heroic national liberation and go against the internationally dominant pro-Israeli sentiment during that period, it is odd that it features only Jewish speakers while the Arab enemy remains silent, deprived of a coherent voice and reduced to either exotic scenery (Bedouin herders who become part of a decorative landscape) or nameless bodies torn apart by the atrocities of war.

Where such elements testify to conservativeness, the film's radicalism is felt more strenuously in scenes that deal with Zionist ideology forthright. On one occasion, when she visits the wax museum in Tel Aviv, where a collection of wax sculptures representing famous people from Israeli history are exhibited in lifelike poses, Sontag puts together a montage of bizarre images from the museum that illustrates the Jewish victimhood discourse. By patiently oscillating between various rooms in which establishing moments in Israeli history are represented on wax—the heroic death of famed soldier Yosef Trumpeldor, the Declaration of Independence, the Eichmann trial, or the liberation of the Wailing Wall—Sontag crafts an implied criticism on the official Zionist discourse in Israel and its limitations. What constitutes collective memory is, for Sontag, an artificially restraining narrative that stipulates dogmatically what is important and what is the ideologically dominant version of Israel's history. At other times, Sontag carefully expresses her reservations through edited observation. She repeatedly attends funerals and memorial services held only a few days after the war, when the wound is still open and bleeding. The mourning rituals she is filming are forming historical continuity. They are bookended by the opening shots of the film, which show tombstones and funerals of victims from World War I, and its last sequence, where tanks are making their way to the next future conflict. War begets war, Sontag insinuates, and there is no end in sight to this bludgeoned struggle.

The most memorable—and also most troubling—scene in the film is its penultimate sequence, in which Sontag directs her gaze onto an experimental treatment for shell-shocked war veterans. In a post-combat rehabilitation clinic, we watch a doctor and a male nurse recreating battle noises of shooting and bombing for a drug-induced patient who seems to be in a state of trance. Banging drawers, slamming beds, and shouting orders, they attempt to heal a soldier who suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) using a terrifying treatment of sound reenactment. Sontag, who patiently observes the situation with penetrating and unflinching direct-cinema methods, called the psychiatrist in charge of these therapies (which now seem more torture than therapy) Dr. Strangelove. The scene, which certainly belongs to a very specific time period and to treatment principles that may now seem totally obsolete, functions as a terrifying cinematic allegory to a haunted society and embodies the feeling of claustrophobia a nation experiences in a tragic moment. As viewers trapped in Sontag's silent and merciless gaze on this patient twisting in pain and covering his face with a pillow, we are left with nothing else but his suffering and the sounds that generate it. The artificial audial landscape created for the patient, composed of a tape recorder playing back horrific elements from the battlefield and diegetic sound effects performed by the staff, merges seamlessly with the multilayered soundtrack Sontag uses throughout the rest of the film. Regarding the pain of others, as Sontag would later title her last published book on war photography, means not only watching it in photographs but also listening to it on film.

The hospital scene resonates in many ways with John Huston's *Let There Be Light* (1946), which provided an unprecedented look into the psychological wounds of World War II, specifically PTSD among returning soldiers. While Huston's film was produced by the US Army in 1945, it was first allowed public screenings in December 1980, seven years *after* Sontag returned from Israel. As a penetrating look at a medical procedure, the hospital scene also clearly echoes Frederick Wiseman's *Titicut Follies* (1967), the first direct and merciless documentation of the casually inhuman hospital treatment of the criminally insane. As a frightening testament to masculinity in crisis, the scene was probably also the main reason behind the Israeli government's decision to ban *Promised Lands* in Israel upon its initial release, fearing it would damage the collective national morale. After all, this is a film that was produced ahead of its time. Showing a variety of unresolved complexities, it neither imitated the nationalistic and heroic cinema

made in Israel during the immediate post-Independence era nor aligned itself with the worldwide wave of support the country was enjoying after the Six-Day War. Her conservative inclinations notwithstanding, what Sontag captured with her film camera—images of a "beleaguered, paranoid, and terrified nation grappling with the traumas of persecution, war, pain, and death"[39]—was not easy to swallow.

When *Promised Lands* was screened in the United States, it was harshly criticized by Nora Sayre of the *New York Times*, who questioned whether it really "should have been a book instead of a film." *Promised Lands* "won't increase your understanding of Israel," she claimed, failing to understand that Sontag's filmic rumination was not intended primarily for providing information or context.[40] *Variety*'s film critic, Gordon Hitchens, was similarly displeased, calling the film "noble, but vaguely misdirected."[41] Sontag, who was rather content with the final result, never resumed her work as a documentarian, perhaps because she was discouraged by the negative reviews. I believe, however, that Sontag more or less anticipated this line of criticism, at least from a political point of view. Sontag belonged at that time to the intellectual and liberal milieu in New York City and tried to undermine its historically sympathetic, yet largely uninformed and one-dimensional, understanding of Israel. She wanted to make clear that Israel is not only a victimized Jewish nation founded on the ashes of the Holocaust and surviving the threats of Arab nations against all odds but also a rather confused and fragmented society, torn apart by "competing values of militarism, consumerism and religious identity."[42] Here, I believe, the national and the transnational become intertwined. Sontag's tourist perspective, looking for traces of a fragmented social fabric in Israel after the Yom Kippur War, aligns quite accurately with the harsh reality of a nation that was indeed left torn apart and fractured after the traumatic experience of the war.

Nowadays, the film seems to be painfully and tragically prescient. It deals with a watershed moment of national rupture in Israeli history, rarely grappled with in both fiction and documentary Israeli cinema (Amos Gitai's *Kippur* [2000] being one striking exception), and provides rare documentation on the outcome of war from the perspective of an outsider. Sontag's film is a pioneering attempt to illustrate the severe moral crisis the country experienced following the war and the resulting sobering-up process from the euphoria of the Six-Day War. As a hybrid of sorts between news reportage and an anthropological essay film, *Promised Lands* documents

the sociopolitical catastrophe in Israel, the inevitable collapse of the Zionist dream as it is eaten away by the reality of a continued Jewish-Arab conflict. Caught in an elaborate transnational matrix, this film may seem too conscious of its own liminal standing to impose a dominant meaning on this state of affairs. Rather than dictate a message, it asks its audience members to experience, reminding them that "every image," as Sontag wrote close to the end of her life, is first and foremost "an invitation to look."[43] Taking it a formal step further, *Promised Lands* is an exceptional essayistic struggle that requires not only watching but also listening to the physical and mental pain emerging from an historical moment of national rupture.

Conclusion

Description of a Struggle and *Promised Lands* are not flawless masterpieces. Their creators, trying to document an exotic Levant that they had previously only imagined and conceived in their fantasies and desires, occasionally fell into the trappings of cliché. However, each of these films is still fascinating, challenging, and relevant in its own unique way and should not be dismissed as simply a display of nostalgia. These two documentary efforts dramatize the complex and often turbulent relations between utopia and dystopia, vision and reality, dreaming and awakening. Marker and Sontag came to Israel with different aspirations for observation, different legitimizations for their projects, and separate fantasies about the nature of their object of study. While Marker's vision of Israel as a socialist haven was shattered by the disillusioning traces of capitalism and euphoria he came across during his trip, Sontag's curiosity and vested interest in Israel as an American Jew made her practical findings even more distressing than what she had expected. Their fluidity of perspective, channeled through aesthetics that were formed elsewhere, marked them as outsiders to a nation that still, at that period, attempted to assert its national indigenous exclusivity.

Yet we should be wary of accepting such simple binarism between foreign and local unquestioningly. Considering the nature of their short and singular visits to Israel, Sontag and Marker may have avowedly embraced a tourist's point of view on Israel. Yet this position was taken up in a reflexive manner, exposing the very process by which one acquires knowledge of a place, as well as how a place projects a certain self-image for outsiders to know. Their seeming confusion was thus a result of negotiating the very fluidity that comes to pass when categories of national knowledge

are unraveled—a result of their transnational position. Such decentering may not have complemented the dominant ideology of Israeli nationalism (though neither did the dominant tradition of heroic Israeli cinema), and in this sense, it may have foreshadowed the broader process of transnationalism Israel has gone through since the 1990s. Yet one may also say that it clearly resonated with contemporaneous Israeli attempts, albeit marginal, at breaching the national through participation in a fluid transnational sensibility. To the extent that such attempts are apparent in the development of an Israeli high-modernist cinematic style, one could definitely see *Description of a Struggle* and *Promised Lands* as contributors to this evolution. Defining this contribution as a mere importing of modernist aesthetics from without, however, would be to misunderstand the nature of the transnational conversation at play, dictating that Israel belongs solely to Israelis and modernism to Europeans and Americans. Such an argument on belonging, while not without merit, should not be carried too far, for it obfuscates the reality of a transnational project in which Israel is imagined in modernist terms by Israelis and non-Israelis alike, all looking inside and outside simultaneously, attempting to make sense of the very confusion inherent to traversing categories. Marker and Sontag, despite their global prominence, are not foreign instigators of this trend as much as partners within it. Their singular importance is that they exist categorically outside of the border of Israeli national cinema and as such may serve to expose its basic impermeability.

Notes

1. John Hess and Patricia R. Zimmermann, "Transnational Documentaries: A Manifesto," in *Transnational Cinema: The Film Reader*, ed. Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden (New York: Routledge, 2006), 98.
2. Ibid., 100.
3. Ibid., 105.
4. Deborah Shaw, "Deconstructing and Reconstructing Transnational Cinema," in *Contemporary Hispanic Cinema: Interrogating the Transnational in Spanish and Latin American Film*, ed. Stephanie Dennison (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell and Brewer, 2013), 48.
5. Ibid., 60–61.
6. Ibid., 58.
7. Ibid., 54.
8. Ibid., 56.
9. Notably, Marker and Sontag's films are not the only documentaries made by renowned non-Israeli filmmakers as a result of their historical visits to Israel. If we take into account

also Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Scouting for Locations in Palestine* (1964) and Claude Lanzmann's *Pourquoi Israel* (1973)—two other films whose rhetoric should be placed on the thin line between utopia and dystopia, vision and reality—we could possibly trace the contours of a larger group of transnational films that has not been granted appropriate critical reception and has been excluded from the discussion of Israeli cinema throughout the years.

10. Malkin would perform the Hebrew voice-over narration in the film.

11. Qtd. in J. Hoberman, "Postcard from the Edge: Marker's Impression of Israel," *Film Comment* 39, no. 4 (July/August 2003): 48.

12. I am indebted here to Israeli photographer Shuka Glutman, who showed me several of those photographs, which he received as a gift from Lia Van Leer.

13. *Description of a Struggle* would also become the title that Marker gave his film in its English and French versions. The original Hebrew version was called *The Third Side of the Coin* (*Ha-tzad Hashlishi Shel Ha-matbea*), attesting perhaps to the ambiguity Marker wanted to keep in his position toward the complexity of the situation in Israel, especially when addressed to an Israeli audience.

14. David Greenberg, "Description of a Struggle: Excerpts from the Script by Chris Marker" [in Hebrew], *Omanut Hakolnoa* (August 1961): 20. Yet while Marker purportedly had full artistic freedom, Lia Van Leer, seeing a copy of the script, encouraged him to edit out the most extreme statements about the State of Israel. See also *Lia* (Taly Goldenberg, 2011), a documentary about Van Leer in which she discusses these editorial changes.

15. The archival recovery of many of these lost photographs would serve to deepen our understanding of this creative process.

16. Chris Darke, "Eyesight: Chris Darke Unearths Marker's 'Lost Works,'" *Film Comment* 39, no. 3 (May/June 2003): 48.

17. Ibid.

18. The word *sign*, it should be noted, appears in the film fifteen times.

19. Catherine Lupton, *Chris Marker: Memories of the Future* (London: Reaktion Books, 2005), 67.

20. For a more thorough attempt to compare *Description of a Struggle* with *In Jerusalem* as two poetic essay films that resist the didactic tone of the propagandistic cinema in Israel during the 1960s, see Shuka Glutman, "Moments of Promise: The Sensitivities of the French New Wave Meeting the Promised Land," *Takriv* 9 (January 2015) [in Hebrew].

21. André Bazin (1958), "Bazin on Marker," *Film Comment* 39, no. 4 (2003): 44.

22. Lupton 2005, 68.

23. Ibid., 68.

24. Yoram Kaniuk, "Susan Sontag Tells How It Feels to Make a Movie," *Vogue*, July 1974.

25. Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 66.

26. Kaniuk 1974.

27. Sontag 2003, 8. Emphasis in the original.

28. Paul Arthur, "Essay Questions: From Alain Resnais to Michael Moore," *Film Comment* 39, no. 1 (January/February 2003): 60.

29. Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Straus and Giroux, 1977), 4.

30. Kaniuk 1974.

31. Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Penguin, 2009), 7. Emphasis in the original.

32. Michael Renov, *The Subject of Documentary* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 22. Emphasis in the original.

33. See, for example, Miriam Hansen's attempt to track ways in which cinemas from different geopolitical locations and constellations are engaged with the contradictory experience of modernity. Hansen suggests several directions in which the concept of vernacular modernism might provide "a heuristic framework for tracing transnational relations between and within Japanese and Chinese film practices of the 1930s" and thus serve as an example for how national cinema aesthetics can never be truly indigenous. See Miriam Hansen, "Vernacular Modernism: Tracking Cinema on a Global Scale," in *World Cinemas, Transnational Perspectives*, ed. Natasa Durovicova and Kathleen Newman (London: Routledge, 2010).

34. Liam Hoare, "Susan Sontag's Panned and Banned Israel Documentary," *Forward*, January 8, 2015.

35. Remarks of this kind, it should be noted, were pretty rare at that time in Israel, when the debate about Palestinians' rights was practically nonexistent within the public discourse.

36. Taken from the *Fandor* website's description of the film, https://www.fandor.com/films/promised_lands, accessed September 19, 2020.

37. Sontag 2003, 6.

38. Nora Sayre, "Screen: Sontag's 'Promised Lands': Treatment of Israel Is at Screening Room," *New York Times*, July 12, 1974, 44.

39. Hanan Toukan, "Grappling with Israel: From Sontag to Lacan and the Maoists in Between," *Jadaliyya*, September 3, 2012.

40. Sayre 1974, 44.

41. Gordon Hitchens, "Promised Lands," *Variety*, July 10, 1974, 16.

42. Taken from the *Fandor* website, https://www.fandor.com/films/promised_lands, accessed September 19, 2020.

43. Sontag 2003, 45.