# Essayistic Travelogues in Israel: Between Anticipated Wonders and Encountered Realities


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# Essayistic Travelogues in Israel: Between Anticipated Wonders and Encountered Realities

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## ABSTRACT

This essay examines a corpus of essayistic travelogues filmed in Israel by non-Israeli filmmakers between 1960 and 1974, a period marked by political upheaval, shifting global perceptions, and the consolidation of Israeli national identity. These films—by Chris Marker, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Jules Dassin, Michael Mindlin Jr., Michael Roemer, Susan Sontag, and Claude Lanzmann—negotiate the tension between pre-existing ideological projections and the complexities of the land they encounter. Rather than adhering to conventional touristic or colonialist gazes, they employ self-reflexive and essayistic strategies to interrogate the representational challenges posed by Israel's layered and contested landscape. Central to this analysis is Roemer's *Faces of Israel* (1966), an observational documentary that captures Israel on the brink of the Six-Day War. Roemer, whose engagement with Jewish identity and ethical Zionism shaped his perspective, presents Israel as a nation oscillating between historical trauma, military preparedness, and collectivist aspirations. His film, like the other travelogues discussed, reveals the filmmaker's evolving relationship with Israel, often culminating in ambivalence, disillusionment, or transformation. By engaging with theories of space, place, and representation in relation to the cinematic travelogue, I explore how these essayistic films resist fixed narratives, ultimately redefining the travelogue as a space of inquiry rather than of resolution.

The geography of modern Israel, shaped by millennia of cultural evolution and political conflict, poses a formidable challenge for those attempting to capture its complexity—particularly for visitors unfamiliar with its layered histories. Filmmakers who arrived in Israel hoping to distill its essence into cinematic language were soon confronted with the reality, as Edward Grossman aptly notes, where "the land and its people, overexposed, remain a mystery to the movie camera."[1] Their efforts to reconcile this enduring mystery inevitably produced what Rocco Giansante and Luna Goldberg describe as "the intersection between what it [Israel] projects externally

and what is projected onto it."[2] For many foreign directors, Israel became a symbolic canvas onto which preconceived notions and imagined constructs were inevitably superimposed.

Given this context, the difficulty filmmakers encountered in capturing Israel speaks to broader tensions inherent in the cinematic travelogue as a form. Long situated between modes of observation and projection, the travelogue oscillates between documenting foreign landscapes and inscribing the former with preexisting cultural, ideological, or personal narratives. While similar tensions can be observed in other contested or symbolically charged landscapes, they find particularly vivid expression in travelogues filmed in Israel—a land steeped in historical, religious, and political significance, where external perceptions often collide with lived realities. For foreign filmmakers arriving in Israel—whether drawn by political upheavals, personal histories, or artistic curiosity—the act of filming becomes a process of negotiation between expectation and encounter, between the imagined and the experienced.

This dynamic becomes particularly visible in the 1960s and 1970s, a tumultuous era for Israel, whose armed conflicts and political turmoil drew the attention of non-Israeli documentarians eager to capture the nation's evolving landscape. Over the course of fourteen "explosive years" (1960–1974), which are the focus of this essay, several major filmmakers—Chris Marker, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Jules Dassin, Michael Mindlin Jr., Michael Roemer, Susan Sontag, and Claude Lanzmann—turned their attention to the essayistic travelogue, a niche cinematic practice well suited to exploring Israel's complex historical moment. At times deliberate, at times unwieldy, the blending of lowbrow and highbrow modes of address in these films that combine the tourist's gaze with the cine-artist's critical perspective, testifies to the complexity of the filmmaker's position as both an outsider and a traveler with a deeply personal stake in the land visited.

This article seeks to map out this body of Israel-centered essayistic travelogues created by non-Israeli directors during their short visits to the country, offering insights into the works of these seven renowned filmmakers while devoting extended analysis to Roemer's *Faces of Israel* (1966), a film that has never before been examined in academic scholarship.[3] Central to this exploration is the question of how these films confront the representational challenges posed by Israel's layered and contested landscape. Rather than falling into the traps of the colonialist or touristic gaze, they employ reflexive and self-interrogative strategies that foreground their filmmakers' evolving relationship with the space they document. By examining how these works navigate the tensions between anticipation and reality, I explore how they simultaneously resist and reshape the conventions of cinematic travel, ultimately producing a form of nonfiction filmmaking that is as much about internal reckoning as it is about external documentation.

In the essayistic travelogues examined here, the process of cinematic inquiry often reveals the filmmakers' emotional and intellectual struggles, not only in relation to the physical landscape they encounter, but also with the

terms of their own artistic subjectivity. Drawing on Timothy Corrigan's notion of the "excursion film," I argue that the act of navigating foreign spaces with a deliberate openness to uncertainty frequently leads these works to project the filmmaker's internal landscape onto the Israeli terrain, transforming the travelogue into a narrative of personal reflection and transformation. Simultaneously, these films underscore the inherent difficulty of representing Israel/Palestine as a coherent destination, emphasizing its resistance to fixed representation. Drawing from W.J.T. Mitchell's concept of the "holy landscape," along with other theoretical approaches to space and place in cinema, I argue that this resistance arises from a profound epistemological gap between the symbolic constructions of Israel/Palestine produced from a distance and the heterogeneous, often contradictory realities encountered on the ground. While such tensions are often present in travel experiences more broadly, they are particularly heightened in Israel/Palestine due to the immense historical, religious, and ideological associations that have accumulated over the years. The weight of these layered narratives can be overwhelming for visitors, yet it also holds the potential to destabilize and expand the filmmaker's preconceptions, challenging overly rigid expectations.

## Travel Documentaries to Israel by Foreign Filmmakers in the 1960s–1970s: A Chronology

A focus on this period is crucial because it marks a pivotal moment in Israel's history, a time when the state was still in the process of consolidating its national identity while simultaneously becoming embroiled in regional conflicts that would redefine its geopolitical standing. The aftermath of the Holocaust, successive waves of Jewish immigration, the 1967 occupation of Palestinian territories, the devastation wrought by the Yom Kippur War in 1973, and shifting global perceptions of Israel all contributed to an era of profound transformation. For foreign filmmakers, these developments provided both a dramatic backdrop and a compelling subject for cinematic inquiry, offering a lens through which to explore broader questions of displacement, ideology, and the politics of representation. More specifically, and of central concern in this essay, this period saw the emergence of essayistic and self-reflexive documentary practices, allowing filmmakers to approach Israel not merely as an exoticized destination but as a site of ideological contestation, historical reckoning, and personal confrontation.

The seven films that fall within this category of documentary visits to Israel between 1960 and 1974 may seem like a relatively small corpus. Yet, each of these works holds significant cultural weight, offering new ways of thinking about the intersection of travel and cinema, particularly in relation to the kinds of knowledge that the essayistic travelogue produces or withholds. These films also challenge prevailing narratives about foreign perspectives on Israel and the affective dimensions of intercultural engagement. To lay the groundwork for this discussion, a brief survey is necessary.

Two visits to Israel in the 1960s illustrate the fraught relationship between fantasy and reality, as well as the tension between romanticized expectations and pragmatic discoveries. Marker's *Description of a Struggle* (*Description d'un combat*, 1960), an essayistic travelogue commissioned during a period in which Marker was documenting nations undergoing significant political and social change,[4] offers a complex portrayal of Israel at the height of its nationalist fervor. The film simultaneously embraces and critiques some of the country's most potent symbols, resulting in an ambivalent meditation on Israel's national identity. However, Marker's relationship with the film soured in the aftermath of the Six-Day War (1967), leading him to disown it because of his disappointment over Israel's actions. Similarly, Pasolini's *Scouting for Locations in Palestine* (*Sopralluoghi in Palestina*, 1963) reflects another conflicted cinematic encounter with the region. One of several travelogues Pasolini created throughout the 1960s and 1970s, this intimate and unpolished *unmaking-of* documentary chronicles his unsuccessful search for suitable filming locations in Israel and Jordan for *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (1964). However, the obstacles Pasolini encountered were not merely logistical; instead, they revealed a deeper existential crisis for the openly gay, Communist filmmaker. His journey to the Holy Land, initially motivated by a desire to affirm a profound religious sentiment, ultimately led to disillusionment with the modernized, secularized landscape of contemporary Israel, which failed to align with his imagined biblical vision.

Between the Six-Day War (1967) and the Yom Kippur War (1973), three significant documentaries were created by renowned American artists, each offering a distinct lens on Israel during this critical period. The first of these, *A Journey to Jerusalem* (1968), directed by Michael Mindlin Jr. and filmed by acclaimed documentarians Albert and David Maysles, follows celebrated conductor and composer Leonard Bernstein as he tours Israel in the immediate wake of the Six-Day War. The film culminates in a grand concert on Mount Scopus, featuring Bernstein alongside violinist Isaac Stern and the Philharmonic Orchestra. As a travelogue, it serves as an enthusiastic tribute to Israel's military success, framing the victory as both a strategic and moral achievement. Similarly, *Survival 1967* (1968), directed by émigré filmmaker Jules Dassin, offers a celebratory portrayal of Israel's recent battlefield accomplishments. Dassin fully embraces Jewish ethno-nationalism, weaving it into his own ideological framework of socialist-universalist resistance to oppression—a perspective shaped by his experiences as a victim of McCarthy-era persecution. The prevailing sense of triumph found in these two films is notably absent in *Promised Lands* (1974), a documentary directed by esteemed essayist and occasional filmmaker Susan Sontag. As her only foray into documentary filmmaking, the film presents a starkly different vision of Israel in the aftermath of the Yom Kippur War, a conflict that nearly led to the nation's collapse. In place of the earlier celebratory tone, Sontag offers a sobering portrait of a nation grappling with trauma, paranoia, and existential fear.

A key figure in francophone cinema, Claude Lanzmann approached Israel with a perspective shaped by both proximity and distance: as a Jewish filmmaker engaging with a land that was neither entirely foreign nor truly familiar. Lanzmann's directorial debut, *Pourquoi Israël* (1973), wrestles with the challenge of depicting a country that occupies an ambiguous space in his identity, existing somewhere between home and elsewhere. Filmed shortly before the Yom Kippur War, *Pourquoi Israël* presents a forceful and provocative defense of Israel's legitimacy as a young nation, and would later serve as the foundation for Lanzmann's cinematic trilogy on Jewish identity and history, alongside *Shoah* (1985) and *Tsahal* (1994).[5] Deeply personal in its motivations, the project was partly a response to criticisms Lanzmann faced as a staunch advocate of Israel following the 1967 occupation. Through observational sequences capturing everyday life such as interactions with new immigrants, dock workers, and prison inmates, Lanzmann explores how Israel perceives itself twenty-five years after its founding, probing its political, cultural, and religious underpinnings. His position is inherently dual: as an outsider, he maintains a degree of detachment, yet as a Jew, he is deeply invested in Israel's future. This tension results in a complex perspective whereby his emotional alignment with Israel limits his critique, while his observational distance allows him to document facets of Israeli society that, at the time, remained unspoken or actively suppressed in public discourse.

**Disillusioned Journeys: Utopian Fantasies and Personal Projections**

Travel films, initially designed as substitutes for physical travel, allow viewers to embark on virtual journeys and vicariously experience distant landscapes without leaving their seats. Jennifer Peterson highlights this experiential dimension, noting that travelogues provide sensations that often rival or surpass the authenticity of actual journeys.[6] Emerging alongside the democratization of tourism, these films became a popular form of "armchair tourism,"[7] offering audiences who were economically restricted the opportunity to visually traverse foreign environments. Peterson describes the function of travelogues as "compensatory"; while "not quite as good as the real thing, perhaps," they nonetheless serve as "fulfilling a perceived lack in the spectator's real life."[8] This compensatory effect, central to the experiential dimension of travel films, can also be observed in travelogues made in Israel, which at times sought to engage (particularly Jewish) audiences outside the country by offering mediated representations of a young nation too remote for easy access through physical travel. However, the primary concern of the films examined here is *not the audience's experiential deficit but rather that of the filmmakers themselves*. Such works avoid presenting Israel as a polished visual postcard for external consumption; instead, they document the filmmakers' subjective encounters with the landscape, emphasizing the tension between preconceived expectations and the complex realities they confront on the ground.

Put differently, the influence that conventional travelogues often exert on their audiences, as Peterson notes, lies in the fact that they "are more about desire than education." While travelers may appear to seek knowledge about their destinations, their primary motivation often stems from "a desire to experience someplace (anyplace) different, a desire to leave one's current conditions, a desire for new experiences."[9] Cinematic travel intensifies this phenomenon, since filmic representations, unlike physical journeys, are freed from the constraints of real-world landscapes, enabling virtual explorations driven by imagination rather than factual accuracy. Consequently, most travelogues cater more closely to the audience's idealized fantasies than adhere to the complexities of the places depicted. The travelogues set in Israel, however, break away from this tendency. These films, I argue, do not strive to fulfill the viewer's expectations of a romanticized or exotic locale, but instead emphasize the filmmakers' own imagined projections onto Israel and the inevitable disillusionment that arises when confronted with its realities. The spectator is invited to engage with the filmmaker's personal journey, encountering the filmmaker as a contemplative guide navigating the tensions between fantasy and experience.

Research on early travelogues explores, however, not only their compensatory function as virtual substitutes for physical travel, but also their utopian dimension. The immersive sensory quality of early travelogues fostered a unique spectatorship that extended "beyond mere observation," allowing viewers, according to Peterson, to enter a dreamlike state of "poetic reverie," entranced by exotic visual spectacles and imaginative personal associations.[10] However, this form of transcendence was rarely neutral. Early travelogues by August and Louis Lumière, Edward Curtis or Robert Flaherty frequently conferred "positive or even utopian implications"[11] onto their subjects, whether drawn from the landscape itself or projected through an idealizing cinematic gaze. Travelogues to Israel in the 1960s-1970s present a different form of utopianism. At their center lies the realization of Israel as being a utopia in its etymological sense of "non-place," a vision that, though idyllic, is built upon a void. Rather than engage the viewer in the possibility of dreaming upon a poetic Israel that never is or was, these films point to the impossibility of such a poetic reverie and the filmmaker's personal struggles in that regard.

Much like the distinction between the utopian Jerusalem of above and the quotidian Jerusalem from below, traversing this divide hinges upon a matter of faith. These travelogues follow a different path, cultivating doubt rather than faith; as a result, they seem perpetually locked in the movement between the fullness of utopia's dream and the absence of utopia's traces in real life. While in its most common form the travelogue is even more likely than a physical passage to adapt its perspective to the viewer's desirous imaginings and fantasies, it is not the case, I would argue, with travelogues made in Israel. Here, it is the filmmaker's own imaginings and fantasies, and the inevitable compromise and disappointment that shape the cinematic visions of Israel.

A central theme explored in the travelogues filmed in Israel is the country's significance in shaping the filmmakers' personal identities within their cultural circles. Each of these documentarians entered the contested Israeli landscape with a distinct expectation, seeking to discover or affirm something specific about themselves, rooted in the particular fantasies they projected onto the region. For Marker, Israel represented an opportunity to explore yet another iteration of ideological nation-building, a theme that had defined much of his early cinematic engagement with utopian political projects across national borders. Pasolini imagined the land held the promise of a biblical world preserved in time, a repository of revolutionary energy from the past, only for it to reveal itself as a site overwritten by capitalist modernity, its archaic potential disrupted by the signs and structures of a new economic order. Lanzmann saw Israel as both a deeply personal and political terrain, which ultimately forced him to confront his complex position as a French Jew and intellectual in the 1970s, seeking to articulate a moral and ideological justification for Israel's existence.

Their journeys to Israel became a means of confronting and processing deeply personal concerns related to national and religious identity, political and ideological commitments in relation to Israel specifically and within a broader framework tied to the cultural contexts from which they emerged. However, rather than confirming preconceptions, their travelogues document complexities and contradictions, ultimately capturing their filmmakers' evolving attempts to reframe and make sense of a reality that resists easy categorization. Nonetheless, it is crucial to avoid framing these travelogues within a simplistic narrative of disillusionment. This would imply that the filmmakers initially approached Israel with a sense of naïve credulity, an assumption that seems improbable. These films are far from being uncritical portrayals. Their creators were never truly "the innocents abroad," to borrow Mark Twain's ironic phrase.[12] In Pasolini's case, for example, the so-called "unmaking-of" documentary for his planned Jesus film may well have been a performative exercise, given that he likely anticipated Israel's failure to align with his artistic expectations from the outset. In an interview with Oswald Stack, conducted four years after the film's production, Pasolini admitted that the decision to relocate the filming of his Jesus film to southern Italy may have already taken shape as a concrete plan prior to the visit. "I had decided to do this [to shoot the film in Italy] even before I went to Palestine, which I only did to set my conscience at ease. I knew that I wanted to recreate the *Gospel* by analogy."[13]

Marker, whose body of work consistently challenged conventional travel narratives, had long rejected the notion of the innocent tourist and visited Israel only at the invitation of local filmmakers Wim and Lea van Leer. His personal investment in the project as a skeptical essayist distinctly imprints the film with an unmistakably auteurist signature, adding layers of meaning beyond the circumstances of his invitation by the van Leers and the financial support provided by their foundation. I argue that none of the visitors approached the landscape of Israel with merely preconceived utopian fan-

tasies; instead, their films invite us to question whether the archetype of the "innocent" tourist is itself an externally imposed construct. Has this trope always been a projection onto foreign travelers rather than an identity they genuinely assume? What does it mean when filmmakers deliberately stage and confront their own sense of bewilderment at the perceived disconnect between Israel's symbolic identity and its lived reality?

## A Space That Exists Elsewhere: Disoriented Journeys and the Value of Being Lost

This shift in perspectival focus from the viewer's fascination to the documentarian's realization process allows filmmakers to direct the travelogue towards fulfilling its potential as a personal essay. Rather than aiming for objective representation, the travelogues set in Israel accentuate their travelers' inherent inclination for what W.J.T Mitchell describes as "witnessing and testifying to a surface experience of landscape, a comparative experience that has to be understood in autobiographical terms, as inescapably private, personal and ignorant."[14] Here, ignorance is not merely a limitation but a fundamental aspect of the traveler's "aesthetic attitude."[15] In some cases, such as Pasolini's visit to Israel, the act of embracing ignorance, whether genuine or performative, becomes a driving force behind the subjective perspective that defines the travelogue, transforming it into an introspective exploration of both place and self.

What emerges from this "certain kind of willful unknowing,"[16] which often manifests as a deliberate performance of uncertainty on screen is the portrayal of "an imaginary and symbolic as well as a real entity, a landscape, a visible, perceptible shape that is freighted with so many associations and conflicting representations that it is a wonder that the earth's crust does not buckle under their weight."[17] Instead of conforming to official, propagandistic, or tourist-driven narratives that seek to gloss over complexities thereby leveraging the travelogue's traditional role in shaping national cohesion as an "international construct established through travel"[18], these films actively resist such reductive interpretations. They engage with the inherent contradictions of the landscape, exposing the tensions that complicate any attempt at a singular, coherent representation of Israel. As a result, the Israel depicted in these films do not cater to an audience anticipating familiar and comforting portrayals of the region. Instead, viewers are confronted with a dual sense of estrangement both from the land itself and from the filmmaker's distinct perspective of purposeful ignorance. This layered alienation, which challenges conventional expectations, may explain why such films have remained relatively obscure and underexplored.

The tension that arises from the experience of getting lost in travel is often highlighted through the paradoxical use of maps and cartographic cues. In his analysis of films that incorporate diegetic maps, Tom Conley argues that these visual elements introduce a fundamental ambiguity about both


*Figure 1.* Consulting maps onscreen in Pasolini's *Scouting for Locations in Palestine*

location and identity that is deeply tied to the concept of place. As Conley astutely notes, "A map in a film prompts every spectator to consider bilocation; when a map in a film locates the geography of its narrative, it also tells us we are not where it says it is taking place. The story that is said to be there is nowhere."[19] In essayistic travelogues, this disorientation is further emphasized, mirroring the filmmaker's own sense of displacement. Instead of providing a reassuring sense of orientation within the depicted landscape, maps in these films highlight their own inadequacy, underscoring the filmmaker's deliberate, and perhaps reluctant, acceptance of disorientation. Ultimately, they become emblematic of the traveler's imagined control over an unfamiliar space, exposing the illusion that a foreign place can ever be fully mapped and comprehended. This dynamic is particularly evident in Pasolini's exploration of Israel, where the act of consulting maps on-screen or plotting a logical route through biblical sites traced in the footsteps of Christ stands in stark contrast to the film's seemingly fragmented and chaotic structure.

Pasolini's evident confusion about the land and its relevance to his intended project is heightened by the structured cartographic representations, ultimately revealing a striking discord between the ordered appearance of maps and the unpredictable, disjointed reality captured in the film.

The experience of feeling lost and disoriented in unfamiliar spaces is often seen as a temporary phase within travel. This unsettling interlude eventually leads to reorientation and reaffirmation of the traveler's sense of self. However, in the context of essayistic travelogues in Israel, I propose an alternative outcome: rather than leading to a return to stability, disorientation serves as *a catalyst for the ongoing destabilization and transformation of subjectivity*, primarily experienced through a shifting mental landscape. Timothy Corrigan characterizes the written travel essay as one in which "the experience of space redefines a self within a constantly shifting 'elsewhere,'"[20] representing subjective transformations through epistolary, journalistic, and conversational modes. Travel thus becomes an opportunity to redefine the self, producing what Corrigan describes as "a drifting and dislocated voice—an absent subject in foreign lands, an alien at home, a mind exiled from nature—exploring interior and exterior geographies of everyday life."[21] Along these lines, Corrigan conceptualizes the "excursion film" as a fusion of the travelogue and the essay film, exploring scenarios in which "even the individual subject that motivates journey films is or becomes incomplete and unstructured."[22] This form of essayistic travel "maps that incomplete journey in a way that also describes or suggests how the excursion has fundamentally altered and destabilized the traveling subject."[23] Corrigan's framework provides a useful lens for understanding the travelogues made in Israel, which frequently reflect the filmmakers' evolving and often unsettled relationship with their personal and ideological identities.

A compelling example of an excursion that destabilizes the traveling subject is found in Lanzmann's *Pourquoi Israël* (1973), in which the filmmaker grapples with his Jewish identity as a European intellectual living in France, while simultaneously navigating his position as a French public figure defending the Zionist project of the 1970s. Lanzmann, who had gained privileged access to the left-wing intelligentsia in France as Jean-Paul Sartre's secretary and close friend, found that his pro-Israel views were increasingly alienating him from his intellectual peers. In this sense, embarking on a trip to Israel can also be read as an attempt to intellectually reposition himself within that milieu. In this project of self-legitimation his Zionist standpoint serves not only as a political declaration but also as a means of reconciling personal convictions with a shifting ideological landscape.

This notion of a "destabilized traveler" is equally relevant to other prominent filmmakers who documented their journeys in Israel. Marker's socialist utopian hopes for the country were profoundly shaken by the aftermath of the Six-Day War and Israel's occupation of the Palestinian territories, leading him to withdraw his film *Description of a Struggle* from circulation. Viewed through the lens of a destabilized subject, such a decision is not simply a reaction to a changed political reality, but a reflection of the filmmaker's evolving attitude toward it. To withdraw a film from circulation is not merely a political gesture; it also signifies the moment when reality intrudes upon the filmmaker's shifting, subjective perspective. That act, too, becomes essentially, and profoundly, essayistic.

Similarly, Pasolini's search for an archaic biblical landscape was thwarted by the realities he encountered, resulting in an essayistic *unmaking-of* documentary that confronts his own disillusionment. On a practical level, Pasolini ends the trip deeply disappointed: "I found nothing I can use in the film," he remarks sweepingly. His ambivalent position toward modernity leads him to ostensibly reject the very sites he visits. Finally, in the case of Sontag, it is likely that her decision to travel to Israel was also motivated by a desire to test her own unequivocal position regarding the politics of the region. She sought to formulate an educated opinion on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, even if doing so meant interrogating the Israeli side she intuitively favored, an intellectual exercise that might have placed her at odds with the New York Jewish intelligentsia of the 1970s.

Each of these examples underscores how the essayistic travelogue, rather than offering resolution or certainty, serves as a vehicle for exposing the complexities and contradictions faced by the traveling subject. In blending the external and internal, the descriptive and the reflexive, these films employ an essayistic rhetoric that Michael Renov describes as "a writing practice that couples a documentary impulse—an outward gaze upon the world—with an equally forceful reflex of self-interrogation."[24] This dual perspective, central to the essay film tradition, enables the filmmakers to explore not only the landscapes they traverse but also their own evolving subjectivities within them.

## Mapping the Imaginary: Space, Place, and the Politics of Representation in Travelogues on Israel

> *Doesn't the Landscape perspective itself reduce a place to an image, a representation?*[25]

At their core, travelogues center on movement through space, with the primary goal of revealing that space to the spectator-traveler. In this context, space is understood as a tangible, physical entity—its coordinates measurable and empirically verifiable within a recognizable geography. Travel inherently assumes the existence of such geography, offering an encounter with both its physical dimensions and the diverse ways in which human activity shapes and inscribes meaning onto it. Space, therefore, is not an abstract, platonic ideal but rather a dynamic construct that materializes through lived experience; for the traveler, the journey presents an opportunity to witness this process firsthand—an "authentic" engagement that simultaneously contributes an external layer of interpretation and practice.

However, drawing on Michel de Certeau's assertion that "space is a practiced place,"[26] it is essential to acknowledge that spatial authenticity is never neutral; rather, it is shaped and often distorted by ideological and political forces that impose specific frameworks of meaning. In this sense, "place," in contrast to "space," functions similarly to W.J.T. Mitchell's understanding

of "landscape" not simply as a physical environment but as a cultural genre or medium that mediates and structures our perception of it, much like a painting frames open space.[27] This process becomes particularly fraught in contested spaces such as Israel/Palestine, where Palestinians and Israeli Jews engage with space in pursuit of opposing ideological objectives, often within the very same geographical areas.

The travelogues filmed in Israel appear acutely aware of this complex interplay between space and place, as evidenced by their recurring tendency to commence with a visual introduction of the landscape. This is reflected in numerous instances: Dassin's sweeping aerial shots of the Dead Sea, Sontag's evocative portrayals of wartime remnants scattered across the desert, and Marker's panoramic framing of images as semiotic signs at the outset of his film. "The trope of the panoramic view/shot taken from the perspective of the traveler," as Laura Rascaroli reminds us, "contributes to the production of an ethnographic space, one that was clearly shaped by Western discourses."[28] Such framing strategies spatially invoke the challenges of depicting a landscape that is at once foreign and familiar, a terrain to be charted and interpreted through the lens of the Western traveler. However, unlike the conventional use of these shots in ethnographic films, which offers viewers an illusion of control and mastery over unfamiliar spaces, the panoramic shots in these travelogues resist providing spatial certainty or a fixed spectatorial position. Instead of stabilizing the landscape, they reveal its inherent unruliness, undermining any notion of an ordered, comprehensible space. This is partly why Marker adopts semiology as the film's dominant interpretive framework, and opens with still images of land and water, followed immediately by shots of rusted, burned-out tanks abandoned in the desert. "This land speaks to you in signs," the calm voice-over intones, "signs of human beings, of lands." Israel becomes a semiotic text that Marker attempts to decode, where images of people, places, or even animals, sometimes plucked from their original context, speak mutable meanings.

Rather than positioning space within defined coordinates, films such as Marker's present spatiality as a "hieroglyph," to borrow Henri Lefebvre's term, offering a signifier of competing and often contradictory social meanings.[29] Implicit here is the recognition that addressing the intricacies of Israel's landscape requires moving beyond cartographic simplification and rejecting any imposed sense of spatial order. As Lefebvre, and later Mitchell, assert, space is inseparable from history, maintaining a dialectical relationship with the past; it fosters only an illusion of naturalness while simultaneously being produced through economic, social, and historical forces.[30] The fluid and continually evolving image of Israel as perceived by foreign observers and internalized by many Israelis has also been theorized by Edward Said through the notion of "imaginative geography," which highlights the disjunction between material reality and constructed perception, and underscores the extent to which symbolic representations often eclipse actual places and their inhabitants.[31] All of these frameworks illustrate how cinematic portrayals of Israel oscillate between lived experiences and imposed

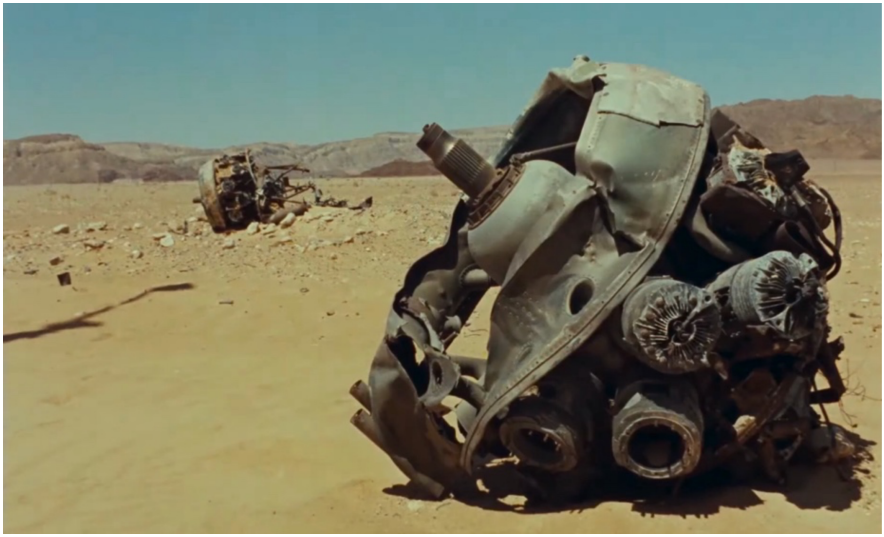

*Figure 2.* Semiology as the dominant interpretive framework in the opening shot of Marker's *Description of a Struggle*

symbolic projections, creating a contested space ideal for the destabilized traveler as exemplified further by the following case study.

### *Faces of Israel*: Michael Roemer's Impressionistic Portrait of a Nation in Flux

Roemer's *Faces of Israel* (1966) serves as a case study, crystallizing tensions between personal investment, ideological commitment, and cinematic representation. Its portrayal of Israel on the brink of the Six-Day War vividly encapsulates the broader dynamics central to the essayistic travelogue explored in this essay. Conceived during Roemer's research for an unrealized film on Martin Buber,[32] *Faces of Israel* eschews traditional documentary narration in favor of an impressionistic montage and observational aesthetic, aligning itself with the tenets of Direct Cinema.[33] As Roemer traverses the country capturing the rhythms of kibbutzim, the energy of bustling marketplaces, and the regimented intensity of military exercises, he constructs a layered and multifaceted depiction of a nation in the process of defining itself, simultaneously redefining his own identity in relation to it. Through stark juxtapositions, evocative imagery, and a reliance on music and sound to convey meaning, *Faces of Israel* crafts a nuanced meditation on a society in flux, mirroring Roemer's own internal transformation.

Roemer, who was born to a bourgeois Jewish family in Berlin in 1928 and fled Nazi Germany as a child via the Kindertransport in 1939, had long

grappled with questions related to his ethnic identity. After witnessing the destruction of his father's and grandfather's livelihoods under Hitler's regime, he spent the war years at a boarding school for refugees in England before immigrating to the United States in 1945. At Harvard, he resisted assimilation into a predominantly gentile environment, instead affirming his Jewish identity by editing the university's Zionist newspaper, often writing most of it himself. An immigrant consciousness, shaped by both personal experience and intellectual inquiry informed his perspective on Israel, grew to occupy a place of profound significance in his evolving sense of self. A natural result of this evolution, Roemer's documentary in Israel was actually not self-initiated but rather commissioned by PBS American television network. This fact helps us situate *Faces of Israel* within a broader tradition of externally funded documentaries by filmmakers with a personal investment in the country. In this regard, the film draws an implicit parallel to *Description of a Struggle* (1960), which, although commissioned by the van Leer Foundation, still bore the unmistakable imprint of Marker's cinematic sensibilities. Similarly, despite its commissioned status, *Faces of Israel* reflects Roemer's distinct artistic vision, maintaining the aesthetic and thematic independence characteristic of an established auteur's output.

Roemer's political consciousness had long been informed by his experiences with fascism and racial discrimination, and, therefore, extended its reach well beyond the specific case of antisemitism. For example, in his *Nothing But a Man* (1964), based on a script co-written with Robert Young on African American life under segregation, Roemer connects systemic racism in the United States to broader struggles against oppression. The film, which won two awards at the Venice Film Festival, uses a Euro-neorealist aesthetic to tell the story of a working-class Black couple in Alabama. Judith Smith explains that "for Roemer, White supremacy in some ways resembled Nazi racialization,"[34] an insight that underlies his filmmaking ethos as a whole and explains his desire to make a film in Israel. This intersection between Jewish identity, racial politics, and broader struggles against oppression also recalls the work of Jules Dassin, who similarly drew connections between the Black freedom struggle in the United States and his unequivocal support of Zionism as a response to anti-Semitism before making his travelogue *Israel 1967*. Dassin's interest in black revolutionaries was not unrelated to his ideological affinity with the Israeli cause, stemming from the same radical politics of the left. Himself a victim of a political witch-hunt, Dassin saw both fights as power struggles pitting a weak minority against a Goliath opponent. Roemer, just like Dassin, framed racial and ethnic struggles within an overarching political lens that was profoundly transnational.

*Faces of Israel* opens with a haunting and charged juxtaposition: images of Holocaust corpses abruptly transitioning to footage of Israeli fighter jets in flight, followed by triumphant military processions and displays of national strength. This stark contrast encapsulates the film's central thematic tension—the lingering specter of Jewish trauma set against the burgeoning military confidence of the young state.[35] It is striking that Roemer's film,

made just one year before the Six-Day War, still adheres to the entrenched cause-and-effect narrative linking the Holocaust to national resurrection (in Hebrew: *Shoah Ve'Tekuma*). However, the 1967 war would fundamentally alter this paradigm, serving as definitive proof that resurrection had already been achieved. With Israel's military triumph, the state no longer needed to justify its existence through Holocaust survival alone but could instead begin the process of reshaping its national identity, distancing itself from the trauma of its past.

At face value, *Faces of Israel* appears to resonate with the politically charged intellectual montage employed by Marker in *Description of a Struggle*. However, whereas Marker adopts a dialectical approach by interweaving rapid juxtapositions with reflective voice-over commentary, Roemer remains committed to an observational mode, deliberately eschewing both narration and intertitles. As Melissa Anderson notes, this stylistic choice actually anticipates Susan Sontag's "more oblique, less hopeful examination of the same terrain, 1974's *Promised Lands*,"[36] a stark meditation on Israel in the immediate aftermath of the Yom Kippur War. While *Faces of Israel* does not engage in direct or indirect self-interrogation in the manner that Marker, Pasolini or Sontag do, Roemer's observational approach nonetheless embodies an implicit essayistic rhetoric that aligns with theirs. The absence of voice-over fosters an open-ended interpretative experience, inviting audiences to engage with the images on their own terms. At the same time, the film's sustained attention to quotidian life reinforces its dual perspective on Israel as both a site of national revival and a landscape marked by ideological contestations.

Roemer captures the arrival of new immigrants, emphasizing gestures, facial expressions, and moments of unspoken emotion, allowing the weight of exile and return to be felt without expository explanation. He explores the bustling marketplace, a site that Marker also visited, where commerce and cultural diversity are vividly on display. Such engagement with faces, gestures, and everyday actions recalls Roemer's broader preoccupation with embodied storytelling in *Nothing But a Man*, where emotion and meaning are conveyed through image rather than dialogue. As Terry Francis observes in a discussion of Roemer's earlier work, "Roemer and Young's photography [in *Nothing But a Man*] creates psychological landscapes in faces."[37] This insight applies equally to *Faces of Israel*, where close-ups of individuals serve as a microcosm of the film's broader concerns, while the actual title *Faces of Israel* carries a dual meaning, it refers not only to the literal visages captured on film but also to the multiple, often competing, narratives that shape Israeli and Palestinian history.

Religious life in Israel is presented through a striking juxtaposition: Orthodox Jews praying in a synagogue set against Arabs engaged in prayer at a mosque. This sequence underscores the coexistence and tensions inherent in Israel's social fabric, echoing Pasolini's unrealized vision of a pre-modern Holy Land, as suggested in his *Scouting for Locations in Palestine*. The echoes of Pasolini's aesthetic choices are also apparent in Roemer's depiction of ag-

*Figure 3.* An Arab worker bailing hay in Roemer's *Faces of Israel*: an outsider's fantasy projected onto the land.

ricultural labor as an outsider's fantasy projected onto the land. The image of an Arab worker bailing hay closely resembles the opening sequence of Pasolini's film serving as a visual signifier of an unchanging, agrarian existence that Pasolini associated with the archaic authenticity he sought.

Roemer broadens his observational lens to document a diverse range of social rituals and institutions: a classroom where students engage in music-making, a klezmer orchestra performing, children taking communal showers in a kibbutz, and Israeli soldiers undergoing military training. These moments construct a panoramic view of Israel as a society oscillating between collectivist ideals and military preparedness. Particularly striking is the presence of female Israeli soldiers assembling rifles—a subtle yet potent gesture toward the gendered dimensions of national service and Zionist ideology. On the one hand, Roemer's depiction of Israeli militarism recalls the triumphalist portrayals in films like *A Journey to Jerusalem* and *Survival 1967*. However, unlike these post-war celebratory narratives that proclaim victory post facto, *Faces of Israel* was made before the Six-Day War, capturing a nation in a state of uncertainty still on the precipice of its defining military victory rather than basking in its aftermath.

The sound design in *Faces of Israel* complicates things further and articulates a documentary voice that emerges not through narration or direct ad-

dress but through a dispersed sonic texture. While Roemer's observational aesthetics capture an Israel in motion—soldiers training, new immigrants arriving, farmers laboring in fields—the land is not rendered as spectacle. Instead, national identity is approached as a processual formation, unfolding through the rhythms of everyday life. These rhythms are conveyed sonically: through ambient sounds, ritual music, communal singing, and the auditory textures of agricultural labor. The absence of a central narrating voice enhances the impression that the film's cadence emanates organically from the convergence of people and places. This mode aligns with what Trish FitzSimons has described as the *choric voice*, a documentary configuration understood "not as an expression of any single individual, but rather as a collection of braids," with the director's perspective subtly embedded at the center.[38] The film thus constructs a sense of harmony, situated on the threshold of the Six-Day War, in which shared labor by Jews and Arabs is presented not as overt argumentation but as an experiential weave of sound and motion. In contrast to the increasingly discursive and interruptive voice that dominates later travelogues, such as Sontag's *Promised Lands*, Roemer's film briefly sustains a fragile equilibrium that seems to emanate from the land itself, before the impending rupture of war renders such harmony untenable.

Ultimately, *Faces of Israel* emerges as both an impressionistic essay and a historical document, offering a rare glimpse into a pivotal moment in Israeli history, shortly before the 1967 war that would change the country's history forever. It carries implicit echoes of Martin Buber's philosophy, whose writing Roemer initially wanted to adapt into a film. Buber argues for a Zionism rooted in dialogue, coexistence and ethical responsibility rather than exclusionary nationalism,[39] a perspective that resonates with Roemer's humanistic approach in *Faces of Israel*. The film, while not explicitly advocating for Buber's perspective, shares the philosopher's deep interest and concern with the multiplicity of identities in the country. Its refusal to unabashedly impose a singular Zionist or anti-Zionist stance mirrors Buber's critique of political Zionism, and specifically its increasing reliance on power over ethical engagement.

Rather than constructing a passive, consumable vision of the land, *Faces of Israel* requires active interpretation, presenting a nation at once triumphant and unsettled. Roemer's position as a filmmaker was not overtly critical towards Israel. Considering his Jewish identity, his intellectual commitment to ethical Zionism, and his fascination with the militarized nation he encountered in 1966, it is not surprising that Roemer never publicly disavowed *Faces of Israel* unlike Marker, whose post-1967 disillusionment ultimately led him to distance himself from his own portrayal of the country. Yet he never pursued another project in Israel (as, for example, Lanzmann later did), and his cinematic engagement with the country effectively ended with this film. Did he, like Marker, grow distant from Zionist ideals over time? Roemer's subsequent cinematic work does not foreground Jewish identity in a comparable way,[40] suggesting a quiet retreat from the questions raised in *Faces of*

*Israel*. Perhaps the Israel that emerged from this pivotal moment of filmmaking did not provide Roemer with the resolution he initially sought, rendering his film yet another illustration of the travelogue as a space for personal reflection and transformation.

## Conclusion

The films explored in this essay inevitably grapple with this formidable legacy, negotiating the enduring influence of both Zionist and pre-Zionist travelogues. However, rather than passively inheriting the fusion of colonialist and Zionist cinematic perspectives, these essay films forge their own distinct paths. While each reflects the unique sensibilities of its creator, they collectively challenge the conventional definition of the travelogue as an imperialist pursuit, instead offering a more complex and critical engagement with the landscape and its representations.

What emerges from this corpus of films is a mode of travelogue that functions less as a passive record of external discovery and more as a reflexive meditation on dislocation, subjectivity, and representation. Whether through Pasolini's failed search for an imagined biblical past, Marker's disenchanted reassessment of his own socialist ideals, or Roemer's contemplative exploration of a society undergoing transformation, these films approach Israel as both a literal and metaphorical terrain onto which their filmmakers' ideological and personal projections are inevitably inscribed. As such, those cinematic journeys do not simply document a place; they expose the tensions inherent in the very act of seeing, interpreting, and narrativizing a landscape that has been so heavily burdened with competing histories and symbolic associations.

Furthermore, these films underscore the instability of the travelogue as a form, resisting its traditional reliance on spatial mastery and pedagogical certainty. In contrast to early travelogues that sought to frame foreign spaces within a coherent, consumable narrative for Western audiences, the works examined here reveal an epistemological crisis at the heart of the travel encounter. The instability of Israel as a symbolic and political space becomes an extension of the instability of the filmmakers' own subject positions, making these travelogues as much about internal, psychological, and ideological journeys as they are about geographic displacement. There is no attempt here to "explain" Israel or to resolve the contradictions embedded in its landscapes. Rather, the films reveal the act of travel itself as a fraught, unstable endeavor, one in which the journey is always shaped by the limitations of perspective, the burden of history, and the contingencies of the moment. In this way, they redefine the travelogue as a space of perpetual inquiry rather than of conclusive discovery.

## Notes

1. This essay is part of a research project supported by The Israel Science Foundation (Grant No. 481/22).
. Edward Grossman, "Susan Sontag's Israel," *Commentary* (October 1974): 78.
2. Rocco Giansante and Luna Goldberg, "Introduction," in *Imagined Israel(s): Representations of the Jewish State in the Arts*, ed. Rocco Giansante (Leiden: Brill, 2023), 9.
3. Some of the ideas discussed in this article are developed further in my book *Brief Encounters: Documentary Visits to an Imagined Israel* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2026).
4. China under Maoism was explored in Marker's short film *Sunday in Peking* (1956); the Soviet-promoted Five-Year Plan for industrialization and electrification served as the background for *Letter from Siberia* (1957); and Cuba's attempt to consolidate Castro's revolution is portrayed in *¡Cuba Sí!* (1961). These travelogues, though each set in a different geo-political context, all consider the utopian dream of building a new society.
5. For further discussion on Lanzmann's *Pourquoi Israël* (1973) and *Tsahal* (1994), two films that negotiate a delicate balance between insider and outsider perspectives, see Ohad Landesman, "Exploring the Etiology of a Jewish Homeland: When Claude Lanzmann Visited Israel," *Jewish Film and New Media* 9, no. 1 (Spring 2021): 3–27.
6. Jennifer Lynn Peterson, *Education in the School of Dreams: Travelogues and Early Nonfiction Film* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 212.
7. Amy Corbin, "Travelling Through Cinema Space: The Film Spectator as Tourist," *Continuum*: *Journal of Media and Cultural Studies* 28 (2014): 318.
8. Peterson, *Education*, 216.
9. Peterson, *Education*, 233.
10. Peterson argues that "the spectator in a state of reverie might experience a series of free-floating, subjective associations," *Education*, 231.
11. Peterson, *Education*, 208.
12. Mark Twain, *The Innocents Abroad, or: The New Pilgrim's Progress* (Knoxville: Wordsworth Classics, 2010).
13. Oswald Stack, *Pasolini on Pasolini: Interviews with Oswald Stack* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 82). Luca Caminati agrees with this version and explains that "the trip [Pasolini's] was apparently undertaken as an excuse to travel through the Middle East rather than to actually find locations, since at this point Pasolini had already decided to shoot his film in Matera in Southern Italy." See Luca Caminati, *Traveling Auteurs: The Geopolitics of Postwar Italian Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2024), 83.
14. W.J.T Mitchell, "Holy Landscape: Israel, Palestine, and the American Wilderness," *Critical Inquiry* 26, no. 3 (Winter 2000): 197.
15. Mitchell, "Holy Landscape," 197.
16. Mitchell, "Holy Landscape," 197.
17. Mitchell, "Holy Landscape," 199.
18. Kay Dickinson, *Arab Cinema Travels: Transnational Syria, Palestine, Dubai and Beyond* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 2, quoted in Caminati, *Traveling Auteurs*, 9.
19. Tom Conley, *Cartographic Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 3–4.
20. Timothy Corrigan, *The Essay Film: From Montaigne, After Marker* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 105.
21. Corrigan, *The Essay Film*, 105–106.
22. Corrigan, *The Essay Film*, 112.
23. Corrigan, *The Essay Film*, 112.
24. Michael Renov, *The Subject of Documentary* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 105.
25. W.J.T. Mitchell, "Holy Landscape," 205.
26. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 117.
27. W.J.T Mitchell, *Landscape and Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 14–18.
28. Laura Rascaroli, *How the Essay Film Thinks* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 73.

29. Quoted in Anat Y. Zanger, *Place, Memory and Myth in Contemporary Israeli Cinema* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2012), xv.
30. Quoted in Zanger, *Place, Memory and Myth*, xvii.
31. Edward Said, "Appendix: Invention, Memory, and Place," in *Visioning Israel-Palestine: Encounters at the Cultural Boundaries of Conflict*, ed. Gil Pasternak (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2020), 270.
32. Roemer sought to adapt Buber's *A Land of Two Peoples*, a book that aligns with Roemer's broader interest in Jewish identity and ethical responsibility. See Martin Buber, *A Land of Two Peoples: Martin Buber on Jews and Arabs*, ed. Paul R. Mendes-Flohr (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).
33. "Direct cinema" is a method of documentary filmmaking that was dominant in the 1960s mostly in the US and in Canada, in which a small crew (usually one cameraman and one crew member holding the sound equipment) go out into the real world to film people doing what they have been doing regardless of the camera's presence. The filmmaker becomes what is referred to as "a fly on the wall", which means he is not supposed to change reality more than what he changes it by the very mere act of being there. For more on direct cinema and its legacy, see Dave Saunders, *Direct Cinema: Observational Documentary and the Politics of the Sixties* (London: Wallflower Press, 2007).
34. Judith E. Smith, "Civil Rights, Labor, and Sexual Politics on Screen in Nothing But a Man" (1964), *Black Camera*, Vol. 3, no. 2 (Spring 2012): 170.
35. This sequence is also reminiscent of *Hill 24 Doesn't Answer* (Thorold Dickinson, 1955), in which the character David Airam (Arik Lavi) defeats a Nazi soldier, emerges from the cave, and watches an organized formation of Israeli fighter jets soaring through the sky.
36. Melissa Anderson, "Nothing But the Truth," *Artforum* (2014).
37. Terri Francis, "Can't Stay, Can't Go: What Is History to a Cinematic Imagination?" *Black Camera*, Vol. 3, no. 2 (Spring 2012): 133.
38. Trish FitzSimons, "Braided Channels: A Genealogy of the Voice of Documentary," *Studies in Documentary Film* Vol. 3, no. 2 (2009), 138.
39. Buber opposed political Zionism, which sought to establish a Jewish state through force or exclusion, and instead promoted a binational vision in which Jews and Arabs would share the land based on mutual recognition and justice. He saw Zionism as a moral and spiritual endeavor rather than a nationalist one rooted in territorial claims. He argues: "We do not want to turn them [Arabs] into Jews, but we want to cooperate with them in building a homeland where both of us can live as free human beings." (Buber, *A Land of Two Peoples*, 174).
40. In the late 1960s, Roemer and Young acquired the rights to Elie Wiesel's *Dawn*, a novel centered on the Holocaust. While in Israel, Roemer conducted research for the project but ultimately decided against making the film. Reflecting on this decision, he admitted, "I thought perhaps we could make it, but after six months I just knew it wasn't going to be a good film. In my view, there was no way you could make a fiction film about that experience" ("The Nonconformist: A Conversation with Michael Roemer," *MUBI Notebook*, Dec. 12, 2023).