

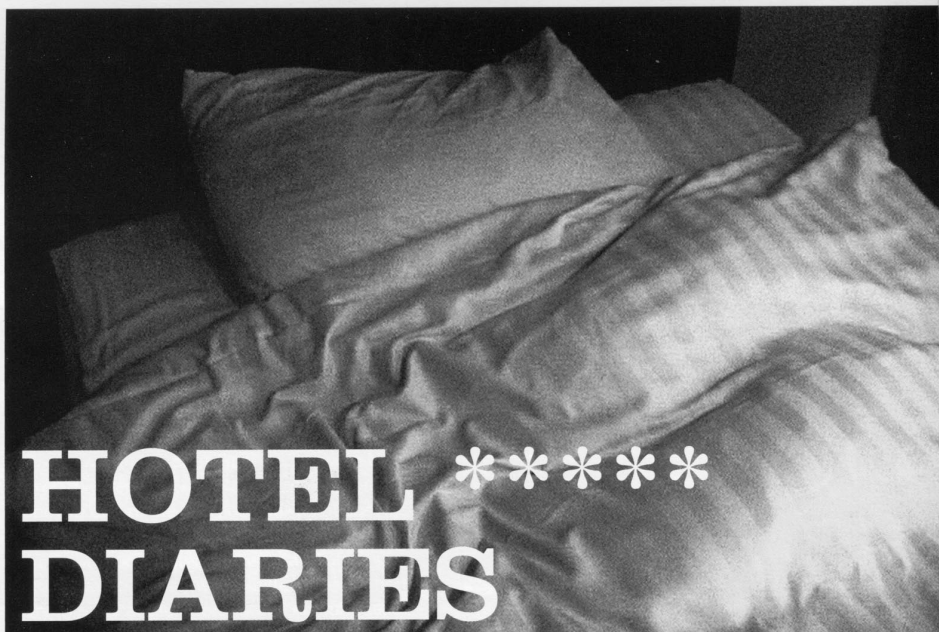
It's tempting to write about *Hotel Diaries* in the way that this series of films seems to have started. Turn on the computer/camera and start writing/filming what immediately strikes you. I'm in a train in upstate New York and have just finished re-viewing John Smith's series of films made in hotel rooms over six years. I was occasionally distracted by the Hudson River running alongside the railway track, thinking about the diary film and why it seems to be such an intrinsically American form. Something to do with Thoreau recording the seasons out at Walden, or Brakhage living rough up in the wilds of Colorado, or Jonas Mekas chronicling the New York art and indie film world. We don't really do diary films in Britain, do we?

Actually, these aren't diaries in any conventional sense: they're more like nocturnes, in which Smith ruminates, apparently talking to himself while filming in a series of hotel rooms that chart his travels, mainly around film festivals. Like almost all of his films they offer a carefully crafted nonchalance, a studied lack of pretension. The décor of hotel rooms is a running theme: he is infuriated by the uselessness of a flimsy folding suitcase stand. A tray with bottle and glass provides an attractive ready-made composition, which he's spoiled by leaving his debris next to it. Why, he wonders, are Irish hotel rooms becoming blander, more interchangeable with rooms in a dozen European cities he has visited?

American pastoral the tone certainly isn't. It's more Pooterish, a deliberate cultivation of the everyday traveller's minor joys and woes. We learn little of what has taken Smith to these rooms in six countries, since the festival screening of his films – presumably? – remains off-screen. But cumulatively the persona Smith is creating develops, as we learn what intrigues and irritates him, and come to share his delight in the epiphanies of the solitary traveller. Why does a late-night television programme suddenly freeze on screen? This sends Smith off on an extended reflection about what might have happened back in London; one that's part-comic as his speculations grow wilder, but also has an undertow of pathos. Might this be how we learn of catastrophe, from a malfunctioning television screen in a hotel room? Maybe this is closer to Edward Hopper's edgy nocturnes.

There's also an extraordinary moment in a German hotel when Smith's nocturnal exploration is interrupted by a startling encounter with himself, as he enters a mirrored lift. It's impossible to know whether this is staged, but its *doppelgänger* effect (yes, it is Berlin) is as eerie as Hollis Frampton's confrontation with the image of his younger self in *nostalgia*.

I'm putting off the inevitable – the reason I first responded so strongly to *Hotel Diaries* when I saw it in a cinema screening as a feature-shaped 'real film'. For this is a series of films that trace Smith's growing concern about political events in the wider world. That frozen image occurred in October 2001 during a report on American and British air strikes in Afghanistan. All the horrors of the Iraq invasion take place off-screen during subsequent segments of his travels, but remain very much on Smith's mind. The fate of the Palestinian people amid the 'war on terror' haunts him, as he reflects on the comfort of his surroundings. *Hotel Diaries* may be our very own one-man version of the French and German collective films *Loi de Vietnam*



John Smith makes room for reflection

By Ian Christie



and *Germany in Autumn*, chronicling our sense of distance from urgent events far away in which we're implicated but which we seem powerless to effect. Smith's 'ordinary man' can't ignore the headlines that reach him on hotel television, even though he is moved not to visit the Jewish Museum in Berlin out of a sense of revulsion at the news of the 2004 assault on Fallujah. Eventually, it seems inevitable that we find ourselves with him in a hotel room in Palestine, determined to see for himself.

The surreal epiphanies haven't stopped: in fact, one of the strangest takes place in that Bethlehem Inn hotel room. But the film has taken on a cool anger as Smith recounts what he has seen on the border between Israel and the Palestinian enclave. And the grim view from his hotel window does indeed speak, or show, for itself without any need of commentary. The mundane surroundings of hotel rooms have now come to seem like comfortably padded cells that cocoon us from too much reality, like the pods that E. M. Forster imagined future beings inhabiting in 'The Machine Stops'.

I've been watching some of Straub-Huillet's later films and am reminded of Jean-Marie Straub insisting that their early rigorously formal films about long-dead art and artists were a protest against the Vietnam War, and the incredulity this provoked in some quarters. Smith, I'm sure, would have no qualms about his film being regarded as propaganda on behalf of the Palestinians. But it's also propaganda on behalf of film as a vital way of connecting with the world. A dirty lens matters to a filmmaker, as it should, while a wall of 'separation' built to encircle a captive people should matter to the world.

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Images courtesy of the artist, LUX London.