Critical attention to cinematic space has increased steadily in recent years. As cinema’s globalizing character becomes an entrenched disciplinary fact, the formal and semiotic structuring of filmic mise-en-scene and framing are found once again socially and politically meaningful, now in geographical terms of architecture and landscape. While these terms are familiar within mass culture theory, their contemporary redeployment is innovative for the questions they enable about the relationship between film studies’ analytic adoption of the marketing category, “world cinema,” and the projection by films, collocated by that category, of situated diegeses. This article enters this general discussion by locating and critically explicating the aesthetic coordinates of international border wall depictions in three “world” films: The Color of Olives [El Color de los olivos] (Carolina Rivas, Mexico/Palestine, 2006), covering the currently expanding Apartheid Wall in Palestine/Israel; From the Other Side [De l’autre côté] (Chantal Akerman, France/Belgium, 2002), covering the currently expanding U.S.–Mexican border wall; and Redupers [Outtakes]: The All-Round Reduced Personality [Die Allseitig-reduzierte Persönlichkeit] (Helke Sander, West Germany, 1977), covering the now-dismantled Berlin Wall. My aim is to ascertain the differing, often overlapping knowledgableabilities informing these depictions and, in so doing, to interrogate their implications for both a historiography of border walls and an epistemology of cinematic spatial division.

Of the three films, the one most known to scholars is Redupers. Helke Sanders’ New German Cinema classic has been analyzed historically for its feminist intervention into patriarchal state and civic culture formations in the former West Germany, for which the Berlin Wall marks a visual paradigm. For Kaja Silverman, Judith Mayne, Inge Scharf, and Lisa Katzman, Redupers’ feminist recasting of modernist montage, which adapts and reworks Alexander Kluge’s aesthetics of Zusammenhang (see Sander; and Lutz), critically refracts the officially propagated singularity and permanence of the Berlin Wall, revealing instead what Anthony Giddens might call its “duality of structure” (qtd.Bruney-Jailley 644). On this general reading, Redupers illuminates reflexively how aesthetic ideologies can at once mar and traverse physical walls, helping re-envision them as media for producing and conditioning social praxis—in this instance, intervention by alterior female subjectivities. Inscribing a mise-en-abyme structure which galvanizes a visually dislocated pro-filmic, Redupers’ bilateral rendering of the Wall helps shift the common image of West Berlin advertised officially to tourists and the capitalist West as an
island of freedom in a desert of totalitarianism, to an uncommon image of territorial exception—a “special status” outpost (Katzman 61)—that served U.S. rather than German (much less women’s or workers’) interests. Accordingly the film’s aesthetic structuring refigures the Wall’s ostensive function of marking concretely a political division of geographical territory into divergent, adversarial zones, into a deconstructive challenge by which to reconnect two falsely opposed sides.

In this light, Judith Mayne has referred to Redupers’ ironical “juncture of spectacle and narrative,” its ability to reconcile the Berlin Wall’s physical division of East and West, as a ubiquitous phenomenon and effect of the two Germanies’ “hidden” commonality (156). For example, the film’s repeated lateral trucking shots of the Wall and Berlin cityscape (see Rich), presumably from the point-of-view of a passenger car window; its close-ups of film negatives of the Wall hanging before a darkroom mirror; its long-shots of the women’s collective’s photographs of the Wall pasted together laterally, first on a domestic interior wall, then on the Berlin Wall itself, and so on, have been discussed as cinematic means by which modern ideology and its practical effects (here associated with West Berlin’s community of women artists as much as with East Berlin’s mediated public sphere, made readily available to the film’s protagonist through DDR radio broadcasts) can be depicted both as preceding and exceeding the physical division of territory (here affiliated with capitalism as much as socialism), in turn illustrating the narcissistic futility and ontological absurdity of any such division, and recommending implicitly its imminent reversal.

Within this general perspective, uncritically nostalgic as it may also be considered for presuming a normalizable German reunification (in both philosophical and political terms) (see Berg-Ganschow), the fundamentally disunificatory and asymmetrical political and social structures and relations in fact exposed and analyzed by Redupers’ depiction of the Berlin Wall are only obliquely, indirectly referenced. In fact, Redupers’ is less interested in excavating a utopic impulse to social universality and imminent national (re)unification at the core of the Wall’s architectural ethos—its monumental ubiquity to/within the encircled West Berlin cityscape, its interiority as well as exteriority, its Eastern as well as Western projections—than in offering what Mayne and Katzman do indeed insist is the film’s “all-round” critique of Western dissimulations of that ethos, of its one-dimensional characterization of the Wall as an inhospitable and mean-spirited blockade against free commodity circulation, when in fact the Berlin Wall was a tragically misguided reaction to the contradictory character of imperial capitalism itself misrepresented as “freedom”—freedom of movement, freedom from unlawful confinement, freedom to associate—which the epochal history of nationalism and state-building proves is available largely to exploiters, not to the exploited.

Rather than edging toward national unity by indicating how the quotidian, “residual” (Scharf 389) lives of West Berlin feminist artists may prompt their defetishization of the East, and in turn their re-envisioning of the Berlin Wall as a grand metaphor for the patriarchal ubiquity of historical Germany, Redupers figures the Berlin Wall as a technique of fundamental disintegration, for which, in Redupers, East and West are irreconcilable, because their genuine reunification is impossible on the capitalist proviso which finally conditions the Wall’s very existence as a physical projection and displacement of Left solidarity, of collective resistance that pre-exists the Wall historically, thus marking the exploitative core of capitalism without which that system would not exist as such. Redupers’ Klugean montage of mobile and static documentation, of narration and monstration, always and ultimately vis-à-vis the Wall, and its shrouding of the Eastern sector in shadows, fog, and off-screen space, all mediated by the dialogues and debates within and around the women’s collective, supply the formal analogue to this logical irreconcilability. The film’s modernist inversion of spatial and temporal depth through a mise-en-abyme structure located dramatically to the perspective of female cultural workers in struggle, not only mimics critically West Berlin’s absence of genuine social depth and difference vis-à-vis the Wall, and its travesty even of capitalist prosperity), but evidences the concomitant, obverse fact that depth and difference are, aesthetically, structures of bourgeois perspectival stratification which, if restored, might well factor persistent social division and exploitation in an imagined post-Wall Berlin.
In contrast to Mayne’s claim, then, that, notwithstanding their reservations, the project of Redupers’ women’s collective points, through an act of spatio-temporal distillation, to a political “third way” for divided Germany (171), and contrasting Katzman’s hopeful attributions of redemption to the emergent, if marginalized “women’s struggle” associated in Redupers with the Wall as highlighted by that project (and allegorized in turn by the film), I contend that the Wall as depicted in Redupers belies the aesthetic reduction and critical redemption attributed to it, as misplaced, dystopic symptoms of chaos and despair.

More optimistic, while different markedly in aesthetic structuring from Redupers, is From the Other Side. This avant-garde/experimental documentary takes as its subject a small geographical area of the U.S./Mexico border region that includes Agua Prieta, a maldeveloped border town in Mexico’s Sonora province, nearby Douglas, Arizona, and some architecturally diverse sections of the U.S.-built “pedestrian barrier” situated between the towns. From the Other Side intersperses long tracking shots of Agua Prieta and the corrugated border wall lining its northwestern edge, with long takes of the wall and of the town’s rural inhabitants speaking into the camera about Mexican lives lost crossing the border illegally. The film’s final third supplies interviews with rural property and business owners in Douglas, who in general decry the immigrant situation from the perspective of U.S. eminent domain.

In its course, From the Other Side widens and extends rather than distills space vis-à-vis its subject wall, thereby suggesting different conclusions about national borders than those proposed by the film’s New German predecessor. Exemplary is the moment at which, after an extensive running-time in Mexico, From the Other Side finally carries its spectator across the U.S.–Mexican border into Arizona. The moment of crossing is marked cinematically by a 180° and geographical break from a shot of the border—here, a concrete wall (figure 1)—followed by a shot of a sign, written in English and positioned to the left of the border, here a barrier fence, which reads, “Stop the Crime Wave! Our Property and Environment is [sic] Being Trashed by Invaders!” (figure 2). The break is particularly jarring in light of the film’s prior depictions, which consistently situate the border and the rural town it lines to the right of the mise-en-scene. Although the sign clearly refers pejoratively to Mexican immigrants from the hostile perspective of U.S. property owners, its positioning to the left of the border facilitates a cinematic trompe l’oeil that momentarily renders the sign’s geographical location ambiguous. Through this disorienting
tack, the sign seems on first glance to refer not to Mexicans and the dangers they describe facing when attempting to cross the border, but to U.S. citizens, who face no comparable danger. This visual trick is underscored by the transparent quality of the fence, its barbed-wire construction that ascribes violently laced arbitrariness to U.S.–Mexican division, even while underscoring—indicting—its indubitable U.S. control.

*From the Other Side*’s paradigmatic cut is all the more jarring in context of the film’s otherwise carefully faithful mapping of Agua Prieta’s geography. In that context, it is always extended still shots of the U.S. border wall to which the lateral camera returns following its slow, unhindered forays into and, penultimately, around the town, including one smooth glide past—not through—the official U.S.–Mexican border plaza, clogged with automobile traffic, noise, and fumes. In classic Akerman form, this plan-séquence structure permits a sustained, discomfiting gaze upon the rural townscape and the wall lining it, which at times fills the entire frame: from the Mexican side, the wall is positioned as looming, luminescent, omnipresent, even autotelic—but in any case mortally impenetrable; from the U.S. side, however, it is veritably absent—from the mise-en-scene as well as, the film insinuates, from U.S. consciousness. From both sides, moreover, the barrier is an uncanny portal into historical memory of the very division it marks: the European colonization of the Americas, the Spanish Inquisition, Western expansionism and the creation of a Third World, the Holocaust, etcetera.

Like *Redupers*, *From the Other Side* reflexively implicates its praxis in the contradictions of what here is revealed starkly as U.S. capitalist hegemony. Not only does the 180˚ cut self-consciously remind that film partakes of a technology which encourages and privileges imaginary transgression (remarked famously by the opening crane shot in Welles’ *Touch of Evil*). Recalling the advertisements which flank and potentially compromise the women’s collective’s Wall photomontage in *Redupers*, *From the Other Side* links its own cinematicity to the night-vision surveillance technology utilized in border police helicopters to track actual transgressors (“illegal” migrant workers), candid footage of which appears in the film once Akerman and her crew have passed theoretically to the “other” (U.S.) side. Similarly, whereas Akerman’s voice is not heard during the Agua Prieta interviews, it becomes increasingly audible in Douglas scenes, where it comes finally to narrate a long take, shot from the front seat of a car traveling speedily along a Los Angeles/(Hollywood)-bound highway, in which the disappearance
of a female migrant worker is recounted from the perspective of her ostensible co-worker. As the narration slips allegorically into Akerman’s perspective, moreover, it likewise positions her, a non-U.S. citizen (and a non-commercial filmmaker), as “alien,” even as she is exceedingly empowered by her European status—a fact emphasized during an earlier interview with a Douglas restaurant owner, to whom Akerman’s Belgian crew confess to the ease with which they have obtained U.S. tourist visas. In that instance, Akerman’s voice is heard briefly off-screen, referring to her activity in the U.S. as “shooting”; whereas we know she means film shooting, we also know that the ease with which she has obtained her tourist visa, and by which she may slip metonymically into a perspective of “otherness,” imply that the cultural labor she performs as an independent cineaste, regardless of its ostensible subversiveness, is not designated “work” by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, is not—like Mexican immigrant labor—considered a threat to U.S. economic integrity.

Hence *From the Other Side* stands to critique the U.S.–Mexican wall and its (limited) permeability, here understood, again, as a “structure of duality,” but this time one overdetermined economically rather than politically. On one hand, the film’s value is off the (geo)political radar, enabling it to masquerade as respectable (bourgeois, Euro-American) bohemianism uninhibited by market exigencies. By the same token, its dialectical organization—its deliberate mapping and veritable portraiture of the wall and environs, increasingly disjointed editorially the further north we get—overdetermines the film’s uncanny gaze, transforming aesthetically the local history of the U.S.–Mexican border region into a “scar of history” (Macard qtd. Kolosov 619), an allegorical excursus on U.S. neocolonialism. In this regard, the final narrative of Mexican absence and alienation in Los Angeles stands ironically to re-enact the literal—speedy, overnight—absenting of Mexicans by Europeans/Americans from what is now the U.S., previously Mexico (and, before that, architecturally undivided Native American territory), in effect mapping cinematically an aborted Mexican homecoming.

The Mexican/Palestinian documentary, *The Color of Olives*, carries the cinematic analysis of divided (inter)national territory to a week-in-the-life of the Palestinian Amer family, whose house has been targeted for demolition by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), in order to make way for construction of the infamous Apartheid Wall, part of which has already completely surrounded the Amer’s house, separating the family from their generations-old olive groves and their neighbors in the West Bank town of Masha. *The Color of Olives* recalls *From the Other Side*, with its extended takes and markedly slow, uneventful pace, and is thus also atypical of Mexican cinema. In contrast to *From the Other Side*, however, and recalling Redupers, *The Color of Olives* comprises mostly still shots, arranged through a combination of intellectual montage and découpage, and depicting a modicum of action that is often staged and orchestrated in an exaggerated verité style. Significant screen time is lent interior scenes of the Amer family at home (the children studying; the father, Hani, conducting religious lessons; the mother, Monira, cooking and surveying the exterior through a barred window for rock-throwing Israeli settlers), while exterior scenes (usually the space outside the Amer house but within the parameters of the Wall) are intermittent, almost punctual, paralleling in their careful framing and shot content both the claustrophobia and utopic security of the home’s interior. Typical of Palestinian cinema (although more true of properly fictional works), furthermore, this paralleling of interiority and exteriority is repeated at the film’s mimetic register, where the traditional line between documentary and fiction is deliberately confused to the point that the diegetic exterior is inflected with a fictive quality that renders it almost surreal, or at least encourages allegorical readings of the film’s actions and events, but which, moreover, marks critically the Wall’s appearance of geographical division as a cynical mechanism of deliberate political indecisiveness aimed at facilitating the permanence of Israeli expansionism (see Weizman). As I shall indicate through an analysis of the film’s climactic scene, this critical effectivity within the context of movement confined spatially by the Wall suggests that it is the Wall’s degradation of the Amer home *per se*—their house and their land, here describable in Samar Attar’s terms as a space in which “eyes used to darkness” see past and present simultaneously,
enabling their mutual illumination—which thwarts the family’s acquisition and allocation of basic vital resources as well as their economic stability and self-determination as people attempting to live at home.

This climactic scene occurs toward the end of the film and marks perhaps its only genuine event: Hani Amer’s return to his family after a day spent in the field beyond the Wall. Throughout the film, Hani has been portrayed waiting on the enclosed side of the Wall for the IDF to unlock the gate that opens onto the path to his olive groves; likewise, Monira is shown repeatedly gazing at the Wall through a gated window, guarding the house from settlers and awaiting her children’s return from school and Hani’s return from the fields. Only later in the film do we actually see IDF soldiers open the gate and allow Hani to pass; even so, multi-angle shooting fragments the pro-filmic space, disorienting perspective on this moment and, especially, on the Amers’ baby donkey running frantically along the Wall’s perimeter, dodging a playful child, Shaddad Amer, as the donkey’s mother departs pulling Hani’s cart—perhaps the only time during the film in which such spontaneous and vital movement is recorded. Just prior to Hani’s return a few scenes later, a point-of-view shot is inserted from his position astride the cart, behind the mother donkey, who brays, it seems, at the approaching scent of her offspring. The return itself is shot from within the enclosed space, yet now, visual fragmentation cedes to a motionless, extreme long take, underscoring and emphasizing the erratic movement of the anxious baby donkey pacing to and fro at the gate. As in From the Other Side, the camera in this scene “magically” transgresses the divide marked by the Wall, but unlike Akerman, Rivas returns with her subjects to their prison house behind the Wall: the insert shot is as momentary—and contextually engulfed/framed by nostalgia—as is the sense of utopic transcendence elicited during an earlier, interior scene, shot Fassbinder-like down a hallway through a doorframe, of Hani instructing his children from the Qur’an; and as are the many shots of Monira gazing uncertainly but expectantly through the window of her house-turned-fortress.

In this way recalling both Redupers and From the Other Side, The Color of Olives foregrounds the asymmetrical power relations at the structural core of the Apartheid Wall; while, unlike Sander and Ackerman, who are both Europeans, the Mexican Rivas reveals the Wall riving Palestine/Israel less a “structure of duality” by which such relations might be deconstructed and critically superseded, than an absolute limit to an exteriority that is Palestinian interiority under Israeli occupation, and that, as such, marks ominously the potential genocidal ruin of Palestinian life itself.

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WORKS CITED

BORDERING ON DISASTER


