

WALL

A film by Simone Bitton

Length : 1h38

35 mm Color - 1,85 - Dolby SR

France / Israel – 2004

U.S. Distribution

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HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH: Official Selection

SYNOPSIS

WALL (Mur) is a cinematic meditation on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in which the filmmaker blurs the lines of hatred by asserting her double identity as Jew and Arab. In an original documentary approach, the film follows the separation fence that is destroying one of the most historically significant landscapes in the world, while imprisoning one people and enclosing the other.

On the building site of this mad wall, daily utterances and holy chants, in Hebrew and in Arabic, defy the discourses of war, passing through the deafening noise of bulldozers. MUR offers its spectators a last glimpse of the beauty of this land and the humanity of its inhabitants a moment before they disappear behind the wall.

INTENTION NOTE

Spectators are not blank pages. They know a lot of things about this country, about this war. They have opinions, at times too clear-cut, at times opinions I don't share. I did not make this film in order to convince them, or provide them with arguments. I made this film in order to share what I feel, what comes from my heart. I made this film in order to relay what I see to them, and offer myself for them to see as well. The wall that I filmed is as much a part of me as it is part of the mental and physical horizons of my characters. This wall is, in a sense, testament to our failure. WALL is a political film because everything is political, but it doesn't talk about politics. It talks about me, it talks about us. Beyond the Middle East tragedy, I made this film in order to evoke that which is happening elsewhere on this planet between rich and poor, between the mighty and the weak, between the "democrats" and the "others," between those who have everything and those who have nothing. Everywhere, the weak want to traverse the walls put up in order to keep them out, and everywhere the mighty are scared to find themselves in the place of the weak. As if the happiness of some can only come at the cost of depriving and confining others. Sometimes, the mighty are so afraid of the weak that they'll do anything to justify their fears and turn the weak into a real threat.

Peace will come. It always does. But for now, the era of walls is upon us and I sense that it will be a horrific one. - *Simone Bitton*

Conversation with Simone Bitton

In the film, you speak in Hebrew and in Arabic. What are your origins? Where have you lived and where do you live today?

I was born in Morocco, in a traditional Jewish family. I went to the French school. My parents spoke Arabic among themselves and French with their children. When the family moved to Jerusalem in 1966, I learned Hebrew very quickly but continued to read in French and sing in Arabic.

I did my military service during the 1973 war: I saw death, and it made me a pacifist for life. At 20, I hitch-hiked all over Europe like a hippy, then settled in Paris where I started to watch films. I was lucky to pass the entry exam of IDHEC, the French film school. Since then, I have lived between Paris and Jerusalem. I visit Morocco as often as possible. I have three countries and three cultures. I have always considered this to be a great asset, a rare privilege in a world where millions of people are stateless.

In Jerusalem, do you live on the Israeli or the Palestinian side of the city?

It depends on the periods and on the films. Let's say that I'm an expert in crossing check-points in both directions. And it is an art.

After directing many documentaries for television, why did you choose to apply for the CNC cinema fund and to approach a cinema producer?

The moment I had the idea for the film, it was obvious to me that WALL was meant for the cinema. In this film, space is essential: the sky, the earth, the landscapes are full-fledged characters. In order to show the devastation of the landscape, I wanted to have wide open shots with a real horizon line. If I could have the film in cinemascope, I would have done it! But of course, we had to shoot with portable video equipment, due to the difficulties of moving around in the field. The film has been carefully blown up into the 1,85 format and the result is impressive.

I also wanted to make a film that gives the viewer time to see, and this has become less and less possible on television. I wanted one-shot sequences, travelling shots long enough to be perceived as such, sounds rather than words and silences between the words – all these elements that cinema is generally made of, and that television generally rejects. I had a deep longing for cinema and am happy that WALL will come out in theaters. But I also hope that it will be broadcast on television. I am always moved when my work is shown on television: I look out of the window and see the little television lights flickering behind drawn curtains and feel that I've arrived safe and sound, into people's home, into their lives. It is a great honor, at least as great as being selected for the Cannes Festival.

How did you get the idea to make a film about the wall?

On a summer evening in 2002, while watching the evening news on television, I saw the first images of the wall. The Israeli Defense Minister, who had just inaugurated its construction, said that this fence made of iron and concrete would be the ultimate solution for the country's security problems. Both these words and these images were so weird and worrying to me, and I said to myself: "That's it, they've gone crazy!".

That night I couldn't sleep. The very idea of a wall erected between Israelis and Palestinians tore me apart. In the following weeks, I was really distressed. I had the feeling that I was being cut in half, that who I am was being denied: an Arab Jew whose entire being is the site of a permanent dialogue. I felt that this wall would be insurmountable for all the good-willed people like myself, while creating hundreds of new suicide bombers.

Does the film exorcize your distress?

Not only that. It is an act of resistance. Even if the battle is uneven. One of the characters in the film says: "When people are despaired they are silent. I am not despaired, I am fighting." I think like he does. When I will really be despaired of all hope, which is not impossible given how things are going, I will stop making films in the Middle East.

How did you prepare the film? We feel that it was made in a state of urgency, that most of the encounters are fortuitous, spontaneous. At the same time, the film is carefully written, the frames precise and the sound elaborate.

I am untidy and impulsive in life, but very calm and patient in my work. I love the technique and craft of cinema. In January 2003, I started location scouting. At that time, little information was available on the wall, so I went to see for myself. I filmed with my little camera, took notes. In the spring, I rented a small cottage in a Jerusalem monastery with a lemon tree in the garden. It became the film's headquarters. I hung a big map of the country on the wall and sketched the encroaching advance of the wall onto the map, like a general preparing for battle.

My two assistants are a bit like me: they speak the languages of the area, understand the codes and nuances of the place. But Jacques Bouquin—the cameraman—and Jean-Claude Brisson—the soundman—had never worked in Palestine. I needed their fresh eyes and ears to help me distinguish between the things only I could feel, and the things that are universal enough to move them along with me. In June, we drove off in a mini-van to storm the wall. With a not-so-young crew and a desire to take our time, we strove to make the kind of documentary we love: film reality but also dare to decipher and interpret it through a unique, personal look regard. My crew members put their heart into the film, giving me their very best talents, which are immense, and I think this is perceivable both visually and aurally.

The wall is present in nearly all of the film's shots. One wonders if it is not the central character of the film?

I show the wall in all its forms: concrete wall, electronic fence, ditch, barbed wire, and from all its angles. It is always present so that the entire film is experienced through this obsessive manifestation of separation and enclosure. The voices—mine and those of the characters—are nearly all off screen. Neither commentary nor explanation, they are human voices trying to make themselves heard beyond the deafening noise of the bulldozers. In fact, the principle is very simple: I move along the wall's various construction sites and people talk to me. Often we do not see them, because they stand behind the camera, like us. They are looking at the wall while we are filming it, and they are as stunned and alarmed as we are. They are workers building the wall, or people living beside it, or people who are trying to cross it but get stopped... The wall has such a presence, it is so huge and insane, that one cannot but feel, while looking at it, that it is a symptom of a serious illness.

We don't always know on which side of the wall the camera stands, nor in which area. It is as if the geography of the place, and thus of the conflict, is omitted.

This is true and it is a conscious choice. I invited a few people in the editing room to test my approach. Some suggested to include a map or titles indicating the different places. Some even suggested using different color letters in the subtitles, to differentiate between the languages spoken. But had I abided by that, the film would not have existed. Nothing touches me more, in life as in my film, than to mistake a Jew for an Arab or vice versa. Israelis and Palestinians resemble each other, like prisoners and wardens ultimately do. For me, this country is one country, a very small one, inhabited by Jews and Arabs alike. I identi-

fy myself with it, because I too am a Jew and an Arab at one and the same time. Judaism is part of this country's history, but one day, Israelis must agree to become a little Arabic too. That day, the walls will come tumbling down.

There is only one set interview in the film, that of an Israeli official.

The interview is with General Amos Yaron, director general of the Israeli Ministry of Defense. He is close to Ariel Sharon. And like his boss, was also implicated in the Sabra and Shatila massacres in 1982. The wall is being constructed by his Ministry. He is the man in charge: with a pen stroke on a map, he can seize fields, uproot olive trees, close the only access road to a village; and he needn't refrain himself. In fact, one can say that for two years now, he's probably been doing just that.

Why was he willing to give you such a long interview, in which he doesn't appear so sympathetic, framed by two flags and so sure of his own truth?

He doesn't see things the way we do. He set up the interview: his spokesperson placed the flags and checked the frame. The questions were relayed to him in advance. It is part of his job to sell his soup to the media. His words have not been manipulated. He appears in a long sequence shot where I only ask him technical questions. He is part of the wall, as insurmountable as the wall itself.

Can you give us a reason to have hope?

To name this madness is a step toward healing. Hope resides in people's humanity, in the words of the Israeli guy who says he is ready to host all the leaders of the region in his house, and if need be give his house for peace. It resides in the dignity of the Palestinians at the checkpoints, in the laughter of the psychiatrist who tells me that I am not mad, that refusing the wall is a sign of sanity.

I don't want to promote a cheap illusion. We have suffered enough from the showbiz of peace, all these hand shakes while people are still dying. I've been traveling in Palestine and Israel for over 20 years and I have never encountered so much cruelty and madness as today. The wall is not only a slap in the face of those of us who want peace, not only a crime against one of the most beautiful and historically meaningful landscapes in the world. For Palestinians, it is a mechanism of ongoing dispossession and expulsion. As far as Israelis are concerned, it is terrible to see how this people, my people, who have crossed the seas to escape the ghettos, are

enclosing themselves willingly and consensually. One of the characters of the film expresses this very well: "We love this land so much, that we enclose it." Another says that the Holy Land has been taken by the devil. It is exactly my feeling, even though I don't believe in God nor in the devil.

Paris, April 2004

Simone Bitton

Author & Director

- Simone Bitton was born in Morocco in 1955.
- She is both an Israeli and a French citizen and also considers herself as a Moroccan national and an Arab Jew.
- She graduated from the French Institut des Hautes Etudes Cinematographiques (IDHEC) in 1981 and directed more than 15 documentary films.
- Her work varies in style from historical inquiries to first-hand reportages and intimate portraits of cutting-edge authors, artists, and political figures. All of her films attest to her deep personal and professional commitment to better representing the complex histories and cultures of the Middle East and North Africa.
- Several of her works have been broadcast simultaneously on European, Arab, and Israeli television and engendered passionate debate on all sides of the Mid-East conflict.
- WALL is her first feature film produced for the cinema.

Filmography

2001: Citizen Bishara. 52-minute portrait of Dr. Azmi Bishara, a Palestinian philosopher and member of the Israeli Knesset.

2001: Ben Barka: the Moroccan Equation. 84-minute portrait of third-worldist Moroccan opposition leader Mehdi Ben Barka, assassinated in Paris in 1965.

1998: The Bombing. 58-minute documentary following a suicide bombing in Jerusalem and the common mourning of Israeli victim's families and Palestinian suicide bombers' families.

1997: Mahmoud Darwich: As the Land is the Language. 58-minute portrait of legendary Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwich

1993: Palestine: Story of a Land. 110-minute two-part documentary history of Palestine using archival footage.

1993: Daney/Sanbar: North-South Conversation. 47-minute documentary meeting between French film critic Serge Daney and Palestinian historian Elias Sanbar. Co-directed by Catherine Poitevin.

1990: Great Voices of Arabic Music. 180-minute three-part documentary series of 55 minutes each: portraits of Um Kulthum, Muhammad Abdel Wahab, and Farid al-Atrache.

Lifesize Entertainment

North American Distributor

Lifesize Entertainment recently celebrated their 7th anniversary as a full service North American Distribution Company and Worldwide Sales Agent for quality feature films and documentaries.

Lifesize has made its reputation by championing quality films both large and small in a very competitive marketplace. Their upcoming slate of films reflects these efforts, with titles coming from countries as diverse as Mexico, Croatia, and Belgium. Previous releases include Oscar nominee ZUS & ZO, Independent Spirit Nominee OASIS and Kim Ki-Duk's BAD GUY.