

A S T E R L | G H T

PRESENTS

THE AMERICAN SECTOR

DIRECTED BY COURTNEY STEPHENS AND PACHO VELEZ



70 MINUTES / ENGLISH / NOT RATED

Official Selection: 2020 Berlinale

TO ACCESS FILM MATERIALS:

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LOGLINE

The American Sector takes viewers on a roadtrip to visit fragments of The Berlin Wall, scattered across the United States.

SHORT SYNOPSIS

The American Sector takes viewers on a fractured road trip, encountering panels of The Berlin Wall that have been installed as public monuments throughout the United States. Visiting over forty sites, the film weaves together the stories people tell about these imported monoliths, capturing how artifacts bond the past and the present.

LONG SYNOPSIS

Why did you bring me here to see it?
A temple of crates in cramped and crated scenery,
what can it prove?

– *The Monument*, Elizabeth Bishop

The Berlin Wall “fell” on November 9th, 1989. But in the United States, large sections of The Wall still stand, installed as monuments across the United States. Taking viewers on a fractured roadtrip, *The American Sector* visits these panels. Part geographic scavenger-hunt, part window into historical memory, the film tries to understand The Wall’s significance as well as its enduring, gnomic power. Beginning with “still lifes” of the wall *in situ*, the film invites audiences to witness the unexpected sight of a concrete panel standing in a forest, a hotel lobby, and a university campus. But what do these memorials stand for? And what is the value of bearing witness to them?

Through vignettes, recorded during three years of travel to over sixty sites, and featuring conversations with everyone from CIA agents to parking attendants, the filmmakers ask these questions of the fellow Americans. Through the claims, concerns and questions that these questions raise, The Berlin Wall emerges as an open symbol, a “freedom” charm applicable to all sorts of ideologies. At the State Department, it celebrates the freedom promised by democratic government; at Microsoft Headquarters it is a reminder of the “free” market’s ability to overcome borders; at the Christ of the Ozarks Statue, it is a tablet dedicated to religious freedom.

While the film takes audiences on a journey across the country, it also places the wall within the chronology of the Cold War itself: eight panels reside in Fulton, Missouri, on the spot where Winston Churchill delivered a speech warning of an “iron curtain descending across Europe;” at the John F.

Kennedy Presidential Library, a panel stands beside a recording of JFK's trip to Berlin, the first visit by an American President in West Berlin; at the Newseum, an authentic East German guard tower is displayed alongside Tom Brokaw's iconic "Fall of the Wall" broadcasts.

By documenting The Wall's afterlife in America, the film sheds light on the language undergirding public debates happening today around issues such as border walls, historical monuments, and immigration quotas. These contemporary resonances encourage audiences to consider how The Berlin Wall has been transformed, and the ways that recent history is inscribed in the national imagination. The existence of the USSR gave America the language of the "Free World." With that adversary gone, how does America now define its ideals?

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

The spectacle of November 9th, 1989, made it appear as though the East German state's power had been embodied in concrete form and then demolished by the people. In celebration, American collectors of all stripes acquired their own fragments of history, which now grace sites across the United States. In November of 2016, just after Trump's election, we began visiting these panels across the United States. On our journey, spanning three years and over 10,000 miles of road and rail, we filmed more than sixty installations of the Wall across twenty states and the District of Columbia.

The film uses an approach of deep listening, receptive to chance encounters. We speak with curators and museum administrators, employees on lunch break, eager tourists, and a passing bicyclist. Choosing to include fragments of the film's production process alongside these interviews -- flaws in the 16mm film, small glimpses of our travels, and our own voices -- we let people's words about the wall emerge from our own journey. As a result, the film also documents the American landscape, shaped by its own checkered history of exploitation, border wars, and westward expansion.

Placing far-flung locations beside one another, our film is an essayistic collage that generates ideas through juxtaposition. Contrasting panels with other pieces of archival media encountered *en route* (news footage, infographics, and historical artifacts), the film tells a fading, fractured history of America's relationship with The Wall: JFK's speech in 1963, VHS home movies from the 1980s, and finally NBC broadcasts marking its demise. Through these flashes of the past, the film shows the reduction of the Cold War's complicated narrative to a series of iconic moments, capturing the distillation of current events into history.

Like the mysterious black monoliths in *2001: A Space Odyssey*, perhaps The Wall is less a monument to the past than a portal to a shared future, propelling new ideas into focus. Disconnected in space and time, the concrete slabs, and the people who speak for them, are instead linked through the collective imagination of America as it continues to shape itself.

– Courtney Stephens and Pacho Velez

KEY PERSONNEL

Courtney Stephens (Director) is a nonfiction and experimental filmmaker, whose work focuses on language and geography. Her films have appeared at the international film festivals of New York, Hong Kong, Mumbai, San Francisco, Dhaka and elsewhere. She was a Fulbright scholar to India, and previously assisted Terrence Malick.

Pacho Velez (Director) directs nonfiction films. His previous features have played at the New York Film Festival, Toronto International Film Festival, and on CNN. His first feature, *Manakamana*, won a Golden Leopard at the Locarno Film Festival (2013). Pacho received his MFA from CalArts, and teaches filmmaking at The New School (NYC).

Asterlight (Production Company) is a home for filmmakers and content producers developing high-concept nonfiction and scripted projects grounded in vivid characters, histories and settings. Asterlight develops content and provides resources to independent directors and producers committed to unexpected points-of-view, cutting-edge approaches, and long-term connections to the worlds being featured. Recent Asterlight projects include *The American Sector*, premiering at the Berlin International Film Festival 2020; *The Westies*, a podcast about the brutal gang that for decades ran Hell's Kitchen; *The Browsers*, a documentary portrait of the trials and tribulations of New Yorkers searching for love online; and *Realm of Satan*, a docu-fiction film about the daily lives of disciples of the Church of Satan.

Dounia Sichov (Editor) is a French actress, editor, producer and director. She worked with directors such as Catherine Breillat, Mikhaël Hers, Denis Côté, Abel Ferrara, Antoine d'Agata, Jonathan Caouette, Sharunas Bartas. She played in *Siberia* by Abel Ferrara, selected in Berlinale 2020.

Paul Hill (Sound Mixer) is an award-winning filmmaker, editor and sound mixer. He joined the Wexner Center's Film/Video Studio Program in 1996 where he edits with world renowned filmmakers and video artists. In 2003 Paul completed *Myth of Father*, an award winning documentary about his transgenderd father, and in 2015 he co-directed and edited *Cincinnati Goddamn*, a documentary about racial profiling and police brutality in Cincinnati, Ohio, that is currently being screened at film festivals and museums across the country.

Maile Costa Colbert (sound designer) is an intermedia artist and sound designer, researcher, and educator with a focus on time-based media. She is a PhD Research Fellow at the Universidade Nova de Lisboa. Her current practice and research asks what we might gather from sounding the past. She is a member of CineLab, IFILNOVA's research lab for cinema and philosophy, and is an editor and author at *Sonic Field*.

Hannah Buck (Consulting Editor) is a New York-based film editor with a focus on creative non-fiction. Her background in visual arts largely informs her approach to editing. Her films have screened at festivals all over the world, including Sundance, Berlinale, CPHdox and many others. Recent credits include *Vision Portraits* (SXSW 2019), directed by Rodney Evans, *The Proposal* (Tribeca 2018), directed by Jill Magid, and *Chef Flynn* (Sundance 2018), directed by Cameron Yates.

FULL CREDITS

Directed by

Courtney Stephens and Pacho Velez

Executive Producers

Joe Poletto
Sam Roseme

Produced by

Pacho Velez

Edited by

Dounia Sichov
Courtney Stephens

Consulting Editor

Hannah Buck

Sound Mixer

Paul Hill

Sound Designer

Maile Colbert

Color

Loren White

Titles

Jacob Shpall

Camera

Pacho Velez

Sound

Courtney Stephens

Visual Effects

Mo Ku

Legal

Steve Holmgren

Featured Locations

Military Intelligence Heritage Museum

Fort Huachuca, AZ

The Great Passion Play

Eureka Springs, AK

The Wende Museum

Culver City, CA

5900 Wilshire Blvd

Los Angeles, CA

Mountain View Public Library

Mountain View, CA

Chapman University

Orange County, CA

Norton Air Force Base Museum

San Bernardino, CA

Ronald Reagan Park

San Bernardino, CA

Miami Dade College

Miami, FL

Universal City Walk

Orlando, FL

Atlanta International School

Atlanta, GA

Kennesaw State University

Kennesaw, GA

Friends Suwanee Grill

Suwanee, GA

Brown Line Western Ave CTA Station

Chicago, IL

Eureka College

Eureka, IL

Fort Leavenworth

Fort Leavenworth, KS

Museum of World Treasures

Wichita, KS

Long Wharf

Portland, ME

John F. Kennedy Presidential Library

Boston, MA

Gerald R. Ford Presidential Museum

Grand Rapids, MI

The National Churchill Museum

Fulton, MO

Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and
Museum

Hyde Park, NY

United Nations

NYC, NY

Stony Point Justice Court

Stony Point, NY

Capital University

Columbus, OH

National Underground Railroad Freedom
Center Museum

Cincinnati, OH

German Society of Pennsylvania

Philadelphia, PA

Menzel LP

Spartanburg, SC

Memorial Park

Rapid City, SD

George H.W. Bush Presidential Library Center
College Station, TX
Hilton Anatole Hotel
Dallas, TX
Ripley's Believe It or Not!
San Antonio, TX
University of Virginia
Charlottesville, VA
Virginia War Museum
Newport News, VA
German Armed Forces Command
Reston, VA
Microsoft Headquarters

Redmond, WA
Troll Avenue
Seattle, WA
Seattle Center
Seattle, WA
John Hopkins University School of Advanced
International Studies
Washington DC
Newseum
Washington DC
United States Diplomacy Center
Washington DC

Additional Locations

Northern Arizona University
Flagstaff, AZ
Loyola Marymount University
Los Angeles, CA
Warner Brothers Studios
Burbank, CA
Rosenthal Vineyard
Malibu, CA
US Army Defense Language Institute
Monterey, CA
Ronald Reagan Presidential Library
Simi Valley, CA
Richard Nixon Presidential Library
Yorba Linda, CA
Miami Ironside
Miami, FL
National Infantry Museum
Fort Benning, GA
Hult International Business School
Cambridge, MA
Grand Valley State University
Allendale, MI

Grand Rapids Public Museum
Grand Rapids, MI
Main Street Station Casino
Las Vegas, NV
The National Atomic Testing Museum
Las Vegas, NV
Battery Park City
NYC, NY
Milton J. Rubinstein Museum of Science and
Technology
Syracuse, NY
National Museum of the U.S. Air Force
Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, OH
Vereinigung Erzgebirge
Warminster, PA
Rice University
Houston, TX
Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany
Washington DC
Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade
Center
Washington DC

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