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FROM THE OTHER SIDE

★★★★

Directed by Chantal Akerman.

By Jonathan Rosenbaum

THE GREAT DIVIDE

Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to
breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming
shore.

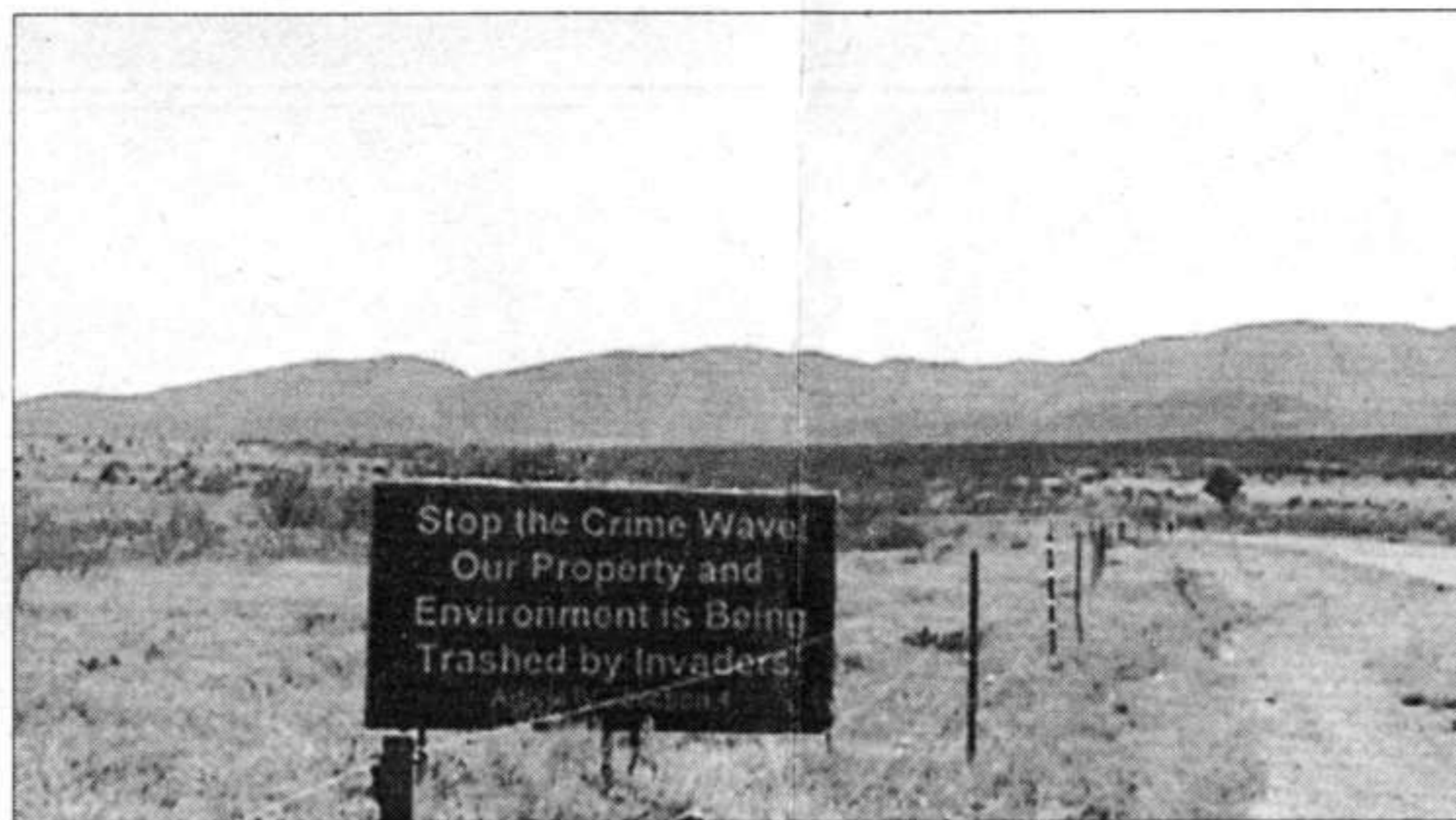
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost
to me.

I lift my lamp beside the golden door.

—from "The New Colossus" by
Emma Lazarus, quoted on a
plaque at the Statue of Liberty

More than 25 years ago, when I was living in a beachside bungalow in a suburb of San Diego, I eventually realized that the bungalow across the alley was a halfway house for Mexicans who'd just made it across the border. I had to figure this out on my own because none of my neighbors ever even alluded to the place or what it was. The constant arrival and departure of new faces was perfectly obvious yet completely unacknowledged—in fact, everything in the surrounding elysian landscape seemed to encourage one not to observe it.

The halfway house was there but not there, like the Mexican ghettos in other parts of suburban San Diego—too decorous to prompt a second look. If people needed to go there in search of cheap labor, they concentrated on what they were looking for. Partial and momentary awareness of other realities was permissible, as long as it didn't



movies

go too far.

The denial there wasn't complete, but with respect to the homeless people I encountered when I lived in Santa Barbara a few years later denial was all but obligatory: no one, after all, had any reason to go looking for the homeless. I'd grown up in Alabama, where perception of servants was similarly peripheral but the ghettos were less camouflaged. The Californians had a different way of expressing their xenophobia: they smiled cheerfully at everyone and everything in the style of Santa Barbara's most famous resident, Ronald Reagan, without allowing themselves to see much of the pain or desperation in their midst. Some of the restaurant owners in downtown Santa Barbara used to lace their garbage cans with poison to keep away the homeless. Not out of malice, they were careful to explain, but simply out of consideration for their customers, who wanted to enjoy their meals in peace.

Toward the end of Chantal Ak-

erman's powerful new documentary, *From the Other Side*—shot along the Arizona-Mexico border—a compassionate and thoughtful American sheriff is interviewed. He says some people think that if Mexicans trying to cross the border illegally are forced out of the cities and into "more hostile environments" such as the Arizona desert, they'll give up and go home. What often happens instead, he says, is that they die in the desert—suggesting that it isn't the only hostile environment they have to contend with.

Some reviewers regard *From the Other Side*, showing this week at the Gene Siskel Film Center, as the third part of a documentary trilogy dealing with specific localities, preceded by *From the East (D'est)* (1993) and *South* (1999). Akerman's painterly eye for landscapes and her penchant for calmly traversing spaces in cars is apparent in all three, yet the differences between these films are much more important than the similarities.

From the East, one of Akerman's best films, contains no interviews at

all; it travels from eastern Germany to Moscow soon after the collapse of communism. *South*, perhaps the weakest of her films, contains several interviews, though it elides her questions; it focuses on the town of Jasper, Texas, shortly after the brutal and racist murder there of James Boyd Jr. I would surmise that the differences of approach and quality in these films relates directly to Akerman's personal investment in their subject matter. The daughter of eastern European Jews who survived the Holocaust, she grew up in Brussels and might be said to be tracing her roots in *From the East* at the very moment when many of the people she's filming are being uprooted, physically and emotionally. In *South* she's basically a sympathetic tourist bearing mute witness to a hate crime—appalled by what she hears and imagines, but not bringing any fresh insight to her subject.

In *From the Other Side* we hear Akerman interviewing Mexicans in Spanish and Americans in English. Here her interest in her subject goes well beyond sympathetic tourism. The final sequence, shot from the front of a car traveling down a freeway at

night, features her own beautiful and moving monologue, spoken in French, in which she speculates about the fate of an interviewee's mother, who disappeared after crossing the border into the U.S.

We never see this woman, and she isn't mentioned before this monologue, so we wind up imagining her as we would a character in a short story. Akerman traces some of her jobs and finds oblique references to her in the stray comments of other people, following the woman's elusive trajectory as if she were a ghost fading into the anonymity of the hypnotic superhighway. This character's fugitive and semifictional existence, which flits in and out of our consciousness before vanishing, provides a heartbreaking summation of all the hard facts about her and other Mexican migrants we've been absorbing over the previous 90 minutes. This is sensitive portraiture and investigative journalism, maintaining a respectful, inquisitive distance from its subjects that recalls some of Walker Evans's photographs of Alabama sharecroppers in his book with James Agee, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. In a way, Akerman's powerful monologue serves as a counterpart to Agee's impassioned and empathetic prose.

Akerman begins the film by interviewing a 21-year-old Mexican on the Mexican side of the border about his older brother; he tried to cross to the U.S. with a group, and all of them eventually perished in the desert. Next she focuses on portions of the border itself—a wide, dusty road, a field where three kids play baseball, and

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film ratings

★★★★ Masterpiece

★★★ A must-see

★★ Worth seeing

★ Has redeeming facet

• Worthless

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another road flanked by a high wall. Then she interviews Delfina, a woman in her late 70s, about her family, including the son and grandson she lost when they tried to cross the border. Her husband less stoically bemoans their loss. Akerman then turns back to the various landscapes along the border.

Only much later in the film does she finally get around to people and places on the American side—spending time in a restaurant, then talking to a rancher and his wife, who express fears about Mexicans “taking over and doing a lot of damage” by, for instance, carrying diseases. We hear Akerman ask them if September 11 has changed things. The wife says, “It makes us realize life is short.” Her husband responds by saying he considers anyone who comes onto his property a trespasser, and the warning sign doesn’t have to be in Spanish either. “This is America,” he concludes.

The cumulative impact of the eventless shots of the border wall that appear periodically over the course of the film is striking. In themselves the shots are fairly nondescript and uninteresting, but the more we accept the wall as part of the everyday surroundings, the more disquieting and menacing it becomes. This is especially true after we see lights on it at night and helicopters with searchlights moving along it, giving the settings some of the ambience of a lunar landscape. And we can’t shake that impression when we see illegal aliens being tracked from the vantage point of a plane in the daytime. The wall that appeared to be a neutral dividing line at the beginning of the film seems more and more like a scar once we see the kinds of pain and anguish it causes. And as Akerman’s title suggests, which side of the border we’re viewing it from can make all the difference. ■