Directed by Wim Wenders
Written by Sam Shepard
Adapted by L.M. Kit Carson
Produced by Anatole Dauman and Don Guest
Original Music by Ry Cooder
Cinematography by Robby Müller
Film Editing by Peter Przygodda

Harry Dean Stanton... Travis Henderson
Dean Stockwell... Walt Henderson
Hunter Carson... Hunter Henderson
Nastassja Kinski... Jane Henderson


Wim Wenders, from World Film Directors, V. II, Ed., John Wakeman, H.W. Wilson Co. NY 1988, Entry by Christopher Lambert

German director, scenarist, and producer, born in Düsseldorf, West Germany, the son of a doctor. Raised as a Catholic, Wenders was at first ambitious to become a priest, though he repudiates the notion that he is obsessed by his religious upbringing and says that rock music was ultimately a more important influence. The Ruhr district of Wenders’ adolescence was surrounded by US military bases, and he stayed tuned in to the American Forces Network, fascinated not only by the music but by all things American. As it did for so many of his generation in postwar Germany, rock ‘n’ roll provided him with a specific sense of identity, the first thing in his life “that wasn’t inherited.” He went so far as to tell Jan Dawson that “rock music actually saved my life.” Certainly by the age of eighteen his ecclesiastical ambitions had ended, sacrificed to the dual distractions of the juke box and the pinball machine (which he played just as fanatically).

Possessed more and more by the creative energy—it has more to do with joy than anything else”—he found in rock ‘n’ roll, and increasingly immersed in the counterculture of the 1960s, Wenders abandoned his studies in medicine and philosophy and in 1966 went to Paris to study painting. Instead, he discovered the Cinématèque Française, where he was able to view as many as five feature films a day and often did. He returned to Germany in 1967 and enrolled at the newly founded Hochschule für Fernsehen und Film in Munich, where he studied for three years. Jan Dawson said of the apprentice films he made there that they “combined a descriptive approach with a terror of cutting, or of asserting a point of view.”

In his first year at the Munich Film School, Wenders made two 16mm shorts, Schauplätze (Locations) and Same Player Shoots Again. While the former no longer exists (Wenders seems to regard it as no great loss), some of its material is incorporated in the short, precredit sequence of Same Player Shoots Again. This otherwise consists of the same shot of a man running, repeated five times—one for each ball of the pinball machine suggested by the title—the repetitions being distinguished from each other only by certain variations in color. In its structuralist concerns the movie is very much in the spirit of the “loop” films fashionable at the time in
Munich and Berlin (wherein the film was actually looped into a circle so that it repeated itself indefinitely). What distinguishes it from this vogue is its suggestion, however embryonic, of narrative. In addition, the stylistic echoes of American film noir indicate interests that were to become central in Wenders’ more mature work.

Two more shorts followed in 1968. Still experimental, they show a growing technical and stylistic competence. Silver City, which Wenders describes as an experiment in “missing narrative,” divides into two halves. The first studies a series of empty, early morning streets; the second shows the same streets filled with homeward-bound traffic. Made up entirely of extreme long shots taken from high angles, the film evokes a strong feeling of emptiness and impermanence—a sense of contemporary dislocation and transience that Wenders returns to again and again in his later work. Polizeifilm (Police Film) is of a very different nature—Wenders calls it his Laurel and Hardy film. An ironic comment on the tactics employed by the Munich police in dealing with the 1968 student demonstrations, the film is Wenders’ most overt political statement. It provides a continuous commentary in the form of a voice whispering advice for policemen on how to handle the various aspects of a demonstration. Polizeifilm has a subtlety and sophistication that distinguishes it from the more polical films of the period, while embracing a similar ideology.

Alabama—2000 Light Years (1969) is notable for being Wenders’ first experiment in 35mm film and for the camerawork of Robbie Müller, who has shot all of Wenders’ films since, with the exception (on account of American union restrictions) of Hammett. In Alabama, a fatally injured driver climbs into his car and goes on driving until he dies, accompanied by rock music and the sound of the engine. For Wenders, the film is “about the song All Along the Watchtower...about what happens and what changes depending on whether the song is sung by Bob Dylan or by Jimi Hendrix.” Three American LPs is also about the emotions and images suggested by rock music, an element in all of Wenders’ later pictures. Produced by Heissischer Rundfunk for German television, the film (which was never shown on television) was the director’s first collaboration with the Austrian writer Peter Handke.

Rock music plays a different but equally indispensable role in his diploma film, Summer in the City (which originally bore the subtitle Dedicated to the Kinks). His first feature, albeit in 16mm, it was made in 1970 on a budget of DM 12,000 (about $5,000). “To me, now, Summer in the City is really a documentary about the end of the Sixties...” Wenders says, “about the ideas people had in 1969 and 1970, the way people felt.” The documentary quality of the film is due as much to its long takes, fixed camera, and black-and-white photography as to its slow and sometimes motionless narrative. Hanns Zischler (the running man in Same Player Shoots Again) plays a character who, after being released from prison, journeys in search of his former friends, flying on from one wintry city to another, always failing to rediscover the real relationship he seeks. The rock music in the film provides a bitter counterpart to the action, evoking summer, heat, and the emotional warmth so conspicuously absent from the narrative.

This lean, raw film marks the transition in Wenders’ career from apprenticeship to maturity. It scale obliged him to bring together a production team attuned to his ideas and working methods, beginning with Robbie Müller as cameraman and Peter Pryzgodda as editor. With the addition in his next movie of Martin Müller as sound recordist, Wenders had assembled the crew that was to be responsible for his next six features. Wenders is very conscious of the importance of this continuing collaboration—of what he calls “learning together”—which accounts for much of the improvisational freedom and stylistic consistency in his work.

Developments in the German film industry at this time also had their effect on Wenders’ career. The interest shown by German and Austrian television in the contemporary film scene and the government funding of institutions to encourage young filmmakers, such as the Kuratorium Junger Deutsche Film, contributed enormously to the emergence of a new wave of German filmmakers including Straub, Kluge, Herzog, Fassbinder, and Wenders himself. Moreover, with admirable foresight, some of these young directors recognized that it was the lack of appropriate distribution outlets that would hamper their efforts to reach an audience. In 1970, therefore, Wenders, together with eleven other filmmakers, formed the Filmverlag der Autoren (The Filmmakers’ Company), based in Munich. The establishment of the Filmverlag allowed Wenders to turn to filmmaking as a career with the knowledge that the distribution of his work would be as much under his control as its creation.

In 1971, after a brief stint as a movie critic with Filmkritik and the Süddeutschen Zeitung, Wenders made his first 35mm feature. It had some backing from Kuratorium Junger Deutsche Film but was funded primarily by Austrian television (“the guy who made the contract with us was thrown out of television one month later because of it”). Die Angst des Tormanns beim Elfmeter (The Goalie’s Anxiety at the Penalty Kick), based on the novel of Peter Handke, is about a soccer star past his prime who walks out a game in Vienna after an argument with the referee. Bloch (Arthur Brauss) wanders around the city killing time—drifting in and out of movie theatres, checking the football results—then just as casually strangles a girl he picks up for the night. He takes a bus to the border in search of an old girlfriend and, finding the border closed, simply waits for the police to find him (or not).

The film is a study in alienation—an unbridgeable gap that suddenly opens up between Bloch’s sense of reality and that imposed by his society. Wenders calls it “a completely schizoid film, right in the middle of everything,” and the borderlands where it ends are also the borderlands of the mind. As Richard Combs wrote, the movie filters “its sense of the hero’s remoteness from life through the network of alien [American] artefacts—the technology, the songs, the movies—that both fascinate and dislocate...A stream of sixties pop tunes through the film is forever filling in the emotional spaces between people that the images leave blank.” The movie puzzled some of its reviewers, but for some, like Tony Rayns, it achieved an effect which is “richer and more original than in any of Wenders’ subsequent films.”

Der scharlachrote Buchstabe (The Scarlet Letter, 1974), an international coproduction, was an experience Wenders would prefer to forget. Starring Senta Berger, Hans Christian Blech, and Lou Castel, it is an adaptation of Nicholas Ray’s Johnny Guitar. Wenders was initially attracted by the relation of the mother and daughter but, handicapped by an excessively formal shooting script and various production problems and personality clashes, he apparently lost interest. The result lacks both credibility and a dramatic center. The producers were so dissatisfied that they actually cut ten minutes running time out of the negative before distribution, an action Wenders will never forgive: “The film is destroyed now.... The producer seemed to be one of the few really good left-wing people in Spain; but I’d rather work with a fascist who leaves my negatives alone.”

With the Filmverlag der Autoren itself acting as producer, Wenders completed his third feature in 1974, Alice in den Städten (Alice in the Cities). A tale that ranges from New York to
Amsterdam to the Ruhr valley, this is another of Wenders’ journeys through a sterile, impersonal world, but one that becomes an odyssey of self-discovery. A German journalist (Rüdiger Vogler) in America suffers a crisis of identity (brilliantly evoked in the empty and meaningless American vistas he obsessively records with his Polaroid camera). He abandons the article he has been commissioned to write and returns to Europe with a nine-year-old girl (Yella Rottlander) whom he is supposed to deliver to her mother (Lisa Kreuzer) in Amsterdam. When the mother fails to arrive, the odd couple set off across Europe in search of the little girl’s grandmother.

While it is concerned primarily with the journalist’s rediscovery of personal relationships and identity, the film is also a full-blooded attack on the America that had obsessed Wenders since his youth; having finally got there, he obviously found it just as bleak and disfiguring as his own Europe. But the world of Alice in the Cities is neither as oppressive nor as depressive as that of his earlier films, the journalist in the film having discovered at least a modus vivendi. Though its story is similar to that of Bogdanovich’s Paper Moon (1973), Wenders’ film displays a much greater precision of image and mise-en-scene; it seemed to Tom Milne that “the difference between the two films is the difference between sentiment and sentimentality.” David Robinson agreed, calling it “a funny, observant account...of the relationship that grows up between the disenchanted man and the little girl with her unpredictable mixture of frosty good sense, childish inconsequent and voracious appetite.

Falsche Bewegung (Wrong Move, 1975), freely adapted by Handke from Goethe’s Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre, continues Wenders’ exploration of “the notion of identity” in terms of a character in transit, again using as his paradigm a blocked writer played by Rüdiger Vogler. (Wenders repeated recourse to the same small stable of actors in his feature films adds to the impression of visual consistency provided by his use of a virtually unchanging production team.) In Falsche Bewegung, Wilhelm begins a journey through Germany so as not to have to face his inability to write. After a series of coincidental meetings, a group of social outcasts forms around him and joins him in his travels. Its most socially acceptable member, an industrialist (Ivan Desny), commits suicide, and after that the group slowly dissolves, leaving Wilhelm alone again.

While Wenders’ narratives contain so little dramatic action that his detractors prefer to call them non-narratives, they are perfectly congruent with the contemplative, explorative nature of his concerns and the improvisatory character of his filmmaking. Wilhelm comes to recognize that his life has been a series of wrong moves. Nevertheless, it is clear that he will survive and continue his attempt to write, and this allows the film to end in a mood of something approaching hope—a mood that is augmented by the wry and gentle humor characteristic of all Wenders’ films, and by the freshness of the characterization, especially that of the silent street entertainer and pickpocket Mignon (Nastassja Nakszynski). All the same, this “ravishingly photographed” movie seems to some critics an excessively academic treatment of Wenders’ preoccupations.

Not content with having a hand in the distribution of his films, Wenders then established his own production company, Road Movies Produktion. Its first project was his Im Lauf der Zeit (King of the Road, 1976), winner of the International Critics Prize at Cannes. This picture, which finally established Wenders as a major figure in the New German Cinema, was the third of his trilogy of road films, all starring Rüdiger Vogler. For many it was the ultimate road movie”—the quintessential product of a genre that includes Dennis Hopper’s Easy Rider and Monte Hellman’s Two-Lane Blacktop, in which the distances traversed by the protagonists are as much emotional or spiritual as territorial. In this respect, the train (appearing in all his films as his most obsessive image) is a central metaphor for the possibility of development: “I think motion constantly maintains the idea of change. The people in my films don’t actually change much, if at all, but they are nevertheless maintaining the idea.”

Like most of his films, King of the Road is shot in black and white, which Wenders finds “much more realistic and natural than color.” Nearly three hours long, it has even less dramatic content than its predecessors. Vogler plays Bruno Winter, who drives the big truck he lives in through the borderlands between East and West Germany, repairing old projectors in rural movie theatres (and incidentally documenting the decay of cinema as a popular art form in Germany). He meets Robert Lander (Hanns Zischler) when the latter drives into a river in front of him in an ill-judged suicide attempt. Robert, who works on the borders between linguistics and pediatrics, is on the run—from language, marriage, and life in general. The two join forces and wander on together through the various inconsequential adventures and encounters (including a splendid sequence when they entertain a restless audience of children in a movie theatre with an impromptu shadow play). Gradually they reveal their natures, their fears of life, loneliness, and women, their awareness that “the Yanks have colonized our subconscious.” In the end, Robert departs by train, leaving a note saying simply: “Everything must change.”

The film’s theme is one of regeneration and self-definition, and this is clear in spite of the fact that Wenders’ script (which he wrote as he went along) is more notable for its long silences than for expository dialogue. The communication between Bruno and Robert is on a more delicate and subtle level than that of language, often enacted through the simultaneous recognition of cultural references. The promise of self-realization at the end is more positive than in any of Wenders’ earlier films. For Richard Combs, this movie finally established that “‘alienation’ is not really Wenders’ subject, although his lonely, self-obsessed heroes might suggest as much”; rather, in a manner reminiscent of Yasujirō Ozu, he is concerned “to suggest how the cause, context, and cure of his heroes’ problems arise (as the German title of Kings of the Road has it), in the course of time.” The picture received the Fipresci Prize at Cannes in 1976.

Kings of the Road seemed to mark the end of one phase in Wenders’ work. His next film Der Amerikanische Freund (The American Friend) was his most ambitious project to date. Co-financed by Road Movies, German television, and a French company, the film is trilingual, the actors of three different nationalities, and the script an adaptation by Wenders of Patricia Highsmith’s novel Ripley’s Game. Half-a-dozen filmmakers have
parts in the film, and there are cameo performances by two of the directors Wenders most admires, Samuel Fuller and Nicholas Ray. It is also one of Wenders' few color films, although he uses color in a characteristically unorthodox manner, accenting tones and shades most directors try to eliminate. Welding his fascination with existential choice to the drive of the modern thriller, the film pays homage to Hitchcock and to the American film noir while remaining firmly within Wenders' own world.

Central to The American Friend, as to Wenders' earlier films is the exploration of an unlikely and accidental friendship, this time between Jonathan Zimmermann (Brno Ganz), a Swiss picture restorer, and the amoral Tom Ripley (Denis Hopper). Ripley tricks Jonathan into carrying out a murder on behalf of Ripley's gangster friend Raoul Minot (Gérard Blain). Jonathan is suffering from an incurable blood disease and, persuaded by Ripley that his death is imminent, accepts the assignment so that he will have some money to leave his wife (Lisa Kreuzer). Having killed one man, he is blackmailed into murdering another, succeeding this time only with Ripley's help. The two fight off a Mafia attack, and after abandoning Ripley, Jonathan slumps over the wheel of his car. Wenders handles the complexities of Jonathan's decision and Ripley's progress towards admiration and affection for him in an extraordinary mixture of cinematic styles. The result is a tour de force that received almost unanimous critical praise and considerable popular success. Bruno Ganz's performance as the humble, anxious Jonathan was particularly admired, and Derek Malcolm wrote that Robbie Müller's location photography in Paris, Hamburg, and New York “imparts an added sense of isolation” to Ripley's character. Pauline Kael found the film turgid and incompetent, but Tom Milne called it “cavalier and casually funny...also a riveting film noir,” and most critics agreed.

Wenders' next two films both took him back to the United States. Lightning Over Water (1979) records in agonizing detail the last few weeks in the life of Nicholas Ray, then in the final stages of lung cancer. Ray and Wenders made the film in collaboration and so long as Ray dominates, it is a study of courage. As Ray weakens, however, intellectual command passes to Wenders, David Robinson thought that the latter “reveals himself lacking either in humour or discretion. Thereafter the film becomes voyeuristic and disgusting.”

Hammett (1982) was a more ambitious endeavor but was plagued by problems and proved extremely frustrating for Wenders. Wenders agreed to do the movie for Francis Ford Coppola’s Zoetrope Studios, but once begun its script was revised endlessly by a series of writers. Then Coppola decided to close the film down when it was ninety-percent complete, and novelist Ross Thomas was brought in to rewrite the screenplay yet again. When shooting began on the movie a year later, entire characters had been eliminated—and so, it seemed to some critics, had Wenders’ distinctive cinematic vision.

Hammett recreates the passage in Dashiell Hammett’s life from hack writer for pulp magazines to premier mystery writer and author of The Maltese Falcon. The Point of passage is dramatized by a case on which Hammett works as a Pinkerton detective that leads him into the shadowy world of San Francisco’s Chinatown, “inner” and “outer” stories becoming ingeniously interwoven. Most critics, however, found the result disappointing. David Ansen called the film a “highly stylized pastiche...filled with choice character actors approximating ’40s acting styles.” “Yet, given the ambition of Wenders' previous films,” he went on, “it seems a very minor effort.” To Michael Sragow, Hammett seemed “the latest evidence of a lamentable new trend: the pseudointellectualization of the movies. In works like Hammett, the filmmakers stretch out ideas without filling them in with people or plot.” David Sterritt admired its “visual detail and insinuating rhythm,” but thought its plot littered with clichés. For Vincent Canby, it was a pleasant, “watchable” film, with atmosphere and attractive sets. What he found most wrong with it was “the total absence of Mr. Wenders’ point of view as a European cineaste fascinated by American movies, the quality that distinguished his beautiful, melancholy caper film, The American Friend.”

Wenders’ troubles with Hammett would seem to have provided the inspiration for The State of Things (1983), made during a long hiatus in the shooting of the detective film. It won the top award at the Venice Film Festival, as well as West Germany’s National Film Prize, given annually by the Minister of the Interior. The State of Things, written by Wenders and Robert Kramer, begins with the shooting of a low-budget science fiction movie outside Lisbon. When shooting has to stop because of inadequate financing, the producer (Allen Goorwitz) flies to Hollywood to consult his backers, and for a time Wenders focuses on the crew’s stalled lives as they discuss such things as the nature of film illusion and life. Finally, the director (Patrick Bauchau), having heard nothing from Hollywood, goes off in pursuit of the director in Los Angeles. He eventually finds him cruising the city’s streets in a mobile home to escape the loan sharks who backed the movie but have since lost faith that a non-narrative European film could succeed. Reception of the film in the US was favorable but restrained. David Denby thought that the Hollywood part contained “memorably funny dialogue” and that the work “gets better and better as it goes along.”

Vincent Canby found the dialogue flat at times and at other times “quite marvelous.” Its sensibility, he remarked, “is very romantic, very European….I feel that I must weigh my words carefully here because, although it left me absolutely cold—frigid really—I know that it’s the kind of work that will be infinitely fascinating to film aficionados.”

Paris, Texas (1984), written by playwright Sam Shepard and L.M. Carson, dispenses with elaborately detailed plotting to emphasize the inarticulate rituals of American mythic experience. At the beginning of the film, a solitary man (Harry Dean Stanton) is found wandering in the desert near the Mexican border. His brother (Dean Stockwell), who has presumed him dead and has taken care of his young son (Hunter Carson) for four years, comes to pick him up, but for a long time the Stanton character does not utter a word. When he finally begins to talk, a relationship tentatively develops between him and his son. Eventually he sets off with the boy to find the third member of the family, his wife, who disappeared four years before. In a climactic scene, he confronts her (Natassia Kinski) at the upscale Houston peep show where she works—a scene that rather than providing resolution confirms Stanton’s solitude and isolation. Derek Malcolm called Paris, Texas a “beautiful, resonant, and affecting movie...that may well attain the status of a modern classic.… I’ve seldom seen such a potent combination of superior talents. Combine Wenders’ existential view and the more cranky complexities of Shepard, and you have the tone of the piece, which deals with love, freedom, reality, and illusions, but is perhaps chiefly about our capacity to deceive ourselves. Despite its length and [slow] pace, the film holds you in its grip like a vice.” It won the Golden Palm at the 1984 Cannes Film Festival.

American reviews, however, were generally unfavorable. It was often felt that the movie was long and pointless, improbable in its character motivation, and bogus in its ending. David Ansen thought that the characters were ideas, and that Wenders and Shepard had “proclaimed their themes rather than dramatized
them.” David Denby called Paris, Texas “a fiasco of the most dismaying kind….Both [Wenders and Shepard] have...a weakness for the instantly legendary, and a corresponding indifference to actuality, plot, [and] characterization. What results from this doubling up of styles and obsessions is a lifeless art-world hallucination that does not come together as a drama.” Stanley Kauffmann thought the film burdened by its heavy symbolism and uncertain of its direction. “Paris, Texas not only doesn’t know where it’s going when it starts,” he commented, “it doesn’t know where it’s arrived when it’s finished….Wenders’s direction is, at its best, utterly ordinary...his eye is looking for what he has seen in previous films.”

In the interstices of his career, Wenders has made a number of short “diary films.” Reverse Angle (1982) shows the filmmaker in New York for the editing of Hammett, brooding over the problems of his craft (“I have the feeling that the story and images don’t belong to me”) and wandering around the city (which is very keenly observed). Chambre 666 takes its title from the number of Wenders’ hotel room at the 1982 Cannes festival. There he set up a camera and sound equipment and invited his fellow directors one at a time to speak about the probable extinction of cinema (a television set plays in the background; otherwise there is no decor). “For once.” J. Hoberman wrote, “the filmmakers just have to face the camera; the result is something like an auteurist Chelsea Girls. Jean-Luc Godard, Stephen Spielberg, and Michelangelo Antonioni (the only director to look out the window) do the most talking…. Werner Herzog—the only one to take control of his own image—sits down, takes off his shoes and socks, and turns off the set….The only two women...both smoke furiously and cite ‘passion.’…. The film is a great time capsule.

...Wenders has written and directed a 92-minute film, Tokyo-Ga (Tokyo Images), a record of a trip he made to Japan in 1983 and an homage to the great Japanese director Yasujiro Ozu (1903-1963). In the film, Wenders talks at length with Chishu Ryu, who starred in many of Ozu’s films, Yuharu Atsuta, the cameraman whose career was shaped by Ozu’s vision, and Werner Herzog, the brilliant German director whom Wenders encountered by chance in Tokyo. The film becomes a meditation on Ozu’s filmmaking, in which the decline of the Japanese family and of national identity was a major theme, and on the current state of civilization. “More than anything else,” Vincent Canby observed, Tokyo-Ga is a moving, perceptive critique of the Ozu career, written not in prose but in images extraordinary enough to do justice to the subject….It is a small but important film.”

Wenders lists as the major influences on his work the films of Ozu, for their precision and simplicity and the emotional density of their narratives; American cinema—particularly that of John Ford and Anthony Mann—for their clarity of structure and its development of a unique film language; and the work of Jean-Marie Straub, “the only influence on me coming from inside Germany. Wenders in his turn has already exerted a substantial influence on contemporary cinema—not only aesthetically, but through the activities of Road Movies Production. In 1977 Wenders produced Peter Handke’s first film as a director, The Left-Handed Woman, and in 1979 Road Movies cofinanced (with the British Film Institute) Chris Petit’s first feature, Radio On; Wenders has also given support to several American independents.

“Wenders has issues to settle with cinema….and the ways its innocent reflection of our lives can also become a colonising predetermination.” writes Richard Combs. “But Wenders’ cinema should not be made to sound forbiddingly formalist. It is also, often surprisingly, emotionally direct and involving.” Jan Dawson, comparing Wenders with his colleagues in the New German Cinema, says that his films “lack the flamboyance of Fassbinder’s, the metaphysical ambitions of Herzog’s, the intellectual honesty of Kluge’s: more significantly, they are also totally lacking in aggression. Their pacing and perspective, their vision of an incongruous universe in which the human characters are seldom the most interesting item on the screen, their emphasis on the language of gesture rather than on dialogue—all of these leave Wenders closer to Ozu than to the conventional Hollywood narrative.”

Jan Dawson wrote that “the conspicuous isolation of the introspective characters” in Wender’s films “marks the fact that the films are profoundly political: the fundamental questions of ideology and social values are presented, not in any conventional way, but — like the landscapes, characters and urban environment—materially, phenomenologically. Like his film and music criticism, his films reflect a purely descriptive approach. The paradox is that in the revelation of objects, landscapes and relationships without any intrusive directorial presence, one recognizes Wenders’ personal vision: the outward signs of a society in quest of both its roots and its future, of the point where object and subject might happily coalesce.”

Wenders himself maintains that “every film is political, but, most of all, those that don’t want to be: ‘entertainment films.’ They are the most political because they dispel the idea of change in people. Everything’s all right just the way it is, they say with every shot. They are one big advertisement for the status quo.” Wenders perceives his own work “as more documentary than manipulative. I want my films to deal with the period of time in which they were made, with the cities, the landscapes, the subjects, the people who work on them.”

From The Logic of Images: Essays and Conversations. Wim Wenders, Faber & Faber London & Boston, 1991

Why do you make films? Reply to a questionnaire

Ever since this terrible question was put to me, I’ve done nothing but think of how to answer it. I have one answer in the morning and one at night, one at the editing-table, one when I’m looking at stills of earlier films of mine, another when I’m speaking to my accountant. And yet another when I think of the team I’ve been working with for years now. Every one of these different answers, these reasons for making films, is sincere and genuine, but I keep saying to myself there must be something ‘more fundamental’, some ‘commitment’, or even a ‘compulsion’.

I was twelve years old when I made my very first film, with an 8mm camera. I stood by a window and filmed the street below, the cars and pedestrians. My father saw me and asked: ‘What are you doing with your camera?’ And I said: ‘Can’t you see? I’m filming the street.’ ‘What for?’ he asked. I had no answer. Ten or twelve years later, I was making my first short film in 16mm. A reel of film lasted three minutes. I filmed a crossroads from the sixth floor, without moving the camera until the reel was finished. It didn’t occur to me to pull away or stop shooting any earlier. With hindsight, I suppose it would have seemed like sacrilege to me.

Why sacrilege?

I’m no great theorist. I tend not to remember things I’ve read in books. So I can’t give you Béla Balázs’s exact words, but they affected me profoundly all the same. He talks about the ability (and the responsibility) of cinema ‘to show things as they are’. And he says cinema can ‘rescue the existence of things’.
That’s precisely it. I have another quote, from Cézanne, where he says: ‘Things are disappearing. It you want to see anything, you have to hurry’.

So back to the awful question: why do I make films? Well, because...Something happens, you see it happening, you film it as it happens, the camera sees and records it, and you can look at it again, afterwards. The thing itself may no longer be there, but you can still see it, the fact of its existence hasn’t been lost. The act of filming is a heroic act (not always, not often, but sometimes). For a moment, the gradual destruction of the world of appearances is held up. The camera is a weapon against the tragedy of things, against their disappearing. Why make films? Bloody stupid question!

Impossible Stories
Talk given at a colloquium on narrative technique

Where French and German each have a single word for it, English has only a two-part phrase: ‘to tell stories’. That hints at my difficulty: the man you’ve invited to talk to you about telling stories is a man who over the years has had nothing but problems with stories.

Let me go back to the beginning. Once I was a painter. What interested me was space; I painted cityscapes and landscapes. I became a film-maker when I realized that I wasn’t getting anywhere as a painter. Painting lacked something, as did my individual paintings. It would have been too easy to say that they lacked life; I thought that that was missing was an understanding of time. So when I began filming, I thought of myself as a painter of space engaged on a quest for time. It never occurred to me that this quest should be called ‘storytelling’. I must have been very naïve. I thought filming was simple. I thought you only had to see something to be able to depict it, and I also thought a storyteller (and of course I wasn’t one) had to listen first and speak afterwards. Making a film to me meant connecting all these things. That was a misconception, but before I straighten it out, there is something else I must talk about.

My stories all begin from pictures. When I started making my first film, I wanted to make ‘landscape portraits’. My very first film, Silver City, contained ten shots of three minutes each; that was the length of a reel of 16mm film. …

For a writer, a story seems to be the logical end-product: words want to form sentences, and the sentences want to stand in some continuous discourse; a writer doesn’t have to force the words into a sentence or the sentences into a story. There seems to be a kind of inevitability in the way stories come to be told. In films—or at least in my films, because of course there are other ways of going about it—in films the images don’t necessarily lead to anything else; they stand on their own. I think a picture stand on its own more readily, whereas a word tends to seek the context of a story. For me, images don’t automatically lend themselves to be part of a story. If they’re to function in the way that words and sentences do, they have to be ‘forced’—that is, I have to manipulate them.

My thesis is that for me as a film-maker, narrative involves forcing the images in some way. Sometimes this manipulation becomes narrative art, but not necessarily. Often enough, the result is only abused pictures.

I dislike the manipulation that’s necessary to press all the images of a film into one story; it’s very harmful for the images because it tends to drain them of their ‘life’. In the relationship between story and image, I see the story as a kind of vampire, trying to suck all the blood from an image. Images are acutely sensitive; like snails they shrink back when you touch their horns. They don’t have it in them to be earthhorses: carrying and transporting messages or significance or intention or a moral. But that’s precisely what a story wants from them.

So far everything seems to have spoken out against story, as though it were the enemy. But of course stories are very exciting; they are powerful and important for mankind. They give people what they want, on a very profound level—more than merely amusement or entertainment or suspense. People’s primary requirement is that some kind of coherence be provided. Stories give people the feeling that there is meaning, that there is ultimately an order lurking behind the incredible confusion of appearances and phenomena that surrounds them. This order is what people require more than anything else; yes I would almost say that the notion of order or story is connected with the godhead. Stories are substitutes for God. Or maybe the other way around.

For myself—and hence my problems with story—I incline to believe in chaos, in the inexplicable complexity of the events around me. Basically, I think that individual situations are unrelated to each other, and my experience seems to consist entirely of individual situations; I’ve never yet been involved in a story with a beginning, middle and end. For someone who tells stories this is positively sinful, but I must confess that I have yet to experience a story. I think stories are actually lies. But they are incredibly important to our survival. Their artificial structure helps us overcome our worst fears: that there is no God; that we are nothing but tiny fluctuating particles with perception and consciousness, but lost in a universe that remains altogether beyond our conception. By producing coherence, stories make life bearable and combat fears. That’s why children lie to hear stories at bedtime. That’s why the Bible is one long storybook, and why stories should always end happily.

Of course the stories in my films also work as a means of ordering the images. Without stories, the images that interest me would threaten to lose themselves and seem purely arbitrary.

For this reason, film-stories are like routes. A map is the most exciting thing in the world for me; when I see a map, I immediately feel restless, especially when it’s of a country or a city where I’ve never been. I look at all the names and I want to know the things they refer to, the cities of a country, the streets of a city. When I look at a map, it turns into an allegory for the whole of life. The only thing that makes it bearable is to try to mark out a route, and follow it through the city or country. Stories do just that: they become your roads in a strange land, where but for them, you might go to thousands of places without arriving anywhere.

What are the stories told in my films? There are two sorts; I draw a sharp distinction between them, because they exist in two completely separate systems or traditions. Furthermore, there is a continual alternation between the two categories of film, with a single exception, The Scarlet Letter, and that was a mistake.

In the first group (A) all the films are in black and white, except for Nick’s Film, which belongs to neither tradition. (I’m not sure that it counts as a film at all, so let’s leave that one out.)
In the other group (B) all the films are in colour, and they are all based on published novels. The films in group A, on the other hand, are based without exception on ideas of mine—the word ‘idea’ is used loosely to refer to dreams, daydreams and experiences of all kinds. All the A-films were more or less unscripted, whereas the others followed scripts very closely. The A-films are loosely structured, whereas the B-films are all tightly structured. The A-films were shot in chronological sequence, beginning from an initial situation that was often the only known point in them; the B-films were shot in the traditional hopping-around way, and with an eye to the exigencies of a production team. with group A films, I never knew how they would finish; I knew the ending of B-films before I started.

Basically all the group A films operate in a very open system, the B-films in a very closed one. Both represent not only systems but also attitudes: openness on the one hand, discipline on the other. The themes of the A films were identified only during shooting. The themes of the B-films were known; it was just a matter of deciding which bits should go in. The A-films were made from the inside, working out; the B-films the opposite. For the A-films a story had to be found; for the B-films the story had to be lost sight of.

The fact that—with the exception of the already-mentioned mistake—there has been a constant pendulum swing between A- and B-films shows that each is a reaction to its predecessor, which is exactly my dilemma.

I made each of my A-films because the film before had had too many rules, hadn’t been sufficiently spontaneous, and I’d got bored with the characters; also I felt I had to ‘expose’ myself and the crew and the actors to a new situation. With the B-films it was exactly the other way round: I made them because I was unhappy that the film before had been so ‘subjective’, and because I needed to work within a firm structure, using the framework of a story. Actors in B-films played parts ‘other’ than themselves, represented fictional characters; in the A-films they interpreted and depicted themselves, they were themselves. In these films I saw my task as bringing in as much as possible of what (already) existed. For the B-films, things had to be invented. It became ever clearer that one group could be called ‘subjective’ and the other ‘search for objectivity’. Though, of course, it wasn’t quite so simple.

Tokyo-Ga

If our century still had any shrines...if there were any relics of the cinema, then for me it would have to be the corpus of the Japanese director Yasujiro Ozu. He made fifty-four films in all, silents in the twenties, black-and-white films in the thirties and forties, and finally colour films until his death in 1963—on 12 December, his sixtieth birthday.

Ozu’s films always tell the same simple stories, of the same people, in the same city of Tokyo. They are told with extreme economy, reduced to their barest essentials. They show how life has changed in Japan over forty years. Ozu’s films show the slow decline of the Japanese family and the collapse of national identity. They don’t do it by pointing aghast at the new, American, occidental influences, but by lamenting the losses with a gentle melancholy as they occur.

His films may be thoroughly Japanese, but they are also absolutely universal. I have seen all the families in the world in them, including my parents, my brother, and myself. Never before or since has the cinema been so close to its true purpose: to give an image of man in the twentieth century, a true, valid and useful image, in which he can not only recognize himself, but from which he can learn as well.

Like flying blind without instruments

On the turning point in Paris, Texas

The story’s about a man who turns up somewhere in the desert out of nowhere and returns to civilization. Prior to filming, we drove the length of the entire US-Mexican border—more than 1,500 miles. Finally we decided to shoot in an area called ‘Big Bend’ in the south-west of Texas. Big Bend is a National Park with incredibly beautiful mountains, through which the Rio Grande flows. That’s the river the ‘wetbacks’ have to swim. As it turned out, we didn’t film there, because when we were looking over the area again from above, in a helicopter, the old pilot, a local guy, told us there was an area a little way off called ‘the Devil’s Graveyard’. This godforsaken patch of ground wasn’t even entered on our maps, and it turned out to be a gigantic abstract dream landscape. There are no police and most of the immigrants who swim across there just die in the desert because there’s not a drop of water anywhere in it. So that’s where we started our film; that’s where we see Travis for the first time. After he collapses with exhaustion, he’s picked up by his brother. The first place they go is a little hamlet of about twenty houses called Marathon. It has a hotel where Walt drops Travis, and goes off to buy him some clothes. But when Walt gets back, his brother has taken off again. The next, slightly bigger, place that Walt and Travis pass through on their way from Texas to Los Angeles is Fort Stanton, a town with a couple of thousand inhabitants. We tried to arrange the film in such a way that all sizes and types of American towns appear in it. Actually the smallest place of all was the gas station where Travis collapses. It was called Camellot, and we only stopped there on the recce because we thought it was a funny name. Then came Marathon, then Fort Stanton, then El Paso which is a middle-sized town, and finally the metropolis Los Angeles. I didn’t show Los Angeles as a city, but as an enormous suburb. You don’t really see ‘LA’ in the film. The only real city you see is Houston, Texas. Houston is one of my favorite cities in America. So, you see, I tried to show all kinds of towns, though of course there are also a lot of scenes that are just set in the countryside.

Actually, I was going to make a far more complex film, because I’d originally intended to drive all over America. I had it in mind to go to Alaska and then the Midwest and across to California and then down to Texas. I’d planned a real zigzag route all over America. But my scriptwriter Sam Shepard persuaded me not to. He said: ‘Don’t bother with all that zigzagging. You can find the whole of America in the one state of Texas.’ At the time I didn’t know Texas all that well, but I trusted Sam. I travelled around Texas for a couple of months, and I had to agree with him. Everything I wanted to have in my film was there in Texas—America in miniature.

A lot of my films start off with roadmaps instead of scripts. Sometimes it feels like flying blind without instruments. You fly all night and in the morning you arrive somewhere. That is: you have to try to make a landing somewhere so the film can end.

For me this film has come off better than, or differently to, my previous films. Once more, we flew all night without instruments, but this time we landed exactly where we meant to. From the outset, Paris, Texas had a much straighter trajectory and a much more precise destination. And from the beginning, too, it had more of a story than my earlier films, and I wanted to tell that story till I dropped.

May 1984

Although a relative late-comer to the movement known as the Neues deutsches Kino, or New German Cinema, Wim Wenders is internationally its best known and most successful active member today. In a career spanning almost four decades, he has made eleven short films, seventeen feature films, seven documentaries, two television films, several music videos, and numerous advertising films for television, many of which have been awarded prizes at international film-festivals. His work as a photographer has been exhibited on eight separate occasions in Europe, Asia and America, and he has published nine books. Paris, Texas

...The major formal and thematic influence on Paris, Texas that which came immediately before: Wenders’ experience of film-making in Hollywood with Hammett, and his reaction to this experience in The State of Things. In the latter film, Wenders had pushed himself into an extreme and decisive position, which he describes in the following terms: “In order to be able to visualise the free space in the middle [between the images], you need walls. After The State of Things I thought ‘Now or never!’ Either I learn from this film to reject its thesis about the impossibility of stories, or I have no real future as a film-maker. That’s why I tried to follow the script strictly in Paris, Texas:”

Paris, Texas addresses the conflict between image and narrative that had always been latent in Wenders’ filmic discourse, but that came to a decisive peak in The State of Things, both in its structure and its theme: what kind of storytelling is possible in film without threatening the integrity of the image, and its primary function of rendering the wold visible?

In The State of Things, Wenders found his theory that the space between the images in a film were enough to hold the film together to be flawed. Clearly in response to this dilemma, Paris, Texas, with a script written by the American actor/author Sam Shepard, exhibits one of the strongest narrative structures in any Wenders film, and recalls his experiments with stronger narrative structure in The American Friend and Hammett. Common to these three films is a clearly defined space in which the narrative unfolds. In the case of Paris, Texas this geographical space is triangular and incorporates western and southern territories of the US, from Houston and the Mexican border in the extreme south as far as Los Angeles in California on the West Coast. In contrast to Wenders’ earlier films, in particular the road movies, the narrative develops within this enclosed space rather than following a line, as is the case in Alice in the Cities, King of the Road and Wrong Movement. Paris, Texas relies as much on dramatic tension as The American Friend and Hammett, and culminates in a dramatic peak at the end of the film. Though the film is open at both ends, the dramatic culmination—-the apparently successful end of a search—-lends the film a feeling of closure. The narrative moves within a self-contained geographical area and, at the end of the film, returns to where it began, giving it a united, circular form. It exhibits none of the temps morts of The State of Things or the earlier road movies, is generally quicker-paced and provides a good sense of the passage of time.

One important consequence of the boundaries of the narrative in Paris, Texas being fixed within borders is that the narrative space is divided into three separate units of space, much as the seemingly endless temporal trajectories of the road movies are divisible into units or episodes of time. Paris, Texas is spatial film rather than a segment of time. This is partially responsible for the impression reflected in most critical writings on Paris, Texas that the film exhibits a more conventional narrative structure: emphasis is laid on each of the spaces—the desert of the beginning, Los Angeles in the middle and Houston at the end—where dramatic events relevant to the development of the narrative occur. In the road movies, such stations were less bases than they are in Paris, Texas, more places to be passed through and left. It is the divisions of the narrative space and the particular associations attached to each of the three spaces that make this structure particularly suitable for the theme of Paris, Texas, as the movement of the protagonists and the film between these spaces reflect Wenders’ thematic concern: the search for a kind of narrative, a frame that allows the presentation of the film’s images, without compromising their integrity.

The film begins in the desert of the American South-West. In the desert, vision is limited only by the sky itself: there are few landmarks and there is no language. The desert is, for these reasons a place where a story, which requires language and points of reference, is nigh on impossible: in a film that follows a solitary character, not only is there no vehicle for expression of the story, but its path would be aimless if there were. The unobstructed vision, and the lack of any recognisable landmarks in the desert sequence of the first half of Paris, Texas makes the desert the realm of the image.

The second narrative space, centred on Los Angeles and the Henderson family home, is marked out by a completely different set of characteristics. It begins when Travis stumbles into a settlement called Terra Lingua. As the name of the town suggests, this is also the point at which language enters the film, and at which the spectators receive the first verbally communicated narrative information: that Travis is dumb, and has a relative in Los Angeles. Travis is led away from the vacuum of the desert into the new environment by his brother, Walt, who is most strongly associated with this new milieu. The desert clinic and the inside of Walt’s car are the places where language resides. Walt moves in straight lines, is unwilling to depart form his course and would like to reach his destination as quickly as possible. From the moment of Travis’ arrival at Walt’s house in a Los Angeles suburb, almost all the narrative information until the end of the film is transmitted verbally. The more language begins to define the progress of the narrative, the stronger the presence of the narrative also becomes. At the same time, vision on the level of the film image becomes increasingly restricted the closer Walt and Travis come to Walt’s home.

A third narrative space consists of an amalgamation of Travis’ and Walt’s spaces in form, beginning the moment Travis and his son, Hunter, leave Los Angeles for Houston. The road to Houston begins beneath a freeway bridge where several roads meet, symbolising the blending of chaotic with resolute movement through this space, and the fact that a decision is made here that will decide the shape of the future for the protagonists. To get to Houston, Travis re--enters the desert with Hunter but stays on the road. Though the destination is certain—a drive-in bank—neither figure knows for sure whether they will also find the object of their search, Jane, Travis’ wife and Hunter’s mother. The combining of
his imagin...about how images just lead to new images. Travis had an image in story of Travis, a man who wants to work off his guilt by cinematic e...the love story of Travis and Jane to address the nature of the images is correct, he does not go far enough beyond the banality of although Kolditz's conclusion that make a state...subjects, are perverted in a way that separat...potential dangers involved when photographic images, or their...result of Travis' projection of an image of her in his mi...identity. Travis is then sent to Houston where, in a brothel representing the desert  and the inside of Travis’ car on the way to Houston leads to a camera use that reflects the contrasting spatial dimensions at play: several wide shots on the landscape, and close-ups inside the car, while medium shots are mostly used within hotel rooms and populated areas along the route. Houston is presented as ‘the opposite image to the desert in the beginning’ and is where the strongest narrative elements develop. Travis and Hunter stake out a bank in the hope of catching Jane as she comes to deposit money. This is immediately followed by a car-chase sequence and the tension of not knowing whether the pair are following the right car. Finally, we see Jane in the claustrophobic cubicle where she works. Vision is most limited here, and the camera continuously seeks new angles on the figures. Language flows freely both in Houston and at this dramatic moment from the point of view of the narrative in the film, which ends in a flood of words as Travis relates the story of his life together with Jane.

The development of the theme of Paris, Texas is thus reflected in the film’s structure: on the search for a formula, a narrative structure that admits a story, dialogue, and communication into the film while at the same time offering, even promoting the integrity of the filmic image. The film moves from a dead space, where narration is impossible, but where vision on the level of the image is unlimited, to inhabited or developed spaces, where the liberty of the image becomes increasingly restricted spatially, and where the fact of communication—the presence of language—promotes the act of narration in the film. …

Kolditz identifies as one of the themes of Paris, Texas the potential dangers involved when photographic images, or their subjects, are perverted in a way that separates the subject and its identity. Jane’s condition in Paris, Texas is presented as a direct result of Travis’ projection of an image of her in his mind that conformed more to his imaginary ideal than to the nature of the woman he was actually with, which Wenders uses thematically to make a statement about the abuse of images in general. Still, although Kolditz’s conclusion that Paris, Texas is a film about images is correct, he does not go far enough beyond the banality of the love story of Travis and Jane to address the nature of the cinematic exploration in progress: “If Paris, Texas really is the story of Travis, a man who wants to work off his guilt by reconstructing what he had destroyed, then the film tells the story about how images just lead to new images. Travis had an image in his imagination that blinded him to reality, which he then destroyed. Now, four years later, he has a new—diametric—image in mind...He unites Hunter with Jane, not because she’s his biological mother, but because he wants to get rid of the image of his guilt, which he finally recognizes at the end of the film.”

Paris, Texas is thus a film about images, about degraded images, and about the degraded images men can have of women. Images that are appropriated for advertising, or taken out of their original contexts for any reason at all, face the danger of losing their meaning or having it altered, of dissolving in a pastiche of degraded images without an undoubted identity of their own, and lose the spirit of identity that is latent within them. Precisely this happened to Jane in the background story to Paris, Texas (although it should be noted that the case of women is just the extreme of a general situation: Wenders is making a statement about any abuse of images).

Wenders’ character, Travis Henderson, representing as he does the average middle-class American male, is sent forth from the desert—an iconic, now dead and empty landscape that has come to symbolise the myth of Hollywood’s entertainment industry and, for Wenders, the death of the myth of Hollywood—into (apparent) civilisation. In Los Angeles, the font of the American image-making tradition, Travis’ brother, Walt, is a producer of advertising billboards that feature commercialised images of women. Wenders confronts his character with one of these, and Travis begins to understand something of the nature of his violence against Jane. Travis is then sent to Houston where, in a brothel representing the absolute in perversion of images, a kind of dark, underground purgatory where degraded images collect, he discovers Jane’s fate (Wenders chose Kinski for the part of Jane because he felt she was a capable actress who had come to represent a sort of nymphet figure through her roles in semi-pornographic and erotic movies over the years).

From the point of view of story in film, Wenders claims to have made a new discovery with Paris, Texas: “I learned that stories really do exist without us. They’re like a river, and the film is a boat. Before I had just explored the tributaries, the brackish waters. Then I ventured out into the middle of the river. That was Paris, Texas. Once one has completely surrendered to this flow, the flow of storytelling, one gets to the sea. I’ve been looking for this experience over and over again since then.”

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