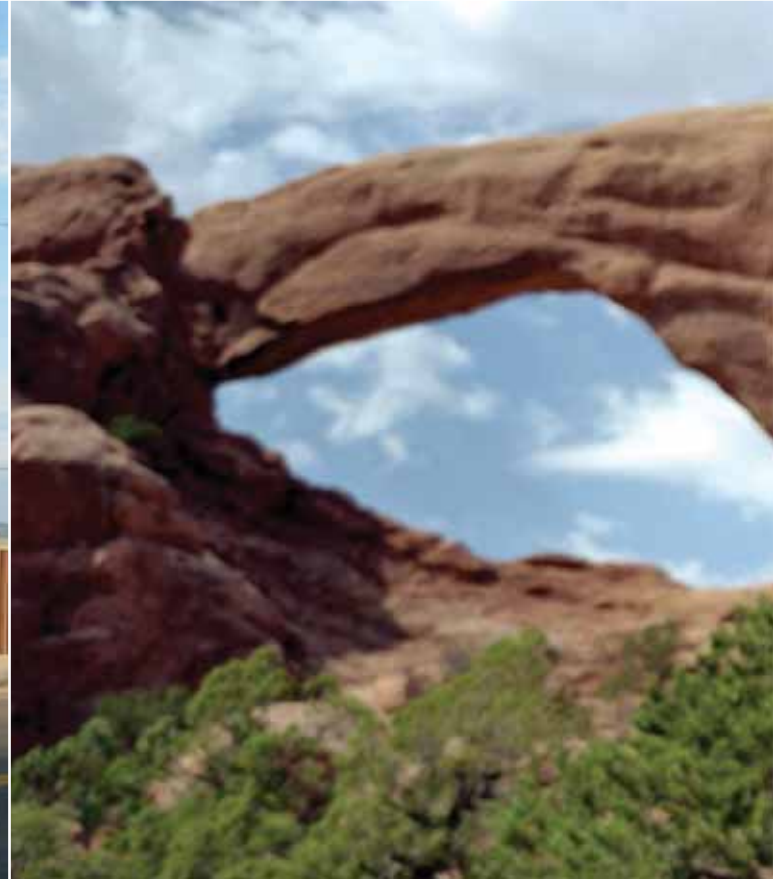




wim wenders





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foreword

Almost forty years on from his professional debut, Wim Wenders continues to find innovative new ways of using images as a means of evaluating and processing experience, and of understanding our place in a frequently alienating, but nonetheless fascinating, world. One of the key figures of the New German Cinema and subsequently one of the most distinctive voices in contemporary European filmmaking, any attempt to distil Wim's aesthetic, methodology and estimable influence into this short introduction is thankfully rendered unnecessary by the numerous essays, images (a good number of which have been generously supplied by the director himself), extracts and citations that follow.

In the process of creating this book, what emerged most clearly was the admiration, respect and awe Wenders inspires, not only amongst his peers, but throughout the wider film community. Though operating on a truly universal scale, our relationship to his films is often intensely personal, as we share in the failures, disappointments and occasional victories of his protagonists. Offering a moment's reflection on an instinctive and endlessly enthralling journey, this book both contemplates and celebrates the work of a visionary director.

Jason Wood and Ian Haydn Smith

introduction



One of the most exciting developments in film during the second half of the twentieth century was the emergence of what became known around the globe as the New German Cinema. A great many directors, writers, actors, producers and other creative personnel were involved in that remarkable phenomenon, but there is no denying that Wim Wenders, along with Rainer Werner Fassbinder and Werner Herzog, was one of the most distinctive, most influential and most creatively fruitful.

With films like *Alice in the Cities* and *In the Course of Time* (aka *Kings of the Road*) Wenders took the road movie into uncharted territory, exploring – with precision and poetry – not only America's cultural influence on Europe but a particularly rootless mindset of the masculine psyche. With crime movies like *The American Friend* and *Hammett* he inflected a quintessentially American genre with a European sensibility, providing ample suspense even while favouring mood and characterization over plot. As time passed, his films became ever more ambitious and diverse: *Paris, Texas*, *Wings of Desire*, the epic *Until the End of the World*, *Lisbon Story* and *The End of Violence* all offer evidence of a restless, experimental desire to keep moving on, even as the enormously successful documentary, *The Buena Vista Social Club* testified to an enduring interest in music that had made itself felt in Wenders' earliest work as a filmmaker.

Geoff Andrew, Head of Film Programme, BFI Southbank





wim wenders in interview



Jason Wood: Your work and work rate suggests that you are not someone who likes to look back. However, on the occasion of this retrospective what thoughts, memories and perceptions do you have regarding some of your past filmmaking endeavours?

Wim Wenders: There's a strange thing about looking back. Of course I dread the embarrassment that inevitably comes with it. There are always scenes and shots (or entire films) that I regret or that I should have done otherwise, or would have wanted to do otherwise, if the limitations (also my own) would have allowed me to.

And then there are scenes and shots (or entire films) that I know I could never do again. I realize I wouldn't have that in me anymore. That is a very troubling feeling.

I'm not a very 'cerebral' filmmaker; I work mainly from the guts. So when you see what once came out unconsciously, or without much reflection or at least without cautiousness, you start wondering who you were then and who you are now. And that concern I find pretty uncreative, sometimes plain scary. There's really nothing I fear more than to repeat myself. I try to avoid that as much as I consciously can. But going back in time and being confronted with my own work, I inevitably recognize just that: there are numerous subjects, themes, camera movements, framings, 'idiosyncrasies' and whatnot that re-occur and that go through my work sometimes like subterranean connections. And I must say, I'd rather not know this stuff. I'd rather keep working under the assumption that I do things from scratch. Retrospectives tend to thrash this wishful thinking.

JW: It's impossible to condense or distil your achievements but there is a sense that viewed collectively there are themes and concerns that recur: issues relating to communication; the road as a sense of both discovery and alienation; and the impact of the past. Do you see these as being subjects to which you are continually drawn, what continues to draw you to them and how has the way in which you have attempted to deal with these subjects changed?

WW: When I was young filmmaker and at the age of thirty had made six feature-length films, I noticed that many of my reviews, especially the English and American ones, summed up my work as dealing, basically, I quote: 'with Angst, America and Alienation'. I called these my 'triple-A reviews'. Undeniably, there was some truth in it. At least, I can say that in hindsight. Communication, the road, estrangement, and yes, the 'American colonialization of our subconscious' were (and are) big subjects of my work. But while these themes continue to show up in my work, the points of view have changed. For a long time, my films were strictly seen through the eyes of my male heroes. But over the years women have played a more and more important part, and their absence is no longer a subject, like in *Alice in the Cities*, *Kings of the Road* or other films. And, in very general terms, 'Love' has become an increasingly dominating subject. 'Places' also play a more important role, like Berlin, Tokyo, Lisbon or Palermo lately. Plus there is an increased interest on my behalf in reality, even in political terms, so I have made a number of documentaries over the last few years.

“ The German New wave took its British pop seriously, more so than English filmmakers ever did. Wenders dedicated his first feature to The Kinks. Fassbinder played ‘In My Room’ by the Walker Brothers in *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* and even Herzog used a dreamy bit of Cream in *Fata Morgana*. Wenders’ talent was for itinerary rather than narrative, for places rather than the stories put in them. Given nothing to do except create an extended sequence out of the road, he comes close to genius. *The Goalkeeper’s Fear of the Penalty* only discovers its proper pace and subject after leaving Vienna, with a long bus journey out of all proportion to the level of incident shown. This is done with a haunting authenticity lacking in more scripted moments. The best part of the film is ‘The Lion Sleeps Tonight’ heard on a tinny transistor radio, a sequence where all the disparate strands come briefly together into a believable whole: the goalie’s past, the half-hearted murder he is running away from, and his failure of imagination all make perfect sense for a moment. The sequence catches what Wenders is best at – capturing the banality of life on the road, with its lack of dramatics and the tedium of its rituals, in a way that is magical because it gives time and space to those extended moments other films pass over. ”

CHRIS PETIT





JW: From the moment you dedicated *Summer in the City* to The Kinks you have been inextricably linked to music and perhaps, particularly rock and roll. Do you continue to draw inspiration from the art form and could you say something about the function music has played in your work?

WW: My daily life is very much driven by music. I wake up with music, I write with music, I drive around with music. I have a great stereo system at home, and I love my iPod with my little 'HeadRoom' headphone amplifier on the road. I would not get on a plane without my music, for instance. I listen to a lot of new stuff every day, and I also cherish my 'old heroes'. So, in the development of a new film, either in the writing process or in the travelling and locations scouting period, there is always some music that imposes itself and that is of particular importance in my life at that time. And then, when I shoot the film or when I sit in the editing room, that music tends to impose itself, and I try to work it in, as a tribute or an homage to the role it played in conceiving that film. Rock 'n' Roll and Blues have continued to be constant companions, but I also listen a lot to African music these days, to (older) Jazz and to Bach.

JW: You've also demonstrated a remarkable responsibility in regard to fostering and encouraging emerging film talent. Perhaps the most notable incident is your dedication of prize

money to Atom Egoyan many years ago. Do you feel that it is a responsibility of more established filmmakers to do this in order that cinema continues to evolve and accommodate new blood?

WW: When I got interested in filmmaking, and finally totally immersed in it, the part that some of my 'father figures' played for me was invaluable. The advice I got from Sam Fuller, the friendship with Nicholas Ray, the telegram by François Truffaut, the inspiration by Yasujiro Ozu or Andrej Tarkovsky, the learning in the films by John Ford or Anthony Mann, the contact with John Cassavetes, the call to come to America by Francis Coppola, you name it, THAT helped me more than any film school.

So I have always felt I had been given so much, I had received so much not only from individuals but also from the history of cinema, that it was only natural, or totally evident, that I would have to give something back. I am teaching for the last 15 years or so, on a regular basis, and I was lucky that among my assistants and collaborators there were such marvellous talents like Claire Dennis or Allison Anders, and that I was able to help (at the time) young filmmakers like Jim Jarmusch, Chris Petit or Lucian Segura, among others, and recently Holger Ernst or Robinson Savary.

JW: You have entered another extremely creative and prolific period. What challenges still await you and in the years since you

first set out what have been the most significant developments (technical or otherwise) in filmmaking?

WW: When I did my first films, you had the choice between 16mm and 35mm, and between colour (expensive then) and black and white. Those were the only choices. When we mixed *The Goalkeeper's Anxiety at the Penalty Kick* the process lasted one day. We had all the sounds of the film on four tracks and we mixed it straight to optical!

Today you have an almost infinite amount of choices of how you want to approach a film. You can turn big ideas into small budget movies, and you can let your subject and your desire for freedom and independence tell you if you want to shoot on film (with an enlarged range of formats) or on digital, also with a whole variety of approaches. And sound is yet another story. The greatest progress I witnessed was certainly the boost that soundscaping got from being strictly mono (and optical, or magnetic) to digital stereo sound.

When I started out as a young director, limitations were rigorous. Your budget basically dictated what you were able to achieve, or to say. Today, thanks to digital technology, you can say a lot with very little means (unfortunately, the reverse is also true: if you have big means you're not allowed to say much anymore), and you can be so much more spontaneous and flexible. I am much more 'independent' today than I was able to be when I set out.

So I feel it is a great privilege to work today, in the digital age, just as much as it has been a privilege to start at a time when you could still be in touch with the very beginning of filmmaking. I have worked with actors who had begun their career in silent movies! And I was able to still work with a cameraman (Henri Alekan) who had been an assistant to a pioneer like Eugen Schüfftan!

October, 2007.





“ Wim Wenders is a master of the road, a voyeur of the perils and seductions of traveling outside of time, into time, surrounded by time, and yet, when all is said and done, transcendent of time. A journey which involves a strategy of inhabiting and seducing the present; an investigation of the infinite and perilous complexities of ‘self’, all of which, after all, is an illusion, but what an illusion! An illusion of smoke and mirrors that keeps us going, always moving on and off the road. And beyond. ”

RUDY WURLITZER





Vendo

walter salles on wenders

The generation of filmmakers that preceded my own was mostly influenced by the French Nouvelle Vague, Italian Neo-Realism and Brazilian Cinema Novo. Those cinematic movements and the films that blossomed under their wings were of fundamental importance to me, but they were not the ones that brought me to cinema. They were like sacred objects. I worshiped those films to the point that I never felt I would be able to do something even vaguely similar one day. They had, for me, an almost mythological quality.

And then, I saw Wim Wenders' *Alice in the Cities*.

It was one of the films that altered my perception of cinema. Watching *Alice in the Cities*, I felt a kind of emotion I had never experienced before. Wenders' alter ego, Philip Winter, pertained to a world to which I could directly relate. His identity crisis reflected the malaise of the times we were living in. He invited us to drift with him into uncharted territory. He transported us to a land of incertitude. I shared his journey and was transformed by it. Cinema had rarely seemed so raw and so lyrical.

There was something in the narrative that also felt completely new: the film wasn't constructed around the principle of cause and effect. It seemed that life and events were captured on camera as they unfolded in reality. A breath of fresh air and freedom transpired in every frame. Moments of silence acquired a different meaning. For the first time, I understood that incompleteness and imperfection were necessary for true cinematic life to exist.

The second Wenders film I saw was *Kings of the Road*. I was hit by the same sense of wonder that I had experienced watching *Alice in the Cities*. I actually prefer the film's title in German and in French, *Im Lauf der Zeit/Au fil du temps*. Time is the essence that only a few, rare filmmakers manage to grasp and translate to the screen. In most of his films, Wenders captures time in an effortless, unpremeditated manner. He blends this talent with an uncanny capacity to unveil a geography that, up to that moment, was either partially or totally unknown to you.

As in *Alice in the Cities*, two characters in displacement are at the core of *Im Lauf der Zeit*. Bruno Winter, a projectionist, is played by the same Rüdiger Vogler who gave life to Philip Winter in *Alice*, while Robert Lander is played by Hanns Zischler. Cinema and post-war Germany are the other characters in this road-movie that ends at the Weisse Wand, the White Screen Cinema. As the film unfolds, one can feel an homage emerging to a missing father, Fritz Lang, as much as one can sense the longing for a kind of cinema that is dying. But, paradoxically, *Im Lauf der Zeit* talks about the death of cinema at the same time that it reinvigorates it. Made without a traditional script, it is the embodiment of a new form of cinema based on constant invention – and rigor.

Every single frame of the film seems to contain the film as a whole. The personal history of the characters blends with the history of cinema, as well as with the country's recent past.

- 'I want to know who you are', asks Bruno.
- 'I am my own history', Robert replies.

He is, indeed. Remains of the Second World War grant a strange, melancholic quality to the characters' pilgrimage. When the two men visit a bunker full of graffiti left there by G.I.s, a premonitory sentence can be heard: 'The Americans colonized our subconscious.' No underlining, no preaching. As a spectator, one is invited to fill in the blank spaces, the spaces in between. It is as if the filmmaker himself didn't have all the answers, as if cinema could be a process of discovery. You were called to join it and be part of a unique process of unveiling.

Alice in the Cities and *Kings of the Road* ignited the desire to discover the films made by the Filmverlag der Autoren, a collective that would redefine the German cinema of the 1970s. This is when I saw Wenders' first film, *Summer in the City*, his first collaboration with cinematographer Robby Müller, as well as his powerful adaptation of Peter Handke's *The Goalkeeper's Fear of the Penalty*.

Next came another film I am not ready to forget: *The American Friend*, an adaptation of a Patricia Highsmith novel, as well as the object of a new collaboration with Handke. More than a study about the violence that we carry within, *The American Friend* can be seen as a film about reality and unreality, the original and the copy. It is no accident that Nicholas Ray, Sam Fuller and Dennis Hopper are actors in the film, as *The American Friend* is also a film about a film genre, the Film Noir of the 1950s and 1960s. What makes the film unique is precisely its capacity to transcend the genre it pays tribute to. Bruno Ganz is mesmerizing as Jonathan Zimmermann, the framer whose life is on a string. Very few actors have granted

