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978-0-521-38976-1 - The Films of Wim Wenders: Cinema as Vision and Desire

Robert Phillip Kolker and Peter Beicken

Excerpt

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I

The Boy with the Movie Camera

Biography, Historical Background, Student Films

Fathers and Children

“The art of things, as well as persons, becoming identical with themselves” is how Wim Wenders has defined cinema, his chosen art.¹ For Wenders as filmmaker the mission of the cinema is to create a self and discover an identity. Asked once to present his *raison d'être* of filmmaking, Wenders gave a genealogy of his artistic career beginning with his initiation into cinema as a young boy. At age six, his parents gave him an old hand-cranked projector. The desire for the imaginary, for a comfortable, internal world of images, made him seek the pleasures of Chaplin, Keaton, Mack Sennett, and their likes, greats of the movies that his father had favored before him. At Christmastime, the only thing young Wenders asked for was a new Walt Disney or Laurel and Hardy film.² When he was about eight, he went to a movie house for the first time, accompanied by his grandmother, to see a Laurel and Hardy film. Instead of the hoped-for pleasure, the visit turned into a nightmare. No Laurel and Hardy, but rather a cheap horror film, *Die Nacht der Reitenden Leichen* (*The Night of the Riding Corpses*), which shocked the young boy and traumatized his relationship with the cinema for years.³

At age twelve, Wenders was given an 8mm film camera by his father to complement the projector. Seizing the opportunity to renew his relationship with the cinema, young Wenders positioned himself at the window of the family's home, fixing the camera on the street below. Filming the goings-on at an intersection, he was questioned by his father: “What are you doing there with your camera?” The original German words, “Was machst du denn da mit deiner Kamera?” sound inquisitive, and rather than expressing

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interest or curiosity, they seemed to express a sense of impatience and lack of understanding on the part of the father. They marked a certain parental disapproval, and Wenders answered promptly: “I’m filming the street, can’t you see.” (“Ich filme die Straße, das siehst du doch.”)⁴ Wim’s answer revealed some annoyance at the paternal impatience, and the response he received in turn – “And what for?” (“Und wozu?”) – was met only by silence. Wenders did not have an easy answer, nor could he give any reason for what he was doing. Unable or unwilling to justify his filming, the boy with the movie camera continued to do what seemed to him most natural and beyond questioning: fulfilling a desire to film.

This episode seems insignificant at first sight; but it is revealing that Wenders, thinking about his childhood, needs to locate his aesthetic origins in conflict with the father, whom he recalls both as a nurturing parent (he gives his son the initial filmmaking apparatus) and an inquisitive but disinterested authority who needs appeasing. When he was first asked, “Pourquoi filmez-vous?” by *Libération* in 1987, his initial response was to request a “less stupid question” and not have to respond again to the voice of the past.⁵ But then he goes on to make a confession and elaborate rather extensively on this crucial childhood episode. Recalling his childhood experiences, Wenders eschews any theoretical or political response to a very broad and open inquiry. He simply maintains that his present occupation had originated in childhood, as if it were the result of uncontrolled inspiration rather than a chosen act. Filming, then, was a mission beyond explanation and justification, a natural desire, an existential imperative, a gift and challenge from the patriarch.

In this same 1987 interview, Wenders goes a bit further with his memories of cinema making. He talks of his attraction to film as a mixture of instinct and desire, but also associates his childhood fancy with the camera with his later work. This becomes clear when he refers to his actual start as a filmmaker. He recalls somewhat self-consciously that “ten or twelve years later,” when he made his first short film (*Schauplätze*, 1966–7) in 16mm, he repeated exactly the exercise he had done as a boy. He trained the camera from the sixth-floor window of a building onto the street below, filming an “intersection without moving the camera until the reel was empty.” Wenders recounts: “The idea to stop the running camera before that did not occur to me. From hindsight, I can imagine that [stopping the camera] must have appeared to me to be sacrilegious.”⁶

By linking the childhood experience to his professional beginnings, Wenders establishes a continuity of desire and vision that reveals a propensity to mythologize or mystify the origins of his craft. He finds and wants no

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The quintessential Wenders view: filming the street, from *Silver City* (1968–9).

explanations for his childhood love of movies and refuses to analyze his art as an adult. “I do not have a mind for theories,” he maintains.⁷ The little theorizing that he does indulge in grounds his cinematographic inclination in a tradition that legitimizes and ennobles his desire with a metaphysical aura, putting forth basic ideas about filmmaking as a passive act that records the ongoing reality of the world, while refusing to elaborate those theories with analytic insight. A quasi-mystical bent is noticeable when he refers to the Hungarian film critic and theorist Béla Balázs, who, he says, extols the “possibility (and the responsibility) of the cinema ‘to show things as they are.’” In fact, what he ascribes to Balázs is essentially the position Siegfried Kracauer, a member of the Frankfurt School, whose writings on film and culture are becoming increasingly more influential. Wenders invokes the cinema’s duty to “preserve the existence of things” (“*die Existenz der Dinge retten*”), a statement that recalls the subtitle of Kracauer’s *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*. Wenders was familiar with this book at the time he began to film in earnest during his student years.⁸ Kracauer, along with the French critic André Bazin, held that cinema’s task was to reveal the “thereness,” the ongoingness of the world, to act as an instrument that clarified perception, placing the filmmaker and film viewer in direct touch with reality, with space and duration, in ways no other art could manage.

Concern for the redemptive mission of cinema – which Wenders found confirmed in Kracauer – had obviously been present when, as a boy, he intuitively attempted to preserve the constant flux of appearances and phe-

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nomena outside his window. He confirms this desire to redeem the transient state of things later, when he refers to a statement by the painter Paul Cézanne, who lamented the “disappearance of things. One needs to be alert if one wants to see anything.”⁹ Desiring the camera to engage in a great rescue mission, arresting, recording, and memorializing what otherwise continually vanishes in the visible realm, Wenders understands that filming is a “heroic act” directed at the preservation of a phenomenon and its underlying reality. The camera records what can be viewed later, time and again. In fact, it is a “weapon,” he says (recalling a phrase from left-wing manifestos of the twenties) “against the misery of things, namely against their disappearance.”¹⁰ The boy with the camera intuitively pursued this desire to perceive, contemplate, and record a world that is in a state of constant permutation. Following a basic need to understand the act of perception and to orient himself in the visible, the child indulged in an activity both natural and necessary. Absent from this sensory pleasure principle were the processes and conditions of adult perception and reasoning: intentionality, explanation, and interpretation. Only rarely, out of intellectual need or the pressure of an interviewer, does Wenders attempt to articulate and legitimize his aesthetic premises. But when he does, his explanations take something of a romantic turn, employing the myth of the artist as redeemer of the transient world, despite his oblique reference to an old twenties left-wing slogan about art as weapon in the class struggle.

The filmmaker as redeemer: this was, in 1987, a form of self-legitimation by a star of international cinema. At work on his film about angels, *Wings of Desire*, Wenders attempted to find a hallowed niche for his filmic mission by transforming the politics of personal desire into the metaphysics of art. From his earliest work on, Wenders has presented himself as the unquestionable *vates*, as the seer beyond reason and reproach. At once self-effacing and self-promoting, this attitude has a tendency to imbue his ideas about cinema – and occasionally his films themselves – with stylish prophesies, with an aura of precarious purity and vulnerable ethics. His aesthetic is an intriguing mix of melancholy and imagination, of intuitive vision and self-conscious mission. Ultimately, he appears to be on an endless, quasi-mystical search for the appeasing and accepting father – his real father, who nurtured his desire to film while putting his son’s filmmaking practice into question (his father, whom he declared a fascist even while affirming his love for him) – and a search, finally, for the accepting and guiding fathers of world cinema.¹¹ The wish to please the father imago, this obsessive hold on an uncompleted, perhaps uncompletable oedipal process, seems to foster in Wenders’ work a

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reluctance or inhibition to get involved with reality, no matter how much he claims reality and truth to be his goal. In a way, Wenders is still the boy with the camera fixed on the street scene, where, only far away, at a safe distance, life goes on, social and sexual intercourse take place, and the seer remains a child voyeur in a state of oedipal suspension, hoping for redemption through the passive act of looking.

The films of Wim Wenders reveal a special link between the biographical and the cinematic. Time and again, he manifests a desire for authorship beyond the established notions of auteurism. His work goes beyond the subjectivity, the stylistic and thematic coherence, that one usually looks for in the work of a strong auteur. These are all present, but so is something else. His subjectivity tends to reveal itself in a continual quest for cinematic identity. This search is implanted in his works in a variety of ways. The quest for cinematic patrimony is one. “Personal appearance” – his stepping into the frame at strategic moments in the narrative – is another. There is also his insistence on intuitiveness and the self-evident, that what appears or happens in his films is right because he understood it as right at the moment of creation. One indication of this is given in Wenders’ statement to Jan Dawson about one of his earliest films, the short *Alabama*:

When I was asked by some critics at a festival press conference what the film was all about, I said, “It’s about the song ‘All Along the Watchtower,’ and the film is about what happens and what changes depending on whether the song is sung by Bob Dylan or by Jimi Hendrix.” Well, both versions of the song appear in the film, and everybody thought I was pretty arrogant to explain the story this way. But the film really is about the difference between the Dylan version of “All Along the Watchtower,” and the Jimi Hendrix version. One is at the beginning and one is at the end.¹²

Asked to explain what the press wanted to understand as the “story” of the film, Wenders retreated to his “unquestionable” personal position, knowing very well that *Alabama* was not an ordinary narrative: “It’s a story and it’s not a story.”¹³ His remarks provoked indignation, they introduced a common theme of many of his films – the struggle to tell stories and understand what telling a story entails – and they confirmed Wenders’ insistence that his films were personal beyond the realm of analytic discourse. This insistence is

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not uncommon; many artists claim that they cannot provide intellectual analysis of their own work. However, Wenders apparently wanted to make it even more difficult for the critics to approach his early work (such as *Alabama*), by insisting upon an artistic self-expression that denies translation into ordinary understanding. As his work matured and received greater recognition, he relaxed and became more interested in reaching a larger, responsive audience. This required a somewhat less confrontational stance; yet Wenders maintained his pose of romantic seer (perhaps in a less preposterous way than his colleague, Werner Herzog) and still attempts to authenticate his work with an authorship that seeks a uniquely personal expression, while remaining highly communicative and intuitive.

Cinematic identity and personal identity are inseparable for Wenders. (Frederic Jameson states that “personal identity is itself the effect of a certain temporal unification of past and future with one’s present; and, second, that such active temporal unification is itself a function of language,” in this instance the language of cinema.)¹⁴ Much of what Wenders has revealed about his childhood, his years of growing up, and his search for a personally satisfying vocation indicates the extent to which his development as a filmmaker is entwined with his search for self. In order to understand this more completely, we must backtrack and look at the major developments of this biography in order to understand what led to Wenders’ desire to pursue filmmaking as a personal quest. At first, little in his upbringing pointed to this career, although we recall that his father, Heinrich, a physician and movie lover, initiated his son into the use of both the movie projector and film camera. Heinrich Wenders was a fairly successful and well-to-do physician, and his career led him to assume the directorship of the St. Joseph Clinic in Oberhausen, the industrial town in the Ruhr district known for its festival of short films and – later, in 1962 – the Oberhausen Manifesto, the signal document that ushered in the *Junger Deutscher Film* (Young German Film) movement and, subsequently, the New German Cinema.

On August 14, 1945, Wenders was born in Düsseldorf (an old, culturally sophisticated town, the birthplace of the poet Heinrich Heine), but his parents soon moved to nearby Benrath. Then, in 1949, they moved again, to the small provincial town of Koblenz. Wenders is aware of the places of his childhood and observes that he spent most of his life away from real urban life, living on the outskirts of the dark cities. He explores these places in *Alice in the Cities* (1974) and remarks that the distance from urban culture had a profound impact on him as a young boy, when at the age of ten or twelve (approximately at the time he got involved in his 8mm filmmaking and home movie projection) he sought out the “only cultural institutions” the outskirts

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The jukebox: Wenders' homage to rock and roll, from *Alice in the Cities* (1974).

had to offer: ice cafés and jukeboxes.¹⁵ His pleasures were not unlike those of an American teenager, listening – against parental wishes – to Chuck Berry, Elvis Presley, Little Richard, Roy Orbison, and Gene Vincent on broadcasts of the American Forces Network. At the age of fifteen, he became interested in the detective novels of Raymond Chandler (which climaxed two decades later when he made his own American detective film, *Hammett*). Growing up in a society that maintained itself in a state of cultural and historical amnesia, obsessively ignoring its terrifying past, Wenders went about creating a culture for himself out of the bits and pieces of Americana that came his way. Later, he recognized that this re-creation of America in the suburbs of German cities altered his sense of being forever, for these elements make up the very fabric of sounds, images, and themes that will come to constitute his own coherent semiotics, the resonant images that recur throughout his films.

While Wenders pursued his filmmaking hobby and even attended the Oberhausen short film festival a few years after its inception, he did not immediately consider the pleasures of his pastime as the beginning of a professional career. His family were practicing Catholics and attended

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church services regularly, forcing Wim to attend mass often. However, he would skip services in favor of playing pinball machines in the Casino next to the church whenever possible. Despite his reluctance to attend Mass, one of his early vocational considerations focused on the priesthood. His interest waned, however, and had vanished by the time he was sixteen. Later, he described in blunt terms what he found so disaffecting about church religion: “Catholicism is much more a way of thinking than a question of believing in something. And as a way of thinking, it has a lot to do with capitalism and oppression.”¹⁶ His recollection and critique of Catholicism is redolent of the late sixties, when Wenders came of intellectual age within the student movement and its radical politics. He rarely shows interest in such openly political discourse, but his opposition to the church clearly indicates that his contemplation of cinema as a redemptive act was arrived at by means other than institutional religion.

Wenders worked through other interests before settling upon his true calling. Influenced by his family, who for centuries had produced doctors and pharmacists, he now followed the family tradition and decided to study medicine at the universities of Munich and Freiburg after completing his secondary school education in Oberhausen in 1963. He did this for two years, while also pursuing an interest in philosophy. However, finding the university too authoritarian, he became disaffected. He found working in a hospital, where he took a job as an orderly for a year, a depressing ordeal. His experiences did not coincide with his ideas of “what medicine was all about.”¹⁷ The prospect of many more years in an oppressive environment took him away from the hospital and to Düsseldorf for a fourth and final semester. His adolescent years seem to have been a process of first moving toward and then reacting against his family’s tradition; they also seem to be a period in which the choice between vocational fantasies and the discovery of their unpleasant realities led to his fleeing from both.

Once he gave up medicine, Wenders pursued an interest that was closer to his heart. Enjoying landscapes and having tried his hand at painting, he decided to go to Paris and enroll at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. Ever the naïf, he discovered that life drawing was a prerequisite for study and that he didn’t like it. Without any previous experience in this “ridiculous” exercise that made no sense to him, Wenders followed the advice of an acquaintance and studied with Johnny Friedländer, a printmaker who appeared more congenial because of his orientation to abstract art and liberal attitude toward instruction. For six enjoyable months Wenders spent the mornings in the studio. This left him free afternoons to visit the Paris Cinémathèque, where he – like the filmmakers of the French New Wave before him – indulged

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himself in viewing as many films as possible, as many as four a day.¹⁸ It was here that he absorbed the vast repertoire of world cinema. A decade later, in gratitude for this wealth of cinema that quite literally transformed his personality, Wenders dedicated his film *The American Friend* (1977) to Henri Langlois, founder and director of the Cinémathèque.

At the Cinémathèque, Wenders finally overcame the childhood trauma that had marred his first encounter with the movies when the horror film was shown instead of Laurel and Hardy. Now he came back to the cinema and rediscovered not only his old pleasure, but its transforming and redeeming power. He was infatuated, carried away. The aspiration to find self-expression in painting gave way to the desire to study at the Parisian film school IDHEC (L'Institut des hautes études cinématographiques). However, as no place was available to him, he applied to the newly founded Munich Hochschule für Fernsehen und Film, which had been inaugurated with funds from the Film Subsidies Bill of 1967. Whereas Rainer Werner Fassbinder, later one of the leading figures of New German Cinema, did not pass the entry examination, Wenders became a member of the institution's first class and, subsequently, its most famous graduate. From the start, because of the newness of the organization and an unstructured curriculum, Wenders, with his dislike for restrictive educational systems, enjoyed plenty of leeway to do things the way he saw fit and at his own speed. Being ambitious and prolific, he engaged in making more films than were required for the diploma, using his own financial means in the process.

A love of cinema had merged with the obsessions with American popular culture, especially rock and roll. Two of the most powerful cultural forces of the sixties revealed to the young German a means of expression and a release of the imagination. He listened to music incessantly and viewed as many films as possible at Langlois' Cinémathèque. He idolized American rock and American film. He wrote about both and, when he began filming, included the music in the films.

The Desiring Gaze

The concept of seeing is central to the understanding of Wenders' dynamics as an apprentice filmmaker. His childhood openness to sensory stimuli was driven by a desire to take in the world visually. He exuberantly exercised this sense of perception in his contemplation of landscapes and cityscapes. And because he was intuitively attracted to the visual, Wenders found in film a medium whose very structure was perceptual and that allowed him to capture and preserve the fleeting and momentary appearance of things. He

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The desiring gaze: Wilhelm confesses a “kind of erotic insight” to Thérèse, from *Wrong Move* (1975).

responded powerfully to the psychology of cinematic poetics, which seemed to fulfill his desire to impress his subjectivity upon the fluctuating world of physical reality. The desiring gaze quietly views and contemplates things as they appear and disappear; it constitutes in the eye of the beholder a world fleetingly present to the amazed senses; it moves outward to inscribe its amazement upon that world. The persistence with which Wenders pleads for a truly contemplative perception is remarkable in its intensity. When Wenders, as the boy with the movie camera, directed the motionless camera at the street, he trained his desiring gaze on the appealing motion and traffic that carried him away and focused his adolescent anxieties. The gaze did not merely give him sight and insight, it grounded his emotions and made them authentic.

The eros of seeing is alluded to in *Wrong Move* (1975). Wilhelm, the central character, moves up the winding serpentine road on the mountain over the Rhine and discusses with Thérèse his vision of the world and his concept of writing. Challenged by her to become more observant of his surroundings, he acknowledges that he does not always take notice of things. However, he believes that in counterdistinction to the normal powers of observation, he is specially gifted with an “erotic insight” (“eine Art erotischer Blick”), which makes him “notice something and get a feeling for it” (“Ich seh dann aber nicht nur, sondern krieg gleichzeitig auch ein Gefühl