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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

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The Films of Wim Wenders traces the development of one of the most well known directors of the New German Cinema, which flourished in the seventies and early eighties. Examining Wenders' career from his early film-school productions through his mature works of the seventies, this book also analyzes his more recent films, as well as the themes and preoccupations that unite his oeuvre. As the authors note, Wenders' works have been profoundly influenced by American films, especially the "road movie" genre. They often feature characters who are always on the move in an attempt to capture a glimpse of their identity and place in the world. They also represent a generation of postwar Germans seeking to redeem themselves and the history of their country by turning to American popular culture, particularly its music and movies. In such films as *The Goalie's Anxiety at the Penalty Kick*, *Alice in the Cities*, *Kings of the Road*, and *The American Friend*, Wenders offers an articulate cinematic vision of the emotional landscape of postwar Germany. In his most recent films, such as *Paris, Texas*, *Wings of Desire*, and *Until the End of the World*, Wenders continues his quest for certainty, for a domestic and romantic haven, in a style that transforms modernism into postmodern pastiche and in which such elements as melodrama, fantasy, and desire are fused.

Providing close analyses of Wenders' most important works, *The Films of Wim Wenders* serves as a useful introduction to a serious filmmaker for whom cinema represents nothing less than the redemption of the imagination and the reclamation of history.

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“Double-crossed for the very last time, but now I’m finally free!” Robert Lander in *Kings of the Road*.

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Preface

Tell stories looking ahead, that is what I want to do. . . . This was the great accomplishment of classical American cinema: that collective narrative came about because of the studio system, not just storytelling in one voice. The collective narrative was the one that created all those myths which, in fact, connected the cinema back to the great storytelling of the past. Something the European cinema never achieved nor the auteur film. None of us was able to come up with such storytelling. Our stories have been subjective. Now, we have to understand that this form of collective narrative can neither be imitated nor ever be recuperated. That fact should not be lamented over. That's done with forever. Nevertheless, there is an enormous need for stories: people still want to experience connectedness – certainly not only in *Star Wars*, but in stories in which they discover part of themselves. We must stop complaining about the loss of the resounding voice of the old cinema.

Wim Wenders, *Die Logik der Bilder*

This book tells the story of a filmmaker who attempted to knit together the broken weave of cinema and culture in the seventies and eighties. He began making films as a student in Munich, collaborated with the Austrian novelist Peter Handke on his first commercial feature, *The Goalie's Anxiety at the Penalty Kick*, and went on to develop a moving variation of the American road movie in such films as *Alice in the Cities* and *Kings of the Road*. With his homage to fifties film noir, *The American Friend*, he became (along with Rainer Werner Fassbinder and Werner Herzog) one of the best-known directors of the New German Cinema in the United States. He came to the attention of Francis Ford Coppola, who invited him to come to America to direct the ill-fated *Hammert*. Wenders' experience in Hollywood led him to make a stark and contemplative film, *The State of Things*, a despairing reflection on the possibilities and impossibilities of cinema today. In an attempt to come to terms with filmmaking and the continuing influence of

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American culture on his imagination, he returned to America and made another English-language film, *Paris, Texas*. He then returned to Germany to make his postmodernist meditation on romance in Berlin, *Wings of Desire*, and went back on the road for *Until the End of the World*.

Throughout his work, Wim Wenders connects history and personality, Hollywood storytelling and the practices of modernism, the anxieties of postwar Europe and the desire to be saved by cinema. His films constitute an ongoing narrative in which self and style, hope and despair, the highway and the road to heaven find a common intersection. The story is a rich one because Wenders' films – themselves deeply emotional and visually eloquent meditations – are part of large cultural and aesthetic forces, complex and often contradictory.

The goal of this study is to expose the weave in the alternately rich and confused pattern of Wenders' life and work. We concentrate on an analysis of the films, read them closely in order to see what makes them work, how they structure intentions and meanings, how cinema and self intertwine in stories about modernity and disrupted identities. However, Wenders' work is intensely personal, and his personality is the result of many currents; we have therefore started with a chapter that mixes the biographic with the aesthetic. A childhood in postwar Germany, an early attraction to the movie camera and American rock and roll music, and a late adolescence in film school during the political upheavals of the sixties help explain the often conflicted elements in the later films.

The second chapter serves as a link between the discussion of the school films that ends the first chapter and the close analyses of the films in those that follow. Here we account for Wenders' place in the great movement of the New German Cinema of the seventies and eighties and his love of fifties American film, particularly the work of John Ford and Nicholas Ray. We explore some of the images and themes that recur, almost obsessively, in film after film. In so doing, we lay a base for discussing in detail *Kings of the Road*, *The State of Things*, *Paris, Texas*, and *Wings of Desire*. The second chapter also gives us an opportunity to look at such films as *The American Friend* and *Wrong Move*. Other films, especially the documentaries *Tokyo-Ga* and *Lightning over Water*, are discussed in later chapters where they help clarify the fictional works. *Until the End of the World*, released late during the writing of the book, is referred to throughout. (One film, Wenders' adaptation of Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, seems so much outside the concerns of the body of his work and so much the product of other intervention – it was done on assignment for a Spanish–German coproduction – that it gets only brief reference.)

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With this structure in place, the reader can get a sense of the movement and interrelationship of Wenders' films, life, and cultural milieu, and then move to the analyses of specific works. And because all of the films (with the exception of the early school exercises) are available on videocassette, there is opportunity for the reader to look at the images as closely as they are examined here, enlarge upon our analyses, and even go beyond them.

Our hope, finally, is that this study will offer insight about the work of one important contemporary filmmaker, present some speculation about the relationships between history, subjectivity, and mass-mediated art, and provide some tools with which to examine the complex fabric of cinema.

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The stills from *Same Player Shoots Again*, *Silver City, Alabama: 2000 Light Years*, *Polizeifilm* (*Film about the Police*), *Summer in the City*, *Die Angst des Tormanns beim Elfmeter* (*The Goalie's Anxiety at the Penalty Kick*), *Alice in den Städten* (*Alice in the Cities*), *Falsche Bewegung* (*Wrong Move*), *Im Lauf der Zeit* (*Kings of the Road*), *Nick's Film* (*Lightning over Water*), and *Chambre 666* are copyrighted by Wim Wenders Produktion, Berlin.

The still from Nicholas Ray's *Lusty Men* is from the clip in *Nick's Film* (*Lightning over Water*), and the still from F. W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* is by courtesy of Filmmuseum München.

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Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Werner Herzog, and Wim Wenders in *Chambre 666*, Cannes, May 1982.