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# Wim Wenders:

## A Worldwide Homesickness

In *The Goalie's Anxiety at the Penalty Kick* the distracted protagonist, Joseph Bloch, learns the name of the woman he has spent the night with in the course of their morning breakfast. She spells it for him: "G-l-o-r-i-a." Later, after strangling her, he goes to a disco where "Gloria" is played on the jukebox. But this does not register. Phillip, the unhappy, down-and-out journalist of *Alice in the Cities*, finds himself saddled with Alice, a precocious nine-year-old German girl whose mother has abandoned her in New York. Returning to Germany, these two unfortunate strangers travel together trying to locate Alice's grandmother with nothing more to go on than a photograph of her house. In *Wrong Movement* a group of aimless young people come together by chance around Wilhelm (an updated Wilhelm Meister) as this would-be writer crosses Germany from the Baltic to the Alps. And in *Kings of the Road* two young men, a projector repairman who lives in a van and a researcher in child linguistics who has recently left his wife, meet by accident early one morning, and decide to spend the next few weeks together as they travel across the bleak

North German Plain. In fact the only thing that doesn't seem accidental, or even silly, in all of this, are the number of fleeting, chance encounters themselves, and it is precisely this sense of anxiety-ridden transience, of fragility, that has marked just about everything Wim Wenders has done.

Wenders's films seem almost frivolous, off-the-cuff, alongside those of his compatriot Fassbinder, whose enormous energy and prolific output, along with his furiously conscious embracing of melodrama and his more obvious political stands, have won him wider critical attention. Wenders has gone the other way, just about eliminating drama altogether (except in *Alice in the Cities*). And alongside Werner Herzog's major films, where the starting points themselves almost always seem to be weighty—a child is locked in a closet for 16 years; an off-shoot group from Pizarro's conquistadors explores the Amazon—Wender's subject matter seems slight: a few days in the life of a disgruntled goalie, a cross-country journey by two young men in a van. But Wenders shapes his trivial stories into something far more

*Dennis Hopper*  
in Wenders's  
new film,  
**THE AMERICAN**  
FRIEND.



affecting than what they're ostensibly about. His films are slow, yet not so slow in that purposeful, painful way that Antonioni's and Resnais's films are slow. There is none of that ponderous sense of deliberation that somehow makes you feel that here must be a rewarding experience. No, Wenders includes too many silly little jokes for that. *Alice in the Cities*, for example, opens with a shot of Philip, the German journalist, huddled beneath a boardwalk on an overcast day at a deserted Long Island beach, taking pictures with his Polaroid while singing, in English, "Under the boardwalk/on a blanket with my baby . . ." (As it turns out, he does later find himself on a blanket at a German beach with a nine-year-old girl.) It's a nice, low-keyed opening for the film, an opening we can imagine neither Fassbinder nor Herzog using. It's the sort of child-like silliness that perhaps Salinger might have brought to the screen had he become a film-maker rather than a writer. And so it seems almost accidental that what Wenders's films leave us with finally is simply a mood—a chilling and exacting mood, a sense of things, that somehow corresponds to what our own nerves tell us about the world.

Born in Düsseldorf in 1945, Wenders studied at the Munich Film Academy from 1967-1970 while working as a film critic for *Filmkritik* and *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. He made several experimental films, including the negligible *Summer in the City* in 1970, and then in 1971 he completed his first feature, *The Goalie's Anxiety at the Penalty Kick*, based on the Peter Handke novel,

and shot for the most part in the Austrian village where Handke wrote the novel. "I never wanted to show things that are shown in general," Wenders has said in an interview with Tony Rayns. "Even the first film I made at film school had the sense of a missing story. . . ."

*The Goalie's Anxiety at the Penalty Kick* is, ostensibly, a murder thriller. But the thriller, which we are prepared for early on, simply falls by the wayside. The film is really about anxiety, and through a remarkably simple series of static shots that make us identify with Bloch's passive point of view, alternations of long shots and claustrophobic close-ups that serve to quickly involve and detach us, and an unnerving amplified sound track that shows the influence of Bresson, Wenders manages to induce in us a state of anxiety similar to that of Bloch. The mechanical arm reaching out for the records inside an old jukebox becomes in close-up something menacing. And the sound track, which starts off normally enough, is gradually subjected to increasing distortion—the way a glass is placed upside-down over a beer bottle, the way the cutlery rattles, become positively jarring. All these things do not make it a pleasant or an easy film to watch. Shot in color and for the most part at dusk, the film has a number of strikingly eerie long shots of fluorescent lights of gasoline stations that seem to burn against the twilight skies, and of the rural farmlands where cars, headlights aglow, move almost mysteriously along the back country roads. Dusk, that time of day when light gets slowly choked off from the sky, becomes the visual translation of anxiety. It is this twilight region that Joseph Bloch, soccer goalie, inhabits.

After murdering a movie house cashier in her apartment in a scene that is shot in a deliberately understated way, Bloch carefully wipes his fingerprints off everything he has touched. But the camera notices two American coins, souvenirs of a recent soccer tour, that he missed under the newspapers on her kitchen table. A short while later on a bus when some American coins fall from his pocket, an elderly woman brings them to his attention. And when he pays for a hotel room, he accidentally gives the manager an American



◀ ALICE IN THE CITIES

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bill. All these mistakes make us sit up straighter, for in the conventions of the thriller they foretell his doom. But it is a doom that never arrives. The framework of the thriller, which was a skeleton for Godard to hang a different story on in *Breathless*, here dissolves into nothing. We are left not with a criminal but with a man quietly going mad. Yet he never goes entirely mad—it is as if his rage has reached such an intensely high level that it has freed him of having to cope with it any longer, and so affords him a curious relief.

And the things that happen to him in the course of several days, although obviously accidental enough, *seem* like a carefully pre-arranged series of outrages. He turns on the TV, only to watch himself bungle a goal in a replay of the afternoon game. His hotel room overlooks the main street, where the last bus passes at midnight. The cashier's apartment overlooks the airport, which the last mail plane takes off from after midnight. He gets beaten up . . . We see all these things in a series of quick, disconnected shots with fade-outs between scenes, with no more emphasis on a shot of Bloch getting beaten up than there is on a shot of an empty village square. The effect of cutting short those scenes that we expect to be significant, and arranging them without any particular emphasis, is to confuse our normal sense of emotional involvement while at the same time intensifying our perceptions of transition shots that would normally pass over us, so that an empty village square can actually set us on edge. Bloch's disconnection, his dread, at once understated and furiously alive, becomes our own.

Many of Wenders's films contain direct homages to John Ford who, with his feel for overwhelming skies and disquieting environments that isolate his characters, has clearly been an influence. But I think it is more properly Bresson, with his precise camera work, who has been a stronger influence. One of the few films I have seen that captures so painfully well this sense of things *always* going awry, always closing in on one, is Bresson's *Mouchette* (1967). Even Wenders's static camera, with the characters moving in and out of the frame, is reminiscent of Bresson.



THE GOALIE'S ANXIETY AT THE PENALTY KICK

In 1972, between the making of *The Goalie's Anxiety at the Penalty Kick* and *Alice in the Cities*, Wenders directed a loose screen adaptation of *The Scarlet Letter*. The wilderness, America, Hawthorne—they're all there. Yet this film, a minor work, perhaps because it does embrace subject matter so apparently foreign to Wenders, reveals itself as distinctly his. It is filled with strange silences between people, silences that become prolonged by startling close-ups of the characters who seem to be exploring their own frames just as certainly as they are learning to live in a strange, new country. The lucidly cool color compositions and the simple strains of mournful music further add to the sense of strangeness that seeps into us, to the feeling that none of the characters are quite in touch with one another, to that haunting atmosphere of foreigners lost in a strange country that really permeates all of Wenders's films. (Wenders has said he was attracted to this project by the idea of dealing with the first generation of Europeans in America.) It is a feeling perhaps more clearly defined in his next film, *Alice in the Cities*, where the strangers wander lost in their own country.

Shot in 1974 in a grainy black and white whose contrast is occasionally too high, *Alice in the Cities*, though not quite as successful as *The Goalie's Anxiety*, has more of a story than Wenders's other films and is possibly the most affecting. Phillip (played by Rudiger Vogeler), a depressed and nearly broke German journalist in New York, suddenly finds himself responsible for Alice, whose mother has abandoned her (Alice is stunningly, maturely, portrayed by Yella Rott-

lander, who also plays Pearl in *Scarlet Letter*). Together they return to Germany and try to locate Alice's relatives.

The first part of the film, shot in the New York area, includes a series of tritely handled sequences depicting homogenized, roadside USA, with television sets constantly playing old movies and bad commercials in hotel rooms that all resemble one another. In addition, all the vignettes with Americans—a used-car salesman, a black boy on a bicycle, an airline stewardess—seem stilted, as if Wenders was trying too hard to get these Americans to be . . . Americans. Back in Germany, the film becomes more sure of itself.

The heart of the film lies in the relationship that develops between Phillip and Alice as they search for her grandmother's house. In the course of their travels the two of them, both lonely and depressed at the start, grow closer. This film has been compared with Peter Bogdanovich's *Paper Moon*, to which it bears a superficial resemblance. But the relationship of Alice and Phillip actually bears a stronger resemblance, in a junior category sort of way, to the screen relationship of Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall, who, with their extremely self-conscious way of clowning, of talking in innuendos, established a bond of such innate understanding between themselves that their roles seemed to merge into something entirely new. And something of this same alchemy develops between Alice and Phillip in the course of their travels. There's a sense of play, of teasing, that grows between them that is simply lovely to watch—the way they perform calisthenics on a park green with a perfect physical sense of each other's movements, and yet at the same time parody the exercises themselves, or the way they mimic and double-mimic each other's expressions inside an instant-photo booth. The rapport, the sense of themselves that they develop, becomes their own saving grace in a world portrayed otherwise bleakly. Their vulnerabilities, their sensitivity to each other's vulnerabilities, become their strength. So it's not surprising that, late in the film, Alice gets upset when Phillip sleeps with a German woman he's just met and he in turn becomes defensive. It's really like a betrayal.

One theme that does not come off too well in the film revolves around the use of photographs.

Phillip constantly takes pictures with his Polaroid while talking about their meaning, and Alice carries a snapshot of her grandmother's house, which is the only clue to where she lives. But the whole grab bag of artistic themes and motifs—reality versus images, sterility and creativity, the nature of illusions—is summoned up in a way that feels forced, and so symbols become things that are more easily exploited than explored. This is not the case in the harsh and lovely *Kings of the Road* (*Im Lauf Der Zeit—In the Course of Time* or *As Time Goes By*, which is what it would have been called if rights problems had not intervened).

In the final scene of *Kings of the Road* (1976), Bruno, a traveling projector repairman, talks with an elderly woman who has closed down her movie house because the distributors no longer offer anything except films that exploit sex and violence. Wenders, who often displays a sly sense of humor, presents this episode quite seriously. Our reaction might have been, "We know all this," but there is such a bone-dry integrity to the scene that we find ourselves agreeing with, rather than scorning, the obvious intentions of the filmmaker.

*Kings of the Road* is a long, harsh film about the exhaustion and the abandonment of people, places, and the movie industry. Shot in a very technically sharp, hard-edged black and white, it looks bleak. The bleak precision of the photography in fact—a precision common to Wenders's films—serves as an icy counterpoint to the general vagueness of the film's actual story. It's a form to contain the generally formless lives of his characters. And because the photography is so coldly precise, those brief scenes such as the above mentioned one, which do carry some measure of emotional resonance, come across all the stronger.

Bruno (played by Rudiger Volgeler, the journalist of *Alice*) lives in a van and drives from town to town repairing projectors in run-down movie houses. Robert, recently separated from his wife, does research in child linguistics. The two meet one morning when Robert, in a suicide attempt so careless that it seems he doesn't even care whether he succeeds or not, drives his Volks-

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wagen at full speed into a river. Bruno, laughing, watches as Robert climbs out and plods to shore. The two men decide to travel together, and the film becomes the story of their trip through northern Germany, in the underpopulated and desolate region that runs parallel to the East German border.

It's a simple structure, a picaresque, episodic story based on the road—*Tom Jones*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *On the Road*, *Easy Rider*—and the road, along which life unwinds, is the classical metaphor for time. But within this simplest of frameworks Wenders works to strip the mechanics down still further. The film is teeming with vignettes alive with fruitful possibilities—possibilities that are always allowed to fade out. Bruno meets a woman who works at a local movie house outside a bumper-car ride, and we expect a prototypical amusement park scene like the one we got in *400 Blows*. (Even Bresson, the severest of filmmakers, couldn't resist showing us a bumper-car ride in its entirety in *Mouchette*.) But then, with the scene hardly under way, it's over; we see that our own expectations were artificial, founded upon previous films rather than any real experience. Later, Bruno spends an apparent sexless night with this same woman who at one point says to him, "I live with my daughter and I want it to stay that way." In the morning she cries a little. They separate. We don't really know what transpired, everything remains underneath, in undertones. Yet the spare details—even the *missing* details—seem enough for us to fill in all we need to know about the characters.

In this way each sequence of shots refuses to capitalize on the momentum of the preceding sequence, or even on itself. Accordingly, the film seems to be constantly starting out down new roads after making false detours. Episodes remain isolated moments, unlinked. Hence, *In the Course of Time* (a more truly ironic title than the American one, *Kings of the Road*) is a film about the discontinuity of time, and this is perfectly in keeping with that disturbing subcurrent of feeling that runs through most of Wenders's films, the feeling that the characters have no real future—disturbing precisely because it corresponds in some unspeakable way to our own feelings that the world itself seems to be winding



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down. Events, which are uniformly accidental, transient, inter-changeable, do not add up to anything recognizably sequential, which is what we expect a life to be. In this sense Wenders's characters are close cousins to the aimless young people in the films of Godard, who spoke of "the present, where the future is more present than the present."

Yet if this film consisted of merely discontinuous segments, it would leave little or no impression on us. This is not the case.

Slowly, imperceptibly, the film pulls together before our eyes and emerges as a coherent whole that progresses not along the usual dramatic story line but by cautiously circling around certain returned-to areas of experience, drawing closer and closer to the elusive heart of the matter. In an incident late in the film Bruno and Robert are woken up one night by a young man who sits atop a grain elevator, weeping as he drops rocks down the echoing metal shaft. In a stark shot looking out across the moonlit fields we see a smashed car alongside a tree, and we learn, though with typical indirection, that the man's wife killed herself. This brief scene possesses such an unnerving eloquence that we nearly forget that what was treated lightly at the beginning of the film—Robert's own inept suicide attempt—has here been returned to but on a more deeply felt level.

Moreover, almost all of these seemingly disconnected scenes are intended to bring about some aspect of the problems of communication. I don't want to labor the point, but it becomes obvious in a scene where Robert and his father, both of whom work in communications (journalism and

linguistics), try to talk about the father's marriage, but fail. Ideas and symbols are nothing without the feelings on which they rest, and *Alice in the Cities* is in part unsuccessful because too often the ideas and symbols remain just that. In *Kings of the Road* they are for the most part invested to the right degree with the feelings behind them, and consequently this movie, without demanding that we be fully conscious of all that's going on, affects us, has resonance.

(Incidentally, this refusal of Wenders to get excited about story telling, which he had just about formalized in *The Goalie's Anxiety*, is a trait he shares with the Austrian writer, Peter Handke, who also scripted Wenders's *Wrong Movement*. It's as if stories are a deception, a useless fiction; this notion perhaps gets more clearly articulated in Handke's brief book about his mother's life and suicide, *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams*, in which her own codified life is seen in terms of a missing story, or rather, a story which never took off: "No possibilities, it was all settled in advance.")

A strong sense of childhood, of a yearning for it, runs through this film, and it coincides with a symbolic yearning for the early days of cinema, a yearning that is evoked in a scene where Bruno, asked to repair the sound system in a children's theater, improvises with Robert a shadow show behind the screen, much to the delight of the children. The scene ends when their silent show ends. And throughout the film we see Robert watching children float paper boats down a stream, or removing a flattened coin from a railroad track. Wenders himself cannot give us a shot without a river or a railroad track in the distant background without a boat floating by or a train roaring past. This fascination with childhood is not simply sentimentality, but rather ties in with the sense that, in a world whose future looks dim, children seem to represent the only concrete link to that future. And at the same time they serve as a reminder of a certain grace, a certain simplicity of style, of playfulness, that has much to do with Wenders's aesthetic.

There are long silences in *Kings of the Road*, as one might well expect in a movie about people's difficulties in making themselves heard or understood. Visually this translates into an austerity of images, of long tracking shots on the road, of the

camera following the line of telephone wires as they trail off against the sky.

The camera work of Robbie Muller, who has been director of photography for all of Wenders's films, is just about faultless in this film—the framing is always ruthlessly clean and balanced, with shapes and contrasts played with a precisionist's eye. As in *The Goalie's Anxiety*, the camera work alone makes this film worth seeing. And certainly one would hope for no less from a film whose hero himself is obsessed with fixing projectors and making sure that films are projected properly. The focus is generally hard and sharp, the frame often desolate—long, empty, static shots of a bleak countryside, with its underpopulated border towns. Our interest, which in the hands of a lesser director, would surely wane, is held throughout by the sheer strength, grace, and wit of the camera work. *Kings of the Road* is one of those rare films—Godard has made several—where we are conscious throughout the actual viewing that almost any still would make a first-rate photograph. And the film also makes us conscious of frames themselves: of the double windshield of the parked van, which Bruno and Robert often lean against as they talk; of the skylight in the van through which we see the brilliant night clouds passing by overhead; of Bruno poking his head through the small window that opens into the cashier's box at the movie house, so that he's framed by all sorts of movie advertisements and posters; and in one lovely, stunningly executed shot we see Bruno and Robert in sharp close-up as they drive; the landscape, perfectly horizontal, whizzing by in the background; and on the curve of the rearview mirror the landscape, perfectly vertical, unwinding in a blur like a reel. All this isn't merely pretty; rather, it brings a certain metaphorical element of depth and precision to the film, like, say, the infinitely reflecting mirrors of *Lady from Shanghai*. It becomes Wenders's way of asserting control over a film whose characters, while not lacking depth, lack those situations, lack the world in which they might have grown and become more. The film's fragmentary mood is counterbalanced by the coherence of the film's visual style, and the film itself becomes a meditation on outward realities because the inner will not do. It's almost as if

there's a need for surfaces to absorb oneself in—we feel how fragile Wenders's own control is in the relentless way he manipulates and balances the images; the deceptively calm surfaces belie the inner tensions of the characters, and the screen itself becomes charged with the resultant tensions.

And if the world Wenders presents is one in which the proliferating modes of communication have failed us, leaving in their wake vast stretches of silence, then the visual correspondence would, as we might expect, discover itself in as economical a reduction of images as possible, in a spare use of panning, zooming, and tracking in and out, in camera work that, brilliant as it is, remains strangely unfancy. Bazin pointed out that with depth of focus Welles was able to resolve into a single shot an action whose meaning in the past required several shots to clarify. Now, with the development of faster film stock, more refined and expensive lenses, the temptation for many directors has been to use depth of focus to fill the frame up with all sorts of nonsense, as if some resonance might possibly result from the collision of all that clutter on the screen. In *Kings of the Road* Wenders has simply cleared the frame and allowed the screen to breathe. Even the interior shots of the van, which is filled with a bunk bed, movie projectors, an old jukebox and more, seem unusually free of clutter.

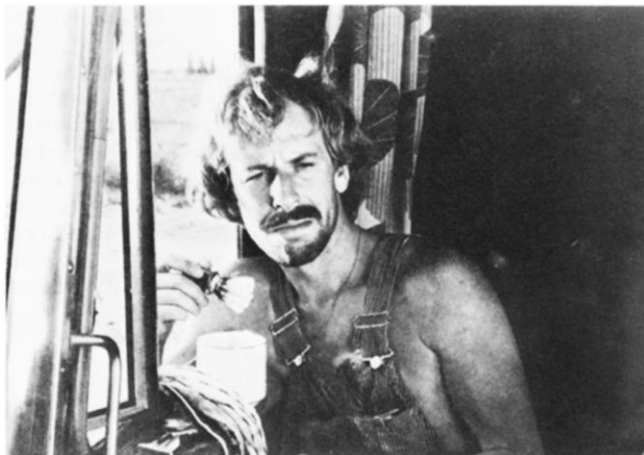
Finally though—and this is what makes Wenders seem so peculiarly modern—he has allowed a certain unspeakable, invisible, yet omnipresent sense of strangeness to seep into his films. What these films transmit—and *Kings of the Road* in particular—is the dread feeling that all roads now lead nowhere, and that the writing is already on the wall. Despite the deliberate eschewing of storytelling, the rejection of psychologies as methods of comprehension, the missing or confused motivations, the spare or alternately pleonastic use of dialogue, despite all these things—or because of them—I don't think Wenders is trying to be consciously uncommercial (although *Kings of the Road*, with its abandoned and pornographic movie houses, is, as a film, aware of the decay of commercial cinema) or that he's working out of some perverse vein of arrogance and whimsy. For despite the lack of all those things mentioned above, there remains too powerful a residue of feeling

in his movies, a feeling that resides in the absence as well as in the presence of things. The artificial discontinuities, the willful fragmentation often practiced by experimental film-makers (this holds for Wenders's early film, *Summer in the City*, which looks like a student film with its long, dull tracking shots of city streets and its drawn-out static shots of people reading newspapers and watching TV) usually prove irritating because the points scored almost always seem intellectual or aesthetic in the worst sense. I think Wenders succeeds for the most part in his films precisely because the lack of connections is real, deeply felt and worked out accordingly; because the characters, who all seem to live in the outlands of existence (which are becoming more and more interchangeable with Main Street) are groping for these lost connections.

Dislocation, both psychological and geographical, has always been one of Wenders's major concerns, and his most recent film, *The American Friend*, based on Patricia Highsmith's thriller *Ripley's Game*, integrates these concerns in ways that his earlier films only hinted at. The severity of the plotless *Kings of the Road*, with its spare, black-and-white photography, has given way to a visually opulent trilingual production that—at \$1.2 million—cost more than Wenders's previous five films put together. "What attracted me to the Highsmith novel was I thought I had room enough for my own stories inside the structure of the novel—and when I say, 'my own stories,' I mean for instance living in the cities, or traveling, or losing control of oneself."

Shot in a new color stock that was only recently developed, the intense colors of this film seem to

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compose themselves around the astonishingly chilly blues and reds which themselves become an important part of the story, defining the landscape through which the characters move. The story leaps continually back and forth between the United States and Europe, between Germany and France, as it follows the dealings of a shady American, Tom Ripley (Dennis Hopper), who, wearing his cowboy hat, picks up in New York's Soho the paintings of Derwatt, a "dead" American artist (Nicholas Ray), which he then sells at Hamburg auctions to dealers who will resell them to rich Texans. When someone asks this cowboy what he does for a living, he replies, "I make money. . . . I'm bringing the Beatles back to Hamburg." Quite fittingly, he lives in Germany in a mansion that looks as if it might have been transplanted from Monticello or the University of Virginia.

It is also Ripley who sets the film's convoluted plot in motion. He suggests to a French gangster in need of an unknown gunman Jonathan Zimmerman (Bruno Ganz), a gentle Swiss who lives in Hamburg with his wife and child, and who makes his living constructing picture frames. Why Jonathan? For one he is dying of leukemia, his life has little value, and so there is a chance he might want to leave his wife and child a large sum of money. Perhaps more importantly, he once snubbed Ripley at a gallery auction and now Ripley wants to prove that Jonathan is as corruptible as anyone else. He does. After some initial hesitations Jonathan, who is unaware of Ripley's involvement, agrees, kills one man in the Paris Metro, then loses his nerve on the second assignment at which point Ripley, who suspected he might bungle it, suddenly appears and saves Jonathan's life by killing a Mafia captain along with his bodyguard—or so he thinks—on the Hamburg-Munich express.

Narrative plotting has never been one of Wenders's strengths. It has been his strength in fact to avoid plotting in such a deliberately conscious way as to make clear the film syntax that usually governs films in general (and genre films in particular), and which, by extension, governs our own consciousness. Consequently, it perhaps was to be expected that, trying to satisfy his own requirements while fulfilling those of the genre,

he would not carry off this complicated thriller with total success. Loose ends abound everywhere, and unlike those in his earlier films they annoy. Nor is this film as fast-paced and as exhilarating as *The Big Sleep*, where we are left not really caring whether or not we followed all the actions. (Wenders himself, aware of some of the plot confusions, has cited *The Big Sleep* in his defense.)

Yet *The American Friend* manages to fascinate in a way that thrillers seldom do; it is a profoundly sad and bleak film. Unlike most thrillers, it subordinates plot to the characterizations (this is true of Highsmith's novels themselves) while the usual strong sense of location—Chandler's "Los Angeles," Hammet's "San Francisco"—is replaced by an overwhelming sense of dislocation. The feelings of rootlessness, of homesickness, of lack of personal identity, that run through *Alice in the Cities*, *Wrong Movement*, and *Kings of the Road*, become in *The American Friend* an actual function of the rapid cutting from shot to shot, so that the establishing shots of New York, Hamburg, and Paris follow each other so rapidly that they fail to establish anything. In *Alphaville* Godard made a science fiction film about the future, but instead of using constructed sets he used the most advanced examples of urban architecture he could find in Paris and its suburbs. The lesson was clear and now Wenders has elected to photograph similar architecture, with similar purposes in mind (playing with space rather than time). The opening long shot in New York's Soho looks down a vista of old tenements towards the twin towers of the World Trade Center. The Eiffel Tower remains to identify Paris, but just barely, for it has been pushed all the way to the far side of the frame, crowded out of the picture by the skyline of new, taller office towers. And when we see the Statue of Liberty it is not the original one in New York, but a small replica on an island in the Seine. The film in effect describes a worldwide homesickness.

This powerful sense of geographical dislocation finds its psychological correlative in the characters of Jonathan and Ripley. Ripley, the American liberated from local and national boundaries, does not feel at home anywhere. Efficient in his shady dealings, he is also cursed with a touch of *Angst*, which is not quite in line with someone of

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his trade. He keeps a journal—not in a notebook—by talking into his cassette recorder: “Today is December 6, 1976, and I know less and less who I am, or who anybody else is.” It is not on a par with Roquentin’s diary, yet it affects precisely because Ripley is a pathetic sort of gangster and his confusion, as self-indulgent and poorly articulated as it is, makes itself felt. (Incidentally, an advertising poster for the film gives us a front shot of Ripley as he waits in his parked car at night looking tense and smoking a cigarette while holding something that looks like a walkie-talkie next to his ear. It’s a classical thriller genre shot: one would guess he’s in communication with someone as together they stalk their quarry. So it comes as a crazy surprise when we learn the object he’s holding is a cassette recorder and that he’s playing back his diary.) Also, his diary remarks are true. When he says he does not know who anybody is, he may be thinking of Jonathan, whom he himself has transformed into someone very different from the person he was when Ripley first met him. Even visually Jonathan undergoes a metamorphosis, looking less and less like the craftsman we see in the beginning, and more and more like a deranged underworld figure. There is one scene in a hotel room where he practices using his gun in front of a mirror, a scene as disturbing as DeNiro’s hotel room exercises in *Taxi Driver*. This gentle man who has provided his son with all sorts of wonderful visual and cinematic toys changes, in the last days of his life into a new person, removing himself even from his wife Marianne (Lisa Kreuzer) who cares for him but, sensing he’s become involved in some sort of shady business, begins to withdraw her affection.

The precarious friendship that develops between Jonathan and Ripley cannot compensate for this loss. Early in the film Jonathan, ashamed of a former rudeness, gives Ripley a gift: it’s a small photograph of a man which, when tilted, changes his expression. What’s clear is that Jonathan is fascinated by the mechanics, the style of the thing. Genuinely moved, Ripley presents Jonathan with a small box which, when held up to the light and looked into, reveals nude women. It’s the contents that fascinate Ripley.

Yet it’s Ripley, the psychopathic American se-



THE AMERICAN FRIEND

ducing an innocent man into murder, who worries more and more about the consequences of his actions, about his own state of grace. Not since *Easy Rider* has Dennis Hopper given such a fine performance (he hums a Byrds tune from that movie in *The America Friend*) and in one brief scene that goes a long way in establishing Ripley’s self-doubts, he lies down on a pool table beneath the glare of the overhead lights, beads of perspiration running down his anxious face, and takes pictures of himself with a Polaroid which ejects the photographs one after another so that they rain down all about him.

Still, there’s something of the Marshall Plan about Ripley in the way he enters Jonathan’s shop and crowds him into his small work space in back while offering him friendship, work, and money. (In so many of the shots Ripley actually seems to be trying to crowd Jonathan out of the frame.) By the end of the film, after involving Jonathan in five murders and causing an irreconcilable breach between Jonathan and his wife, it’s clear when he sits alone on the beach singing Dylan’s “I Pity the Poor Immigrant” that he still doesn’t understand why in the end Jonathan rejected his friendship.

Wenders has said that “film language is always political: it is either exploitation or it isn’t exploitation . . . not only the story that is told, but the way it is told.” On one level it comes down to something as simple as this: there are different ways to film a man being garroted, and even in a movie as good as *The Godfather* the temptation has been to shoot the scene in such a way that

we're more astonished by the resourcefulness of the make-up team than we are concerned with the actual dynamics of what is happening; that is, when Sollozzo chokes Luca Brasi to death we watch with a fascinated sort of horror as Luca's eyeballs nearly jump from their sockets. Roughly speaking, it's entertaining. In *The American Friend* when Ripley loops a garrote over a gangster's head we don't actually watch the man's life being choked out of him: what we do see is a pained look on Ripley's face. Also, the garroting requires a fair amount of exertion.

More broadly, Wenders is talking about the ability of films to change the way we look at the world by changing the way we look at films, by calling into question *in the film itself* the already codified grammars of other films. Even the way a landscape is shot tells us something about the director's worldview, whether it is a static or a dynamic one. Think of *Swept Away* with its Air Mediterranean shots of surf crashing on long white beaches; of Joseph Strick's most recent disaster, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, where the shots of the lushly green Irish countryside give back to us . . . the Irish countryside. These are shots that have nothing to do with their films, they're descriptive passages that describe nothing; they could have been edited into any one of a hundred other films, the hundred other films from which in fact they've been extracted.

In contrast, towards the end of *The American Friend* when more people are dead than Ripley knows what to do with and everything seems to have come apart, we get a shot whose luminosity is so intense and dream-like it's disquieting: Ripley has driven an ambulance loaded with corpses up onto the wet sands of a beach at dawn, and the quality of the silver-blue light reflecting off the sands is such that we cannot tell where the shoreline ends and the ocean begins—the ambulance seems to be swimming. And it is exactly this sense of confusion, of disorientation, coming at this precise moment near the film's end, that makes this shot so unsettling, and makes it seem a summary of all the larger confusions about place and identity that have preceded it. The shot in effect describes itself. It belongs nowhere else.

Wenders links up with a new generation of German and Austrian film-makers and writers, a group that includes Fassbinder, Herzog, and Alexander Kluge, the playwrights Franz Xaver Kroetz and Peter Handke; most of them came of age in the turmoil of the sixties. Between them there has been an extraordinarily happy degree of cross-fertilization: Fassbinder has directed a Handke play, and he has used a Kroetz play as the basis for his film *Wildwechsel*; Wenders, as mentioned, has collaborated with Handke on film scripts and has helped produce Handke's first film; and we see the same actors and actresses moving in and out of all the films. And while the visions and methods of these artists range over a great deal of different territory, most of them have in common a leftist worldview that speaks more of a concern with the state of contemporary consciousness, or anxiety, than it does of Germany's special past. At one point in *Kings of the Road* Bruno picks up a newspaper and reads a headline about a terrorist bombing in Jerusalem, and the viewer of course is aware that this is a German reading it. But more often than not it is America, for better and for worse, that has come to occupy a central place in these artists' consciousnesses. In Fassbinder's *Fox and his Friends*, Fox gets propositioned in a pinball gallery by two American GIs stationed in Germany. And in *Kings of the Road* Bruno and Robert pass a night in an abandoned GI bunker on the East German border, drinking Jack Daniels and making jokes about the Americans who "have colonized our subconscious."

In taking leave of Germany's past, of the Nazi enterprise that was the burden of an earlier generation of German artists—Heinrich Böll, Gunter Grass, the Gruppe 47—and which left the German film industry in ruins, these younger artists have brought to world literature and cinema a new and startling art with an appeal at once personal and international. *Kings of the Road* opens with a prologue in which an ex-Nazi party member explains to Bruno that he was unable to get his movie theater back until he sued in 1951. But its epilogue, about the closing of the old woman's movie theater, could have been set in any western country.

Wenders's own films will be disliked by some because they won't know what to make of these characters who seem so absurdly out of touch. Also, his unassuming humor often belies the seriousness of his intent, which will bother those people who like their art high-minded down the line. Moreover—and there's no getting around this—his films finally are depressing, and this has rarely struck a receptive box-office chord.

Consequently, his audience, although an international one, will probably remain limited to those people who share a similar set of values, similar frames of literary, film, and pop music references; who, in short, perceive the world in basically similar ways. There's a radical distress in his films that I don't believe even Fassbinder, despite his white-heat anger and his more obviously anticapitalist intentions, makes felt, and which few American film-makers have begun to approach. (An interesting American companion piece to *Kings of the Road* is—not *Easy Rider*,

which Wenders gently parodies—but David Burton Morris's and Victoria Wozniak's *Loose Ends*, an independently produced film about two working-class males who take to the road to escape the drudgery of their lives. Like *Kings of the Road*, this movie makes it a point not to romanticize either the road or the traditional male bonds of friendship.)

It would be wrong to see Wenders's minimal tendencies as simply an aesthetic direction rather than as his reflection of a world that seems increasingly fragile and tenuous, with the constantly shifting moods of the films emphasizing his transience. His films are all low-keyed, understated; there's something casual, almost fortuitous, about them: no great intellectual weight is brought into the discourse. So when we finally realize how deeply he has gone with all his offhand jokes, chance encounters, accidents, semi-anecdotes, rootless characters and so forth, it comes as a beautiful surprise.

**MICHAEL DEMPSEY**

# Ken Russell, Again

IN PRINT AND FILM

The Ken Russell Problem is back on the agenda, thanks to *Valentino* and to *Ken Russell: The Adaptor As Creator*, by Joseph Gomez.\* This full-scale critical study, published before the release of *Valentino*, features a Rousseauesque Russell beaming on the cover and bears his imprimatur: an introduction quoting forgotten critics who applied the Hysterical-Lurid-Crazy sticker to his artist subjects the way most of their modern counterparts do to his films. Gomez has written a patient, detailed refutation of this persistent cliché. Combining biography and criticism, he trails the

director from birth to *Lisztomania*. A sketch from childhood turns up a 9.5 mm Pathescope projector like the fabled machine which became Ingmar Bergman's first magic lantern. Some snapshots of youthful isolation and woolgathering lead to a vignette from the Royal Naval College: cadet Russell staging drag versions of Betty Grable and Dorothy Lamour movies. Then come a nervous breakdown after service with "a modern-day Captain Bligh," the discovery of classical music during recuperation, stints as a ballet dancer and chorus line hooper, a bit of photographic study, marriage, and conversion to Catholicism. From the Church, says Russell, "I suddenly found a

\*New York: Pergamon Press, 1977.