

WIM WENDERS AND KIT CARSON ON PARIS, TEXAS

by

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"Most movies about men and women describe relationships as a total disaster, or they describe them, in the wrong way, as beautiful and doable, as if love can overcome everything. So I felt that this film, Paris, Texas, should make an effort to show, not a solution, not a way out, nor a Utopia, but just show some sort of transcendence like a man jumping over his own shadow or some sort of reverse order of things, where everything would be doable again.

"So that's what we're trying to do, and it took us a long time to get to the point where I was ready, or where the movie or the people were ready, to transcend this theme that the movie is about. We are all working on it, and it is very much about what men expect from women, and also very much about America, things in America that I'm preoccupied with, and maybe both are the same after all. So - - so what did I start off with?" asked Wim Wenders, the young German director who is now shooting his eleventh feature film, Paris, Texas, in and around Houston and Los Angeles.

The screenplay (conceived by Wenders and Sam Shepard) was still undergoing changes when I arrived on the set; and Wenders was allowing the natural character development of Travis (Harry Dean Stanton), Jane (Nastassja Kinski), and their child (Hunter Carson) to determine his rewrites. Sam Shepard was on the telephone from Iowa (where he is starring in a film, Country), monitoring the changes that Kit Carson, author of the film Breathless, was dictating on location.

Mr. Carson is the actual father of the child actor, Hunter Carson, and he said that the story of Paris, Texas, mirrored his own in many ways: that of a father who leaves his child and wife and returns in order to bring about some new relationship or family bond. How the father creates this new bond, and the way he transcends his own confusion and disintegration, is the basis of this ever-changing screenplay. But Wenders stressed that he was not just interested in the lonesome self-discovery of Travis. For the first time in his career, he was attempting to explore a woman's development.

"It was a lot to even consider as a main theme of a movie for me, and that was a big step, to not just have it be one of several underlying subjects, but to say, 'hey, this is what the movie is about.' I mean my own life had been so much dominated by my work in the movies, and I had identified so much with work so that I, in a way -- the last three films that I had made, had all dealt with the cinema itself. And I had certainly come to an end with that."

Wenders seems relieved to be working within the restrictions of a low budget. Paris, Texas is being financed by Channel Four and French and German TV. His attempt to work with American finance proved disastrous when Coppola agreed to produce Hammett, but ended up trying to interfere with the direction of the film. Wenders demands total control over his method of working and material, but within that freedom, lies the possibility of contradicting his own assumptions:

"I feel that I am in more control than I can handle. I know my theme so well that it scares me. Usually I don't know that. You see, I can't stand working on a movie if the work itself and actual making

of the movie isn't also some sort of a discovery; isn't also some sort of an adventure. If it's just executing a certain idea that you had before, then I lose interest. So when you said the shooting of Paris, Texas is confusing for a lot of people, including the crew, it's because we're making changes at the last minute.

"But one really can't discover the characters until one starts shooting. The ending really comes out of them, and they actually 'wrote' this story to the point where it is now. But I'm also discovering what the story is that this movie is telling. The process is still going on. It's sort of exciting now that we know what we know and what's going to happen to the characters over the next three weeks. It will be pretty exciting."

Watching Wenders directing his actors is like watching a painter sensitive to each change in texture and tone, without being able to see the actual canvas. Sometimes he demands retakes of what appears to be a simple gesture: "The hardest part, though, is to make everybody believe that it's going to make sense. If I tried to do it any other way, by first making a big sketch that everybody could look at, and understand -- well, I couldn't do it. It would be awful. I have to start painting in one corner and paint a little bit in another corner. The very process, each day, of adding another little line here and there -- it just takes a lot of energy, but I'm still trying for the narrative in general. I'm trying hard. Every night before I go to bed I say, 'I'm telling a story so I better stick to it.'

"Sometimes film-making is very much based on subconscious choices or intuitions, and sometimes you're in touch with them and then you really know what you're doing, and sometimes you're not in touch -- or you're out of touch. You were once, and then you forget how the intuition fits the whole. You need energy to make one image after another for ten weeks and twenty every day so that in the end it tells a story.'

"It's not a coincidence that Sam and I work together. So we have something in common. Stories to tell. Yes. Maybe Sam is looking for something similar in America [that I was looking for out of Europe and that I saw in America, and Sam sees it in the West. So he's looking for something in America that he found and that he finds lost and it's somehow in the West; in the idea of the West in America. '

"And for me, it was the idea of America seen from Europe. It's almost like I have to go to -- from Europe to America -- to find this guy who was looking West of where I was looking. I took it as a whole and only had to understand when I came here that it wasn't a whole. I know it better than a lot of Americans I know. I've been everywhere. Driving or flying.'

"I wouldn't want to say it's my homeland because I really don't have the right to say that. It's not my homeland because I'm not home here. Maybe I'm attracted by the very fact that it seems the ideal of a homeland for so many people and that is like a strange conglomeration of all these dreams for two hundred or three hundred years, and it actually isn't even a land of its own, somehow. It's just a sum of all these wishes from all these countries and all these people, and I really still find it hard to believe that it's supposed to be one country.'

"I think that I, from my European point of view --I was looking for something in America that I felt that Sam had been looking for inside of America, in the West. That being a kind of hope or a place where there was still some sort of change taking place. I don't know. Or at least the West for him -- at least in the plays of his, there is still this mythical place that for me America is. That's what I tried to say."

Did he feel that American society had realized, in any form, its utopic dreams?

"No, I think the opposite is true. I think that all the people who fled from Europe in the seventeenth century, and the nineteenth century, were trying to avoid inequities in Europe and hoped that this was the country where all these abuses wouldn't hit them anymore. I think it was totally reversed, in that all these abuses have installed themselves on a much bigger scale here in America. We've just imported them. '

"The Germany of the 1970s was pretty liberal, but it was also very narrow-minded and very humorless, very much stuck -- it feels more stuck than ever whenever I get there. It feels so stuck these days that I get out at the airport in Frankfurt, and I get stiff in my neck just by the impact of all this -- all this stiffness around. So I'm in New York, of course. New York's New York. I want to be in New York because it is New York, not because it's America. America is really much more here. Texas. The places where we've been shooting lately, and also those empty places in between Texas and California. Arizona and New Mexico."

Wenders is, paradoxically, more comfortable when he finds himself on the peripheries of an unknown, be it in his artistic choices or his personal life. His fascination with America is based on the indefinable nature of society.

"The very idea of being a pioneer hasn't existed in Europe for five hundred years, except for those Europeans who left to explore the Antarctic, but, otherwise, there is no notion of a very ordinary person becoming, in a sense, a pioneer, by moving someplace new with his family. So there's this whole long culture and tradition that has totally eliminated the possibility of being a pioneer."

Wenders has consistently been drawn to landscapes where one cannot remain: freeways, motels, deserts, and open country. Looking out at the mirrored skyscraper upon skyscraper of the Houston skyline, he surprised me by saying that this modernity was not alienating for him, but rather a part of his aesthetic. Alienation is a quaint concept for Wenders. His characters do relate, with emotion, to their environment, but they are more attuned to the moment and to the shifting landscape of modernity; they become drifters, not loners.

"The movie never intended to be just another movie on alienation. From the beginning this had -- now the guy might start this way but he's going to end up in a different place. Only we felt it was going to be him and the child that were going to end up in a different place, and my only decision, and my only feeling after some time, was that the woman that they are looking for should be given a choice, should be given the same chance to end up in a different place."

"And that was the only thing I really changed. The original concept of Sam and mine had ended in this long walk. We call it the Mythical Walk of Travis and his son across America. It's going to end up more or less with that now, only that it includes the woman too. We sort of excluded her in the beginning from participating in our ending. And that's what I felt was wrong with it, with our ending, that it didn't give her a chance to take part in what we wanted, in the way we wanted the movie to end."

But the voyage towards his rebirth had to be intuited by Wenders. He was loathe to construct a logical or chronological transformation, believing that change is always transcendence, is always mystery. Wenders charted Travis' progress from an archaic conception of love to a resurgence of love as affection, coupled with a recognition of Jane's actual qualities.

"I think Travis' problem with Jane was that at some point he just loved her too much. That makes a lot of people totally sick. That makes them lose all sense of who they are if they love somebody too much. And I mean that really leads to violence in no time, because then suddenly you have to reject this person, and all he does is just love you, and then he's rejected and he's hurt and in no time, I mean, you are in the middle of a Greek tragedy. '

"Very much in the beginning we thought that Travis had been a victim of something until we find out that he himself must have been the aggressor. And that he was violent. He had to come to terms with that. And most men do. I mean they are all potentially violent.'

"Travis doesn't want to see Jane's generosity. Because he instantly turns it around, the idea that she could be -- that she could be generous makes him instantly jealous. It's hard to be with somebody who is generous if you are not generous yourself. It's impossible. You keep feeling neglected. You keep feeling put down.'

"So I think Jane is a woman who just has a lot to give, generously. And that's just the way she is, and already four years ago that's the way she was. She was open to anybody. And he very easily and very often misunderstood that. Or wanted to misunderstand that. Or himself wasn't generous enough not to misunderstand that. But Travis is going to come to terms with her because he's going to tell her -- he's going to tell her his whole story -- to her, in our famous Talk Show."

Equality is the key theme, and Wenders believes it is essential in all relationships, although true equality is hard to achieve.

"I think it's more that Travis realizes that what he has inside him, the feelings that he has, the good feelings that he has, that it is not fair towards Jane, the woman, to not share it with her, the same way he could share it with a kid. Because it's easy, you see -- it's so easy to behave generously towards a child, and a lot of people can do that perfectly, and then they walk out of the room, and with the next person they meet they are in no way able to maintain that generosity.'

"I meant that's why people's friendliness and good feelings and behavior toward kids doesn't really count very much, I think, usually. Because it's just too easy. Some of the most honest people I know, and some of the people that I really respect, are pretty harsh to kids. It has to do with superiority. Just a lot of people think that they're nice to a kid, and the fact that they're gentle and friendly toward a child is because that can afford to be, because they know they're superior."

Wenders has a natural bond with children. In his previous films, such as [Alice in the Cities](#), his direction of the child was as sensitive as Truffaut's achievement with child actors. Watching him frolicking on the set with Hunter Carson, one sees a boyish vigor and unmasked joy radiating through his somewhat guarded manner.

"I lived with a boy for seven years, but he was not my child. And also you can never have any equal relationship to a child if you don't have any of a child left in you. And that's the real test between an adult and a child. How much child there is still in you? They sense it pretty quickly and they are pretty accurate about phony childishness."

The incongruity and meshing of the real and fictional world has always been a theme in Wenders work. We discussed the fact, for example, that Kit Carson had been able to use the film to reinforce his bond with his son, and the evident mirroring of fact and fiction in the shooting of this film. Did Wenders believe that his films had some power other than the power to entertain?

"Fiction is really like religion. Or you can say it the other way around, too. That religion is basically nothing else but giving people some fiction to hold onto. Fiction gives people structures to compare their own life with. So fiction is really a great remedy, I guess, for all kinds of fears and doubts.

"Story-telling, in general, reassures not only kids, but adults, and it does have a stabilizing effect. Just by the very fact that it has a structure. It's something firm, and it starts somewhere, and it ends somewhere. Everything that real life doesn't really tend to do. I really don't know what I would have done without these films that I make. I would probably have found some other sort of experience, but I feel that I not only measure my life through these ten movies that I've made so far but that the changes that I have gone through are always enforced by the films I make."