Wim Wenders talks with WSWS: “The culture of independent film criticism has gone down the drain”

Richard Phillips
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In late December Wim Wenders visited Australia to promote Buena Vista Social Club, *his documentary on the life and music of what is now Cuba’s most famous band. Described by some as a love letter to Cuba and its musicians, the film was shot over three weeks in 1998 and released to widespread critical acclaim last year. The film powerfully captures the alluring beauty of Cuban music and the irrepressible energy and artistic vitality of Buena Vista Social Club band members, whose average age is 70.*

Wenders, who was born in 1945, studied medicine and philosophy before attending the Academy of Film and Television in Munich from 1967-70. He was a film critic for Süddeutsche Zeitung *and* Filmkritik *in the late 1960s and since 1970 has directed more than 20 feature films. Along with Rainer Werner Fassbinder and Werner Herzog, Wenders was one of the leading figures of the New German Cinema of the 1970s. Many of his films achieve the lyrical and atmospheric mysticism first produced by Italian director Michelangelo Antonioni. One leading cinematographer accurately commented that “light and landscape are actors” in all Wenders’ films.*

His filmography includes: The Goalkeeper’s Fear of the Penalty Kick *(1971);* Alice in the Cities *(1974);* Kings of the Road *(1976);* The American Friend *(1977);* Lightning Over the Water *(1980);* Paris, Texas *(1984);* Wings of Desire *(1987);* Until the End of the World *(1991);* Far Away, So Close *(1993);* Beyond the Clouds , *in conjunction with Michelangelo Antonioni (1995);* The End of Violence *(1997); and soon-to-be-released* The Million Dollar Hotel.

Richard Phillips: The *Buena Vista Social Club* is a remarkable film by any measure. There have, however, been criticisms raised in some quarters claiming that the film abstained on the political and historical questions in Cuba. How would you respond to such comments?

Wim Wenders: My answer to this sort of comment is to explain that it is much simpler to make a film that is explicitly political. My aim, however, was to make a film that refrained from a political view of Cuba or Havana or these people’s lives and just phenomenologically show it as it was. This, I believe, has a bigger political impact in the long run.

I really wanted the film to be shown in the US because Cuba, for a huge section of the American public, has been eradicated from view. It doesn’t exist any more for many Americans and if you showed them a map and ask them to point to Cuba they would not be able to tell you where it was. So I felt that a film that refrained from a political interpretation and just showed these wonderful people and their music as they were, would better enter into the American consciousness. And I think that I’ve been proven right.

RP: One of the extraordinary elements of *Buena Vista Social Club* is how it demonstrates the warmth and good humour of the Cuban people in the face of all difficulties.

WW: The Cuban people have an amazingly strong and unbroken spirit. I think this is connected to their attitude to music. They live with music in a way that is so different from anything most of us ever experience.

For us music is mainly part of the entertainment world and is often a luxury. Take opera for example—to go to the opera you have to dress up in a tuxedo and pay lots of money. In Cuba music is anything but that. It’s not a luxury or commercial entertainment but something essential, like eating, breathing and sleeping. It is an integral part of living, and that for me was extraordinary and very moving because I’ve never lived in a place where this was the case.

Members of the band have been through a lot of hardship, and a lot of deceptions, and they speak about it quite honestly and frankly. Ibrahim [Ferrer], for example, has no trouble acknowledging that he was very disappointed with his life and his career at one point. He wasn’t really acknowledged for his talent, he was never a lead singer in his life, he was always second voice, and finally he was kicked out of the band he was playing in. He couldn’t make a living from music and had to do all sorts of work, including selling lottery tickets.

Obviously he had never been to Paris, London or New York but he had travelled. In the 1970s he had been to Moscow, Prague, Warsaw and most of the capitals in the Eastern world, but even that came to an end and he was not performing any more. He didn’t know what he wanted to do and finally he had given up on music.

But the way he explains all this, however, is not like anyone else I’ve met who probably would tell you their life story with a certain amount of bitterness, regret or reproaches against the system, colleagues, the audience, or anything else that may be overlooked. Ibrahim tells his story without a grain of complaint, and this was true for all of the band members. This is very much part of the Cuban spirit and soul.

Maybe it’s the music that enables them to function like that, to always take everything as it comes and never complain about the misery, hardship or injustice. This is an incredible quality. I’ve never been anywhere in my life like it and I only really noticed it when I returned to Los Angeles and then Berlin. Everybody is much better off in these places, there is not poverty like in Cuba, but everybody complains about things. Havana is one of the poorest cities I’ve been in the last few years and yet we were never asked for money from anybody during our stay.

You might remember the scene when Ruben [Gonzalez] is playing piano in the gymnasium that used to be the casino and is now used for kids. You remember the little girls learning ballet. We spent the entire day with these kids and then we packed our stuff and moved it into the little van we had parked around the corner. Just as we were about to leave one of the little ballerinas came running up to us. She was holding a $20 bill in her hand that my wife must have dropped. Before Donata [Wender’s wife] could say thank you the little girl was gone again. She gave it to her with a big

smile and was gone in a flash.

Every kid in Cuba knows what the dollar is worth, it is the other currency and there are many things you can only buy with American dollars. She certainly knew that her father would have to work for a month to earn that kind of money but she didn't even wait for a thank you. This for me summed up the Cuban spirit—a people not governed by the sort of values that we know.

RP: Many of your films explore the impact of American cinema on popular culture in Europe and internationally. Has the making of *Buena Vista Social Club* influenced the way in which you view this question?

WW: I'm getting a little bored by the juxtaposition of American and other cinema. I no longer think this division is as true as it might have been in the 1980s, or the early part of the 90s. Cinema is a worldwide phenomenon. What is generally referred to as American-style films are, in fact, studio productions. Industry-driven cinema, however, exists in many other places—in Asia where there are a huge number of industrial, studio-driven, and formulated movies produced; and in Europe where more and more of these type of films are being produced.

On the other hand in Europe, Asia and America other kinds of films are being produced which are story-driven, experience-driven films that try to explore the world rather than trying to exploit it. And so the division between industry-driven films and, due to lack of a better word, independent films is not a national issue but a worldwide phenomenon.

So I am getting a little bored with defining one type of film as American and the other European or from somewhere else because the division is no longer true.

RP: You would disagree then with those that counterpose so-called European culture against American culture or those who call for cultural protectionism?

WW: Yes. I was in the forefront of that discussion for many years and as chairman and president of the European Film Academy had many long debates over this. For years all I seemed to be doing was lobbying politicians and others to persuade them that European culture needed movies, and that we had to protect it. But I think that the spirit of protectionism would be the grave of European cinema. You cannot protect something by building a fence around it and thinking that this will help it survive.

As proud as I am of European cinema, the way to make it survive is not to make it an endangered species but to put it out there in the world. Movies are something people see all over the world because there is a certain need for it.

In fact, it is amazing how much European films—Italian, French, German and English—have recovered a certain territory of the audience in their countries over the last few years. In the late 1980s the amount of German films was down to four or five percent of the market, and the remaining 95 percent were American. It is now 20 to 30 percent German productions. Ten years ago this would have sounded like a complete utopia, it was unimaginable. This didn't happen because it was protected but because it started to become more aware of its own value rather than an attitude of, "please help me to survive against the giants".

RP: Did you follow the recent controversy in France after Bertrand Tavernier and other directors suggested that there should be a code of ethics for film critics?

WW: I heard about it, mostly over the Internet.

RP: What do you make of it?

WW: A lot of the discussion and debate made me laugh. In some ways it's a very French phenomenon. Of course the French are making very credible movies and it is still one of the greatest nations in terms of world cinema but the real problem is the decay in film criticism.

In this age of consumerism film criticism all over the world—in America first but also in Europe—has become something that caters for the movie industry instead of being a counterbalance. Most journalists today work for the film industry and not as a sort of mirror of the industry. And that phenomenon has struck the French as well.

Many French directors, having now realised there was no more real criticism, that the standards of the past have gone, are very offended about the quality of film criticism. And it is true. If you read *Liberation* it is flabbergasting how bad the critics have become; how opinionated they are; how, even in a left magazine like *Liberation*, they cater to the American movies describing anything American as wonderful and put down anything that is critical, weird, strange or French. This is really the case and Tavernier and others are not exaggerating.

But the decline of film criticism is not just confined to France it's worldwide. It's very hard to find critics or a magazine today that will publish material that is genuinely independent and written without any concern about being cut off some distributor's list or not be invited or flown into screenings. Many of the critics today get airline tickets, hotel accommodation, bags, beautiful photographs, gifts and other expenses paid by the distributors, and then are supposed to write serious articles about the movie. How can they write anything independent under these circumstances? They can't. Their living consists of working and writing for the distributors.

This was not the case during the New Wave. At that time critics were truly independent and they never, ever wrote to please anybody. Filmmakers and critics wrote about each other and sometimes very harshly. This no longer exists.

The culture of independent film criticism has totally gone down the drain and this seems to come with the territory of the consumer age that we are now living in. Everything is entertainment; criticism is now entertainment and it seems that the French directors have woken up one day and suddenly realised that they were not backed up any more. So I thought the debate about a set of principles for critics was amusing. I can share their anger, but on the other hand I don't think a code of ethics for critics is going to solve the problem.

RP: Do you think that film as a medium can expand the imagination of the viewer and create a longing within them for a different reality against the existing state of affairs?

WW: Yes, I think so. Film is a very, very powerful medium. It can either confirm the idea that things are wonderful the way they are, or it can reinforce the conception that things can be changed. I think these two positions also go across the board—through American and European cinema.

Entertainment today constantly emphasises the message that things are wonderful the way they are. But there is another kind of cinema, which says that change is possible and necessary and it's up to you.

Any film that supports the idea that things can be changed is a great film in my eyes. It doesn't have to be overtly political. On the contrary a film can promote the idea of change without any political message whatsoever but in its form and language can tell people that they can change their lives and contribute to progressive changes in the world. Any movie that has that spirit and says things can be changed is worth making.

RP: Although we only have a few more moments left in this interview could you make an assessment of Rainer Werner Fassbinder's work and explain his influence on you?

WW: We started more or less in the same year, the big difference was that I was accepted into film school in Munich and Reiner was rejected. He was so angry about being rejected that he decided to make movies while we were still studying. And I think he was a little better off for this.

I am very happy that I knew him and we were friends, and that we worked together and had a common production and distribution company. In fact, filmmaking at that time in Germany was an act of solidarity and we all helped each other to produce movies. Neither Rainer Werner, nor any of us could have succeeded, or produced the number of films that we

did, just on our own. We showed our films to each other, discussed them vigorously and rarely agreed.

There was never a bunch of more diverse ideas, styles and opinions about filmmaking, but we also agreed that we could only keep working if we continued with that sort of solidarity. This is what really made the New German Cinema at that time. It was different to the French in that we never had any agreement about style or content; or like neo-realism in Italy, which had a program. We never had any of that. Everybody brought his or her own tradition, or ideas.

Rainer was the most prolific of all of us and he definitely worked himself to death. He knew that he was doing this but that was his approach. In doing so he created a body of work that is still valid and important and his loss is great. He made some of the greatest movies in the second half of the 20th century. He was an inventor, and although quite a radical person, he wasn't at all vain. He could never be replaced by anybody, at the time, or even now.

Sometimes I think of the films that he could have made in the 1990s and I get incredibly mad at him because he didn't pay enough attention to his health. He took pills at night to go to sleep at 3 or 4 in the morning. Then at 7 o'clock in the morning he would take pills to be awake. You can't survive that for very long. He was just a maniac—a workaholic—and rather consciously worked himself to death.

RP: You worked with Michelangelo Antonioni on *Beyond the Clouds* (1995), the film he made after his stroke. Could you describe that experience?

WW: This was an extraordinary chapter in my life. I am happy to have been involved in that project and happy that Michelangelo could prove that he was able to make a movie at his age and in spite of his handicap. As you know he had a stroke in 1985 and lost the ability to speak, apart from a few dozen monosyllabic words like yes and no, and other basic simple things.

Before we made the film together I spoke to Jeanne Moreau who had worked with him many times. I told her about the project and asked if she thought I should do it, or if she thought there would be any problems.

"Do it of course, you have to do it," she said immediately. "You should keep in mind," she said, "that when I did *La Notte* with Antonioni, he never spoke a word to me—from the first to the last day of shooting. He never, ever said anything to me, and this is one of the movies I am most proud of. So I don't think that the fact that he cannot speak should be any handicap for him." And she was right, he proved that his limited ability to speak was, for him, as a filmmaker, the least of his problems.