

Berlin film festival, part 2

The tension between cinematic vision and life itself

The Million Dollar Hotel, directed by Wim Wenders

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26 February 2000

This is the second in a series of articles on the recent 50th Berlinale, the international film festival, held February 9-20. The festival is one of the largest in the world, with more than 300 films screened. Subsequent articles will review a number of the most interesting works, including a new film by German filmmaker Volker Schlöndorff, as well as documentaries on the Kosovo war and conditions in post-Soviet Russia.

German director Wim Wenders' new film, *The Million Dollar Hotel*, opened the 50th Berlin international film festival. Wenders occupies a virtually unique position bridging European and American film and is the only German filmmaker of stature who has been able to work with a degree of independence from the main American studios.

Following his own disastrous experience and conflicts with Francis Ford Coppola and the American studio system in the course of making the film *Hammett*, Wenders licked his wounds, summed up his experiences of Hollywood in his film *The State of Things* (1982) and was able to recover ground. In particular, following the success of *Buena Vista Social Club* (1999), he is now in a position to raise sufficient finances to develop his own projects employing some of the best talent on offer on both sides of the Atlantic.

Wenders first began his film work in the 1960s as part of the cinematic movement known as New Cinema. Wenders has spoken about the particular problems confronting German filmmakers at that time following the experience of fascism and the general postwar cultural stagnation in Germany. "I don't think any other country has had such a loss of faith in its own images, stories and myths as we have. We, the directors of the New Cinema, have felt this loss most keenly in ourselves as the absence of a tradition of our own, as a generation without fathers." Wenders, along with others, set about to find new sources for potent images and stories, a new basis for German film itself.

Throughout his film work Wenders has drawn heavily from American film influences—notably Nicholas Ray and John Ford. Wenders recalls that in the late 1960s, during the heyday of radicalism on the campuses, fellow film students urged him to attend political meetings. Wenders preferred to watch American westerns. He has made no secret of his admiration for road movies such as *Easy Rider* and many of his films revolve around a journey or quest.

In a number of his films Wenders has also played with the classic thriller theme in the shape of an investigating detective. *Hammett*

(1982) is devoted to detective novel writer Dashiell Hammett and his involvement in a real-life mystery, and in *Until the End of the World* (1991) he featured an investigator who travels across continents, while the journey of the film's heroine culminates in outer space. Featuring rootless individuals (Travis, the main figure in *Paris, Texas* [1984] emerges suddenly from the American desert—apparently lacking a past) relieved of immediate social ties, Wenders' films recurrently point towards a rupture which has taken place in the lives of his characters.

Traditionally, both the road theme and the detective on a quest have been used to construct a rigid framework for the development of a film story. In his own films, however, Wenders demonstrates that real life spills over and rarely fits into the neat who-done-it framework of the classic thriller, real life never begins and ends as cleanly as a bus trip.

Wenders search for new cinematic inspiration and a new language point both to the strengths and the weaknesses in his work. Employing elements of traditional American film genre Wenders has been able to take up themes such as the reliability of memory, the difficulties of communication, the way in which we perceive the world and how this perception can be illuminated or distorted by film itself.

At the same time, when compared with other figures of the New Cinema movement, for example R. W. Fassbinder or Volker Schlöndorff, Wenders exhibits a tendency to pull back from difficult social and historical questions. Both Fassbinder (one of whose principal cinema influences was the German-American director Douglas Sirk) and Schlöndorff have tackled head-on issues emanating from the German past and fascism in particular. On many occasions their films have encountered withering criticism and hostility from vested social interests (see Schlöndorff review).

In Wenders' own films the traces of the past remain either traces—political slogans daubed on a wall in the background—or assume an absurd form—such as the Nazi war movie being rehearsed in *Wings of Desire* (1987). This is not to insist that every German filmmaker has to devote all of his work to making films devoted to the German past, but Wenders evinces a reluctance to really come to grips with the roots of the problems displayed by the figures in his films, loneliness, despair, disorientation.

Wenders originally planned a science fiction film entitled *The Billion Dollar Hotel* whose action would have taken place late in the

21st century. Budgetary limitations meant that the completed film, based on an idea by U2 pop singer Bono, takes place in the here and now. One of Los Angeles' most exclusive hotels in the 1920s, which has meantime become a depository for the poor, socially excluded and mentally disturbed, provides the arena for the action.

The film begins with a long pan of the LA skyline which ends on the roof of the hotel. One of its residents, Tom Tom (Jeremy Davies), runs the length of the roof and pitches himself over the edge. Through Tom Tom's eyes we experience the plunge from the roof and his slow-motion passage past the windows on each floor. In the course of his fall we catch a glimpse of some of the hotel's inhabitants and their activities. Tom Tom's leap recalls a scene from Wenders' earlier film *Wings of Desire* —the plummet of an angel from the top of the Siegessaule in Berlin. In the *Wings of Desire* the fall of the angel to earth brings new life, with the angel exchanging its eternal, ethereal existence for a material, mortal one.

In *The Million Dollar Hotel*, following his suicide leap, the childlike, innocent Tom Tom is evidently fated to travel in another direction. The shot of the hotel windows is evidence of the director's keen eye and artistic vision which permeate the film. His balancing of light and shadow, securing his subjects within the framework of a room or street, recalls in particular the pictures of Edward Hopper. At the same time the action is driven forward by carefully selected rock music.

We do not experience Tom Tom's encounter with the ground—instead his voice observes: “After I'd jumped everything was clear.” He continues to narrate the story of the film, which moves briefly back in time to deal with the circumstances leading up to Tom Tom's suicide leap. Prior to Tom Tom, another hotel resident Izzy had taken the same route. Did he fall or was he pushed? Izzy has a rich father who wants to know (or suppress?) the truth and employs a super detective, FBI-agent Skinner (Mel Gibson as a sleuthing “cruise missile”) to investigate the circumstances of his son's death.

We are introduced to the inhabitants of the hotel. Dixie (Peter Stormare) plays guitar, wears his hair long and maintains he is the long ignored fifth Beatle—the man who really wrote the songs for John Lennon and Paul McCartney. Geronimo (Jimmy Smits) is an American Indian with esoteric artistic interests and a restrained, silent manner recalling the Indian figure in Milos Forman's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (which Wenders acknowledges was an influence on this film). Eloise (Milla Jovovich), cool and reserved, is a young woman who seeks refuge in a bookshop by day and offers her body to strangers at night.

Tom Tom loves Eloise and in the course of the movie they develop a relationship. The various inhabitants of the hotel meet together and, in free-ranging discussion, discuss how they can exploit Izzy's death and the subsequent interest on the part of the media for their own benefit.

In *The Million Dollar Hotel* Wenders returns his recurring detective motif but there is no obvious journey undertaken in the work—apart from the film-length passage of Tom Tom from the hotel roof to the ground. Our attention is focused entirely on the inhabitants of the hotel and the development of their relationships. In this respect Wenders' considerable cinematic skills are unable to disguise the thinness of the plot and the inadequacy of the characters.

Eloise begins the film as a virtually autistic creature, rejecting company and unwilling to communicate. Under her arm she carries a book, *A Century of Loneliness*. She speaks only under duress and then to declare that *she does not exist*. Rescued from a nighttime rape by agent Skinner, she unwinds sufficiently to develop an affectionate

relationship with Tom Tom. Her moments alone with Tom Tom towards the end of the film contain real tenderness and are sensitively filmed, but her own transformation remains unexplained and too abrupt.

In his opening scenes FBI agent Skinner functions as a sort of Robo-cop, ruthlessly intimidating murder suspects and planting bugs. His head is supported by a neck-brace—in fact, his back and spine are horribly disfigured. In one scene, recalling David Cronenberg's work, Skinner is bent double, twisted in agonising pain as he spies on the hotel's inhabitants. The man of law and order also admits to being as much a freak as the people he is investigating and in his own sudden about-turn protects the suspect Tom Tom from pursuing police.

Tom Tom is the adult with the spontaneity of a child, the innocence of an angel. His view of the world is direct and free from ideological ballast, his spontaneity works to break down tensions between the hotel inhabitants. The theme of childish perception of the world is another recurring theme of Wenders. The closer we get to the characters, however, the more unsatisfactory they become. In his notes to the Berlinale Wenders declares: “The hotel can be understood as a kind of madhouse, except that, ultimately compared to the world around them, the supposedly crazy inhabitants appear quite normal and healthy.” Wenders has acknowledged parallels drawn between his film and *The Idiots* by Lars von Trier.

Without disputing the “derangement of the real world,” there are definite problems with such a standpoint. Put a deranged person together with relatively a sane person, there is bound to be conflict. Put two mentally and socially disturbed people together, they will adjust to one another and live in harmony—is it really as easy as that? But this seems to be the message communicated by the harmonious and democratic meetings of the hotel residents.

Wenders himself is not blind to the realities of modern day Los Angeles. Indeed he notes that during the shooting of the film at the hotel ambulances and police cars were a daily occurrence—dealing with disturbances and disputes, carting off the latest victims of drug overdose. In his film, however, Wenders chooses to largely exclude such manifestations of poverty and mental illness, with the result that he does a disservice to his characters. The film presents us with pure, at the same time privileged spirits, too good for this world and doomed to destruction.

Wenders entire career in film exudes a continual dissatisfaction and unease with the conventions and trivial priorities on offer in modern society—priorities promoted by the mass media which work to blunt critical faculty. But in his latest film Wenders is too compliant in ironing out contradictory elements of modern life which could get in the way of his artistry and cinematic concept. Not only do his story and characters suffer as a result—as social tensions intensify the danger arises that such one-sidedness can reduce the filmmaker's work to the level of the evocative but insubstantial.



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