



## The Ambivalent Object(s) of America in Wim Wenders

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### Abstract

This article will consider Wim Wenders' relationship to America in several of his films during the New German Cinema Movement of the 1970s and 1980s. In particular, it will explore the place America occupies as a fantasy object, framing this through the distinct roles individual objects play in Wenders' films. Firstly, in the initial period of his life, various accounts point to the fact that the director related to American culture as a substitute for his own country's fascistic past. Such a viewpoint is then countered in his film *Alice in the Cities* (1972), where the protagonist is initially puzzled by the enigma of America, but finds he can comprehend it upon hearing of the Hollywood director John Ford's passing from a newspaper. In *The State of Things* (1982), apropos Wenders' experience working in Hollywood under Francis Ford Coppola, the relationship to objects again changes, this time from the subject's mastery over objects, to the mastery of the object over the subject. However, an alternative position emerges through a more careful reading of the film *Hammett* (1982), which, exists as a short-circuit in the typical narrative of Wenders' cinematic trajectory. Rather than emphasizing the mastery of the subject or the object, through the use of narrative, the film *Hammett* reveals an alternative position by implicating the two in a dialectic. Such a position takes on a refined inflection in *Paris, Texas* (1982), in which the subject implicates themselves in their own fantasy, repeating the radical gesture from *Hammett* (1982) and forging a new relationship between subject and object.

**Keywords:** Wim Wenders; Jacques Lacan; Subjectivity; Fantasy; Psychoanalysis; European Cinema



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## The Ambivalent Object(s) of America in Wim Wenders Laurent Shervington

In the work of director Wim Wenders, in particular, his output during the New German Cinema movement (1970s – 1980s), the status of America takes on a certain aura of fascination. From a psychoanalytic lens, the repeated representations and explorations of American culture in his work place it as a fantasy object, ambivalently swaying between idealization and rejection. This relationship is cinematically mediated by material objects, such as newspapers and Coca-Cola bottles, as well as immaterial objects such as the voice and the gaze, which, when read together, dramatize his relationship towards the United States and its cultural industry. In exploring several crucial objects in the films *Alice in the Cities* (1974), *The State of Things* (1982), *Hammett* (1982) and *Paris, Texas* (1984), the contours of Wenders' fixation can be apprehended.

This article takes up a psychoanalytic approach in order to offer a novel perspective of the director's New German Cinema era oeuvre. In distinction to previous applications of this theory, the present study does not seek to affirm certain biographical facts or diagnoses regarding the auteur figure, at the same time, nor does it dismiss the search for grasping a unified meaning between a set of commonly authored texts. Rather, it follows the idea of the short circuit introduced by Slavoj Žižek (2003) and developed by the Ljubljana school of psychoanalysis, which strives to take a “major classic (text, author, notion) and read it in a short-circuiting way,”

through the “lens of a ‘minor’ author, text or conceptual apparatus” (2003, p. vii). The value of this approach is in its ability to “lead to insights which completely shatter and undermine our common perceptions,” while also making the viewer aware of “another – disturbing – side of something he or she knew all the time” (2003, p. viii). In approaching the figure of Wim Wenders, a quintessential European director subject to countless critical surveys, this article foregrounds the marginal and critically dismissed film *Hammett* (1982) as the site of an exemplary short circuit. While previous accounts of this particular film have rejected it as unworthy of serious consideration, placing the film in the foreground not only proves to disrupt several established narratives about Wenders’ work, but complicates the broader dualities between Hollywood and art cinema, realism and fantasy, and narrative and non-narrative film. These dyads aren’t simply deconstructed for the sake of showing their falsity, but, following the logic of the short circuit, reveal the underlying unities, unconscious presuppositions and disavowed consequences of Wenders’ artistic trajectory during this 20 year period.

Analogous projects have been previously attempted. In a section dedicated to the director in his expansive 1989 work, Thomas Elsaesser (1989) offers an astute psychoanalytic reading of Wenders’ oeuvre during the new cinema era in Germany. Here he notes that “any kind of overt violence or even conflict” was rarely depicted by the director (1989, p. 230), showing additional exception to the usual trend of making the family the “emotional or dramatic centre of the story”

(1989, p. 228). Despite these marked absences, Elsaesser speculates that such conflict is displaced onto the substitute father figures in Wenders' films, namely the "non-German, Hollywood misfits Sam Fuller and Nicholas Ray" (1989, p. 230). Such appearances are not only symptomatic of "displaced and yet subtly aggressive oedipal challenges," but also prefigure the ambivalent role America *qua* Hollywood plays in his work (1989, p.230). As Elsaesser presciently posits, America took on a dual role as both resented and liberatory, standing for "the 'other' as opponent, rival and father," where in fellow new cinema directors it was mythologized (Herzog) and sexually charged (Fassbinder) (1989, p. 231). With the absence of the familial in Wenders, "American popular culture functions as a surrogate home, which can appease the hunger for experience" (1989, p. 232). Developing from Elsaesser's insights, such a psychoanalytic apprehension can be furthered through an analysis of how certain material and immaterial objects in Wenders' films function vis-à-vis America. Structurally, these objects can be understood as proxies for this broader fantasy object, acting as indexes for the director's evolving psychic position.

In approaching this matter, the initial theorisation of Sigmund Freud (1957) on the ambivalence of objects in his essay "Repression," proves invaluable. As Freud posits, the process of repression is an inevitably incomplete procedure, as remainders of the repressed content re-

emerge (*qua* the return of the repressed) in distorted form for the subject through their relationship to certain people, places or, indeed, objects. In turn, these objects of fascination are subject to contingent, minor distortions, which condition the subject's response. As Freud posits, the objects which subjects "give most preference, their ideals, proceed from the same perceptions and experiences as the objects which they most abhor" (1957, p.150). Despite their common origin, the object becomes "split in two, one part undergoing repression, while the remainder, precisely on account of this intimate connection, undergoes idealization" (1957, p.150). Here, the capacity for objects to embody both an ideal and a debased form is put forward, with such a twofold quality implying the mechanism of repression. While certain films in Wenders' trajectory will tend to finish with an emphasis on idealisation or rejection, taking these objects as a whole reveals a dialectic at work in which America holds an equivocal place. In other words, it is not as though America is simply idealised or reviled, but both simultaneously. Another conceptualisation of the object that runs parallel to Freud's is Jacques Lacan's concept of *das Ding*, an object that represents the primordial inner desires of the subject. As Richard Boothby (2001) describes:

In the encounter with *das Ding* the subject thus comes into relation with an aspect of the real that is at once outside and inside itself. *Das Ding* functions to site, to hold the place of, something that will emerge at the heart of the subject itself. It will establish the originary object that all subsequent longing will strive to re-find, but in doing so serves to orient the subject with respect to its own innermost longings (2001, p. 205).

By considering America as a form of *das Ding* in Wenders' work, the significant objects in his films can be read symptomatically and holistically as part of a broader structure. The intention here is not to discover a primal repressed kernel, but to understand the various ways Wenders dramatizes his relation to America, crucially, through the mediation of objects. In this sense, it is through these material and immaterial traces that a different understanding of the director's work can be forged.

### America as Substitute Object

Wenders' obsession began in the early postwar period, prior to the director's foray into filmmaking. These years in Germany were largely marked by the task of responding to the defeat of the German forces and the subsequent fall of the Nazi state. In Jennifer M. Kapczynski's historical account of this period, she points to the ubiquity of corporeal and medical metaphors, with Germany cast as a "critically wounded body" suffering from the "extended effects of fascism" (2018, p.2). Through this language of sickness, the postwar condition developed an alternative to enduring collective guilt over the atrocities committed, instead framing the German recovery through a "model of collective illness" (2018, p.3). Likewise, as Eric L. Santner (1990) describes, an immediate recognition of the "crimes committed in the name of the fatherland" (1990, p.3) and mourning "for the victims of Nazism" did not follow (1990, p.3), with German

subjects more preoccupied with the psychic crisis of the “traumatic shattering of the specular relations they had maintained with Hitler and the *Volksgemeinschaft*” (1990, p.4). Framing the collapse of these forms of domestic symbolic authority was the context of the Cold War, with America seeing value in increasing its influence over the country in the late 1950s (Patton, 1999, p.17-18). Specifically, the German state began to be mediated by the forces of American politics, economics and culture. Such a Cold War dynamic produced a conservative reaction within several sections of German society, which sought to maintain the social order as it had existed previously (Kolker and Beicken, 1993, p.12). Drawing from interviews and biographical sources, Kolker and Beicken point out that Wenders saw in American popular culture (such as rock music, Hollywood film and television) an oppositional and transformative force. According to this account, the proliferation of American popular culture was endorsed by sections of the youth in Germany because it allowed for a cultural disavowal of fascism. Resonating with Elsaesser’s thesis on the dual position of America in Wenders, Kolker and Beicken argue that “Americanization played a double role in the process” (1993, p.12). On the one hand, working in tandem with the “conservative practice at the time ... substitut[ing] the energies of an external culture for the necessary introspections and progress of the native one,” while in an emancipatory sense (1993, p.12), it freed “intellectuals and ordinary people alike, who embraced it from the burdening legacies of the German past” (1993, p. 12). Finding resonance with this

latter part, Wenders saw American culture as a safe or alternative place that existed outside the fascist cultural past that preceded him. In a mid-1970s interview, Wenders himself recalled that:

rock'n'roll gave a lot of people a sense of identity for the first time. In a way, because it had more to do with joy than with anything else. So it was with rock'n'roll that I started to think of fantasy, or creativity, as having something to do with joy: the idea of having a *right* to enjoy something (Dawson, 1976, p.10).

This account does well to document the dialectic at work in the postwar configuration, as the German enjoyment of American culture is necessarily supplemented by a disavowal of the nation's recent history of Nazism. In this early period, along with many of the youth within Germany, Wenders approached American culture as a substitute object with the possibility of liberation and escape from a troubled past.

### *Knowing the Object in Alice in the Cities*

Such a laudatory orientation towards American popular culture is problematised in Wenders' 1974 film *Alice in the Cities*, the first of his road movie trilogy that chronicles Phil (Rüdiger Vogler), a German writer, and his struggle to compose a piece about the United States. On Phil's journey back to Germany after failing to meet the deadline for his article, he encounters Lisa



(Lisa Kreuzer) and her daughter Alice (Yella Rottländer) who are also on their way back home. After learning that flights to Germany have been cancelled due to a flight controller strike, Lisa leaves Alice with Phil to deal with a recently ended relationship with a man named Hans. Phil and Alice fly to Amsterdam to wait for Lisa, but she never arrives. At this point, Alice and Phil decide to return to West Germany to find Alice's grandmother, although the young girl is unable to remember the address or name of her relative. After searching through the city of Wuppertal, Alice reveals that she made up the fact that her grandmother lives there, to Phil's anger. At this point, Phil drops Alice off at the police station, but the young girl escapes and finds Phil with the information that her grandmother lives in Ruhr. The pair search the area for a short while before encountering the police officer that had earlier checked Alice into the station, who informs them that Lisa and the grandmother have been found, with the police search being not for Lisa or the Grandmother but for Phil and Alice themselves. In the final scene, Phil and Alice sit together on a train to Munich. After Phil reads a paper declaring the death of John Ford, he declares that he will finish his story on America.

A central concern of *Alice in Cities* is the relationship that Phil has with America and American culture, which is framed by several objects. Corollary to his search for Alice's mother and grandmother, Phil is also involved in a psychic search for the thing that will provide him with an answer to the enigma of America, with each ensuing object he encounters offering a

different response. Such a dynamic is set up in the first part of the film, which follows Phil's solo adventures around an idyllic beach and motel landscape near New York. This portion of the film foregrounds Phil's way of relating to America as a fantasmatic space that can't be captured by images or words, a position that is mediated through the object of Phil's instant camera and the subsequent photographs he takes. In the opening scene, Phil sits underneath a jetty with his camera, singing the 1964 American doo-wop hit "Under the Boardwalk" to himself and taking photos of the ocean in front of him. Phil observes the photos he has taken and compares them with the subject matter. Reflecting on his photographs later, Phil laments "It just never shows what you saw." After the beach, Phil spends the night at a motel watching an old Hollywood movie, which offers him the inverse of his pristine fantasy. What follows is a montage of driving that fades back into the Hollywood movie as shots of Phil sleeping are shown. Returning back to the consistent shot of Phil awake watching the TV, a commercial of a man advertising a community development in Florida is shown, to which Phil reacts harshly, throwing his shoe at the screen and knocking the TV onto the floor. Such distaste for the commercial side of American culture is consistent in Phil's character, as he later reads a selection from his incomplete article aloud:

What's so barbaric about this TV is not that it chops up everything and interrupts it with ads, though that's bad enough. Far worse is that everything it shows turns into advertising

too, ads for the status quo. All these TV images come down to the same common, ugly message, a kind of vicious contempt. No image leaves you in peace. They all want something from you.

While Phil maintains this level of cynicism, on his way back to Europe with Alice, he finds himself unconsciously drawn back to the image of America in several ways. A clear example is his attendance of a Chuck Berry concert while in Wuppertal, a scene that features several images of him drinking CocaCola and intently listening, showing his enjoyment of the spectacle of American culture. The object of the CocaCola bottle stands quite directly as an object of distinctly American enjoyment, following Žižek's theorisation of it as "the direct embodiment of "IT," of the pure surplus of enjoyment over standard satisfactions, of the mysterious and elusive X we are all after in our compulsive consumption of merchandise" ("Surplus-*Jouissance* Between the Sublime and the Trash"). Such an object has a strong resonance with Phil's own fantasmatic attachment to the image of America, which, at this stage, he feels is still enigmatic to him. Stressing the use-less dimension of the drink, Žižek posits that "since Coke does not satisfy any concrete need, we drink it only as a supplement, after some other drink has satisfied our substantial need" as it is this "superfluous character that makes our thirst for Coke all the more insatiable" ("Surplus-*Jouissance* Between the Sublime and the Trash"). In this sense, the bottle of Coca-Cola represents for Phil the successor to his camera as the embodiment of America's fundamentally elusive and quasi-noumenal nature.



*Figure 1: Phil enjoys Coca Cola at the Chuck Berry concert in Wuppertal in *Alice in the Cities*.*

The other, more subtle ways that Phil's attachment is shown is in the quiet moments in hotels where he looks back through photos of his time in the US, as well as his realisation that he has kept his key from Starway Hotel, the place he stayed at near New York. Phil's attachment to his photos and the hotel key can be understood through the logic of the fetish, where an ordinary empirical object is elevated to an augmented status through the process of unconscious libidinal investment.

However, later scenes of the film have the effect of demystifying the fetish of America, firstly by challenging the objective status of photographs as guarantors of truth, and elsewhere in the final scene, where the death of John Ford sparks Phil's intent to finish his article. The first

case is presented in the scene in which Phil and Alice are driving around the Ruhr region in search of Alice's grandmother's house. Several instances are shown of Phil talking with locals about where the location of the house might be and showing them Alice's photo. Rather than leading them directly to the house, the information given by the civilians is inconsistent and ends up taking them further away from their destination. From the experience of these failures, it appears that Phil comes to recognise the necessity of interpretation and desire in the viewing of images, which he reflects back upon his own adoring gaze of the photographs of America.

In the final scene, where Alice and Phil return to Munich to meet with Alice's mother, the definitive object of the film, the newspaper, is presented. This object stands for the assertion of objectivity and finality in the film, standing as a counter to the ephemeral objects of exchange, such as the keys, Coca-Cola and camera, which ignite Phil's desire but don't provide him with an adequate response to the enigma of America. The scene begins with a mid-shot of Phil, followed by a close-up that reveals a newspaper article entitled "'Lost World' On the Death of John Ford." Phil seems to ponder it for a moment, before being interrupted by Alice's question: What will you do in Munich? Phil pauses, and then begins to smile, responding, "I'll finish writing that story." Alice retorts, "You're scribbling?" to which Phil again smiles and nods.



Figure 2: Phil's newspaper declares the death of Hollywood director John Ford in *Alice in the Cities*.

The logic that this final scene ascribes is that the creative work can only be pursued once the symbolic paternal authority of John Ford has been demystified, or in this case, has passed on. In this way, *Alice in the Cities* demonstrates Phil being able to overcome his fantasmatic relationship with America, resulting in a newfound ability to adequately capture the country free from fetishisation. While Phil from *Alice in the Cities* can be taken in many ways as a figure that resembles Wenders' own obsession with America, this final scene betrays the inexorable attachment that the German filmmaker has with America and American popular culture.<sup>1</sup> Formally speaking, while the proliferation of various types of objects in *Alice in the Cities* points to the overall ambivalence of Wenders' position, the final scene decisively emphasizes one object's ability to cast light over the others. However, such a finality would not halt Wenders'

continued attachment to the framing object of America, as the oscillation between fetishisation and debasement would follow in the films to come. Indeed, the films that immediately followed *Alice in the Cities* would primarily conjure the image of America through reference to genre. In particular, *The Wrong Move* (1975) and *Kings of the Road* (1976) drew heavily from the road movie corpus, a genre which had a resurgence within Hollywood in the 1960s with *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider* (1969). Hopper would go on to play a leading role in Wenders' 1977 homage to film noir *The American Friend*, a rendition of American novelist Patricia Highsmith's *Ripley's Game* which heavily referenced American music (such as The Kinks and Bob Dylan) and featured Hollywood directors Nicholas Ray and Samuel Fuller in the role of gangsters. Such a persistent attachment to America would become pushed to its limits during the production of *Hammett*, a film that provoked a profound shift in the trajectory Wenders' career.

### The Trauma of *Hammett*

*Hammett* (1982) was Wenders' American debut feature, a neo-noir film shot in San Francisco that features Francis Ford Coppola as the executive producer. Compared to the earlier Wenders films, *Hammett* appears as a major departure, both stylistically and formally. For this, it remains a perplexing film for many, with theorists and reviewers much preferring to consider the works he made during the five-year production of the film because of their directly critical stance with

regard to Hollywood.<sup>2</sup> For many, *Hammett* represents a formal incursion in the context of the Wenders oeuvre, one which is often forgotten to focus on the more stylistically realist elements of his other work. Likewise, films made during the production of *Hammett* (such as *The State of Things* and *Lightning Over Water*) are often read as Wenders' "complex response to this foray into the unknown," marking the director's flight from the trauma of the rigid and oppressive Hollywood studio system (Russell, 1995, p.96). The majority of the scholarship claims that *Hammett* is a film that stands outside of Wenders' control and vision, and critically, the film has attracted only a cursory glance, seen as a mere contingency or misfire compared to his other great works of European cinema. As Vincent Canby from a 1983 *New York Times* review claims, "It's not ever boring, but heaven only knows what it's supposed to be about or why it was made" (1983, p.8), going as far as to claim the "total absence of Mr. Wenders's point of view as a European cineaste" as compared to *The American Friend* (1977) and *The State of Things* (1982) (1983, p.8). Elsewhere, Kolker and Beicken similarly undercut the film as a project with little to no value, pointing to the contrast between the studio system's negation of artistry and Wenders' role as a "sensitive, subjective filmmaker" (1993, p.101). Furthermore, the director's "attempts to maintain his sensibilities and cinematic raison d'être against the Hollywood machine were done in for good and all by his *Hammett* experience," with the project being ultimately



“unredemptive and fruitless” (1993, p.101). Within this broader narrative, the failure of *Hammett* and the Coppola production provoked a direct artistic response from Wenders, in the form of *The State of Things*. Compared to *Hammett*, this film appears as a return to the director’s previous approach, refusing the Hollywood studio system’s penchant for simplicity:

All of the conventional narrative elements, a simple linearity, continuity, psychologically motivated characters, a defined and ‘realistic’ space through which the characters move, melodramatic closure – those elements that Coppola and his producers persuaded Wenders to adopt in the second version of *Hammett* – are negated in *The State of Things* (1993, p. 98-99).

Catherine Russell also discusses the importance of *The State of Things* in conceptualising and critiquing *Hammett*, linking the film, as well as *Lightning Over Water* (another Wenders film made during the production of *Hammett*) to the idea of the death of realism in Wenders’ oeuvre. For Russell, both films represent the “mortality of a certain ideal of realist European art cinema,” with Wenders fascination with death acting in part as “an allegory of the failure of the filmmaking promised by the French New Wave,” as well as the realist cinema proposed by Andre Bazin (1995, p. 68). Following Russell’s reading “Wenders’s spectator is lured into a Bazinian obsession for total cinema” however, “as the gap between reality and image is narrowed, that reality is at the same time dying, revealed as temporary” (1995, p.84). Concomitant with the abandoning of the ideal of realist cinema is the notion that Wenders was forced to give in to the classical Hollywood requirement for narrative as a necessary

precondition. While Wenders himself virtually disowned the film after its release, he displayed an interest in releasing his own director's cut. Nonetheless, only a cut negative has survived. Framing its initial and retrospective receptions, *Hammett* might itself be understood as a traumatic object that was swiftly refused by director, critic and spectator alike. As previously mentioned, in light of his experience in Hollywood, Wenders turned to another film, *The State of Things*, to articulate his ambivalence. In particular, many critics use the autobiographical element of this film to substantiate their critique of *Hammett*.

### The Determining Object in *The State of Things*

*The State of Things* (1982) chronicles the character Fritz (Patrick Bauchau), a film director whose project in Portugal is cut short due to the removal of American funding. Refusing to give in to this obstacle, he subsequently travels to Los Angeles to confront his producer about the nature of cinema. For Fritz, a film can exist without a necessary plot impetus; it can effectively work without the “walls” of an explicit narrative. However, for the Hollywood producer Gordon (Allen Garfield), a film by all accounts must have a narrative. A crucial piece of dialogue between the two reveals this dynamic:

Gordon: A movie's got to have walls.

Fritz: Why walls? The space between the characters can carry the load.

Gordon: You're talking about reality. Fuck reality. Cinema is not about life going by.

Importantly, in the final part of the film, Fritz is killed by an un-locatable object, which Russell reads as a “capitulation to storytelling,” and Wenders’ “revelation that ‘all stories have to end, so all stories are about death’” (1995, p. 93).



Figure 3: Fritz holds his camera up in a futile attempt to protect himself from the unseen lethal force in *The State of Things*.

With a different accent, Kolker and Beicken read the defeatist logic of *The State of Things* as a way for Wenders to purge himself of Hollywood, and reaffirm the absence of narrative.

Specifically, the film emerges as “a determined stand, a purification through defiance, that attempts to claim ... the moral integrity and imaginative vitality of a cinema that foregrounds

form and the auteur's imagination over story and commercial interest" (1993, p.101-102). This theme of purification is central to this reading of the film, which altogether functions as:

an act of cleansing for Wenders as much as it is a denunciation of the Hollywood system ... a cathartic way for him to eliminate unyielding and perhaps unfruitful aesthetic obsessions by reflecting them in a work that is about that very preoccupation, a way to achieve the redemption lost in the making of *Hammett* (1993, p. 104-105).

Once again, the narrative presented by the critics of *Hammett* is one in support of Wenders continuity as a director, with *The State of Things* acting as a restoration of both a "desire to protect cinema from the subversive powers of the cultural industry" (1993, p.109), as well as Wenders himself from the impurity of the studio system. Considering the lethal un-locatable object in *The State of Things* comparatively, this period in Wenders' work might be characterised as one in which objects come to dominate and determine their subjects. Similar to *Alice in the Cities*, a definitive object comes to allegorise Wenders' relationship to the United States, however, rather than offering the prospect of knowability and mastery, it is the object which appears to master the subject. Significant here is the shift from material to immaterial objects, which marks a turn in Wenders from the empirical and knowable, to the intangible and unknowable. Within this position, rather than the subject determining the object, the object

comes to determine the subject, a repetition of the situation in which Wenders personally found himself in the Hollywood studio system.

Such a dramatic shift in position is one worth considering more closely, as the duality of either a determination *by* or mastery *of* objects prompts the existence of a dialectical alternative between such positions. In exploring such an alternative, the status of *Hammett* as a short circuit might be further considered. While the dominant account of Wenders' complete lack of creative control in the Hollywood studio system is tempting to take as an example of the total conservatism of Hollywood and the culture industry, the naturalization of such a reading creates space for a certain level of suspicion. In keeping with the ambivalence that Wenders holds towards the place of America, an alternative approach places *Hammett* as a film that is traumatic for Wenders, not from the point of him having no input or vision in the final product, but rather, having revealed something in him so proximate that the director had no choice but to retreat and denounce his association with it. If such a reading is to be substantiated, a return to the film *Hammett* must be ventured, paying close attention to the feature that Wenders was drawn to but, at least initially, recoiled from: the potency of narrative. While it is perhaps true that all narratives, by virtue of their form, presuppose the loss and potential re-finding of an object, by engaging with a tighter form of narrative tension, Wenders forges a novel relation to objects through his experience directing *Hammett*.

## The Radicality of Narrative in *Hammett*

*Hammett* holds such a unique place in Wim Wenders' filmography because of its investment in narrative, something that is mostly shied away from in his earlier films such as *The Goalkeeper's Anxiety of the Penalty Kick* (1972) and *The Wrong Move* (1975). While it seems that this convention is firmly tied to the conservatism of the Hollywood studio system, Wenders' encounter with it in *Hammett* and the later film *Paris, Texas*, shows that an engagement with narrative provokes the possibility of an alternative relationship towards the object of America. In an essay on Jean-Luc Godard's shift from narrative to non-narrative driven cinema, Todd McGowan considers that while "narrative most often works to ideological ends and to depoliticize the spectator with an image of social harmony," it is also "requisite for making evident the antagonism that undermines the functioning of ideology" (2012, p.112-113). In this Lacanian sense, narrative in cinema functions on the level of the symbolic, acting as a potential mediator for the revelation of antagonism within a film. In *Hammett*, a clear template for narrative and desire is laid out, with the protagonist Dashiell Hammett (Frederic Forrest) caught up in a web of mystery that concerns the elusive whereabouts of Crystal Ling (Lydia Lei). For its critics, *Hammett* relies on a conventional narrative, simple linearity, continuity, psychologically motivated characters and a defined and realistic space through which the characters move.

However, it is not simply narrative that Wenders came across in the making of *Hammett*, but more specifically, the radical link between narrative and fantasy. Given the opening assertion that America exists as a fantasy object for Wenders, it follows that a fantasy object might only be taken seriously by representing it fantasmatically. In *Hammett*, the dramatization of fantasy is shown in the scene after the casino owner Fong's bodyguard beats up Hammett and throws him in a solitary confinement room. What follows is a fantasmatic scene without any previous correlation, by which Hammett, in a semi-conscious state, is addressed by an unknown man with a cowboy hat and the elusive Crystal Ling. The oneiric nature of the scene is immediately detectible, taking place in a pastiche western universe:

Cowboy Man: You gonna be able to cut it, laddiebuck?

Hammett: Oh, god. Why couldn't it be giant spiders and pink elephants? What the hell is this supposed to be?

Cowboy Man: Well, what does it look like? It's a Mexican crib joint! Christ, you picked it out!

Hammett: I did?

Crystal Ling: I told you he wouldn't remember.

Cowboy Man: This is it, kid. This is where they make the big payoff. General Calaveras and his bunch. Twenty crates of Springfield aught-threes for 85,000 Mexican silver dollars. Now do you remember?

Hammett continues to engage in this nonsensical back and forth with Ling and the Cowboy man, with the intercutting shots of him coming back to consciousness in the darkroom contrasting

significantly with the bright pink landscape of the fantasy world. The following shot, from the perspective of an open door, shows a Mariachi band stepping outside the range of visibility,



Figure 4: The vibrating animatronic doll cackles excessively within Hammett's fantasy sequence in *Hammett*.

Following this, he finds himself being addressed by a small Chinese girl who beckons him to follow her. He gets up and leaves through the door, which takes him through to a dormitory area and a bathhouse before arriving in a small room where he finds his partner Ryan, who had been declared missing up to this point of the story.

Within this passage, two objects stand out as playing central roles. Perhaps most obviously, the animatronic doll invokes a sense of shock and anxiety in both the spectator and in the character Hammett, existing as an exceedingly out of place object in an already absurd



environment. The uncanny nature of the doll itself, in attempting to imitate a human subject adds to the ambiguity it provokes. Beyond the physical presence of the doll, the immaterial status of the laughing voice adds to the bizarre and seemingly unplaceable nature of the scene, harking back to the un-locatable object that kills Fritz in *The State of Things*. In Jacques Lacan's work, the voice is itself considered an object, or more specifically, a partial object, which both elicits the desire of the subject, but also threatens the subject with the traumatic dimension of such a desire. In addition to the voice, the disjointed visual construction of the scene, reveals the presence of another immaterial object in the scene, specifically, what psychoanalytic film theory terms the gaze.<sup>3</sup> In opposition to the look, the gaze is the point in the visual field that takes the spectator's place into account, thus transforming the seemingly neutral backdrop of the film. Developing from Lacan's formulations in Seminar XI, Joan Copjec describes the gaze as the "object cause of the subject of desire in the field of the visible," provoking the revelation that "it is what the subject does not see and not simply what it sees that founds it" (1994, p.34). An encounter with the gaze, which usually appears as a distortion or interruption, changes the viewer's perception of what they are viewing as a purely external medium, with their own desire now caught up within the film itself. As Todd McGowan elaborates, "The gaze is a blank point—a point that disrupts the flow and the sense of the experience—within the aesthetic structure of the film, and it is the point at which the spectator is obliquely included in the film"

(2008, p.8). Such an encounter marks a moment of gaze (in the form of the animatronic doll's sporadic appearance) within the film, one which would not have been possible without Hammett's libidinal investment in the figure of Crystal and in finding Ryan. This is to say, such an encounter with fantasy requires a minimal commitment to narrative to take place. The fundamental gesture of this scene is that Hammett, after having experienced the encounter, now finds himself within his own fantasy frame, revealing that fantasy and reality can now no longer be separated. Through *Hammett*, Wenders accepts the condition of fantasy as constitutive of reality, a radical gesture that breaks from the separation of the two shown in his previous films. Returning back to the issue of Wenders' adamant denouncement of the Hollywood studio system, both verbally in interviews and more extensively in the films *The State of Things* (1982), *Reverse Angle* (1982) and *Lightning Over Water* (1980), it is clear that the experience of making *Hammett* constituted a traumatic encounter for the director. Rather than simply put this down to issues of a lack of creative freedom in the shadow of Francis Ford Coppola, *Hammett* remained a traumatic, yet generative encounter for Wenders because he saw the radical potential of narrative and fantasy in approaching the object of America.



Figure 5: Hammett finds himself within his own fantasy frame in *Hammett*.

In striking too close to the director's attachment to his fantasy object, the director likely had no choice but to renounce his unconscious investment in it through the films he made inbetween the production process. While *Hammett* was perhaps not the film that either he or the producers wanted to make, its mark on Wenders is undeniable, a mark that finds repeated expression in the film that followed, *Paris, Texas* (1982).

### Embracing the Fantasy in *Paris, Texas*

*Paris, Texas* is in many ways, for Wenders, a self-reflection upon his filmmaking over the New German Cinema era of production, as well as, a culmination of his ongoing ambivalence towards the object of America. The film's script was co-authored by Wenders and American playwright Sam Shepard, being the final film in a series that the German director would make in America

before his European return with *Wings of Desire* (1987). As Richard Brody characterises in a 2017 retrospective, *Paris, Texas* is a film deeply interested in America, with Wenders filtering “his mythologized America back onto American characters and places” culminating in “a cinematic echo chamber that also echoes Hollywood’s clichéd sentimentality and offers no contrasting practical complexity”. Specifically, the 1982 film emerges as a kind of spiritual successor to *Hammett*, taking the idea of the object as revelatory rather than restrictive to its logical conclusion. The intimate links between the two films begin with the sparse desert landscape – somewhere between Texas and Mexico – that marks the opening scene of *Paris, Texas*, a throwback to the fantasy scene from *Hammett*. In this landscape, seemingly bereft of all content, the film introduces the character of Travis (Harry Dean Stanton), a middle-aged man with a grimy suit and red baseball cap who appears to be aimlessly walking through this barren environment. As McGowan claims, this opening scene “establishes a sense of mystery around the identity of Travis (Harry Dean Stanton), who represents the paradigmatic subject of desire, a subject almost completely bereft of fantasmatic support for his identity” (2008, p.197). As Travis is eventually found and picked up by his brother, he regains his capacity to speak and when he returns to Walt’s (Dean Stockwell) house in Los Angeles, he develops an interest in his son Hunter, who he abandoned for four years. This development, read allegorically through

Wenders' career of films marks his movement from the early narrative-less films to a place where narrative is accepted. Such a point resonates with Bennett's discussion of the film, which notes the contrast between the initially awe-inspiring landscape of the rocky desert with the perplexing and alienating modern American environment of "airports, flyovers, advertising billboards, plastic chairs and processed food" (2022, p.132). These contemporary settings initially appear as obstacles to the personal drama that unfolds, as "vital, intimate conversations and events" are continually interrupted by "crowded, intrusive backgrounds," yet, for Bennett, this contrast is key to the film's sympathy with Travis' character, who is forced to act "*in spite* of what is going on around him" (2022, p.137). This insistence dovetails with Wenders' own obsession with America, which Bennett characterises as both a "kind of love of Americana," yet also "a love for the possibilities for human development that, despite its challenges, America presents" (2022, p. 143). For Bennett, Travis, as well as Ry Cooder's accompanying soundtrack to the film, stand out as aspects of an "artform that only America could have produced," while also functioning as "products of the society that the film critiques" (2022, p.143). In this sense, in *Paris, Texas*, Wenders repeats his rapport with the United States and Hollywood, not in the form of an abstract refusal, but in a dialectical mediation whereby America is represented, but not uncritically. In this way, Wenders forges a novel relation to his fantasy object, from the position of proximity and intimacy rather than refusal and distance.

This theme of intimacy finds its apogee in the widely discussed penultimate scene, in which Travis finds himself in the fantasy space of a peep show booth. This environment contains the traumatic element of his desire in his ex-wife Jane (Nastassja Kinski), who during his initial visit, he keeps at a distance through the use of a one-sided mirror. Upon his all-important second visit to the booth, Travis recounts the story of their relationship without explicitly mentioning their names, but this time reveals his identity by turning his chair around and adjusting the lamp so that Jane can see him. Several commentators of this scene again refer to the concept of the gaze to interpret this moment of vulnerability. In Pagès' reading, the overlapping shadows between the characters come to represent the failure of the visual, as “love cannot be fixed in an image,” with the scene revealing that “in love there is always something that cannot be expressed or represented in an imaginary way” (2021, p. 757).



*Figure 6:* The reflective mirror is turned back towards Travis, and the spectator now sees him from the position of Jane in *Paris, Texas*.

In McGowan's reading of the scene, he observes that the fantasmatic nature of the environment is fertile ground for Travis to communicate his spoken narrative, precisely because it offers him the protection of keeping his identity concealed, as well as placing Jane in the role of listener.

However, despite this shielding, the radicality of the gaze emerges:

Wenders indicates that Travis feels his vulnerability as he enters into this fantasy world: even though Jane cannot see through the glass, Travis turns his chair around and faces away as he speaks. He can't endure the possibility of encountering the gaze in Jane's blank stare (2008, p. 198).

In the broader framing of Wenders' oeuvre, this scene shows a repetition of the radical gesture in *Hammett*, whereby a character finds themselves implicated in their own fantasy, but doesn't retreat from it. This repetition, rather than simply duplicating the original, shows an allegorical insistence at work within Wenders' work as a director, moving from a refusal of fantasy to an embrace of it.

The logic of the third position that emerges first in *Hammett* and is then repeated in *Paris, Texas*, is that the fantasy object of America can exist between states of mastery. Instead, there is shown to be a certain liberation to be gained from the dismissal of mastery as a necessary condition of each side of the subject-object relationship. Such a gesture doesn't do away with or relinquish subjectivity, but rather, reconciles a different mode of subjectivity that emphasizes the subject's vulnerability. As McGowan explains, it is precisely this moment that marks the ethical dimension of fantasy, as "at the heart of the fantasy, the desiring subject itself becomes exposed"

(2008, p.199). It is this aspect of fantasy that “places the cinematic spectator in the same position as Travis” as both find themselves “fully exposed on the screen, materialized in the form of the gaze” (2008, p.199). In this way, through the obstacle of *Hammett*, Wenders develops from a filmmaker of the mastery of or by objects, to a filmmaker in which both subject and object are co-implicated in one another dialectically. Extending McGowan’s reading here, it can be claimed that the ethical dimension of fantasy in Wenders’ film can be applied to the director himself, as in *Paris, Texas*, Wenders embraces fantasy in the form of narrative.

Applying this theoretical analogy to the discussion of Wim Wenders’ films from the 1970 and 1980s, it appears that the director consistently maintained an inquiry into America and the promise of Hollywood, yet kept its influence at a safe distance in his early films, not allowing it to corrupt his mostly non-narrative, realist style. During the production of *Hammett*, he came to realise the inexorable status it played in his films, which he initially critiqued as being suffocating in *The State of Things* and mythic in *Lightning Over Water*. However, with the release of *Paris, Texas*, Wenders embraced his fantasy of America and Hollywood, and if only on the level of filmmaking, saw the value in identifying with this short-circuit and using it for his own creative impulse.

This article has considered Wim Wenders’ relationship to the fantasy object of America in his



1970s and 1980s work. In particular, it has used the place of objects in Wenders' films to theorise distinct orientations and shifts in logic. Firstly, in the initial period of Wenders' life, before he became a filmmaker, he related to American culture as a substitute for his country's fascistic past. Such a viewpoint was countered in *Alice in the Cities*, where the protagonist Phil is initially puzzled by the enigma of America, but with the news of John Ford's death, finds he can comprehend and master it. In the shift from *Alice in the Cities* to *The State of Things*, the subject's relationship to objects changes from the mastery *over* objects, to the mastery *of* objects. These two positions inscribe two different orientations towards the fantasy of America, the first emphasizing a total knowability of the object, while the second, more cynically, stresses the overwhelming of the subject by the object (as a proxy for the Hollywood system). However, an alternative emerges through a more careful reading of the film *Hammett*, which, rather than emphasizing the mastery of the subject or the object, implicates the two in a dialectic. As opposed to the finality of *The State of Things*, the subject's encounter with the object in *Hammett* is revelatory, directing the protagonist towards their goal. Such a position takes on a developed inflection in *Paris, Texas*, in which the subject (Travis) implicates himself in his own fantasy, revealing himself for his Other (Jane). At this point in Wenders' career, a refined relationship to the fantasy object of America is sustained, as the question posed by his work might be thought of as no longer simply – what is America to me? – but, in addition – what am I to America? It is

thus logically sound that in the years following *Paris, Texas* Wenders would turn to the figure of Yasujiro Ozu in his film *Tokyo-Ga* (1985), another director who bore a highly ambivalent relationship to Hollywood and America.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Wenders' relationship to the United States has many parallels with Jean Baudrillard's 1986 study *America*, which considers the mythology of the "road" and the "west" that fetishises America. I owe this insight to Tony Hughes d'Aeth.

<sup>2</sup> To clarify, the production of *Hammett* began in the late 1970s but was only released in 1982.

<sup>3</sup> The initial theorisation of the concept of the gaze in cinema came in the 1970s, with the work of Christian Metz, Jean-Louis Baudry and contributors to the British cinema journal *Screen*. This first wave tended to associate the gaze less with a moment of radical disruption, than with an imaginary identification between the spectator and the image. In the 1990s, Joan Copjec's essay "The Orthopsychic Subject: Film Theory and the Reception of Lacan" re-theorized the gaze as the point of dis-identification.