

'The Role of Memory': Image, Place and Story in the Films of Wim Wenders

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...the real storytellers and artists are places.¹

In spite of the evident attention given to the composition of sound in his films – he has, after all, worked closely with musicians such as Ry Cooder, Willie Nelson, Nick Cave, Daniel Lanois, and U2 – the centrality of the image is a topic to which Wim Wenders has returned on numerous occasions in film, lecture, and conversation. In one respect, this should be no surprise, for it is surely the image, or more specifically, the moving image, which is the essence of film. This is not to denigrate the role of sound, but merely to acknowledge that, in film, sound works only in and through its relation to the image, and to the succession of images. Yet it is not simply the centrality of the image to which Wenders draws attention, but to the relation between the image and memory, as well as dream, between image and story, between image and place.

Responding to a question concerning the role of memory in his films, Wenders tells us that 'Every film starts off from memories, and every film is also a sum of many memories. Then again, every film creates memories'.² The memory and the image are closely tied together: memory is frequently given in the form of the image, and the image also contains and gives rise to memory. Moreover, while memories are certainly not restricted to the visual

¹ 'In Defence of Places', Director's Guild of America Magazine, 28-4 (2003), online at http://www.dga.org/news/v28_4/craft_wendersplaces.php3. Wenders makes a similar comment in Once. Pictures and Stories (Munich: Schirmer/Mosel & DAP/Distributed Art Publishers, 2001), p.13: 'I firmly believe in the story-building power of landscapes... Landscapes can be leading characters themselves and the people in them the extras'.

² 'Film Thieves', in Wim Wenders: On Film. Essays and Conversations (London: Faber & Faber, 2001), p.194.

alone,³ the memories from which a film begins are surely for the most part, if not all (since one would not wish to dismiss the role of sound) , the memories that are indeed given in the form of the remembered image. The idea of the film as beginning with memories, then, can itself be seen to reinforce the idea of the centrality of the image – in starting from memories the film also starts from images.⁴ Wenders has also said that it is his conviction ‘that a film has to be preceded by a dream,’⁵ and elsewhere that ‘a dream is made of images much more than of words. Your SEE dreams’.⁶ The memory and the dream are often hard to disentangle – memory provides the stuff of dream, while dream can itself be the stuff of memory. It is the image that is common to both, however, and it is the image that each supplies as the stuff of film. The image at issue here, particularly inasmuch as it is remembered, cannot be any mere ‘representation’, as if it were the flattened replica of something no longer present, but instead must carry the fullness, as well as the opacity, that typically comes with memory as such.⁷ Moreover, while every film may start from a remembered image, or from a number of such images, the priority of the image at issue here does not derive from its being first in the succession of images that comprise the film. Instead, the images from which the film starts are those images – those memories – from which the film can itself be said to arise, that stand at its heart and constitute its soul, but which may appear at any point in the succession of images.

The idea that every film begins with a remembered image (or is preceded by an image dreamt) is undoubtedly connected with Wenders’ own

³ Moreover, while memory may most often, at least for the sighted, be heavily oriented to vision, it is often other senses, especially taste and smell (as Proust’s work famously demonstrates), that are the trigger for the recall of memory.

⁴ Wenders has also said that it is his conviction ‘that a film has to be preceded by a dream,’ (‘The art of seeing’, in Wim Wenders: On Film. Essays and Conversations, p.297) and elsewhere that ‘a dream is made of images much more than of words. Your SEE dreams’ (‘The American Dream’, in Wim Wenders: On Film. Essays and Conversations, p.129). The memory and the dream are often hard to disentangle – the memory provides the stuff of dream, while the dream can itself be the stuff of memory. It is the image that is common to both, however, and it is the image that each supplies as the stuff of film.

⁵ ‘The art of seeing’, p.297.

⁶ ‘The American Dream’, p.129.

⁷ Or, to be more specific, that comes with feature of experiential memory – it is not, of course, a feature of what we may call informational or ideational memory.

beginnings in painting: 'Let me go back to the very beginning', he says, 'Once I was a painter. What interested me was space; I painted cityscapes and landscapes. I became a filmmaker when I realised that I wasn't getting anywhere as a painter.'⁸ Moreover Wenders' involvement with painting, as well as with photography, is also evident in the way in which many of the scenes in his films are themselves often photographic or painterly in their character and composition. This is true of many scenes in Paris, Texas (1984), as well as Wings of Desire (1987), but also of scenes in many of Wenders' other films. In The End of Violence (1997), the interplay between film and painting takes on a very specific form in Wenders' use of a version of Edward Hopper's Nighthawks at the Diner as the basis for a number of scenes. The connection with Hopper is a particularly interesting one, since could say of many of Hopper's paintings, as Wenders does, that they also have a certain narrative, or even cinematic, quality: 'An Edward Hopper painting is like the opening paragraph of a story. A car will drive up to a filling-station, and the driver will have a bullet in his belly. They are like the beginnings of American films'.⁹

Wenders' own filmic techniques often draw attention to the scene as image, and thereby also to evoke the photograph or painting. Wenders will thus often shoot a scene in a way such that the camera dwells on the scene alone, leaving its image suspended on the screen, perhaps holding the shot until after the action has passed, or allowing the characters to appear as if they were incidental to the scene as such. In this way the image itself emerges as a distinct element in the film, not merely as one of a succession of images that constantly unfold before our eyes, but as a single constant appearance. Thus Wenders can say, while acknowledging the importance of the combination of images, the montage, that:

⁸ 'Impossible Stories', in Wim Wenders: On Film. Essays and Conversations, p.210. Elsewhere Wenders writes that, 'The first paintings I made were like paintings sustained over a certain length of time. I had more painter models than directors', 'The Truth of Images', in Wim Wenders: On Film. Essays and Conversations, p.324.

⁹ 'A step ahead of the times', in Wim Wenders: On Film. Essays and Conversations, p.419.

...if each image couldn't be taken on its own terms and at its own worth, the sum of all of them would amount to nothing... each individual circumstance is so important to me that I'd happily see it by itself, and each image by itself. I think only if you give each image the right to be there for itself and tell its own story can you hope to be given the right by each image to place it in a larger sequence and make it part of some bigger whole.¹⁰

Once again, however, it is not the image as mere 'representation' that appears here, but the image in its fullness, its opacity, its reality – an image that does not somehow stand in for the world, but rather opens it up. Wenders' films often appear as composed of just such distinct and distinctive images, with each image itself a memory, and a source of memory.

This opening up of the world through the memory and the image occurs in its most direct and immediate way through the way in which the image locates us, orients us, places us. The image thus 're-presents' a place or locale. In fact, if we turn our attention back to memory – that from which Wenders claims every film starts – then the sorts of images that are associated with memory are just those that are both placed and placing in this way,¹¹ while memory as such also seems to stand in a close relation to place. Perhaps nowhere is this relation made so evident as in the work of Marcel Proust, whose In Search of Lost Time (A la recherche du temps perdu), is a work dedicated to the exploration and recuperation of identity, lost in the inexorable passage of temporal succession, through the exploration and recuperation of the remembered places with which that identity is entwined, and through which it is articulated.¹² Indeed, not only are memories tied to places, but places are themselves haunted by memory. To return to a place is thus often to find oneself assailed by memories and emotions that may otherwise have remained hidden and obscure.

Memory – re-remembering – may thus be thought as a form of re-placing, a returning to some place that is no longer the place of our immediate

¹⁰ 'The truth of images', pp.326-7.

¹¹ Once again, the connection is with experiential memory, not the memory of information or idea.

¹² See my discussion of Proust in Place and Experience (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp.138ff.

location; similarly to return to a place is also to be assailed by memory, to re-member. The role of memory, in one sense, is to effect such a return. It is no accident that nostalgia, which is literally, from the original Greek, a pain that comes from the unfulfilled desire to return to the place that is one's home, is so often associated with the experience of places, and the memory of places. The close connection between memory and place may be thought to derive, in part, from the way in which places themselves serve to hold images, feelings, emotions and experiences. It is this character of place that was the basis for the ancient 'art of memory' that was employed, up until the time of the Renaissance, as a means to train memory through the association between certain places, organised as part of a single 'palace' in the mind, and particular images or ideas.¹³

Wenders' work provides us, of course, with some wonderful examples of the connection between memory and place – none better, perhaps, than Wings of Desire. Here is a film in which the leading character could almost, be said to be the city itself – the original German release was titled Himmel über Berlin ('Sky/Heaven over Berlin'), and Wenders himself says that 'the city called the film into being'.¹⁴ The role of Berlin in Wings of Desire is not as some sort of static backdrop to the film's narrative development. Wenders tells us that the film 'isn't about Berlin because it's set there, but because it couldn't be set anywhere else.'¹⁵ The story of the film is, indeed, embedded in, and drawn from, the city, and in this sense the city itself substituted for the script that Wenders did not have – a 'technique', if it can be called that, also exemplified in Kings of the Road (1976),¹⁶ in which the places along the old border between East and West Germany provide much of the basis for the story. As Wings of Desire is drawn from the city, so the sparse narrative structure of the film, which is constituted in terms of many different, if often

¹³ See especially Frances A. Yates, The Art of Memory (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1974).

¹⁴ 'The Truth of Images', p.330. Wenders does say, however, in the commentary to the DVD version of the film, that he prefers the English title.

¹⁵ 'Attempted description of an indescribable film', in Wim Wenders: On Film. Essays and Conversations, p.233.

¹⁶ The more evocative German title is Im Lauf der Zeit – In the Course of Time.

minimal, narrative strands that themselves relate to the different locations through which the film moves and to which it so often returns: Potsdamer Platz, the public library, the Siegesäule Angel, the gutted building in which Peter Falk is filming, the vacant block on which the circus is set up, the bar in which Daniel and Marion meet. The multiple strands that make up the film's narrative come gradually to cluster around the strand that, over the course of the film, establishes itself as central, namely, the story of the angel become human, Daniel, and his relationship with the trapeze artist, Marion; in this way, the various places through which the film moves also come to settle around the key places that figure in the relationship between Daniel and Marion. The integral relation between the city and the stories that make up the narrative structure of the film is such that Wenders can say of Wings of Desire that it is a film 'driven' by place, and, in this respect, the film stands in clear contrast to its Hollywood remake City of Angels (1998, directed by Brad Silberling) – a film that, unlike Wings of Desire, is determined purely by story, not by place (and that also possesses, therefore, a much more traditional narrative structure), and in which the city that is referred to in the film's title, the city of angels itself, Los Angeles, provides nothing more than a convenient location.¹⁷

In Wings of Desire, the city of Berlin is constituted, not only from its contemporary streets, buildings, and roads, but also from the memories and images that are contained in those locations and structures. Indeed, it contains some of Wenders' own memories – for instance, the Renault 4 on which Marion sits in an early scene of the movie was the favourite car of Wenders' childhood, and Marion's caravan contains, among some stones, a photo of Wenders as a child, while the book that Homer examines in the library is Wenders' favourite (which also figures in Notebook on Cities and Clothes – 1989), August Sander's Man of the Twentieth Century. Some of the early scenes in Wings of Desire are also interspersed with archival footage of Berlin during the War, and the memories recounted by Homer as he wanders

¹⁷ See Wenders, 'In Defence of Places'.

through the derelict Potsdamer Platz are the memories of the actor himself, Curt Bois, who knew the pre-war city. The Berlin that appears in Wings of Desire is thus imbued with memory and image – those of Wenders, and of Bois, of the characters within the film, of the paths and places of the city – it is itself made out of such memory and image.¹⁸

This is not to say, however, that the Berlin of Wings of Desire is merely an imagined or remembered city – as if this could be different from the real city. The city is its images and its memories as much as it is its buildings, its streets, its squares, and its people. Yet Berlin is also a city whose identity, and the memories and images that make up that identity, are, in many respects, as fragmented and broken as were its buildings and streets, as divided as was the city itself, at the time Wings of Desire was filmed. Part of the story of Wings of Desire concerns the experience of fragmentation, dislocation, and loss, and the reconstitution of memory and of identity in the face of such fragmentation. Berlin appears, and appears as the city it is, in spite of the loss and destruction to which it has been subjected; the city continues to live, and the human beings who live within, whose lives it gathers together, continue to remember it, to imagine it, to reconstitute it – ‘We live in the cities/And the cities live in us’.¹⁹

The loss, or perhaps better, the questioning, of memory and identity that appears as a theme in Wings of Desire, partly through the angel Damiel’s own search for identity, and for human life, as well as through the loss, dislocation, and reconstitution of the city itself, is a recurrent element in many of Wenders’ films from his early works through to his most recent. Moreover, just as the issues of memory and identity in Wings of Desire are inseparable from city of Berlin, so too are the issues of memory and identity that figure so

¹⁸ The film now also constitutes, of course, a memory of the city as it no longer is, since many of the locations Wenders used, Potsdamer Platz, for instance, have now been redeveloped, and, perhaps most significantly, the city is no longer divided as it was when the film was shot – as Wenders comments ‘The whole film suddenly turned into an archive for things that aren’t around anymore’ (‘A step ahead of the times’, in Wim Wenders: On Film. Essays and Conversations, p.419).

¹⁹ Notebook on Cities and Clothes – see the English commentary as given in Wim Wenders: On Film. Essays and Conversations, p.363 (the title of the film is given here as Notebook on Clothes and Cities).

prominently elsewhere in Wenders' work, whether in Kings of the Road, The American Friend (1977), Paris, Texas, The End of Violence, or in almost any of his other films, are not merely issues about the memories and identities of individual human beings, but about the 'memory' and, one might say, the 'identity' of the world. What is at issue is a remembrance or imagining of the world, a reconstitution of the world, a return to the world. Thus Wenders can say of Wings of Desire that 'I didn't just want to make a film about the place, Berlin. What I wanted to make was a film about people – people here in Berlin – that considered the one perennial question: how to live?' / And so I have 'BERLIN' representing 'THE WORLD.'²⁰

It may, however, appear somewhat odd to talk of this apparent preoccupation with memory and image in terms of a return to the world, or as I have above, as an opening up of the world, since it may well seem to lead in the exact opposite direction, away from the world, into what is indeed a form of nostalgia, a longing for what has been rather than what is, a preoccupation with what exists only as image, and not as reality. Such a view connects with a common tendency, within both European and American thought and culture, to treat the memory and the image as always somewhat removed from their objects, and so from the world, and so to view them as belonging to the life of the subject, but not to the reality of things.

Yet the idea of the memory and the image as removed, or even abstracted, in this way is, arguably, itself somewhat removed from the actuality of human engagement in the world. The world in which we find ourselves is never presented other than as remembered and imagined. The world is given in and through the memory and the image, and the memory and the image are themselves part of the very fabric, the very substance, of the world – just as they are also constitutive of the fabric of a human life. It is, indeed, our memories, and the images that belong to them, that are the basic stuff of our identities as human beings, that inform our present, and shape

²⁰ 'An attempted description of an indescribable film', in Wim Wenders: On Film. Essays and Conversations, p.233.

and direct our future. Without memory our lives are meaningless – are not lives at all – and we remain as mute and incapable as does Travis in the opening scenes of Paris, Texas, as he stumbles across the Texan desert landscape. The one thing Travis carries with him that provides him a sense of his own identity (as opposed to the merely nominal items of identity that enable those who find him to contact his brother), and by which he appears to define himself once he re-enters the world of human discourse, is the image, the photograph, of a nondescript piece of land – ‘Paris, Texas That’s where I began.’²¹

The image, and the memory to which it is related, thus have the capacity to refer us back to ourselves, as well as back to the world, and to the things of the world. Yet the appearance of the image involves an inevitable doubling of that which is presented in the image with the image as such. The doubling that emerges here, the duplication that comes with the very appearance of the image, thus leads in two directions: back to that which is presented, and so back to the world, but also away from that which is presented, away from the world, and on towards a proliferation of images that is enabled by the image itself. One image leads on to many images, even when that multiplication is nothing more than the multiplication of the original image – duplicated by reflection, replication, reproduction. The proliferation of the image is, of course, assisted and promoted by the rise of a whole range of modern technologies from the neon sign, the billboard, the newspaper and magazine, to film, television, video and even inbuilt camera of the mobile phone. Moreover, just as the centrality of the image is a recurrent theme in Wenders’ work, so too is the proliferation of the image – a proliferation that moves us away from the image as it refers us back to the world, and on to the image as it connects with a multiplicity of other images. As Wenders puts it, it is a proliferation that takes us away from the ‘first hand’ to a ‘second-hand’ reality:

²¹ Travis’ comment to his brother in Paris, Texas.

It's hard enough to experience anything at first hand anyway. Everywhere there are the pictures, the second-hand reality. And the pictures are proliferating with breathtaking speed. Nothing can stop them, no organization, no authority.... Images have distanced themselves more and more from reality, and have almost nothing to do with it now. Think back over the last ten or twenty years and the proliferation of images will make you quite dizzy.²²

Film is itself, of course, one of the media that contributes to this proliferation, and Wenders' own movies often play with the image-proliferating effect of film. Thus Wenders frequently includes reproduced images within the scenes of his movies – advertising signs, cinematic projections, video or television pictures (for instance, in Notebook on Cities and Clothes Wenders places, within many of the shots, a small video screen playing images of the same or a similar scene); Until the End of the World (1991) takes the collection, duplication and transmission of images, whether in relation to sight, memory or dream (and the potentially dangerous consequences of such a project) as a central theme; Wenders' films also contain many direct references to film and the practices of film – Kings of the Road in an early example of this, while Wings of Desire and The End of Violence both use the device of a film within the film as an element within the structure of their narratives.

The idea that the reproduction of images by modern technologies is somehow problematic is not without precedent in modern aesthetic theory. Most famously, perhaps, it is a central theme in Walter Benjamin's 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', first published in German in 1936. Benjamin argues that modern techniques of reproduction, and the possibilities for the duplication of artworks that this allows, are destructive of the authentic presence of the artwork:

Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place it happens to be... The situations into which the product of mechanical reproduction can be brought may not touch the actual work of art, yet the quality of its presence is always depreciated. This holds, not only for the art work, but

²² 'Talk About Germany', Wim Wenders: On Film. Essays and Conversations, p.442; see also Wenders' English commentary in Notebook on Clothes and Cities (in Wim Wenders: On Film. Essays and

also, for instance, for a landscape which passes in review before a spectator in a movie...One might subsume the eliminated element in the term 'aura' and go on to say: that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art. One might generalize by saying: the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence.²³

The emphasis on the plurality of copies brought about by reproductive technique is important here, since it immediately connects with Wenders' emphasis on the proliferation of the image. In this respect, it is also noteworthy that in the passage just-quoted, Benjamin takes as examples both the reproduction of the artwork and the representation of landscape in film – thus it seems that it is, indeed, the proliferation of the image that is at issue here as much as it is the reproduction of the artwork in the image.

Film itself has a special role in Benjamin's account. The three technologies that he specifically cites as playing key roles in the development of reproduction are lithography, photography and film, and film he treats as the most powerful of these technologies. Moreover, Benjamin also devotes a significant portion of his discussion specifically to an examination of the structure of film, drawing a number of direct contrasts between film and painting:

Let us compare the screen on which a film unfolds with the canvas of a painting. The painting invites the spectator to contemplation; before it the spectator can abandon himself to his associations. Before the movie frame he cannot do so. No sooner has his eye grasped a scene than it is already changed. It cannot be arrested. Duhamel, who detests film and knows nothing of its significance, although something of its structure, notes this circumstance as follows: 'I can no longer think what I want to think. My thoughts have been replaced by moving images.'²⁴

Conversations, pp.363-74).

²³ Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), pp.220 & 221..

²⁴ Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', p.238. The embedded reference is to Georges Duhamel, *Scènes de la vie future* (Paris, 1930), p.52.

While there is much more to his argument here (including a much more positive appreciation of film and the image than may initially be apparent²⁵), Benjamin seems to present film as placing us completely in the thrall of the image, compelled to move with it, and unable to contemplate what is presented to us, or explore its own complex associations and interconnections – we are forced along in the train of images, along a path that is already determined for us, and from which we cannot diverge. Thus while the painting makes available an open realm of possibilities, and thereby contains an essential indeterminacy, the film, so it would seem, carries a certain already determined direction, an already determined set of movements.

The problem to which reproduction appears to give rise, and which film may be taken to exemplify, is directly tied to the loss of the uniqueness of the object or work that is reproduced, and can be understood, in its simplest terms, therefore, as the threat of a loss of identity. The reproduction of the object involves a multiplication of the object that is also a reduction of the object to just that which is reproducible and repeatable – to that which can be subject to, or graspable by, the techniques of reproduction. As a result, the object is severed from the space and time, the history, the place, to which it originally belonged. Through reproduction the original object is itself lost, and, indeed, the very distinction between object and reproduction ceases to matter, ceases even to be meaningful – there are, in a certain sense, only reproductions. In this way, the reproduction ceases to refer us back to that which it is a reproduction of, and only on to the multiplicity of reproductions of which it is a part. Thus Wenders can claim that amidst the proliferation of images in the contemporary world, there is no longer any reality to which those images can be seen to relate, other, perhaps, than that of the constant play of images as such, no world other than the world of the image alone.

²⁵ In fact, Benjamin sees film and photography as both having the power to reawaken our sense of what is given in the image. Benjamin's analysis, then, does not stop with the recognition of a certain loss through reproductive proliferation – see my 'Heidegger in Benjamin's City', for a further exploration of the possibility that the proliferation of images may actually lead us back to a sense of the presence of things. Moreover, as I argue here, Wenders' work can be seen as constituting a response to the apparent problem posed by the proliferation of images in a way that seeks to use the technologies that contribute to such proliferation so as to return us to a

In Until the End of the World, Wenders presents such a world of the image as itself having an intoxicating and addictive power. The characters of Sam and Clare are both infected by the 'disease of images'²⁶ (elsewhere Wenders refers to the exposure to 'the inflation of images' as 'one of the worst diseases of our civilization'²⁷), and in being so infected, in being so addicted, they cease to be able to function as human beings, withdrawing into a self-obsessive realm that is removed from the immediate place in which they remain situated, from the world in which they nevertheless remain embedded. This is the real danger of the proliferation of the image that is at stake here – a problem that goes beyond any loss of a sense of the authenticity of art alone. In the proliferation of the image, and the immersion in the realm of the image, we risk losing a sense of ourselves, of the world, and of the places within the world to which we never cease to belong, as properly distinct from the images of them or that may be generated in and through them. The proliferation of images generates a 'virtual' world that is both a part of the real world, and yet also not real, since it is, indeed, a world of image; it takes us into a world of image removed from the place of our ordinary embodied existence, and yet it continues to depend on that embodied world, just as we continue to remain anchored in the place of our immediate location – that we can see images at all is dependent on our being located such that the images can be seen, that the images can move us depends on our particular orientation to the things around us, that the images can mean anything to us depends on the history and tradition that is a part of where we ourselves are.

Talk of the 'virtual' here should be immediately suggestive, of course, of the apparent transformation of the world, and of our relation to it, through contemporary digital and virtual technologies. This transformation is often understood as having its most obvious effect in terms of a transformation of

sense of the things as such, and the places in which those things are to be found. In this latter respect, Wenders could be seen to follow a path that is itself indicated in Benjamin's own work.

²⁶ The phrase is from Until the End of the World, but see also 'The truth of images', p.340.

²⁷ 'The truth of images', p.327.

space and time, and especially of space, and a related transformation in the human relation to place – in the world of the virtual, the digital, the global, place and places no longer matter. Every place becomes merely an interchangeable location within a homogenous, flattened-out, space. Within the contemporary film industry, this reduction of place into mere ‘location’ takes on a very real form as, under the influence of largely commercial imperatives, locations become nothing but the generic backdrops to increasingly formula-driven stories and action,²⁸ or, where the location does figure more prominently, it is often for no more than its commodified ‘touristic’ or scenic value (its ‘Sehenswürdigkeit’).

Yet if the proliferation of images does indeed present such a threat, and if, moreover, as Benjamin himself seems to suggest, film itself has played and continues to play a role in this proliferation, then how can film offer any response to such proliferation that would not simply contribute, but would actually constitute a counter to it? There seems no doubt that Wenders himself sees film as indeed having the potential to re-establish the reality of the image, and in so doing to return us, by means of the image, to the world and the places within the world, to which we belong. To achieve this, even to attempt it, means standing that aspect of that duality of the image that leads back to that which is presented in the image, back to the world from which it comes, against the other aspect of the image that leads away from the world in the direction of the proliferation of images. It is with respect to this former aspect, namely, that aspect which leads back to what is presented, that Wenders can be taken as referring when he talks, as he does, of ‘the truth of images’,²⁹ and when he also argues that film, in spite of the way it might also threaten the sense of reality and identity, may also have the power to enable its retrieval:

No other medium can treat the question of identity as searchingly or with as much justification as film. No other language is as capable of addressing itself to the physical reality

²⁸ See Wenders, ‘In Defence of Places’.

of things. "The possibility and the purpose of film is to show everything the way it is."

However exalted that sentence of Belá Belázs sounds, it's true'.³⁰

The question remains, however, as to how film can do this – for clearly not all film is successful in attaining this end, and Wenders' own comments indicate that, even in his eyes, film also contributes, in fact, to an exactly opposite outcome.

In fact, Wenders is quite explicit as to what he believes the solution here to be – a solution, moreover, that has already been implicit in much of the discussion so far. In Until the End of the World, the character of Eugene (played by Sam Neill) tells us, in reference to the 'disease of images' suffered by Clare (Sollveig Dommartin) that, 'I didn't know the cure for the disease of images, but I believed in the magic and the healing power of words and of stories.' Wenders himself comments that 'Clare's sickness is a sickness of images, and she is healed by a much older and simpler art-form [than the art of film], by the art of storytelling,'³¹ and he is also quite clear in acknowledging the role of story in his own film-making practice as an antidote to the loss of reality and identity that occurs through the proliferation or inflation of images (although it is something that he also acknowledges he had to learn). As Wenders puts it:

I found out that there was only one thing I was able to do to not let my images drown in the flood of all the others, and to not let them become the victims of the ongoing competitiveness and the overwhelming spirit of commercialization, and that was: to tell a story.³²

The role of story and narrative has, in fact, stood in the background for a great deal of the discussion so far, without being explicitly taken up. For Wenders, however, the image and the story are closely connected. On the one hand, Wenders seems to treat certain images or kinds of images as themselves

²⁹ See 'The truth of images', pp.324-9.

³⁰ 'The American Friend', p.177.

³¹ 'The truth of images', p.340.

³² 'Urban landscape from the point of view of images', in Wim Wenders: On Film. Essays and Conversations, p.379.

having a certain narrative possibility within them. Thus, referring to a novel by Emmanuel Bove and a book of reproductions of Hopper's paintings, Wenders writes that 'These books remind me that the camera is capable of equally careful description, and that things can appear through it in a good light: the way they are. With these newly acquired images a new story can begin right away...'³³ Yet he also says of the stories that appear in his films that 'the stories ... also work as a means of ordering the images', adding that 'Without stories, the images that interest me would threaten to lose themselves and seem purely arbitrary. For this reason, film stories are like routes.'³⁴

The idea that the story of a film may be like a 'route' immediately picks up, not only on the fact that so many of his movies have been, in one form or another, 'road movies', but also on the role of place and places in his films – something evident, not only in films such as Kings of the Road or Wings of Desire, but throughout almost all of his works. Thus, when Wenders tells us that 'My stories all begin from pictures', he goes on to say, as if it were the same thing, 'My stories start with places, cities, landscapes and roads.'³⁵ The stories that Wenders tells are the stories that are given in the images, in the pictures, but those images, those pictures, are themselves grounded in specific places, in particular spaces and times: 'I could go on with the entire list of my films, proving to you that they all started like this: as a place wanting to be told, as a place needing to be told'.³⁶ One might also say: a place wanting, needing to be shown, but the showing is a showing that cannot occur other than in and through the narrated image – indeed, it is through its narrated character that the image is properly meaningful, that it carries the fullness and the opacity that makes it something other than a flattened-out 'representation'. In this respect, the images of memory themselves have such fullness, and such opacity, precisely because of the narrational character that

³³ 'Reverse angle', in Wim Wenders: On Film. Essays and Conversations, p.180.

³⁴ 'Impossible stories', p.213.

³⁵ 'Impossible stories', p.210 & p.211.

³⁶ 'In Defence of Places'.

they also carry with them. The images of memory are like those Hopper paintings from which Wenders draws inspiration – they already carry stories within them, even though they are stories still remain to be told (and so too are Hopper's painting themselves like the images of memory).

Wenders' films attempt to slow down the production and proliferation of images through techniques that aim at allowing the object to appear in and through the image in a way that Benjamin argues is precisely what the mechanical reproduction of images destroys, namely, in terms of 'its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place it happens to be'.³⁷ This means sometimes slowing down the movement of film, so that, contrary to Benjamin's description in which 'no sooner has his eye grasped a scene than it is already changed', Wenders' films aim to retain the scene and the image within the succession of images, so as to allow a certain presence to unfold before us. The way they do this is not merely through the use of certain shots or editing techniques (one such technique, as I noted above, is to allow the camera to linger over scenes, sometimes leaving a single scene to remain suspended in front of the camera in an almost meditative repose), but also through allowing the image to be retained in the succession of images through the narration of the image, through allowing the image to remain connected to the place, and to the world, by means of a narrative connection of images that always allows the possibility that more can emerge from the image. The image in Wenders' films is thus not flattened out into the merely reproducible, but rather opens out into the uniqueness of the place, and of that which is present, in all the ambiguity of that presence, in the place.

If the role of memory in Wender's films is, as he himself says, to provide that from which film starts, then the role of memory is only to be understood in terms of the intimate connection between memory and image,

³⁷ It should be noted, however, that just as I have shifted the focus of the discussion away from Benjamin's focus on the work of art and on to the image, so Wenders should not be read as attempting, through film, to somehow restore the 'aura' of the artwork, or, indeed, to establish a certain 'aura' for film. Instead, the task is one of showing how it is that the image can be understood in a way that returns us to that from which the image comes as opposed to taking us perpetually further away from that starting point.

and thence to identity, to story, to place, and to world. The role of memory in Wenders' films is not to take us away from the world into some form of narcissistic introspection nor into any virtual world of multiplied and displaced images, but rather to return us to the places in which memory inheres, the places in and out of which identity is formed, the places in which the possibility of encounter, with ourselves as well as others, is possible. In this respect too, Wenders' films can be seen as attempts to grapple with what is often seen as a characteristic feature of contemporary life: the apparent loss of a sense of identity, of a sense of reality, of a sense of place. Wenders strategy has been to approach this problem, not by rejecting the art and technology of film that seems to contribute to this loss and displacement, but by making films that themselves open up to the world through the openness of the narrated image. In doing this, Wenders reminds us of the role of the image, as well as of memory, but he also draws attention to the importance of the stories that reside in places, of the life of places, and of the repose of human life in places.

Such a preoccupation with place, and the sense of place, is probably unsurprising for a German-born director who has spent so much of his own life between the places of Europe and of America.³⁸ It is, however, a preoccupation that can be just as meaningful for those who remain 'at home' as for those 'on the road'. It is also, perhaps, a preoccupation whose exploration is particularly well-suited to the medium of film, for one way to think of film is as itself comprising a certain 'memory' of place, and of movement in place, as recorded in light and sound, while all film, no matter whether it is indeed primarily 'driven' by story or by place as such, depends upon place and location, working through the elements of place (which

³⁸ There are, of course, a number of issues that could be explored here, not only in terms of Wenders own biography (and on this matter see Wenders' talk, given in the Münchener Kammerspiel, on 10 November 1991, entitled 'Talk about Germany', in Wim Wenders: On Film. Essays and Conversations, pp.434-44), but also relating to the history of German film over the last fifty years or more. Indeed, there are a range of other issues that lie just beneath the surface of the discussion here, concerning, for instance, German cinematic realism, that deserve further exploration. Wenders' work provides a fertile ground for such discussions, although they are discussions that must be left for another time.

includes the people whose lives are bound up with that place), allowing the place to appear (no matter how imperfectly), allowing us to enter into it. It is thus that film has the capacity to bring to light, and sometimes to re-articulate, our connection with place, with the world, and with ourselves.