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Wim Wenders retrospective: five to watch, and one to miss

The director, currently the subject of a retrospective in New York, gave us Harry Dean Stanton in the desert and Pina Bausch in 3D. Here are his best films (and one clunker)



Angelic obsession: a shot from Wenders' *Faraway, So Close!* Photograph: Photo12

As one of the key figures – along with Fassbinder, Herzog and Schlöndorff – of the New German Cinema movement that reinvigorated (West) German film in the 70s, and gave the country of Marlene Dietrich, Ufa and FW Murnau a bona fide cinematic movement to rival the nouvelle vague, Wim Wenders has been making films for over four decades. In that period he's produced some genuine masterworks, a handful of uncategorisable oddities and more than his fair share of clunkers. If Herzog comes off as unhinged, and Fassbinder as ice-cold, Wenders appears urbane (when he's good) and unbearably pretentious (when he isn't).

Be that as it may, Wenders has earned his place among the pantheon of postwar European auteurs and in recent years has expanded his range by increasing the amount of documentaries, essay-films and segments of short-film collections that he turns out. Many are currently being screened at a festival devoted to the director's work at MoMA in New York. So here are his five best films, plus one to avoid.

1. *Alice in the Cities*



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In his 70s work, Wenders' finest achievements revolved around a detached, unhurried observation of postwar German angst, and the sense that the cold war generation had allowed its imagination to be colonised by US culture. Wenders plastered his films with American pop and rock music and appropriated US cinema's genres and formats, but realigned them to express a very European form of crisis and alienation. *Alice in the Cities*, which was released in 1974, is the first of his "road movie" trilogy (along with *Wrong Move* and *Kings of the Road*) and yokes together the urban landscapes of the US and Germany; Rüdiger Vogler plays a photographer/journalist who finds himself stymied by his meandering tour of middle America, but who then is forced to repeat the experience in the Rhineland badlands after he is lumbered with a kid at the airport and he has to look for her grandmother. *Alice* unexpectedly morphs into a charming film, as Vogler escapes his funk back in the old world.

2. The American Friend

Thematically, Wenders gravitated towards American material as the 70s wore on, and with this loose adaptation of Patricia Highsmith's *Ripley's Game* he indulged in some living Americana, in the form of Dennis Hopper, who he cast as Ripley. (Old-school directors Nicholas Ray and Sam Fuller also show up in minor hoodlum roles.) Ripley, the slippery customer from a string of Highsmith novels, talks a gangster contact of his into tricking a seriously ill picture framer (played by Bruno Ganz) into carrying out a gangland hit; the two men subsequently become friends, and Ripley helps the framer fend off mafiosi who come looking for him.

If this sounds complicated, that's because it is; but *The American Friend* is a tremendous mood piece, and another fruitful collaboration between Europe and the US. It would presage Wenders' long-anticipated shift to America itself in the early 1980s, first for a documentary on Ray (*Lightning Over Water*) and then for *Hammett*, a fictional biopic of the hardboiled crime writer which turned into a creative disaster, after Wenders clashed with executive producer Francis Ford Coppola.

3. Paris, Texas

Despite the chaotic, drawn-out experience of making *Hammett* – during which the film was almost entirely re-written, he shot another feature, *The State of Things* (based on a trip he took to help out Raul Ruiz in Portugal) and a short film, *Reverse Angle*, about his disputes with Coppola – Wenders did manage to make one brilliant American film: *Paris, Texas*, for which he transposed many of his New German cinematic tics into dramatic American locations, zeroing in on the bleak dusty expanses of the west and south.

Harry Dean Stanton, even more gnarled and carved-from-redwood than Hopper, is the lost soul stumbling through the desert on a mysterious personal mission; he eventually tracks down his

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wife (played by Nastassja Kinski) to a Texas peep show. Paris, Texas re-engineers the Alice in the Cities conceit – that landscape and its observation can both reflect and inform states of mind – but also captures something then-novel about the US: a quiet, poetic misery that perfectly matched the mood of the burgeoning American indie movement of the 1980s, for which Wenders was a key inspiration.

4. Wings of Desire

With Paris, Texas winning the Palme d'Or at the 1984 Cannes film festival (the same edition where his acolyte, Jim Jarmusch, won the Camera d'Or for *Stranger Than Paradise*), Wenders returned to Europe in triumph. *Wings of Desire* brought the best out of him: co-written with Peter Handke, it emerged a dreamlike fable about two angels moving through a gloomy, late-80s Berlin, providing comfort to the stricken.

One of the angels (Bruno Ganz, again) falls in love with a trapeze artist, and like a lugubrious, existential version of David Niven in *A Matter of Life and Death*, exchanges the black-and-white lyricism of the infinite for the colour-clash chaos of everyday human reality. Though punctuated by Wenders' predilection for long overcoat hipsterism – notably a live-concert scene featuring Nick Cave – *Wings of Desire* remains a serious, absorbing, brilliant film.

5. Pina

Flash forward 24 years. This is not to say Wenders produced nothing of worth in the interim, but something profoundly disappointing happened to his feature film making (of which more below). His characteristic ingredients – a meditative mood, grandiloquent rocker posturing, putatively sublime grand tours – lurched inexorably into pretentious self-pastiche: nothing he tried from the early 90s onwards seemed to work. On the other hand, his non-fiction films were suddenly much more substantial: *Buena Vista Social Club*, *The Soul of a Man*, the Sebastiao Salgado profile *The Salt of the Earth*. Probably the pick of them, however, is his evocation of the work of choreographer Pina Bausch, filmed in a loving, visually exhilarating 3D. While *Pina* is not exactly generous to non-Bausch devotees – little in the way of contextual information is provided – Wenders' unswerving focus on the physicality of the dance means the film is an extraordinary experience.

And one to miss: *Until the End of the World*

Wenders' decline as a force in fiction film-making became apparent during the 1990s and 2000s; the first in a long line of stinkers was this absurdly self-indulgent epic starring William Hurt (at his most annoying) and Wenders' then-partner, the late Solveig Dommartin. It combines some of Wenders' familiar elements – a road-movie structure, an alienated male protagonist, a *Wings*

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of Desire-esque entrée into human thoughts – but something about the swirling soup of its pomposity is absolutely ruinous.

Wenders' own cut is 295 mins, and that is the one MoMA will be showing: no doubt it's some improvement on the 2hr 40min version that was originally released, but as a benchmark for super-inflated lameness, I suspect it will never be beaten. Wenders has made some terrible features since, but the fact that this followed the superlative *Wings of Desire* in his film-making canon means the shock of its awfulness was all the greater.