Goodwin, Christopher, "Wim Wenders and the pull of America," *Financial Times*, February 27, 2015.
Accessed online: http://www.ft.com/intl/

Wim Wenders and the pull of America

Ahead of a retrospective, the German director talks about the draw of the US throughout his 50 years of film-making

Film directors, like conductors and architects, have a calling that apparently refuses to take account of age. The German director Wim Wenders, at 69, sees a retrospective of his work open at the Museum of Modern Art in New York next week. But he offers no hint of laying aside his clapperboard: earlier this month, the Berlin Film Festival showed his latest feature, *Every Thing Will be Fine*; and immediately afterwards he hotfooted it to the Oscars, where his documentary *The Salt of the Earth*, a tribute to the Brazilian photographer and environmental activist Sebastião Salgado, was nominated for an Oscar.

Every Thing Will be Fine, Wenders' first narrative feature since 2008, stars James Franco as Tomas, a self-absorbed writer who kills a child in a car accident. The film follows Tomas's life over 12 years as he periodically encounters the child's mother, Kate (played by Charlotte Gainsbourg), whose tenderness and compassion help him to heal from the tragedy. Surprisingly for a low-key drama, it was shot in 3D.

Wenders, who also made his 2011 documentary *Pina* in 3D, says: "Towards the end of *Pina* I realised that [in 3D] just having a human being in front of the camera was mind-blowing, you could see a whole different presence."

Wim Wenders at the Berlin Film Festival ©Christian Jungeblodt

The film was not received kindly by the foreign critics — Variety deemed it "dreary" — but German critics were more upbeat, with Berliner Zeitung calling it "a return to top form" while Der Spiegel praised its "unusual visual opulence".

In Berlin, Wenders was also picking up an Honorary Golden Bear award for lifetime achievement. Some of his best-known films were shown alongside a blizzard of talks discussing his career, which stretches back nearly 50 years and encompasses more than 50 films in genres from detective thrillers to fantastical love stories.

I met Wenders during one of his few breaks in this frenzied schedule. Dressed in one of his self-consciously auteur-ish suits and blue-framed oval spectacles, his usually flowing grey locks uncharacteristically trimmed, he explained the plans for his MoMA retrospective. The gallery will show 20 of his films, including new digital restorations of his best-loved features: *Paris, Texas*, the 1984 Cannes Palme d'Or winner; and *Wings of Desire* (1987), about two angels (Peter Falk and Bruno Ganz) who intervene in the sorry affairs of men from a perch above Berlin's Potsdamer Platz, then a physical and ideological wasteland between east and west.

A scene from 'Pina' ©Wim Wenders Foundation

In addition, there will be documentaries such as *The Buena Vista Social Club*, Wenders' moving and popular tribute to the ageing musicians of Cuba, and *Pina*, his ravishing, swirling 3D evocation of the German choreographer Pina Bausch; plus rarely seen short works from the late 1960s. Wenders set up a foundation two years ago to buy back the rights to all his films and to restore them digitally, a solution to the problem of artistic legacy that he recommends to other film-makers.

The MoMA retrospective has a special resonance for Wenders. He first went to the US in 1974 for the local premiere of *The Goalie's Anxiety at the Penalty Kick*, a languid existential thriller that he co-wrote with the Austrian author Peter Handke. "I didn't sleep for five days," Wenders

says, "because I felt that sleeping would be a waste of time. I was in America. I needed to live every second."

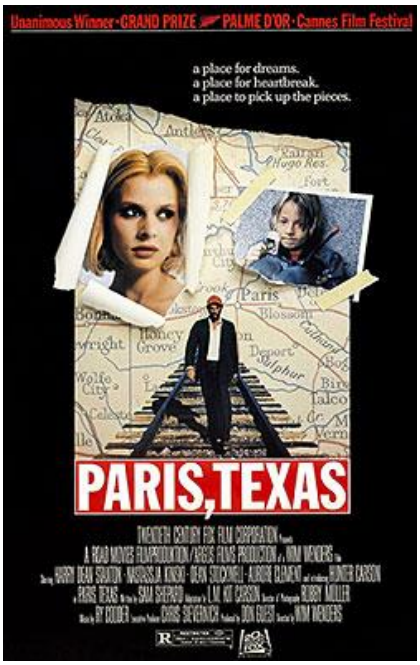
Like much of Wenders' work, *Goalie* explores the powerful cultural influence the US had on West Germany in the postwar years — and on him. Since childhood (he was born in Düsseldorf three weeks before the end of the second world war) Wenders' imagination has been fired by the idea of America. He says it "was the place where all the things that I liked came from, not only sweets and chewing gum, but also comic strips." Much of his most powerful work, especially *Paris, Texas,* with its desolate Western desert landscapes, its spare, poetic script by Sam Shepard, its lost, wandering hero (played by Harry Dean Stanton) and its haunting country music by Ry Cooder, has been concerned with reimagining the mythology and meaning of America through European eyes.

Wenders with Dennis Hopper during the filming of 'The American Friend' in 1977 ©Donata Wenders

The intensity of his feeling for all things American was not shared by Wenders' parents, especially his father, a dour Catholic surgeon. Because of the recent horrors of the Nazi era, the world Wenders grew up in had "been stripped of memory", he says. "Even in my own family there were some dark figures. I knew that not being able to look back was a bad sign. That black hole behind, even as a child you sense it, and nobody tells you what it is but you realise, why is there so little joy and why the heck do we not have a past?"

So the young Wenders got hooked on the rock 'n' roll of the late 1950s and on American films, especially the grand panoramic Westerns of John Ford.

"That really convinced me that this legendary place called America, that's where everything good came from," says Wenders, who was also, somewhat perversely, a Marxist in his twenties. He is now a churchgoing Protestant for whom religion is "the backbone" of his life.



Poster for 'Paris, Texas' ©Allstar

Wenders has twice lived in the US, but each time he moved back to Berlin and he now lives in the Mitte district with his wife Donata, a photographer.

Perhaps the secret to Wenders' longevity as a film-maker has been his willingness to reinvent himself by tackling new forms and subjects. It would be hard to argue against the thesis that, in the past two decades, he has worked more successfully in documentaries than dramatic features, although that's not something he likes to admit. But he does acknowledge that the two forms involve very different skills.

"In a feature you bring everything," he says. "You bring the story, you bring the actors, you bring the form and then you apply it to a place.

"In documentaries it is the other way round. You come, hopefully, rather empty . . . You don't want to install [the story], you want to extract it. The two are really reverse angles of storytelling. In documentaries you are the listener to the story, you are not the teller."

March 2-17, moma.org

Photographs: Christian Jungeblodt; Donata Wenders; Wim Wenders Foundation; Allstar