

GENRE AND IDENTITY IN *THE AMERICAN FRIEND*

For Theresa Gaughan Sullivan

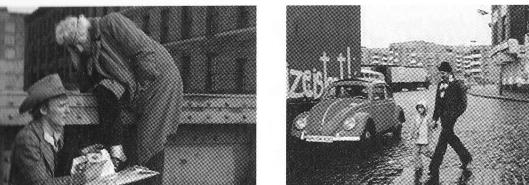
Things are not as they seem in Wim Wenders' *The American Friend*. When it was originally released in 1977, the movie was variously seen as a commercially successful turn to conventional narrative film form (his two previous films, *Kings of the Road* [*Im Lauf der Zeit*], 1976, and *Wrong Move* [*Falsche Bewegung*], 1975, were highly regarded artistically but decidedly limited to art-house audiences); a splendid imitation of a Hitchcock thriller; and another triumph for the burgeoning "New German Cinema" movement (co-led by auteurs Werner Herzog and Rainer Werner Fassbinder). What has been neglected – and what I wish to examine here – is how troubled a film *The American Friend* is: troubled about morality, troubled about identity, troubled about the modern world, and especially troubled about its own status as a German work of art in relation to the capitalist industry of Hollywood genre film? Although the film has been regarded for the most part as (merely) a European take on the American thriller genre (in the same way that the films of Jean-Pierre Melville are seen), it actually functions as an exemplary early postmodern film text.¹ As a thriller it is easily read within genre conventions: "innocent sap is set up by the Mob; only when it's too late does he see the truth." As a postmodern text, it posits urban space as taking on an "overall" look; personal identity as being exceedingly unstable; the work of art as being not only "unoriginal" but instead a hodge-podge or pastiche of a variety of quotations and references; and knowledge as a state of undecidability; while also critically questioning the status of its own

auteurist/generic identity. The film, we shall see, vacillates among these qualities on both the level of the narration and the level of the image.

Before undergoing our examination, it is useful to recount the plot of the film: Jonathan Zimmerman (Bruno Ganz) is a frame-maker in Hamburg; he suffers from a potentially fatal blood disease. At an auction he meets – but refuses to shake hands with – Tom Ripley (Dennis Hopper), an American criminal living in Hamburg. A secondary plot concerns Ripley and Derwatt, a painter who is supposedly dead, but in fact is alive and painting in New York. Ripley seems to supply a steady stream of "newly discovered" Derwatts for the market. Ripley learns about Jonathan's illness. Later, Ripley is visited by Minot (Gérard Blain), a French gangster who has come to collect on a debt Ripley owes him: he needs a murder done. Ripley arranges for Jonathan to receive a faked telegram from a friend saying how worried he is about Jonathan's health. Jonathan begins to panic, thinking he is not as well informed by his doctor as he should be. Minot comes to his shop with a proposition: to kill a man, possibly two; for he is in a perfect position: not being a killer he would never be suspected; and, as he is dying, he will be well paid and thus be able to leave his family with money after his death. To prove his good faith, Minot has arranged for Jonathan to see a specialist in Paris. Jonathan comes to Paris and has a test, but Minot fakes the results, which he shows to Jonathan. At this moment of weakness, Minot suggests that the murder be committed now, and Jonathan accedes. He kills the man. Minot and Jonathan meet again in Hamburg; Minot has only half the money. A second murder needs to be committed. Again, Jonathan succumbs. Ripley learns about it. Next day Minot points out the victim among a group of gangsters who make porn films. Just as he is about to kill the man, Ripley appears to help him. Later, Jonathan learns about the set-up from Ripley. He returns home; by now, with all his secretiveness, he is almost entirely estranged from his wife Marianne (Lisa Kreuzer), where he faints. Minot enters: his Paris apartment has been bombed. Jonathan is worried and calls Ripley. They go to Ripley's house anticipating the worst. It comes: the gangsters arrive, but Ripley and Jonathan manage to kill them. Now, only one last thing needs to be done: to dispose of the bodies. Ripley proposes a long two-car drive to the sea. Suddenly, Jonathan's wife appears; she wants to make peace with him, but Ripley tells her they need to do this one thing, and as Jonathan is so exhausted, could she drive? The party takes off. At the sea, Ripley sets the car with the bodies on fire. Aghast at this, Jonathan gets in his car with Marianne and drives away, leaving Ripley alone on the beach. But Jonathan is growing faint; his car swerves off the road; Marianne manages to stop it, but by now Jonathan is dead.

DECEPTIONS

In *The American Friend*, perception is deception.² Jonathan believes he is dying; we (and the gangsters) know he is not. But then he dies. Everyone has been deceived except the one who was meant to be deceived. This vacillation is expressed very early on in the film. It opens in New York (identified by the Twin Towers in the background) with Ripley receiving a new painting from Derwatt. Ripley is wearing a cowboy hat; Derwatt asks, "Do you wear that hat in Hamburg?" – pronouncing the German place-name properly, while also reminding us that "homburg" is also a type of hat. Ripley replies, "What's wrong with a cowboy in Hamburg?", pronouncing the name like the meat sandwich, and implying that Americans – and their diet – rightfully belong in Europe.



Ripley walks along a New York street and Wenders cuts to another long shot of city blocks; the viewer assumes that we are still in New York. A medium shot shows a man (Jonathan) walking with his son, and not until the camera pans along with them and we see some graffiti do we realize that we are in Germany, presumably Hamburg. Then the film cuts to an overhead shot of Ripley in overalls and cowboy boots lying on a bordello-red satin sheet; the camera tilts down as he rises and speaks into a tape recorder: "I know less and less about who I am or who anybody else is." Where he is, we do not know. He goes on: "Even this river, this river reminds me of another river," and he begins to sing "The Ballad of Easy Rider," the title song of the movie that had made him – or rather, Hopper the actor – famous in 1969. We see a river and a harbor, but we still do not know where we are. We see Ripley in a medium-close-up from behind. He raises his arm in salute and Wenders cuts to a long reverse shot which shows us Ripley's raised arm in the distance, while on the soundtrack we hear a foghorn – as if the sound arose from his "conducting" – but even more startlingly, we see him standing on the second-storey balcony of an aristocratic Neo-classical villa. *Where, exactly, are we?*³ Then cut to Jonathan's shop where he takes from out of a safe the painting Ripley had gotten from Derwatt. It is a painting of a train surging forward – an image we will see duplicated at least twice more and possessing a variety of evocations. And then the auction begins.

The film will continue like this throughout, employing six distinct devices: 1) surprising displacements; 2) continuity cuts that are in fact discontinuous; 3) loss of self-knowledge and identity; 4) puns,⁴ quotations and references; 5) a doubling that often becomes a tripling; and 6) worries over the complications of art and commerce. The overall effect is a sense of uncertainty and unknowingness of both person and place. The stylistics of the film recapitulate its narrative: perception is deception.

The six are each characterized in their own way. Displacements occur *within the image*: a gleaming white Neo-classical mansion along a dirty river and modern harbor. Narrative and spatial discontinuities are the result of a cut, they are a *relation between shots*: from New York cut to momentarily look-alike Hamburg. Identity loss occurs especially *in performance*: Ripley tapes his memo to himself. Filmic references occur *across film history*: "Wow, that's Nick Ray!" The

techniques of doubling and tripling, as well as the psychological notion of "the double," occur as a visual motif *across the film and beyond it*. Finally, the question of art and money, raised by the forgeries, extend to an (unresolved) ideological debate *outside the film*.

While these six devices can be said to be discrete unto themselves, in use they are often seen together, two or three occurring at a time creating a vertiginous effect of



unknowingness. However, they also seem to fall into two distinct groups. The first three bear a certain obvious quality, which might be described as "splitting" or, better, "division" (though in the case of the first two that division will sometimes seem like an addition, in that, eerily, they serve also to *unify* places in a generalized way; for example, displacements may seem like the union of two disparate places, but in fact is constituted by their *excision* from their natural places.). The second triplet possesses the quality of "expansion," or, "multiplication." Let's examine each device in turn.

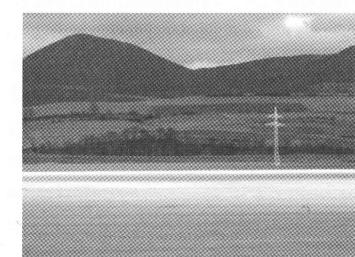
DISPLACEMENTS

Besides seeing a cowboy in Hamburg we are also shocked (or amused) to discover his home, that Neo-classical building along the filthy riverbank and modern harbor. Later, it will come as no surprise that the cowboy has "decorated" his German home with a gaudy Canada Dry soft-drink sign, Coke machine, Wurlitzer jukebox (with, apparently, the same Kinks record as Jonathan has), and other über-American paraphernalia.

A somewhat more amusing displacement happens when Jonathan visits his doctor, making himself at home by resting one of his arms in a gynecological stirrup (and thus too momentarily "feminizing" him) – amusing to the extent that even he does a double-take when he notices.

A disconcerting displacement occurs when we see a mini-Statue of Liberty set in the River Seine in Paris (and an even smaller toy Eiffel Tower when Daniel, the Zimmermann's son, is taking a bath), or hear of an "American Hospital" – "the best one in Paris."

Far more unsettling are three shots that seem to remove the narrative from itself; for an instant we wonder if we are still in the same film, so eerie are these sights.⁵ The first occurs just after Jonathan has committed the first murder. He emerges from the station; the camera observes him directly from above then tilts and pans down as he looks about himself, at La Défense, the empty square and surrounding office blocks; then cut to a slightly high-angled long shot of a greenish-lit run-down street (a few cars, what might be a restaurant), with more anonymous office blocks in its distance, and above it all an eerie reddish-orange sky. Is this still Paris, we wonder? Has a considerable amount of both time and space elapsed? Stranger yet is what follows. Jonathan enters a café (the same one we just glimpsed); it appears to be Middle Eastern (the music, the language, the belly dancer in the video behind) – yes, we remind ourselves, it can be Paris, the one changing in demographics at the time. Finally, the sea coast that they drive to at the end, where Ripley burns the ambulance with the three bodies. The screen is split laterally into almost exactly two halves,



with the white ambulance and the red Volkswagen speeding right to left and reflected in what seems to be the ice below. The real place is dematerialized in the perfectly doubled shot.

DISCONTINUITY CUTS

As already mentioned, the first discontinuity occurs when Ripley waves his arm and it seems to result in the sound of a foghorn. Interestingly, the discontinuity here does not occur between shots, but between the visual and the sound tracks. Many more disconcerting cuts in the film are to follow.

Having read Allan's false telegram, Jonathan rushes to his doctor's office. We see an overhead long shot of what we take to be a train or subway station; this is followed by a shot of Jonathan running down an electric-blue escalator, then through a greenish tunnel, and finally entering his doctor's office. Are any of these spaces continuous? We have no way of knowing. Somehow, via the film's system of supposed *spatial* continuity – one shot following another – we are lead to think that the office is in fact located underground in a tunnel. (It is during this visit that Jonathan's doctor tells him that what he has heard about his illness is "rumor-mongering." Jonathan, of course does not believe this, the truth.)

Another early discontinuity cut occurs when we see Jonathan lying on the doctor's table to be examined; cut to his son Daniel in a similar supine position. Is there a connection? Do they both suffer from the same disease? Are they both potential victim-murderers? The film never answers these questions, but by the simple juxtaposition of shots, it seems to imply that there is more than a father-son connection being made here.

A moment later Jonathan draws the curtains open; cut to a wide view of the harbor; we think it is his point of view; the shot ends with a view of him viewing the shot we are seeing. There is no continuity: there is only vision – and much of that is false. Immediately before these few shots, Jonathan looks at a stereoscope, adjusting the device so as to clarify his vision; later he is seen using a penlight to read in bed; the short scene ends with Daniel play-acting holding a telescope so as to see his father clearer. Also, as the camera tilts high to reveal an empty sky, we hear the sounds of birds cawing long before they become visible. Things are unclear, out of focus, or can't be seen: nature itself is out of whack.

This is where the crisis occurs, in the failure of vision – and hence, the failure of belief – for both the characters in the film, and those observing them. We cannot trust anything we see. It is not a simple matter of form expressing content ("a film about deception requires a deceptive means of expression"), but something more fundamental to cinema itself. After this scene how can we dare follow the film? How dare we continue to believe in the cinema and its stories? But then there is Jonathan: he is decent (like us); he is worried about his future (like us); he has a family (like us). We have to defeat what the film is telling us, before its quality as an hallucination -- as the truth of the cinematic lie -- overwhelms both it and us.

And then it happens again: Jonathan, after hearing Minot's second murder proposition, rushes through a neon tunnel – running against "perspective" – and, cut, he again enters his doctors'

office, now convincing us that the office *is* in fact located in the tunnel. Perception now convinces; deception triumphs.

The sort of parallel discontinuity cut that we saw in the two shots of Jonathan lying supine followed by Daniel doing the same, occurs again when we see Ripley laying back in his plane back to Europe, and then Jonathan settling down in his train sleeper returning to Hamburg following the first murder. And again later, following the second murder, we see Ripley laying back on his pool table (when he takes Polaroid pictures of himself), and then cut to Jonathan lying on his sofa (after he and Marianne have argued). Not only do the two shots connect that which is not connected, the two men are also lying down in "unnatural" places (a hard table is an uncommon photographic backdrop, Jonathan's sofa is not his proper bed), in other words, we have displacements here as well. Think also of what these last two shots might have looked like had Wenders chosen to dissolve between them: Jonathan lying across Ripley (taking up a theme I look at below). Another, somewhat disturbing cut occurs from Ripley seen head-on in his Thunderbird (listening again to his tape, "I no longer know ...") to Daniel looking out of the rear-view window of his father's Volkswagen. Poor Daniel, we wonder: the earlier shots hinted at a relation between him and his father's illness; these want to connect the boy with Ripley's evil.

After Marianne discovers the bank transfer, accuses Jonathan and then runs out of his shop, he rushes home to her, but she is not at the apartment, and then he falls – his disease presumably now really hitting him; the film then cuts to an overhead shot of, again, presumably, his Hamburg neighborhood. How are these two shots related? What are they intended to signify? His losing consciousness? An elegiac farewell? Is the second shot an establishing shot for the scene to follow (Minot's entering the apartment with the news that his Paris apartment has been bombed)? We cannot answer these questions for certain, but we *feel* they are related, and it leaves us with a sense of dread.

LOSS OF IDENTITY

Jonathan's is, of course, the central crisis of the film – indeed, it is tragic. A short message from a friend results in a complete undermining of his security and identity, of his faith and trust. He doesn't even bother to make the slightest investigation into its reliability. Even within the little we get to know him in those few minutes before Allan's telegram arrives, there is nothing to make us suspect that this most decent of men is primed for so awful a crack-up. But then the telegram arrives; he hears Minot's offer; he goes to Paris to see a doctor; and only hours later he becomes a murderer. We see his guilt at work, but then he is ready to do it again, supposedly for the well-being of Marianne and Daniel. There is no explosion of anger, no sign of a repressed "killer personality," no quarrels with the Law. He thinks his body is working against him faster than he thought, and so he kills so as to leave some money behind. That's all. No deeper explanation is offered.

Nor do we know any specific reasons for Ripley's crack-up; we simply watch it at work, though with little of the emotional or moral investment we put into observing Jonathan's. Indeed, we first come to know him as a man observing his own breakdown when very early in the film he tape records that message to himself: "I no longer know ..." Equally telling is the scene with the

Polaroid camera in which he tries to validate his existence via instant and multiple replication of an image of himself.⁶

Unsurprisingly perhaps, Ripley even shouts, utterly, simply, "I'm confused!" in his second scene with Derwatt, who, no fool he, quips, "Close the doors, they'll come in through the windows," and seconds later, "A little older, a little more confused." Ripley's declaration arrives in sharp contrast to his earlier self-assertion to Minot, who has just insisted that he help him out in murder: "I know Rock musicians, I know lawyers. I know art dealers pimps, politicians ..." (All these people he knows, and yet he does not know himself) Remember, this is the man who is going to "bring the Beatles back to Hamburg." As in Jonathan's case, we do not know why he "no longer knows."

Jonathan Zimmerman then, decent family man, becomes a murderer; and Tom Ripley, American gangster, "a little more confused." Two men with seemingly nothing in common – but fated to meet, and more. While there is no overt expression of homosexual desire in the film, there are enough subtle signs to make it a constant theme throughout, and especially one of the principle attractions that draws Ripley closer to Jonathan's side.⁷ They meet rudely. Then, at the frame shop, Jonathan makes an apology by giving Ripley one of his visual toys. Next time, Ripley returns the favor with the sexually loaded words, "I'm gonna give it to ya." The heat rises with the seductive look he gives Jonathan when he surprises him on the train during the second murder, "Hi, Jon." (Later, when he is teaching Jonathan how to drive his Thunderbird, he calls him by yet another sweet diminutive, "Jonnie.") Then, when they meet again in Hamburg, some time after the second murder, Ripley admits to Jonathan, "I would like to be your friend," but admits too that that is no longer possible. And then comes the astonishing revelation concerning Ripley's motivation for setting up Jonathan for the first murder:

RIPLEY: "Do you remember that day we were introduced at the auction, and you said, 'Ya, ya, I've heard of you.' You said that in a very nasty way."

JONATHAN: "That was all?"

RIPLEY: "Isn't that enough?"

Finally, things come to a verbal climax the night of the final three murders. After Minot's visit to Jonathan's apartment, he calls Ripley in desperation ("I've got to see you"); the reply is that of a reassuring lover ("Stay cool. Know what I mean? 'Cos I'm comin' right down to pick ya' up, ya' hear me?"). Jonathan keeps guard outdoors; Ripley comes to him with a plate of food, and remarks, "I'm thinkin' about ya' all the time," a remark that we have by now certainly come to believe. And then, once the murders have been committed (the two bodyguards killed, along with the pornographer), they embrace jubilantly. Consider here, too, Ripley's polite deference to Marianne, whom he twice addresses as "Mrs. Zimmermann," as he explains how he and Jonathan are "in a lot of trouble," like a teenager asking his boyfriend's mother to be patient and understanding (as well as complicit) over something juvenile the two have done. And then the drive to the sea, and despite Jonathan's abandonment of Ripley, he can still say, "Oh well, we made it anyway, Jonathan," and then, tenderly, caringly, "Be careful." What does he mean by "we made it"? When did they "make it"? When was his desire fulfilled? When they became murderers together? Was this a sexual act for him? And finally, he begins to recite the Dylan song, "[I] Pity the poor immigrant, whose ..." But

who is this immigrant? What is his condition ("whose ...")? Does he sing for himself in mockery of exile? For Jonathan who has crossed over the other side of decency? Or for the two of them who did not cross far enough into their (his) unspoken, unfulfilled desire?

IN-BETWEEN

At this point, before I proceed with those devices that partake of the multiple, I need to point out that there is a third or middle category of device that both divides or separates and multiplies or connects. Crucially, there are certain spaces in the film that seem to have no definition whatsoever (and hence no chance for placement, much less displacement): these comprise escalators, corridors, tunnels, subways, train lines and highways, locations that Marc Augé has theorized as "non-places."⁸ The first time Jonathan rushes to his doctor we see what we take to be an underground station; cut to a chain of at least three zigzagging electric blue escalators; then he rushes through an awful neon green tunnel that seems to be available to both pedestrians and auto traffic.

When he leaves for Paris we see him on another chain of escalators, this time green and silver; is he in another train station in Hamburg, or could he be in the Hamburg or Paris airport? The camera tracks backwards as he walks forwards; a reverse cut now tracks in towards him as he lies asleep on a couch; then, movement does not stop there; the camera has, it turns out, been walking with Minot – in what we only understand retrospectively: while the camera has continued to come closer forward, Minot took a turn around the sofa so as to now appear behind the sleeping Jonathan. Here, the in-between, transitional device has been made of the camera's own tracks.

There are many other beautiful shots, too, that include camera movement (tracks, pans, tilts) and spatial/narrative transitions. In his Paris hotel – a Japanese chain – Jonathan opens the *shoji*, we see only an empty white sky; he walks away, the camera tilts up slightly, and the Paris cityscape is revealed to us. Even more remarkably, a moment later, he hears from Minot, who lives across the Seine from the hotel, and tells Jonathan where he lives. In an extreme long shot, the camera pans and we can actually see Minot waving his white scarf from a very distant window. Much of the first murder seems to occur within a twisting network of transitional spaces, the corridors and tunnels and escalators of the Paris Metro system, while, of course, the second occurs in the corridors and along the tracks of a Munich-Hamburg train. And let us recall that Ripley's declaration, "I'm confused!" occurs as he walks, uncannily, along a car-less highway in New York.

QUOTATIONS AND REFERENCES

The American Friend is an adaptation of a novel, *Ripley's Game* (1974) by Patricia Highsmith. And Tom Ripley is one of the most original characters in modern fiction, an American in Paris, an aesthete, amoral, asexual, rich and ready to kill whenever required, and like Dennis Hopper's Ripley, quick to take offense. But Wenders/Hopper's Ripley is not Highsmith's (whom we could never conceive experiencing any sort of crisis of identity), a point which disappointed many viewers – Highsmith included – when the film was released.⁹ But then *The American Friend*, as stated, is an *adaptation* of a book, and not a faithful reproduction. In fact, the film is an adaptation of two

Highsmith novels, the other one being *Ripley Underground* (1970), in which the Derwatt story is more fully told.

The American Friend is another sort of adaptation too, the quotation/homage. Not only are there direct evocations of various Hitchcock films, but the very *tone* of the German film is more successfully Hitchcockian, than perhaps any other film.¹⁰ Two scenes especially stand out: the auction scene would remind any cinephile of the auction scene in *North by Northwest* (1959); while the murder on the train (especially the shot of Ripley hanging outside the rushing train as he clings to a door) reminds one of the penultimate scene in *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943). Furthermore, the main double-theme of Jürgen Knieper would remind cinephiles of Bernard Hermann's double-theme for *North by Northwest*; and the theme of the "wrong man," the innocent declared guilty, is one central to Hitchcock's work. But the operative term here is "evocation," that is, there are no direct quotations, no duplicated shots or lines of dialog that makes the viewer think that Wenders stole them from Hitchcock. Instead, it is an overall mood of dread and suspense, the shadows of reference that hover around the film, that make it so successfully "Hitchcockian" while it remains primarily Wim Wenders' own very original creation.

Finally, while there may be references to other films and filmmakers¹¹ – for example, Buster Keaton's *The General* (1926), clearly marked in Daniel's night-lamp; or Jean-Pierre Melville's *Un Flic* (1972), hinted at in the high-angled long shots of the racing train during the second murder¹² – one of the most subtle references might be to F. W. Murnau's *Sunrise* (1927).¹³ In *Sunrise* semi-allegorical figures act out a drama of seduction and near-murder, resurrection and reconciliation in the opposed setting of the Country and the City. Can we not see in *The American Friend* a similar opposition of sites – Europe (the Country) versus America (the City), and even the characters: Jonathan as the decent but weak Man, Marianne as the believing, faithful Woman, and Ripley as the mean and seductive Woman from the City intent on bringing down a happy home?

DOUBLING AND TRIPLEX

In some respects, *The American Friend* is a film about numbers. From haggling over prices (the Derwatt painting in the auction, and Derwatt's own arguing over the number of forgeries he can make in a couple of months; the old lady who names her own price for Jonathan's labor) to the number of murders agreed upon (one becomes two, but in the end it jumps to five), and at the most absurd, the mathematical problem enumerated by the newspaper and Ripley following the second murder, numbers abound.

But the numbers two and three are perhaps the most significant. Two is the number of the double, the mirror; three, the creative number that leads to all the rest. More doubles occur: Jonathan and his mirror-image; Ripley and Jonathan; Samuel Fuller and Nicholas Ray; the toys exchanged; the murders wanted by Minot; the double mention of Ripley not wanting to wake his neighbors; two doctor's examinations.

But Wenders laces his film with triplets as well: three trains (Daniel's lamp, Derwatt's painting, the train of the second murder); the Zimmermann family; Ripley, Jonathan and Minot; the three weeks Allan Winter is gone in Canada. But more significantly, there are three languages

– German, English, French – making *The American Friend* one of the few tri-lingual films. And especially – and to bring ourselves back to the opening paragraph – the film takes place in three cities – Hamburg, Paris, and New York – that uncannily at times, seem like one. This is achieved, as was made apparent earlier, by spatial displacements and discontinuity cuts. Paris has its own Statue of Liberty and Hamburg its Eiffel Tower; Hamburg is home to the Beatles and a contemporary cowboy; and New York, unfortunately, is the source of two of the world's great evils, forgery and pornography. New York becomes Hamburg, Hamburg becomes Paris, Paris becomes Hamburg. Airports and train stations may link them together in an obvious way, but more subtly, escalators, tunnels and elevators are the common bind. This continuity between the discontinuous is purposefully disruptive and disturbing – it is Wenders' warning and prophecy – but it is also, as we now know all so well, a part of postmodernity (failed warning, successful prophecy). As forgery and pornography and art dealing expand from the individual to all of society, so the individual cities have lost their singular identities and have expanded to become an overall generalized city. This is a point Wenders acknowledges (on the DVD version) when he says that he tried "to make it look like one big place." Hopper too recognizes this: "You made it look like all one place. ... Germany and France and the United States, they all look the same; they all seem to be the same place. ... It was before globalization." Wenders also acknowledges the source for this to be the Highsmith novel. Of course, Paris may have the original Eiffel Tower and most people there speak French, and New York have the Statue of Liberty with English the common tongue, but such "trifles" might not be the central point today when financial and cultural globalization and the loss of identity among former major capitols, are the norm.¹⁴

ART AND COMMERCE

The American Friend possesses an almost Dantean morality when it comes to questions regarding art – particularly visual art – and how it is corrupted by certain types of people and by capital. This occurs especially in three areas with ever-widening social effect. The first type of corrupted art is that of forgery. Derwatt sins against both himself (like a suicide: Seventh Circle of Hell) and against society (Eighth Circle, Bolgia Ten, very near Satan). Next comes the pornographer, someone who corrupts desire (the lustful: Circle Two), and corrupts others' flesh (panders: Eighth Circle, Bolgia One). And finally comes Tom Ripley who sells art by lying to others (clients-as-betrayed guests: Ninth Circle, Ptolomea, only a step removed from Satan). Other forgeries occur too: the forgery of Allan's telegram, Minot fixing Jonathan's medical results. As for Derwatt, his corruption is designated by the red light at the entrance to his studio – marking him as a prostitute, another sin against the self.

But in this moral scheme of things, Ripley is the worst. Is his awareness of this the cause of his crisis of identity? He knows that he really does nothing in life; he says that he "admires" Jonathan for being a good craftsman, for being able to make something with his own hands. What does he do? "I make money," he boasts. Wenders' indictment is implicit: he creates evil. Jonathan is very aware and clear of his position vis-à-vis Ripley. "I don't like people who buy paintings as an investment." Ripley plays innocent: "You count me out?" Jonathan points the finger: "No, I count you in." Minot is not far removed from Ripley. When Jonathan meets him, he asks, "Are you an art

dealer?" Minot replies, "In a certain way." He has arranged a deal, a "fix" – could he claim to be an artist as well, an artist of death (the violent against others: *Seventh Circle*)?

Or is Jonathan in fact the morally worst? He sinks: it is not important whether he falls for the deceptive telegram and doctored medical report and succumbs to Minot in a moment of extreme weakness; his motive of leaving his family some money is equally insignificant here; the fact remains that he acts contrary to all that he (seemingly) believes in – and then he kills. (Then, too, there is the supreme irony, that the only truth in the film is Jonathan's death.) Ripley, on the contrary, begins as a completely lost man, then moves in the opposite direction and chooses to do good. He will take on Jonathan's crime and perform it himself, and thus perhaps redeem himself. Jonathan pays for his sins at the end. Ripley survives, redeemed (by his moral standards), and is to be pitied.¹⁵

This corruption, this perversion of the natural order sinks deep into society. Think only of the old lady who negotiates her own price for Jonathan's framing job. She too is deceitful, and Jonathan is helpless against her scheming. And, despite its seeming innocence, even the little mechanical toy (like a miniature, intimate slide projector), partakes in the pornographic: the soft porn photographs are even (deliriously!) self-referential; a photo of a small-breasted woman, for example, bears the caption "Flat lighting." And, the pornographer mentions wrapping up "the German co-production": complicity grows, pornography partakes in the global market.

Against these medieval indictments, Wenders opposes something almost naïve: a faith in the handmade, the crafted, the small. One can't help but be struck by the variety of types of visual media and devices in the film; not so much the contemporary,¹⁶ but the old-fashioned. In addition to the mini-slide projector, there is also the toy that Jonathan gives Ripley; the Zoetrope by the telephone in the Zimmermann apartment; what looks like a Nickelodeon in Jonathan's shop; the stereograph; the lamp with a scene of a waterfall, also in the shop; and Daniel's night-lamp. Behind all of these, of course, is Jonathan, frame-maker and painting restorer, that is, not a creator, but a preserver.

Wenders' film worries over the moral status of cinema as an image-making medium. Cinema here appears in the form of pornography. There is nothing against the making of images, but against its dealing and marketing, how it is corrupted by money because, by creating false or unnatural desires, it stains or perverts not only the image, but the image-maker and, in the end, the image-recipient: the audience, you and I. Apart from his old-fashioned toys, Wenders offers no way out of this dilemma: it is, after all, the name and the rule of the game – Ripley's game.

Certainly Wenders includes himself among those dealing in images for money; the moral argument is not only about forgery and pornography, but also and perhaps especially auteurist cinema. And by acknowledging his complicity in the dilemmas of commerce Wenders must simply hope for the best, hope that some honor and integrity are maintained. But within that dilemma there exists another: how to exist as an individual (auteurist) work of art, and yet communicate with an audience, that is, to be a commercially successful product as well as a serious work of art? Here the answer seems to lie in the film's existence as a genre piece – a thriller with the setting up of an innocent at its narrative center – that cleverly adds some original twists. Of course, audiences expect some twists in conventions but Wenders takes things further than expected by way of displacements and discontinuities, or, said in another way, he satisfies but then betrays his viewers.¹⁷ In

this questioning of its own status as a work of art, the film demonstrates that the very fundamentals of filmmaking – the shot and the cut (the image and the relation between two images) – can undermine any claim to truth. Again, it is not simply a matter of style reflecting story, but a very worried mistrust of cinema's ability to tell the truth. This strategy results in an overall destabilization. It is not only Tom Ripley who can say "I no longer know who I am, or who anybody else is." Now, *no one knows* who he or she is, or even *where*: the Zimmermann apartment seems a stable, family home, yet becomes a site of violence and disruption; Ripley's home is some monstrous, Pop culture, paranoid bunker; and Minot's Paris apartment is empty and anonymous. In this world, nothing is original – quotations abound, along with forgery and corrupt images – and numbers – prices, dead bodies – grow and grow. We are betrayed from both within – blood, desire, identity – and without – "friends," images, buildings, the cities we live in. All of these make *The American Friend* a troubled and troubling film.¹⁸

1 Indeed, it came at just that time when postmodernism came to be seriously considered; I am thinking here of such landmark texts as Jean-François Lyotard's *La condition postmoderne* (1979), and Charles Jencks' *The Language of Postmodern Architecture* (1977). I do not want to rehearse here once again the question of what constitutes (or does not) the postmodern. The two texts and their authors just mentioned may differ in their own ways (Lyotard's exhaustion of the grand narratives, and the postmodern as the "future (post) anterior (modern)," (p. 81); and Jencks and the notion of pastiche and homogenized space), but together they suffice to provide a general description of the *mood* or condition we live in today. The film is, let us say, on the cusp of a full-blown postmodernism, call it "pre-postmodern" in that its stylistics, while radical in their own way (as this paper hopes to show) are not full flourishing mannerisms. (Lyotard again: "Postmodernism ... is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state" (p. 79).)

2 Who is "the American friend"? Two early working titles for the film were "Framed" and "Rule without Exception." The first is rather obvious, while the second I will make something of later. (This information comes from Wenders' commentary on the DVD edition of the film, hereafter simply noted as DVD.) Near the end of the film, Marianne, just after accusing Jonathan that he is "using your illness to deceive me," adds, "What do I care what you're up to with your American friend?," the only time the title is directly stated. Obviously, she is referring, with great sarcasm, to Ripley. But Ripley can hardly be called a friend of Jonathan's. That distinction must go to Allan Winter (played by former folk rocker David Blue), who in the auction scene buys the Derwatt that's for sale despite Jonathan's telling him that "the blue's not right" (but of course it must be right, as it really is a Derwatt). It is *supposedly* from Allan that Jonathan receives the sympathetic telegram offering financial help if needed: actually the contents have been concocted by Ripley and Minot. But then too we never see or hear from Allan again. So, that American friend proves unreliable. Finally, could "the American friend" even possibly be the character played by B-film cult auteur Samuel Fuller, listed in the credits only as "Der Amerikaner"? This "Amerikaner" is, in the film, a porno director, while outside the film, Fuller was both a father-figure and friend to young European auteurs such as Wenders. And one more "father-figure-friend" is certainly the legendary American film director Nicholas Ray (about whose real dying days Wenders made the documentary *Lightning Over Water, Nick's Movie*, 1980), who here plays Derwatt. What does the presence of these latter two film directors – one a pornographer, the other a forger – mean in this film? Wenders' earlier films had worried over America's "cultural colonialism" of Europe, and here he depicts it at its worst – though not, however, without letting himself off the hook: indebted to the American cinema, the film is hesitant over its own status as both an art object and an object of commerce. Perhaps, there simply is not an "American friend."

3 On the DVD version Wenders claims the building is a copy of one in Russia. He may have intended this additional displacement but in truth the house was built in 1820 by Danish architect Axel Bundsen (1768-1832), while the somewhat similar empire style villas in Crimea are later. *Architekturführer Hamburg* by Ralf Lange (Stuttgart, Edition Axel Menges, 1995) also mentions that the house was renovated in 1936.

4 Actually, the only other major pun – and a rather obvious one at that – occurs (after we have probably been waiting for it for some while) after the first murder when Jonathan is alone in his shop and drapes a frame over his neck; this is later echoed by Ripley when having heard from Minot about the plan for the second murder, he goes to Jonathan's shop and receives his now framed print, and pronounces the word we have been waiting to hear.

5 Praise must surely be given to Robby Müller's beautiful cinematography. Müller has worked extensively not only with Wenders, but Jim Jarmusch and Lars von Trier also.

6 Together, these attempts to over-compensate for loss via an excess of self-replication enact a kind of masturbatory scenario: masturbatory because it is self-obsessed, single, alone, or separate and divided, like a soundtrack without an image-track, an image-track without a soundtrack. Recall here too how he props up his idea of himself via the trappings of his home-decoration scheme, what we might call his "schizoid mise-en-scène."

7 While we see Jonathan's contented home life, we know next to nothing about Ripley. He seems to live alone; he seems to be known in Hamburg society, but from a distance; he does not seem to take part in any local social life (and seems to have little home life either, considering the state of his mansion's decorative unsettledness). The first time we see him, he is back home, in America – and he kisses a man. But this is Derwatt, partner-in-crime, and the kiss seems more genuinely affectionate, younger to elder, than to possess any homosexual undertone. (It is also Dennis Hopper acknowledging Nicholas "Mastertician" Ray; Hopper also acted in Ray's *Rebel without a Cause* [1955]). At their first meeting, during the auction scene, recall, Jonathan rebuffs Ripley, and unknowingly sets in motion the wheel of his fate. Recall, too, that the early scene of Ripley confused ("I no longer know ...") is evoked later, after the first murder, when he is again confused (drinking, nervous), and once more emerges from his bedroom to his balcony, and again raises his arm in salutation: this time, however, as we (again) hear a faint foghorn, we cut to Jonathan waking suddenly as if from a bad dream, as if from a call from his evil twin, Ripley. At first then, Ripley clearly dislikes Jonathan, and feels no compunction about setting him up. But gradually, as he meets him again and again, and observes both his settled state, which seems to envy, and the trials he undergoes, he grows to like him, perhaps even to desire him in some fashion. Consider especially the language of their exchanges.

8 Augé, Marc, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, London, Verso, 1995.

9 And that continues to irk some people as a 2003 *Film Comment* review of Liliana Cavani's film of *Ripley's Game* (starring John Malkovich) expresses.

10 Brian de Palma's early films are known for being Hitchcockian in manner, but *The American Friend* is faithful in spirit.

11 Mention must also be made to the appearances in the film of, besides the Americans Nicholas Ray and Samuel Fuller in their significant roles, but also another four European film directors in various small roles – Jean Eustache, the friendly man with a bandage in the Arab café; Daniel Schmidt as the first murder victim; Sandy Whitelaw as the Doctor in the American Hospital; and Peter Lilenthal as "Marcangelo," the second murder victim – all of these appearing in a sort of whirlwind of Hitchcockian cameos.

12 As well, the question of the train being either a miniature or real reminds the cinephile of the notoriously "bad" process shots of the ships in, again, Hitchcock's *Marnie* (1965). Melville's train sequence might also be a source for some of the second murder scene; it too includes a shot of cleaning the wash basin.

13 The New German Cinema was very aware of the disaster that had preceded it – not only the Nazis but their cinema too – and the glory that preceded that; the German Expressionist cinema of the teens and twenties. The ultimate homage was to come in Werner Herzog's *Nosferatu, Phantom der Nacht* (1979), his remake of Murnau's *Nosferatu, Eine Symphonie des Grauens* (1921).

14 Wenders depiction of this overall, generic and global single city surely reminds one of Rem Koolhaas's notion of the "Generic City" (published in *S, M, L, XL*, London, Penguin, 1995). The correspondences are numerous; from the very beginning: "1.1 Is the contemporary city like the contemporary airport – 'all the same'? Is it possible to theorize this convergence? And if so, to what ultimate convergence is it aspiring? Convergence is possible only at the price of shedding identity." Does Wenders precede Koolhaas, or Koolhaas Wenders?

15 I am indebted to Stephen Zepke for the ideas in this paragraph.

16 As for the contemporary, there is a television – off – in the Zimmermann apartment and another in Ripley's bedroom – on – but he is not looking at it. More significantly, the security system – a bank of monitors – in the Paris Metro, may be on, but no one is watching, implying, perhaps, the failure of this screening apparatus – and any such apparatus, cinema included? – to distinguish right from wrong.

17 Something, of course, that Hitchcock supremely did with the shower murder of *Psycho* (1960), thereby forever upping the ante of what "playing by the rules" might mean.

18 Much more could be said about this film: the grim humor; Minot's petulance when Jonathan refuses to commit the second murder, "Ah, Jonathan, the first one went so well!"; and especially Ripley's mathematical problem of how many minutes pass between two events – throwing gangsters from a train moving at a constant speed); the three Kinks' songs, ("There's too Much on My Mind" is repeatedly sung or hummed by Jonathan); Jonathan's clumsiness, and many more details that give the film not only a rich texture but a narrative, spatial and cultural voluminousness that resonates powerfully for any viewer.



In 1928, architecture historian Sigfried Giedion declared that only film can make the new architecture intelligible. For him, only a dynamic medium such as the cinema could capture the simultaneities and blurred boundaries of the contemporary city and communicate the new worldview across cultural and ethnic borders. Similarly, Le Corbusier argued that the silent film, as a purely visual medium, passes over frontiers, just like the aeroplane.

In recent years, the early modernists' enthusiasm for the cinema has not only been matched but actually surpassed, with architects increasingly replacing the teetotal with the image in their effort to express the changeability of the built environment and to capture the informational, event-like, fluid character of the city as a generic form liberated from identity and reducing any sociological explanations.

The essays in *Datutop 29* offer a contribution to the discourse concerning the city and cinema within the genre of the 'city film'. Instead of postulating the generic city as the original condition of contemporary urbanism, it is argued that each place has its own uniqueness, its own history, and its own unique physical structure, *pace* popular glosses on greater homogeneity within ever-expanding globalization, or visions of cyber technologies bringing about the dissolution of space and the dematerialisation of the city.

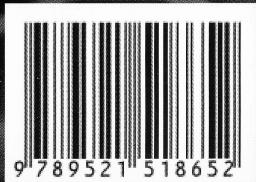
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