

## *In conversation with* Wim Wenders



Alongside Rainer Werner Fassbinder and Werner Herzog, Wim Wenders was one of the leading figures of the New German Cinema of the 1970s. Born in Germany in 1945, he became one of the most critically acclaimed film makers of his generation. Inspired by rock and roll, and an introspective and intensely manic period of film study in Paris, he went on to create cinematic masterpieces such as *Wings of Desire* (1987), *Paris, Texas* (1984), and *Buena Vista Social Club* (1999).

Wenders also brings his atmospheric lyricism to photography. Having taken pictures since the age of seven he was influenced by some of photography's great names: Walker Evans most of all, but also August Sander, Edward Steichen, and Joel Meyerowitz. Renowned for his ability to place his finger tips on the human soul, Wenders has dedicated his life to gently searching streets and cities gathering inspiration for his films and photographs.

**Wim Wenders in conversation with Jon Baker.**

**Illustration by Roberto Amoroso.**

**Jon Baker:** *I have heard you began taking pictures at the age of seven, what did you take pictures of and how has your approach to photography changed since your early start?*

**Wim Wenders:** My first camera was a cheap 6x6 roll film camera that worked a bit like a Rolleiflex: you looked at the picture on a ground glass from the top, and you'd hold the camera in front of your belly. So all my pictures were taken at a rather low angle. I did not really like that perspective and it was a revelation to me when I later got a viewfinder camera that you could lift to your eye. My first pictures were mainly animals in the zoo. And houses. I got an early attraction to buildings. I was never much of a photographer of people, even as a kid. I love taking pictures of places, streets, cities, deserts... It is only lately that I'm getting interested in people, but in wide shots, lost in landscapes and cityscapes.

*Apparently Walker Evans is a big influence in your photography – how so?*

That was an initial inspiration, but strangely enough more for my film-making than for my photography. My film 'Im Lauf der Zeit' (Kings of the Road) is heavily influenced by Walker Evans' work, for example. I took black and white pictures for 20 years. I liked his compositions, his fascination with advertising and typefaces and corrugated iron. The distance he kept to his subjects. The way he didn't impose himself as "interpreter" of things. He saw himself more as a "preserver". But since I took my first photograph in color in the early Eighties I have not gone back to black and white, so the influence of Walker Evans has faded. I always was more impressed by the history of painting, anyway. My great heroes are painters, not other photographers. I think I learned everything about framing from Dutch landscape painters.

*Have you seen William Eggleston's new book '5x7'? What did you think? (do you find it interesting that he was so prolific before the publication of the guide) Which if any of his books is your favourite?*

I know Eggleston's work, and I'm a big admirer of his. I don't think I know the book you're referring to. My favorite of his is a book just called 'William Eggleston' and published in 2002 by the Cartier Foundation. I first saw his work in a book that was very important for me, called 'New Color/New Work', published in 1984. I had just started taking color seriously the year before, and all my hopes for color photography were confirmed by this book. Eggleston was one of 18 photographers portrayed in this volume.

*In your series 'Pictures from the Surface of the Earth' colour obviously plays a big part, how did you approach taking those photographs? Is it the colour that attracts you or something a little more elusive?*

Color is definitely part of the equation, but not all of it. I think the initial "encounter" is between the place and something deep down inside my soul that I do not want to name or even know.

Let's say I feel a "connection" to the place, and it moves me. I care about it. I try to get to know it like you might want to get to know a person.

Find out about its history. Listen to its story. Try to see it in the best light. I always think of my camera as an instrument that both captures the light, the colors, the physical appearance of the place as well as "recording" its story. Places have amazing things to tell us if we're ready to listen...

*Are you drawn to any contemporary photography of the last few years?* I like the work of my German contemporaries, Andreas Gursky most of all. And I love the work of the American photographer Joel Meyerowitz a lot. My favorite living photographer is Sebastiao Salgado!

*How was it being immortalised by Helmut Newton?*

It was a cold and rainy day in Berlin. Helmut just took me to lots of places in Berlin, by the wall, in Kreuzberg. He was relentless. Always one more place. And always one more film... I was starting to freeze more and more, and my nose got redder and redder. I was more and more uncomfortable, but he seemed to think that was good for the picture he was after. So I trusted him.

*What is your favourite John Cassavettes film?*

It used to be 'Faces' until I saw 'Woman Under the Influence'. And in the end it was 'Love Streams'. I knew John a bit and met him a few times. What impressed me most of all was his LOVE for the actors and all aspects of the craft of filmmaking.

*What do you think of the Hollywood remakes of your films?*

Not so bad at all! Meaning: Could have been a lot worse!

*Has your outlook as a filmmaker developed with your maturity as a person?* The two are really inseparable. The person matured with his films, (or not), and the films matured with the man, (or not). I think I learned more about life through the process and the interaction of film-making than through any other occupation. I was a pretty introverted character, and I would have remained that, if I had become the painter I initially wanted to become. As a filmmaker I became a social human being...

*What do you think of Francis Bacon, who repeatedly dealt in religious iconography?*

He is a scary painter. Some sort of a contemporary Hieronymus Bosch. I would not have wanted to live in his mind. But I stood for hours in front of his paintings, as a young man, totally in awe.

*You have said you enjoyed reading the 'Adventures of Huckleberry Finn' and 'Tom Sawyer'; did the outlook of those books have an influence on your filmmaking?*

Funny question. I never thought about that. But I'm sure these books left their traces, as I loved them so much! You might see hints in the two men in 'Im Lauf der Zeit'. Or in 'Alice in the Cities'. Again, it's not up to me to look for that. I'm quite happy to keep working with my unconsciousness without analyzing or questioning it too much. I really work very much from the guts, and unlike what you might think, not all that much from my brain. So I very often go with intuitions instead of with any "knowledge" or "insight".