

## Watershed April 2008 Podcast

This month we focus on two European auteurs – Austrian Michael Haneke and German Wim Wenders. We are opening Haneke's remake of his original 1997 **Funny Games** and with Wenders' we are screening a retrospective of his earlier work to tie in with the reissue of **Alice in the Cities**. If I have my facts right then there have been copyright issues with Wenders early German films that have prevented them from getting exposure either in cinemas or on DVD. I guess this must have been resolved.

I first saw **Alice in the Cities** in the early 1980s at the brilliant Scala cinema in Kings Cross in London – a cinema committed to repertory unlike any other – and still sorely missed. At the time I was studying film at Bulmershe College in Reading (as an aside there was only a handful of places then that you could study film to degree level. Bulmershe was one of them and with people of the calibre of Doug Pye, Jim Hillier, Laura Mulvey and a young turk by the name of Stuart Cosgrove – no relation by the way – it was an excellent place to learn about film). London was a 40 minute bus trip away and I and fellow student Andy Willis – now Dr Willis of Salford University – would schlep up to London to see, for example a Wenders triple bill. It was on one of these occasions that **Alice in the Cities** came into my cinematic orbit – a quite brilliant experience, leisurely paced about a photographer who realises more about himself through his relationship with a young girl as they travel. Rudy Vogler has a great presence. It was a unique film and would have a huge influence on the independent American filmmakers like Jim Jarmusch.

One of the films may also have been **Kings of the Road**, another of the defining films of early Wenders. It is a film about male relationships and the distance in between but more importantly those relationships of the generation who grew up post war. It is also a film about the influence of America. The oft quoted line – 'The Americans have colonised our subconscious'. Which is a theme and a relationship running through most of Wenders' work.

These early films were not only defining for Wenders' career but were central to the development of what has been described as the New German Cinema of the 1970s. Wenders along with Werner Herzog and Fassbinder were shaping a hugely influential moment and movement in European cinema. The trajectory of Wenders – his stories of outsiders, drifters framed within landscapes cityscapes led to the worldwide acclaim for **Paris Texas**. I can hear Ry Cooder's distinctive groundbreaking score already. Of course music and American music were very much a structured presence in Wenders films. One of his most recent projects was a documentary on bluesman J B Lenoir for Martin Scorsese's series on the blues.

Documentary is also an area that Wenders has excelled in – most people will know of **Buena Vista Social Club** but he has a broader portfolio of documentaries that are less well known. For me a real highlight is **Lightning over Water** – a portrait of the great Hollywood director Nicholas Ray in the final months and days of his life as he was dying of cancer. Ray directed **Rebel without a Cause** and one of my all time top ten films **In a Lonely Place**. Ray was the original outsider and the documentary is a moving account of the filmmaker. Nicholas Ray also connect Jarmusch and Wenders more directly – Jarmusch studied under Ray in New York. Other documentaries include **Tokyo-Ga** where Wenders travels to Japan to document the legacy of great Japanese director Yasujiro Ozu and **Notebooks on Cities and Clothes** where Wenders uses a documentary on fashion designer Yohji

Yamamoto to interrogate his own practice as a filmmaker. In this one in particular, shot in 1989, Wenders is seen embracing the creative possibilities of hand held digital cameras.

The season offers many riches – I haven't even mentioned the stunning **Wings of Desire** – but I will just say a bit about **The American Friend**. I had the rare privilege of seeing Wenders in conversation with Hopper at the Berlin Film Festival. The story as Wenders tells it was that he had signed Hopper to star in the film alongside Bruno Ganz, shooting was due to start in Hamburg, Wenders was to collect Hopper from the airport. What he didn't quite realise was that Hopper was coming straight off the shoot of **Apocalypse Now**. Wenders was met by a Hopper still dressed exactly as he looks in **Apocalypse Now** complete with cameras around his neck but also and more worryingly bitten by all sorts of insects. Wenders first job was to get Hopper to the hospital and basically keep him alive!

When the filming started it quite quickly became apparent that Hopper's method approach to acting was clashing with Ganz's more classical style. This led to arguments but as Hopper remembered it he realised he had to be more on his game, meanwhile Ganz was taking a leaf out of Hopper's book. By the end of the film they had almost transformed into each other's style. Adapted from Patricia Highsmith novel **The American Friend** is another defining Wenders film and again hugely influential especially in the development of American Independent cinema.

**Alice in the Cities** opens on the 4<sup>th</sup> April  
The **Focus on Wim Wenders** Season runs throughout April  
See [watershed.co.uk](http://watershed.co.uk) for more information

Where Wenders is an incurable romantic as a filmmaker Austrian Michael Haneke is tougher, more philosophical and more confrontational. His last film **Hidden** was a deserved great success and brought his cinema to a much wider audience. He has now remade his controversial 1997 film **Funny Games** for the English language market and stars Tim Roth And Naomi Watts. I wrote a piece for staff at Watershed to provide some context to the film here it is

I thought it might be useful to give some context to the forthcoming release of **Funny Games**, Michael Haneke's English language version remake of his 1997 Austrian original.

The original was controversial and I suspect the remake may be so as well. (Although this is by no means guaranteed!) For info, we have flagged up the nature of the film in brochure copy and press reviews will similarly highlight the controversial nature of the film)

Why is it controversial? - The film plays with and exposes the audiences vicarious and questionable pleasures whilst watching fictionalised horror/violence. **Funny Games** is a violent thriller but does not allow the audience to hide in the comfort of the dark but rather tries to make the viewer, in a way, complicit with what is happening on screen. This, as you can imagine, can be a deeply uncomfortable experience.

Why does it do this? - Haneke wants us to think about what we are doing when we engage in such cinematic 'pleasures' and to ask why do we want

to see such violence, raising questions about the audience's impulse and the cinematic mechanism. Its aesthetic (and possibly political) roots are in Brechtian theatre. Haneke, like Brecht, wants the audience to actively engage and not passively consume - in this instance, about what it means to consume such images? what do we want to get enjoyment from? Ultimately Haneke with **Funny Games** wants the audience to reject the experience and walk out - demanding a more civilized and civilizing (film) culture.

As a film, **Funny Games** is a pure distillation of the (nice)-family-in-peril thriller genre.

As filmmaking, it is brilliantly orchestrated and choreographed, beautifully precise with (certainly in the original) excellent performances.

As a filmmaker Haneke is one of the most challenging and important of European directors - see also **Hidden, The Piano Teacher, Code Unknown**.

I suggest that if any audience member leaves through outrage or disgust they are entitled to demand a more civilizing and civilized (film) culture BUT not their money back!

NB This is a shot for shot remake - why? In my view, why change a perfect script/plot construction when you are simply being asked to appeal to a wider English speaking audience.

**Funny Games** plays at Watershed from Fri 4 to Thu 17 April.