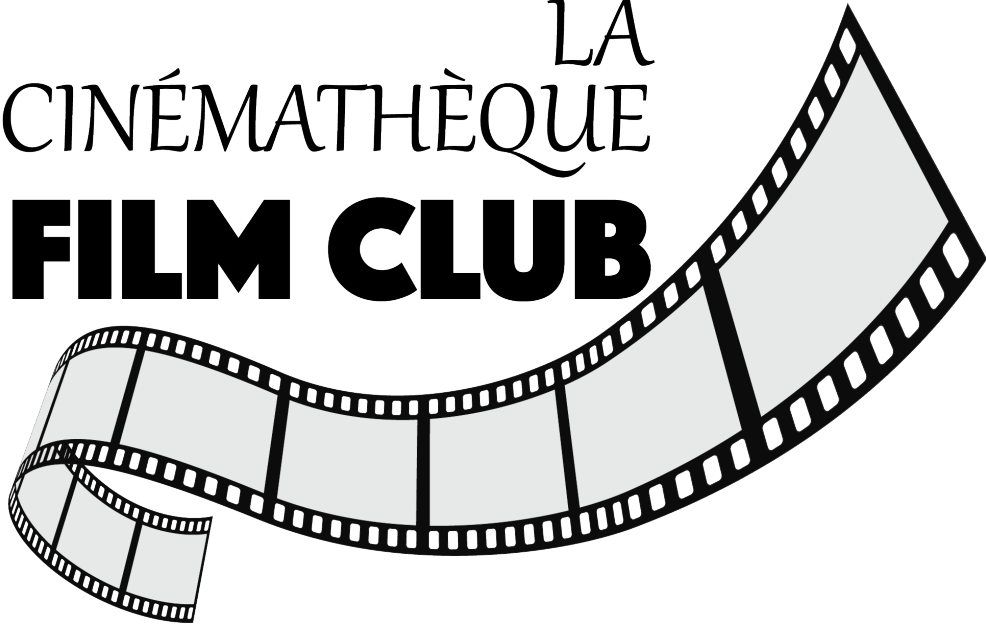


LA
CINÉMATHÈQUE
FILM CLUB



Cannes Palme d'Or Winners
2018-2019

Wim Wenders
b.1945

Paris, Texas
1984

Paris, Texas

Lee Hill • October 2014

Article sourced from *Senses of Cinema*: <http://sensesofcinema.com/2014/cteq/paris-texas/>

Paris, Texas (1984) is a story about the prodigal son and his uneasy homecoming. It is also, among other things, a road movie, a modern Western, a near textbook perfect example of what an “art film” can be rather than should be, and also a rare example of an international co-production whose poetic reach isn’t handicapped by the lure of foreign sales. It represents the peak of Wim Wenders’ career in the ’70s and early ’80s. Debuting at the Cannes Film Festival in 1984, where it deservedly won the Palme d’Or, the film achieved the German director’s long sought fusion of the European personal film with classic American cinema’s preoccupations with male identity, the frontier and the ideology of romance. The film was viewed as a comeback for Wenders, whose reputation as one of the superstars of the New German Cinema along with Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Werner Herzog, Volker Schlöndorff, Margarethe von Trotta and Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, had been bruised by the lukewarm reception to *Hammett*(1982), his troubled collaboration with Francis Ford Coppola’s Zoetrope Studios and the marginal distribution of such meditations on the crisis of the auteur as *Der Stand der Dinge* (*The State of Things*, 1982) and *Chambre 666*(1982). *Paris, Texas*’ enduring power was also confirmed by the celebration of the 30th anniversary of its release at the 2014 Cannes Film Festival.

The film opens with ravishing aerial footage of desert and mountains in West Texas, a sparse, yet epic canvas for Wenders to kick off a story about a man who is a stranger not just in his own land, but his own skin. Emerging from the desert, Travis (Harry Dean Stanton), lost and severely hydrated, is rescued by a German doctor (a cameo by Bernhard Wicki, the director of the 1959 anti-war film *Die Brücke* [*The Bridge*]) living in a remote village. Whether traumatised by his desert ordeal or hiding a dark secret, Travis refuses to speak, but the doctor manages to track down and contact Travis’ younger brother, Walt Henderson (Dean Stockwell), the hardworking owner of a billboard company in Los Angeles.

Walt loyally takes time off from work to meet a brother he hasn’t seen for over four years. He



encounters a near catatonic; a weather beaten shadow of the man he once was. As they journey back to LA, Walt is both frustrated and puzzled by Travis' passivity and eccentric behaviour. Travis tries to flee back into the desert, refuses to fly, and when he does speak, his responses are gnomic clues to a family history Walt has long moved on from. In LA, Travis is gently welcomed by Walt's French wife, Anne (Aurore Clément), but less so by his son Hunter (Hunter Carson, the son of co-writer and actor, L. M. Kit Carson, and actress Karen Black).

Now seven, Hunter has only a vague memory of the man who abandoned him when he was barely out of diapers. Hunter is wary, distrustful and not a little embarrassed and ashamed of this clumsy, shy stranger in comparison to the aunt and uncle who raised him as their own child. The two gradually bond, in part, because their age gap is surmounted by a common bedrock of stoic wonder and humour (demonstrated by a bit of Chaplinesque interplay when Travis, dressed as a very LA kind of cowboy, walks Hunter home from school).

Yet Travis has barely emerged from his shell and reconnected with his child when he takes off on a road trip with Hunter to find his wife, Jane (Nastassja Kinski). Although Jane had left Hunter in the care of her in-laws not long after her marriage with Travis disintegrated, she sends a check every month via a bank in Houston to Anne as a form of child support. When Travis locates Jane, it becomes clear she has undergone a breakdown of identity as severe as the drinking and depression that crippled her husband. No longer the young and happy bride of an urban cowboy, Jane works in a strange peep show; sitting in a glass booth and engaging in phone sex with customers who can see her, but not touch her. Pretending to be one of Jane's anonymous patrons, Travis embarks on one of the most moving reconciliations in modern cinema

Wenders first met Sam Shepard, with a view to having the playwright/actor star in *Hammett*. Instead they began to collaborate on a project inspired by themes from Shepard's 1982 play *Motel Chronicles*, and Wenders' notion of a modern update of *The Odyssey*. Production on *Paris, Texas* began before Shepard completed a satisfactory shooting script and Carson (who had recently scripted Jim McBride's *Breathless* [1983] remake) came on board as the on-the-set writer. Carson fine-tuned much of what takes place in the scenes between Travis and Jane in Houston, but in such a way that it is difficult to determine where Shepard's contributions begin or end.

Despite the somewhat hasty nature of the film's production, the key creative participants, behind and in front of the camera, unite to create a heartbreaking yet liberating meditation on the nature of family. Although



the film is ultimately about kind of loss and sense of enigma that broken families rarely come to terms with, *Paris, Texas* left the international audience who embraced the film on its release exhilarated. Perhaps because Wenders was sufficiently detached from his material, he achieved the kind of dramatic power that he so admired in the work of directors like Nicholas Ray and Elia Kazan. While Shepard's ongoing examination about the love/hate between fathers and sons, husbands and wives, brothers and sisters has never been as powerfully achieved on film since (Robert Altman's adaptation of *Fool For Love* [1985] is a problematic exception).

The emotional complexity of this collaboration between a great auteur of the cinema and a master of contemporary theatre would not exist or work without the cast. Stanton in perhaps his most famous lead role (after Alex Cox's *Repo Man* earlier the same year) is utterly convincing as a man seeking to salvage not just self-respect, but the future from the ashes of failure. Stockwell and Clément embody an ordinary middle-class couple with specificity and a lack of sentiment. Kinski, in her best role since Roman Polanski's *Tess* (1980), has perhaps the hardest part in the film – playing both a young woman in the full bloom of a great romance and a hardened survivor who has to gauge whether to trust again. Their work is ably supported by Robby Muller's cinematography with its echoes of the hyperrealist paintings of Edward Hopper and Ed Ruscha.

In a recent interview Wenders made a comment that suggests why *Paris, Texas* was such a specific landmark for the director: "Unlike other directors from Germany and Austria who have gone to America as an exile, it was never an exile for me. It was always some sort of parallel life that I could live somewhere else."¹

Since the release of *Paris, Texas*, Wenders has made films all over the world including Germany and America. As time, the great destroyer marches on, homecomings of the artistic kind become less frequent and more elusive the more a filmmaker consciously strives for them. And yet Wenders, like Shepard, remains driven. You can't go home again, perhaps, but home has a funny way of coming back to you regardless.

Paris, Texas (1984 West Germany/France/UK/USA 147 mins)

Prod Co: Road Movies Filmproduktion/Argos Films **Prod:** Anatole Dauman, Don Guest **Dir:** Wim Wenders **Scr:** Sam Shepard, L. M. Kit Carson **Phot:** Robby Muller **Ed:** Peter Pryzgodda **Art Dir:** Kate Altman **Mus:** Ry Cooder **Assistant Dir:** Claire Denis

Cast: Harry Dean Stanton, Nastassja Kinski, Aurore Clément, Dean Stockwell, Hunter Carson, Bernhard Wicki, John Lurie

¹ Wenders in "Wim Wenders: Everything I Loved I Had to Defend", *The Talks*, 29 January 2014: <http://the-talks.com/interviews/wim-wenders/>.

Selected Filmography as Director

2018	Pope Francis: A Man of His Word (Documentary)	1995	Beyond the Clouds (prologue, intermissions & epilogue)
2017	Submergence	1994	Lisbon Story
2016	The Beautiful Days of Aranjuez	1993	U2: Stay (Faraway, So Close!) (Video short)
2015	Every Thing Will Be Fine	1993	Faraway, So Close!
2014	The Salt of the Earth (Documentary)	1992	Talking Heads: Sax and Violins (Video short)
2014	Cathedrals of Culture (Documentary) (segment "The Berlin Philharmonic")	1992	Arisha, der Bär und der steinerne Ring (Short)
2012	Invisible World (segment "Ver ou Não Ver")	1991	Until the End of the World
2011	Pina (Documentary)	1990	U2: Night and Day (Video short)
2010	If Buildings Could Talk (Documentary short)	1990	Red Hot and Blue (TV Movie) (segment "Night and Day")
2010	Il volo (Documentary short)	1989	Notebook on Cities and Clothes (Documentary)
2008	8 (segment "Person to Person")	1987	Wings of Desire
2008	Palermo Shooting	1985	Tokyo-Ga (Documentary)
2007	To Each His Own Cinema (segment "War in Peace")	1984	Paris, Texas
2007	Invisibles (Documentary) (segment "Invisible Crimes")	1982	The State of Things
2005	Don't Come Knocking	1982	Reverse Angle: Ein Brief aus New York (Documentary short)
2004	Land of Plenty	1982	Room 666 (TV Movie documentary)
2003	Other Side of the Road (Short)	1982	Hammett
2003	The Blues (TV Series documentary) (1 episode) - The Soul of a Man (2003)	1982	Cinéma cinémas (TV Series documentary) (1 episode) - Episode dated 16 March 1982 (1982) ... (segment "quand je m'éveille")
2003	The Soul of a Man (Documentary)	1980	Lightning Over Water (Documentary)
2002	U2: The Best of 1990-2000 (Video documentary) (videos "Stay (Faraway, So Close!)", "The Ground Beneath Her Feet")	1977	Ein Haus für uns (TV Series) (2 episodes) - Die Insel (1977) - Aus der Familie der Panzerechsen (1977)
2002	Ten Minutes Older: The Trumpet (segment "Twelve Miles to Trona")	1977	The American Friend
2002	Ode to Cologne: A Rock 'N' Roll Film (Documentary)	1976	Kings of the Road
2000	U2: The Ground Beneath Her Feet (Video short)	1975	Wrong Move
2000	Un matin partout dans le monde (TV Short)	1974	Alice in the Cities
2000	The Million Dollar Hotel	1973	The Scarlet Letter
1999	Buena Vista Social Club (Documentary)	1972	The Goalie's Anxiety at the Penalty Kick
1998	Willie Nelson at the Teatro (Documentary)	1971	Summer in the City
1997	The End of Violence	1969	Kaspar Hauser
1995	Lumière and Company (Documentary)	1969	3 amerikanische LP's (TV Short)
1995	Die Gebrüder Skladanowsky	1969	Alabama (2000 Light Years) (Short)
		1969	Police Film (TV Short)
		1969	Silver City Revisited (Short)
		1968	Klappenfilm (Short)
		1968	Victor I. (Short)
		1968	Same Player Shoots Again (Short)
		1967	Schauplätze (Short)