WANDERING: SEEING THE CINEMA OF WIM WENDERS
THROUGH CULTURAL THEORY AND
NATURALIZED PHENOMENOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

In both form and content, Wim Wenders’s films create a cinema of wandering, tracing a route of intersections between the modern and postmodern visual landscape. The space of the world, its deserted horizons and populated streets, are a kind of visual architecture through which the mobile vision of the film wanders, just as Wenders’s peripatetic characters wander through space and time towards encounters with others. This wandering invites a phenomenological understanding of embodied spectator experience and perception, for as much as Wenders’s films are about the representative image, they are also about the dynamic relationship of the embodied spectator to the visible world. A first avenue of inquiry leads through the deserts and cities that shape the visual terrain of Wenders’s cinema. These locations are always sites (places) and sights (images) of recuperation that offer critique, analysis, and resistance to the hyperreal and the reductive visual practices of postmodernity. A second route follows the journeys of both Wenders’s characters and films. The insistence in existential phenomenology that meaning and intentionality inhere in the body’s motility provides a starting point for elucidating the relationship of cinematic technology to embodied vision. The film and the spectator share a way of being in the world, and the wandering vision and audition that shape the journeys of Wenders’s films are always expressions of the modern experience of space and time. Finally, this dissertation undertakes a third course, applying naturalized phenomenology to a reading of the encounters of Wenders’s wandering subjects. This methodology allows for a clearer understanding of the socially mediated subject, and of the relationship of spectator to film. The dynamic mirroring that constitutes cinematic experience as it occurs neurologically and phenomenologically shapes cinematic encounters. Film is a mirror, but more significantly, the spectator is a mirror. For the spectator, as for Wenders’s characters, wandering is a way of engaging the contingencies of the other and confronting the truths and lies behind cinematic illusion.
DEDICATION

For Nguyen…

Only one is a wanderer;
two together are always going somewhere.
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CHAPTER 1
CINEMA, MODERNITY, AND PHENOMENOLOGY

My gaze wanders in the halos of Being.
Maurice Merleau-Ponty

Some years ago, while making my living as a photographer, I wandered about parts of the United States, Europe, and Central America. Mostly, I wandered about the city that was then my home, Albany, NY. In winter, I dragged my equipment through drifts of snow, searching for the ideal composition. At night, I set up my tripod on deserted streets to catch the lamplight falling on forgotten cobblestones. I felt driven to capture images that reached back in time, past the clutter of the present and into a history that seemed far more visually exciting. The nineteenth-century architecture, the Fredrick Olmstead park with its lake and iron bridge, the rusted railroad lines that stretched across the Hudson: these were the places that captivated my gaze. Some twenty-five years later, this dissertation on the cinema of Wim Wenders has returned me to this fascination with wandering and the images of late-modern, urban culture.

Flânerie, the act of urban wandering, figures prominently in recent film theory, particularly among critics who have collectively developed what is often called the “modernity thesis.” In Melodrama and Modernity, Ben Singer offers this characterization of the modernity thesis:

What unites recent work by Guiliana Bruno, Leo Charney, Anne Friedberg, Tom Gunning, Miriam Hansen, Lynne Kirby, Lauren Rabinovitz, Mark Sandberg, Vanessa Schwartz, and others is an interest in unearthing or rethinking cinema’s emergence within the sensory environment of urban modernity, its relationship to late nineteenth-century technologies of space and time, and its interactions with adjacent elements in the new visual culture of advanced capitalism. (102)

Singer gives credit for the term “modernity thesis” to David Bordwell, whose critical evaluation of the theory appears in On the History of Film Style (141). Bordwell also refers to critics such as those named by Singer as “modernity theorists” (144). Following this lead, I will employ the terms “modernity theory” and “modernity theorists” throughout the following work to refer to the
cultural film theory and the cultural theorists characterized above by Singer’s remarks. These theorists have argued that *flânerie* enacted a prototypical cinematic experience, a mobilized, wandering vision enabled by the changing urban landscape and the proliferation of visual culture that catered to the appetite of the urban spectator. Over time, the mobility of *flânerie* accelerated in the technologies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and the increasing speed of the mobilized gaze radically altered subjective experience. This dissertation is motivated in part by the similarity between these wandering visual experiences of late-modern, urban culture and the form and content of Wim Wenders’s films. More than any other body of work, Wenders’s is a cinema of wanderers; more significantly, his is a wandering cinema.

How wandering communicates in all of its manifestations as a figure in Wenders’s films can be understood best through a combination of modernity studies and phenomenological film theory. This introduction will therefore begin with a brief survey of modernity studies as relevant to the work of Wenders. It will then examine the symbiotic relationship of film theory and phenomenology. The convergence of these two theoretical approaches not only offers an opportunity to understand Wenders’s films, but bears a larger significance for film theory as well.

**Modernity and Visual Culture**

A few words should be added about terms. In the following work, *modernity* will generally refer to the late-modern period stretching from the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century. *Postmodernity* will refer to the second half of the twentieth. These are limited but useful frames. The terms *modern* and *postmodern* are more difficult. They refer to cultural experiences that qualitatively or quantitatively differ from one another, but the experiences often overlap and resist strict categorization. To try to systematically list or delineate the distinctions of modern and postmodern would only open a can of semantically slippery worms. It probably clarifies the project better to say that in the following work, the terms
will refer to poles at the ends of the continuum of mobility and the continuum of visual culture. In the first case, modern characterizes flânerie and mechanized travel; postmodern characterizes the virtual travel in space and time afforded by cinema. In the second case, modern refers to the growth and amplification of visual spectacle in the late-modern period, including panoramas, photography, and cinema. Postmodern describes a visual culture where images are multiplied to the point of producing a hyperreal landscape and are unmoored from referents in the real world. Obviously, cinema can occupy either or both ends of these continuums, hence, the complexities. There are nevertheless, clear and definite poles of experience with respect to both mobility and vision. I will rely on explicit description to locate subjective experience within culture as much as possible, but the terms modernity and postmodernity will serve as useful reference points.

A fundamental principle of modernity theory and the modernity thesis is that “modern culture was ‘cinematic’ before the fact” (Charney 1). In Melodrama and Modernity, Singer characterizes the work of critics interested in the intersections of modernity and film as taking shape in three distinct but overlapping suppositions: First, movies are “like” modernity in that they “resemble the subjective experience of urban modernity” (103). Second, movies exist within the context of numerous modern phenomena; more importantly, they are in “dynamic interaction” with these phenomena. Thus, movies are a product of modernity “within relationships of contextual contiguity and interaction” (103). They are, in other words, inseparable and interactive within other manifestations of modernity. A “third component of the modernity thesis, and the most controversial, is the argument that cinema… was a consequence of modernity. This posits a relationship of causality” (103). Leaving aside the controversy surrounding causal relationships, I want to focus on the phenomena of modern urban life that characterize and intersect with cinema. Singer enumerates those that appear most frequently in the work of modernity theorists:

These include, among others, new technologies (e.g., the railroad, the telegraph, the photograph, electric illumination), new entertainments (e.g., the panorama and diorama, the amusement park, the world exhibition, the yellow press, the
wax museum, the morgue), new architectural forms (e.g., the panopticon, iron-and-glass construction), new visual displays (e.g., the billboard, the shop window, the illustrated press), new social spaces (e.g., the boulevard, the arcade, the department store), new social practices (e.g., flânerie, shopping, unchaperoned female mobility, widespread tourism, systematized surveillance), and new (or newly rampant) environmental obstacles (e.g., crowds, traffic, congestion). (103)

All of these aspects of modernity (with the exception of the wax museum) appear significantly and often in Wenders’s films. Railroads, for example, make prominent appearances beginning with his earliest extant work, Silver City (1968). Proto-cinematic characteristics of modern culture saturate his work to the point that they pervade the very form and style of the films. Many of these markers and mechanisms of modern visual culture, particularly flânerie and overland travel by train or automobile will occupy much of my own analysis.

Clarifying the points from which I am proceeding will help to contextualize my own arguments about the intersection of the modern environment, mobility, and the subjective experience of the cinema spectator. Architecture, visual amusements, urban planning, and modes of transportation are all central to early critical theorist such as Walter Benjamin, Rudolph Arnheim, and Siegried Kracauer, and it is fair to say that the reconfiguration of the urban landscape, particularly as it occurred in nineteenth-century Paris, underscores much of the film theory that addresses the changing visual experience of late-modern life. However, the visual landscape transformed along a continuum that stretches back to a much earlier moment in time. Relevant modern changes in urban landscapes and visual culture can reasonably be traced to the Renaissance, when the science of optics radically transformed the arts. I once had the pleasure of wandering through Seina, Italy with an urban-anthropologist who was keen to point out the distinct differences between the spaces that were native to the Gothic development of the medieval city, and those that were imposed by the conquering Florentines during the Cinquecento. The Gothic architecture and public spaces grew organically out of the landscape; the Renaissance spaces conformed to the strict geometry of single-point perspective. Side-by-side
in the streets of Siena, one encounters to this day two distinct ways of organizing the visual world.

The Renaissance visual system, or what Martin Jay calls “Cartesian perspectivalism” (4), amounts to a paradigm of visual discourse, or what Jay, borrowing from Christian Metz, calls a “scopic regime of modernity,” which is most clearly and systematically articulated by Leon Battista Alberti in his 1435 treatise, *de Pitura*. Jay contends, however, that the scopic regime sowed the seeds of its own contestation, arguing that “it is possible to discern internal tensions in Cartesian perspectivalism itself that suggest it was not quite as uniformly coercive as is sometimes assumed” (10). One can locate for example, in Benjamin’s analysis of the Haussmannization of Paris, a critique of the space that employs Cartesian perspectivalism in urban design to ennoble imperialism, and at the same time, a recognition of the instability of the paradigm:

Haussmann’s ideal in city planning consisted of long straight streets opening onto broad perspectives. This ideal corresponds to the tendency… to ennoble technological necessities through spurious artistic ends…. The perspectives, prior to their inauguration, were screened with canvas draperies and unveiled like monuments; the view would then disclose a church, a train station, an equestrian statue, or some other symbol of civilization. With the Haussmannization of Paris, the phantasmagoria was rendered in stone. Though intended to endure in quasi-perpetuity, it also reveals its brittleness. (“Exposé 1939” 24)

This incorporation of single-point perspective within the design of Parisian boulevards – Benjamin specifically mentions the Avenue de l’Opera – served to frame monuments in the urban landscape. Haussmann’s public spaces resemble the sort that defined Renaissance urban design in the *cinquecento*. One need only compare the vista looking down the Avenue de l’Opera towards the Palais Garnier to the vista of the painting, *View of an Ideal City* (1470), which Jay cites as an example of Cartesian perspectivalism, to find evidence of a Cartesian scopic regime.

It is important to remember here that precisely this sort of public space gave rise to a new kind of mobilized gaze that reconfigured not only representational practices (and paradigms), but
intellectual and philosophical understandings of vision. In short, the public spaces that emerged over the continuum of modernity reconfigured the practices of vision and the conceptualization of human vision. Jonathan Crary, in “Modernizing Vision,” makes precisely such a point with respect to the camera obscura as a model of a scopic regime, arguing that “the model collapsed in the early nineteenth century … when it was displaced by radically different notions of what an observer was and of what constituted vision” (30). The cultural concept of vision, in other words, was reconfigured not only in terms of how one would explain the mechanics of vision (perspectivalism), but also in terms of epistemology. The (visual) subject was no longer conceived of as a disembodied consciousness privileged with a singular perspective on transcendental and absolute (visual) truth. In short, the contingencies of embodied vision replaced the mathematically ideal vantage point of the camera obscura. Crary’s analysis draws heavily on the physiology of the nineteenth century that would lead to gestalt psychology and existential phenomenology, and he uses language that is implicitly phenomenological. He writes: “the body which had been a neutral or invisible term now was the thickness from which knowledge of vision was derived. This opacity or carnal density of the observer loomed so suddenly into view that its full consequences and effects could not be immediately realized [itals added]” (43). Crary borrows the language of existential phenomenology, but it is Jay who specifically invokes that philosophy in a rebuke of Cartesian formulations of vision:

Cartesian perspectivalism has, in fact, been the target of a widespread philosophical critique, which has denounced its privileging of an ahistorical, disinterested, disembodied subject entirely outside of the world it claims to know only from afar. The questionable assumption of a transcendental subjectivity characteristic of universalist humanism, which ignores our embeddedness in the what Maurice Merleau-Ponty liked to call the flesh of the word, is thus tied to the ‘high altitude’ thinking characteristic of the scope regime [Cartesian perspectivalism]. (10)

Jay establishes in this passage the significance of the body to a cultural theory of vision. When one talks about vision, or when one talks about visual representation, one must be clear on the
relationship of body and mind. To say that the flesh of the body, with all of its contingencies, is
the seat of perception does not posit a Cartesian subject. The seeing, opaque, fleshy body
inaugurates vision in a world of contingency, mobility, and other visual subjects. The flâneur,
while seemingly the embodiment of the centered, Cartesian, subject of the Enlightenment, is not a
mobilization of a mental camera obscura, but a contesting mode of embodied visual practice. As
Keith Tester says in his book-length study of the flâneur, “Flanerie can be understood as the
observation of the fleeting and the transitory which is the other half of modernity to the
permanent and central sense of self” (7). This mobilized vision must be seen in the context of
contesting models of vision, just as the city of Siena must be viewed within the context of the
opposing visual paradigms of Gothic and Renaissance cultures. To put a fine point on it, these
visual modes still oppose one another in Siena and are a matter of regional pride: one learns
quickly in Siena that it is always better to voice a preference for Duccio di Buoninsegna, than to
praise a master of the High Renaissance. This example suggests agreement with Martin Jay’s
point that scopic regimes exist in dynamic opposition. Such a dynamic history of vision in culture
underlies much of modernity studies in film theory. Anne Friedberg, for example, paralleling
Crary’s attention to the embodiment of the gaze, argues that the flâneur dynamically opposed the
episteme of the régime panoptique described by Foucault. She writes: “the trope of flânerie
delineates a mode of visual practice coincident with – but antithetical to – the panoptic gaze” (16-17).

This flânerie, which was so characteristic of the nineteenth century, emerged over time as
an opposing cultural force within a historical continuum of visual practices and provides a formal
model for cinematic spectatorship. In Theory of Film, Siegfried Kracauer likens the
“fragmentary” sensations of the cinematic spectator to those of the flâneur (170). In her study of
flânerie in the Weimar Republic, Anke Gleber offers an exceptional definition of flânerie as the
model for cinematic vision:
The figure of the flâneur presents himself as an all-encompassing medium of perception, a visual perspective that sensitively responds to the continuously changing conditions of modernity with the specific attention and openness of a new aesthetics. Joining the images of an impressionistic, panoramic and photographic mode of seeing with the art of walking in the street – that is, an art of perception in motion, a quasi-filmic way of seeing – the flâneur becomes the human equivalent and corresponding medium of the unfolding visual multiplicity of modernity. (41)

Friedberg also identifies flânerie as a proto-cinematic mobility in her significant contribution to modernity studies, Window Shopping. In this dissertation, flânerie will contribute to a phenomenological reading of Wenders’s films.

So will other distinctly modern modes of wandering, especially travel by trains and automobiles. Technology accelerated the mobility of the modern gaze beyond the relatively slow pace of the flâneur. Haussmann’s radical redesign of Parisian thoroughfares enabled the development of the necessary infrastructure. According to James Kunstler: “The city that Louis-Napoleon took over as emperor was a rat-maze of poorly connected, narrow, disorienting streets, medieval in character” (8). The city did not invite casual or efficient passage. “The entire system was a claustrophobic labyrinth” (Kunstler 10). In relatively short order, however, Haussmann’s plan afforded public transportation the arterials it needed to move the Parisian population through the streets. According to Norma Evenson, the first lasting and successful public transportation service was established in Paris in 1828 by the Entreprise des Omnibus (77). During the administration of Haussmann, omnibus transportation was reorganized under the monopoly of the Compagnie Generale des Omnibus, and in 1873, there were 32 routes serving 111 million passengers yearly (77). People not only became more mobile within public spaces, but public spaces themselves become mobile: “Describing Parisian traffic in 1878, Edmondo de Amices likened the omnibuses to ‘perambulating houses’” (Evenson 77). This poetic image of rolling homes recalls Benjamin’s observation that “Parisians make the street an interior” (Arcades M3,1). The streets of Paris were corridors for the predecessor of the mobile home, a conveyance that
enabled tourism (and that figures prominently in Wenders’s films). Both the omnibuses and the trams carried on their roofs a section called the imperial, where passengers sat facing outward (Evenson 77), a position that afforded them a rolling view of the urban landscape. There are clear and obvious similarities between the visual experience of the seated omnibus rider and many of the experiences Walter Ruttmann and Dziga Vertov would seek to capture in their respective films, *Symphony of a Great City* (1927) and *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929). These films stand as such remarkable documents because they enact and depict in form and content both the ubiquity of motorized trams and the frenetic pace with which spectators were whisked through the urban terrain. By the Belle Époque, trams came to dominate the streets of modern European cities. According to Evenson, in 1910 “twelve companies operated more than a hundred tram lines in Paris and the suburbs” (82). In addition to intra-city systems, inter-city railroads also mobilized vision in distinctly modern and cinematic ways, as a number of writers have argued.¹

Ultimately, mobilized vision finds its most radical and postmodern manifestation in the virtual mobility of cinema. At times, Wenders makes conspicuous use of the spatial and temporal dislocations film form makes possible, yet he remains committed to *flânerie* and mechanized overland travel as the formal mobility of his cinema. His films usually walk, take trains, or drive. Their wandering is grounded in mobility that is not wholly alien to the human body in the modern environment. For this reason, among others, his films not only invite phenomenological readings, but demonstrate as well a functional phenomenological cinematic practice. Wenders grounds his formal practice in the mobility of the body and the streets of the city.

Film and Phenomenology

The methodology of modernity studies offers a way of historicizing the experience of the embodied spectator, yet it sometimes lacks precise methods to clearly explicate spectator experience as embodied experience. Such a method is precisely what existential phenomenology and contemporary neurophenomenology offer. Moreover, existential phenomenology fits well with the pursuits of modernity studies because it emerged, like cinema, within the transformative practices of modern culture. If modernity created cinema, it also created phenomenology. Merleau-Ponty concludes the preface to his most important and comprehensive work, *Phenomenology of Perception*, with the provocative suggestion that the philosophy of existential phenomenology and the aesthetics of modernity developed in concert with a distinctly modern attention to the phenomena of the world:

> If phenomenology was a movement before becoming a doctrine or a philosophical system, this was attributable neither to accident, nor to fraudulent intent. It is as painstaking as the works of Balzac, Proust, Valéry or Cézanne – by reason of the same kind of attentiveness and wonder, the same demand for awareness, the same will to seize the meaning of the world or of history as that meaning comes into being. In this way it merges into the general effort of modern thought. (xxi)

The thrust of “modern thought” could thus be characterized by a novel drive to locate meaning in phenomena and experience as it was lived by the body, and by the same attentive “wonder” that is the province of the aesthetic of the modern artist. If Proust explored the phenomenon of memory and Cézanne tried to render on his canvases the phenomenon of vision, certainly the art of cinema could also render the phenomena that were characteristic of the modern world, and in particular, the modern city.²

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² Johah Leher’s *Proust Was a Neuroscientist* argues that many of the moderns, including Proust and Cézanne, understood intuitively what neuroscience has latter established to be the case. In many ways, Leher’s work is a phenomenology of aesthetics, and the focus he shares with Merleau-Ponty on the work of both Proust and Cézanne is significant: Proust focused on the embodied experience of memory; Cézanne on the embodied experience of vision.
For Merleau-Ponty, modern thought sought to unite subject and object much in the same way as did the gestalt psychology that was so influential on existential phenomenology. Merleau-Ponty closes his essay, “The Film and the New Psychology,” with an assertion that cinema and the modern understanding of the world as characterized by gestalt psychology and phenomenology are linked by a shared focus on embodied human experience and by a tacit rejection of Cartesian dualism:

This psychology shares with contemporary philosophies the common feature of presenting consciousness thrown into the world, subject to the gaze of others and learning from them what it is... Phenomenological or existential philosophy is largely an expression of surprise at the inherence of the self in the world and in others, a description of this paradox and permeation, and an attempt to make us see the bond between subject and world, between subject and others, rather than to explain it as the classical philosophies did by resorting to absolute spirit. Well, the movies are peculiarly suited to make manifest the union of mind and body, mind and world, and the expression of the one in the other. (58)

Merleau-Ponty recognizes in this passage the modern conviction that the self is contingent on one’s perception of the environment and on one’s perception of others, and that film emerges in the modern world as the technological expression of this recognition of the embodied consciousness. Film and phenomenology act as different modes of understanding. Phenomenology, as a mode of philosophically engaging the world, is internal; film, as a mode of technological engaging the world, is external. To express this cohesion of internal and external modes of “presenting consciousness thrown into the world,” Merleau-Ponty borrows from Goethe:

If philosophy is in harmony with the cinema, if thought and technical effort are heading in the same direction, it is because the philosopher and the moviemaker share a certain way of being, a certain view of the world which belongs to a generation. It offers us yet another chance to confirm that modes of thought correspond to technical methods and that, to use Goethe’s phrase, “What is inside is also outside.” (59)

What Merleau-Ponty says in this passage has tremendous bearing not only on understanding the development of film as a modern representational technology, but also on understanding the
experience of the spectator. To understand movies within the context of culture, and to understand movies as the technological extension of modern philosophical inquiry, modernity studies and spectator studies must address the body. The “certain way of being” that is shared, the “certain view of the world” that “belongs to a generation” belongs to a modern generation. That view is fascinated not with “absolute spirit,” geist, or disembodied thought, but with embodied perception. “A movie,” says Merleau-Ponty, “is not thought; it is perceived” (58).

Wenders’s own remarks on the power of film to express the subject’s contingency on the world bear remarkable similarity to Merleau-Ponty’s assertion that films “make manifest the union of mind and body, mind and world, and the expression of the one in the other.” Speaking in and interview for German television in 1991, Wenders gave this account of vision:

The great thing about seeing for me is what distinguishes it from thinking, namely that it doesn’t entail having an opinion. In thinking, every thought also contains an opinion of a thing or a person or a city or a landscape. There are no opinions in seeing; in seeing you can come to a view of another person, and object, the world, that doesn’t imply an opinion, where you just confront the thing or person, take it on board, perceive it. (“Truth” 46)

The similarity in these two passages, one from a phenomenologist and the other from a filmmaker, suggests that film and phenomenology emanate from a shared modern interest in the unique perceptual experience of an embodied consciousness. Thus, it is not surprising that both cognitive film theorists and modernity theorists increasingly direct their attention to human perception. Since Wenders’s cinema focuses sharply on the existential experience that characterizes modern and postmodern culture, his films offer an ideal body of work for such phenomenological analysis of cinema as it emerged from modernity and developed through postmodernity.
The Path of the Argument

Wenders’s body of work comprises over 3-dozen films in a variety of formats and genres, ranging in length from one reel to 270 minutes. To do some justice to the richness of his oeuvre, and to touch on points relevant to the arguments made herein, the following investigation will itself wander at times, following paths of interest as they appear in the films that are known best. Since the themes of modernity and the theoretical methods at work in this dissertation tend to cross often, like the streets of a city, seeing all of the relevant sights will require the occasional turn down an intersecting avenue of inquiry. There is, nevertheless, a destination and method in this wandering.

There are several aims along the way. First, this dissertation attempts to understand better the relationship of Wenders’s wandering cinema to the experience of the mobile and visual culture from which it emerges. While much of the critical work on Wenders’s cinema categorizes his films as either modern or postmodern, not a great deal addresses the clear and pervasive connections between the form of his films and the form of experience within modernity and postmodernity. At times, Wenders’s films root themselves in a distinctly modern landscape, seeing the world with a flânerie characteristic of the nineteenth century, or gazing from the windows of trains and automobiles. In these cases, both film and spectator engage the world with a vision not unlike that of a wanderer moving in the spaces of modernity. At other times, Wenders’s films see the world “digitally”; that is, they compress and expand space and time, moving unfettered by the limits of the body. These two modes of visual experience – one modern, one postmodern; one orienting; one disorienting – are never far away from another aspect of visual culture that presents itself in Wenders’s work, namely, the state of the image within the context of the modern / postmodern continuum. The visual experience of images is not unlike the visual experience of the modern / postmodern landscape. It has become increasingly disorienting and unmoored, and the images themselves adhere less and less to real phenomena. Almost
without exception, Wenders has made this problem a concern of his films, many of which are simultaneously critiques of visual culture and committed attempts to rescue the cinematic image. The overlay of simulacra is only one of the threats to the image that present themselves in Wenders’s filmography. Others include the effects of narrative structure and the corrupting influence of commercialism. These pressures affect his filmmaking at different times and in different ways throughout his career, but wandering remains central to the style and content of his films. Hence, understanding wandering as a means of critiquing and salvaging the cinematic image is the second general aim of this dissertation.

Finally, this project will seek to contribute to an emerging possibility for film theory that is growing out of several distinct and often opposed theories of cinema. One is modernity theory. Another is cognitive theory. These often-disparate approaches increasingly share the common ground of phenomenology, and I hope to enliven the conversation. Wenders’s cinema and the wandering that gives it shape offer promising ground on which these theories can converge. Thus, this dissertation will ultimately work to demonstrate and apply a methodology that combines modernity theory and scientifically informed phenomenology towards an understanding of cinematic form and the nature of spectator experience.

A brief introduction of naturalized phenomenology and neurophenomenology is appropriate here. Naturalized phenomenology a broader than neurophenomenology. Both, however, attempt to understand the mind and consciousness through combining first-person phenomenological description with the empirical data of the cognitive sciences. The term naturalized phenomenology describes a general tendency towards the convergence of cognitive science and phenomenology, while the term neurophenomenology, coined by Francesco Varela in 1996, refers more specifically to the application of neuroscience to phenomenological inquiry (Gallagher and Zahavi 28-33). One of the most significant areas of investigation for neurophenomenology continues to be the study of intersubjectivity, and that work has recently
benefited enormously from the discovery of the mirror neuron system. The growing body of evidence for a complex mirror neuron system in human beings helps substantiate Merleau-Ponty’s fundamental assertions that much of our knowledge of others resides not in thought, but in prereflective, embodied experience. This convergence of science and philosophy produces new and interesting ways of thinking about cinema.

Since this dissertation divides wandering into three aspects – landscapes, journeys, and encounters – the larger objective of understanding Wenders’s cinema can be separated into three primary arguments and a concluding argument. The first of these is undertaken in Chapter 2. This chapter explores the intersection of the cinematic image with the landscapes of modernity and postmodernity, and seeks to explain what deserts and cities mean in Wenders’s films over time. The landscapes and cityscapes of modernity offer a terrain for wandering visual experience, both inside and outside of the movie theater. At times, the wanderer encounters sights embedded in the unique history of the space, or environments that are marked by the immediacy of human lives and stories. At other times, the real landscape lies under a surfeit of mediation, like the surface of a coffee table covered with cheap photo collections, magazines, and mass-reproduced art books. Ultimately, in all of Wenders’s film, the landscapes that the wanderer negotiates are terrains of images, and spaces for recuperating visual experience.

Chapter 3 addresses film’s mobility. It will show through existential and naturalized phenomenology that the film grounds its expression in a wandering mobility that the spectator understands through embodied perception. Cinema creates spatially and temporally disorienting experiences, but the spectator’s experience is always lived through the body. Existential phenomenology explains how movement communicates the experiences of the modern and postmodern world. Wenders’s films are particularly interesting in this respect because they engage the environment with an attention to both vision and audition that is always linked to the active mobility of the wandering film itself.
Chapter 4 explores encounters: the relationships of spectator to film, and subject to other.

In the literature of film theory, the terms subjectivity and subject often serve as catch-all phrases for conceptual ambiguities. At times the terms seem to refer simply to subjective experience; other times they refer to vague concepts of identity. Often, subject and subjectivity are conflated with notions of the subject, or models of subjectivity. To avoid confusion, I will use the terms within this strict definition: Subjectivity is the condition of being a socially mediated subject; it is the perspective of a self-consciousness that emerges from the dynamic contexts of intersubjective encounters. It makes little sense to talk of a subject outside of the context of other subjects.

Chapter 4 therefore explores the spectator-subject as a film viewer who is mediated in the encounter with the other. Cinema not only presents these encounters in its images, but enacts them as well. In doing so, the film can either sustain a subject’s notion of subjectivity, or disrupt that notion – the truth of that notion notwithstanding. Explaining how cinema sustains or disrupts the spectator-subject’s notion of subjectivity is the first task of this chapter. This chapter will also examine how Wenders’s Wings of Desire strives to unify its divided characters in the encounters of the film; more importantly, it will argue that Wenders attempts to create a unifying cinematic form, a practice that unites spectator and film in the cinematic encounter.

Chapter 5 incorporates the methodologies of the preceding chapters into a close reading of one of Wenders’s most recent films, Don’t Come Knocking. I argue in the context of what has gone before that this wandering film directly confronts a primary concern of Wenders’s cinema – the truth and the lies of the cinematic image.
CHAPTER 2
LANDSCAPES: THE TERRAIN OF THE WANDERER

There is something of the freedom of movement that you have in the desert here, and indeed Los Angeles, with its extensive structure, is merely an inhabited fragment of the desert. Thus the freeways do not de-nature the city or the landscape; they simply pass through it and unravel it without altering the desert character of this particular metropolis.

Jean Baudrillard

In 1967, Wenders titled his very first film *Schauplätze*, a title he himself translates as *Landscapes*, and in 1982 he said of his first filmmaking efforts, “I wanted to make ‘landscape portraits’” (“Impossible” 51). In the same year, he confirmed the importance of landscapes to his cinematic aesthetic: “For me, landscape has everything to do with cinema!” (“Film Thieves” 37).

The topic of landscapes, therefore, seems to offer an appropriate beginning. From the outset, Wenders has incorporated the terrains of modernity and postmodernity into his films as more than dramatic setting. This chapter sets out to explore how Wenders creates meanings from those landscapes, and how those landscape shape the distinctive spectator experience that defines his cinema. Under consideration are two distinct yet always associated types of landscape: the desert and the city. The term *desert*, as it applies to Wenders’s landscapes in this discussion, will not always refer to an arid geographic region, though often that will be the case; frequently, the term will denote a sparsely populated, desolate urban space. The term *cities*, of course, refers to metropolitan centers, but in Wenders’s films these spaces are almost always paragons of modernity or artifacts of the twentieth century whose singular character is threatened by unchecked development or the de-historicizing effects of postmodernity. For Wenders as for modernity theorists, cinema emerged from urban life: “The cities just had to create cinema,” he said in 1991, speaking at an architectural design conference (“Urban” 94). He also succinctly articulated a central tenet of his aesthetic philosophy: “Let me start by saying that there are links
between the cities, the urban landscapes and the cinema. Film is a city art” (93). If deserts do not share a common root in modernity with cinema, as do cities, they are still important to Wenders’s aesthetic use of space because cities can become as empty as deserts. Wenders expressed precisely such a point in 1989: “I have to say that by now I like empty landscapes like deserts and so on almost as much as cities. Then again, it’s like opposites meeting, there are cityscapes that remind you of deserts” (Wenders, “Truth” 49). Yet another crossover exists in Wenders’s films: geographical space intersects with the space of the screen; each is a terrain of the wanderer. These intersections of landscapes and images – the conflation of the cinema screen with the space of the world – is a sight of meaning in Wenders’s critiques and celebrations of cinema’s ability to communicate truths of human experience.

Frequently, Wenders’s realist aesthetic brings into relief the conditions of visual culture in postmodernity. In the same way that technology has given rise to modes of production that alienate the subject from communal life, mass-reproduction and the proliferation of media have saturated visual culture and drained images of their signifying power. Wenders’s address to the architectural conference makes clear this equation between the alienating modern urban landscape and the state of the image:

I think images have undergone a similar development to the one of our cities. Like them [images], our cities have grown out of proportion, and continue to do so. Like them, our cities have become colder, and more distanced. Like them, they are more and more alienated and alienating, like them they force us more and more to ‘second-hand experiences’, like them they become more and more commercially orientated. (95)

In effect, this view of the landscape and the image grafts the virtual world on to the real world much in the same way that the real world and the simulated world become one in Baudrillard’s description of postmodernity:

If once we were able to view the Borges tale where the cartographers of the Empire draw up a map so detailed that it ends up exactly covering the territory (but where, with the decline of the Empire this map becomes frayed and finally ruined, a few shreds still discernible in the deserts…) this fable would then have
come full circle for us, and now has nothing but the discrete charm of second-order simulacra. (166)

In Baudrillard’s vision, it is no longer the representation that lies here and there in desiccated fragments: “it is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges persist here and there, in the deserts that are no longer those of the Empire, but our own. The desert of the real itself” (166). A number of critics have explored this intersection of screen and landscape in Wenders’s work and their analyses will be touched on in this chapter, but my assertion here, by way of introduction, is that deserts – and cities as well – present themselves in Wenders’s work in much the same way the desert does in Baudrillard’s metaphor. Within these images, contours of the real appear as vestiges, here and there breaking through the simulation like rock formations or skyscrapers poking through the over-laying map of Borges’s fable.

This chapter will therefore analyze the formal intersection of landscape and screen. That intersection draws out and traces not only the development and emergence of modernity’s urban spaces, but also the development of cinema’s virtual spaces. Wenders’s films present not just reflexive meditations on the image, but complex explorations of the environment in which vestiges of the real emerge through an aesthetic practice that engages the embodied and wandering gaze of the spectator. In this respect, Wenders’s cinema has everything to do with the work of cultural theorists who locate the spectator’s cinematic experience within the coordinates of the modern (and post-modern) environment. Landscapes also offer a clarifying starting point for understanding both Wenders’s development as a filmmaker and the nature of his complex realist aesthetic.
Searching the Western Horizon

Wenders’s films, and more importantly the landscapes that are the settings of those films, must be understood within the context of Wenders’s development as a filmmaker who began his career searching for a new cinematic patrimony. Like much of the New German Cinema, Wenders’s early films are cinematic orphans. New German filmmakers like Wenders, who grew up in the wake of National Socialism and World War II, shared a “climate of cultural pessimism and historical skepticism” (Cook & Gemünden12).³ Much of recent German culture had become an unwanted and unusable birthright. Citing the Oberhausen motto – “Opas Kino ist tot!” – and quoting Wenders’s own assertion from 1977 that no other country “has had such a loss of faith in its own images, stories, and myths as we have,”⁴ Robert Kolker maintains that the wanderers of Wenders’s films are searchers for an authentic patrimony that would serve as “guide into adulthood (33-37). To find such a guide, Wenders adopted directors such as Nicholas Ray and John Ford as cinematic forebears, but this new patrimony, itself a legacy of the occupying Allied forces, put Wenders in “the double bind of the colonized, who has to articulate the critique of colonialism in the language of the colonizer” (Cook & Gemünden12). One can hear this double bind articulated in Kings of the Road (1976) when Robert tells Bruno, “The Yanks have colonized our subconscious.” In the end, American directors would be “role models for him [Wenders] to study and follow, but ultimately to abandon or supersede” (12). Wenders’s search for a cinematic “father” fits nicely into the Oedipal model, and has proven irresistible to critics. Kolker and Beicken argue, for example, that “Wenders is still the boy with the camera fixed on the street scene, where, only far away, at a safe distance life goes on, social and sexual intercourse take place, and the seer remains a child voyeur in a state of oedipal [sic] suspension, hoping for

³ Wenders was born August, 14, 1945.
redemption through the passive act of looking” (5). The Oedipal analogy, however, need not subject the auteur to psychoanalysis or his work to Freudian theory to be instructive; after all, the story of Oedipus is at its heart the story of a wanderer driven out of domestic spaces by his past.

For Wenders, finding cinematic patrimony early in his career partly involved finding a new historical landscape. Talking in 1991 about his artistic development in the context of his youth in post-WWII Germany, Wenders said, “I was never proud of this country, I never wanted to stay in Germany. Even as a child, I only ever wanted out, and as soon as I was old enough to travel on my own, I got out…. But that was the feeling I grew up with: it was wrong to look back” (“Talking Germany” 156). Rejecting der Vaterland and “Opas kino,” Wenders turned his vision towards America and toward the American Western for a horizon of possibilities. He found there images and horizons, both literal and figurative, that could convey meaning out of history – even a twisted history:

You can only live in the present if the past is an open book and the future beckons. That’s what I learned from the American cinema. Instead of being wrapped up or half-ashamed of itself, it was ‘there’ and ‘upfront’. No dissembling, no secrets. There was expansiveness, my own country was mean. I discovered the horizon from watching American Westerns, which, while they may have falsified American history, were still able to tell stories that were rooted in that history. (“Talking Germany” 157)

Wenders, the auteur who turned to the Western for a usable past, found in the genre emblematic wanderers who like himself, searched for new horizons, and from these characters, he created his own brand of searcher: “Wenders’s central figures are all children of Ethan Edwards, all questers, men on the road seeking out domestic landscapes, hoping to root themselves and to be free of roots at the same time” (Kolker & Beicken 35). Their searching is driven by the desire for a national domesticity, but as is the case with Oedipus and Ethan Edwards, home is a tenuous concept.

Wenders maintains a tremendous commitment to the “realistic” image, and grounds his work in the realist tradition articulated by Siegfried Kracauer, who believed that film “is uniquely
equipped to record and reveal physical reality and, hence, gravitates toward it” (Theory of Film 172). Wenders specifically gravitates towards the reality of the road. Wenders’s fundamental faith in the truth and primacy of the image is not unshakeable, however, and virtually all of his work betrays an anxiety born of an increasingly hyperreal visual culture. As electronic media emerged, and television grew into a commercially dominant form of image production and consumption, Wenders became especially suspicious of the video image. In Notebook on Cities and Clothes, which was released in 1989 midway through his forty-year career, Wenders asks, “We have learned to trust the photographic image. Can we trust the electronic image?” In the same year, he stated in an interview that the excess of images in the late twentieth century is “one of the worst diseases of our civilization” (“Truth” 47). The fate of the image in an environment where the image loses its connection to an original referent remains a primary concern of Wenders’s work – although as we shall see in an analysis of his recent work, this suspicion has changed over time, and it has never precluded his playful use of video. His position does not lack complexities, nor does it avoid complicating the issues.

Stories and narrative present their own problems with respect to the images of the landscape, especially in his early films. Wenders attempted from his earliest short films in the late-sixties to eliminate storytelling as a formal cinematic component, but as he would explain in 1982, soon recognized that “the assembling of scenes and their arrangement in an order was, it seemed already, a first step towards narrative” (“Impossible” 52). Based on this recognition of a story’s inevitable entry into the structure of film, Wenders came to accept the necessity of the narrative framework, believing that “stories give people the feeling that there is meaning, that there is ultimately an order lurking behind the incredible confusion of appearances an phenomena

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5 Both Kracauer and and Béla Balázs had a significant influence on Wenders, as noted by Alexander Graf (22) and Kolker & Beicken (3). In addition, Wenders has often expressed an affinity for the work of realist photographers like Robert Frank, Walker Evens, and August Sander, all of whom were wanderers in their own right.
that surrounds them” (54). Wenders, nevertheless, recognizes that, “images are quite sensitive…. They don’t have it in them to be carthorses: carrying and transporting messages or significance or intention or a moral. But that’s exactly what a story wants from them” (53). In Wenders’s view, narrative structure and form, plot, and continuity editing, all threaten to reduce images to performing a function that lies outside of their capacity. Again, from 1982:

I totally reject stories, because for me they only bring out lies, nothing but lies, and the biggest lie is that they show coherence where there is none. Then again, our need for these lies is so consuming that it’s completely pointless to fight them and to put together a sequence of images without a story – without the lie of a story. Stories are impossible, but it’s impossible to lie without them. (59)

This stance is especially evident in the more fragmented narratives of his earlier films, but his films are always structured by the “big impossible paradox” of stories – a tension between images without stories and images in the service of stories (59).

Stories are not just necessary outcomes of running a film camera. For Wenders, stories are also a consequence of landscapes. In Wenders’s films, everything begins and ends with landscape, figuratively and literally speaking: the stories he tells not only originate there, but his films typically begin and end with shots of landscapes. In 1991 during a conversation printed later in *Kulturchronik*, Wenders cited the implication of narrative in the realistic landscape image as a reason for his deep appreciation of Edward Hopper’s painting: “An Edward Hopper painting is like the opening paragraph of a story. A car will drive up to a filling station, and the driver will have a bullet in his belly. They are like the beginning of American films” (“A Step” 137). That assertion varies little from a 1982 statement: “When I look at a road, for example, I begin to ask myself what kind of thing might happen on it… I look out of the window, it’s raining hard and a car stops in front of the hotel. A man gets out of it… he starts walking down the road...” (“Impossible” 53). In this same speech, Wenders asserted, “My stories start with places, cities,

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6 Gerd Gemünden has argued in his book, *Framed Visions*, that Wenders found an affinity with Hopper because of the implied narrative of the painter’s landscapes and cityscapes (5-6).
landscapes and roads. A map is like a screenplay to me” (52). However, the map serves as a vehicle for engaging landscapes more than it does for arriving at a destination; that is, the sights and images remain to a large degree independent. Images of landscapes do not carry the viewer towards a determinate meaning, but contribute to a wandering tour de force of landscape photography. This fact is one of the most immediately apparent – and curiously, one of the least written about – aspects of Wenders’s style. Close ups of objects that follow eye-line matches, reaction shots, conspicuous uses of close framing that restrict the mise-en-scène, point-of-view shots, shots that direct the viewer’s attention: these are comparatively rare in Wenders’s films, and cinematographic devices that serve to propel narrative play the smallest role possible. Wenders’s films always guard against the danger narrative presents, namely, that it will obscure the landscape image: “You make something up: a story, set in a place, a city or a landscape, and sometimes it happens that what you’ve made up makes it impossible to look out into the landscape” (‘A Step’ 137). For Wenders, the landscape must remain open before the gaze of the wanderer, and while the map that presents itself in the landscape invites a journey, that journey is always one where narrative remains subordinate to the visual experience of the landscape. Meaning emerges in the act of seeing and the wandering gaze that roams the landscape, rather than at some specific destination determined by the screenplay.

Wenders searching is an ongoing project. What began as a movement towards the promise of the American West, has become a process of coming to terms with the threats to cinema: the danger to the image inherent in narrative form; commercial, Hollywood cinema; a visual culture saturated with mass-reproduced images; television, high-definition television, and video. In 1991, Wenders released Until the End of the World, an epic-length road movie that engages in complex ways the concerns listed above, and presciently looks forward to cinema’s next challenge, digit media. In that same year, Wenders also received the Murnau Prize. In his acceptance speech, Wenders introduced an earlier 1982 work, The State of Things:
It’s a turbulent time for the cinema. So it seemed appropriate to choose for this evening’s screening, a film that tries to draw up a kind of balance sheet of the cinema, exactly fifty years after Murnau’s death. It’s no accident that it’s in black and white, or that the director character in the film goes by the name of Friedrich Munro. Nor is it a coincidence that the film begins in Europe, at the most westerly point of Portugal, where Europe sticks its nose out to America, or that it ends with the death of the director on a street that’s barely an hour’s drive from where Murnau died. The night before his death, Friedrich, our director, stands in a phone box, and quotes a diary entry of Friedrich-Wilhelm Murnau’s: ‘I’m at home nowhere, in no house, in no country…’ (172)

Wenders then clarifies his own development with respect to images of the landscape, declaring that while the vision of The State of Things is a bit dark, “ten years have passed since then and ‘the state of things’ is different again.” He admits to having exercised some of his old demons, and looks forward to a reinvigorated European cinema (173). There are several ways to read the trail of Wenders’s cosmopolitan wanderings. One such possibility would identify 1982 as the end of his initial New German period, a year in which Fassbinder died, and Wenders published or gave as speeches the most significant documents in the collection he would later publish as The Logic of Images. Another such marker would be 1991, the year in which he came to terms with Hollywood and looked forward to a new European cinema. This movement is real and significant to placing Wenders’s films within the context of globalism. These important movements within the context of an emerging global media notwithstanding, I want to examine Wenders’s use of landscape exclusively through a phenomenological lens. In this respect, Wenders remains very much “at home nowhere, in no house, in no country.” Wenders’s landscapes will here be viewed as sites (and sights) of modern and postmodern experience. They are in short, spaces where truths about visual experience emerge. The state of things is thus an ongoing confrontation with the divide between the spectator and the image.

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7 Wilhelm, as fate would have it, is also Wenders’s middle name.
8 Nora Alter’s study of German non-fiction cinema from 1977 – 2000, locates Wenders’s diary films of the late-eighties within both his efforts at collaborative European cinema, and a geopolitical aesthetic grounded in a return to his native Germany. See Projecting History, pp. 127-149.
Since a central goal of this dissertation is to assess the ways in which Wenders’s films seek to unify the cinematic image with the real landscape of human stories and histories, the empty landscape of the American West, which was in many ways Wenders’s own starting point, presents a point of orientation. This landscape – this empty horizon of the Western – offers an open terrain for the wanderer. The landscape is empty, to be sure, but “emptiness” carries a positive connotation along with the negative. The desert is not just a place of endless, isolated wandering and longing; it is also a place where stories can emerge. Similarly, while the cinematic image is often empty – a wasteland of simulacra, or a visual representation desiccated by commercialism – it is can also be a place where meaning is not determinate. Such an “empty” image offers the wandering gaze of the spectator a new freedom.

The Landscape and the Cinema Screen

Wenders’s landscapes often echo John Ford’s legendary images of Monument Valley and the American West. These open terrains, especially as they appear in the beginnings of Paris, Texas (1984) and Wenders’s very recent film, Don’t Come Knocking (2004) represent the paradoxes of the cinematic image: on one hand, the desert landscape offers the promise of images of authentic and valuable representation, and on the other hand, the cityscape of Los Angeles represents the anxiety Wenders feels regarding the contamination of the image by commercial media. The landscape intersects with the image on the cinema screen, and the wandering protagonist’s search for identity parallels the filmmaker’s search for meaningful images.

Paris, Texas opens with aerial images of its protagonist, Travis, walking in the desert, a “godforsaken patch of ground” near Big Bend, Texas called “The Devil’s Graveyard” (“Flying Blind” 66). Travis enters the landscape in media res on a voyage whose essential nature is hinted

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Wenders read Homer’s Odyssey for the first time during the early production phase of Paris, Texas (Logic 105).
at by his name: he will “traverse” the spaces of the desert landscape and the cityscape. These spaces visually impart separate but intertwining representations of emptiness that are not only spaces of isolation, as numerous critics have pointed out, but also about the possibility of the image to both create and destroy meaning. Finding his way out of one wasteland, Travis continues his odyssey in another, this one characterized by commercial images. When he first finds civilization on the edge of the desert, Travis, suffering desperately from the inferno of the desert, enters a ramshackle outpost of a bar. Here, the mise-en-scène marks the entrance to a new visual terrain. On the wall is a centerfold pinup that foreshadows Jane’s “image” in the peep-show scenes near the end of the film. The bar opens onto the new terrain of the commercial, corrupted image. A sign hanging on a post offers a kind of ambivalent set of directions to the gaze of the wanderer (both the wanderer Travis and the cinematic wanderer who is the spectator): “The dust has come to stay. You may stay, or pass on through, or whatever.” This fatalistic acknowledgment of a barren landscape – the landscape of Hollywood and commercial cinema – marks the entrance to a world in which Travis is “framed against semi-pornographic images of women” (Graf 99). Numerous critics have recognized significance in the work of Travis’s brother Walt, who constructs billboards that bear the images of women. Paris, Texas presents exploitive images of women as a symptom of the morbid effects of commercialism on visual culture. As much as Travis is framed against semi-pornographic images, he also finds himself adrift in a landscape where advertising images and signs repeatedly and noticeably project from the desert landscape, just like the billboards Walt creates for a living. Travis wanders in a landscape spoiled by the visual blight of commercialism. Travis and the film’s spectators all traverse that world of images. Watching the film, spectators accompany Travis as he “is sent forth from a desert – an iconic, now dead and empty landscape that has come to symbolize the myth of Hollywood’s

10 Robert Kolker, Peter Beicken, & Kathe Geist, have offered readings that frame Travis desert isolation in the context of failed domesticity.
entertainment industry and, for Wenders, the death of the myth of Hollywood – into (apparent) civilization” (Graf 103). This apparent civilization, however, is Los Angeles. In light of this, the sign that hangs in the bar is not unlike the sign above the gates of Dante’s Inferno: “Abandon all hope, yee who enter.” In moving from one scorched wasteland to another, Travis is simply wandering in circles from one “Hell” to another.

A paradox develops in the course of Wenders’s work. It lies between the filmmaker’s attempts to retain his faith in images of iconic Western landscapes (and his faith in cinema), and the filmmaker’s conviction that contemporary Hollywood cinema has impoverished images and restricted their potential meaning. Two years before the release of Paris, Texas, Wenders said:

I keep having the physical sensation of being tied all the time – as though there were cables running from the screen to each seat. Like a dog on a leash, that’s what it’s like in the cinema nowadays…. Great cinema let people off their leashes. In John Ford’s films, say, you were up there with the fellows on the screen in that great openness. (“Goodbye” 48).

One gets the sense from this quote and numerous others that champion the image of the open landscape that Wenders’s view of the screen image resembles the cinephelia of the Cahiers du Cinema. In his recent work, Christian Keathley likens the cinephile’s desire to scan the screen with a liberated vision comparable to the panoramic vision of the flâneur:

Tom Gunning has explained that, “As an observer par excellence, the flâneur attempted to assert both independence from and insight into the urban scenes he witnessed.” Similarly, the cinephile is, on the one hand, focused in the way that the film’s makers would want him or her to be; but as the most “literate” of film viewers, the cinephile is able to “read” what is on offer with comparatively little effort and thus has a certain amount of perceptual energy left over. This energy is then devoted to a posture that facilitates the panoramic scanning of the image (in the same way that the flâneur employed it for a panoramic scanning of the city). (44)

Keathley argues that the “sketched film,” a concept he borrows from Bazin’s work on Italian neorealism, invites this sort of activity. A sketched film offers only the ontological essentials (78), and Keathley suggests that with such a film the spectator’s eye is “not just able, but prompted, to wander, and in wandering it makes discoveries” (italics mine, 80). This is the sort of
cinematic experience Wenders celebrates, and his landscapes invite the spectator to wander freely, occupying the screen space with a liberated vision. The image is empty in that it is an open, vast panorama; however, at the same time, Wenders’s images always call up and critique images that are empty in a different sense, namely, in the sense that they have no value.

The dialectic between images that liberate the gaze and images that are over-determined and commercial drives Wenders’s recent film, *Don’t Come Knocking* (2005). In many ways, this film extends Wenders’s critique of the cinematic image. Like *Paris, Texas*, the project begins in the desert of the Western, and like Travis, the protagonist Howard Spence emerges from the desert to wander through cities. The opening title sequence of the film is striking for both its visual effect and its economy, and it serves to express the corruptive and restrictive effects of commercial cinema on the landscape image. The film opens with a full cinemascope frame of blackness, which is pierced by two eye-shaped holes that fade-in to give the viewer eyes with which to look at the blue sky floating beyond the blackness. In a sense, the spectator sees what will come to be the significance of the film as a whole; namely, that the cinematic image often obscures more than it reveals and that one has to look through the obscuring film image to find truth. When the shot brightens, it exposes the foreground and reveals that the holes are natural gaps under a land bridge in the red rock cliffs of Arches National Park in Utah. This shot is absolutely Fordian. A cowboy rides into the scene, but this shot does not emblematize the grand old American cinema to which Wenders turned as a New German filmmaker; rather, it presents the image of a devalued cinema, quite literally, for the cowboy is Howard Spence, who through his profligacy, drug use, and violence, stands for the corrupted visual culture of Hollywood. Howard attempts to escape from a landscape of the Hollywood-manufactured film by riding towards a world of indeterminate possibility, signified initially by the open desert. The second shot of the film shows Howard’s flight, a long take in which Howard gallops into the frame from behind the camera, and then away into extreme long shot as he travels across the dusty plains and
under the span of a natural rock bridge. This is the western desert of the films Wenders so admires. The next scene begins with a panning sweep of the environs of the desert near Moab, Utah, a landscape purely evocative of Monument Valley. This open, panoramic image is disrupted, however, when the camera finally stops its pan on the film set from which Howard has fled, a ring of trailers and trucks that make up the set of *The Phantom of the West*. The mise-en-scène depicts a visual parody of the circled wagons of the old Western, and the panning of the opening shot from the broad, open landscape to the restricted and crowded enclosure of the film set signals the limiting force of Hollywood cinema—an *containment* of the landscape and the image by the commercial project of the film. The production company’s anxiety over the financial liability of Howard’s disappearance, and the subsequent attempt of the detective figure Sutter to return Howard to his duties, underscore the primarily commercial nature of Hollywood films. Wenders’s long pan from the open planes to the film set, which sits in a depression in the hills, enclosed by the landscape rather than liberated by it, presents in its movement a temporal compression of the change in the nature of the image through the twentieth century as viewed by Wenders—a movement from an open image to a restricted image. In this case, the image of the landscape, so central to early American cinema, has been shackled to meanings determined by market forces of Hollywood cinema. The circled wagons are in reality, those used by Wenders and the crew in the filming of *Don’t Come Knocking*, a reality that gives the text a self-referential critique of its own power to compromise the cinematic image. This shot is a metaphor for the collapse of the mythic landscape-image that Wenders laments in “Talking Germany”: “John Ford’s landscapes have been renamed ‘Marlboro Country’, and the American Dream has become an advertising campaign” (158).

The idea that Howard is strictly an image without meaning—an image corrupted by the greed and excess of commercial cinema—is perhaps most clear when Howard confronts himself, as if in a mirror, when he stands before the image of this former self depicted in an old movie
poster of the film he had made years before. The poster proclaims: “Howard Spence is *Just Like Jesse James* (the image of a locomotive, so ubiquitous in Wenders’s films, can be seen in the background of the poster). More than a simple homage to Nicholas Ray, who made *The True Story of Jesse James* (1957), this poster recalls the pure image of the Western. In standing before this image, Howard, who is dressed just as he is in the poster, represents the repentant, prodigal image returned to the place of his own birth. He stands before himself, a film image before a film image, an image in crisis. Roger Cook argues a similar point about *Paris, Texas*: “What is at risk in Travis’s crisis is not only the individualistic male hero of the American West, but also Wenders’s own grounding in classical Hollywood cinema” (132). In this shot of Howard, Wenders self-consciously reveals his own anxiety over a visual culture where commercial images have proliferated. Howard fits the description given by Cook to earlier wanderers in Wenders’s films:

The self-styled loner of Wenders’s road movies is a throwback to the films he [Wenders] viewed during his youth and to the myths that inspired, above all the American Dream – myths created by the big-screen narrative style of classical cinema. A simulated media culture that has lost contact with such myths and figures would threaten the roots of Wenders’s own cinematic vision. (Cook 132)

Drug-addled and booze-soaked, Howard is a not only a fallen Hollywood star; he is shattered Hollywood image and a personification of Hollywood’s own decline.

Here the visions of Wenders and Shepard coincide. Howard behaves like a teenager, and indeed, when he returns home to his mother, he is treated like one. His mother has arranged Howard’s room as though her son were a still a boy. When Howard gets himself arrested, the local police hand him off to her as if he were simply in need of a little discipline at home. Howard, a father in search of his son, has become the boy (In this respect Howard and Travis are alike). Shepard’s script and his performance as Howard make the character a prodigal son. But Wenders’s film has made of Howard a prodigal image who has driven himself to the brink of despair with every imaginable kind of debauchery, and now seeks forgiveness and reconciliation.
Howard is the reckless film image trying to return home – a prodigal image. The wanderers who emerge from the western landscapes of Paris, Texas, and Don’t Come Knocking are searchers seeking domestic spaces and family, but Howard is also a film image seeking meaningful content.

The deserts of Wenders’s films cannot be considered fully without a discussion of the windshields and windows that often frame and reflect the landscape. As they are revealed in and through windshields, deserts function as formal expressions of the cinema screen itself – the terrain of the spectator’s gaze. Alice Kuzniar, who discusses “Wenders’s Windshields” in an eponymously titled article, reads the reflected images of the landscape in Wenders’s car mirrors and windshields as simulacra, and she argues “Wenders’s road movies are quintessentially about the way we perceive ‘reality’ through photography, film, and video” (224). Concerning Kings of the Road, Kunziar points out that Bruno’s “truck fully substitutes for the cinema. Its windshield is the ‘Weiße Wand,’ the name of the last theater Bruno visits. Indeed, at the end of the film, the capital neon letters ‘WW’ are reflected in the truck’s windshield” (228). The Weisse Wand (the cinema’s name is spelled in the film with a double-s, and not with an eszett), or “white wall,” directly links Bruno’s cinema repair truck with the cinema, and the windshield with the screen. This scene also harkens back to a pivotal earlier scene in which Bruno and Robert stand before the painted-over, white windshields of the bratwurst-stand-truck. Here, the windshield becomes the weisse wand of the cinema, and the wanderers Bruno and Robert, shot in two-shot as they lean against the white windshield, inhabit this screen. They animate this space as cinema characters, just as they have in the immediately preceding scene, a slapstick sequence in which they take advantage of accidental backlighting to perform a slapstick shadow play for a theater full of children. Additionally, the wanderers actually inhabit the mobile theater that is the cinema

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11 In this final shot, the interlocking WW logo of the Weiss Wand is lighted, but the neon letters of the theater’s full name are burned out with the exception of the “e,” the “n,” and the “d,” that is, the “end.” W and W are also, of course, Wenders’s initials. Wenders thus signs the end his film with playful auteurism.
repair truck, making a mobile home of it. As they travel in the truck, Bruno and Robert are
embedded in the partially reflective windshield of the truck, visually inscribed into the images of
the landscape that play on the surface of the glass: to be more pointed, their movement across the
desert landscape is simultaneously a movement across a barren “white wall.” Both the onscreen
character and the in-the-seat spectator wander within the frame of the image.

The intersection of landscape and screen that figured into the formal play of *Kings of the
Road* takes on a new complexity in Wenders’s 1985 “diary film,” *Tokyo Ga*. From the outset of
the film, Wenders articulates a heightened anxiety over the ontology of the image. The film self-
reflexively and exhaustively explores that ontology, commenting on both simulacra and the
“post-modern” culture spawning the hyperreal. But as much as Wenders critiques, he also
deliberately turns his lens on the cityscape in an attempt to convey a truth about the experience of
modernity. Wenders begins *Tokyo Ga* by borrowing the opening credits and first scenes of
Yasohiru Ozu’s *Tokyo Monogatari* (1953). Ozu’s film tells the story of two elderly Japanese
parents who travel to Tokyo to visit their children. The parents become wanderers, alternately
staying with different children, then in a resort spa where the noise drives them away. Finally,
when they seem to have no other place to go, they consider sleeping in the street. They suffer the
wandering transience of an uprooted Japanese family, a family transformed by increasing
transience and the mobility of modernity, symbolized most clearly in the film by the railroad. In
Wenders’s *Tokyo Ga*, it is the wandering of the camera over the intersecting terrains of city and
image that both uproots and grounds the spectator.

With respect to Tokyo itself, Wenders’s fascination with the material and cultural
landscape of the city raises the question of reality in the postmodern world. In a chapter-length
study of Wenders’s two Tokyo diary films, Nora Alter speaks to this point: “The most significant
sequences show a world dominated by mass media images, artificial signs of an alienated
hyperreality suggesting an overall loss of essence and the related loss of an unmediated vision or
meaning of reality” (Projecting 113). With respect to images, Wenders’s uneasy meditations on the nature of reproduced images presents a “meta filmic perspective” in which “Tokyo-Ga appears as a… filmic practice both defined and confined by cinematographic illusion” (117). The cityscape of Tokyo is not just corrupted by images; in Tokyo Ga, the city is reduced to image, a free-floating simulacra. Nowhere is the dissipating power of the hyperreal image more clearly rendered than in the two minute traveling shot in which Wenders films Tokyo at night through the windshield of a moving taxi – a windshield with a small television affixed in the center playing Japanese commercial programming. The television image is a synecdoche within the larger mediating screen that is the windshield, a simulacrum of images fit within the simulacra of Tokyo’s visual culture that play across the windshield. Partially occluding the camera’s view, the television appears to deny Wenders the possibility to document the Tokyo of Ozu. Wenders’s voice over attests to his disillusionment:

The more the reality of Tokyo struck me as a torrent of impersonal, unkind images, threatening, yes even inhuman images, the greater and more powerful it became in my mind the image of the loving ordered world, of the mythical city of Tokyo that I knew from the films of Yasojiro Ozu, perhaps that was what no longer existed: a view which still could achieve order in a world out of order. A view which could still render the world transparent.

At this point in the voice over, the film cuts to a shot of a larger television in Wenders’s hotel room. The set nearly fills the frame, an image within an image, contextualized only by a can of beer in one corner of the frame and part of a lampshade in another. Wenders continues his commentary as the images on the television play out, including images from a camera commercial (which is of course a commercial image selling an apparatus that produces images) and an underwear commercial (which with its women’s wiggling bottoms clad in colored underwear is as much about selling titillation as it is about selling garments). Wenders speaks over these images: “Perhaps such a view is no longer possible today, not even for Ozu were he still alive. Perhaps the frantically growing inflation of images has already destroyed too much.
Perhaps images that are at one with the world are lost forever.” Here the scene on the television changes, and Wenders goes silent to allow the viewer to contemplate the end of John Ford’s 1949 film, *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* – and to contemplate the loss of such images. As John Wayne wanders back into the desert – reduced here to constricted television image – the television station ends its programming day with the image of the Japanese flag. Here, Wenders resumes his voice-over:

> When John Wayne left, it wasn’t the stars and stripes that appeared, but rather the red ball of the Japanese flag. And while I was falling asleep, I had the craziest thought that where I am now is the center of the world. Every shitty television set no matter where is the center of the world. The center has become a ludicrous idea, and the world as well.

The television then shows a small, blue globe rotating in blackness, an image of the earth as if it were seen from space. Wenders’s commentary continues: “An image of the world – a ludicrous idea the more TV sets there are on the globe. And here I am in the country that builds them all for the whole world so that the whole world can watch the American images.” The image of the cheap, plastic model of the earth spinning at the center of a black TV screen, a screen image which is itself at the center of another image, conveys perhaps as strongly as any moment in Wenders’s work his belief that the postmodern inflation of images has decoupled the image from any true referent – or center – other than itself. The globe, a cheap reproduction, shows only the truth that the world is filled with cheap reproductions.

At the same time Wenders engages in this post-modern critique, his voice-over underscores the distinctly modern role he takes on as wandering documentarian of a real cityscape, a role that was characterized by Baudelaire in his essay, “The Painter of Modern Life”: “To be away from home and yet to feel at home anywhere; to see the world, *to be at the very centre of the world*, and yet to be unseen of the world, such are some of the minor pleasures of

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12 As he is interviewed later in the film, Werner Herzog expresses his wish to film in outer space from the space shuttle, lamenting that there are no more worthy images on earth. Herzog eventually does just this when he borrows NASA footage in 2005 for his science fiction film, *The Wild Blue Yonder*. 
those independent, intense and impartial spirits…” (italics mine). Wenders could well use these
words to describe his own solitary and worldly attempts to paint a portrait of both Ozu and
Tokyo. Wenders is in effect, the painter (filmmaker) of modern life. At home in the crowd, the
center of the world, he looks for the characteristics that define the era of the electronic image.
Again, Baudelaire’s description of the modern recorder of daily life fits Wenders: “We may rest
assured that this man, such as I have described him, this solitary mortal endowed with an active
imagination…. He is looking for that indefinable something we may be allowed to call
‘modernity.’” Wandering like a modern flâneur through a city of postmodern simulacra, Wenders
searches the cityscape for meaningful images. This role of the flâneur who is at once a collector
of images emerges in Wenders films, especially his later films, as a functional means of
addressing the crisis of the image in the postmodern landscape. For now, however, it is important
to focus on that landscape, the center of which, in Wenders’s words, is “every shitty television.”

Wenders’s assertion that cities are suffering from the same affliction as images, that
cities, like images, “force us more and more to ‘second-hand experiences,’” and that cities, like
images, have “become more and more commercially orientated” (“Urban” 96), receives perhaps
its fullest visual articulation in *Tokyo Ga*, but the sentiment continues to inform his later work. In
*Don’t Come Knocking*, spaces in general are terrains where the proliferation of endlessly
reproducible commercial images contaminates the visual landscape, and Wenders’s scatological
reference to television extends here to a larger concept of cultural waste. For Sutter, the
wandering detective in pursuit of Howard, images amount to a repellent blight on the landscape.
As he closes in on Howard, Sutter arrives in Butte and surveys the city from a hilltop through a
pair of binoculars. The film offers the viewer a binocular-matte, point-of-view shot of a curiously
red-brown lake. Wenders’s own commentary on this shot speaks directly to the threats of
commercialism that degrade both image and landscape. Wenders says the hill from which Sutter
views Butte is “significant” because it is the sight of the mining industry that was once the
economic engine of Butte. He adds that the lake was created by water seeping into a mile deep hole when the operation shut down. Wenders calls “the single most polluted body of water in the world.” He is not far off. The lake, called the Berkeley Pit, is a superfund sight laced with heavy metals, chemicals, and acid (Pitwatch), and with its curious color and barren banks, it looks no less toxic in Wenders’s images. Indeed, the lake is “significant” because Sutter is not just tracking a man, but a Hollywood image “polluted” by a commercial enterprise. Howard’s rampant substance abuse has made his own body a Berkeley Pit of sorts, and Hollywood has polluted the once mythical landscape image. Sutter gazes at the lake for the same reason he visually searches for Howard: both are sites and sights of pollution, visual images that have been ruined by commercial interests. Sutter bears the same cynical disdain towards the world of images that he bears towards Howard. During their return trip to the set of *The Phantom of the West*, Sutter protests when Howard suggests they listen to the radio, expressing his disdain for what he calls “outside influence… the world at large.” He adds, “It’s a nasty place.” Sutter says this to Howard in a two-shot taken from a camera position just outside of the windshield of the car. In the windshield, the images of that world pass by in reflection, emphasizing the commercialism of the terrain. In this shot, the windshield, as it often does, serves to reflect empty referents. As Alice Kunziar has argued regarding Wenders’s earlier films, the mediating frame of the windshield “comes to represent a kind of void, a screen on which to record the movement of disappearance. The images on it are as blank and non-referential as is its reflecting, clear surface. As pure surface or container, this sealed aperture is a paralyzed metonymy” (227). The film cuts away from the simulacra on the windshield to reveal the road ahead. The camera looks forward into the night where illuminated signs (signifiers) of commercialism float in the darkness. Sutter’s comments on the “world at large” sound almost paranoid: “Why allow it in?” he asks Howard: “Livestock

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13 In fact, Berkeley Pit has become a marketable attraction: according Pitwatch.org, tourist can pay two dollars to access a viewing stand and see the polluted image Sutter views with his binoculars.
reports, Navajo chanting, beheadings, bestiality – nothing’s changed. Black Death, the Inquisition, the Crusades, the conquest of Mexico. What’s changed?”

In Sutter’s mind, this random collection of news items from darker periods of human history amounts to a stream of media imagery that is both constant and detrimental. To let it in is to pollute one’s consciousness. Nevertheless, he has a detective’s keen interest in images, and his quarry Howard fascinates him as much as the quarry of Berkely Pit. As Sutter drives to Butte, he stops in the dessert to change his clothes and shave. As he stands by his car, the camera shoots over his shoulder in a medium close-up, showing the scrapbook that documents Howard’s aberrant behavior. Sutter reviews the images as he runs a loud, buzzing, electric razor over his face. Starting at eye-level, the camera tracks back, then tilts up, reframing Sutter in a medium shot. It then begins a 360-degree dolly around Sutter, revealing the open sky and horizon of the desert. Sutter looks up from the photographic images of a “polluted” Howard, struck by the emptiness of the horizon, and then switches his razor on and off, as if trying to comprehend the silence of a world not saturated with the noise of media. The film then cuts to a shot of Howard standing in Butte. He too is framed in a tight-medium, head-and-shoulder shot. He walks away from the camera and crosses an empty street. The film cuts back to a matching shot of Sutter walking away from the camera and into the open plane of the desert. The parallel editing economically links the two wanderers. One is a Western hero and Hollywood image, a man who should be on the open plain, but is instead walking the streets of the city; the other is a flâneur / detective who should be pounding the pavement of the city, but instead stands in the vast empty desert. Sutter is out of place in this world devoid of media images, and his response to the emptiness and silence of the desert – a timid and weak, “Hello?” – comically underscores the point. It is significant also that Sutter, an urban and urbane wanderer, has found himself in the terrain of the cowboy, that other cinematic wanderer who is the Western’s counterpart of the wandering private eye. In a sense, the two wanderers of Don’t Come Knocking are archetypal
searchers, roaming across and between archetypal landscapes and cityscapes, and images that can (and cannot) make meaning – a visual culture contaminated by commodification of the image and the hyperreal.

Given Wenders’s writing, which clearly articulates his anxiety over the image, and given the self-reflexive expression of that anxiety in much of his cinema, *Tokyo Ga*’s disillusioned engagement of the modern cityscape suggests that Wenders’s cinematic searching leads him to an empty cul de sac. His search for truth and significance appears stymied by both the nature of the cityscape and the culture of image production, and the cityscape of Tokyo seems hopelessly empty of truth. The search for a cinematic model – a filmmaker and a film practice to emulate – leads Wenders early in the film to Ozu’s grave, the headstone of which is inscribed with “mu,” the character for “emptiness,” a grim symbol for the dearth of significance in a contemporary city and cinema. Alter writes of this scene:

One can never film nothingness but only suggest it, as it were, by a reference to a presence. Wenders’s search for Ozu leads to such a suggestion of determinate absence: a gravestone inscription that is real but refers to a nothingness, which cannot, by definition, be represented. Similarly, all cinema’s search for reality is figured by images that may in some sense be real and artistically striking but can only suggest a reality without any objective reliability. (121)

Both Alter and Kunziar speak to Wenders’s attempts to manage a dilemma in which his own attempts to convey truth fail to fully overcome the limits of a postmodern desert and the inadequacies of cinema.

The symbol of emptiness that is Ozu’s grave offers a second meaning, one that implies openness of landscapes and an openness of the image for the wandering gaze. This “emptiness” is essential for understanding Wenders’s landscapes, and it has a lineage in another of Wenders’s artistic models, Edward Hopper. The vision of Ozu dovetails with a distinctly modernist mode of composition characteristic of Hopper’s “empty” or “open” mise-en-scène.

Hopper’s most abstract paintings, such as “Rooms by the Sea” (1951) and “Sun in Empty Room” (1963), which focus exclusively on the composition of light and
space, entertain obvious similarities to Wenders’s short films and their minimalist narratives but also to the so-called pillow shots of Yasujiro Ozu…. Like the paintings, these shots often depict empty rooms, still-lives of urban settings, clothes drying in the breeze, or… the withering of grass as a train passes by. These shots have no function in the diegesis of the film but serve as moments of contemplations and reflection – much as one stops to look at a painting or a photograph. (Gemünden 10-11)

This openness of frame, this emptiness-as-unrestricted-space, liberates the spectator’s gaze. The emptiness of the landscape, like the emptiness of John Ford’s Monument Valley, thus serves as a restorative space for the wandering gaze in a culture where images have been otherwise emptied of truth and signification by the problems Wenders confronts (but perhaps fails to resolve) in the cityscape of Tokyo.

This emptiness in both Wenders’s and Hopper’s landscapes is also the space from which meaningful stories might emerge. In Paris, Texas, this potential is symbolized by the tattered picture of an empty lot Travis carries among his few belongings. When he shows the picture to Walt, his brother comments, “There’s nothing on it.” Travis replies with an odd, almost joyful appreciation of this: “Empty,” he says. For Travis, the empty lot is a place of both real loss and mythical potential – much like the grave of Ozu. The land Travis bought so that he and Jane might live there with Hunter is a landscape in which the story of a unified family might have emerged. Such a narrative is derailed, however, by Howard’s own desire-driven fantasies, which in the film are associated with commercial images of women, and the fantasy narrative of his father, who tells people he met Travis’s mother in Paris, France, not Paris, Texas. Thus, the potential of the empty landscape in the photo, becomes lost potential. This tattered remnant, like the tattered pieces of Borge’s map, is equated with the illusion of the film through the name of the town and title of the film, Paris, Texas. In this conflation of landscape and image, illusion threatens to “empty” the landscape of its possibilities and potential – and of course, illusions and fantasies are the very nature of cinema.
Wandering is the only recourse left to Travis and Wenders. Both confront the illusion of a mythical father, and when they find emptiness, their only recourse is a return to the landscape. By searching the empty landscape, both character and filmmaker come to terms with the failures of narrative and fantasy, the failure of film itself. They return to the landscape, however, as clear-eyed searchers, detectives sifting through fantasy and the desert of the real, wandering in search of vestiges of the real. The only way out of illusion, fantasy, and a visual culture emptied of significance, is the ceaseless engaging of the landscape. Wenders’s filmmaking is always thus phenomenologically inflected. Truth lies not in the image, but in the experience of the wandering gaze, the experience of actively searching the terrain. The openness of the image, threatened as it is by the desire to impose fantasy or narrative into it, still offers such a space, an open space in which the spectator might find the only truth available: the nature of one’s relationships with actual landscapes and cinematic images.

The Painter and the Filmmaker of Modern Life

Wenders’s cityscapes owe much to the paintings of Edward Hopper, who can be seen in much the same way Baudelaire saw Constantin Guys – as the painter of modern life. In Hopper’s painting, as in Wenders’s films, one finds focused expression of the fleeting imagery of the modern environment. Wenders has often expressed a desire to capture landscapes that are about to disappear: “The fact that something is due to go is always a good reason to include it in a scene” (“A Step” 133). Hopper worked out of a similar desire, as is suggested by the title of a 1929, New York Sun review by art critic Henry McBride: “Americanism of Edward Hopper: Native Artist Who Finds an Interest in Fast Vanishing Local Scene” [italics mine] (qtd in Troyen, “Sacredness” 129). In addition to the urge to document, Wenders shares with Hopper a fascination with trains, cityscapes, and the flânerie of the city wanderer, as a close analysis of Wenders’s frequent and unapologetic quoting of Hopper’s imagery demonstrates. That Hopper
bears some resemblance to Baudelaire’s painter of modern life is not surprising. One of the teachers from the New York School of Art to whom Hopper felt close was Robert Henri, a teacher who “enthusiastically encouraged his students to find subjects in the world around them and to seek out what appealed to them in the modern urban milieu” (Davis 37). Moreover, Henri specifically encouraged the emulation of Baudelaire’s painter of modern life, a figure Henri called “the sketch hunter” (Davis 37). Indeed, Guy’s quickly drawn representations of equipages capture the fleeting impressions of the modern street as seen by the flâneur. It seems this idea influenced the young Hopper, and it is clear from much of his subject matter that Hopper was himself something of a stroller of the city: “In examining Hopper’s range of preparatory drawings, it is clear he frequently adopted the method Henri describes, wandering the streets of New York City in search of appropriate subjects and repeatedly jotting down details as he formulated a composition over weeks, or even decades” (Davis 38). Hopper took for his subjects the same “contemporary human subject” as the impressionists Manet and Degas, and seemed also to take the viewpoint of the street wanderer: “In scenes of urban America, such as Nighthawks… we have the sense that we are seeing through the eyes of a twentieth-century flâneur – not the leisured, strolling dandy of mid-nineteenth-century French literature and painting but instead a sharp-eyed pedestrian, observing from street level what he sees on the city avenues (Barter 196). Hopper, in other words, recorded the distinctly modern experience of life in the street, and his work formally captured with the “immediacy” of the sketch the transience and contingencies of modernity. Henri’s use of the term “sketch hunter” bears more than a merely semantic connection to the “sketched film” discussed by Keathley. In all cases, the sketch captures the immediacy of the moment and the immediacy of the visual experience. Keathley’s analysis of the sketched film is admittedly phenomenological, and he likens the sketched film to the photograph in its ability to grasp the moment of experience (74-75). Sketches, like photographs, are phenomenologically
expressive of the experience of the moment; they render the glimpsing of the ephemera that passes before the mobile gaze of the flâneur.

Hopper and Wenders share another fascination: trains. According to Elliot Davis, Hopper’s interest in trains began in the landscape of the painter’s hometown:

The railroad line that ran through towns like Nyack along the Hudson inspired Hopper’s early images of trains viewed from the landscape surrounding the tracks, as well as from the confines of a compartment. The abandoned areas surrounding railroad tracks and train yards are such a recurrent theme throughout his work that once one is familiar with Hopper’s imagery, it is difficult not to view train yards on the outskirts of a city through his eyes. Hopper’s obsession with viewing New York City as approached by train, or from the vantage points afforded by the modern “elevateds” as they entered Manhattan, helps explain what he later described as his interest in painting moments of “moving on.” (31)

Such moments of “moving on” are charged with a sense of impending wandering and define the terrain of the modern cityscape. Hopper encountered such environments not only in his own youthful experiences, but during his travels in Paris, where the modern railroad terminal reached its architectural apogee in ferro-vitreous enclosures such as the Gare de Orsay and the Gare Saint Lazare. Hopper could be said to have literally inherited an aesthetic sensibility to the modern spaces that became theaters for moments of moving on: “By the time Hopper painted one of his first major oils devoted to trains, he also had access to the paintings of the French Impressionists, particularly Claude Monet’s series of trains beneath the modern glass enclosure of the Gare St. Lazare in Paris or passing through the Parisian suburbs” (Davis 32-33). This predilection for capturing the spaces and moments of movement shared by Monet, Hopper, and Wenders is not coincidental; rather, it emerges from the same visual culture. The experience of that environment was shaped in part by the twin technologies of the railroad and the cinema. Gemünden offers a similar argument: Hopper’s “fascination with trains and railroads, which he shares with Wenders, can be explained in this cinematic context, for looking out of a train compartment creates the same sensation of the rolling-by of framed images as a visit to the movie theater” (10). In other
words, modern vision for both Hopper and Wenders is a matter of perspective, a cinematic way of experiencing the landscape.

The cinematography of Don’t Come Knocking takes its inspiration directly from the work of Hopper, whose influence also reveals itself elsewhere in Wenders’s work. Wenders and cinematographer Franz Lustig render Don’t Come Knocking’s primary settings in the same boldly colored, sparsely populated, geometric landscapes that are typical of Hopper’s work. They also share Hopper’s appreciation for the effect of sun on broad facades and for deeply shadowed recesses in the composition. But more than composition or pallet, what Wenders’s images share with Hopper’s is a recognition of urban spaces as thoroughfares for lonely travelers. Much of Hopper’s work, particularly that depicting hotel lobbies, railroad carriages, landscapes, and locomotives, evokes the same sense of traveling quickly through a location that is so characteristic of the 1940 painting, Gas. Few places in American landscapes so evoke transience and isolation as the scene of the gas station. Linda Nochlin argues that Hopper’s Gas evokes “a thoroughgoing kind of rootlessness: alienation seized under the aspect of a particular time and place which is yet part of a larger American alienation” (Nochlin 136). Howard’s estrangement in Don’t Come Knocking is the same alienation that Nochlin sees in this painting, which “embodies an obvious isolation of self from community – from a shared present” (136). Hopper later depicted the scene of a gas station in Four Lane Road (1956). This image is still more evocative of the isolation felt by an increasingly transient population. In Gas, the lone figure is engaged in work at one of his pumps, as if to imply a narrative that involves motorists stopping to purchase fuel. The trees grow in a canopy over the road, and it would seem the gas station services a town with a population that might travel, but does not often pass beyond the limits of the area’s narrow

14 Specifically in The American Friend (1977), Reverse Angle (1982), and The End of Violence (1997). Gemünden argues that Wenders’s early short, Summer in the City, “may well be an illustration of Hopper’s painting by that name” (10).
roads and bucolic confines. The later *Four Lane Road*, however, depicts a different world. The attendant sits in a lawn chair, as if eternally waiting in a location where the trees are cut back to the horizon to make way for a highway carrying travelers quickly through and beyond the surrounding landscape. The attendant’s isolation in this paved over Limbo is evident in his lack of response to the woman who seems to call to him from the window. He only stares vacantly away towards the horizon, withdrawing from the human encounter as if he too were passing through in the direction of the cars that seem never to stop at his isolated outpost. In the case of gas stations, Wenders imparts a landscape akin to Hopper’s. In *Kings of the Road*, gas stations represent human alienation. As Kuzniar notes, “the first two gas stations at which Robert and Bruno stop no longer service customers” (227). Perhaps more significantly, when Bruno searches one of the dilapidated buildings for water, he comes across a man sitting ghost-like and alone in the darkness.

Hopper’s gas stations, like his theaters and restaurants, represent a kind of location characterized by isolation in public places. Nochlin argues that Hopper’s rendering of “spaces of urban recreation” amount to “loci of alienation” (137). I would add that such images depict *loci of transience*. It is precisely this kind of location through which Howard and nearly all of Wanders’s wanderers often pass. Such locations are a legacy of the urban architecture of the nineteenth century; their archetypal precursors are the *passage couvert*, the covered markets of Les Halles and the modern department store, and nineteenth-century train station, spaces that modernity theorists repeatedly cite as the transformative architectural designs of a mobile culture of urban modernity.\footnote{Emil Zola documented the wandering of his protagonist Florent under the roofs of Les Halles in *Le Ventre de Paris*, and Anne Friedberg has pointed out in *Window Shopping* that Zola’s *Au Bonheur des Dames* mobilizes the gaze of the *flâneuse* in the department store.}

Another such locus of transience is the hotel lobby. Working in part from Siegfried Kracauer, who dedicated a chapter to hotel lobbies in *Mass Ornament*, Gleber positions the “new

\footnote{Emil Zola documented the wandering of his protagonist Florent under the roofs of Les Halles in *Le Ventre de Paris*, and Anne Friedberg has pointed out in *Window Shopping* that Zola’s *Au Bonheur des Dames* mobilizes the gaze of the *flâneuse* in the department store.}
adventure of the metropolis” within the contexts of modern culture and the emerging art of cinema:

Its locations are the places both of collective boredom and of its collective distraction: streets, cinema palaces, and hotel lobbies. Kracauer locates the Weimar hotel lobby as the terrain of a detective novel of the real world: it is filled with the stimulating, secretly anonymous “coming and going of unknown people,” which likewise structures the aimless distraction of the crowd in the streets. (46)

The hotel lobby, like the cinema, characterizes the modern space in which the wanderer sees. Like the hotels of Wenders’s films and Hopper’s paintings, the spaces Gleber describes are spaces of restlessness – a characteristic that defines Howard. These public spaces are always passages – ambiguous structures that erase the distinction between street and interior. To recognize the significance of such a space within the convergence of modern mobility and cinema, one only recall the now legendary tracking shot from Der letzte Mann (1924), by F.W. Murnau (a filmmaker Wenders’s admires deeply). The camera drops through the high vertical space of the hotel lobby, and then dollies forward across the lobby floor, through revolving doors, and into the bustling street. The shot formally combines the mobility of cinema with the transient space of modernity, erasing distinctions between interior space and the public street. The film moves through the lobby as a flâneur moves through the passages couverts.

Hopper and Wenders both frequently dissolve the distinction between interior and exterior city spaces, positioning their images in spaces shaped and defined by mobility rather than stasis. There is a correlation between what I have called a “locus of transience” and what Deleuze calls “any-space-whatever.” Such a space is neither abstract, nor homogeneous. It is an undetermined space that can “be grasped as pure locus of the possible” (109). Deleuze’s descriptions characterizes well the modern, post-war landscapes of both Hopper and Wenders:

It is therefore shadow, whites and colours which are capable of producing and constituting any-space-whatevers, disconnected or emptied spaces. But, with all these means and with others as well, after the war, a proliferation of such spaces could be seen both in film sets and in exteriors, under various influence. The
first, independent of the cinema, was the post war situation with its towns demolished or being reconstructed, its waste grounds its shanty towns, and even in places where the war had not penetrated, its undifferentiated urban tissue, its vast unused places, docks, warehouses, heaps of girders and scrap iron. …the determinate locations were blurred, letting any-spaces-whatever rise up where the modern affects of fear, detachment, but also freshness, extreme speed and interminable waiting were developing. (Cinema 1 120-21)

This passage evokes in particular the space of Berlin as filmed in *Wings of Desire*. The locations in that film manifest the indeterminacy, detachment, and waiting that characterize Deleuze’s any-space-whatevers: “shanty towns” (the circus camp); “vast unused places” (Potsdamer Platz, the Esplanade); “waste grounds” (the Anhalter Bahnhoff). In *Wrong Move*, docks, abandoned or nearly abandoned, often provide the backdrop. In *Kings of the Road* the landscape is littered with “heaps of girders and scrap iron.” Hotels, bus terminals, and train stations, or spaces of “extreme speed and interminable waiting” appear frequently as primary settings in Wenders’s films and Hopper’s paintings. These places, above all, encourage mobility, and if one waits in such a space, it is only for the next train, or the next opportunity to move on. These are loci of transience.

*Don’t Come Knocking* is full of such places that are distinctly inspired by Hooper. After Howard escapes from the film set of *Phantom of the West*, he makes his way to Salt Lake City, and there he catches a bus. According to Wenders’s commentary on the film, the set of the bus station is in actuality an old train station that has been converted to a museum. Its early-century architecture from the days of frequent train travel offers a space reminiscent of Hopper’s urban interiors, lighting, and composition. This is a place in which no one lingers. Howard’s next stop is Elko, Nevada, where his bus arrives at the aptly named Travelers’ Hotel, and Howard again finds himself in a *locus* of transience. When he arrives in Butte, Howard takes a room at the Finlen Hotel, a hotel built in the second-empire style, and opened in 1924 – again, an appropriate “residence” for a mobile and isolated wanderer. After Howard has checked in, Wenders offers a shot of the cowboy walking down a large hallway to his room. The shot is a stationary, eye-level, long shot looking down a broad corridor connecting to the lobby. Sunlight filters in from the
lobby’s large windows. In the distance, Howard walks away from the camera, valise in hand, his figure silhouetted against a band of sunlight on the rear wall. On each side of the hall (and frame) sit two deep-cushioned, green chairs. These, the dark wood-paneled door at the center of the frame, and the light-green walls give this shot a striking resemblance to the setting Hopper rendered in Hotel Lobby (1943). In each, figures of isolation, dressed for travel, temporarily inhabit spaces meant primarily to move people through the city.

Wenders’s fascination with hotels and Hopper-inspired images of hotel windows shapes the mise-en-scène of his detective film The Million Dollar Hotel (2000). Shot almost entirely on location in Los Angeles at the twin buildings of the New Million Dollar Hotel Rossyln and the Rossyln Hotel Annex, the film conflates the interior spaces of the hotel with the exterior space of Fifth Street, which runs between the two buildings. The street itself, set in the shadows between the high facades of the hotels, resembles a narrow and sordid arcade, and is fronted by pornographic bookstores and populated by streetwalkers. A striking number of scenes filmed within the rooms of the hotel include shots that look through windows at facades across the street. Often, the rooms are lighted to match spaces visible through windows, particularly in the night scenes. This conspicuous choice of lighting – usually, cinematographers will vary light levels by several f-stops in either direction to distinguish space – conflates interior and exterior, rendering the hotel rooms indistinguishable from the absolutely transient space of the street. Giuliana Bruno’s work on the relationship of modern architectural spaces to cinema directly equates the transience of the hotel and arcade to that of the film itself: “The urban dweller, at home in the hotel lobby or the city’s arcade, inhabits the map of modernity; so does the film spectator, a flâneur who genealogically resides in the arcade, itself a place of transit” (16). The mise-en-scène is the architecture of the image, and the film is the locus of transience for the spectator. Anke Gleber, working from Kracauer’s discussion of the hotel lobby, makes a similar connection between the flâneur / detective and the habitués of modern loci of transience such as hotels: “The
observers waiting in the hotel lobby exhibit characteristics of the detective as well as the aimless curiosity of the flaneur” (46).

In *Don’t Come Knocking*, the image of people always on the move appears vividly in the scene of Howard’s final encounter with Doreen, during which she rejects Howard’s attempts to rekindle their relationship. The penultimate shot of this sequence is filmed from inside of a storefront gym. Howard and Doreen stand on the sidewalk on the other side of a large plate glass window. In a long shot, they are framed on the left by a man pedaling a stationary bicycle, and on the right by a woman walking on a treadmill. The extraordinary composition of this setup offers three planes of depth. In the background stands a sunlit, brick façade that evokes Hopper’s *Sunday Morning* (1930). In the middle ground on the sidewalk stand Howard and Doreen, and in the foreground, the interior space of the gym occupied by the camera, are the two “traveling” figures who seem to walk and peddle their way through space, moving even as they remain in place, isolated by the glass. The large plate glass is essential to the scene, and essential to the experience of modern visual experience in the city. In Friedberg’s words, the modern shop window “was the proscenium for visual intoxication” (Friedberg 65). In this scene, however, the *flâneur* and *flâneuse* do not look in from the street, intoxicated by consumer goods; rather, the *flâneur* and *flâneuse* look out through the plate-glass screen at Howard (a movie star) and Doreen. The stationary peddler and walker watch a “scene” with “mobilized” gazes just as the film viewer enjoys a mobilized gaze of the city while remaining stationary in a theater seat. The link between this storefront and the transient “mobile” space of the theater is not difficult to see in the context of the architectural development of theaters as formulated by Bruno:

As cities are spaces of transitions so are movie theaters, whose shape and concept have changed over time in the urban environment, yet always remain an intricate part of its fabric. Cinema is primarily of the street, even as a form of spectatorship. If we consider the history of exhibition in the early days of cinema’s invention, we can better see the root of this urban bond. The motion picture was largely born out of the pavement and has closely participated in its urban development. At the origin of cinema, one would watch films by moving
from pavements into cinemas that were fundamentally ‘storefronts’. The theater was not only located at street level but also shaped like any other store. Many retail shops were remodeled and adapted for the new use of shooting films – for the new urban fashion. It was true urban recycling. Watching film remained inseparable from one’s activity of flânerie: it was part of ‘street-walking’, a peripatetic use of the street and a variation on strutting. (18-19).

These mobile spectators of Howard and Doreen’s tense drama engage simultaneously in a variation on flânerie: they exhibit themselves in the window as they engage in spectating; they are seen as they look. At the same time, they are isolated by their headphones and “tuned out” as they exercise. They occupy the locus of transience that is their storefront theater with the same sense of alienation so apparent in Edward Hopper’s rendering of a solitary figure in New York Movie (1939). In this famous work, an usherette stands in the entry hall just outside of a movie theater auditorium, isolated in the right third of the frame, separated from the crowd. Her posture is one of only momentary rest. Like so many of Hopper’s city scenes and so many of Wenders’s, the theater, like the storefront gym, is a locus of transience where isolated figures never linger for longer than the length of the spectacle.

A few more visual quotes of Hopper are so striking and significant as to deserve attention. After Howard and Doreen separate, Doreen walks away and crosses the street with Howard following. He stops on the corner as she walks out of the shot, and then leans against a streetlamp. The shot, “a clear steal from Edward Hopper” according to Wenders’s commentary, frames Howard in an extreme long shot. The post on which Howard leans bisects the frame. On one side, across the street in the shade, stand boarded-up storefronts; on the other, behind Howard, the late-afternoon sun illuminates the antiques in a corner store window and sets aglow the bricks of the building and a brilliant red fireplug. This shot not only echoes the isolation of Hopper’s Sunday Morning, which made a significant impact on Wenders (“A Step” 136), but frames the city of Butte in a frozen moment of time that could easily be the nineteen-fifty’s of Edward Hopper’s America.
Another shot Wenders calls attention to as particularly Hopperesque shows Howard at twilight sitting in the window of his hotel room. Besides echoing the theme of apartment dwellers seen through windows, which is evident in Hopper’s paintings *Apartment Houses* (1923) and *House at Dusk* (1935), this shot takes on an aerial perspective that was common in Hopper’s work and quite pronounced in *The City* (1927). Carol Troyen argues that such a high vantage point for the gaze reflects the “images of Parisian parks from upper story windows that Camille Pissarro … produced in the late 1890s,” and that Hopper’s perspective is also “informed by the work of … American photographers … who exploited the dramatic vantage points” afforded by skyscrapers (112). The shot of Howard, taken from a point that literally floats outside of the window – it is a crane shot that drifts and pans across the façade of the building and stops directly across from Howard – simultaneously quotes two of Hopper’s most famous works. One is Hopper’s appropriately entitled *Night Windows* (1928), which offers a transient look through the corner windows of an upper-level apartment at a woman making her bed. The other painting is *Room in New York* (1932), which allows a view from a closer vantage point of an evening interior: a man reads the paper while a woman seated at a piano fingers the keys with her right hand. Paintings such as these, argues Gemünden, see the city with “angles only imaginable from a mounted camera” (10), and of course, this is precisely how the city is seen in the shot of Howard. The exterior brickwork glows faintly with artificial light cast up from the street, while the interior gives off a brilliant incandescence. Wenders’s commentary from the film is worth quoting in its entirety:

> If this setting here will remind you a little of paintings by Edward Hopper, it’s not a coincidence. His paintings are full of these views from outside into hotel rooms, or reverse angles from inside out. Actually, one of the reasons I wanted to shoot in Butte so much is that the entire city was almost like one big open-air set on which Hopper had painted all his paintings. So, you can see the entire film as an homage to my favorite American painter.
The scene continues with a close-up sequence that shows Howard looking at an old black and white photograph of himself and Doreen. The next shot begins with a full shot taken from a reverse angle that puts the camera inside of the hotel room and angles back towards the window. This is the “reverse angle” Wenders mentions in his commentary, and indeed as he suggests, the world of Hopper is full of interiors in which lone subjects look out of windows, such as the aptly titled *Hotel Window* (1955). Howard sits in the window, his leg across the ledge, while the camera tracks forward to the window and looks into the night. Here, the camera tilts down, framing a street corner and a street post casting a long shadow. Doreen walks around the corner. This high-angle, vertiginous shot looks very much like Hopper’s famous etching, *Night Shadows* (1921). Gemünden refers specifically to *Night Shadows* in his own discussion of Hopper’s influence on Wenders, and argues that this work of Hopper “contains motifs such as the strange high-angle, dark shadows cast by a roof and lamp post and the lonely man in a deserted street that would become the trademark of film noir…” (9). The most interesting similarity between Hopper and Wenders is the aesthetic they share. For each, space is vision. The cityscape is inseparable from modern ways of seeing; contiguous interiors and exteriors mobilize the gaze.

**Wenders’s Doubt and the Return to the Modern**

Wenders often films landscapes and cityscapes that are threatened by unchecked development. As he observed in 1991: “Only what is big can survive. Small and modest things disappear, just like small and modest images” (“Urban Landscape” 96). This statement could serve as the tag line for many of Wenders’s films, but especially for *Buena Vista Social Club* (1999) and *Don’t Come Knocking*. To put it succinctly, Wenders worries that unique spaces will vanish, taking with them their history and visual character. The impulse to record, however, is more than a simple response to a rapidly changing world. Wenders’s desire to record landscapes emerges from his understanding of the transience and constitutive powers of vision itself. A
number of critics point to Wenders’s closing comments from his film *Reverse Angle* (1982) to corroborate his anxiety over the ephemeral nature of the modern cityscape: “Working on the script I come across something the French painter Paul Cézanne said: ‘Everything is about to disappear. You’ve got to hurry up, if you still want to see things’” (qtd. in Cook & Gemünden 44). There is something distinctively modern in this conceptualization of vision. More importantly, this way of thinking about vision has much in common with existential phenomenology. It is not coincidental that Wenders shares with Merleau-Ponty a fascination for Cézanne’s work. Merleau-Ponty is trying to ascertain the phenomenology of vision in Cézanne; Wenders is similarly fascinated with vision as it seeks to apprehend meaning in the modern landscape. Ultimately, what matters to Wenders, and what mattered to Cézanne, is what matters to Merleau-Ponty and phenomenology: seeing as an act of *being* in the world.

To this end, Wenders films landscapes in a way that seeks to capture the embodied, visual experience of the landscape, rather than the geometric, perspectival, or even the impressionistic aspect of the image. Realism, in the respect of verisimilitude, does not fully account for the visual experience of the landscape. Rather, in a phenomenological aesthetic, the painter and the filmmaker must capture the experience of the landscape as it emerges in consciousness. The image must emerge from what Merleau-Ponty explains in “Cézanne’s Doubt” as a *motif*:

Motivating all the movements from which a picture gradually emerges there can be only one thing: the landscape in its totality and in its absolute fullness, precisely what Cézanne called a “motif.” He would start by discovering the geological foundations of the landscape; then... he would halt and look at everything with widened eyes, “germinating” with the countryside. The task before him was, first to forget all he had ever learned from science and, second *through* these sciences to recapture the structure of the landscape as an emerging organism. To do this, all the partial views one catches sight of must be welded together; all that the eye’s versatility disperses must be reunited; one must as Gasquet put it, “join the wandering hands of nature.” “A minute of the world is going by which must be painted in its full reality.” His meditation would suddenly be consummated: “I have my motif,” Cézanne would say.... (242)
Wenders produces similar motifs through movement and montage, “welding” and “reuniting” all of “partial views one catches sight of,” thus creating in the experience of seeing the same realization of the “landscape as emerging organism.” *Buena Vista Social Club* is a complex combination of history and movement. This combination forms the motif not only of the cityscape, but of a particularly modern terrain.

A full consideration of camera movement will be deferred until the next chapter of this work, but a brief discussion of movement strictly within the context of the motif of the cityscape is relevant here. The wandering camera renders the landscape from essentially three mobile “setups.” The camera often shoots the terrain of Havana from a moving vehicle, but does not “frame” the image within windshields or capture it in reflections. No metaphorical screen intervenes in the view of the city. In a second common setup, Wenders relies on moving vehicles for following or leading views of another vehicle as it moves through the streets. Finally, a third type of shot, the Steadicam, gives the film its most intimate form of wandering, presenting the terrain of Havana from the eye-level of the *flâneur*. Largely because of how Wenders’s camera moves, *Buena Vista Social Club* does not engage the image in “crisis,” nor do windshields ever act as metaphors for simulacra. While in *Tokyo-Ga*, the hand-held wandering camera captures scenes of imitation and reproduction (fake food being made in Kappabashi-dori, teenagers imitating Hollywood icons, and the repetition of pachinko parlors), in *Buena Vista Social Club*, the mobile camera turns towards the material residue of history. Wenders’s camera rides through the terrain of old Havana, looking at the relics of old cars and pre-Castro architecture, documenting painstakingly the fading pastels of the cityscape. The camera passes across an impressionistic mélange of hues revealed in the sanded layers of paint on an old sedan, glides through the halls and rooms of buildings lit by sunlight filtered through colored glass, and follows Joaquin Cooder down the hallways of a public swimming facility that is lined by brilliantly painted doorways. The Steadicam shots pan and tilt with a kind of alacrity that betrays a curiosity
behind their movement, as if the camera were seeking out in the cityscape the artifacts of a unique
moment in history and culture, or the residue of time’s passing. The camera’s mobility extends
the spectator’s visual experience, producing a phenomenological wandering encounter with the
cityscape – a visual mode of being in the world. Vivian Sobchack borrows from Don Ihde the
notion of “embodiment relation” to explain the extension of the filmmaker’s intentionality to the
apparatus:

> Insofar as it concerns the technology of the cinema, this embodiment relation
between perceiver and machine genuinely extends the intentionality of both
filmmaker and spectator into the respective worlds that provide each with objects
of perception. It is this extension of the incarnate intentionality of the person that
results in a sense of *realism* in the cinema. However, this sense of realism is not –
as theorists like Baudry would contend – an illusion. It is also not a predication of
the world as “real” in some abstractly objective sense, some disembodied sense.
That is, this sense of realism does not make a truth claim about *World*, but rather
makes it about *perceptive experience* of the world [italics in original]. (181)

The truth of *Buena Vista Social Club* is not a “true claim about the world,” but rather expresses
the realism of the “perceptive experience of the world,” or to be exact, the visual experience of
the cityscape. To borrow from Merleau-Ponty, the camera and the spectator “join the wandering
hands of nature” to move through the “perceptive experience” of the landscape. The landscape
image is familiar not just because of a photographic realism, but because it conveys the knowable
and embodied experience of wandering in a visual world.

Mobility is a central concept of modernity theory and postmodern film theory. It also
drives phenomenological film theory. The same mobility that disorients the spectator situates
spectator experience in the landscape. Mobility gives film the ability to express a truth about
experience because mobility is central to embodied existence within all of modernity and
postmodernity. The filmmaker, like the painter, expresses the world by engaging the experience
of the mobile body. The body in the landscape is for the filmmaker what Merleau-Ponty claims
the mobile body in the landscape is for the painter:
The painter “takes his body with him,” says Valéry. Indeed we cannot imagine how a mind could paint. It is by lending his body to the world that the artist changes the world into paintings. To understand these transubstantiations we must go back to the working, actual body – not the body as a chunk of space or a bundle of functions but that body which is an intertwining of vision and movement. (“Eye & Mind” 255)

In *Buena Vista Social Club*, the filmmaker – with help from a Steadicam – “takes his body with him.” And he takes along the embodied gaze of the spectator. Image and spectator are both part of a visible and visual world. In Merleau-Ponty’s words: “I would be at great pains to say where is the painting I am looking at. For I do not look at it as I do at a thing; I do not fix it in its place…. It is more accurate to say that I see according to it, or with it, than that I see it” (258). In *Buena Vista Social Club*, the spectator sees “according to” the image. The image is not a thing, but a phenomenon of embodied experience, and even more transient than the small and modest landscapes Wenders seeks to capture.

The fleeting and the transient image is inseparable from the flux of vision itself, and thus the landscape and the act of viewing the landscape are phenomenologically linked. The wandering protagonists and the wandering film both inhabit and move in a modern landscape, roaming the city as a street-bound searchers and *collectors* of images. This act of gathering images anchors the wanderer in the phenomena of modernity. Anke Gleber, in a chapter appropriately entitled, “A Short Phenomenology of Flanerie,” links the flâneur’s act of collecting visible images with Kracauer’s realist position:

Choosing sides with the realist-perceptual tradition of cinema…. Kracauer quotes Mesquich, one of the Lumière’s cameramen, on “the true domain of the cinema”: The cinema is the dynamism of life, … of the crowd and its eddies. All that asserts itself through movement depends on it. Its lens opens on the world.” The most contemporary manifestation of this phenomenon, I would argue, takes its human shape in the flaneur, who asserts his urban existence entirely through his movement, with his eyes opening onto the world, perceiving modernity. “Movement” and the “dynamism of life” describes the constants of a filmic disposition toward collecting and experiencing “indiscriminately, all kinds of
visual data, gravitat[ing] toward unstaged reality,”¹⁶ a tendency that cinema shares with the flaneur. Both display the “affinity of film for haphazard contingencies, [which] is most strikingly demonstrated by its unwavering susceptibility to the ‘street’ – a term designed to cover not only the street, particularly the city street in the literal sense, but also its various extension, such as railway stations, dance and assembly halls, bars, hotel lobbies, airports, etc.”¹⁷ (145).

Such a view is not naïve realism. Gleber expresses here a phenomenology of being-in-the-world. The spaces of the modern wanderer encourage and shape the visual interaction with the world that is an act of collecting images. Like a trail of breadcrumbs, the visible accretions of modernity lead the collector nowhere in particular except into an engagement with the modern landscape. In the same way that andenken¹⁸ both defined the space of the passages couverts and drew the flâneur through the space, the visible images of the modern landscape draw the film’s wandering vision into the landscape. This mobile act of collecting positions the wanderer in a space with signifying modern coordinates. Thus, in Wenders’s cinema, collecting roots the experience of modernity in a grasping or gleaning of visible andenken.

Agnes Varda’s Les glaneurs at la glaneuse (2000), an essayistic meditation on wandering, collecting, and cinema, offers an especially clear demonstration of how the visual activity of the flâneur blurs the distinction between the modern and the postmodern, locating visual experience in an act of collecting that cannot be fully separated from the gravitational pull of the real landscape. At the midpoint of the film, Varda’s camera scans an assemblage of gleaner-artist Louis Pons. Pons points to a segment of the work in which horizontal lines are articulated in relief from skirting boards and frames: “This… is a windshield wiper,” he says, pointing to an element of the work. “That’s a statement. Horizontal statements, nothing else.” At this point, Varda’s film cuts to windshield-related horizontal statement – a long, traveling

¹⁶ Theory of Film, pg. 60
¹⁷ Theory of Film, pg. 62
¹⁸ “Was in den Passagen verkauft wird sind Andenken” (from Das Passagen-Werk [Arcades Project] qtd. in Friedberg 49 & note 229).
panorama of the French countryside, which she shoots from a car window. The shot is formally identical to the shots so frequently employed by Wenders. The film cuts to a forward-looking traveling shot, the raindrops emphasizing the screen-mediation of the windshield that lies between the spectator and the road. As trucks loom ahead on the roadway, Varda narrates: “Again one hand filming the other hand, and more trucks.” Varda’s hand appears before the small digital camera with which she films, and she closes her hand around the image of a truck. She says, “I’d like to capture them.” Over and over, she “collects” images of trucks in her grasp and says, “To capture them? No. Just to play.” Thus, Varda acknowledges what inheres in her film – and in much of Wenders’s cinema: what is collected matters less the act of collecting itself. This idea is particularly clear when her hand encircles the image of a giant eye emblazoned on the back of one of the trucks. What she grasps is not the truck, but the eye, the act of seeing itself. The wandering is real, and the playful collecting of images is real – even if the image is merely digital. This sequence bears remarkable similarity to first shot from Wenders’s Notebook on Cities and Clothes (1989). In this long traveling shot, the left side of the frame is filled with the passing billboards that line Paris’s Périphérique. They advertise the image making brands of Pentax, Sharp, and Sony, and the car companies Citroën and Fiat, signifiers for modern mobility and postmodern visual culture that are embedded in the landscape. Wenders’s voice over, unlike Varda’s, presents a meditation on the electronic image and its consequences: “Everything is a copy; all distinctions have become arbitrary.” In the right side of the frame, a handheld video camera reveals what appears to be the roadway of the Périphérique in front of the moving automobile, but the images actually show previously recorded footage from Tokyo; in other words, “distinctions have become arbitrary” and the image unmoored from reality. Nevertheless, Wenders’s hand, which appears to hold the video camera, places his body in the frame and in the landscape, and in the very act of grasping vision itself. The images Wenders holds in the frame are suspect; the act of fashioning images is not. The body in the landscape, the grasp of the
flâneur or the flâneuse, of the glaneur or the glaneuse, is always the concern. The image on the screen is always a mediation of the world, but the act of collecting – of grasping hold of the world with sight – draws significance out of both the landscape that is beyond the screen and the landscape that is the screen. Varda’s and Wenders’s acts of one hand filming the other, echo Merleau-Ponty’s primary metaphor on which he builds his reversibility thesis throughout The Visible and the Invisible: the act of one hand touching the other. Like Merleau-Ponty’s reversibility thesis, the wandering vision of the film remind us that one’s own seeing body is also part of the landscape.

In Lisbon Story (1994), a film that circles back through time to connect the cinema of the silent era with the cinema of the present, Wenders literally puts the filmmaker back into the landscape in the form of two wanderers. One is Friedrich Munro, a filmmaker who wants to film Lisbon with a hand-cranked camera “just like Buster Keaton in The Camera Man.” The other is Philip Winter, a sound technician who has come to Lisbon at the request of Friedrich. Wenders’s camera frequently “borrows” footage from Friedrich’s old camera, and the film in effect becomes an homage to the early cinema of the modern landscape, especially that of Dziga Vertov (“Viva Dziga Vertov” Friedrich tells Philip, describing his own filmmaking efforts in Lisbon). It is the soundman Philip, however, who guides the viewer through Lisbon. The city’s sounds become as important as its images, and Lisbon becomes a soundscape.

Wenders’s film draws an equation between the landscape and the screen image, just as Vertov does in his opening shot of Man with a Movie Camera (1929). In that film, landscape and cinematic image are united as concepts through the superimposed images of a hill and a camera. The cameraman ascends the camera / hill to stand at its summit. Wenders opens Lisbon Story with an iris-wipe that reveals the skyline of Frankfurt. A postcard image of Lisbon drifts through

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the air and into the frame, merging with the landscape. Both openings combine the terrain of the modern world with the terrain of the cinematic image, and in *Lisbon Story*, Wenders returns not only to the old cinema of Vertov, but also to the late-modern landscape and the cinematic practice of wandering the streets of the city. The film also rides the distinctive early-century trams of Lisbon, which appear frequently in the film within the film. These grainy, hand-cranked images could easily fit into Vertov’s film. The cityscape of Lisbon opens itself before the wanderers in the film (and the wandering film); even the children, who record the city on small video cameras, become *flâneurs* investigating the open passages of the city.

These video images present (and represent) a problem for Friedrich and for Wenders, but whereas Friedrich no longer looks through the camera, but merely hangs it from his back, Wenders engages these images, incorporating them into his own celluloid record of Lisbon. The film can be seen as an extension and perhaps partial answer to one of the projects in Wenders’s *Tokyo, Ga*, which Alter identifies as a “rather disillusioned and sometimes paradoxical reflection on the nature of what had been for Wenders the greatest threat to the cinema – the technology of TV, MTV, and video” (107). This latter film seems to reconcile some of the anxiety, or at least to reaffirm the possibilities of film and the primacy of the filmmaker’s vision. Philip’s message for Friedrich, which he records in audio on a video camera, encourages the filmmaker to resolve this crisis, to reengage with his celluloid medium and his environment. Philip triggers the audio playback remotely as Friedrich is retrieving the camera from an abandoned car (a comically small and immobile relic of modernity). At first surprised and amused by the “prank,” Friedrich soon grasps the significance of Phillip’s words and sits back in the antique car to listen to the message: “Why would you want to produce trash if you can shoot indispensable pictures – with you heart – on celluloid!” asks Phillip. One gets a sense that twelve years after having made *Chambre 666*, a film in which he presses his fellow filmmakers to address the uncertain future of cinema in a
world increasingly saturated with electronic images, Wenders is responding to his own apprehensions concerning the celluloid image in the video age.

*Lisbon Story* presents a counter to the corrosive effects of postmodern visual culture on the image. It does so not just through a choice of medium, however, but through a return to the *flânerie* of *Man with a Movie Camera*. *Lisbon Story* presents its own experiment, which seeks to capture on a variety of media the phenomena of the modern cityscape. Video, and specifically, wandering video, augments the celluloid record. Phillip finds Friedrich’s video notebook, a small video recorder with which Friedrich is conducting his “experiment.” Among the images in the notebook, Phillip finds a shot taken from the window of a moving tram – a wandering image reminiscent of the footage Vertov shot from trams. Friedrich’s spoken epigraph for his “visual notebook” is in essence the same as Vertov’s epigraph for his own “excerpt from the diary” of a cameraman,” which serves as prologue to *Man with a Movie Camera*: “For the viewer’s attention: This film presents an experiment in the cinematic communication of visible events….” Friedrich’s intention, or rather his experimental method, is to make his home in the streets. Wandering in search of images, he goes unshaven and in wrinkled clothes, not a dandy certainly, but a man who has abandoned his home. He, like the *flâneur* is lonely: “Loneliness is the precondition for what I am doing,” he confesses to his video diary. “Who else would be ready to lose himself and to completely submerge in the life of a city if not the lonely one?” Friedrich becomes the “painter of modern life.” He is the *flâneur* in the mode of Baudelaire whose self-described loneliness echoes that described by Benjamin in his “Expose of 1939”: “The gaze which the allegorical genius turns on the city betrays… a profound alienation. …The *flâneur* seeks refuge in the crowd. The crowd is the veil through which the familiar city is transformed for the *flâneur* into phantasmagoria” (*Arcades* 21). Friedrich engages the city with his feet, but in his

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20 Wenders’s other diary film seems to pay tribute to Vertov’s seminal film. Alter identifies in *Notebook on Cities and Clothes* a visual quote of Vertov’s famous shot from *Man with a Movie Camera* of a hand-cranked camera atop a tripod.
disillusionment, he refuses to engage it with his eyes. He does not look through his camera, nor does he show his images to others. The images are blind, both in the sense that they do not “see,” and in the sense that they are dead end streets. They offer no possibilities for the mobilized visual experience of the flâneur. In rescuing Friedrich from his fruitless despair, Phillip has restored the filmmaker’s faith in film; more importantly, Phillip has restored the filmmaker’s faith in cinema’s ability to capture the modern visual phenomena of the city through the wandering gaze of the flâneur.

Wenders’s distinctly modern (and distinctly phenomenological) methods continue a larger experiment with imagery that emerged out of Tokyo Ga and clarified its form in Notebooks on City and Clothes. In the later film, Wenders incorporates video into the larger celluloid film. Alter recognizes in the formal strategies of the film a conflation of landscape and media in which film and video are opposed:

The binary polarization persists – Paris = film and Tokyo = video – but there is also a global synthesis achieved in Wenders’s total film presented as film. In other words, under the appearance of balance, the scales remain formally weighted against the old enemy, video, framed and swallowed by the film and cinema. (132)

The equation of landscape and medium, and the opposition of film and video, order the hierarchy of imagery that emerges in Lisbon Story as well, but in this case, the poles stretch across time rather than space. This binary also shapes the relationship of the wanderer to the terrain in a number of films Wenders made subsequently, including A Trick of the Light. Lisbon invites a visual experience grounded in the old metropolis of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Through its incorporation of the children’s new hand-held video footage and Friedrich’s old hand-cranked celluloid footage into the film proper, Lisbon Story formally incorporates the temporal binary of the cityscape itself, “weighting” the scales towards the old city. In returning to Lisbon with Friedrich Munro, Wenders returns to the modern. Friedrich, Phillip, and of course Wenders, must confront new technology, but this singular city, with its inscription of history (its
trams, its washerwomen, its knife sharpeners, its stations, its aqueduct, and the many other anachronisms that Friedrich captures on his old camera) resists the alienating effects of a hyperreal visual culture. Its children become partners in reclaiming a visual culture moored to the enduring landscape.

Even more characteristic of the modern than celluloid is flânerie. In Lisbon Story, the flâneur navigates the city by audition as much as by vision, and Wenders’s experiment plays with sound as much as with images – just as Phillip plays with sound when he sets up a guessing game with the children who loiter around Friedrich’s apartment. Lisbon Story, as an experiment in audio flânerie, offers a kind of music video, particularly through the scenes in which the fado group Madredeus is filmed while recording the soundtrack for Friedrich’s film. This experiment with sound and image creates a perceptual gestalt of the landscape. Sound in a film is not so much autonomous as it is part of a synoptic whole, a unified cinematic expression that cannot be reduced to its component parts. Graf’s reading of the scene in which Phillip first discovers the band, Madredeus, offers a starting point for such an discussion. Graf says of the use of music in this scene, “such a degree of separation is achieved between sound and image that the usual subordination of sound is inverted” (144). This reorganization of the relationship between sound and image constitutes an experiment in sonic documentation:

For Wenders, sound possesses an equal potential to present an accurate acoustic or audio-graphic image of the physical world as the film image. Allowing sound to realize its full expressive force without necessarily corresponding to a visual referent requires in film a significant degree of spatial or temporal separation and autonomy from the image, sometimes even a complete autonomy. (Graf 146)

Clearly, Wenders is interested in exploring and developing the expressive capacity of sound, but experimentation notwithstanding, the film does not work to separate sound and image so much as to create a more unified perceptual experience of Lisbon. In fact, the inclusion of Madredeus performing music that accompanies the film results in much of the music being specifically and clearly diegetic, and the many scenes in which Phillip either records or manufactures sounds not
only directly correlate sound and image, but amplify the connections between them through the literal amplification of the sounds. Graf’s argument that the film frees sound so that it can “realize its full expressive force” can be strengthened through the phenomenological principle that the senses are inextricably connected, which means perhaps keeping in abeyance any assertion that sound and image are autonomous in the film. For phenomenology, and for cinema, “perception is always synaesthetic and synoptic” (Sobchack 76). Graf argues that Lisbon is “shown in images and in sounds that do not compete with one another for dominance, but coexist within the frame of the story” (148). I would amend this slightly, arguing that images and sounds are codependent within the frame of the story. Summarizing the phenomenologist's position, Sobchack says that “perception is not constituted as a sum of discrete senses…, nor is it experienced as fragmented and decentered. All our senses are modalities of perception and as such, are co-operative and commutable” (76). It is this tenet of phenomenology that leads Merleau-Ponty to argue that sound “must not be another means of expression juxtaposed to the visual expression” (“The Film” 56).

In other words, sounds and images must combine in a unified expressive, cinematic, audio-visual percept. What seems important about Lisbon Story is that the film attends to the transformative symbiosis of image and sound. A full analysis of the synaesthetic aspect of the film will follow in the next chapter, but this brief introduction is necessary here to understand the cityscape of Lisbon Story.

In recognizing the synaesthetic and synoptic nature of cinema’s expressive form, Wenders creates a soundscape. Teresa explains exactly this point to Philip in the rooftop scene in which the band members are celebrating the conclusion of their recording work. Philip joins the musicians on the terrace as they listen to the song “O Tejo,” named for the river that runs through Lisbon to the Atlantic. The song plays as Philip looks over the river, scanning its length with binoculars (again, Wenders uses a binocular matte shot to survey the terrain), Teresa asks him “Do you like it?” Philip responds with the question: “The song or the river?” Teresa’s response,
like Wenders’s filmmaking, is to unify sound and image: “Both she replies, they go together.”

Here again, the phenomenological understanding of human perception coincides with an understanding of cinema. In this scene, the song and landscape “go together,” not because the music adds a kind of melancholy to the river, or a sort of sentimentality, but because they create what cannot be otherwise created: the soundscape of the river that is both image and music. Says Merleau-Ponty, “It is not the job … of music to add sentiments. The ensemble tells us something very precise which is neither a thought nor a reminder of sentiments we have felt in our own lives” (“The Film” 56). In Lisbon Story, the fado that is so integral to Lisbon’s culture does not add to the landscape, nor is it juxtaposed to the landscape, it shapes the modern terrain in the same way as the sights of the city. The film reminds the viewer that one does not merely “see the sights”; one hears the sounds as well.

*Buena Vista Social Club* functions in a similar way. Sound is not added to the visual terrain; rather, it defines the terrain. Sounds draw the camera into the spaces of the city like sonic clues, much in the way they draw Phillip through Lisbon as he follows the lead of his directional microphone. Like the sights of a city, sounds lure the *flâneur* into wandering. The biographical sketches of pianist Rubén Gonzáles, bassist Orlando López, and trumpeter Manuel Vázquez demonstrate how sound functions in this way. The scenes all begin with a detective-like movement of the Steadicam as it searches for the source of the diegetic music, which in each case, turns out to be the musician playing his instrument in the vast hall of a colonial-era building. The camera floats up stairs and around corners, seeking the music until it locates the musician, and then settles on the musician, in some cases circling around him with a scrutiny that betrays the curiosity of a *flâneur*. These scenes are about the spaces as well as the musicians. These are spaces of the past, colored by the colonial history of the Caribbean, and the spaces are not only discovered because of the music, they are also created by it. The acoustics of the vast, open interiors gives the music a distinct resonance, a sonic equivalent of the colored light that pours in
through the stained glass. The space “resonates” with the colors and sounds of a singular, modern landscape. These scenes do not simply document the elderly musicians and the historical buildings, they formally “echo” a moment frozen in time, a landscape and culture that is “small and modest,” and “about to disappear.” The entire film is an experiment in synaesthetic flânerie. Like Lisbon Story, it might carry Vertov’s prologue, only slightly modified: “For the viewer’s attention: This film presents an experiment in the cinematic communication of visible and audible events….” The wandering film captures the visual and sonic contours of the city, fusing the cinematic form of the moving picture with the wandering of the mechanical eye and ear of the film.

A year after making Lisbon Story, Wenders returned to the origins of cinema with A Trick of the Light (1995), a tribute to the Skladanowsky brothers, film pioneers who invented their bioscop contemporaneously with the Lumiere’s development of the cinématographe. The film is a mix of documentary and docudrama, and it switches between reconstructions of the Skladanowsky brothers’ work and lives (shot with a nineteen-twenties era, hand-cranked camera) and documentary footage of Lucy Skladanowsky (shot in color with modern equipment). It also alternates between slapstick, parody, documentary, and historical drama. The mix of formats and genre celebrates rather than critiques the power of the film image, offering a sentimental portrait of cinema’s innocent beginnings. The film opens with a turn-of-the-century shot of Berlin’s busy streets being traversed by coaches and trams – a shot reminiscent of Ruttmann’s Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Grosstadt. Wenders, throughout the film, compresses time and history through the inter-cutting of period footage, scenes shot to look like period footage, and contemporary footage of Berlin. In doing so, he foregrounds cinematic form and locates its emergence within the turn of the century. Wenders has often asserted the link between cities and cinema, and only a few years before making A Trick of the Light he offered this reflection on the relationship: “The cinema is the mirror of the twentieth-century city and twentieth-century mankind” (“Urban Landscape” 93).
A Trick of the Light not only returns to the technological roots of cinema through its incorporation of antique media, but also to the historical terrain of the modern city from which cinema emerged. The present is merged with late-modernity, and proto-cinematic Berlin is merged with proto-cinematic Paris. The scenes of the Skladanowsky brothers entertaining spectators with proto-cinematic lightshows – “nebula pictures” produced by projecting images through glass plates – equate the development of such phantasmagoria in Berlin with the proliferation of similar spectacles in Paris during the last decades of the nineteenth century, and the eventual screening of the Lumière’s first film in 1895. The location in which audiences viewed the spectacles provides another link between the pre-cinematic urban environments of the two cities. The Skladanowsky brothers first presented their films at the Wintergarten in 1895, an entirely fitting location for the introduction of moving pictures given that the structure’s ferro-vitreous architecture – like that of Les Halles and Paris’s many passages couverts – mobilized the embodied gaze. Having looked to the west for a cinematic patrimony early in his career, Wenders reorients himself in Berlin’s quintessentially modern loci of transience at the very moment of cinema’s birth in order to find a recuperative cinematic experience. In this brief return to the modern, he trades cynicism for the astonishment and wonder of early audiences. The landscape becomes a timescape.

The final scene of the film is particularly telling. Having left the reconstructed docudrama of the late-modern period and entered the contemporary documentary in which Wenders and his crew interview the real Lucy Skladanowsky, the historical figures of Max Skladanowsky and his daughter Gertrude leave the house to tour Berlin one hundred years after the time of the invention of cinema. A taxicab waits, but after some magic waves of Max’s cane, and another “trick of light,” Max and Gertrude climb into a small, horse-drawn coach. The black and white shot shows the coach as it rolls off down a stone-paved street of Pankow and then disappears. The next four minutes of film constitute a wandering montage of Berlin’s contemporary cityscape, alternating between black and white footage of Max and Gertrude as they gaze at the passing city, and color
footage of Berlin undergoing post-Cold War reconstruction. In an important respect, the Berlin that passes before the wanderers’ eyes is not unlike Paris under Napoleon III: the construction projects of 1995 Berlin that completely reconfigured the cityscape were comparable in their scale and transformative power to the total reconfiguration of Paris under Louis-Napoleon and Napoleon III. Normally, wholesale rapid development of the landscape affects Wenders no less than the inflation of images: “When ‘Les Halles’, the cast-iron market halls of Paris were torn down,” Wenders told an assembly of architects a few years before he made *A Trick of the Light*, “I stood there, weeping with fury” (“Urban” 100). But he added: “Don’t misunderstand me. I am not against… restructuring the face of a city. That would mean being opposed to filmmaking, with the argument that every new film would only add to the inflation of images. No, refusal cannot be the solution” (100). In fact, the images of *A Trick of the Light* do not offer stubborn refusals in the face of change; rather they reassert a commitment to landscapes and films that affirm models of embodied vision. Max and Gertrude proceed through the city slowly, taking in the sights with the gaze of astounded early cinema spectators. The landscape before them, a newly unified Berlin in the throws of redevelopment, offers its own possibilities. Wenders looks forward across this timescape as much as backwards, anticipating with the wandering gaze of the film what lies on the horizon for the cinema and the city. Old and new images, modern and postmodern landscapes, hand-cranked black-and-white footage and contemporary color footage are all formally linked in this film to reassert cinema’s ability to engage the landscape.

That engagement is what matters in Wenders’s images of landscapes. His landscapes are never simply representations, and usually problematic. They are often views of the desert of the real, urban environments overlain with simulacra and devoid of significance. At other times, they seek to capture vestiges of the real that persists in unique places. Narrative, commercial cinema, and overdevelopment often threaten to obscure them. In every case, however, Wenders presents landscapes as terrains for exploring the visual *experience* of modernity and postmodernity. They
are open spaces that allow the spectator to negotiate a problematic visual culture. They are the ground for the wandering journeys that define Wenders’s films.
The chapter title “Journeys” refers both to the nature of the narrative themes of Wenders’s stories and to the formal mobility of cinema itself. This analysis will apply phenomenological film theory to Wenders’s films to understand not only the significance of the journeys of Wenders’s wandering protagonists, but to understand the significance of the formal cinematic movement that expresses these journeys. Additionally, it will be important to inquire into the relationship of cinematic movement to the culture of modernity in which both cinema and phenomenology were born. Ultimately, such an investigation of Wenders’s cinema will demonstrate that film behaves like an embodied, intentional consciousness. Through its behavior and movement, film gestures through a language that is grounded in the sensible world. Wandering through that world is not only a cinematic trope, but also a mode of encountering, perceiving, and expressing the spatial and temporal experience of the world.

Existential phenomenology offers a unique and promising method of inquiry because it seeks to reunite consciousness with the physical world of body, and to understand the world through the investigation of phenomena as they are experienced through the mobile, sensate body. The first section of this chapter will review the theories of phenomenology that ground this work, and offer them within the context of other theoretical approaches. The remainder of the chapter will consider through the lens of existential phenomenology some of the journeys that make up Wenders’s films. These journeys will be considered in a section on wandering in space, another on wandering in time, and finally, in a section that considers the synoptic and synaesthetic experience of cinematic wandering.
Phenomenology and Cinema

In analyzing cinematic movement, theorists frequently quote Gilles Deleuze’s *Cinema 1: The Movement Image*. Deleuze is always provocative and insightful, but his methods and starting points differ significantly from those of existential phenomenology. Drawing distinctions here will be instructive. Deleuze positions his work on cinema in the wake of late-modern philosophical responses to dualism, specifically the dualism between “image and movement, of consciousness and thing” (*Cinema 1* 56). Of the philosophical responses that Deleuze enumerates, he chooses that of Henri Bergson as the foundation for *Cinema 1* and *Cinema 2*. Bergson himself never directly addressed cinema, and Deleuze wonders why cinema received so little attention in late-modern philosophy: “How therefore was it possible not to take account of the cinema, which was being developed at that very moment, and which would produce its own evidence of a movement-image?” (56). There was of course a direct, albeit brief, philosophical response to cinema from Merleau-Ponty. Deleuze acknowledges this, but he argues that because of Merleau-Ponty’s emphasis on natural perception, existential phenomenology renders itself ill equipped to manage an explanation of cinema that actually unites image and movement (57). At the same time – and in spite of Bergson’s own condemnation of cinema as “an ambiguous ally” (57) – Deleuze argues that Bergson’s response to the crisis of dualism, namely the assertion that “all consciousness is something,” ultimately leads to a means of finding in cinema the unification of image with movement. Thus, Deleuze famously asserts, “the shot is the movement-image” (*Cinema 1* 22). Rejecting existential phenomenology, Deleuze also asserts that Merleau-Ponty found cinema inadequate to express the unity of image and world because “it substitutes an implicit knowledge and a second intentionality for the conditions of natural perception” (57).

Sobchack, in her seminal work on film and existential phenomenology, *The Address of the Eye*, responds to this criticism with the rejoinder that “rigorous phenomenological description need never argue that the ‘implicit knowledge’ and ‘second intentionality’ of the cinema necessarily
suppress the spectator’s embodied situation or substitute for ‘natural perception’” (31).21

Deleuze’s assertions that phenomenology found itself unequal to the task of understanding the perception of cinema in non-dualistic terms, and that vis-à-vis cinema it had “an embarrassed attitude,” do not discount Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology as a methodology; in fact, existential phenomenology is ideally suited to read cinematic movement as more than a representation cut off from the truth of conscious experience.

That being said, Deleuze’s several observations about Wenders’s early cinema are significant precisely because they indicate the unique ability of cinematic journeys to appropriate the vehicles of modernity for the expression of modern phenomena. Of Wenders, Deleuze writes:

> What counts is that the mobile camera is like a general equivalent of all the means of locomotion that it shows or that it makes use of – aeroplane, car, boat bicycle, foot, metro…. Wenders was to make this equivalence the soul of two of his films, *Kings of the Road* and *Alice in the Cities*, thus introducing into the cinema a particularly concrete reflection on the cinema. In other words, the essence of the cinematographic movement-image lies in extracting from vehicles or moving bodies the movement which is their common substance, or extracting from movements the mobility which is their essence. (*Cinema 1* 22-23)

Deleuze recognizes here not only the singular mobility manifest in both modernity and cinema, but also cinema’s ability to express that mobility through technology. It is the behavior of that technology that expresses a modern “essence” of mobility.

The difference between Sobchack’s and Deleuze’s views on cinematic movement hinges on the body. For Sobchack, and for existential phenomenology, the relationship of subject to object must be understood in the context of embodiment; the body is the center of a reversible

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21 Sobchack further points out that Deleuze cites only a “few early works” of Merleau-Ponty, and that he consequently misses the semiotic nature of Merleau-Ponty’s later work (31). In fact, Deleuze cites in *Cinema 1* only one brief passage from Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*, a discussion in which Merleau-Ponty offers the zooming close-up as a contrast to natural vision’s ability to retain a horizon. This discussion invokes cinematic vision as a metaphor, and as Deleuze admits, the passage is merely an incidental reference. Deleuze mentions also “The Film and the New Psychology,” Merleau-Ponty’s essay on cinema from *Sense and Nonsense*, but he does so only briefly, without addressing Merleau-Ponty’s significant claim that “movies are peculiarly suited to make manifest the union of mind and body, mind and world, and the expression of one in the other” (“The Film” 58).
system in which consciousness perceives and expresses, sees and is seen, touches and is touched.

This position contrasts with that of Deleuze, at least according to Sobchack, who claims that because of his adherence to Bergson’s assertions in Matter and Memory, “Deleuze neglects the embodied situation of the spectator and of the film” (31). Sobchack’s project attempts to posit the meaningful communicative act of cinema into the same structure Merleau-Ponty describes for language. In that respect, her project articulates a new theory of film through phenomenological methods and a rigorous description of bodily perception and expression. Her theory suggests that film “speaks” the same way people speak. In the same way the body generates meaning, the film draws what Merleau-Ponty calls “primordial language” out into the world. Her project relies heavily on Merleau-Ponty’s work, which draws a distinct connection between the active, perceptive body and the production of meaning. His most significant contributions lie in his investigations of the embodied consciousness and its relation to the sensate world; he is ultimately a philosopher of perception, and it is in her application of these aspects of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology that Sobchack develops a vibrant film theory.

Sobchack asserts that film behaves like an embodied, intentional consciousness inhabiting space. This structural similarity points towards an understanding of the how film “perceives” and expresses the experiences of modernity, and in particular, the experience of the modern wanderer: film, in other words, is a technological extension of human existential experience. Working from Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of cinema in “The Film and the New Psychology,” Sobchack writes, “what is suggested by Merleau-Ponty in his brief discussion of the cinema is a correspondent view of the cinematic apparatus as an intentional technology” (165). Film does not merely present itself; film acts. “Along with its objective existence for us as its spectators, a film possesses its own being. That is, it has being in the sense that it behaves” (61). The film behaves in that it moves. But it is not only that film moves in the sense that it is a motion picture; additionally, film moves in the world with a motility like that of a perceiving and
expressing body. According to Sobchack, the body of the film is implicated by its visual activity: “the film’s body is always implicated in its vision, just as our whole being as embodied informs what we see and makes us present to the visible even as the visible appears as present to us. This incarnation of vision inhabits a world… to which it relates finitely and from an embodied situation” (133). The film, then, behaves in a way that implicates a body even if that body is not visible the way a human body is visible. Such embodied behavior, according to Merleau-Ponty, underlies and generates intentional consciousness:

Consciousness is being-towards-the-thing through the intermediary of the body. A movement is learned when the body has understood it, that is, when it has incorporated it into its ‘world’, and to move one’s body is to aim at things through it; it is to allow oneself to respond to their call which is made upon it independently of any representation. Motility, then, is not, as it were, a handmaid of consciousness, transporting the body to that point in space of which we have formed a representation beforehand. (PP 138-39)

Motility (of a body) brings consciousness into being; it enables intentionality towards the material world and gives meaning to that world. According to Sobchack, “The lived-body not only incarnates consciousness but also animates its intentional structure as the movement of a material and finite being-to-the-world” (63). Cinema as well expresses intentionality through movement: “for both ourselves and the cinema, intentionality … is also always a mobile structure, inscribing itself in the world and the agency and movement of the lived-body” (63). Thus, a phenomenology of cinema posits for the film an implied intentionality – the quality of attributing meaning – that inheres in and emerges from movement in the world. As Merleau-Ponty says in the preface of Phenomenology of Perception (xix), and Sobchack emphasizes (11), “we are condemned to meaning.”

Gesture too is an essential concept to Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy and to a phenomenology of film. In his discussion of early phenomenologically inflected film theory, Dudley Andrew writes that for Merleau-Ponty, “Art is a formal gesture organizing our bodies and our imaginations in response to basic experience. Reason can never replace this gesture though it
can describe it and talk around it” (245). In the following passage from *The Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty further makes clear the relationship between the motility of the embodied subject and the communicative gesture:

The link between the word and its living meaning is not an external link of association, the meaning inhabits the word, and language ‘is not an external accompaniment to intellectual processes’. We are therefore led to recognize a gestural or existential significance in speech…. Language certainly has an inner content, but this is not self-subsistent and self-conscious thought. What then does language express, if it does not express thoughts? It presents or rather it is the subject’s taking up a position in the world of his meanings. The term ‘world’ here is not a manner of speaking: it means that the ‘mental’ or cultural life borrows its structures from natural life and that the thinking subject must have its basis in the subject incarnate. The phonetic ‘gesture’ brings about, both for the speaking subject and for his hearers, a certain structural co-ordination of experience, a certain modulation of existence, exactly as a pattern of my bodily behaviour endows the objects around me with a certain significance both for me and for other. (193)

One can add that the filmic gesture brings about, both for the film and its viewer, a certain structural co-ordination of experience. Film communicates by giving the viewer not representations alone, but by presenting the bodily activity that grounds intentionality. The coordination of the gesture is the root of cinematic communication. Sobchack writes: “Given to *our* experience as the visible inscription and gesture of its *own* experience, the film lives out before us a perceptual life expressed as kin to our own” (*Address* 212). The film is thus not just a framed view onto the world. It is visual activity that communicates through gesture.

Merleau-Ponty’s assertion that language emanates from gesture is not simply speculative philosophizing. Recent research into the mirror neuron system increasingly suggests that there is a gestural origin to both the phylogenetic and ontogenetic development of language. The region of the brain in which mirror neurons were first identified in the macaque monkey is significant. Most authors share the view that the rostral part of the monkey ventral premotor cortex (area F5)
is the monkey homolog\textsuperscript{22} of Broca’s area in the human brain. (Rizzolatti and Arbib 189). Broca’s area is an important language center, and it is also significantly involved in both the execution and imagination of hand and arm movements (189). In other words, gesture and speech share some of the same neuroanatomy. These findings have led researchers to hypotheses that may significantly change our understanding of symbolic communication. One of the most forceful arguments regarding the gestural origins of language in evolution is articulated by Michael Corballis in the journal, \textit{Brain and Language}:

It is clear that the discovery of mirror neurons provided strong support for the theory that language evolved from manual gesture rather than from primate calls. The mirror system in primates seems to provide a natural platform for the subsequent evolution of an intentional communicative system in which inputs are readily mapped onto outputs. In particular, one might readily speculate as to how a gestural language, perhaps eventually resembling modern signed languages, might have emerged from the basic properties of the primate mirror system. (33)

A similar argument is made by Giacomo Rizzolatti and Michael Arbib:

Our proposal is that the development of the human lateral speech circuit is a consequence of the fact that the precursor of Broca’s area was endowed, before speech appearance, with a mechanism for recognizing actions made by others. (190)

There is additional evidence that the ontogenetic development of language is also related to the physical imitation of gestures facilitated by the mirror neuron system. In \textit{Mirroring People}, Marco Iacoboni presents evidence for an “embodied semantics,” the main assertion of which “is that linguistic concepts are built ‘bottom up’ by using the sensory-motor representations necessary to enact those concepts” (92). Central to this development is the intersubjectivity inherent in imitation, particularly between infants and parents. Thus, to understand language acquisition, “we should look at the \textit{coordinated activity} of interacting individuals – a bidirectional flow of information – to better understand the nature and emergence of human

\textsuperscript{22} The distinction between homolog and analog is important, since what matters is not similarity, but similarity determined by evolution.
language’’ (95). In other words, we learn to speak because we physically interact with others through gesture, and as a species we probably developed language in a similar way.

This is significant for an understanding of film. Obviously, films do not wave their arms or gesture, and films do not have a corresponding homologue to Broca’s area. But films do behave; in their acts of seeing, they visually gesture. Films attend to things with visual activity. They direct vision, select objects in space, move towards or away from things, “focus” visual attention, and reorient their viewing positions. This gesturing visual activity creates, to borrow from Merleau-Ponty, “a certain structural co-ordination of experience,” or – to borrow from Iacoboni – a “coordinated activity.” Even more importantly, in attending to things visually, the film intends towards things; that is, film gives things meaning through the intentionality intrinsic to visual activity. Thus, gesturing is the communicative behavior with which the film shares its apparent intentionality with the viewer.

Sobchack calls the film’s visual activity its “viewing-view.” In “The Active Eye,” she defines the term simply as the “meaningful gaze” of the film (21); however, in The Address of the Eye, she elaborates on and deploys the terms “viewing-view” and “viewed-view” far more comprehensively. The concepts come from Merleau-Ponty’s semiotics. Sobchack writes: “Merleau-Ponty’s “speech speaking” (parole parlante) and “speech spoken” (parole parlé) are thus equivalent in cinematic terms to the incarnate gestures of being that are a “viewing-view” and to its constituted images or “viewed-view’’” (50). The film, in other words, exists not just as constituted images, but also, and more significantly, as gesturing body. Daniel Frampton offers an excellent synopsis of Sobchack’s phenomenology in Filmosophy, including this clarifying explication of the term viewing-view:

In both seeing and expressing its seeing, film is not just a view (an image or a scene) for Sobchack, it is a ‘viewing view’. The viewing view presents (the body-subject of vision), the moving sound-image represents (the visible objective body for vision). Film’s viewing view is its meaningful choice-making gaze, and thus a new organization of the whole, a new mode of attention. This
viewing view thus consists in having and expressing perception: that is, film simultaneously has vision and intention, it sees objects and expresses intention about those objects. The expressive ‘camera’ brings the viewing view into visibility (i.e. making film’s intentionality obvious). This viewing view thus makes the film a spectator as much as a subject. (41)

In short, the “viewing-view” expresses the intentional directedness of the film’s visual perception. Sobchack often deploys the terms “viewing-view” and “viewed-view” together, pairing them in a correlation of noesis and noema. The “viewing-view” is the film’s own visual activity – its noematic activity; the “viewed view” is the “intentional objects of the film’s perception” – the “noematic terminus” (279). The “viewing-view” then is the visual behavior of the film as visible to the spectator. In Sobchack’s rather complex semiotics, “our experience of cinematic movement is never merely of one intentionally structured and embodied consciousness… but the relation of two (278), that is, of the film and the spectator.

The essential point is that cinematic communication exceeds symbolic representation by grounding itself in the presentation of its own noematic activity. The film does not just show moving pictures; it shows movement that is intrinsically meaningful. What Merleau-Ponty says in the following passage points to a new understanding how subjects express themselves, and consequently a new understanding of how film generates meaning (and as we shall see in the next chapter, this concept is central to intersubjectivity). The following constitutes one of the most significant and radical passages in the Phenomenology of Perception:

The sense of the gestures is not given, but understood, that is, recaptured by an act on the spectator’s part. The whole difficulty is to conceive this act clearly without confusing it with a cognitive operation. The communication or comprehension of gestures comes about through the reciprocity of my intentions and the gestures of others, of my gestures and intentions discernible in the conduct of other people. It is as if the other person’s intention inhabited my body and mine his. The gesture which I witness outlines an intentional object. This object is genuinely present and fully comprehended when the powers of my body adjust themselves to it and overlap it. The gesture presents itself to me as a question, bringing certain perceptible bits of the world to my notice, and inviting
my concurrence in them. Communication is achieved when my conduct identifies this path with its own. (185)

In describing the prereflective nature of communication as behavioral gesture, Merleau-Ponty provides a model for the linguistic gesture, which “delineates its own meaning” (186). To this we might add that the cinematic gesture (its mobile, visual gesture) delineates its own meaning. Cinematic form, as conduct and gesture, “outlines an intentional object.” It expresses a perception of the world that “invites concurrence” and the “recognition of a path” that is the viewer’s own. The viewer need not “identify” with this conduct, or path, in the sense that the term is usually deployed in film theory; rather, the viewer recognizes that the gesture of the film “outlines an intentional object” in a way that is “genuinely present and fully comprehended when the powers of my body adjust themselves to it and overlap it.” The spectator understands the film because the film expresses through its own conduct what its seeing body perceives. Merleau-Ponty writes, “For the movies as for modern psychology dizziness, pleasure, grief, love, and hate are ways of behaving” (“The Film” 58). Merleau-Ponty’s point is clear when one considers Hitchcock’s famous dolly / zoom combination from Vertigo. The film communicates vertigo and dizziness through gesture: it expresses its own perception through behavior. The cinematography does not simply present the idea (vertigo) through a clever visual representation (the stretching image of space); rather, the film grounds its communication in its lived body, expressing this experience through its intentional conduct. To borrow from Merleau-Ponty, the spectator, recaptures the sense of the gesture.

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23 We shall see in the next chapter that neuroscience demonstrates that these assertions about the precognitive communicative ability of the gesture have significance beyond the realm of theory. Giacomo Rizzolatti, a leading researcher in brain imaging studies and the Director of the Department of Neuroscience at the University of Parma, quotes the above passage in Mirrors in the Brain to describe a primary function of the mirror neuron system in humans: it “captures the intentional dimension of actions, common to both the agent and the observer” (130).
In “The Active Eye,” Sobchack refers also to the iconic staircase shots of Vertigo, and she too contends that the gesture of the film communicates vertigo. Sobchack argues that cinematic gesture is visible movement that emanates from visual, intentional movement: “Visual (or, in phenomenological terms, introspective) movement can – and must – eventually mature into the visible motion of vision, into an expressive as well as perceptive gesture in which seeing itself can be seen” (22). The visible movement manifests, among other ways, through optical attention and subject movement (22). The former is “usually explored in a specific manifestation such as the ‘zoom,’” and what is “visibly inscribed in this form is the movement of the film’s attention, not its material ‘body’” (22). Sobchack argues that “optical movement makes us visibly aware of the intentionality or consciousness of the cinema’s ‘viewing view’” (25). This movement of the film’s attention should not, however, be confused with movement of the film’s body. This is achieved through the mobile camera. Sobchack calls this “subject movement” (22). The formal gesture of the moving camera “functions as the bodily agency through which the film’s intentionality can be seen and its actional projects accomplished” (22). The critical distinction is that optical movement amounts to a kind of visual highlighting, while camera movement amounts to a bodily tracking, following, or leading (to use language that is relevant to both seeing bodies and films). We intuitively understand, says Sobchack, the “radical difference between the movement of a ‘zoom-in’ on an object and a ‘forward track’ toward it. In the former, the film’s ‘viewing view’ is compelled by the object; in the latter, the film’s material ‘body’ and its ‘viewing view’ literally move toward the object” (25). It is the contradiction of optical movement and subject movement, according to Sobchack, that creates meaning in Vertigo’s staircase shot: The attention of the film is compelled toward the bottom of the staircase while its body recoils from the danger:

Hitchcock constitutes vertigo as the dizziness which emerges when the attention of consciousness and the intention of the body are at odds with each other. Looking down from a stairwell, the protagonist’s attention transcends the
intervening space and locates itself at the stairwell’s bottom – but his body, aware of the fatal fall through space this attention implicates, rebels and intends itself in opposition to the transcendence of attention. This conflict between the transcendent and immanent aspects of lived-body experience is appropriately and integratively termed “psychosomatic.” Hitchcock makes Scotty’s illness visible and intelligible through the simultaneous combination of optical movement (a forward zoom) and camera movement (a track-out) – each opposed to the other in their immediate project. (26)

Sobchack’s reading of this scene makes sense in terms of how it bodily feels to watch the scene; indeed, the shared intentional project of film and viewer involves pulling away from the ground while fixating on the square of ground at the center of the composition.

One must be careful, however, not to extend apparent movement to apparatus movement, for in fact the optical movement is not a forward zoom and the camera movement is not a track out; the camera moves forward and zooms out. Nearly all analyses of this scene, including Sobchack’s, cite François Truffaut’s series of interviews with Hitchcock. Truffaut asks of the shot, “Wasn’t that a track-out combined with a forward zoom?” Hitchcock casually replies, “That’s it” (246). The scene itself, however, demonstrates that’s not it. What is immediately noticeable is that the composition stretches. Since telephoto lenses compress, and wide-angle lenses expand the relative dimensions between foreground and background objects in the frame, the zoom must move from telephoto to wide angle; thus it is a zoom-out. Also, the angle of view changes in a way that could only be produced by a forward track. In the left side of the frame, as the shot begins, a horizontal beam just obscures the view of a windowsill. As the shot progresses, the beam passes over the window from bottom to top, rising up the wall while the entire window moves into view below the beam (see figure 1). Since the line of sight is determined solely by camera position, this specific, relative movement of the beam and the windowsill could only occur in the case where the camera moves forward. Had the camera “tracked out,” the beam would eventually interrupt the line of sight; in other words, the beam would appear in the frame to move downward over the windowsill.
Sobchack’s basic argument, nevertheless, stands. The body of the film does appear to recoil as the space stretches precipitously below it. The best explanation of this scene, however, is the most parsimonious. A discussion of the apparatus confuses and complicates the phenomenological explanation of how the film’s body gestures towards its own sense of vertigo. What matters is that stabile three-dimensional space has become radically unstable in the film’s own visual experience of it, and the film has expressed that through the gesture that is its own visible behavior.

There is another intrinsic danger of phenomenological film theory I wish to conspicuously avoid: anthropomorphism. The arguments I pose do not attribute human cognition or emotion to the film; rather, they acknowledge that for the viewer, the film’s movement, optical attention, and framing are behaviors that imply intentionality. Attention requires and makes evident intentionality – intentionality in the philosophical sense that follows from Franz Brentano. The behavior of the film’s visual activity only makes sense to the perceiving viewer if that visual behavior is the product of an “aboutness,” which is directed towards an object, usually an object that is also the viewer’s noematic target. Clearly, films don’t have minds, but for the viewer, films act as if they must. The embodied viewer has little choice but to recognize in gestural movement a structural coordination with the intentionality inherent in that movement.

A phenomenological reading of wandering must then turn its attention to the gestures and expressive conduct of the film’s body. Wenders’s films lend themselves well to explaining such interaction between the intentional technology of film and the world: as much as his films are about the image, they are also about the interactions of a mobilized gaze with the environment. In short, Wenders’s films don’t just symbolically represent wandering; the films themselves enact wandering through their interaction with the modern world. That interaction is directly evident in camera movements that traverse the landscape. Such shots would include lateral tracking shots, leading or following dolly shots, and shots taken in or from moving vehicles. These shots are
often “travelling shots,” but they include camera setups that are technically stationary, i.e., shots in which the camera is fixed within a mobile vehicle in order to shoot the interior space, but that include the passing landscape in their field of view. I will call these shots “landscape-traversing shots” as a way of taking into account the broader existential condition of the film’s vision – and as a way of identifying an important part of Wenders’s gestural, filmic vocabulary. Deleuze makes a similar point in his discussion of Wenders: “what counts is that the mobile camera is like a general equivalent of all the means of locomotion that it shows or that it makes use of – aeroplane, car, boat bicycle, foot, metro” (22). The camera is concerned with traveling in a very literal sense, and thus the film interacts with its world, expressing what the world is “about,” and communicating meaning through mobility. So prevalent are these sorts of shots in Wenders’s films, and in particular, his early films, that Deleuze writes, “Wenders was to make this equivalence the soul of two of his films, *Kings of the Road* and *Alice in the Cities*” (23). *Wrong Move*, made in the intervening years, is not different, and is available in a digital format that allows one to easily quantify the use of such landscape-traversing shots. The film lasts just over one hour, thirty-seven minutes. Excluding small tracks and dollies within compound camera movements, and counting only those shots that “walk,” “fly,” “drive,” “sail,” or “ride the rails,” landscape-traversing camera movements account for nearly 33 minutes of footage, or approximately one-third of the film’s length. Landscape-traversing shots filmed from Bruno’s cinema repair truck in *Kings of the Road*, or from cars, trains, and planes in *Alice in the Cities* are no less common, and they contribute significant footage to *Tokyo-Ga* and *Notebook on Cities and Clothes*. The prevalence of this mode of mobility in *Paris, Texas*, *Lisbon Story*, *Wings of Desire*, *Buena Vista Social Club*, and *Don’t Come Knocking* will be apparent in the discussions that follow. What is initially and clearly evident in this brief consideration of landscape-traversing shots is the force with which cinematic mobility expresses the experience of the modern and postmodern embodied subject. Deleuze said the *equivalence* of the moving camera is the *soul of*
Wenders’s films, but perhaps it is more accurate to say this motility of the film’s visual body is the basic intentionality of Wenders’s films. As Merleau-Ponty says with respect to one of his discussions of vision and motility: “These elucidations enable us clearly to understand motility as basic intentionality. Consciousness is in the first place not a matter of ‘I think that’ but of ‘I can’” (PP137).

The movement of these landscape-traversing shots has its proto-cinematic beginnings in the flânerie of modern urban culture, a point made by Gleber in her volume, *The Art of Taking a Walk*. She writes of the flâneur, “his art of taking a walk introduces an aesthetics of movement that, more than any other artistic form, reveals an affinity with the long, extended tracking shots of a camera whose movement approaches and embraces the visual emanations of the exterior world” (152). Such an aesthetic of movement is evident, for example, in the long landscape-traversing shots in *Wrong Move* that follow the group down the streets of cities, or up the winding roads of the countryside where they walk. It is evident in *Paris, Texas*, when the film tracks alongside Travis during his long walks through Los Angeles. The film does not just record the activity of the flâneur in these shots. The film moves as a flâneur, expressing the same perambulating visual activity. If film theorists often locate the genesis of the mobilized gaze in the eye of the flâneur, it is likely because so much has been written about the flâneur by Baudelaire and later by Walter Benjamin, yet there are certainly figures antecedent to this. Ulf Strohmayer argues that early flâneurs made a “transitory home” of the Pont Neuf as early as the seventeenth century (84). Certainly, London contributed its fair share of flâneurs before Poe introduced his man of the crowd in 1840. Addison and Steele’s appropriately named Mr. Spectator, roamed the early eighteenth-century streets of that city and recounted his distinctly flâneur-like perceptions in issues of *The Spectator*. Of particular note is Mr. Spectator’s account in *The Spectator*, No. 454, of Monday, August 11, 1712. Penned by Richard Steele, this meandering text presents itself as an early, proto-cinematic voyage through the city. The narrative
records a full day’s wandering during which Mr. Spectator roles through the streets in his carriage in pursuit of a “Silk-Worm” (a window shopper). The chase is distinctly modern in its rapidity, and its characterization is not unlike the descriptions of the shocks of urban life as described by Wolfgang Schivelbusch, Georg Simmel, and contemporary modernity theorists. Ben Singer, citing Simmel’s 1903 essay, “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” argues that “Modernity, in short, was conceived of as a barrage of stimuli” (73), and Singer points to contemporary illustrations to underscore a late-modern fascination with “not only the dangers of a big city life but also its relentless nervous shocks” (83). Mr. Spectator’s observations include such “shocks” as an “Accident of Carriages” and the description of a lady who deftly keeps “her Seat in a Hackney-Coach as well as the best Rider does on a managed Horse.” Mr. Spectator goes on describing the sight of the woman: “The laced Shooe on her Left Foot, with a careless Gesture, just appearing on the opposite Cushion, held her both firm, and in a proper Attitude to receive the next Jolt.” Mr. Spectator was in significant ways a mobilized *cinematic* spectator two hundred years before cinema, and a solid century-and-half before Baudelaire penned “The Painter of Modern Life.” Stanley Cavell’s comments on what he calls, “Baudelaire’s little book” are especially interesting in the context of Mr. Spectator’s proto-cinematic carriage ride:

> Here [in *The Painter of Modern Life*] are stores of cinematic obsession, and they are more convincingly so the more one appreciates… the particular way they occur in movies. Take what he says about Carriages: “Whatever the posture into which it may be thrown, whatever the gait at which it may be travelling, a carriage, like a ship, is lent by its movement a mysterious and complex grace which it is very difficult to note down in shorthand” Difficult? It is impossible to imagine its being seen on paper; but it is the very grain of moving pictures. Baudelaire’s carriages carry the weight of all those conveyances and machines whose movements are so lovingly studied in the film…. (43)

In Wenders’s cinema, the movements of every conceivable modern conveyance, including the carriage, are lovingly studied, and Cavell’s point about Baudelaire and cinematic movement underscores the modernity of such movement. But Wenders’s films also move by means of rapid
conveyance, and with a hypermobility that covers space and time virtually. In other words, Wenders’s wandering films possess a tension between modern mobility and postmodern virtual mobility, a tension best understood through a focus on the body of the film and the body of the spectator.

Wandering in Space

The journeys of Wenders’s films reconfigure space not only for the wandering characters, but also for the spectators. The journey of the film *Lisbon Story* begins when soundman Phillip Winter discovers in his accumulated mail a postcard from his filmmaker-friend Friedrich imploring him to come to Lisbon. Friedrich writes that he needs Phillip’s help and is “M.O.S.” (without sound). The image on the front of the postcard is titled, “Lisboa: Vista Panoramica.” The allusion here to early modes of visual experience such as the panorama, which reconfigured space for the spectator in the nineteenth century, foreshadows the sort of mobilized visual tour of Europe Phillip is about to undertake by driving from Frankfurt to Lisbon; more significantly, it also suggests the modern, formal properties of cinematic vision itself. The long opening sequence in which Phillip drives to Portugal merges the vision of Phillip with the vision of the film. Phillip and the film (and the spectator) read the postcard, and then set off by car as one embodied, mobile, visual, intentional consciousness bent on getting to Lisbon. The next four minutes of footage are shot through the windshield of Phillip’s car as he travels across Europe towards Lisbon. This long sequence of landscape-traversing shots moves the film’s body towards Lisbon. Once there, Phillip will become in very literal terms, a *flâneur*, but his voyage initially begins with a panorama of Lisbon and then proceeds through a panoramic cross-country drive. Panoramas and similar visual amusements of the nineteenth century produced a new kind of vision, and a novel subjective experience for spectators. According to Friedberg, these early “building–machines” were “designed to transport – rather than to confine – the spectator-subject” (20). Kracauer makes a
similar point about the trajectories of technology and visual culture in “Farewell to the Linden Arcade.” He notes of the transformed arcade, “The shops are still there, but its postcards are mass-produced commodities, its World Panorama has been superseded by a cinema” (342). The transformative technology that increased spectator mobility transformed visual experience, and seeing places that were far away and erstwhile singular, became a matter of buying a reproduction or a ticket to the movies.

*Lisbon Story* begins with such an annihilation of space. As the “body” of the film drives across Western Germany, through Paris and France, across all of Spain and Portugal, and finally to Lisbon, the landscape of Europe and the time required to cross that space are compressed or erased by the twin mobile technologies of the automobile and cinema. At the same time, the images seen through the windshield combine with the sounds of the commercial radio playing in Phillip’s car. What passes before Phillip’s windscreen and the spectator’s silver screen, and what Phillip and the spectator hear, should be understood as audio-visual commodities. In the space-time of minutes, all of Europe becomes one country. As Phillip gets closer to his destination, he turns off the radio and begins speaking into a tape recorder. He says, “It seems like Europe is really growing closer. It becomes one country… The landscape remains the same, but always tells the same story of a continent that is tired of wars. It’s a good feeling just to drive and not think of anything, to let the streets and the spirit of history simply pass through me.” This monolog echoes Wenders’s assessment from 1991 regarding the changing perceptions of space wrought by the increasing speed and frequency of travel: “It seems the earth really is shrinking” (“The Act” 20). Both Phillip’s and Wenders’s observations sound remarkably like those of Wolfgang Schivelbusch, who asserted that the railway annihilated space and time (33). As Phillip speaks this last line, the car and the body of the film execute a 180-degree turn, sweeping the landscape and directing its mobile vision at the environment which is itself filled with the infrastructure of mobility: trucks, road signs, highways, and a gas station. Through its embodied gesture, the film
simultaneously witnesses and expresses the mobility of modernity, the “streets and the spirit of history,” and movement through loci of transience – a modern and simultaneously postmodern mobility that Phillip himself is experiencing.

In a curious and significant way, however, the film’s mobilized gaze is moving backwards along the historical arch of visual experience it has traced, slowing down, as it were. As Phillip and the body of the film approach the destination of Lisbon, they shift gears from a technologically driven hyper-mobility to the proto-cinematic mobility of the flâneur. At the Portuguese border, Phillip begins to practice the Portuguese language, and for the first time, the film turns its gaze towards the protagonist. Within moments, Phillip experiences a blowout and is forced to the side of the road. He steps from the car to reveal that he too has a flat tire of sorts: his leg is in a cast. The biological body of Phillip, the technological body of the car, and the technological body of the film all slow dramatically; in fact, Philip barely passes the Portuguese border before he is forced to abandon his car entirely and rely on even slower means of moving his body (and his gaze) towards his destination. The camera’s mobility takes on a pace not unlike that of the typical, tortoise-walking flâneur. The film is still able to compress space and time, but what it expresses through its gesture is not hypermobility, but hypomobility. It is certainly not the first time that Wenders imposes a pre-technological pace onto the mobile gaze of the film. In Wrong Move, the action begins with a hyper-mobile trip through Europe, during which Phillip meets Laertes and Mignon on a train. In these long sequences of locomotive-driven landscape-traversing shots in which the background speeds by in the windows behind the characters, the film’s intentional body is seeing with the modern panoramic vision articulated by Schivelbusch. But later, the film punctuates its rapid, technologically driven travels with slow wandering walks through the cities and countryside, including a nearly 14-minute scene in which the assembled group walks up a mountain road, the camera leading with long, slow reverse dolly shots. These too are landscape-traversing shots in which the film visually gestures at the pace of flânerie. In
Lisbon Story, most of Phillip’s long sojourns into the streets of the city proceed at this slow pace, and the sights of the city are expressed through the visual movement of the film’s body with the careful gaze of an idler. The gesture evident in the flâneur-like pace of camera movement for the larger part of Lisbon Story is entirely appropriate for a film that harkens back to early modernity, a time when technology had only begun to accelerate the mobility of the spectator. In a very real sense, as much as Wenders seems to revel in playing with the infinitely reproducible image through the incorporation of digital and video media, and as much as he incorporates postmodern hypermobility into his critiques of postmodernity, his films always strive to ground cinematic communication in movement that is meaningful to an embodied consciousness situated in finite geographical space. His films, as much as they convey themselves by technological means, also walk.

Flânerie, earthbound and methodical, is the modus operandi of the detective. Benjamin writes, “preformed in the figure of the flâneur is that of the detective” (Arcades M13a,1). The detective sees the world from street level, covering ground in order to read clues like Poe’s man of the crowd. Franz Hessel, in his essay, “Ein Flâneur in Berlin,” is clear about this ability to read: “Flânerie is a way of reading the street, in which people's faces, displays, shop windows, café terraces, cars, tracks, trees turn into entire series of equivalent letters… words, sentences, and pages of a book” (qtd. in Gleber 66). The meaning making work of the detective story lies in reading the sights one uncovers in the act of wandering. This is the legacy of the flâneur, and like flâneurs, detectives are always wanderers who make their homes in the streets. Like Baudelaire’s perfect flâneur, Constantine Guys, the detective must be able, “to be away from home and yet to feel at home anywhere” (PoML). Just as the Western hero searches for a lost domesticity he can never inhabit, so does the homeless detective follow leads in pursuit of some mysterious other who draws him further from home. Such detectives inhabit Wenders’s films. The most obvious case is the title character of Hammet (1982), but nearly all of Wenders’s films involve a
wandering, homeless detective. Even his early film, *The Scarlet Letter*, a fairly straightforward retelling of Hawthorn’s novel, is essentially the tale of such a detective, Chillingworth, who is a wanderer in search of answers to a mystery. In addition, *Alice in the Cities*, *The American Friend*, *The End of Violence*, *Land of Plenty*, and *The Million Dollar Hotel* are all in some way detective stories whose protagonists either have no home or are pulled further out of domesticity. In *Lisbon Story*, Philip becomes a detective in search of Friederich. In *Tokyo Ga*, Wenders’s own search for Ozu is a cinematic investigation in which the camera wanders like a detective through the streets of Tokyo. Even Wenders’s casting of Peter Falk in *Wings of Desire* is weighted with the actor being inextricably linked to the TV detective, Columbo. All of these detectives “pound the pavement,” literally walking the world in order to carefully read visual clues.

Certainly, the films *Paris, Texas*, *Don’t Come Knocking*, and *Lisbon Story* express a mobile visual experience characteristic of the wandering detective. In *Paris, Texas*, Travis and Hunter drive to Houston in search of Jane. Along the way, and both dressed in red, they become partners in detective work. This becomes particularly apparent when they lie in wait at a drive-through bank where Jane deposits a monthly check for Hunter. As Travis and Hunter arrive, the camera surveys the scene from the car as the pair circles the bank. When Hunter complains that there are too many cars and it will be difficult to find Jane, Travis says, “We’ll split up. We can cover more ground.” Hunter replies, “Yeah, we can use the walkie-talkies.” Travis drives to the other side of the bank. Now, with both in position for the stakeout, Hunter calls to Travis over the walkie-talkie, “This is Hunter in position 1, over.” Travis confirms that he is in “position 2” and then surveys Hunter through his binoculars. This is a detective scene, complete with detective jargon. Travis then turns the binoculars on the cityscape of Houston, much in the same way that Sutter, the detective from *Don’t Come Knocking*, scans the cityscape of Butte, and Phillip scans the cityscape of Lisbon. This binocular-matte shot from *Paris, Texas* is virtually identical in form to Wenders’s use of the binocular-matte in *Alice in the Cities*. In each case, the camera pans and
tilts across the skyline and the facades of skyscrapers. In *Alice in the Cities*, the shot reveals Alice’s mother as she leaves a hotel when she is supposed to be at that very moment meeting Phillip at the top of the Empire State Building. In looking down through the viewfinder of his coin-operated observation binoculars, Phillip becomes a detective, and indeed for the rest of the film, he and Alice will search for clues as they wander across Amsterdam and through German cities in an attempt to reunite Alice with her errant mother, just as Travis tries to reunite Hunter with his mother. The similarity of these binocular matte shots goes further still. Formally, the shots themselves wander. They drift over the skyline looking not for anything in particular, and while the gaze is that of characters who are engaged in a kind of detective work, the shots themselves do not seek any particular object with their gaze. The vision of the film wanders with the curiosity of a *flâneur* taking in the city. These shots draw the viewer into the detective work of the protagonists and the films.

The wandering binocular-matte-shot of *Paris, Texas* comes to rest on an American flag flying from a construction crane. The film cuts to a shot of Hunter, who has fallen asleep in “position 1” while the sun has climbed into the sky. Hunter awakens to look down from his perch and sees Jane sitting in a red compact car as she waits to exit the bank. Hunter pulls a photo from his pocket, inspects it, confirms Jane’s identity, and then calls to Travis, who has been sleeping in the car. Roused from his slumber, Travis drives around to pick up Hunter, who like a good detective, has watched Jane’s car to determine which direction he and Travis will have to take in pursuit.

Hunter jumps into the car and the two detectives embark on a “chase sequence” in which they track Jane to her place of work. The scene involves four separate camera setups. One shot is a leading, traveling shot looking backwards at Travis’s car in long shot as Travis and Hunter follow Jane down the freeway. The three remaining setups are positioned just behind the center of the front seat. One angles towards Travis, framing him in medium close-up, and the other towards
Hunter in the same fashion. These two setups, along with the first, provide cut-away shots for the sequence. The fourth setup looks out of the windshield towards the freeway ahead, framing the top of the hood in the bottom of the frame. Footage shot from this fourth setup accounts for two-thirds of the 158-second sequence, making the whole sequence, in effect, a landscape-traversing shot in which the body of the film fully assumes the work and mobile gaze of the detective. This shot is the gesture of the film, the expressive maturation of its visual activity, a communicative act that reveals the film’s intentionality. In other words, the gestures of the film’s body, its visual activity made visible, is the searching and choice making work of a detective covering ground and trying to read clues. As the car (and moving vision of the film) accelerates down onto the freeway, it passes under a network of arterials reminiscent of those under which Travis and Hunter have previously eaten lunch. As Travis and Hunter continue their pursuit of Jane’s car, “a little red Chevy,” all of the shots from the dominant, forward looking camera set-up reveal some sort of complex interchange, overpass, or series of off-ramps. In two instances, Travis has to swerve quickly as he and Hunter try to stay behind Jane. The detectives are making choices, but significantly, so is the embodied, mobile film. The spectator becomes a detective sharing the intentional vision of the wandering film. Sobchack expresses the shared intentionality of spectator and film this way:

The film experience is predicated… on the significance of movement, on its activity of choice-making which is lived through the bodies of both the spectator and the film. It is the expressed bodily and intentional motility of the film’s ‘viewing-view’ that enables us as embodied and intentional spectators [and detectives] to understand the visual presence of the film’s body to the viewed view we see as visibly present. (Address 277)

In searching for Jane’s red Chevy, the film’s visual activity betrays intentionality, an aboutness directed at the noema. The film communicates its vision and its dilemmas to the spectator, so that when two red cars appear in the film’s view, the spectator must also decide, anticipate, and intend towards a particular path, just as the film (and any detective) must make a choice in how and
where to follow – and in how to read. More importantly, the embodied film communicates the subjective experience of mobility through the gesture of movement that is the visible activity of its visual activity; the body of the film communicates to the body of the spectator.

In Lisbon Story, Phillip Winter is also a detective trying to locate Friedrich in the streets of the city (just as he is a detective in Alice in the Cities, trying to locate Alice’s mother). He is also, however, like Friedrich, in search of a cinematic experience that will express the city of Lisbon. Phillip and Friedrich both emulate Vertov’s man with a movie camera and Keaton’s cameraman. More importantly, Phillip and Friedrich embody the film. Each is more than man with a movie camera; each is a man-as-movie. Phillip wanders the city in search of sonic images, collecting them like snapshots of the moment. In the same way, Friedrich, and especially the children who use portable video recorders, wander the city in search of visual images. In directing both cameras and microphones at the singular sounds of the city, these characters enact with their own explicit bodies the activity of implicit body of the film. What is normally only visible as visual conduct (what Sobchack refers to in phenomenological terms as the “viewing-view) becomes the visible image (the “viewed-view”) of Lisbon Story, in other words, the visual body of the film becomes visible through the proxies of the characters. Phillip and Friedrich are synecdoches of the film’s sensate body.

Phillip’s role as synecdoche of the film’s aural body is particularly evident in the scenes in which he wanders the streets of Lisbon tracking down the sounds of the city. Friedrich is a man with a movie camera, but Philip is a man with a microphone. In calling attention to the aural body of the film, Phillip reminds the viewer that the film possesses not only mobile, active vision, but also mobile, active audition. Phillip’s mobility, which is constantly foregrounded by the labored movement of his limp, guides him through the soundscape and inscribes into the visible image the motility of the film’s own aural body as it apprehends the sounds of Lisbon. During the first of many outings, Phillip takes a seat in a small square and begins to record the voices of women
speaking across the square. He looks at one of the women, who his stringing laundry along a clothesline, and points his microphone at her. This act is the intentional act of the hearing film. Phillips microphone is the film’s microphone, and Phillip’s aural activity is the film’s aural activity. In the “background” of the soundtrack, the voices of children grow louder. Phillip, now filmed in medium shot with the portal of a darkened arcade framed next to him, turns his microphone towards the passageway as children begin to pour out of it, filling the square with the sounds of footsteps and small voices. The shot cuts to a close up of Phillip, whose eyes are now closed. He turns his body to move the microphone through the air, as if bodily reaching for the sounds. Visually blind, he is free to encounter the full sonic space of the square. As Phillip says two scenes later, reading aloud from Ferdinand Pessoa’s, “Always Astonished”: “In broad daylight even the sounds shine… I listen without looking.” Next, Phillip fixes on the sounds of pigeons flapping about as a woman in the square feeds them. The film cuts on-sound to another scene in which Phillip sits in another square and is surrounded by pigeons that have congregated en masse around him. The cut-on-sound links Phillip’s cinematic mobility – his movement across space from one scene to the next – directly with the intentionality of his perception: his bodily movement is achieved not merely by implied walking, nor merely by a visual cut; rather, Phillip is bodily moved by his intentionality (the “aboutness” his consciousness deploys to the sounds). The film’s movement is no different. The film’s motility and Phillip’s are functions and maturations of an embodied and technologically aided aural activity.

Phillip proceeds in his wandering to capture the sounds of Lisbon: a streetcar, a ferry, and automobiles crossing the suspension bridge over the river. Throughout the film he makes several excursions to capture with his embodied perception the sonic clues that will allow him to read and express the city cinematically. The meaning-seeking directedness of Phillip’s perception coincides and overlaps with the directedness and intentionality of the perceiving, embodied film. The film communicates the experience of the city thorough its mobility and the audio-visual
activity that is its own gesture. It also presents its own embodied and intentional consciousness through the synecdoche of the wandering detective Phillip. The children are related to the visual body of the film in the same way Phillip is to the sonic body of the film. They too are detectives whose intentionality creates meaningful images of the world. These children are actively engaged in the gathering of images; they are extensions of the filmmaker Friedrich (and Wenders) and they are synecdoches of the visually active, intending body of the film. Young boy Zé, who befriends Phillip early in the film, is particularly active as a diminutive man with a movie (video) camera. He embodies the wandering visual perception of the film. One particularly interesting sequence begins with mobile, hand-held, grainy video images shot through Zé’s camera as he wanders through the passages of the Águas Livres Aqueduct (which is structurally an arcade). These images are not just point-of-view shots from Zé’s perspective as they are Zé’s subjective experience as the subjective experience of an intentional video technology. At one point, this visual body, upon seeing Phillip standing on the aqueduct, runs towards him until it frames him in long shot. The film, integrates the video image into its own image, then cuts to a 35mm celluloid image shot from the same perspective. The cut merges the intentional visual activity of the video with that of the film. Earlier in the film, it is from this perspective of the mobile, visual activity of the “body of the video” that Zé first sees Phillip. The band of roving camerachildren that works for Friedrich, is actually a band of roving, intentional, visual, video “bodies” that works for larger body of the film. All of these visual bodies perceive and express the city through wandering visual activity.

And while the film, *Lisbon Story*, celebrates celluloid, it does not condemn video outright. Wenders, to be sure, has a problematic and complex relationship with video; he derides it even as he seems to enjoy playing with it (Phillip responds to Teresa’s news that Madredeus will shoot a music video with the exclamation, “Oh no!” yet, *Lisbon Story* offers several music videos of Madredeus). *Lisbon Story* offers instead a condemnation of Friedrich’s aesthetic, which
is a cinema without intentionality: his cinema has no meaning— it grants no “aboutness”— because it is not directed towards anything through the motility of the film’s body. Friedrich’s cinema museum\(^{24}\) is a collection of images filmed from his back or from video cameras that are deposited in trash bags throughout the city. These images do not express the perception of a being in the world; they lack the intentionality of an existential, embodied, mobile consciousness. In Friedrich’s mind, these images are “innocent” of commercialism because no one has seen them, either in production or projection: “A picture that isn’t seen can’t sell anything,” Friedrich tells Phillip. “It’s pure…. As long as no eye occupies it, it’s in perfect harmony with the world.” But Friedrich’s images are useless, collected from trash bags and stored in a “trashed” theater. The problem, as Phillip tells Friedrich, is not simply that Friedrich uses video, but that he has been fooled into abandoning his own vision. “These toy images have fooled you,” says Phillip through the recorded message he leaves on one of the trash-bag video cameras. “Now you’re in a dead-end street face to the wall.” In slinging his camera over his back, Friedrich, an embodied, wandering man with a movie camera, has robbed his cinematic vision of its intentional, embodied mobility and found himself halted in a dead end. The camera has intentionality because the filmmaker uses it as an extension of perception. Sobchack is clear about this concept: “The camera’s talents allow for a genuine, if abetted, human perception of the world, for the extension of human intentionality that can realize itself in its objects more richly through a ‘better’ embodiment than the human eye” (184). Sobchack adds to her discussion of the cinematic extension of intentionality a quote from Dziga Vertov, which given Friedrich invocation of *Man with a Movie Camera*, is especially relevant here:

I am eye. I am a mechanical eye.  
I, a machine, am showing you a word, the likes of which only I can see.  
I free myself today and forever from human immobility, I am in constant movement, I approach and draw away from objects, I crawl under them, I move

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\(^{24}\) Stored appropriately in the Cinema Paris movie theater.
alongside the mouth of a running horses, I cut into a crowd at full speed, I run in front of running soldiers, I turn on my back, I rise with an airplane, I fall and soar together with falling and rising bodies....
My road is towards the creation of a fresh perception of the world. Thus, I decipher in a new way the world unknown to you.

If Vertov describes in part an eye that has hypermobility and an “abetted” mobility, he also describes an eye with motility that behaves and gestures as if making choices. Cameras are dragged around; films lead with their “eyes.”

It is useful to put this phenomenological method in the context of Wenders’s very earliest films (Schauplatze and Silver City). These films were static shots of the city. With respect to mobility, they do not differ from the images Wenders’s fictional surrogate collects in Lisbon with his trash-bag cameras. But there is a difference in motility. There is a conscious choice on the part of Wenders (or the photographer, sketch artist, or painter) that extends intentionality to the visual attention of the composition. The long static shots of Wenders’s early films betray an intentionality because they direct visual attention towards specific compositions over time. In the same way, Derek Jarman’s Blue (1993) pays special attention to the subjective experience of blindness. But Friedrich’s films do not pay attention to anything because they are never galvanized by the intentionality the artist. They are technological expressions of an absence of intentionality. If these distinctions seem subtle, they only point more strongly to the signifying power of motility. A mobile film is “condemned to meaning.” One could argue, I suppose, that that a camera left in the garbage is “condemned to meaning,” but that “meaning” would have little significance to an embodied spectator whose visual activity is the constant and ongoing process of assigning meaning to the world. What Friedrich realizes through Phillip’s help is an aesthetic that shapes much of Wenders’s cinema: what matters is not just a return to the celluloid medium of the movie camera, but a commitment to the intentionality of a wandering cinema that engages the world with curiosity, fascination, and movement.
These wanderers within the film show us the role of motility in cinematic aesthetics. The film, says Sobchack, moves in space in order to perceive, express, and give meaning to space:

Movement inheres in cinematic vision as it inheres in human vision…. Even in its most objectively passive mode, the gaze or stare of cinema is introceptively, subjectively busy: at work prospecting its world, actively making – and visibly marking – the visual choice to situate its gaze again and again in the same place, to maintain its intentional grasp on the objects it holds in its sight. (“Active Eye” 24)

The images of the film have little meaning outside of the mobile intentional gaze that brings them to expression. Referring to Merleau-Ponty’s positing of the intentional consciousness in a lived body, Sobchack writes, “The lived-body not only incarnates consciousness but also animates its intentional structure as the movement of a material and finite being-to-the-world that cannot but generate and mark diacritical value in its every expressive act of perception” (Address 63). This describes the body of Lisbon Story as accurately as it describes the body of the wandering detective. Each marks diacritical value in its gesture.

The ceaseless mobility of both the wandering detective and the wandering body of the film finds expressive characterization in Don’t Come Knocking as well. In this film, the journeys of Howard and Sutter begin to intertwine as they seek out their goals. Sutter’s detective-like movements eventually converge with those of Howard as each man looks for clues. Howard is in search of his family; Sutter is in search of Howard. Neither is ever at home, even when they are tempted to settle down. Like Howard, Sutter at one point regresses to childhood, and finds himself standing in Howard’s mother’s kitchen enjoying cookies and milk. Flirting with domesticity as he stands in the kitchen, Sutter explains that he is “just passing through.” Recognizing the wanderlust of both men, Howard’s mother replies, “Well that’s just about all you can do here, isn’t it, just pass on through.” Both men are wandering detectives. They are searchers for images and searchers who are images. The film too is a wandering detective that directs its gaze at images, and a detective that is constituted by images. The spectator wanders in the space
of the film and over space with the film, reading both the “viewed-view” of images and the gesturing “viewing-view” of the film’s mobile body.

Wandering in Time

The desert terrain of Kings of the Road is a temporal field as much as it is an extended flat plain of nearly barren earth. Bruno and Robert wander across space, as one might guess simply from the English title of the film, Kings of the Road, but they also traverse – or rather try to traverse – time, as suggested by the German title, Im Lauf der Zeit. Wandering, as cinematic movement, traverses time as much as space. Film, as Merleau-Ponty insists, generates meaning through this movement in time: “Let us say right off that a film is not a sum total of images but a temporal gestalt” (“The Film” 54). In this light, it is appropriate to consider the journeys of Wenders’s films not just in the context of space, but of time as well; or rather, one ought to consider movement in the space of the film as the movement in the time of the film. In Kings of the Road, for example, movement through the “desert” landscape of the German frontier is Wenders’s attempt to break the moving image out of the desiccated history of German cinema. In moving through a landscape, the wanderers Bruno and Robert attempt to escape the confines of their historical surroundings.

In his analysis of Kings of the Road, from New German Film: The Displaced Image, Timothy Corrigan argues that the film attempts to reveal the movement of desire as it is posited in the structure of the apparatus by Metzian and psychoanalytic models of scopic desire. This desire drives the movement of the film, movement that manifests itself in the figure of the circle. The reoccurring circle motif is manifest, for example, in the circular film loop that Bruno splices together out of pornographic and violent images (31). As Bruno and Pauline sit in the theater and watch this sequence of images circulate, their screen becomes the spectator’s screen, implicating the actual spectator of Kings of the Road in the cycle of cinematic desire. This circular motion is
the larger wandering movement of the two main characters, Bruno and Robert. “Just as the two characters circulate through a voyage bounded by desire and an unattainable object,” writes Corrigan, “the cinematic voyager moves between the same two poles, except that his or her journey belongs to the realm of the virtual” (31). For Bruno and Robert, the voyage moves across the blank spaces of the white screen and the blank (desert) landscape. Corrigan identifies at the center of this circular movement a disruption that manifests itself in the darkened center of a pornographic film projected in the cinema where Pauline works. The circle is caused by a mirror the projectionist suspends in front of the lens in order to reflect the image back into the projection booth. Corrigan explains this extraordinarily rich scene, in which Bruno discovers the masturbating projectionist and the mirror that disrupts the center of the image, as an attempt by Wenders to disrupt the circle by “at least momentarily arresting the desire that creates it” (34). The scene describes a psychoanalytic model of spectatorship in which both characters and spectators are caught in a loop, but also offers a simultaneous therapeutic intervention by the filmmaker, and provides a “self-reflexive mapping out of this strategy of disruption and deconstruction” (34-35). In addition to these two figures, the circle and the disrupted center, Corrigan adds a third: the swerve. This is the literal and figurative motion of the characters in the film that amounts to a “breaking out” of the circle that describes and inscribes desire (35).^25

In this analysis, the characters’ movement is inscribed in the cinematic movement of the apparatus. In perhaps the most clear example of such an inscription, Bruno and Robert, who are installing a speaker behind the screen of a movie theater that is filled with children, find themselves backlit by a spotlight, and to the delight of the young spectators, begin acting out a

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^25 Given Wenders’s early anxiety over the effect of narratives on the image, one can also see Robert’s relationship with Bruno, and their separation and “veering” away in two separate directions – one speeding away on a train, the other in the truck – as a divergence of two separate possibilities: one is visual, one verbal. Wenders also expresses the tension between word and image also in Alice in the Cities through the intra-subjective tension of the photographer / writer, Phillip, and in Wings of Desire through the seeing and writing of Damiel, and through the contrast of the angels vision and Homer’s storytelling.
slapstick comedy with their silhouettes. Just after this scene, Bruno and Robert stand before the painted-over windows of a truck that has been recycled as a bratwurst stand. The scene is especially relevant because the windows, which are painted white, look precisely like a movie projection screen. As I have pointed out in the previous chapter, these white windows of an immobile vehicle correspond to the reflecting windshield of Bruno’s cinema repair truck, the same windshield that at the end of the film, very significantly reflects the neon sign of the Weiss Wand Cinema. Standing before the painted windshield of the bratwurst stand, Bruno and Robert inhabit a space that is figuratively (and in the view of the spectator, actually) the cinema screen itself, the same weiss wand Bruno and Robert animated in the previous scene with their shadows. More importantly, the voyage the two undertake is a voyage of cinematic motion. The screen, like the desert, thus becomes the place in which they must wander, and where their attempts to “swerve” or veer from their predetermined, cyclical course seem at very least, problematic. On one hand, the wanderers are attempting to escape the desiccated desert of the German cinema in a cinema repair truck; on the other, they are traveling in circles because cinema perpetuates desire. Hollywood is “the great desiring machine,” that creates the circle of desire, and “only by recognizing that circle as a staring point, … do he [Wenders] and the other German filmmakers have a chance to write themselves out of it” (40). Bruno and Robert are wanderers attempting to actualize some sort of agency on the road and in the course of time that will propel them towards alternatives to those characterized on one hand by the cinema of their grandfathers (opes kino), and on the other by the cinema of Hollywood.

*Kings of the Road* is a journey in a circle of time, one that is pre-inscribed in the history of the cinema. The very temporal flow of the film itself seems stuck. The characters are always on the move, but never really going anywhere that is not contaminated by the past or corroding in the present. The repeatedly find themselves stuck in places haunted by the past: abandoned buildings, empty homes, old cinemas without a new vision; old printing presses without new
language. They swerve, as Corrigan has suggested, in order to escape, but the escape they seek remains elusive. They are drawn back into a circle of time. This is certainly the case with characters such as Travis (Paris, Texas) and Howard (Don’t Come Knocking), and indeed the paradox haunts the temporal existence of most of Wenders’s protagonists. This paradox is also inherent in the structure of cinematic movement. Cinema plays out in the present even as it breaks the rules of temporal flow with formal structures that compress or dilate. As Friedberg express it, “Throughout film history, some cinematic narratives… have dealt with time travel in diegetic terms – but cinematic and televisual apparatuses do so implicitly” (106).

But what is clear in Kings of the Road is that cinematic form expresses temporal movement phenomenologically. The experience of time relies on the experience of the body (and the film’s body). Corrigan suggests as much in his choice of epigraph for his chapter on Kings of the Road. The passage comes from “The Film and the New Psychology,” in which the Merleau-Ponty describes the meaning that emerges from the experience of a spectator seated in a train and looking at another train when one or the other begins to move (an appropriate passage, indeed, for introducing the railroad-fixated cinema of Wenders). In part, the passage states, “Movement and rest distribute themselves in our surroundings not according to the hypotheses which our intelligence is pleased to construct but according to the way we settle ourselves in the world and the position our bodies assume in it” (52). The point that meaning is not strictly cognitive, but rather embodied, is further driven home in conclusion of the quoted passage: “Nor do I give it this meaning through thought. Perception is not a sort of beginning science and elementary exercise of the intelligence; we must rediscover a commerce with the world and a presence to the world which is older than intelligence” (52). The key point about movement is that it creates meaning for the embodied consciousness that inhabits space. Meaning emanates from the body, not just the cognitive mind or the unconscious.
We understand movement in time in the same way we understand movement in space. This it seems is one of the core meanings of Wenders’s cinema: to move in time one must traverse space. Just as Corrigan’s description of the cinema as desiring machine relies on the embodied meaning of the moving characters, an understanding of the film as temporal wanderer also depends on the phenomenology of movement. Mark Johnson claims in *The Meaning of the Body* that temporal movement is understood in precisely this turn towards a phenomenological analysis of spatial movement, and he argues that we “conceptualize time via deep, systematic spatial-movement metaphors in which the passage of time is understood as relative motion in space” (28). In other words, our concepts of time, like our concepts of space, are rooted in the perceptual experience of movement. “Phenomenologically – at the level of felt experience – two of the most important ways in which time comes to be experienced are through the motion of objects and through movement of our bodies” (29). Time comes at us and passes on, as if it were a river (such as the river into which Robert drives his Volkswagen), or we move through time as if it were a landscape (such as the barren frontier Bruno and Robert traverse). Johnson calls such metaphors “conceptual metaphors”: the first example above, Johnson would call a “moving time metaphor” (29), the latter corresponds to a “moving observer metaphor” (30). The moving observer metaphor is especially useful for understanding the temporal movement of the wandering film’s body. As Johnson explains it, the conceptual metaphor uses our knowledge of the source domain [space] to construct a corresponding knowledge of the target domain [time]” (30), and so we speak of time as if it were space to be covered:

We can visit our relatives for a short time or a long time. Our stay can extend over two weeks, and a conference can stretch over four days. One can travel over the holidays. As an observer moving along a path, one can approach various places and we speak of getting closer to Thanksgiving, approaching (or coming up on) the weekend, passing the deadline, arriving in a minute, leaving some unhappy event far behind, reaching Saturday, and being halfway through the month. (31)
We understand the experience of moving through time because we understand that of moving through space. Just as in *Kings of the Road* images of spinning hubcaps and film reels communicate a cycle of desire, these images also directly express the embodied experience of “spinning one’s wheels.” My own metaphorical use of language is precisely the sort of expression that Johnson enumerates to explain his conceptual metaphor. *Kings of the Road* depends on physical camera movement that translates into the motility of the film’s visual body. In its embodied, expressive gestures, the film communicates to the body of the spectator because the conceptual metaphor of time as space to be covered is embedded in the film’s movement. Time is a circle from which we try to escape, and we understand that existential condition through the film’s expressive, gestural movement in space.

*Kings of the Road* employs a number of formal gestures to enact the conceptual metaphor of “the moving observer” in time. The seemingly endless landscape-traversing shots that deposit Bruno and Robert either in deserted relics of the past, or in loci of transience are formal gestures of mobility. These are not metaphorical images of time, as is the static shot in *Wrong Move* of train passing below a large clock, for example; rather, these are expressive gestures that move the film’s body over a temporal landscape defined by abandoned, uninhabited buildings and the residue of the past. The body of the film moves through a space marked by history, but it never escapes that history, collapsing back into a spatially demarcated circular route. The images of the cinema truck’s spinning wheels also gesture with a kind of frenetic motion to propel the film forward in a temporal desert where everywhere is “nowhere.” The film’s body also repeats turning gestures throughout. In several shots, the camera looks back from its perch on the front of Bruno’s truck while Bruno turns sharply. The reflections gliding over the windshield convey the sense of moving in an arc across the landscape. Other landscape-traversing shots, such as the long sidecar sequences, wind in serpentine paths along curving roads as Bruno and Robert follow behind the leading camera. The body of the film swerves first one way, then another. Its forward
The path seems always to turn backward towards the homogeneous desert spaces and roadways through which it has already passed.

The extended spatial metaphor of such a movement is the spiral. If one tries to escape a centripetal force through the act of swerving, but the force never fully relinquishes its hold, the circular path will transform into a spiral. Likewise, if one travels horizontally around a center, but attempts to escape vertically, one also travels in a spiral. The wandering of the film, the wandering of characters in the film, and the wandering of the spectator can all be clarified by this metaphor. Deleuze describes the structure of spiral time emerging from montage as an “indirect” image of time:

Whenever time has been considered in relation to movement, whenever it has been defined as the measure of movement, two aspects of time have been discovered, which are chronosigns: on the one hand, time as whole, as great circle or spiral, which draws together the set of movement in the universe; on the other time as interval, which indicates the smallest unit of movement or action. Time as whole, the set of movement in the universe, is the bird which hovers, continually increasing its circle. But the numerical unit of movement is the beating of a wing, the continually diminishing interval between two movements or two actions. Time as interval is the accelerated variable present, and time as whole is the spiral open at both ends, the immensity of past and future. (Cinema I 31-32)

Conceived this way, cinematic time is a fluid centripetal movement punctuated by finite and discrete units of measure; it is the route circumscribe by the hands moving around the dial of the clock, counted off and parsed, but suspended in a whole. Such spiral movement is particularly evident in Hitchcock’s Vertigo, Chris Marker’s La Jetée (1962), or Tom Tykwer’s Lola rennt (1998), in which the spectator and main characters move a spiral suspension of time.26

An understanding of how cinema reconfigures and incorporates conceptions of time and space depends on a clear understanding of how space and time are experienced. From the point of view of existential phenomenology, time and space must be accounted for through the motility of

26 La Jetée famously reenacts Vertigo’s giant Sequoia sequence. Lola rennt, is saturated with spiral imagery, and depends heavily on visual quotes of Vertigo, including a spiral staircase, a combination zoom/dolly shot, and a portrait of Madeleine wearing her hair in a spiral bun (or madeleine).
the lived body. Sobchack, whose argument rests on Merleau-Ponty’s location of consciousness in a material world, asserts that “the theoretical and static categories of time and space as they might be described for a transcendental consciousness become for the existential consciousness lived materially, dynamically, and meaningfully as finitude and situation” (59). To live time and space, the embodied consciousness must move. “Thus,” says Sobchack, “in existence, the body’s finitude and situation and its power of movement transform the abstractions of time and space, informing them with the weight of choice and the thickness of movement, with value and dimension” (59). Without intentional movement of the embodied consciousness, time cannot run its course, or perhaps it is better to say, one cannot run in the course of time.

The subject needs a body to move in existential time, and the cinematic wanderer a needs mobilized vision to encounter history in the landscape. For Wenders, time, history, and cities are always linked:

I have a strong feeling in Berlin… that the empty spaces allow the visitor and the people of the Berlin to see through the cityscape. Not only in the sense that they can see through the space, and even see the horizon… but they can also see through these gaps in a sense that they can through time. In life, time defines history. In a movie you can experience something similar. Some films are like closed walls: there is not a single gap between its images that would allow you to see anything else than what this movie shows you. Your eyes and your mind are not allowed to wander. (Urban 99, italics mine)

The intersection here of the real urban landscape with the landscape of the image is centered on the embodied act of wandering in time. Space and time can be conceived of and expressed as transcendent, but they are experienced as lived coordinates. Merleau-Ponty reminds us that we must “avoid saying that our body is in space, or in time. It inhabits space and time” (139). The desire to inhabit real space and time is the desire that moves Wenders’s angels in Wings of Desire. As angels, Damiel and Cassiel, are transcendent, and thus their perception is as unbounded and “virtual” as that of the film. With their incorporeal presence, they represent the transcendental time of the film itself. Their hovering flight is the spatially and temporally
transcendent mobility of the film. The film traces its own technological ability to move in time from the outset. Early in the film, the camera cuts from a sequence of rapid tracking shots of a families riding in a cars to a slow circular track of Damiel sitting in the passenger seat of a BMW convertible, which in opposition to the other cars, sits stationary on the showroom floor of a dealership. A reverse tracking shot then reveals Cassiel sitting next to him in the other seat. A third, stationary two-shot shows the pair as Cassiel begins to read his record of time passing. He announces the hour of sunrise and sunset, and then a string of historical moments, including a hot air balloon flight over Paris two-hundred years prior (a reference to aerial panoramic vision of the sort enjoyed by both angels and modern travelers). Cassiel also recalls a man reading Homer’s *Odyssey* to a child. Damiel then recounts how a woman who senses his presence “gropes at her watch.” He then adds, “It’s wonderful to live as spirit and testify to all eternity to what is only spiritual in people’s minds.” Damiel describes here abstract, transcendental time. This is time as seen from above, withdrawn from the present moment and laid out before the spectator like the streets are laid out below a hot air balloon, or as they stretch into the distance below Damiel as he perches atop the *Siegessäule*. This is abstract time actualized by the cinema. It is time that both Sobchack and Friedberg characterize as photographic. This is a space like that of *La Jetée*, or *Paris, qui dort*, films through which the spectator is given a “virtual passage to the past” (Friedberg 103).

But Wenders’s angels are self-consciously aware of their own incorporeity. As Damiel confesses to Cassiel, “But sometimes I get fed up with this spiritual existence. I don’t want always to hover above. I’d rather feel a weight within casting off this boundless freedom and tying me to earth. At every step, every gust of wind, I’d like to be able to say, ‘Now…’ and ‘now’ and ‘now.’ No longer ‘forever’ and ‘for eternity.’” Damiel expresses in these lines a desire to enter a mortal world where time is deployed by the embodied subject rather than the cinematic, virtual (transcendent) gaze of the film. Damiel wants to be *in*, rather than *over* the city.
Paradoxically, Damiel is expressing his desire in a parked automobile. The two angels, who embody the transcendent mobility of the cinema, are frozen in a static, spatio-temporal forever. Their mobility is not the mobility of the people they observe, the Berliners who drive, walk, and roam the city; their view of time is arrested under a panoramic view of history and “forever.” They do not move in an embodied “now,” but rather they fly disembodied over all of time.

Sobchack examines the tension between transcendent time and lived time as it is expressed formally through the use of the still photograph in Marker’s *La Jetée*. She argues that the film combines and opposes the transcendental structure of the still photo and the embodied structure of the film to create meaning: “It is this explicit dialectic between the *transcendental moment* and *existence as momentum* that gives *La Jetée* its power and particular significance, providing both its structure and its theme and explicitly representing the dialectic implicit in the nature of all film (*Address* 61). This understanding of cinematic time offers much towards understanding the home movie scene from *Paris, Texas*. This sequence, in which Travis sees for the first time old Super 8 footage of his life with Jane and Hunter, amounts to a utilization of cinematic movement that occupies a curious middle ground between the concepts of “existence as momentum” and “transcendental moment.” Rather than creating meaning through a dialectic of still image and cinematic image, the Super 8 sequence creates meaning through slow motion. The scene includes reaction shots of Travis, Hunter, Jane, and Walt as they watch the home movies, but it is primarily a direct transposition of the Super 8 footage into the film proper. The spectator thus sees the conspicuous grain of the Super 8 format, the visible edges the frames, and dust specks caught in the aperture plates of the projector. The footage begins at normal speed and shows Travis and Jane, Walt and Anne, and the toddler Hunter, as they are arriving at the seashore in an RV at the beginning of what will be a short film of a wandering road trip within the larger film of a wandering road trip. Shortly into the home movie, Jane holds a scarf over the camera lens, giving the close-up a *sfumato* effect early cinematographers would often create by
covering the lens with cheesecloth. The image is effectively a still photograph, grainy and suffused with red (the primary color of the film’s color scheme), and it possesses an aura of sorts. This is not strictly speaking the aura Benjamin famously conceives of in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” for film as a mechanically reproduced medium lacks such an aura; nevertheless, the image has about it what Benjamin calls “cult value,” a link to the original “ritual function” of the work of art (120-121). Like much of portrait photography, Jane’s *sfumato* portrait functions as a ritualistic image. “It is no accident that the portrait was the focal point of early photography. The cult of remembrance of loved ones, absent or dead, offers a last refuge for the cult value of the picture” (122). This is certainly how the image functions for Travis, whose emotions are evident in his reaction shot. Additionally, the ephemeral portrait functions as do Marker’s still images in *La Jetée* – it is an ephemeral and transcendent moment, delicately lifted above the embodied movement of the film. This suspension of Jane’s portrait above the flow of the film’s temporality marks the point at which the Super 8 footage begins to move in slow motion. The home movie next shows Hunter “driving” the RV as he sits in his father’s lap. With this shot, the normal, jumpy rhythm and speed of the Super 8 footage smoothly rolls along at a mesmerizing pace that matches the melancholy, non-diegetic music of Ry Cooder’s rendition of *Cancion Mixteca*. This slow and fluid movement of the scene floats in a middle ground, transcending time, yet moving in time – the time of the music.

That Hunter drives the RV in the home movie is significant. In doing so, he becomes Travis, reversing their roles in a spiral temporal loop that Kolker and Beicken identify as a “drama in reverse,” or the “son as father” (128). Travis and Hunter are twin time travelers spiraling in the middle ground between the linear, biological flow of time and the “timeless” moment of the photograph. As temporal wanderers liberated by the time travel of cinema, Travis and Hunter coexist almost as if living a classic time travel paradox. Hunter explains such a paradox to Travis as they drive across the Southwest. Sitting in the back of Travis’s early-model
Ford Ranchero (an appropriately antiqued time machine), Hunter explains the paradox through his walkie-talkie: “Dad, if a guy put a baby down… if he traveled at the speed of light, he would come back in an hour. He would be an hour older but the baby would be a very old man.” Travis then asks Hunter how long it would take the baby and man to get to Houston, to which Hunter responds “It would take about three seconds to get from California to Houston… on light speed.”

Here, Wenders cuts away to neon motel sign that floats in the darkness and depicts galloping horses, then he quickly cuts again to a close-up of the horses’ red neon legs. The legs appear to move in full gallop by virtue of different sets of neon tubes lighting in sequence; in other words, the horses’ legs are animated by the visual phenomenon of beta movement. Not insignificantly, beta movement is the same visual phenomenon that contributes to the illusion of cinematic movement. The horses gallop for just about three seconds, at which point the scene cuts to Travis and Hunter’s arrival in Houston. In effect, the two have time-traveled at the speed of light, or to put a finer point on it, they have time traveled at the speed of cinematic light, traversing space and time through the technology of the cinema. The idea of contemporaneous existence of father and son as one wanderer, moving together on a journey that is necessarily suspended in a transcendental moment outside of the normal course of time is nowhere more apparent than in the last image of the home movie scene. Here, Travis and Hunter, their backs to the camera, dance a lazy jig on the end of a dock, two figures moving back and forth against the limitless expanse of the sea, caught for the moment in a dance that moves “in time,” but is held in the slow-motion transcendent space of the film. The temporal movement of Wenders’s films – the cinematic journeys through time that they enact – often express both the ability of the film to transcend lived temporal dimension, and its power to express finite, situated, lived time in its movement.
Synoptic and Synaesthetic Cinema

A theory of film based on existential phenomenology forces the consideration of sounds as inextricably bound to images. Sights and sounds must be considered as unified perceptual experiences; vision and audition must be considered as a unified perceptual mechanism. Sobchack, following on Merleau-Ponty’s work, writes that perception “is a gestalt, the organizing activity of an embodied intentionality that engages the world in an always structured and structuring encounter. However, as the irreducible existential structure of consciousness animated by and as a sensible body, perception is also always synaesthetic and synoptic” (76). Perception, as synoptic, is enabled by a comprehensive sensory apparatus that cannot be broken into separate constituent parts, at least as far as it operates to grant the qualia of conscious experience. Merleau-Ponty argues that sounds and sights are not strictly separable as percepts, as an objective scientific analysis of sonic waves, light, and the bodily senses would lead one to believe:

"Synaesthetic perception is the rule, and we are unaware of it only because scientific knowledge shifts the centre of gravity of experience, so that we have unlearned how to see, hear, and generally speaking, feel, in order to deduce, from our bodily organization and the world as the physicist conceives it, what we are to see, hear, and feel. (PP 229)"

Perception is thus synaesthetic not in the sense that visual percepts and audible percepts are confused (this is the condition of synaesthesia); rather, perception is synaesthetic in that percepts unite within experience.

What is extraordinary about Wenders’s frequent use of music is that it teaches the viewer what has been “unlearned,” namely, “how to see, hear, and feel.” Invariable, what the viewer learns is to feel the modern phenomenon of wandering in circles through space and time as if the

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27 The condition of synaesthesia is certainly related to this discussion. Oliver Sacks gives it an excellent discussion in his recent book, *Musicophilia*, and the condition is relevant to the context of Merleau-Ponty’s claim that “Synaesthetic perception is the rule”; in fact, one theory says we are all born synaesthetes: “In normal development, according to this theory, a synaesthetic ‘confusion’ gives way in a few months, with cortical maturation, to a clearer distinction and segregation of the senses, and this in turn makes possible the proper cross-matching of perceptions which is needed for the full recognition of an external world…” (Sacks 194).
film were a dance – a merging of audible percepts and spatio-temporal concepts with movement. For example, in the home movie scene of *Paris, Texas*, the movements of Travis, Jane, Walt, Anne, and the young Hunter merge with the movement of the music itself, often to powerful effect. In one particularly eloquent shot, Jane, in full shot, twirls like a ballerina across the sand, brilliantly backlit by the setting sun. The slow motion and the music create a synaesthetic perception of the spiral that Jane gracefully dances in the sunset, as if her spirals carried Travis’s domestic past in a spiral around the center that is the home movie screen. The screening of the film becomes the center of a spiral that recapitulates and reiterates the flow of time. To perceive this scene without the music is to perceive a different experience of time and movement. The dance does not exist without the music; the spiral of time does not exist without the synoptic and synaesthetic perception of the whole medium. The home movie scene, with its emphasis on non-diagetic sound, allows the viewer to see and hear the medium as it self-consciously reveals itself as a moving synthesis of the visible and the audible. Merleau-Ponty emphasizes such a unity of synoptic perception and movement within the cinema:

> When I say that I see a sound, I mean that I echo the vibration of the sound with my whole sensory being, and particularly with that sector of myself which is susceptible to colours. Movement, understood not as objective movement and transference in space, but as a project towards movement or ‘potential movement’ forms the basis for the unity of the senses. It is fairly well known that the talking film not only adds a sound accompaniment to the show, but also changes the tenor of the show itself. (PP 234)

Light and sound, sound and movement, one might say, are “tuned” together in the home movie scene. Wenders’s initial aversion to MTV notwithstanding, it is hard to watch this scene, which was filmed in the year following the launch of MTV, and not consider it a music video.

28 There are significant parallels between this shot of Jane and the shots of the dancing woman in *A Trick of Light*. In *Paris, Texas*, the dance is slowed down; in *A Trick of Light*, it is speed up due to the cranking speed of the antique apparatus. In each shot, the tempo of the music (and the film) matches the speed of the dance.
Music is movement; it has meaning because it is movement: this is the argument of Johnson’s chapter, “Music and the Flow of Meaning.” Music, says Johnson, “captures us, carries us along on a sensuous, rhythmic tonal adventure, and then deposits us, changed, in a different place from where we started” (237). A phenomenological argument that the aesthetic experience of music is grounded in embodied movement can be applied to the cinema. Music and film both create meaning through journeys. Again, Johnson’s concept of the conceptual metaphor explains the embodied foundation of musical motion. “The Music as Moving Force Metaphor” correlates the source domain of physical motion to the target domain of musical experience (254). In this aesthetic model, “musical forces are conceived as acting on listeners to move them from one state-location to another along some path of metaphorical motion” (254). To support the argument that music has meaning for the body because it is conceived of as embodied movement, Johnson presents empirical evidence from pattern analyses of music, computer models of listener expectation, and psychological experiments (254-55). Ultimately, he proposes that “our very experience of musical meaning is fundamentally shaped by conceptual metaphors that are grounded in our bodily experience” (255). This argument seems all the more convincing in light of a chapter from Oliver Sack’s *Musicophilia*, entitled “Kinetic Melodies.” Sack’s documents numerous case histories of patients suffering from post-encephalitic Parkinsonism and Parkinson’s disease in which music and music therapy have literally moved the patients beyond the “kinetic stutter” that characterizes their conditions (274). Sacks writes that the “fundamental problem in parkinsonism is the inability to initiate movement spontaneously; parkinsonian patients are always getting ‘stuck’ or ‘frozen’”(277). While they cannot release their own bodies from this state, outside stimuli often can: “the most potent unlocker here is music” (278). This deep connection between the perceiving body and the life-world underscores the phenomenological premise that subject and object inhere in one another. Sack’s conclusion to the
chapter is particularly telling and eloquent, and his choice of language explicitly describes music as physical motion:

It is music that the parkinsonian needs, for only music, which is rigorous yet spacious, sinuous and alive, can evoke responses that are equally so. And he needs not only the metrical structure of rhythm and the free movement of melody – its contours and trajectories, its ups and downs, its tensions and relaxations – but the “will” and intentionality of music, to allow him to regain the freedom of his own kinetic melody. (238)

For the patients Sacks describes, the phenomenon of music is not just an aesthetic experience enabled by the conceptual metaphor of “music as a moving force”: the music is the experience of movement. When we say that poignant music is “moving,” our language betrays a conceptual understanding that is rooted in the body’s motility. When Richard Wagner famously called Beethoven’s Symphony No. 7 the “apotheosis of dance,” he acknowledged what our bodies already know: music is literally a moving force. 29

Normally, theoretical ontologies of cinema maintain that visible motion is the essence of cinema, but the audible motion of music in the sound film is just as relevant to the phenomena of cinematic experience. In the case of Wenders’s films, particularly Buena Vista Social Club and Lisbon Story, a consideration of the phenomenology of synaesthetic perception enriches an understanding of subjective and aesthetic experience, and it specifically locates the embodied understanding of that experience in the movement of wandering.

That wandering takes place in a soundscape. The spectator wanders in the visual composition in the same way a listener moves through a musical composition. Spatial movement is the grounding of the music’s aesthetic experience, argues Johnson, and the “The Musical

29 My own experience confirms Sack’s contention in rather dramatic way. Some years ago my mother, who at the time was suffering from debilitating atypical Parkinson’s syndrome, sat in her wheelchair watching her children and grandchildren dance at a family wedding. I asked the DJ if he would play Stardust, the song to which my parents had danced at their wedding sixty years earlier. A few bars into the music, my mother stood up, leaned on my father, and began to dance with a grace and ease of movement everyone was certain she had lost forever. For a few minutes, anyway, the moving force of Hoagy Carmichael’s song allowed my parents to dance.
Landscape Metaphor” allows the listener to conceptualize that movement. This metaphor also helps explain the union between cinematic wandering and the perception of music in space.

Johnson says the following of “The Musical Landscape Metaphor”:

The listener takes a journey over the path that defines the particular piece of music being heard. In the MOVING OBSERVER metaphor [of time], the present moment is wherever the moving observer is; likewise, in the music the present moment is where the listener is at, a particular point along their journey. In other words, where the musical traveler is in the music landscape is what the listener hears at that movement. Consequently, what has already been heard is conceptualized as points in the landscape that are behind the listener-traveler, which parts of the music not yet heard are future points on the path that one will encounter later. This explains expression like the following: “We’re coming to the coda” “When we get to measure 57....” Let’s see, where are we in the second movement? “The melody rises up ahead.” “At measure 4, the horns enter.” “Once you reach the refrain, the dissonant part is behind you.” “We’re going faster here”…. (250).

Music is aesthetically conceptualized as movement of the body through space. The listener, argues Johnson, is “moving over the musical landscape” (251). The source domain is “physical space,” and the target domain is “musical space” (250). The aesthetic experience is not conceptually possible without the existential experience of the body’s movement in space.

*Buena Vista Social Club* offers a compelling example of synaesthetic, cinematic perception as musical movement (wandering) through a musical landscape. After a few brief preliminary scenes during which the opening credits role, Wenders introduces footage of the band, Buena Vista Social Club, as its members assemble on stage in Amsterdam. As the credit sequence finishes the band begins playing *Chan Chan*, a *son* composition of Compay Segundo. This is a *son* [sound] of movement in every way. The refrain is a couplet that speaks directly of movement over a landscape: “De Alto Cedro voy para Marcané / Luego a Cueto voy para Mayari” [I’m going from Alto Cedro to Marcané / Then from Cueto, I’m going to Mayari]. The quick tempo and driving, repetitive syncopations of the rhythm carry the listener rapidly across a musical landscape. After three repetitions of the couplet at the beginning of the song, the body of the film complies with the momentum and movement of the music by cutting to a visual landscape shot of
Havana, a brief telephoto shot of waves crashing on the seawall along Havana’s coast. The next shot, a high-angle, telephoto panning shot, which is effectively a landscape traversing shot (the distance between the camera and the sedan makes the panning motion effectively a tracking motion) follows a black, 1940’s sedan as it speeds down the road fronting the seawall, whisking through wet street as the waves heave spray into the car’s path. The film has begun to move over the landscape with the music. In one case, the film has traveled from Amsterdam to Havana; in the other, the film traverses Havana. The music does not change, but the images do, causing the soundtrack to shift from diegetic to non-diegetic. The effect is powerful, and not because the music fails to fit the second scene; rather the music seems to fit more precisely. The effect is palpable watching the sedan as it rolls the wet streets, seeming to keep tempo (which is of course, movement through time) with the music itself. Movement is temporal, spatial, and synaesthetic, a function of sight and sound as they are experienced through the conceptual metaphors of musical and temporal motion. The spectator understands temporal and spatial wandering only because the spectator recognizes this motion in bodily terms. Music, movement, space, and time are conspicuously inseparable. The next shot introduces a leading, landscape-traversing shot of Ry and Joachim Cooder as they travel in a motorcycle and sidecar along the same spray soaked road. The next shot is a lateral panning (landscape-traversing) shot of colonial stone facades, painted in bright Caribbean colors that have faded to pastel hues with age and weather. The scene continues with shots of the sidecar inter-cut with tracking shots of the passing buildings and early-model sedans. The film’s body moves with the wandering of the camera and the moving force of the music, crossing both the space of Havana and, given that Havana’s architecture and cars are temporally frozen in a pre-Castro era, the time of the century. Music becomes inseparable from the spatial and temporal mobility of the film’s body.

As the opening sequence continues, the camera cuts back from the streets of Havana to the live performance as the song comes to a conclusion. The scene then returns to Ry and
Joachim Cooder as they park the motorcycle and walk into a recording studio. Their movement carries the viewer into the next scene and into biographical sketches of Ibrahim Ferrer and Omar Portuondo. The two musicians sing a duet as they stand across from one another at their respective microphones. Here again, the music, the image, and the movement of the camera create a unique synthesis that cannot be broken into component parts. This scene, which last the length of the song, “Silencio” (a title that may seem paradoxical in the context of this discussion), consists almost entirely of a circular Steadicam shot that tracks around the two singers. This footage, like that of the previous sequence, cuts back and forth to live concert footage. During the montage, the soundtrack of the song actually changes from the studio version to the live version, but the cut is an audio dissolve that is barely detectable.

This sequence, like the first, synthesizes the visual and audible elements of the film into the movement of the film’s body, but whereas in the opening sequence the visual body of the film drives rather quickly through Havana’s streets, keeping pace with the music, in this sequence it floats slowly around the two singers, “keeping time” with the slower tempo of the music. Sound and the movement of the film harmonize in a cinematic gestalt of embodied movement and synaesthetic perception. The communication is a function of the gesture of the film’s expressive body, and in this scene, the body of the film literally dances.

Such a synoptic and synaesthetic unity of sound and image is what Merleau-Ponty describes in his discussion of cinema: the way sights and sounds “are put together makes another new whole, which cannot be reduced to its component parts” (55). Thus, the film’s body perceives synoptically. Merleau-Ponty continues: “A sound movie is not a silent film embellished with words and sounds whose only function is to complete the cinematographic illusion. The bond between sound and image is much closer, and the image is transformed by the proximity of sound” (55).
Wenders clearly exploits this bond between image and sound. Even as the film engages in a kind of postmodern time travel, reaching into the historical past of Cuba to recall the music of aging musicians, it remains anchored in bodily movements, and as often as not, it is the wandering, flâneur-like Steadicam that moves the body of the film into the past. Throughout the film, each musician in the band receives a brief biographical sketch, which is introduced by a long Steadicam shot that wanders through a space, often an old colonial structure, towards the sound of the musician playing his instrument. These long, floating shots have the quality of an intentional consciousness seeking the source of the sound, as if the body of the film were a sonic detective following music over the landscape of Havana, through the history of the city, and into the biographies of the musicians. The film acts like Benjamin’s flâneur: “The street conducts the flâneur into a vanished time. For him, every street is precipitous. It leads downward… into a past that can be all the more spellbinding because it is not his own, not private” (Arcades M1,2). In Buena Vista Social Club, the movement of the music guides the flâneur-like film down Havana’s streets into the visual and audible markers of its history.

The scene in which Eliades Ochoa wanders along a railroad track singing “El Carretero” is emblematic not only of the cohesion of sight, sound, and movement that characterizes the film, but of the modern movement that characterizes much of Wenders’s cinema: walking and railroads. This sequence begins, like others, with a long Steadicam shot, which floats through a railway yard, circles around the guitarist, and then moves into a medium-close shot. This wandering take lasts for one minute and fifteen seconds before cutting to live concert footage of a performance of “El Carretero,” the song of a cartdriver who carries his burden along a path by a railroad track. As the sequence moves along, the concert footage is inter-cut with shots of Ochoa carrying his guitar as he wanders through the paths of the railway yard, as if he himself were the carretero. The soundtrack is cut so that the music is always diegetic, but the progress of the song – its forward movement – is never interrupted. The music thus provides the continuity, moving
through the song from start to finish while vision of the film alternately wanders across the stage, follows the wandering guitarist through the railroad yard, and begins driving through the streets of Havana. Of these three separate settings – the concert, the railroad yard, and the streets of the city – the last, in which the music is completely non-diegetic, is the setting in which the music seems most at one with the visual. Merleau-Ponty would say, “the image is transformed by the proximity of sound” (55). Rather than simply matching the sounds with the visual image that are their sources, the shots that move through Havana’s streets relocate the spectator’s attention towards the movement that is the grounding of the aesthetic experience: movement across the musical landscape. The film’s body is moving with the music, and in its gesture it is expressing the wandering travels of “El Carratero.”

Whereas Buena Vista Social Club emerges from the commercially successful recording project of Ry Cooder, Lisbon Story emerges out of the recording project of the film within the film (the sounds collected by Phillip and the music recorded by the group, Madredeus). Like Buena Vista Social Club, the film also expresses the link between sound and cinematic motility within the context of a modern city bearing visible traces of late-modernity. Lisbon was discussed in the previous chapter as a soundscape, but what remains to be considered is the movement and audition of the wandering soundman Phillip with respect to the music of the film. Phillip’s hobbled flânerie creates a self-conscious reflection on film’s ability to wander unhurriedly and to perceive carefully with cinematic “eyes” and “ears.” The wandering of Lisbon Story moves with the slow pace of the flâneur, of whom Benjamin writes, “In 1839 it was considered elegant to take a tortoise out walking. This gives us an idea of the tempo of flânerie in the arcades” (M 3,8). This tempo contrasts with the postmodern speed of cinematic time travel. Lisbon Story is often a film that strolls, and the music moves the body of the film through the city with the same tortoise-like tempo.
Wandering in *Lisbon Story* is the very essence of the film itself, and that movement is inseparable from the synaesthetic and synoptic perception of the film’s body. The sensory heart of this film is a long scene that unites the perceptions of the film with its intentional movement. It begins when Phillip notices music coming from another room while working at an editing table. Initially, he disregards the sounds as he continues to review footage shot on Friedrich’s old hand-cranked camera. The scenes that play out on the editing table include shots of Lisbon’s tram rolling through the narrow city streets, and a low-angle shot of people boarding a train under the steel and glass roof of the train terminal. The sepia toned shot is a direct allusion to the time in which cinema developed, a time when, in the words of Wolfgang Shivelbusch, such ferro-vitreous structures “became a characteristic feature of the great European cities” (174). The fact that the footage is shot on period equipment underscores the fact that this reconfiguration was brought about in the *fin-de-siècle* by the co-emergent technologies of cinema and railroad travel. When Phillip can no longer ignore the music from the other room, he turns away from the silent, kinetic images that play on the editing table and moves slowly down a long hallway, a passage to another sort of cinematic experience.

The ensuing scene combines sight and sound in a purely cinematic and synaesthetic perception. Phillip reaches a door and opens it, and the film cuts to a point of view shot from Phillip’s perspective. The door, which is black in the deep shadow of the foreground, opens, producing a “wipe” transition from a black screen to a brilliant cobalt interior. Blue light floods the room and the performing musicians of Madredeus. At the same time, the sound level rises, flooding the scene with the song “Guitarra.” The rich sonorous wave of music and the intense flood of blue light produce an “image” that is entirely synaesthetic. Merleau-Ponty argues that when sight and sound are perceived, “it becomes difficult to limit… experience to a single sensory department: it spontaneously overflows towards all the rest” (*PP* 227). When Phillip enters the room, he enters a space in which the senses overflow into one another; he enters the
sensorium of the film. This is more than a metaphorical space; the room is formally linked with the larger spatial, temporal, and sensory experience of the film itself, beginning with the door-wipe transition that turns a passageway from one room to another (a door) into a formal cinematic passage from one shot to another (a wipe).

This conflation of cinematic space with the space of the room is distilled to the level of pure perception. The room is absolutely blue, a blue like that of the sun visor Phillip wears during his walks through Lisbon. The air, smoke-filled thanks to the cigarettes of the musicians, captures the light, suffusing the scene with a thin blue haze. Phillip wears an indigo shirt, and the musicians wear black, which captures and reflects the blue lighting. The only other lighting deployed in the scene comes from several warm spotlights, which here and there accentuate the warmth of skin or of the wooden instruments, providing a necessary complementary hue, without which the intensity of the blue would dissipate. In addition, azulejos tile the walls. These blue tiles, which are a traditional Portuguese art and ubiquitous throughout the city of Lisbon, depict a neoclassical sequence of images. As a series of square images (tiles = frames) and vignettes (compositions = shots) that tells a story, this azulejo cycle is itself proto-cinematic. These azulejos further merge the sensory space of the room with that of the film when the mysterious child, who Phillip later trails in the fashion of Poe’s “Man of the Crowd” narrator, stands at the door and peers into the room. The shot in question is composed roughly along a golden mean, with the left third of the frame showing a blue-tinted scene in azulejo tile of a figure passing through an archway with his hand on what appears to be an open door; the right portion of the frame includes the boy, who with his left hand on the doorknob, imitates the stance of the figure depicted in tile. The shot directly equates the proto-cinematic images of the azulejo cycle with the images of the of the film, and each of the figures seems to stand at the passageway into the sensory heart of the film. Their movement is real, but suspended, both in the still image of the tile and in the “freeze-frame” of the shot.
The synoptic perceptual experience of sight and sound is always linked to motility. If the cinematic experience of the sights and sounds of Lisbon itself is refined in the pure sensory environment of the blue room, the motility of the wanderer Phillip and of the wandering film are also refined in the carefully moving gaze of the camera. The scene is ultimately an expression of mobile perception in a blue landscape, and of the inseparability of movement and the unified sensory apparatus of the body. Merleau-Ponty examined the binding relationship of the body’s motility and its perception in one of his last essays, “Eye and Mind,” which was published in 1961 shortly before his death. In this profound examination of vision, Merleau-Ponty explains the body as an “intertwining of vision and movement”:

> My mobile body makes a difference in the visible world, being a part of it; that is why I can steer it through the visible. Conversely, it is just as true that vision is attached to movement. We see only what we look at. What would vision be without eye movement? And how could the movement of the eyes bring things together if the movement were blind?” (255)

Movement in the film must be understood in the respect that the very choice of what to look at is an intentional act on the part of the film’s body. We can recall here that Friedrich’s failed video experiment suffers specifically because its “movement is blind.” The film’s visual activity matures into movement even when the movement is not overt. “Even at its most quiescent,” writes Sobchack, “the ‘viewing view’ is engaged in the activity of constituting sensible images of a world. It is less motionless than intently engaged in the constant work of arresting its gaze – which paradoxically never comes to visual rest even as it might appear to come to visible rest” (“Active” 24). The spectator sees the film’s body visibly at rest through a static shot, yet the film remains actively engaged in visual (and sonic) work in the same way as Phillip. Again, Sobchack equates this visual activity with human perception:

> Movement inheres in cinematic vision as it inheres in human vision…. Even in its most objectively passive mode, the gaze or stare of cinema is introceptively, subjectively busy: at work prospecting its world, actively making – and visible marking – the visual choice to situate its gaze… to maintain its intentional grasp on the objects it holds in its sight. (24)
We see this choice making in the scene. The body of the film positions itself through the intending gaze of the camera primarily between Phillip and the musicians he watches. Alternating shots and reverse shots, the camera not only watches Phillip watching, but shifts its intentional visual activity towards the musicians. The camera even dollys back and forth in an arc to maintain a position where it intercepts and intersects with Phillip’s gaze, thereby focusing on the act of vision grounded in intentionality. As it steers through the world, the film moves in a landscape, a space of vision and sound that is figuratively the landscape of Lisbon, and literally a phenomenological landscape. Merleau-Ponty describes landscapes in terms of potential perception and movement:

In principle, all my changes of place figure in a corner of my landscape; they are recorded on the map of the visible. Everything I see is in principle within my reach, at least within reach of my sight, and is marked upon the map of the ‘I can.’ Each of the two maps is complete. The visible world and the world of my motor projects are each total part of the same Being. (“Eye” 255)

One moves as one sees. Movement, says Merleau-Ponty, “is the natural consequence and the maturation of my vision” (256). Likewise, the film moves as a natural maturation of its vision. Its visual acts become visible. Sobchack writes in “The Active Eye”: Visual (or, in phenomenological terms, *introceptive*) movement can—and must—eventually mature into the visible motion of vision, into an expressive as well as perceptive gesture in which seeing itself can be seen, engaging and engaged by others” (22). The film’s mobile vision is the source of its communicative gesture; its visible activity is the maturation (the visible expression) of its activity.

The film’s mobility, furthermore, cannot be unbound from a synoptic pairing of the film’s seeing and the film’s hearing; the film not only moves to see, but to hear as well. What Merleau-Ponty says in the passage below from *The Phenomenology of Perception* is as true for the seeing, hearing film’s body as it is for the perceiving and intentional spectator:

The sight of sounds or the hearing of colours come about in the same way as the unity of the gaze through the two eyes: in so far as my body is, not a collection of
adjacent organs, but a synergic system, all the functions of which are exercised and linked together in the general action of being in the world, in so far as it is the congealed face of existence. There is a sense in saying that I see sounds or hear colours so long as sight or hearing is not the mere possession of an opaque quale, but the experience of a modality of existence, the synchronization of my body with it, and the problem of forms of synaesthetic experience begins to look like being solved if the experience of quality is that of a certain mode of movement or of a form of conduct. When I say that I see a sound, I mean that I echo the vibration of the sound with my whole sensory being, and particularly with that sector of myself which is susceptible to colours. (234)

The scene in question is about seeing the sound of the music and hearing the sights of the city. The “whole sensory being” of the film’s body is immersed in the distilled sensory environment. The synoptic perceptual system of the body is not to be conceived of as distinct from the motility that defines the intentional consciousness, and the perceptual and expressive form of the film is not to be conceived as distinct from the motility that defines the intentional, meaning-making being of the film itself.

The scene is not just an expression of synaesthetic experience of Lisbon; it is an expression of cinematic form itself. As the scene nears its end, Wenders offers a striking image of singer Teresa Salgueiro’s shadow cast upon the wall by a spotlight. Because the spotlight has a distinctly warmer color temperature than the surrounding blue fill light, the shadow assumes a negative color image: deep blue on warm orange, as opposed to the image of the singer, who is warmely lit against a blue background. This negative image is visually striking and formally significant. It is one of several self-referential cinematic expressions of the film’s synergic system. First, the shot looks like a 35mm frame of color negative. Second, the next and final shot of the scene frames Phillip in exactly the same way. He is a positive image (warmly lit against

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30 Graf argues that in this negative image, “the usual subordination of sound is inverted. The image of Teresa’s shadow (a negative image because it is a shadow) seems almost like an attribute of the music, which contrasts with sound’s more usual status as an attribute of the image” (144). While Wenders clearly foregrounds sound in this film, the film is also about images, and ultimately about symbiotic film form, as I have previously suggested. The image of Salgueiro’s shadow is not the inversion of an asymmetry, but part of a larger expression of films synoptic and synaesthetic form.
blue walls), and he looks at the negative image on the wall across from him, or rather, he is looking at the “film” projected on the wall across from him, which merges with the sound issuing from the singer at the center of the frame. Third, in the final shot, the halo of light surrounding Teresa mimics the ubiquitous iris shots that link scenes in the movie, including the final shot of Phillip leaning on the wall. This final short sequence is an expression of the film’s own form, and a scene of about both seeing and hearing. The sequence links both the material and formal elements of the filmic image with the sound of the film, expressing a balanced synoptic unity of the film’s vision and audition, and a balanced synaesthetic unity of its images and sounds. One could conclude in regard to this scene what Merleau-Ponty concludes of cinema in general: it is “finer-grained than real-life dramas: it takes place in a world that is more exact than the real world. But in the last analysis perception permits us to understand the meaning of the cinema. A movie is not thought; it is perceived” (“The Film” 58).

Much in the same way that *A Trick of the Light* returns to the historical and technological moment of cinema’s birth, *Lisbon Story* returns to the phenomenological roots of cinema and the technological roots of late-modernity. Friedrich succeeds in producing the film he envisions, an homage to Vertov and Keaton, and with Phillip’s soundtrack, that film will express the complete synaesthetic experience of cinema. In this respect, film does what Merleau-Ponty says phenomenology does: it “puts essences back into existence” (*PP* vii). Film does not seek to submit the world to intellectualist or transcendental categories, but seeks to return to the things themselves. This is a world as experienced by the embodied consciousness: “To return to things themselves is to return to that world which precedes knowledge, of which knowledge always speaks, and in relation to which every scientific schematization is an abstract and derivative sign-language, as is geography in relation to the country-side in which we have learnt beforehand what a forest, a prairie or a river is” (*PP* 29). Phenomenology seeks to know what the body knows of the world; likewise, film seeks to *express* that prereflective knowledge of being the world. In this
respect, *Lisbon Story* speaks the cityscape of Lisbon (just as Madredeus sings the river Tejo).

Film is the expression not of things, but rather, film is the speaking of being and moving in the world. In this light, the connections so frequently and carefully traced by modernity studies between the technology of modernity and cinematic form take on a new phenomenological dimension. Merleau-Ponty was indeed correct: what is inside is also outside. Mind and technology are not so far apart. This returns us to where this chapter began, with the problem of dualism and the task of understanding the relationship of “image and movement, of consciousness and thing” (Cinema 1 56). Existential phenomenology provides an answer. It presents cinema studies with the means to understand the union of image and movement, to understand the cinematic representation of the world and the experience of the world as perception brings them together in experience.

The word “image” deserves clarification. Too often, the mental image and the screen image are conflated in the experience of the spectator. For the spectator, the experience of cinema is not the projection of the cinematic image into a darkened theater of the mind, as if neural pathways merely coded or transmitted incoming light to a homunculus. The spectator does not grasp the screen image through purely transcendental faculties, but rather engages the film with an embodied consciousness. The “mental image” of the spectator’s response to the screen image is a complex, embodied experience. In *The Feeling of What Happens*, neuroscientist Antonio Damasio offers a definition of the mental image based on the synoptic perceptual systems of the body that engages the visual world:

> By the term images I mean mental patterns with a structure built with the tokens of each of the sensory modalities – visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, and somatosensory. The somatosensory modality… includes varied forms of sense: touch muscular, temperature, pain, visceral, and vestibular. The word image does not refer to “visual” image alone, and there is nothing static about images either. The word also refers to sound images such as those caused by music… (qtd. in Johnson 243).
Visual images and sound images are thus not just mental representations, but as Damasio reminds us, ways in which our body gives us meaning. Wenders’s faith in both the visual image and the sound image seems always to reflect some deeper understanding that the screen image engages an embodied aesthetic activity. What Johnson says of images seems to hold true for a description of the way Wenders’s films combined the mobility of the camera with the crossing of landscapes and soundscapes to create meaningful images:

Meaningful images… are thus not representations in the classical sense, for they typically are not “about” some extramental content that would constitute their meaning. Instead, they are … patterns by which the contours of our understanding take shape and undergo transformation. They do not so much “picture” or “represent” objects and events as they simply are the patterns of our experience of those objects and events. Consequently, when we talk about meaning in music, it will be in terms of the way auditory images and their relations evoke feeling-thinking responses in us. It will be the contours of those images and the way they flow and connect with each other that will define our experience of the music and meaning it has for us. (243)

Music, because it so fully engages the synoptic, phenomenological perception of the spectator, imbues the image with meaning by including it in a cinematic experience that locates meaning in the active body moving through space, time, and the sights and sound of the world.
CHAPTER 4
ENCOUNTERS: DIVIDED UNITY

We have learned to consider the vast distance separating cinema from life as so perfectly natural that we gasp and give a start when we suddenly discover something true or real in a movie, be it nothing more than the gesture of a child...

Wim Wenders

The nature of the spectator-subject occupies much of film theory, and Wenders’s films offer a unique place to address and reformulate the important questions surrounding the topic. The present chapter addresses subjectivity in the context of the encounter between self and other, and specifically argues that the encounter between spectator and the on-screen image of the other mediates subjectivity. I will not argue that the “body of the film,” to borrow Sobchack’s phrase, presents the cinematic spectator with such an encounter. Others have done so, and done so with an application of Sobchack’s work and Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology. My extension of Merleau-Ponty’s work in this chapter, however, follows the lead of neurophenomenologists, who explore intersubjectivity primarily as a direct neuronal mirroring by the embodied subject of another embodied subject’s visible activity. It is important to recognize that the film’s visible activity is a maturation of its visual activity, which manifests in movement and choice making but not through a visible body, while the direct mirroring posited by neurophenomenology – as that mirroring process is currently understood – requires a visible human body that the “body of the film” lacks (in spite of the implicit physical being its visual activity may betray). In addition,

31 This is the project of Jennifer Barker’s very recent book, The Tactile Eye, which is an extension of the dissertation she began under Sobchack. She writes: “Throughout this book I consider meaning and emotion not as residing in films or viewers, but a emerging in the intimate, tactile encounter between them. That encounter is a conduit of sorts, manifested as specific gestures and styles of behavior (film’s and viewer’s). I’ll consider the active, embodied encounter between film and viewer as a means of grasping the emotional, intellectual, and thematic aspects of any given cinematic experience” (15). Not surprisingly, there are many similarities between Barker’s project and my own, but there are two critical differences: where she locates the encounter between the “body of the film” and the body of the spectator, I locate it between the image of the on-screen body and the spectator’s body; and where she anchors her work entirely in existential phenomenology, I weight my analyses with neurophenomenology and naturalized phenomenology.
while I do argue that the film implies a basic intentionality through its behavior and gesture, I do not suggest here the film’s gesture and comportment would allow for an intersubjective encounter that involves of higher-order cognitive processes. What follows below will therefore primarily address encounters between spectator bodies and cinematic representations of human bodies. The following investigation of both theory and specific films aims to explore the significance of those encounters that punctuate the journeys of Wenders’s wanderers. It also proposes to follow the paths of modernity film theory and scientifically inflected phenomenology towards an intersection where the meaning of the cinematic image can in part be explained through the concepts of embodied empathy and intersubjectivity.

If film theory is a rather diverse and even fractured discipline, its schools of thought may nevertheless have a point of increasing convergence in Merleau-Ponty’s existential phenomenology. That is to say, if Lacanian theory is interested in the interpolation of the subject through the cinematic apparatus, and if cognitive theory is interested in the way film creates meaning through the direct perception of the viewer, and finally, if modernity theory is interested in the way that the modern environment shapes the subjective experience of the spectator, then Merleau-Ponty’s work on perception and the ontology of the subject offers a common site for posing the questions of film theory. Phenomenology also offers a means of incorporating science into post-structuralist discourse about the subject. Film theory that addresses either culture or the spectator-subject as a mediated subject largely steers clear of science; at the same time, cognitive theory itself relegates questions of culture elsewhere and leaves hanging a common thread of much of film theory. The first two sections of this chapter will therefore attempt to reunite the theories of the spectator-subject with theories of embodied cognition as presented in empirical neuroscience and naturalized phenomenology. The first section, “Spiegel im Spiegel,” traces the mediation of the subject in the visual world through a reading of Wenders’s Paris, Texas. The second section, “Mirror Neurons, Neurophenomenology, and Film,” presents an emerging body
of work that offers an important new way of thinking about the mediated subject through
cognitive film theory. The mirror, as both metaphor and mechanism lies at the center of both
sections. In each, the mirror and the act of mirroring help explain the phenomenon of
intersubjectivity. The third section presents a cognitive reading of *Wings of Desire* that explores
how the film’s form and content communicate the themes of division and unity. Wenders’s
characters always encounter others in their wandering. These encounters enact a dynamic that
mirrors the relationship of the spectator and the film. The underlying relationship is never strictly
unity or division, but it is always meaningful, and for the spectator, always embodied.

*Spiegel im Spiegel: Paris, Texas.*

The concept of the mediated subject owes much to the idea that the self is reflected in the
world and in the other. In the words of Jean Hyppolite: “The world is ‘the great mirror in which
consciousness discovers itself’” (143). This formulation receives its seminal treatment in the
philosophy of Hegel. Merleau-Ponty wrote, “all the great philosophical ideas of the past century –
the philosophies of Marx and Nietzsche, phenomenology, German existentialism, and
psychoanalysis – had their beginnings in Hegel” (qtd. in Rauch 139). Much of that influence
clearly comes from Hegel’s *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, and in particular, from the well-know
section, “Independence and Dependence of Self-Consciousness: Lordship and Bondage.” In this
dialectic of self-consciousness, the defining feature of one’s own self-consciousness is the
mediation, or the reciprocal action of recognition between self and other. This concept is critical
to understanding the encounter of self and other, and it is central to much of film theory.

Hegel recognizes that desire and conflict structure this mediation. Desire is the
fundamental experience of human consciousness and the starting point for the experience of self-
consciousness. What consciousness desires most is recognition, or in the words of Hyppolite,
“Self-consciousness, which is desire, can reach its truth only by finding another living self-
The activity of self-consciousness and the genesis of subjectivity do not occur in isolation, but within social interaction. Hegel’s “implicit claim is that intersubjectivity… is a necessary...
condition of self-consciousness” (Neuhouser 44-45). In other words, Hegel’s insight is that subjectivity is always contingent on the encounter with the other.

A similar paradigm structures the encounter as it is conceived by Sartre, who writes in *L’Être et le néant* [Being and Nothingness]:

If the Other-as-object is defined in connection with the world as the object which sees what I see, then my fundamental connection with the Other-as-subject must be able to be referred back to my permanent possibility of being seen by the other. It is in an through the revelation of my being-as-object for the Other that I must be able to apprehend the presence of his being-as-subject. For just as the Other is a probable object for me-as-subject, so I can discover myself in the process of becoming a probable object for only a certain subject. (Sartre 232)

Again, the encounter with the other posits the subject against the object. The subject loses its own subjective center under the look of the other. Or, as Reisman argues it in his commentary on Sartre: “The way in which we are most accustomed to thinking about our bodies… is based on the apprehension of the body-for-others: the person one apprehends when looking in the mirror is one’s presence to the world as mediated by the Look” (Reisman 79). Again, the encounter of self and other is the dynamic engine that produces a subjectivity that is always mediated.

This brings us to Lacan and the spectator as subject. Lacan is deeply invested in Hegel’s dialectic and Sartre’s encounter. Lacan reconfigures the encounter not on a phenomenological terrain, but in the unconscious where desire is the ontological foundation of being, and the subject is merely a function of the symbolic and the imaginary orders. Film theorists have appropriated (and misappropriated) this psychoanalytic model of subjectivity, resulting in a good deal of confusion and at least two distinct forms of Lacanian film theory. Distinctions must be made. There is a first generation of Lacaian film theory, referred to by some writers as MLA theory, after Metz, Lacan, and Athusser. This body of work begins with Lacan’s seminal essay, “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function, as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience.” In the mirror stage [*stade du miroir*], which Lacan claims occurs between six and eighteen months of
age, the child finds an imaginary image of a unified self in the gestalt of his mirror reflection. This gestalt “symbolizes the I’s mental permanence, at the same time as it prefigures its alienating destination” (5). The child thus enters into the imaginary order, which “provides an illusion of completeness in both our selves and in what we perceive” (McGowan 2-3). Early Lacanian film theorists base their work on the imaginary: “According to the early Lacanian film theorists, the spectator inhabits the position of the child looking in the mirror. Like this child, the spectator derives a sense of mastery based on the position that the spectator occupies relative to the events on the screen” (McGowan 2).

The spectator-subject sees the film from the imaginary point of a unified Cartesian subject. Jean-Louis Baudry likened the position of the subject to the position occupied by the prisoners of Plato’s cave, a position comparable to “the forced immobility of the child who is without motor resources at birth, and to the forced immobility of the sleeper who we know repeats the post-natal state and even interuterine [sic] existence” (764). This Platonic model positions the spectator in a theater of illusions in which the spectator’s fixed position corresponds to the single point of perception in Renaissance pictorial space. This Platonic / Cartesian model is central to early Lacanian film theory and is articulated by Laura Mulvey in her seminal article, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”: “The camera becomes the mechanism for producing an illusion of Renaissance space, flowing movements compatible with the human eye, an ideology of representation that revolves around the perception of the subject” (493). In first-generation Lacanian theory, the subjectivity and ideology of the spectator are “centered” by cinema.

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33 Mirror self-recognition tests offer a clear timeline of when a child might identify a unified self in its own reflection. In the mirror recognition test, the subject’s forehead is surreptitiously marked. The degree of mark directed behavior made before a mirror then serves as an indicator for self-recognition, which can be correlated with self-directed emotions. “Infants will make their first mark-directed responses in front of a mirror from 15 to 25 months of age,” and they “begin to imitate their marked image by making faces, sticking out their tongues… around 15 to 18 months of age.” By 18 months, “75 percent of all infants pass the test.” Furthermore: “Without passing the mirror self-recognition test, children rarely display self-conscious emotions.” (Keenan 67-68). This data suggest that the self-conscious emotions (and thus self-awareness) required for comprehending a unified image of self develop later than Lacan thought.
The Cartesian positioning of the subject postulated by early Lacanian theory does not jibe, however, with Lacan’s complete vision of human subjectivity. The model is incomplete. It does not take into account Lacan’s formulation of the gaze *qua* object petit *a*; neither does early Lacanian theory take into account Lacan’s belief that representation could disrupt the subject’s imaginary and symbolic unity. Joan Copjec is explicit on the point. Citing Lacan’s seminars on the *objet petit a*, she points out that Lacan does not conceive of vision (or subjectivity) as Cartesian. Says Copjec: these seminars cannot be used, as they are used by film theory, to support the argument that the cinematic apparatus, in direct line with the camera obscura, by recreating the space and ideology of Renaissance perspective, produces a centered and transcendent subject” (448). Copjec’s attention to Lacan’s formulation of the scopic register, and to Lacan’s explication of the gaze as that which is split from the eye and lies beyond the visible in the scopic register, shifts the meaning of the term, “the gaze.” The gaze is not *le regard*; quite to the contrary, the gaze is that which unmoors *le regard* from a Cartesian certainty. In not adequately accounting for Lacan’s latter work, film theory leaves the spectator chained in a cave of Platonic illusion: “Film theory has only described the construction of this position of misrecognition. Though it implies that there is another actual, non-punctiform position, film theory has never been able to describe the construction of this position” (449). Only later, with reference to the seminars on the *objet petit a*, does Lacanian film theory account for the non-punctiform condition of the spectator-subject and rescue the spectator from Plato’s cave.

These seminars of Lacan, and the application of their ideas in a second-generation Lacanian film theory, mark the convergence of psychoanalytic thought and cultural theory around the notion of the mediated subject. In the words of one writer, “Whatever their disputes, both critics and promoters of the ‘the postmodern’ agree that Lacan’s psychoanalytic theory, with its insistence upon the ‘de-centered’ nature of subjectivity, emblematize the radical position about which they dispute” (Brockelman 207). To be sure, there are many disputes in cinema studies,
and they surround methodological issues as much as they do the notion of the spectator-subject. Cognitive theorists in particular have objected to Lacanian and cultural theory because of a perceived lack of empirical data and scientific method regarding the investigation of perception. I do not wish to enter the fray directly. Rather, I intend to demonstrate in this chapter that cognitive neuroscience supports the overriding supposition of Lacanian theory and cultural theory, which is that the subject is mediated. I begin by addressing one of the richest and most frequently cited scenes in Wenders’s films: the “peepshow” encounters between Travis and Jane near the conclusion of *Paris, Texas*. These scenes present extraordinarily complex expressions of the spectator-subject within a visual dynamic of mediation. They also offer striking investigations of vision and the nature of subjectivity as it is variously described in Lacanian film theory: however, I offer this reading *not* in support of Lacanian theory *per se*, but because a Lacanian reading draws out the elements of this film that are important in nearly all of Wenders’s films, the relationship of the cinematic image to the subjectivity of the desiring, isolated wanderer.

Travis wanders into the film in a mute, pre-linguistic, infantile state. He finds himself significantly in a town named Ter Lingua (literally, the land of language, or the “order of the symbolic”). His brother Walt retrieves Travis from the clinic and the two begin their journey back to Los Angeles, the land of media, mediation, and the imaginary, where Walt (the father who controls the phallic power of the symbolic) literally creates images of women. The confused Travis sits silent in the back seat like an unwilling and dejected child. As the trip progresses, Travis’s conspicuously infantile behavior creates delays. On one occasion, the brothers stop at a hotel. Displaying a marked paternal attitude, Walt goes out to buy Travis new clothes. Now alone in the room, Travis enters the bathroom where he encounters his reflection in the mirror, but rather than experiencing a joyous response to the gestalt of his unified image, Travis suffers a shock, which sends him back into the desert. Travis also petulantly and irrationally refuses to fly, and then childishly insists on having the same rental car he and Walt have previously driven.
Travis’s childlike behavior continues in Los Angeles. At one point he watches airport and freeway traffic through binoculars (another of Wenders’s matte shots). He points, and in a child’s voice says to Anne, “Truck!” In time, Travis matures under the maternal care of Anne, and he seems to reach a turning point when he watches the home movie. This scene marks the moment when he begins to “project” the imaginary image of himself as father. He further works on his father-image, as Elsaesser points out, before a mirror and the female maid (253). Dressed as a caricature of “the father,” Travis sets off to retrieve Hunter from school. Having now fully engaged his role as father and entered the symbolic order, Travis takes Hunter to Houston towards the peepshow encounters with Jane.

The first encounter presents the visual experience of cinema as laid out by early Lacanian theory, beginning with the mise-en-scène. The peepshow booths are polarized spaces of two chambers separated by a quasi-reflective surface. Differing levels of illumination in each room cause the glass to become a one-way mirror. Travis occupies the dark side reserved for the male clients and is able to see Jane, while she occupies the other room, which is decorated to evoke a fantasy setting. This is the stage on which Jane strips for the pleasure of the fantasizing male clients whose own image is occluded by the one-way mirror. The mise-en-scène is a visual arena in which the man is allowed unrestricted voyeuristic pleasure, while the woman is neither able to see the on-looking voyeur, nor able to be anything but a character who performs a role. The one-way mirror constructs a visual space equal to that of the cinema or Plato’s cave. Jane appears through the aperture of the one-way mirror as the object of Travis’s desire. The scene is filmed with three camera setups, each of which produces several distinct shots by varying either focal length or camera angle. The first setup is a medium-close-up of Travis as he sits a table, lit by the desk lamp, and looking screen left through the one-way mirror at Jane. The second camera set-up occupies Travis’s point of view and looks in medium shot through the mirror at Jane. Shots from these setups account for 5-and-one-half minutes of an eight-minute scene. A third set-up films
Jane from a position just to her right side, still positioned on the “correct” side of the 180-degree axis, but pointed at the one-way mirror to capture Jane’s image reflected in the glass. This shot is effectively an over-the-shoulder shot, showing what Jane sees – but seeing what Jane sees means seeing only a reflection and not the face of the other. The critical formal feature of this cinematography and mise-en-scène is that we (both Travis and the spectator) see Jane, but she cannot see Travis, with whom the camera identifies. When the camera does briefly occupy Jane’s space, it remains behind her and out of her line of sight. Even at the moment she looks into the camera and addresses the spectator directly, the one-way mirror intervenes as it does for Travis. The spectator, who according to Baudry, is already in a cave viewing a projected fantasy, is inscribed into Travis’s cave-like peepshow both. The spaces merge formally, erasing any distinction between the Travis’s privileged position and the spectator’s, and placing Jane in the position of the object who cannot look back. When Travis attempts to discover if Jane’s work at the adult club involves prostituting herself, the dialogue emphasizes this visual restriction: “What else do you do?” he asks. Looking directly into the camera, Jane replies, “We’re not allowed to see the customers out of here.” The irony of the statement, which comes from Jane’s inability to see Travis or the spectator even when she is looking directly at them, underscores her role as object. The shot cuts on sound at the end of Jane’s sentence to a medium-close, eye-level shot of Jane’s reflection taken from an over-the-shoulder setup, thus emphasizing again that Jane sees all she is allowed to see: herself as object and as fantasy image. The point is made also in the immediately preceding sequence, in which the wrong girl, Nurse Bibs, is sent to Travis’s booth. When Travis when he asks her what she can see, she answers in a sardonic and weary tone, “I see what you see… Nurse Bibs. Nurse Bibs and a rubber horse.” Nurse Bibs and Jane are visual fantasies. As Laura Mulvey writes: “In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness” (487). This first peepshow scene
formally and metaphorically transfers the spectator into Travis’s seat, creating an imaginary Cartesian subjectivity.

The second, longer peepshow encounter offers an opportunity to employ second-generation Lacanian theory. Travis returns to the club the following day to confront Jane. In this scene, which lasts just over 20 minutes and consists almost entirely of long takes, the cinematography is far more complex than that of the first peepshow encounter. Whereas in the first peepshow scene, Travis looks at Jane continuously, in this scene Travis turns away from Jane. Facing backwards, Travis delivers the long narrative of his separation from Jane and Hunter, and thus, reengages his role as father through asserting control in the symbolic order. When Travis finishes his narrative, Jane approaches the one-way mirror, slowly and deliberately gazing through her own reflection in an attempt to recognize Travis. Attempting to see into the other room, Jane holds her hands about her face so as to shield the reflective glass from the light on her side of the room. She touches her face to the glass, her hands cradling her own reflected image as she whispers Travis’s name. The non-diegetic music stops, underscoring this moment of recognition. Travis turns his chair and settles into it to face Jane. This often-written about shot is one of the film’s most arresting visual compositions. Using the effects of the two-way mirror in combination with selective lighting of the foreground and Travis’s face, cinematographer Robby Muller produces a stunning visual effect in which the reflective image of Travis’s face replaces that of Jane’s face.

One could offer many feasible readings for this shot in line with Lacan’s four lectures given under the rubric, “Of the Gaze as Object Petit a.” All of them, however, follow on what is central to the visual and visible nature of the shot, namely, that it is a disruption of what Lacan calls the scopic register, and a disruption of the imaginary image as shaped by Travis’s misrecognition [mésconnaissance]. Todd McGowan for example argues in a chapter entitled “Wim Wenders and the Ethics of Fantasizing,” that “Fantasy provides enjoyment for the subject
by imagining a threat… that does not exist in the public world. In this sense, fantasy might actually pave the way for the most authentic kind of ethical encounter – an encounter in which the subject opens itself to the real dimension of the other” (195). By entering into the fantasy of the peepshow, Travis opens himself to such an encounter. McGowan argues that Travis becomes vulnerable to recognition in this fantasy, and that in being recognized Travis must confront his own desire:

Travis himself becomes visible in the form of the gaze: he sees himself being seen as the fantasy space folds back on itself and intersects with the outside world. This is a moment where the worlds of desire and fantasy intersect because at this point Travis realizes that the experience of the peep show is not just a fantasy: it implicates him completely. At the heart of the fantasy, the desiring subject itself becomes exposed. But this dimension of fantasy is only evinced when cinema divides the experience of desire and that of fantasy to reveal that latter in its purest form. This dimension of fantasy places the cinematic spectator in the same position as Travis: when we encounter the gaze while caught up in a filmic fantasy, we find ourselves fully exposed on the screen, materialized in the form of the gaze. (199)

This reading fits well with Lacan’s concept of the object petit a. It is as if Travis has looked out onto the screen as Lacan himself looks out onto the sea in his famous anecdote. As Lacan engages in his heroic fantasy of sharing the “danger and excitement” of the fishermen’s proletarian adventure – and, as Copjec points out, the Hegelian struggle of master and slave (447) – his comrade Petit-Jean reminds Lacan of his own imaginary misrecognition. Pointing to the sardine can, Petit-Jean calls to Lacan, “You see that can? Do you see it? Well, it doesn’t see you!” Here, Lacan realizes “I was rather out of place in the picture” (96). He comes to understand that his Cartesian perspective is but a fantasy: “I am not simply that punctiform being located at the geometral point from which the perspective is grasped…. The picture, certainly, is in my eye. But I am not in the picture” (96). Travis is in the same boat. As Lacan says (and Travis could say this), “When, in love, I solicit a look, what is profoundly unsatisfying and always missing is that
– you never look at me from the place from which I see you. Conversely, what I look at is never what I wish to see” (103).

In short, Travis encounters what he cannot encounter in real life, as McGowan suggests. What he encounters is the truth of his own mediation. What is unrealizable in life can be encountered in the picture or film, which is the manifestation of the screen / image that separates the subject (what Lacan calls the “subject of representation”) from the real within of the scopic register. Here Travis sees the stain in the trompe-l’œil of the one-way mirror shot: “if I am anything in the picture,” says Lacan, “it is always in the form of the screen, which I earlier called the stain, the spot” (97). This is the stain Lacan refers to in Hans Holbein’s The Ambassadors (1533). The elongated stain, which through anamorphosis reveals a skull, shows to the viewer the real that the Cartesian look elides. Lacan says this of the anamorphic stain: “All this shows that at the very heart of the period in which the subject emerged and geometral optics was an object of research, Holbein makes visible for us here something that is simply the subject as annihilated…” (88). Travis’s own reflection is the stain that anamorphically disrupts the image of Jane. It is a ghostly skull in which Travis sees himself as the subject (of representation) annihilated.

The picture, the film, the image, the screen: these are the spaces of mediation in which the contingencies of vision can disrupt le regard, which in the formulation of first-generation Lacanian theorists, can enact an imaginary Cartesian perspective that buttresses Cartesian epistemology. The scene in question forces the spectator, along with Travis, to lay down his look; it tames the look [dompte-regard]. The filmmaker does here what Lacan says the painter does: “He gives something for the eye to feed on, but he invites the person to whom this picture is presented to lay down his gaze [le regard] there as one lays down one’s weapons” (101). The weapon metaphor is meaningful, for within Lacanian film theory (which is rooted in a Hegelian episteme) lack, desire, and ultimately some form of conflict mediate subjectivity.
Merleau-Ponty revises this. Lacan and Merleau-Ponty were friends, and the latter’s influence on the former is evident in the lectures on the *object petit a*. In forty-two pages of text, Merleau-Ponty’s name appears over twenty times. In spite of this, Lacan contends that Merleau-Ponty did not adequately challenge the Cartesian ontology of the subject. According to Helen Fielding, Lacan argued that Merleau-Ponty’s account of vision “engages nothing other than the Cartesian eye…” (190). Lacan’s objection results from his suspicion of phenomenology. Again, from Fielding: “According to Lacan, the phenomenologist’s eye is an eye that sees according to the laws of physics and light, registers the flat optics, and transmits this message back to the subject. Such vision is not particular to the subject but is abstract and universal” (190). But Merleau-Ponty was anything but Cartesian, and as fielding argues, “a challenge to the Cartesian ego is central to Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology” (190). The challenge lies in Merleau-Ponty’s concept of reversibility, which formulated experience not as the qualia of an isolated humanist subject, but as a chiasmatic movement, an intertwining of subject and world. Fielding explains the principle’s fundamental challenge to Cartesian models and its relationship to the project of Lacan:

> Because as corporeal beings our bodies are both sensed and sentient, visible and invisible, our perceptions arise from the midst of our relations and not from the periphery as is suggested by the image of Lacan’s voyeur. Merleau-Ponty thus adds another dimension to our understanding of intersubjectivity and that is the dimension of our intercorporeal relations. At this level he opens up a concept of perception that is not experienced at the conscious level but is rather defined in terms of latency, ‘a relation of simultaneity between the visible and the invisible’ that pervades our being. Lacan’s critique of Merleau-Ponty’s vision as one that is ultimately tied to rationalist optics only further indicates Lacan’s own gaps in conceptualizing an embodied subject. Vision is not just visual signification but is also bodily experience intrinsically tied to touch and to motility. (191)

Merleau-Ponty’s unfinished work, *The Visible and the Invisible*, brings into sharp relief the tenet of existential phenomenology that is central to Merleau-Ponty’s earlier works and often overlooked, namely, that perception does not imply a Cartesian ontology. The mediation of the subjectivity vis-à-vis the other is most clear in Merleau-Ponty’s reversibility thesis. The central
metaphor of the reversibility thesis, which Merleau-Ponty extends throughout *The Visible and the Invisible*, is the image and sensation of one hand touching the other:

If my left hand is touching my right hand, and if I should suddenly wish to apprehend with my right hand the work of my left hand as it touches, this reflection of the body upon itself always miscarries at the last moment: the moment I feel my left hand with my right hand, I correspondingly cease touching my right hand with my left hand. (9)

This chiasmatic intertwining of perception and expression, which Merleau-Ponty extends to vision, structures the corporeal intersubjective domain – “the flesh of the world” – in which the subject is always mediated. According to Dilllon:

My body, being seen by the Other, can reverse the roles and take up the Other’s vantage on itself. Here the Other functions as my mirror: he de-centers me, lets me see myself from another vantage. I do not coincide with the Other, but his experience of my being is not the undisclosable secret Sartre would make of it, either. In the language of the Phenomenology, it is the ‘I can’ of motility that allows me to take up the Other’s vantage point. In the *Visible and the Invisible*, this ‘I can,’” this ‘mediation through reversal’ (VI 215; VI-F 269), is subtended by the ‘ultimate notion’ of flesh: the being of which Other and I are discernable parts, but which grounds the commonality which allows our roles to be reversed. (Dillon 166)

There is then, a similar enterprise linking Lacan and Merleau-Ponty, an account of vision in which seeing can disrupt the illusion of the humanist subject. At the same time, there is a distinct and important difference. With Lacan, the contingencies of the body can point to a truth, but that truth is only a psychic lack that drives desire. Seer and seen remain divided, just a Travis and Jane remain divided. This was the problem Merleau-Ponty believed could be solved. In the preface of the *Phenomenology of Perception*, he makes this clear:

The phenomenological world is not pure being, but the sense which is revealed where the paths of my various experiences intersect, and also where my own and other people’s intersect and engage each other like gears. It is thus inseparable from subjectivity and intersubjectivity, which find their unity when I either take up my past experiences in those of the present, or other people’s in my own. (*PP* xx)
Lacan and Merleau-Ponty differ, but the assessment that one’s philosophy envisions a mediated subject, and the other a “centered” subject, creates a false distinction. The critical difference lies in the attention given to the body:

According to Merleau-Ponty, because we are embodied, because we live in and encounter the same world, the primacy of the ego can be dismissed and the problem of solipsism is not a problem. This does not mean, however, that he envisions a unified and transparent subject. Like Lacan, Merleau-Ponty asserts that the subject experiences disunity, but he intuits this disunity as a bodily experience rather than an intrapsychic one. (Dillon 190)

Merleau-Ponty not only argued against Cartesian models of vision and humanist models of “centered” subjectivity, he also confronted the problem of solipsism. This, Lacan did not entirely do. Fielding points out that “in a parallel to Cartesian thought… Lacan would assert that we can never know what the other is thinking; such thoughts would always be our own projections” (191). While the truth of the subject for Lacan involves a mediated ontology, the subject remains chained in Plato’s cave, exactly the position given the spectator by early Lacanian film theorists. “For Merleau-Ponty, however, vision helps to confirm for us that we live in the same world” (191). In reconfiguring models of subjectivity, Lacan never did what his friend the phenomenologist was most interested in doing, namely, putting the body and mind back together again so that in the encounter the subject might know the other.

The problem of knowing the other dominates Wenders’s cinema. His early films consistently follow protagonists who wander the landscape, encounter others, and then return to isolation. These characters always undergo some kind of ethical or psychic growth in these encounters, but they never overcome their isolation. In these early films, there is never any intimacy, never any meaningful physical contact. Attempts at human contact, physical or emotional, tend to self-abort or end in a tenuous pairings characterized by malaise and silence. The ending of Paris, Texas thus marks a curious moment in Wenders’s work because of the intense emotional contact between Jane and Hunter as they reunite. Two distinct readings present
themselves. One, a Lacanian reading, suggests that Travis, like the spectator, is trapped in the imaginary. The other, a phenomenologically inflected cognitive reading, does not argue against film’s ability to suture the subject into the fantasy of the text – in fact, it could support such a reading – but it does suggest an important new way of envisioning the relationship of the film and the mediated spectator-subject.

The Lacanian reading focuses on Travis as spectator. Having articulated his role as father through his peepshow narrative (the symbolic order), Travis now vicariously obtains the object of his desire through the son who is his double. Travis watches Jane and Hunter reunite from the parking lot of the Meridian Hotel (a significant name here, as a meridian can demarcate a space where things are divided or where they meet). Whereas Travis and Hunter are linked throughout the second half of the film by red clothes, Jane and Hunter are now linked through deep green (the complimentary of red). As they embrace with intense physical intimacy, Travis looks on, seeing the spectacle through a framed window (an “image / screen”) while engaging in the fantasy of his infantile desire to be the object of love for the mother Jane. Travis views the scene from a darkened cave where he can never see the real, but only the imaginary unified infant of the stade du miroir becoming for the mother the object of love. By means of a cinematic and voyeuristic fantasy, Travis has simultaneously taken as his own the nom du pere and overcome the Non! du pere (to use one of Lacan’s suggestive puns). He has finally and vicariously seduced Jane in a hotel room, thereby consummating the fantasy of the first peepshow encounter, in which the mise-en-scène evokes the fantasy hotel room. A Lacanian reading would say that the spectator too is positioned in the dark, engaged in the imaginary, sutured and interpolated by the apparatus. Having reunited the child and mother, Travis returns to the road, the land without language, as do we the spectators.

This reading, as well as it fits, draws one into a rather limited view of human subjectivity and cinema. It does so in part because it fails to address the central implication of Merleau-
Ponty’s ontology, which claims the phenomenological world is a shared, intersubjective world. This final scene, an unprecedented moment of human contact in Wenders’s films, marks not only formal and thematic shift in his filmmaking, but invites a different way of thinking about the encounter of self and other, and a different way of thinking about spectator response. It deserves another reading, one that might not leave the spectator out in the parking lot, so to speak.

This reading focuses on the embodied film spectator. The encounter begins when Jane enters the room in long shot, and the eye-level camera pans left, following her as she crosses over to Hunter who plays on the floor. The pan stops as Hunter comes into view. Jane stands in medium-long-shot on the right, her head at the top of the frame; Hunter kneels at the left, his head and shoulders visible in the bottom of the image. The frame is vertically cut on the golden mean by a column, which separates two large windows. Hunter’s small head of blond hair stands out against the dark window on one side, Jane’s blond hair stands out in relief in the opposite window. The shot thus presents the two as mirror images of one another, like the pages of an opened book. Hunter stands and slowly walks towards Jane, while the camera slowly pans left and dollies forward until it frames the two in an embrace. They stand this way for nearly thirty seconds, Hunter with his arms around Jane’s waist, Jane bending over her son and embracing him. As she kneels, the camera pedestals down to stay at eye level. The two look into each other’s eyes. Hunter finally says, “Your hair,” and motions as if cutting it with a pair of scissors – cutting it to the same length as his own. Jane picks up Hunter and spins joyfully with him in her arms.

The entire, nearly silent encounter is filmed in one take of just over two minutes, and presents a physical encounter. This scene expresses the corporeal intersubjectivity that is the foundation of Merleau-Ponty’s ontology; more importantly, it works through embodied empathy and formally enacts this intersubjectivity. Embodied empathy will be the topic of remaining two subsections of this chapter.
In this last reading, Travis still stands as a commentary on the spectator who cannot escape the illusion of an imaginary, symbolically ordering, Cartesian subjectivity. It recognizes, however, that the scene itself allows a different kind of spectator experience, one in which the mediating dynamics of vision are not a disembodied experience. The film can still “lie.” It can still structure imaginary subjectivities, and it can still disrupt those fantasies. A film theory that considers empathy, however, suggests that we do not understand film or others through abstraction alone, and it offers a valuable new way of thinking about both the truth and the lies of the mediating film.

We never lose the capacity for this primary and primordial mirroring. We are, in the words of Johnson, “big babies”:

The purpose of my exaggerated claim that adults are just big babies has been … that from the very beginning of human life, we acquire our burgeoning understanding of our world intersubjectively. We are not solitary, autonomous creatures who individually and singly construct models of our world in our head. On the contrary, we learn about our world in and through others. We inhabit a shared world, and we share meaning from the start, even if we are completely unaware of this while we are infants. In other words, body-based intersubjectivity – our being with other via bodily expression, gesture, imitation, and interaction – is constitutive of our very identity from our earliest days, and it is the birth-place of meaning. (51)

Intersubjectivity is as much a fundamental condition of our being as is conflict and desire. As Helen Fielding points out, Merleau-Ponty was keenly aware of this:

In The Phenomenology of Perception, Merleau-Ponty points out that the child is not yet fully a subject in that she does not yet grasp herself or others as “private subjectivities” nor understand points of view. Thus, before the struggle between consciousnesses that Hegel describes, the child has already experienced being with others. According to Merleau-Ponty: “For the struggle ever to begin, and for each consciousness to be capable of suspecting the alien presences which it negates, all must necessarily have some common ground and be mindful of their peaceful co-existence in the world of childhood.” Prior knowledge of peaceful coexistence leads to a vision of intersubjectivity that does not necessarily involve a violent outcome, as in Kojève’s reading of Hegel, a reading that the French, including Lacan, have relied upon. Whereas Lacan sees the original schism or alienation in our relations with others first generated by the mirror stage as impossible to overcome, Merleau-Ponty, while agreeing that the body is never fully united with the “ghostlike” image that the subject sees in the mirror or
projects as her seen self, does not intuit this alienation to be insurmountable.
(195)

As subjects we are always mediated in the encounter with the other, but we are not condemned to either alienation or fantasy. A structuring mechanism of the mediation is empathy, and that mechanism allows one to find in the encounter with the other a truth that exceeds the only truth Lacanian theory offers, which is the disruption of a fantasy of unified subjectivity. The very truth of empathy is such a disruption, for empathy is by definition, intersubjectivity. To deny empathy or not account for it in the constitution of the spectator-subject would be remiss. Lacan was right to direct our attention to the infant’s encounter with the other in the mirror, and so I want to be careful not to throw the “hommelette” out with the bathwater. We are in fact big babies. And I want to revise the idea of the film as a mirror: the spectator is also a mirror.34

Mirror Neurons, Neurophenomenology, and Film

During the mid-nineties, researchers at the University of Parma, led by Giacomo Rizzolatti, were engaged in mapping the F5 region of the pre-motor cortex of macaque monkeys using implanted electrodes to record the action potentials of individual neurons (Iacoboni 22). The procedure allows brain imagers to see with precision which neurons fire during a specific stimulus or action. The neurons of the F5 region are largely dedicated to goal oriented hand movements, and some mouth movement (Rizzolatti Mirrors 22-24), and so the Parma team set up a recording experiment in which subject-monkeys were tasked with grasping small pieces of

34 Jennifer Barker bookends her argument for a tactile theory of film with a reading of Tarkovsky’s masterpiece, Mirror (1975), and revises the traditional metaphor of film as mirror, arguing that “Merleau-Ponty’s ‘flesh’ may be a better metaphor: the material contact between viewer and viewed is less a hard edge or a solid barrier placed between us – a mirror, a door – than a liminal space in which film and viewer can emerge as co-constituted, individualized but related, embodied entities” (12). While I maintain a resistance to anthropomorphizing the film and fully bracketing the representational nature of the cinema image, I agree with the general argument. On one level, I would go further: the permeable, bodily contours where “material contact” occurs, is more than a metaphorical mirror. They are part of a neurological mirror mechanism.
food. When the monkeys did so, specific neurons within the F5 region would fire, registering their activity on recording equipment. The story goes, at least apocryphally, that while a monkey was still wired to record F5 activity, someone in the lab picked something up in view of the monkey. To researchers’ astonishment, the monkey’s targeted F5 neurons fired – the same neurons that fired when the monkey performed the act (Iacoboni 10). This apparent anomaly led to further research, and by 1996 the team understood “that a particular set of neurons, activated during the execution of purposeful, goal-related hand actions… discharge also when the monkey observes similar hand actions performed by another individual” (Gallese, “Shared Manifold” 35). These particular neurons “were recorded in the cortical convexity of F5 and were named mirror neurons” (Rizzolatti, Mirrors 79-80). The full significance of this initial discovery is perhaps difficult to grasp at first, but its potential to radically reconfigure both notions of human subjectivity and spectator subjectivity becomes apparent with careful consideration of the phenomenon. F5 neurons in the premotor cortex “specialize in ‘coding’ for one specific motor behaviour: actions of the hand, including grasping, holding, tearing, and most fundamental of all, bringing objects – food – to the mouth” (Iacoboni 9). That some of them should actually fire when observing actions, but not initiating actions, made no sense. In the words of Marco Iacoboni, “cells in the monkey brain that send signals to other cells that are anatomically connected to muscles have no business firing when the monkey is completely still…. And yet they did” (11). The monkey, in other words, was bodily simulating the action of another, even thought the monkey remained still. And the monkey was not simply simulating movement; the monkey was simulating goal-oriented movement.

This last point is particularly significant because it means that the shared experience is not simply a simulation of action, but of goal directed behavior. The specific mirror neurons under discussion (and there are different classes, which will be discussed later) do not fire when the monkey witnesses a pantomime of the action, nor do they fire for intransitive actions.
(Rizzolatti, *Mirrors* 80). Still more fascinating, the neurons that fire when the monkey grasps a piece of food with its fingers through prehension, also fire when the monkey witnesses the task being accomplished with a pair of reverse pliers, which require the user to open the fingers, rather than to close them (Rizzolatti, Lecture). In other words, mirror neurons do not code for actions that lack meaning; they code for intentional acts that have significance only to a lived-body in the world. In this particular case, mirror neurons allow the monkey to understand the goal of another subject to pick something up; they mirror intent. Thus, the monkey recognizes not just intent, *per se*, but intentionality in the stricter philosophical sense – intentionality *qua* “aboutness.” Still more important: the monkey does not *think* about the meaning of the act it observes; it *feels* the “aboutness” of the act, and thus prereflectively shares the intentionality of the experience. This is nothing less than a form, albeit a simple form, of unconscious, embodied intersubjectivity. The monkey simulates the state of another being. This is precisely a point Merleau-Ponty makes when he says of an infant, “It perceives its intentions in its body, and my body with its own, and thereby my intentions in its own body” (*PP* 352).

A number of different types of mirror neurons have been identified in the macaque monkey, and among the most interesting are bimodal neurons. These neurons lie within area F4, which along with area F5 forms the ventral premotor cortex (Rizzolatti, *Mirrors* 53-54). Most of the neurons in area F4, are somatosensory neurons, that is, they respond “superficial tactile stimuli,” and their “receptive fields are located on the face, neck, arms, and hands” (54). But many of these neurons “are triggered also by visual stimuli, particularly three-dimensional objects” (54). These are bimodal neurons. They respond to somatosensory stimuli and visual stimuli. “The most interesting functional aspect of F4 bimodal neurons is that they respond to visual stimuli *only* when these appear in the vicinity of their tactile receptive field; more precisely, within that specific space portion which represents their *visual receptive field* and appears to constitute an extension of their *somatosensory receptive field*” (54-55). In simple
terms: somatosensory neurons respond when the skin is touched; bimodal neurons respond as if the skin were touched before it is touch, as when an object moves within the visual field towards the body. In effect, the body has about itself what Rizzolatti describes as a “cushion” (2009 lecture). This space can be more precisely distinguished as a peripersonal space that extends to about the reach of the arms, and it can be contrasted with extrapersonal space, which lies outside of that reach (MIRRORS 62). Bimodal neurons code for space that is anchored to the body; they do not code for space anchored to the visual field. In the words of Rizzolatti, “the most surprising discovery made regarding F4 is that the visual receptive fields of most of the bimodal neurons remain anchored to their respective somatosensory fields and are therefore independent of the direction of the gaze” (56). According to correlational analyses of human patients with hemispheric neglect and somatosensory extinction (64-65), and according to fMRI studies that strongly suggest human homologues for of the cortical regions in question (65-66), what is true for a monkey appears to be true for a human as well. Rizzolatti’s analysis of bimodal neurons and their contribution to the body’s awareness of space is too lengthy and complex to fully explicate here, but the conclusions are significant for a theory of film based on embodied cognition:

...space takes its form initially from the objects and the numerous coordinated acts that allow us to reach out to them. It follows that objects are simply hypotheses of action and therefore places in space cannot be interpreted as ‘objective positions’ in relation to an equally alleged objective position of the body, but must be understood, as Merleau-Ponty pointed out, in their “marking, in our vicinity, the varying range of our aims and our gestures.35 (77)

In other words, the space of the world is organized not through Cartesian coordinates, but through the prereflective experience of a moving body occupying space. Bimodal neurons biologically drive the intentional relationship of consciousness to objects near the body. What they say about vision is essential to supporting phenomenological film theory, which usually assumes that vision is not abstracted from the body in space. Bimodal neurons prove the assumption. All of this opens

35 Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, p. 166.
new avenues for understanding perception, whether one seeks to understand the perception of other bodies (as in the social sciences) or the perception of representations of other bodies (as in the arts). We might consider in the context of film studies what Rizzolatti says of natural embodied perception:

Without a mirror mechanism we would still have our sensory representation, a ‘pictorial’ depiction of the behaviour of others, but we would not know what they were really doing. Certainly, we could use our higher cognitive faculties to reflect on what we have perceived and infer the intentions, expectations or motivations of others that would provide us with a reason for their acts, but our brain is able to understand these latter immediately on the basis of our motor competencies alone, without the need of any kind of reasoning. (Mirrors xii)

In watching a film, we have access to our “pictorial depiction” of the cinematic depiction, and we clearly engage our “higher cognitive faculties,” but a complete account of what is signified requires attention to the “motor competencies” that engage the action on the screen “without the need of any kind of reasoning.” Such a theoretical move in no way obviates conventional film theory or cultural studies, nor does it suggest a normative account of cinematic signification; quite to the contrary, such a consideration of phenomenology enriches discussions of the spectator. It might even provide a middle ground on which competing theories of film might coalesce. In any event, in the fifteen years since Rizzolatti’s monkey surprised researchers in Parma, the evidence for a complex mirror neuron system in human beings has grown to the point that film theorists are beginning to pay attention.  

36 Throughout this chapter, evidence of an extensive and complex mirror neuron system in humans will be presented as necessary. The number of studies contributing to an understanding of the human mirror neuron system is far too large to present, even as a brief catalogue, in a work of this length and well beyond the scope of this particular project. Two relatively brief but comprehensive compilations of data supporting mirror neurons and a mirror neuron system in humans are “The Mirror-Neuron System” (Rizzolatti and Craighero, 2004), and Chapter 5 of Mirrors in the Brain (Rizzolatti, 2008). Suffice it to say here that no real debate exists as to whether or not mirror neurons exist in humans; they almost certainly do. At present, the only technology that can identify an individual neuron as a mirror neuron with absolute certainty involves the invasive procedure of implanting electrodes in the brain. Although opportunities to implant electrodes and thereby make single-cell recordings occasionally arise in cases of surgical exploration, these opportunities make up only a small part of a methodology that generally relies on noninvasive brain imaging technologies. These generally include: electroencephalography (EEG), magnetoencephalography (MEG), transcranial magnetic stimulation (TMS), positron emission tomography (PET), and functional
Efforts by cognitive film theorist to account for spectator experience have relied primarily on ecological models of perception or on sympathetic responses as they are described by “folk psychology” and generated by cinematic narratives and images. Some writers, including Gregory Currie, have suggested models of spectator response that, according to Margarethe Bruun Vaage, consider empathy more seriously, but still relegate empathy to a role that is “secondary and a ‘guide to’ the dominant form of impersonal imagining” (23). Vaage maintains the predominant models of cognitive theory posit sympathy as the primary mode of spectator engagement. Assessing the work of cognitive theory in “The Empathetic Film Spectator in Analytic Philosophy and Naturalized Phenomenology,” she writes:

… it does not seem out of proportion to conclude that a central or impersonal imagining has been the dominant type of spectator engagement in cognitive film theory – at the expense of central imagining and empathy. Empathy is not seen as the basic mode of engagement in film, but on the contrary as a special form of imaginative engagement that might occur, neither necessarily nor usually, in spectator engagement. Empathy also seems typically to be equated with central imagining. Narrative understanding and character construction are claimed to be necessary prior to empathy, or to play a more fundamental or important part in spectator engagement. (Vaage 24)

The debate is not restricted to film studies. According to David Freedberg, of the Department of Art History and Archeology at Columbia University, and Vittorio Gallese, a lead researcher at the University of Parma, a colleague of Rizzolatti and a prominent voice in neurophenomenology, attention to the phenomena of embodied empathy has been largely dismissed in aesthetics:

Most 20th century art history and art criticism neglected the evidence for emotional responses and privileged a fully cognitive and disembodied approach to esthetics, on the grounds that the emotions are largely contextual and

magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI). Data from these procedures are often very specific and detailed, and when they are analyzed against current knowledge of cytoarchetectonics and correlated with other data and observations, the results can yield precise and sound conclusions. In addition, the symptoms of patients with neurological damage such as brain lesions often contribute to such correlational analyses. With the caveat that there are presently no means to establish an understanding of mirror neurons in humans with the same certainty afforded by experiments on macaque monkeys, current research overwhelmingly suggest that to ignore the growing body of work in this area of neuroscience would deprive phenomenological film theory and cultural film theory of a valuable methodology.
incapable of classification. Indeed the considerable neuroscientific evidence clarifying the nature of empathy and the role of sensorimotor activity in empathy and emotion has been completely overlooked in current writing about art and its history. (199)

In effect, “folk psychology” has provided the predominant methodology for understanding spectator engagement, and it relies on what Gallese and Freedberg characterize as a “disembodied approach” (198). The turn to the body in aesthetics means not just addressing higher order cognition, but automatic, prereflective, embodied modes of empathy as well. This is a kind of primary empathy. Empathy arises from our biology, and according to primatologist Franz deWaal, is one of our oldest, fundamental mammalian traits:

Empathy is part of our evolution, and not just a recent part, but an innate, age-old capacity. Relying on automated sensitivities to faces, bodies, and voices, humans empathize from day one. It’s really not as complex a skill as it has been made out to be, such as when empathy is said to rest on the attribution of mental states to others, or the ability to consciously recall one’s own experiences. No one denies the importance of these higher strata of empathy, which develop with age, but to focus on them is like staring at a splendid cathedral while forgetting that it’s made of bricks and mortar. (205).

The radical distinction deWaal makes here redirects considerations of empathy towards “bottom-up” processes. In attempting to account more accurately for the role of empathy in theories of spectator response, aesthetic theorists such as Vaage, Gallese, Johnson, and a number of other theorists interested in embodied cognition tease out the particulars of the debates between proponents “theory-theory” and “simulation-theory,” the two models of theory of mind. “Theory-theory” argues that the understanding of another’s mental state comes from a cognitive analysis of the other’s bodily expression of a state within a context; “simulation-theory” argues that the understanding is a prereflective, automatic, unconscious act that bodily simulates the mental state of the other. The former is a “top-down” model; the latter is a “bottom-up” model. One thing that is immediately clear: a sophisticated understanding of another’s complex mental state always involves some kind of context and conscious thought; top-down analysis is necessary. The debate, however, remains unclear as to the role of unconscious responses to another’s mental
state. Vaage addresses this with respect to empathy, considering on one hand the analytic account, dominant in film theory, and on the other, the phenomenological account as it is buttressed by the discovery of mirror neurons and naturalized phenomenology. What Vaage calls empathy emerges from a combination of “top-down” and “bottom-up” responses: “the full range of theories of empathy, from the neurological basis of mirror neurons, imaginative simulation, and to complex cognitive understanding of the other, is needed in order to explain the spectator’s engagement in fiction film” (31). She works, in other words, with a range of spectator response. On one end is mirror-neuron induced, bodily simulation on the part of the spectator, which she labels as “emotional contagion” (29), and on the other, is the spectator’s thoughtful and imaginative response to the context and experience of the other. For Vaage, empathy emerges between these:

To sum up the position being defended here, let us imagine a continuum of feeling others’ experiences. Starting with contagion of others’ affective states, emotional contagion is not yet empathy. On the other end of the continuum is pure cognitive understanding of the other’s experience. Perspective taking is not yet empathy either. In the middle of these two positions we find empathy. (32)

Vaage thus concludes that “to some degree both embodied and narrative elements are needed for an experience to be empathy” (33).37

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37 The debate between “theory-theory” and “simulation-theory” in regard to Theory of Mind is an extension of a much larger debate in cognitive science between the standard model of cognitive science, which conceptualizes mental activity as the computation of representational symbols, and the more recent embodiment model, which locates mental activity in the body’s direct perception and interaction with the world. The representational theory of mind has dominated consciousness studies, particularly within analytic philosophy, but recent attention to both existential phenomenology and neuroscience has resulted in challenges to the dominance of that model. For example, Michael Steinberg specifically argues against what Steven Pinker has called the Standard Cognitive Science Model, and claims that the influence of Noam Chomsky has generated a linguistic, or grammatical model of the mental operations that control high level mental activity, resulting in a primary grammar called mentalese (56-59). Steinberg argues that such a model cannot account for a communal being, a world beyond one’s own closed system. We are not composites of disconnected and disparate systems: “Looking, thinking, and acting are different aspects of a single process,” claims Steinberg. “It is simple dogmatism to claim that they must be carried out through the manipulation of symbols” (65). Mark Johnson also challenges representational theory, specifically the “folk psychology” put forward by Jerry Fodor. Johnson furthermore argues that “embodiment theory, in contrast to representationalist theories, requires a radical reevaluation of dualistic metaphysics and epistemology, and it challenges Fodor’s representational view that cognition and thought consist of
The understanding of cinema as a valuable artistic expression of truth about human experience – and specifically, as an expression of modern human experience – must be considered in the light of these debates. No one would argue that top-down processes are not essential to an aesthetic, artistic experience, but the top-down model has become top-heavy. Cinema studies, and particularly modernity studies, deserves a foundation built solidly from the bottom up. The work of theorists like Vaage and Thorben Grodal offers a substrate for cultural theory. Vaage offers a reading of James Cameron’s 1997 blockbuster, *Titanic*, as an “example” of an expanded theory of spectator empathetic response, and she effectively combines “theory-theory” and “simulation-theory” (her analysis of cinematic form, specifically of the shot-reverse-shot, is especially noteworthy). A still more complex and comprehensive account of spectator experience that addresses empathy comes from Grodal’s recent book, *Embodied Visions: Evolution, Emotion, Culture, and Film* (2009). Grodal relies on theories of embodied cognition as well some mirror-neuron research, and his study impressively realizes a complex and comprehensive theory of spectator experience and film form that fully justifies the project of a film theory built on naturalized phenomenology.

My position diverges, however, from Grodal’s with respect to the “cognitivist objection” to cultural studies. The differences are important for introducing the arguments that follow. Like many cognitivists, Grodal expresses reservations about “cultural theory.” This criticism is by now, familiar, having been launched by Bordwell and Carroll against “Grand Theory” in their respective volumes, *Post-Theory*, and *Mystifying Movies*. Other scholars have joined the fray, in some cases with collegial respect, in others with impatience (Joseph Anderson, for example, symbolic representations [mentalese] inside an organism’s mind-brain that refer to an outside world” (117). Johnson relies heavily on the pragmatism of William James and John Dewey, whereas Steinberg adheres closely to the continental philosophy of Edmund Husserl. In any case, whether one moves forward from the phenomenological tradition or that of the American pragmatists, the supposition is the same: intentionality is a matter of the active body in the world. As Johnson states it, “thoughts are just modes of interaction and action. They are in and of the world rather than just being about the world) because they are processes of experience” (117).
includes a spirited polemic against “culturalist” and “postmodernists” in the introduction to *The Reality of Illusion*). Grodal’s introduction restates his own version of the cognitivist objection in a more measured way, although I think he overstates his claim in regard to the modernity thesis and modernity theorists:

> Historical studies are indeed very valuable, and the historical turn has provided numerous valuable contributions to cultural and film studies. However, the dangers and pitfalls of making historical studies without knowledge of physiological theory may be exemplified with those visuality and modernity studies that are influenced by Walter Benjamin’s (1977) essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” and other works on the history of mentality which presuppose that the human psyche and human vision have changed radically in modernity, implying that the brain and perception can be totally molded by social changes. (16)

Grodal singles out several works for criticism, including Jonathan Crary’s essay, “Modernizing Vision,” suggesting that “none of the authors has any discussions as to whether their claims about the human psyche and ways of seeing are in accordance with what is know about the human brain within modern psychology or neuroscience” (16-17). On one hand, I am inclined to agree that some writing within the tradition of modernity theory tends to directly and too hastily equate visual culture with the physiology of perception; on the other hand, Grodal’s objection overlooks the central point of much of the work in question, and especially of Crary’s “Modernizing Vision.” Crary does not argue that the modern environment mystically transformed the physiology of the subject. He argues that the intertwining of the visual environment and conceptions of the perceiving body reconfigured *models* of the human subject. What Crary illuminates is the trajectory of visual culture (ideas and practices) that relocated scientific and philosophical thought *away from* a Cartesian model, a model in which the transcendental subject accesses absolute knowledge through the camera obscura of the eye, and *towards* a phenomenological model, in which the corporeal subject encounters and knows the world through the existential contingencies of embodied vision. Nevertheless, there is a noticeable scarcity of science in film theory that purports to explain cinematic perception. Even the work of scholars
that address the popular concept of the tactile film from a cultural perspective refer to comportment, gesture, and touch with little or no attention to the science explaining these phenomena. I hope to fill in some gaps, and bring modernity theory, science, and considerations of the spectator-subject closer together in the following reading of Wenders’s *Wings of Desire*, a film that is at once about culture, cinematic vision, the contingencies of embodied cognition, and the limits of representation.

*Wings of Desire, Embodied Film: Der Himmel über Berlin, Transcendental Cinema*

Damiel and Cassiel are two of Wenders’s most interesting wanderers with respect to theoretical considerations of the embodied spectator-subject. As angels, they stand as metaphors for transcendental consciousness and disembodied vision. The material world, its pains, pleasures, conflicts and joys are inaccessible for them. In Wenders’s words, “All these things escape the angels. They are pure CONSCIOUSNESS” (“Attempted Description” 81). Their respective narratives are ultimately driven by the desire to unite the spirit with flesh, and in this respect they represent the possibilities of a cinema that communicates through the embodied cognition of the spectator. Their experience speaks to the questions of spectator experience, and ultimately, subjectivity. Such questions are often addressed in film theory with too little attention to the embodied mind. Naturalized phenomenology, however, considers the spectator-subject as incarnate, as does a film theory that addresses embodied empathy. In Vaage’s words, “the spectator is rightfully restored as an embodied being in these accounts – watching film is not just a cognitive activity of making sense, but a bodily and affective experience of the character’s experiences” (28). Damiel’s and Cassiel’s journeys and encounters are thus not simply allegories for those of the spectator; their presence formally enacts an encounter between the cinematic image and the body of the spectator. The angels, the spectator, and *Wings of Desire* itself, are all
wanderers participating in visual, embodied, cinematic encounters between strangers under the sky of Berlin.

Borrowing from Simmel’s essay, “The Stranger,” Roger Bromley reads the many different wandering characters of *Wings of Desire* (and its “sequel,” *Faraway, So Close*) as “strangers.” For Simmel, the stranger differs slightly from the wanderer in that the stranger enters a group and a geographical location from the outside, but does not wander further. The stranger, writes Simmel in his essay, is faraway, yet close:

> The unity of nearness and remoteness involved in every human relation is organized, in the phenomenon of the stranger, in a way which may be most briefly formulated by saying that in the relationship to him, distance means that he, who is close by, is far, and strangeness means that he, who also is far, is actually near. (402)

Bromley argues of *Wings of Desire*, that the strangers’ “position is determined (or undetermined) by the fact that they have not belonged to a location from the beginning… and they import qualities into it which cannot stem from the location itself” (75). For Bromley, the many different strangers of *Wings of Desire* and *Faraway, So Close*, occupy a central role in the problematic redefinition of identity within the shifting political and economic environment of late twentieth-century Europe. Strangers are fundamental to articulating the stories of the century and to shaping a creative and unifying response in the wake of a traumatic history. The argument offers a useful analysis of the wanderer within the political context of divided Berlin and post-War Germany, and as is often the case, displacement is identified as a central motif of Wenders’s work. Bromely characterizes Wenders’s films this way:

> The films made by Wenders in the period 1987-1994 are dominated by the following themes: memory, division, homelessness as home, urban and global spatiality, the presence of the stranger, loss and reconciliation. None of these themes figures in a singular or unproblematic way as the films explore how fragmentation, rupture and discontinuity can be transformed from crises of displacement to occasions for possibility and renewal: a fluid becoming based on “migrant” identity. (74)
These themes, extended from their manifestation in earlier Wenders films, rearticulate a primary concern of Wenders’s oeuvre: the displaced wanderer navigating the spatial and temporal coordinates of modernity and postmodernity in search of “placement” within the community.

This concern is not just a matter of the individual seeking a community, or a social identity; it is a matter of intersubjectivity: in Wenders’s films, the wanderer nearly always searches for another human being, and the wandering stranger is always “faraway, so close” with respect to the other.

Bromley’s analysis of Wings of Desire provides starting point for reading encounters in terms of intersubjectivity. An important aspect of his analysis is the topic of solipsism and modernity:

Cassiel, sitting in the back of an old period car heading for the film lot asks: “Are there any borders left? More than ever! Each street has its border line…. The Germans are divided into as many states as there are individuals…. Each carries his own space with him and demands a toll from anyone who wants to enter, but to enter the interior of a state one must have a password.” What the film is producing is a condition of late modernity: the ultimate logic of an individualist creed – being for yourself, egological. Film, storyteller and angel all seek this password into an interior state, not in order to conquer and govern but to liberate and heal, to reconcile. In this film, despite its ending (with its two principal characters self-absorbed, screened off and framed in isolation), this does not really ever happen. (79)

The last line of this passage is confusing, and it would seem that Bromley meant not “despite” the films ending in which the two principal characters are self-absorbed and screened off, but rather because of this ending. It also seems unclear whether the two characters in question are Damiel and Marion, or Damiel and Cassiel; either could be inferred. Nevertheless, the central point addresses an issue at the heart of these two scenes and of the film itself: how does cinema respond as a healing and reconciling creative medium to the displacement and isolation of modernity? A neurophenomenological theory of film contributes to the answer.

A few of Cassiel’s lines omitted in Bromley’s reading, and some unmentioned key shots are important to begin this analysis. As Cassiel rides in the back of the car, he thinks aloud, “The German people are divided into as many states as there are individuals, and these states are small
and mobile.” As Cassiel gives his thoughts voice, the film cuts away from a close-up of him sitting in the back of the sedan to a shot from his point-of-view looking forward through the windshield at the passing streets of Berlin. Cassiel continues: “Each person carries his state around with him and demands a toll when another wants to enter…. And that’s just at the border. To reach further inside any state requires the right passwords.” Again, the film cuts back to Cassiel, and then to a close-up of his hands as he writes in a small notebook. The camera tilts up and reveals Cassiel’s face. The shot is heavily diffused and overexposed, suffusing the image with an aura of light. The cinematographic shift signals that the film has moved back into time, and the next shot, which again looks forward through the windshield, shows a war-torn Berlin, its rubble-filled streets, amputee-veterans, refugees, and burned-out tramcars: it is the landscape of the trümmerfilm, and its use in Wings of Desire, according to Noa Steimatsky, extends the late modern trope of the “ruinous landscape” (44). In effect, the automobile, which is on its way to a film set where a WWII-period film is being shot, transports the spectator’s mobile gaze through time. But it is not just the mobile car that moves vision through space and time: the film also lends Cassiel’s transcendental cinematic vision the spectator. In this way, the film produces “a condition of late modernity” characterized by temporal disorientation. The transcendental wandering of Cassiel crosses time, but in order to affect change and reconcile division, that wandering must be located in the real streets of Berlin. The transcendental wandering must become walking, and the encounters must, in spite of all the passwords and division, must become embodied.

The film, as both narrative and image, struggles to reconcile this division. As Bromley states it, within a divided Berlin, “no convenient narrative offers itself to ‘write’ the history of the postwar city from the textualization of fragmented images. Representation is, like the film itself, continuously interrupted and flawed, on the threshold of a ‘no man’s land,’ a borderline configuration…” (79). Within this modern and “egological” environment, the film itself becomes
a meditation on the ability of all art to reconcile. This is a film full of artists: trapeze artists, actors, writers, storytellers, photographers, musicians, and filmmakers. The character of the storyteller Homer, for example, “laments his inability to create an epic of peace” (78). But it is not just this archetypal narrator of wandering epics who tries to cross the borders dividing the subjective and geopolitical isolation of Berlin. It is all of the artists, and primarily and centrally the film itself, both as transcendental representation and an “embodied” wanderer that seeks to reconcile conflict and division. The success with which the film does this might be contested on a number of levels, but within the context of intersubjective understanding, the film emphatically expresses through its wanderers – and through its wandering form – an ability to enter the subjective terrain of the other’s experience, if only momentarily. Such a permeability of the ego boundaries separating “interior states” offers a beginning – and a productive one. As Homer says in the last line of the film, “We have embarked….”

Wenders’s angels, Damiel and Cassiel are particularly interesting in this regard because unlike Wenders’s other wanderers, they manifest through their incorporeal form the general difficulty of the philosophical problem of “the other.” On one hand, they are Cartesian angels who transcend corporeal experience and move unfettered through time and space. They have access to the immaterial thoughts of mortals. They are in a sense, pure mind experiencing a transcendental intersubjectivity or geist – a self-consciousness with access to others, but only to the disembodied thoughts of others. They long for the capacity to intervene and participate bodily in the world of other wanderers. They lack an embodied existential presence that would allow them to literally feel. In this way, their relationship with the film is like that of the spectator’s relationship with the film as it is often conceived in film theory. Damiel and Cassiel can fly over the city and through history. They can read the minds of characters in the film. They cannot, however, feel the experience of others in the film. They are, like Simmel’s stranger, “faraway, so close.” Their desire to feel, however, draws them towards the existential experience of the finite
body. The angels eventually take on mortal form (Damiel in *Wings of Desire*, and Cassiel in *Faraway, So Close*). They thus engage the world through empathy.

Gallese, reminds us that the word “empathy” has its entomology in the psychology of aesthetics:

> Empathy is a later English translation of the German word *Einfühlung*, originally introduced by Theodore Lipps\(^{38}\) into the vocabulary of the psychology of aesthetic experience, to denote the relationship between an artwork and the observer, who imaginatively projects herself into the contemplated object. Lipps extended\(^{39}\) the concept of *Einfühlung* also to the domain of intersubjectivity that he characterized in terms of inner imitation of the perceived movements of others. When I am watching an acrobat walking on a suspended wire, Lipps\(^{40}\) notes, *I feel myself inside of him (Ich Fühle mich so in ihm).* (“Shared Manifold”\(^{43}\)

References to Lipp’s and *einfühlung* appear throughout the research literature on mirror neurons to describe exactly the empathetic understanding of bodily comportment enabled by the neurological substrate of the mirror-neuron system. The body imitates, or simulates, the action of the body it witnesses. In reconfiguring the debate between cognitive models of theory of mind (theory-theory) and non-symbolic modes (simulation-theory), Gallese argues “that many aspects of our felt capacity to entertain social relationships with other individuals, the ease with which we ‘mirror’ ourselves in the behaviour of others and recognize them as similar to us, they all have a common root: empathy” (42). This empathy is deeply embedded in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology:

> The sense of the gestures is not given, but understood, that is, recaptured by an act on the spectator’s part. The whole difficulty is to conceive this act clearly without confusing it with a cognitive operation. The communication or comprehension of gestures comes about through the reciprocity of my intentions and the gestures of other, of my gestures and intentions discernible in the conduct of other people. It is as if the other person’s intention inhabited my body and mine his.\(^{41}\) (qtd. in Gallese 44, & in Rizzolatti 130)

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\(^{38}\) see *Grundlegung der Aesthetik*. Bamburg und Leipzig: W. Engelmann.


\(^{40}\) Ibid.

\(^{41}\) See *Phenomenolgy of Perception* p.185
In keeping with existential phenomenology, neuroscience describes empathy as a precognitive, reciprocal mirroring of bodily states, the ability to experience another’s intentions.

The trapeze work in *Wings of Desire* (and in *Faraway, So Close*) calls to mind the empathic experience Lipps feels when watching a wirewalker. Marion’s performances evoke a simulation in the spectator, as if one were inwardly experiencing the precarious balance Marion herself seems to feel as she moves through complex poses on the trapeze bar. To paraphrase Lipps, *we fell ourselves inside of her*. These scenes have this effect not simply because the spectator is aware of the danger, or cognitively aware of the difficulty that such acts require; rather, the scenes produce an automatic empathy with the tension, grace, and balance of Marion’s movement. This is not a casual, or strictly theoretical assertion. Although the precise mechanisms of mirror neuron response to the observation of complexly coordinated full-body, intransitive movements is not as well-understood as is the mirror response of simple transitive and intransitive hand and mouth movements, a response to global body movement seems widely assumed in the literature. In an fMRI study conducted in 2005 by Calvo-Merino and others, subjects’ mirror neuron responses to the observation of dancers were measured in an attempt to understand better the correlation of the mirror neuron system to the observers’ own bodily repertoire of movement. The studies concluded that, “while all groups saw the same stimuli, the mirror areas of their brains responded to the stimuli in a way that depended on the observer’s specific motor expertise” (1246). Several things are significant here. First, the mirror neuron system of all the subjects responded; they simply responded differently and to different degrees, depending on their motor repertoire. A second point is particularly significant: these were not live observations. Test subjects viewed video footage that was reflected in a mirror while they lay in the scanner. Certainly, if the text subjects felt inside of themselves the actions of others in such conditions, the film spectator can do so as well. This study, which is about acrobatics, suits the
scenes in question, and it is one among many demonstrating that spectators respond through empathy.

In an article entitled, “Motion, Emotion, and Empathy in Esthetic Experience,” Gallese and Freedberg also address the embodied simulation of imagery. Their work focuses on painting and sculpture, but bears significantly on film studies. Beginning with a decidedly phenomenological (Husserlian) approach, they “‘bracket’ the artistic dimension of visual works of art and focus on the embodied phenomena that are induced in the course of contemplating such works by virtue of their visual content” (197). The phenomena in question conform directly to that which is outlined by Lipps. Examples cited by Gallese and Freedberg include spectator’s accounts of viewing Michelangelo’s *Prisoners*: “responses often take the form of a felt activation of the muscles that appear to be activated within the sculpture itself” (197). The refer in a similar vein to Goya’s *Desastres de la Guerra*, suggesting that instances of “bodily empathy arise... in responses to the many unbalanced figures, where viewers seem to have similar feelings of unbalance themselves” (197). Gallese and Freedberg’s thesis emerges in two directions:

We concentrate on two components of esthetic experience that are involved in contemplating visual works of art (as well as other images that do not necessarily fall into this category): (i) the relationship between embodied empathetic feelings in the observer and the representational content of the works in terms of the actions, intentions, objects, emotions, and sensations depicted in a given painting or sculpture; and (ii) the relationship between embodied empathetic feelings in the observer and the quality of the work in terms of the visible traces of the artist’s creative gestures, such as vigorous modeling in clay or paint, fast brushwork and signs of the movement of the hand more generally. (199)

The first of these two considerations drives the continued reading of bodily touch in *Wings of Desire.*

42 The second consideration is relevant to static visual traces of gesture, such as one finds in painting, Asian calligraphy, and the plastic arts, and especially sketches. Since these “visible traces” are residues of movement in a static work, they could contribute to discussions of static images or “freeze-frames” within films, but the overall experience of movement is explained better with attention to the moving body of the film.
Damiel first encounters Marion as she practices her trapeze routine prior to the performance just discussed. Wearing a pair of feathered wings, she swings through the air while the ringmaster coaches her from below: “Marion,” he calls, “Not like that! Mon dieu! … Don’t dangle. Fly! You’re an angel.” Damiel, an angel, is ironically earthbound as he stands below the flying mortal. The two are divided. Marion’s practice is cut short by news that the circus will close and she will perform for the final time in the evening. Damiel follows her back to her trailer. There, she lies on her bed as Damiel listens to her interior monologue. The mise-en-scène is dense with photographic images, and Marion’s interior monologue is poetically rich. But the essence of the scene is a contemplation of the dichotomy of visual experience and tactile experience. Lying across her bed, Marion says to herself, “Don’t think about anything. Just be.” Damiel joins her, unseen of course, sitting on the corner of the bed. Both are framed in a two-shot, with Marion staring to the left away from Damiel, and Damiel looking at the side of her face. She continues, “Berlin. I’m a foreigner here, and yet it’s all so familiar. In any case, you can’t get lost. You always end up at the Wall. I wait for my photo at a photo booth, and out comes someone else’s face.” In addition to the injunction to herself to “just be” and not think – an express desire to exist bodily rather than mentally – Marion is simultaneously voicing central concerns of Wenders’s films. Her recognition of her status as a stranger in Berlin, and the division of the city by the Wall, communicates the thematic division discussed by Bromely. Significantly, she meditates on the loss of her own identity through the destabilizing presence of the photographic image of someone else’s face: “That,” she adds, “could be the beginning of a story.” Calling to mind here Bromley’s assertion that in divided Berlin, “no convenient narrative offers itself to ‘write’ the history of the postwar city from the textualization of fragmented images” (79), one can find in Marion’s fascination with images of others’ faces the possibility of beginning just such a reconciling and restorative art. The face of the other – the mediation of the other – allows one to say, “We have embarked.”
But sitting on the bed together, the embodied Marion and the disembodied Damiel have no such possible answer to the division that separates them. The angel’s ability to hear Marion’s thoughts (the equivalent of a “theory-theory” theory of mind) does not allow empathy grounded in the body (the equivalent of a “simulation-theory” theory of mind); Damiel is not able to share the bodily state that characterizes those emotions because he himself is disembodied. He thus longs to enter the physical world and encounter Marion through embodied intersubjectivity.

Damiel crosses the small room and observes Marion’s large collection of photos, black and white images, which like the angel himself, are suspended in time, disembodied, transcendental. A double-exposure shows Damiel’s hand as it grasps a rock, and lifts it from a table. The “real” rock stays on the table, and only its immaterial “image” is carried away in Damiel’s hand. In a deep-focus two-shot with Marion in the background, Damiel contemplates the rock (the same token of material existence he will later touch to his forehead at the moment he becomes mortal).

Marion sits up in the background and unzips her garment. Damiel turns and notices, and the film cuts to medium close-up of his face as he is struck by the image of her naked back. Thinking of her upcoming performance, Marion envisions the colors of the circus, and the gaze of her audience: “Every man in the world will look at me,” she says to herself, seemingly aware of Damiel’s gaze and the gaze of the camera, which moves in to a close-up of her back. The “kicker” light from the window outlines the curve of her shoulder, and Damiel’s hand enters the shot. At the moment his finger tips delicately touch the lighted outline of her shoulder, Marion says in her interior monologue, “Longing…” With this, her head tilts towards Damiel’s hand, as if she were aware of his touch. She finishes her thought: “longing for a wave of love to swell up in me.” As Damiel moves away, still contemplating the rock, Marion continues, “That’s what makes me so clumsy: the lack of pleasure. A desire to love.” The film cuts to a full shot of Marion, sitting nude on the bed, her back to the camera. She caresses her own shoulder where Damiel has touched it, and muses over her last thought: “The desire to love!” As she delivers this
final line of interior monologue, the black and white image turns to color, as if to signal a shift from the timeless disembodied vision of the angels to a vision that is more “in-touch” with the material world – a world where human contact is possible.

The scene, despite Damiel’s voyeurism, has little to do with the eroticism of the male gaze. The scene is about the difficulty of human encounters, and most importantly, about the difficulty of cinematic encounters – encounters through visual imagery. The scene, in other words, formally expresses both the inability of cinema to touch the spectator in a way that exceeds symbolic thought and disembodied imagery, and it formally enacts the touch of embodied intersubjectivity. The unification of spectator and film is no less significant a theme in *Wings of Desire* than the unification of the geopolitical states of East and West Berlin.

Neurophenomenology demonstrates that touch does, in fact, communicate embodied states in a way that knocks down the wall separating self and other and opens the subject to the presence of the other through empathy. The observation of touch triggers an empathic response in the form of “mirror touch.” The phenomenon known as “mirror-touch,” involves the registration of the observed touch of another in the somatosensory cortices of the observing subject. Apropos to discussions of cinema, most of the research into the empathetic simulation of observed touch has come from research that involves not the observation of live touch, but the observation of filmed (video) representations of touch. One of the studies relevant to the present discussion of touch comes from Christian Keysers, Director of the Neuroimaging Center, University of Groningen. His introduction to “A touching Sight: SII / PV Activation During the Observation and Experience of Touch” goes right to the point of spectator empathy: “Watching the movie scene in which a tarantula crawls on James Bond’s chest can make us literally shiver – as if the spider crawled on our own chest” (335). To investigate this “as if” experience, what he calls “tactile empathy” (335), Keysers and five other researchers, including Gallese, designed a series of fMRI tests to address “whether movies depicting various types of touch activate the
somatosensory cortices of the observer” (335). They consequently learned “that the secondary
somatosensory cortex [SII] is activated both when the participants were touched and when they
observed someone or something else getting touched by objects” (336). The neurological function
is like that of mirror neurons, though mirror neurons in this case seem to be only indirectly the
cause of “mirror touch”; specifically, Keysers and his team note that in the macaque monkey,
“two of the cortical areas with which SII is reciprocally connected… are known to contain mirror
neurons” (340-41). The researchers speculate that the connections between SII and these areas
“could provide neurons in SII with the information necessary for responding to both the
experience of touch and the observation of someone or something else being touched” (341).
While the exact contributions and functions of the neural circuits involved is not yet fully clear,
the effect amounts to an undeniably intersubjective experience. Keysers summarizes the findings
and their implications this way:

We would therefore like to propose that the activation of such a shared circuit
while we observe the events occurring in the world around us might form an
intuitive and automatic key to an implicit understanding of touch. Equipped with
such a shared circuit for touch, when we witness touch, we do not just see touch
but also understand touch through an automatic link with our own experience of
touch. The brain implicitly transforms the sight of touch into the inner
representation of touch. (343)

Gallese and Freedberg, citing this study and a 2006 study, are still more direct in their assertions
about touch and empathy: “When we see the body part of someone else being touched or
caressed, or when we see two objects touching each other, our somatosensory cortices are
activated as if our body were subject to tactile stimulation” (201). This activation of neural
networks impacts aesthetic responses to such works as Caravaggio’s Incredulity of Saint Thomas
argue Gallese and Freedberg, a work in which “flesh is shown to yield to the pressure of touch”
(201).43

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43 I would add that another group of work from the Italian Baroque, the sculpture of Bernini, is particularly
evocative in the same way. It is difficult to not recognize this embodied aesthetic when viewing Bernini’s
In light of these findings regarding spectator response, the characters’ gestures and touch as depicted in *Wings of Desire* are not just metaphors for understanding others. Damiel’s delicate touch of Marion’s naked shoulder formally engages the spectator’s mirror mechanisms, allowing the spectator to do what the characters cannot: *the spectator can feel the image of the other*. Damiel’s disembodied, cinematic vision is unmoored from the temporally and spatially bound coordinates of the body, yielding only an image of a lifeless, colorless world, but this is only “half of the picture” cinematic vision offers. Film can realize the “touch” of embodied vision.

Mirror-touch simulation has significance that goes beyond simple sensation; the empathy involved is phenomenologically complex, as demonstrated by experiments in on mirror-touch synaesthesia. Individuals with mirror-touch synaesthesia *consciously* feel the touch they witness. Michael Banissy and Jamie Ward write that fMRI imaging has shown “these tactile experiences are associated with hyperactivity in the same mirror-touch network that is evoked by observed touch in nonsynesthete controls in which no overt tactile experience is elicited” (815). In order to investigate if there might be a correlation between such heightened simulation and emotional empathy, the researchers correlated the data from their own fMRI study with subjects’ scores on empathy quotient (EQ) scales. Banissy and Ward discovered that “mirror-touch synesthetes showed significantly higher scores on the emotional reactivity subscale of the EQ” (816). In other words, our ability to unconsciously physically feel what another feels is directly related to our ability to emotionally empathize. Body states and mental states are not mutually exclusive. Damasio has forcefully argued this point in *Looking for Spinoza* (86). In “Embodied Simulation:

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*Rato di Proserpina* (1622), in which the massive hands of Pluto press into the flesh of Persephone’s thigh, or when looking at *Apollo e Dafne* (1625), in which Dafne’s flesh turns to bark under the just-touching fingertips of Apollo’s outreached hand. Because these are troubling depictions of a rape and a would-be rape, the haptic dimension of the works carry even greater impact for the viewer. In the case of Michelangelo’s unfinished slaves, Gallese and Freedberg’s argue that mirror neurons are likely responsible for the reported sense of muscular exertion that these figures commonly produce in viewers (197). Again, in the case of Bernini’s marbles, it is difficult to look at these works without the palpable sensation of the bodily exertion expressed in the figures’ gestures.
From Neurons to Phenomenal Experience,” Gallese writes: “It is common experience to be asked by people we know questions like: ‘Why are you so angry at me?’ without having realized until the very moment in which the question was asked that we were indeed expressing the emotion of anger. We can be in a given emotional state, and express it ostensibly with our body, without fully experiencing its content as the content of a particular emotion” (37). Phenomenologically speaking, the body can “know” first what the mind may only come to know later. Such realizations suggest the force with which physical empathy governs the intersubjective experience of the world.

Marion’s dream sequence, about two-thirds of the way through the film conveys this dynamic sharing of subjective experience directly and forcefully, and within the context of film and mirror-touch. Immediately before this scene, Marion is at a concert in the ballroom of the Esplanade, dancing by herself. Damiel watches her and at one point reaches out his hand to touch her fingertips, following her hand with his own as if joining with her in her dance. She says to herself, “There it is again, my feeling of well-being… as if inside my body a hand was gently closing.” Marion is obviously expressing the “state of grace” she feels in the presence of her guardian angel, but this is not a transcendental or spiritual knowledge: this is a “feeling” and the touch of a “hand” insider of her. In this description of internally feeling the interior state of the other, we can again hear the echo of Lipps: “Ich fühle mich so in ihm.” Marion internalizes Damiel’s bodily presence in precisely the way the mirror neuron system simulates the observed actions of another, or the observed touch of another. This occurs also in her dream sequence following this scene. This overtly transcendental sequence takes her into the timeless world of the film image, the endless and indefinite space of the angels who “cinematically” see in black and white (the “eye” of the film is directly equated with the angels’ vision in the opening sequence with a dissolve from a close up shot of an eye to an aerial shot of Berlin). In this incorporeal, transcendent cinematic / dream space, Marion is visited by Damiel. An image of his wing is
superimposed over her face with a double-exposure. She opens her eyes and raises her head. In a point-of-view full-shot, Damiel stands amid the clouds, wearing his armor, his wings spread and arms beckoning towards Marion. A reverse medium-shot shows Marion as she approaches him in the clouds; another reverse-shot shows Damiel, now closer and in medium-shot. Marion recites the lines, “When the child was a child, it was the time of these questions…” Now the two stand opposite each other, filmed in close-up, the moving clouds superimposed over their faces. Marion then explicitly verbalizes the primary intersubjectivity of a child, “Why am I me, and why not you? Why am I here, and why not there?” After a cut away to Marion, lying on her bed, sleeping with Damiel’s head lying on her breast. She speaks another line in interior monologue and Damiel stares into her sleeping eyes. At this point, the film cuts back to the dream-space of the clouds. In close-up, Damiel and Marion’s hands interlock. This image communicates the central desire of the film: a desire for intersubjectivity and the “touching” mediation of the other. At the same time, the mirror-touch mechanism enacts a response from the mirror touch mechanism of the spectator, engaging an empathetic response to the physical union of two characters, a response that is itself intersubjective. When Damiel and Marion touch, the spectator feels them touch.

To clarify the nature of this cinematic “touch,” I borrow here a fitting metaphor from Barker, with the caveat that she views the film as a tactile body, while I view the image of the body as a trigger for embodied experience. Her point below, nevertheless, expresses the crucial point that cinematic experience is a tactile and empathetic intertwining:

In Sartre’s world, we are victims of the look. Merleau-Ponty, however, was more interested in the notion of “co-being,” which includes the possibilities of the hostility and alienation described by Sartre but also the possibilities of love and mutual respect. His philosophy of the gaze suggested that when two subjects look at one another, they alternate between the roles of seer and seen. Indeed, if we combine Merleau-Ponty’s view of the intersubjectivity inherent in the act of looking with his metaphor of one hand touching the other, we arrive at the handshake. (93)
Marion and Damiel’s “handshake” not only stands as a metaphor for cinematic experience, but in *Wings of Desire* it serves itself as the other hand that intertwines with that of the embodied spectator. Mirror neurons not only make this possible, they guarantee it. Again, a similar exchange of hands defines Barter’s view of the film:

> Our empathy with the film’s body can be considered a kind of handshake. We extend our bodies to the film, and it extends its body to us simultaneously, and in doing so, we agree on certain terms. We commit ourselves to the film’s world without ever abandoning our own world, for the limits of our bodies are never forgotten or confused in the handshake. (94)

The limits of our bodies, however, remind us that the film often exceeds our grasp. Touch is but one aspect of cinema.

*Wings of Desire* demands that we also recognize the other half of the film, the transcendental half, *Der Himmel über Berlin*. For as much as the film opens up a haptic space for the viewer, it also carries the viewer through space and time, over the Wall and through history. *Wings of Desire* is a dynamic exploration of the dialectics of film, the generative tension between vision that is embodied and vision freed of the body. This is a cinema of the body, and a cinema of *geist*. The themes of unity and division extend to the film’s own effort to unify the aesthetic of a purely visual cinema with that of a haptic cinema. In the end, half of the film stays in the sky over Berlin, sitting atop the **Siegessäule** alongside the final image of Cassiel; the other half wanders the earth, embodied, having fallen from the sky like Damiel. The desire of *Wings of Desire*, is thus not only a desire for unification, but also a longing for a unification of film and spectator, a unification that requires embodied vision.

The binary applies to the film’s engagement of history as well. The film moves through the past like the ahistorical angels, and it wanders through the present-day streets that are scarred by history. The scene in which Damiel encounters Peter Falk at a coffee stand, explores this intertwining of the angel’s transcendental time and the mortal characters’ embodied time. The setting of the scene takes place in a deserted (desert) lot in the heart of a city, and on ground that
once was the heart of Berlin’s modern mobility: the sight of the train station, Anhalter Bahnhof. The first shot, a wide shot, shows Peter Falk walking through an empty, muddy lot behind the ruined façade of the station. He first describes in an interior monologue his own modern flânerie, thinking to himself, “Walking; looking and seeing….” As the camera pans to the left, the ragged back of the façade of the Anhalter Bahnhof comes into view, and Falk says to himself, “This must be the place they told me about, the place with the funny name: not the station where the trains stopped, but the station where the station stopped.” Wenders notes in his commentary to the film that Walter Benjamin (the chief documenter of modern flânerie) wrote about the Anhalter Bahnhof because of the station’s curious name, which Wenders explains as, “where things come to a stop… in a very general sense, like time.” The setting becomes a reflection on the modern city and on the flow of modern history, a place that was once like the stations Schivelbusch characterizes as “spatial gateways” (174). Like the arcades, train stations served to traffic or transmit bodies through the terrain of the modern city. Wenders also mentions in his commentary the station’s appearance in Ruttmann’s Symphony of a Big City (1927). In the opening sequence of that quintessentially modern film, the camera rides aboard a locomotive into the city, entering Berlin through the transitional portal of the station. The next sequence begins with an aerial shot – a unifying perspective from der himmel über Berlin – that is nearly identical to the opening aerial shots of Wings of Desire. Ruttmann follows this aerial image with a shot of a clock marking the early morning hour. The film, like Man with a Movie Camera, then proceeds to compress the time of a day into the time of the film. Like these early films, Wings of Desire self-consciously reflects on cinema as a temporal medium, compressing the city’s modern history through wandering cinematic vision, which like the vision of the angels, bodily moves through the city even as it seems to hover over the actual flow of historical events. The setting of the Anhalter Bahnhof is thus doubly significant. On one hand, the vacant lot behind the façade of the Anhalter Bahnhof is (and was) a passage, a loci of transience; on the other, it is what its name implies: a
terminus. The station’s odd name, according to Nicolas Whybrow, comes from the fact that “Anhalt is the name of the region south-west of Berlin... to and from which the trains would travel” (128). Anhalten, however, is the infinitive of the verb “to stop,” and thus, notes Whybrow, this station’s name marks the end of the line, yet, it is also “the point at which one might begin one’s journey” (127). In the context of Daniel’s journey from spirit to flesh, this station marks the beginning of a journey towards bodily encountering the interior states of others, for it is in the shadow of the Anhalter Bahnhof that Daniel meets Peter Falk and decides to bodily fall to earth and enter mortal time. Both Daniel and the film embark (like the wandering poet Homer) on a creative, embodied, visual journey toward reconciling the divisions marking the human landscape. In the very next scene, Daniel tells Cassiel:

I’m going to ‘take the plunge.’ An old human expression I’ve just come to understand today. ‘Now or never.’ Time to ford the river. But there is no other bank. There’s only the river. Onward into the ford of time, the ford of death! Let’s climb down from this watchtower of the never-born. To watch is not to look down from above, but at eye level. First I’ll take a bath.

Daniel’s “plunge” into the mortal river of time, is like Robert’s headlong speeding drive into the river at the beginning of *Kings of the Road*. Both are entering the “course of time,” taking a bath, as it were. They thereby enter into the embodied world and are able to participate in history. The façade of the Anhalter Bahnhof, and the lot where the station once stood, is just such a space, bearing the visible scars of history, the monuments and walls left ragged by bombs. These are spaces that, as Wenders points out in his commentary to *Wings of Desire*, “showed the traces of history that it had come through.”

In the context of Berlin’s political history, the Anhalter Bahnhof marks a temporal arrest, a moment when the creation of a productive history was curtailed by a political and geographical schism:

Anhalter’s demise also correlated exactly with the sudden, brutal imposition of the Wall. It could have been restored after the war but wasn’t because partition between East and West made it unclear how it would function. Its location no
longer represented the beating heart of Berlin but anaemic non-land, effectively on the edge – albeit an inside edge – of West Berlin. Trains would have arrived ‘nowhere’, effectively grinding to a halt at the Wall. (130)

This wonderful passage from Whybrow lays out the geographical and historic context that makes Damiel’s passage into mortal history so significant. In becoming mortal, Damiel takes on the human responsibility of addressing political division. Angels can transcend the wall, flying over it at will, but the only true remedy for social anemia and the cardiac arrest of “the beating heart of Berlin” requires human contact. In short, “idealism” cannot succeed in unifying the East and the West – the self and the other. To move beyond “the station where things come to a stop” – to move history forward by embarking on a new beginning – the wanderer must engage the other not from the transcendental “watchtower of the never-born,” but “from eye level” in streets of the flâneur that are scarred by mortal history.

This scene, in which Falk approaches the coffee stand and encounters Damiel, is especially important because it serves as a nexus of three primary features of Wenders films: the modern landscape of the wanderer (and the wandering film); the journeys of the wanderer (and that of the wandering film), and the encounters between self and other (and between spectator and film). Falk and Damiel’s encounter is an complex meditation on the capacity for individuals to “touch” one another in meaningful ways – to move through the passages of the ego. And it is about film’s ability to signify and communicate, to “touch” the spectator. The scene begins with a wide establishing, landscape-traversing shot that tracks slowly to the right, as if the film’s body is itself wandering along the cobblestones. The shot reveals Falk at the coffee stand, drawing in a sketchbook, and Damiel approaching the stand. A medium-close point-of-view shot shows Damiel looking at Falk – that is, he looks directly into the camera and at the spectator. The Anhalter Bahnhof stands just over his shoulder to screen-left, hovering beyond the limited depth-of-field in soft focus, like a ghost-image of the past. A reverse shot establishes Falk, looking sharply towards screen-right. This configuration of the characters’ gazes and camera position puts
the camera directly on an axis between them, but Falk’s gaze, in effect, breaks the 180-rule. He cannot obey the visual rules of cinema, of course, because he cannot see Damiel, but the all-seeing angel looks right at Falk (and the spectator of the film who occupies the space of the mortal in the exchange). Falk says to Damiel, “I can’t see you, but I know you’re here. I feel it!” Falk expresses here the dynamic division of the characters and their respective worlds. They are divided along lines of perception: Damiel sees; Falk feels. But as a former angel who has literally “fallen” to earth, Falk understands both worlds, and standing in two-shot with Damiel, he tries to convey the simple experiences of the body: cold, warmth, coffee, and cigarettes. Perhaps most significantly, Falk tries to communicate the pleasure of drawing – the creation of visual art. He is after all, an actor, a mediator who must at once understand not only the world of the visual, but also the world of the perceiving, expressive, feeling body. He lives in a world of embodied vision – he says to Damiel, “I wish I could see your face, just look into your eyes and tell you how good it is to be here.” – and he lives in a world of touch: “just to touch something…” he says to Damiel, with relish in his voice. He is especially enthusiastic about rubbing his hands together: “See, that’s good!” he says, “That feels good!”

But this is not Damiel’s world and Falk recognizes the division. “But you’re not here…” he tells Damiel. “I’m here… I wish you were here.” He reaches out his hand to Damiel, saying, “I’m a friend: compañero.” In a close-up shot echoing that in which he and Marion clasp hands (and echoing the handshake Barter poses as a metaphor of spectator experience), Damiel takes Falk’s hand, but loosely and awkwardly, unable to feel. The men are communicating, but incompletely. They cannot reach across the divide separating the transcendental and the mortal. This scene gets to the heart of the wanderer’s desire to escape the isolation and division of modernity through the real human contact of touch, and the film does not offer a simplistic or sanguine view of either the world or cinema’s ability to unify individuals or political states. Cities are divided terrains, and people will always live with walls separating them. Cinema too offers
only temporary encounters. Unity is at best a momentary handshake, and intersubjectivity, as an experience in life or in art, is at best a transitory intertwining of ego boundaries that otherwise define the borders of self and other. This it seems is a central point of *Wings of Desire*.

One cannot define the self without the other. This intersubjective process of self-definition has a neurological root. As Iacoboni states it, “I am convinced that understanding the fundamental connections between self and other is essential for understanding ourselves…. Mirror neurons are the brain cells that fill the gap between self and other by enabling some sort of simulation or inner imitation of the actions of others” (258). This chiasm of intersubjective experience is not only a central point of *Wings of Desire*, but it is also a crucial component for the force of aesthetic experience. Gallese explicitly recognizes this in the preface to *Mirrors in the Brain*, his comprehensive book, first published in English in 2008. This book comprises hard empirical data and is expressly written for other neuroscientists, yet it begins with this provocative convergence of science, existential phenomenology, and aesthetics:

It would seem… that the mirror neuron system is indispensable to that sharing of experience which is at the root of our capacity to act as individuals but also as members of a society. Forms of imitation, both simple and complex, of learning, of verbal and gestural communication, presuppose the activation of specific mirror circuits. Moreover, our capacity to appreciate the emotional reactions of others is correlated to a particular group of areas that are characterized by mirror properties. Emotions, like actions, are immediately shared; the perception of pain or grief, or of disgust experienced by others, activates the same areas of the cerebral cortex that are involved when we experience these emotions ourselves. This shows how strong and deeply rooted is the bond that ties us to others, or in other words, how bizarre it would be to conceive of an I without an us. As [theater director] Peter Brook reminds us, the players on the stage [or screen] overcome all [or at least most] linguistic and cultural barriers to encompass the spectators in a shared experience of actions and emotions. The study of mirror neurons appears to offer, for the first time, a unitary experimental and theoretical framework within which to decipher this form of shared participation that the theatre [and cinema] provides and which is fundamentally the basis of our common experience. (xii-xiii)

In Gallese’s conceptualization of the chiasm of subjectivity, which is the intertwining of self and other within social experience, and of actor and spectator within aesthetic experience, there is an
inherent injunction to reevaluate visual experience. Hence, it seems a reevaluation of spectator studies within a neurophenomenological understanding of intersubjectivity can expand concepts of what it means to encounter a film. *Wings of Desire* strikes me as an interesting movie because its themes of wandering strangers, modernity, vision, and the existential experience of the mortal body point the way towards a just such an inspection of the spectator’s perception of self, other, and film.

What I am suggesting about the film’s significance regarding intersubjectivity is perhaps most clear at the film’s end. Marion stays in Berlin when the circus leaves, looking for Damiel without knowing exactly how to find him. When she recognizes Falk as the wandering detective Columbo, she seeks his counsel. Both are standing at a coffee stand, a setting like that of the meeting between Damiel and Falk. She says, “Lieutenant, I bet you must know how to find people.” Falk replies, “Well I know how to look for them, but I don’t always find them.” Falk’s reply carries a caveat that encounters are more about the searching, an act of desire that may go unfulfilled. Marion, of course, does find Damiel in his mortal form when she meets him at the bar of the Esplanade. Marion’s long monologue in this scene, delivered while she and Damiel stand in a two shot with their faces nearly touching, their eyes meeting only to look away again, conveys a sense of the struggle to overcome division that functions as the motif of the film. On the surface, her poetic meditation presents a melodrama of romance and consummation, and metaphorically, it presents a dramatization of the potential reunification of Berlin. But most interestingly, this scene expresses the dynamic structure that is characteristic of intersubjectivity and constitutive of spectator experience. Marion and Damiel engage in an intersubjective exchange that defines their own individual subjectivities. They exchange looks of recognition.

Their encounter is in some ways analogous to the dialectic of Hegel’s *Phänomenologie des Geistes*. Says Hegel: “Self-consciousness exists only in being recognized – i.e., recognized as the expression of personhood” (*PG* 13). The self, in other words, needs the recognition of the
other, or as Hyppolite expresses this, “I am a self-consciousness only if I gain for myself recognition from another self-consciousness and if I grant recognition to the other” (166). This central dynamic persists throughout the tradition of phenomenology. Husserl’s formulation (from his *Cartesian Meditations*) is addressed here by Paul Ricoeur in the context of Hegel’s:

The sense “ego” is transferred from me to the Other if it is true that the Other is “alter ego.” This is just why reduction to the sphere of ownness constitutes in no way a dissolution of the Other into me but rather the recognition of the paradox as a paradox: “in this very specific intentionality there is constituted a new being-sense that encroaches on the own being of my monadic ego. There is constituted an ego, not as ‘I-myself,’ but as mirroring itself in my own ego, in my monad” (*CM* p. 125: 28-32). The two key words “encroaches on” (*uberschreitet*) and “mirroring” (*Spiegelung*) bear witness to the paradox of the wresting of another existence from my existence at the very moment that I posit the latter as unique. Here one cannot fail to think of the Hegelian problem of the doubling of consciousness, for in the experience of only myself there is every sign of an encroachment in the direction of another ego.” (Ricoeur 119)

Sartre, of course, famously reconfigures this confrontation of consciousnesses in the chance encounter of “the other” in a park. In spite of how it differs from earlier models, seeing means being seen. In Sartre’s words: “‘Being-seen-by-the-Other’ is the truth of ‘seeing the Other’” (233). Central to the concept of the encounter between self and other in all of these formulations is a notion of self / other encounters as an existential condition that is a dynamic, potentially violent mediating phenomenon. That division is a bit like the Berlin Wall: it demarcates states, or more specifically, it demarcates ego states. Philosophy often begins its elaboration of self-consciousness and consciousness of the other with the assumption of such strict divisions in place. But neurophenomenology presents evidence that these divisions are surprisingly permeable, and that they are erected after the fact of a primordial intersubjectivity.

We tend to think of our default state as divided, but at some levels in our brain, neurons do not distinguish between self and other. Biologically, we begin this way. We are like the children in *Wings of Desire*, who mysteriously see the angels when others cannot. Because we
begin without the necessary ego demarcations in place, we must develop the ability to distinguish shared experience:

We are entrenched in this idea that any suggestion of an interdependence of self and other may sound not just counterintuitive to us, but difficult, if not impossible, to accept. Against this dominant view, mirror neurons put the self and the other back together again. Their neural activity reminds us of the primary intersubjectivity, which is, of course, the early interactive capacities of babies displayed and developed in mother-baby and father-baby interactions. (Iacoboni 155)

In fact, mirror neurons do not simply remind us of early interactive capacities, but are likely central to early infant intersubjectivity. Piaget believed that invisible imitation (imitation involving body parts not visibly available to the infant, such as its own face) was not possible prior to eight to twelve months of age, but Meltzoff and Moore have demonstrated in a series of experiments stretching from 1977 to 1994, that such imitation occurs shortly after birth (Gallagher and Meltzoff). Meltzoff explicitly revises Piaget’s vision of the developing self: “According to Piaget, infants begin life as asocial creatures, in a state of ‘solipsism’ or ‘radical egocentrism’… only gradually coming to apprehend the similarities between the actions of self and other…. The recognition of self-other equivalences is the foundation, not the outcome of social cognition” (“Like Me” 126). Meltzoff’s studies show evidence that there is “something like an act space or primitive body scheme that allows the infant to unify the visual and motor / proprioceptive information into one common ‘supramodal’ framework” (130). Significantly, the discovery of this “supramodal act space” is “compatible with discoveries in neuroscience concerning mirror neurons” (130). The point is that we do not develop intersubjectivity; we emerge from it:

If mirror neurons are actually shaped in our brain by the coordinated activities of mother and father and baby, then these cells not only embody both self and other, but start doing so at a time when the baby has more of an undifferentiated sense of us (mother-baby or father-baby) than any sense of an independent self, before the baby can pass the mirror recognition test. From this primary “us,” however, the baby slowly but surely comes to perceive the other naturally and directly and
obviously without any complex inference; it proceeds to carve out a proper sense of self and other. (Iacoboni 155-56)

Iacoboni has proposed that a class of neurons, which he calls “super mirror neurons,” might be responsible for regulating this primordial intersubjectivity. Surmising that “if mirror neurons are such powerful neural elements that help us reenact in our own brains what other people do… the evolutionary process that created such a neural mechanism must also have created some form of control over it” (200). Iacoboni hypothesizes that these neurons would most likely be located in three specific regions of the frontal lobe, and he and a colleague were able to take advantage of a rare neurosurgical opportunity to map this area single-electrode technology. They have “so far obtained recordings for approximately sixty single cells that show mirror neuron properties” (202). In some of the neurons, however, “the firing rate increases while the patient performs the action, as in monkeys. In sharp contrast with mirror neurons in monkeys, however, these cells shut down entirely while the patient observes the action” (202). This finding suggests that mirror neurons may be important not only for simulating the experience of others, but for distinguishing that simulation from ones own experience (203). In other words, according to Iacoboni’s hypothesis, some of the cells function as regulating “super” mirror neurons, neurological substrates that serve as both dividers between – and “passwords” to – the ego of the other. The same mirroring mechanism that brings us together in intersubjectivity also serves to distinguish us as individuals, remaining with us in life as “the neural signature of this sense of us to which both self and other belong” (156).²⁴

³⁴ Meltzoff’s work is significant for a number of reasons to the topic of intersubjectivity. It forces a rethinking of how subjectivity develops, and a reevaluation of subjectivity’s complexity. This is clear in his revision of Merleau-Ponty’s Piaget-influenced ideas of infant’s body schemas: “Infants are not only capable of external perception and of imitating the gestures of others much earlier than Merleau-Ponty thought, they are also able to imitate after a delay, imitate novel gestures, and monitor their own movements and correct them to match a visually-specified target. These abilities involve, in addition to an innate body schema, an innate capacity for proprioceptive experience, an important element of a primitive body image. An infant’s gestures, in effect, become an object of attention for the infant and she is able to discriminate between her own gesture and the gesture of the other. The experiential connection between
This complex mediation characterizes Damiel and Marion’s encounter at the bar of the Esplanade Ballroom. Looking directly at Damiel, Marion recollects that all of her interpersonal relationships have never been serious, and that it “must now become serious.” At the same time, she regrets that she has yet to be “lonesome.” Furthermore, as she verbally consummates her union with Damiel, she paradoxically says, “tonight I’m lonesome at last.” She declares that she “must put an end to coincidence” and “decide.” Her agency leads her to declare her self-individuation and simultaneously, her commitment to the other, a metaphorical unification. If Marion’s speech is loaded with apparent paradoxes, it is because her encounter with Damiel is charged with the knowledge that bridging the divide of two subjects is never a matter of simple intersubjectivity, but rather, a struggle in which the individual subject asserts agency vis-à-vis the reflecting image of the other. Like Jane and Hunter the pair are presented in a long two-shot, facing one another like mirror reflections. The film spectator is implicated in this complex interplay of communication and recognition between self and other when the camera cuts abruptly to a close up of Marion from Damiel’s point of view. Marion, looking slightly off screen, says “Not only the whole city, but the whole world is taking part right now in our decision.” With a turn of her head, Marion gazes directly into the camera, confronting the spectator through the borrowed “eyes” of Damiel. She says, “We’re more than just the two of us now. We embody something.” What Marion and Damiel embody is the unification of the politically and geographically divided Berlin, but her continuing speech is an injunction to the viewer: “Now it’s your turn,” she says, “You hold the game in your hand. It’s now or never.” In this direct address to the spectator of the film, Marion draws the viewer into the dynamic exchange between subject and other. The film engages the viewer “face-to-face” and places the

self and other is operative from birth, and is not, as Merleau-Ponty contends, a syncretic confusion. At the very least, for the newborn infant there is a rudimentary differentiation between self and non-self, so that one's earliest experiences include a sense of self and of others” (Gallager Meltzof).
The next scene presents the metaphorical unification of Marion and Damiel expressed as an embodied and dynamic interaction between two individuated subjects. It is the morning after, and the setting is still the Esplanade. Daylight filters in through the skylight, illuminating Marion, who performs acrobatics on a rope suspended vertically from the ceiling. As in the trapeze sequence where Damiel first sees Marion, Damiel remains below, on the ground. But in this scene, he is embodied, and he partakes in the acrobatics. Anchoring the rope so Marion can execute her maneuvers, Damiel enters into an embodied relationship. Both he and the spectator, like Theodor Lipps, empathize with the acrobat through a physical connection. The scene alternates between low-angle full shots of Marion, and medium-close shots of Damiel. The scene includes also a wider shot showing Marion performing while Cassiel, visible as a black-and-white image, watches her from the steps of the ballroom. Throughout the scene, Damiel articulates the unification of their consummated love. His often-metaphorical language expresses this new intersubjectivity in terms that directly suggest embodied empathy: “Something happened. It’s still going on. It binds me. It was true in the night, and it’s true now, during the day. Even more so. Who was who? I was inside her and she was all around me.” At this moment in the voice-over, a wide-shot reveals the whole of the ballroom and the three characters: Cassiel on the steps, and Marion and Damiel physically “bound” together by the rope. Damiel continues his voice over as the scene returns to its alternating medium shots. Again, Damiel and Marion are shown separately, even as the rope unites them. During these separating medium shots, Damiel expresses the dynamic chiasm (*not* chasm) of intersubjectivity and self-definition: “Who in the world can claim that he was ever truly together with another being? I am together. No mortal child was conceived, only an immortal shared image.” This line returns to a topic that is always at the heart of Wenders’s work: the image itself. Damiel’s monologue suggests that the image itself bears the
possibility of manifesting the unification of self and other (and of east and west Berlin). The next, and final shot of the sequence is a wide shot of the wall of the ballroom. On it is a black and white painting of a man and woman dancing, the woman’s flowing dress engulfing the two figures as if they had merged in the dance as one. Onto this painted image falls the shadow of Marion’s spinning body. An incorporeal shadow, this superimposed image flies over the image of the couple like an angel in flight. The shot is similar to the shot of Teresa Salgueiro’s shadow falling on a wall in Lisbon Story, and it too refers to itself as pure image. Thus, a scene about intersubjectivity and unification bears a tension between, on one hand, the image of a man and a woman physically united as one, bound together and working together as physical bodies, and on the other hand, the final image of a disembodied shadow floating over a static, colorless adumbration of a couple – a transcendental, but not mortal image of unity. The tension between self and other, the struggle for intersubjectivity, is similar to a tension inherent in the image. The image is incorporeal and symbolic; at the same time, the image and spectator are “bound” by the physical connections of embodied perception. The image is at once disembodied, transcendental, and angel-like. It hovers over the divided city (Der Himmel über Berlin), yet it is also longs (Wings of Desire) to become embedded in the physical world. Like East and West Berlin, and like Marion and Damiel, the incorporeal film and the embodied spectator are divided, but struggle towards the possibility of communion and communication across a divided landscape.
CHAPTER 5
THE PHANTOM OF THE WEST

*Man, in effect, knows how to play with the mask as that beyond which there is the gaze. The screen is here the locus of mediation.*
Jacques Lacan

On his sixty-fifth birthday, Wenders, who now resides in Berlin, gained his place on the city’s “Boulevard of Stars.” Lying down on his star before a crowd of photographers, Wenders looked up and declared: “I wanted to have the view that the star does: the sky over Berlin.” This reference to *Der Himmel über Berlin* has significance given the course of Wenders’s journeys as a filmmaker; more importantly, it points to the curious relationship of spectator and film. The sky covers the landscape, unifies individuals, and links geopolitical states. The spectator, however, is grounded in the material world. At the risk of appearing over metaphorical, I want to suggest that Wenders’s playful drama before the photographers sets up a way of thinking about film – and even Wenders’s own journeys as a filmmaker. *Der Himmel über Berlin* – both the sky and the film – is a transcendental plane from which the filmic vision of the angels looks down; at the same time, the spectator and the filmmaker are always committed to “lying on the ground.” Spectator and filmmaker experience cinema from the perspective of a body that wanders the landscape, the streets, the literal ground of history and experience. If we are condemned to meaning, it is because we are condemned to the wander the modern world at street level. The embodied spectator looks at the film and sees an ethereal image of pure light, but like Wenders, the spectator is also playful, and in playing with the locus of mediation, the mirror of the film, the spectator often sees the truth of cinema and the truth of his or her own mediation.

Wenders’s *Don’t Come Knocking* explores in its play the paradoxical relationship of film to the real landscapes and experience of modernity, and the equally paradoxical relationship of spectator to image. Each relationship is constituted by unity and division, truth and lies. Films can show a world of fantasy, unmoored from the real, and films can anchor their images to the visual
experience of real spaces. Films also can simultaneously suture the spectator into an imaginary certainty of centered subjectivity, and films can show the truth of a mediated subjectivity and epistemic uncertainty. The most recent of Wenders’s films (those that are available in the United States), Don’t Come Knocking engages the same problematic issues that have structured (or fragmented) nearly all of his previous productions, and it simultaneously incorporates those themes and paradoxes that have served as touchstones throughout his career. The film, in short, offers a distillation of everything “Wenders,” and is thus an ideal text in which to see a convergence of the ideas I have articulated in the preceding chapters. The landscapes of modernity, the mobility of modernity, and cinematic encounters (the relationships of self to other and spectator to film) shape this film in a way that directly and forcefully speaks to the knotty problem of images. How the film works is best explained with an eye to visual culture, the phenomenology of cinema, and of course, the wandering gazes of the film and the spectator. In Don’t Come Knocking, wandering leads film and spectator over the modern terrains of landscape and image on a visual journey towards the always-complex encounter with the truth and the lies of images.

Howard’s many encounters with his would-be family members formally enact the visual confrontations of image and spectator. The family members are the spectators; Howard is the personification of the image. Like the image, Howard is inherently untruthful and too cowardly to take any responsibility. Doreen makes the point clearly in her final meeting with Howard when she screams, “You’re a coward Howard!” She even underscores the significance of the rhyme, a play on words that recalls Howard’s mother’s own words to Sutter: “Lying is for cowards.” Lying is what images do in the world of the Hollywood film from which Howard has fled, a sardonic parody of what the grand old cinema of Ford, Ray, and even Ozu, has become. Howard has effectively dropped out of the real world by immersing himself in a life of tabloid scandal. He has no connection to the real landscape or the real people of his family. He lives in the manufactured
landscape of the film, and his family only knows him through the disembodied images they collect. Sky’s computer file of digitalized images, Howard’s mother’s scrapbook, the poster on the wall of Doreen’s diner: these are the illusions that visually inscribe Howard’s biography. Only Howard’s son Earl lacks such a collection. Like Wenders, who emerged from the post-War desert of German cinema with no cinematic patrimony, Earl too is fatherless. And like Wenders, who in his own writing said “goodbye to the grand old cinema,” Earl has no use for Hollywood images. He embodies Wenders’s own complex disillusionment with the image, although in this film, disillusionment is never simple.

The encounter with Earl leads to a violent and a stark conflict, which Wenders compares in his commentary to the showdown in *High Noon*. The scene is striking for its distinct mise-en-scène, which presents a twist on the modern theme of the street as interior. Having learned from his mother, Doreen, that Howard is his true father, Earl flies into a fit of rage, destroys his own apartment, and ejects its contents from a second-floor window. Howard, hoping to speak with Earl, walks into the middle of his son’s living room, which now lies in wreckage in the middle of the street. The confrontation comes to fisticuffs, and Earl storms away in anger. As he does, the camera tracks right and comes to a stop as it frames Howard standing in long-shot in front of the couch, which lies askew in the street. Due to a particularly lucky and well-timed passing cloud, the sun disappears and the landscape darkens ominously. The wind tosses the leaves of a book that lies open on the pavement. This few seconds of footage offers a striking example of what Keathley has celebrated as the cinephiliac moment: “the site where this prior presence, this fleeting experience of the real, is felt most intensely or magically” (37). In their own phenomenological arguments, Keathley and Barker both have appropriated a now well-know expression, “the wind in the trees,” which Kracauer cites in his own realist arguments:

I have stressed that films conform to the cinematic approach only if they acknowledge the realistic tendency by concentrating on actual physical existence – “the beauty of moving wind in the trees,” as D. W. Griffith expressed it in a
1947 interview in which he voiced his bitterness at contemporary Hollywood and its unawareness of that beauty. (60)

Wenders’s has voiced a similar bitterness, and his filmmaking stands as a phenomenological commitment to the beauty of the “fleeting of the real.” The wind in the leaves of the book is as much a cinephiliac moment as the wind in the trees. And the shadow of the passing cloud produces the kind of cinephilia Wenders celebrates in his narration of *Tokyo Ga*: “we gasp and give a start when we suddenly discover something true or real in a movie, be it nothing more than… a cloud casting its shadow over the scene…. ” The sky darkened by the cloud, Howard drops wearily onto the couch where he will spend the night in the street. Once again, Howard finds himself in the well-worn shoes of the *flâneur*. A low-angle shot captures the storm-dark sky with the bright green gables of a roof in the foreground, and in the distance, a black, steel tower with an American flag waving in glowing sunlight that has found its way through the clouds in the background – again, the Hopper-inspired cinematography is evident. The shot cuts back to a long shot of Howard on the couch as he lets out a defeated laugh that turns into soft sobbing. This shot dissolves into a more tightly framed middle-shot of Howard as he waits and watches while daylight fades.

This is the first in a long sequence of 16 separate shots that condense time as dusk turns to evening and then night, a sequence which Wenders’s calls the “centerpiece of the film” (Commentary). “Centerpiece” is an entirely fit metaphor, since for the next three-and-a-half minutes, the camera circles with an intentional mobility, a circling curiosity directed at Howard. All of the shots are framed as middle or middle-close shots, and all are circular tracking shots stitched together with slow dissolves. In effect, the body of the film floats in a sleepy, mesmerizing orbit around Howard. Over the course of the sequence, Howard surveys his surroundings – an empty box is blown like a tumbleweed down the lonely street, a car covered entirely with square mirrors drives by, a dog visits him – until finally in the last shot, with his
boots sticking over the armrest and his hat over his eyes, he falls asleep like a cowboy under the stars. The mobile body of the film continues to inscribe a circle around Howard, directing its vision at the primary signifier of the film – Howard, the wandering Hollywood image in temporary repose in a locus of transience. Howard’s daughter Sky enters the frame, wakes him, and sits next to him on the couch. As the two talk, the camera circles them in an extended take of over two minutes, making several revolutions as the darkened world rotates behind them in soft focus. The visual effect is such that Sky and Howard appear to float in the darkness like two wanderers come together, as if in a movie theater. Sky learns that Earl refused to speak with Howard, and tells Howard that Earl refused to speak with her: “Just the idea that we might be related… He doesn’t want to be related I don’t think.” Sky then asks Howard if he wants to be related, a question that is doubly significant, since Howard is father to Sky as well, a realization he is now only beginning to make. “I thought I did,” Howard tells Sky. She then asks, “Why? Why suddenly when you haven’t been for so long? Howards reply raises the topic of isolation and division: “I just started thinking I missed everything, you know… maybe I threw everything away… cut myself off.”

Howard is “cut off” in many ways, as are so many of Wenders’s wanderers, and like Damiel’s separation from a the community of mortals, Howard’s separation from his family is equated with the difficulty of bringing together the filmic image and the embodied spectator. Whereas Damiel lives in the timeless, disembodied world as the figure of transcendental cinematic vision, Howard is an irresponsible, untruthful, and alienated Hollywood image. He wanders the world, removed from his family history, separating himself in his mobile home, hanging on his door a sign that warns the world: “Don’t come knocking.”

The scene continues to examine the nature of the image. Sky asks Howard, “Why did you let so much time go by?” As the question is posed, the camera finally stops its orbital track in front of Sky and Howard, framing them in two shot as they sit together on the couch. “I didn’t
know it was passing,” says Howard. Caught up in his decadent Hollywood lifestyle, Howard exists, like the angels of *Wings of Desire*, outside of real, finite, embodied time. The camera cuts to a medium-close shot of Sky, who asks, “Are you gonna leave town now?” The following exchange is filmed in shot-reverse-shot. Howard replies he has nowhere to go. Sky suggests he live in Butte. “What am I gonna do here?” Howards asks. Sky responds, “Make it your home. You need a home, don’t you?”

The dialogue expresses not only Howard’s inability to inhabit a domestic space, but speaks to commercial cinema’s inability to meaningfully inhabit landscapes marked by human history – landscapes such as the city of Butte. Sky, the foil and half-sister of Earl, embodies the other half of Wenders’s complex relationship with cinema, namely, a desire for an image that can unify self and other, spectator and world. On one hand, Wenders never sets aside fully his suspicions regarding the image. He remains, like Earl, embittered towards the failure of Hollywood film; on the other, he believes like Sky that the image can inhabit the real world, locating its modern, wandering vision in streets and landscapes enlivened by history and human encounters. Damiel leaves the transcendental realm in an attempt to negotiate the difficulties and complexities inherent in the cinematic form; Howard leaves the world of film, symbolized by the production of the *Phantom of the West*, in order to extricate himself from the empty illusions of cinema. Each character is an embodiment of cinematic form – Damiel is vision; Howard is the image – trying to reach across the divide separating film and spectator.

Like the peepshow scenes of *Paris, Texas*, Howard and Sky’s encounter is about mediation. The camera work and mise-en-scène contrast markedly, however, with that of the peepshow encounters. In the peepshow scenes, the space of Travis and Jane’s encounter is static. Separated, the two characters look at one another through a television-like, rectangular plate of glass. The encounter is thickly mediated. Travis and Jane even speak through an intercom system that electronically projects their voices and narratives into the space occupied by the other. They express themselves as disembodied images and sounds, unable to otherwise escape the isolation
of their respective spaces. The encounter between Sky the collector of images, and Howard personification of the image, takes place in a different environment. The mise-en-scène is the open space of the street. Nothing separates Sky and Howard as they sit together on the couch, and the camera’s circular dolly creates a central, unified core of space that emphasizes their proximity. As two wanderers, father and daughter have come together in a moment of embodied communication. The “body of the film” views this scene with movement, rather that the static, fragmented vision of the peepshow sequence. The differences in these scenes speak to two very different ways of thinking about the image and the subjective-experience of the spectator. Each scene sets up an encounter, and each presents the difficulty and conflict that divides the subjects, but Don’t Come Knocking foregrounds the possibilities of an embodied cinema: the movement of the film’s body in the open space of the street – a space that invites flânerie – locates the mediation of the film not in disembodied images, but in embodied vision. Howard the image and Sky the spectator experience a meaningful encounter because they engage each other as wanderers in the street, the real world where the contingencies of the “flesh of the world” mediate subjectivity. The film does not “think” or “represent” the encounter, but rather implicates its own mobile body in the landscape, communicating through its gesture and its motility. It engages the visible world not through Cartesian coordinates, the way Travis engages Jane in the Cartesian coordinates of the peepshow, but through a “body” that is visible in the world by virtue of its visible activity.

Howard’s final encounter with Sky near the end of the film also presents a metaphor for the difficulty of cinematic communication, but in this scene the film engages the spectator through empathetic touch. It formally communicates what it presents on the screen, a “touching” encounter between spectator and image. The scene begins with Howard, Sutter, Sky, Earl and Amber assembled in the street among Earl’s scattered belongings. Impatient to return Howard to the film set, Sutter begins dragging him off by the handcuffs that link the two men. Sky takes
Howard by his free hand, stopping him. The critical sequence begins with a close-up of Sky as she says to Howard, “I need to tell you this before you leave again.” The next shot is a close up of Howard returning Sky’s gaze, and then a close up of the characters’ two embracing hands. The two close-ups of Howard and Sky establish a shot-reverse-shot pattern that will dominate the sequence of Sky’s monolog. Every shot during Sky’s monologue is a close up, including the reactions shots. As the camera cuts back and forth between the close ups, drifting in slightly on the faces with an almost imperceptibly zoom, and cutting away once to the composition’s center, a close-up of the hands, Sky delivers her lines in a near whisper. First, I will run through the scene shot by shot, and then analyze both the thematic and formal elements.

Sky begins in close up as the ambient sound drops to near silence. As she speaks, the film shifts its focus from actions to emotional affect, framing Sky in a close up. Sky says to Howard, “I used to wonder about you all the time. I’d study your pictures. Old photographs. I would stare at them for hours. I’d run my fingers over your face, tracing the bones. Study your hands under a magnifying glass, looking for veins, knuckles, some clue. [I used to] stare at my own face in the mirror, wondering, watching…” At this moment in the dialog, the shot cuts to a close-up of the expressive face of Amber, Earl’s girlfriend. Normally her behavior is manic and childlike, but in this shot her affect is transformed in witnessing Sky’s monologue. Her head resting against Earl’s chest, she bears an expression that seems at once grave and terrified. The camera tilts up slowly to reveal the equally dramatic countenance of Earl, whose rage has suddenly softened to reflective, pained longing. He raises his eyes to view the scene before him, showing a clear empathy for Sky’s own emotions. Indeed, he seems to be experiencing exactly what Sky’s describes as she continues to speak while the camera lingers over Earl’s face: “hunting,” she says, “for some tiny twitch of the eye, some wrinkle of the lip…” Earl’s visual activity and the film’s visual activity do exactly what Sky describes. Each visually searches the image of the other.
The shot cuts back to Sky as she continues speaking to Howard: “…anything that might suddenly give the whole thing away.” After another reaction shot of Earl, who raises his eye-line to look where Howard is standing, Sky continues: “It never revealed itself.” The camera once again returns to its established close-up of Sky. She says, “There was always something halfway hidden. Now you’re here, you’re right here in front of me… you’re standing right here – I’m still not sure. “Why is that? How could that be?” At this point, the film cuts to an extreme close-up shot of Sky and Howard’s hands as they part in slow motion, their fingertips brushing lightly as they separate. Two brief close ups of Sky and Howard end the sequence and the camera cuts to wide three-shot of the pair with Sutter standing behind them, still handcuffed to Howard.

The answer to Sky’s question, “How could that be?” is simply that Howard is a phantom. The characters of the film repeatedly ask, “Where is Howard?” Howard is “not there” because he is a persona, a cinematic wanderer who enters from the horizon, and in the end rides into the sunset. Howard will later do just that, but for the moment he belongs to Sutter, the wandering detective who looks out for Hollywood’s financial interest.

Sky’s statement that there is something “halfway hidden” is not just a commentary on the illusion of the image, however. There is something else in the scene that is halfway hidden, or perhaps half-way discovered. The scene expresses not only two wanderers encountering each other in a moment of stark communication and intersubjective understanding (even if that understanding is itself about division), but also the ability of the image to literally “touch” the viewer. The scene is entirely about the role of empathy in the encounter of self and other, spectator and image, and its effectiveness results in large part from its use of close-up shots of touch and affect.

As we have seen, the mirror neuron system likely plays a large role in granting us precognitive emotional understanding of others’ mental states. A closer look at current findings and hypotheses in this particular endeavor is relevant to understanding touch and affect in
Howard and Sky’s goodbye scene. The research into the mirroring of another’s facially expressed emotional state is particularly rich. One rather famous, and very simple experiment conducted in 2005 by Paula Niedenthal, and reported by Iacoboni in his discussion of facial recognition, reveals that holding a pencil in the mouth so that it restricts mimicry makes test subjects “much less efficient in detecting changes in emotional facial expressions” than subjects who are free to imitate (111). What this experiment demonstrates is the “facial feedback hypotheses,” a concept with origins in the psychology of William James and the revolutionary work of Darwin (120).

Rizzolatti and colleagues, correlating fMRI data from their own experiments with that of clinical cases and other research projects, conclude “experiencing disgust and perceiving it in others have a common neural substrate” (Mirrors 182). In other words, seeing someone else express disgust makes the observer “feel” disgust. Iacoboni argues that “mirror neurons provide an unreflective, automatic simulation… of the facial expressions of other people” (111-12), and indeed there is compelling evidence for this:

Plenty of empirical evidence supports the facial feedback hypothesis, which in turn aligns beautifully with our investigations of mirror neurons. By firing as if we are actually making those facial expressions we are simply observing, these neurons provide the mechanism for simulated facial feedback. This simulation process is not an effortful, deliberate pretense of being in somebody else’s shoes. It is an effortless, automatic, and unconscious inner mirroring. (120)

The precise neural mechanisms and pathways by which we recognize the emotions of others are not yet precisely understood. Damasio presents evidence in Looking for Spinoza for an “as-if-body-loop,” which Rizzolatti summarizes in Mirrors in the Brain: “observation of the faces of others expressing an emotion would activate the mirror neurons of the premotor cortex. These neurons would then send a copy of the activation pattern (an efferent copy) to the somatosensory areas and the insula” (188). Rizzolatti, however, proposes an even more direct process in which “visual areas, providing descriptions of faces or bodies expressing emotion, is conveyed directly to the insula, where it autonomously and specifically activates a mirror mechanism that
immediately codes these description in the corresponding emotive mode” (189). Whatever the mechanism, the clear implication is that when one encounters the face of the other, one does not do so from a centered position of Cartesian certainty, but rather from an embodied subjectivity that is mediated by the bodily contingency of that other. What the subject feels, experiences, and identifies as “mine” is conditioned by the other.

It follows that understanding the experience of Sky’s final goodbye to Howard requires a close look at affect and Wenders’s use of the close-up in general. Wenders, like his adopted cinematic father, Ozu, generally likes two-shots and medium-long shots. He tends not to guide the viewer with traditional shot-reverse-shots, especially in his early work. When he does film faces in close-up, however, he tends to linger, turning the face into a kind of landscape where the spectator’s gaze can wander. Based on Christian Keathley’s contention that some filmmakers work not with Astruc’s caméra-stylo, but with “a different camera-pen: that of the sketch artist” (74), I would argue that Wenders’s camera also sketches faces, or rather captures affect through lingering close-ups, as opposed to scripting or inscribing a determinate meaning. A beautiful “illustration” of this can be found in the scene from Wings of Desire in which Peter Falk draws the wonderfully expressive faces of extras congregated on the film set. In fact, throughout the film, Falk wanders around with his sketchbook after the manner of Constantine Guys; he is a sketch hunter collecting impressions. This fascination with the phenomena of capturing affect is evident also in the extraordinary reaction shot of Jane in the second peepshow encounter, during which Jane listens to Travis narrate the story of their violent and tragic separation. The sequence comprises three separate close-ups, totaling nearly four minutes of run time, including a single take of three minutes and fifteen seconds – an exceptionally long close up. During these close-ups, Nastassja Kinski fully transforms her visage, and in an extraordinary performance, begins weeping so expressively that the tears drip from her face. As spectators, we are “taken out of ourselves,” “decentered” as it were. Subjectivity is always mediated, arising in the dialectic of
self and other (the chiasm of seeing and seen, touching and touched), but rarely are we so aware of this mediation as when the contingencies of the other make themselves know through embodied empathy:

When we see the facial expression of someone else, and this perception leads us to experience that expression as a particular affective state, we do not accomplish this type of understanding through an argument by analogy. The other’s emotion is constituted, experienced, and therefore directly understood by means of an embodied simulation producing a shared body state. It is the activation of a neural mechanism shared by the observer and the observed that enables experiential understanding. (Gallesse, Eagle, Migone 143)

Such images engage an embodied empathy, and while all close-ups have that capacity, Wenders’s close-ups do not engage emotional mirroring for the sole purpose of inscribing a specific meaning. They are not just ideas or symbols for the spectator, but indeterminate experiences. Roland Barthes beautifully explored the difference between the close up as universal idea and the close up as particular phenomenon, contrasting Greta Garbo and Audrey Hepburn: “As a language, Garbo’s singularity was of the order of the concept, that of Audrey Hepburn is of the order of the substance. The face of Garbo is an Idea, that of Hepburn, and Event” (italics mine 57). The idea of the close up as either linguistic sign or (phenomenologically felt) event is not particularly radical. What is radical, however, is the contention of neurophenomenology that we do not just understand what a character feels; we literally feel what a character feels. Great actors know this. Hence, the words of the great Norma Desmond: “We didn’t need dialogue; we had faces!”

Sky’s goodbye scene is more than metaphor. This scene formally enacts the embodied encounter of spectator and film. It does so by triggering automatic, prereflective responses to faces. The sequence described above lasts exactly two minutes and fifteen seconds from the moment Sky begins until the moment she embraces Howard. Every shot is a tight close up, and each face is taught with emotion. Earl and Amber are spectators in this scene. Eye-line matches direct their gazes at the encounter of Sky and Howard. These spectators “mirror” the acts of the
cinema spectator: all are watching the drama of a human encounter. The emotional weight of the scene comes from the reaction of spectator-characters, yet at the center of this drama is Sky, whose monolog expresses not so much a melodramatic desire for reunification with her father, but instead describes her complex emotions vis-à-vis the image that finally stands bodily before her. She searches “old photographs” of Howard. Looking for some “twitch of the eye, some wrinkle of the lip.” She touches the photos as if the images were a real. She too is a detective, “looking for clues,” as she says. She stares at his image for hours, and then at her own face in the mirror. Her search for Howard is not just the search for a father, but also a search for an intersubjective reflection, a real experience, a mirroring image that might offer some truth about her place in the world. Sky describes what is essentially a cinematic experience, a wandering search for images that tell the truth. Her visual search speaks to the contingency inaugurated by the face-to-face encounter – this is the contingency of the flâneur’s mobilized and embodied vision. In voicing her own spectatorial acts, Sky describes explicitly the phenomenological encounter with the Other. This scene, like the reunion of Travis and Jane, is at its core about people struggling to cross the divide that separates them. Whereas Travis finds the truth of his subjectivity in the anamorphic stain of his own reflection superimposed on Jane’s face, Sky looks into Howard’s face (the face of the image) and finds the truth of her own subjectivity. In each case, the image is the projection of a desire, and in each case the image reveals the truth that is half-way hidden. In the encounter between Sky and Howard, however, the mediation is not a Lacanian mirror, but the body’s own. This is as true for the spectator as for the character.

Perhaps the most important image of the scene is the slow-motion close up of Sky releasing Howard’s hand. The shot captures a metaphor for the encounter of film and spectator. By enacting a mirror-touch response in the embodied spectator, the shot formally expresses the encounter of Sky and Howard; more importantly, it formally enacts the embodied encounter between the image and the spectator. It calls to mind Barker’s handshake metaphor, itself an
adaptation of Merleau-Ponty’s reversibility thesis. Based on existential phenomenology, Barker argues that the body of the film and the body of the spectator shake hands. If one applies neurophenomenology to an analysis of the experience of watching the image of Sky’s hand release Howard’s hand, the argument that the filmic image and the spectator meet through the spectator’s embodied understanding of the image can be based on empirical science. More importantly, the experience is not just one of unity. The scene shows not just a handshake, but a letting go of hands. In this respect, the film shows and enacts a larger truth: cinema is as much about letting go and division as it is about taking hold and unity. The film’s formal engaging of the spectator expresses this truth – the truth of Merleau-Ponty’s ontology, which is never a simple matter of unity between self and other, seer and seen. Intersubjectivity is always a chiasm, an intertwining across a divide. Encounters are momentary.

Don’t Come Knocking addresses questions at the heart of cinema studies and Wenders’s oeuvre: What is the ontological status of the cinematic image? Does the image exceed its purely symbolic and representational status, or does it point to truths in the material world? I have suggested that the answer is yes – what cinephile would not? At the same time, I do not wish to dismiss the difficulty of the problem any more than the film itself does. Howard, after all, returns to the set of the film-within-the-film, The Phantom of the West. In this scene, filmed in bright colors with an overtly blockbuster style, Howard says goodbye to the prima donna starlet of the film, who significantly bears a striking resemblance to Sky. The two exchange clichéd words of parting, and Howard mounts his trusty stallion. The horse rears up in slow motion as Howard waves his cowboy hat. The scene is a scathing parody of the commercial Western: a pointed reminder of the failure of Hollywood cinema, and a cartoon-like manifestation of the fantasies cinema projects. Howard is still a coward and a liar. He is still a hackneyed cowboy image, still a cheap reproduction. This image is a mask. It is helpful to remember the playful opening of the film: a black screen obscures the classic Fordian landscape, which slowly reveals itself, first
through two “eyes” that look out onto the sky, and then through a slow dissolve that reveals the
desert landscape. The film thus reminds us that cinema is simultaneously a view onto the world
and a masking illusion that obscures our vision of the real – the truth that is our own mediation in
the visual world. This film plays with the mask, as suggested by the epigraph of this chapter:
“Man, in effect, knows how to play with the mask as that beyond which there is the gaze. The
screen is here the locus of mediation” (Lacan, “What is a Picture?” 107). In Merleau-Ponty’s
terms, what lies beyond the visible is the invisible. The invisible is the phenomenological
implication of the visual, seeing subject as visible and seen in the world, or to employ the terms
Sobchack uses in her own appraisal of Merleau-Ponty’s ontology against Lacan’s, the body as
“seeing being” that is “being seen” (Address 120). The subject who sees the world is also seen;
the subject who touches the world is also touched. This reversibility is the contingency of the real
that often eludes our vision. In the opening scene, that contingency is the blue sky; later, that
contingency is “embodied” in Howard’s always-dressed-in-blue daughter, Sky. Bodily carrying
the bodily remains of her mother, which she will later return to the landscape when she scatters
the ashes, Sky wanders “into the picture,” so to speak, bodily disrupting the illusion of the image,
reminding the viewer (and Howard himself) that the spectator is part of what Merleau-Ponty calls
the “flesh of the world.” Sky is the truth beyond the mask, a truth that is at once embodied, and at
once transcendental like the sky over Berlin.

What in the end is so astonishing about cinema is not how much its mediation hides, but
how often its mediation invites the spectator’s body into a wandering search – and how often that
search yields encounters with the real, moments when, to borrow from Wenders, “we suddenly
discover something true or real in a movie.” In wandering, the spectator encounters the gestures
of both the film and of others, and in these gestures discovers the truth of seeing. As the
relationship of the filmic image to the object it represents is by definition one of mediation, so are
the dynamics on the near side of the image. A phenomenology of cinema shows us that the space
between the film and spectator is never strictly one of division or unity, but rather a series of embodied and empathetic encounters between wanderers, a chiasm of touching and touched, seeing and seen.

I will end where Wenders does. In the final shot of Don’t Come Knocking, Earl, Amber, and Sky, all seated in the front seat of Howard’s old Packard, ride off “into the sunset” of the American West. The film offers a final panoramic shot of mountains on the horizon and a winding road that stretches through the foothills. As the trio sings, “Where is Howard?” the car travels over a rise and disappears into the landscape. On the right of the frame stands a road sign directing the wanderers: “Divide 1, Wisdom 52.”
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