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## Wim Wenders' Use of Space in *The Million Dollar Hotel*

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### **Abstract**

*Wim Wenders has been quoted as saying, of his own development as a filmmaker, that he is "a painter of space engaged on a quest for time" (qtd. in Graf, 2002, p.63). This paper offers a systematic assessment of the way Wenders creates the filmic space of The Million Dollar Hotel (Wenders, 1999) from a place existing in downtown Los Angeles: the Frontier Hotel on East 5<sup>th</sup> St., LA (with its companion hotel, the Rosslyn, just across the street). This study considers both place and space as filmic effects, which operate on a continuum from documentary to fantasy.*

### **Introduction**

Wim Wenders recognises in himself what he calls a 'weakness' for places: "Ich habe einfach ein Faible für Orte. Im vorigen Jahrhundert wäre ich Reiseschriftsteller geworden." ("I've simply a weakness for places. In the previous century, I would have been a travel writer." (Kilb, 2000, p.27. All translations by SJ). The collections of Wenders' writings on cinematic topics and related matters, such as his *Emotion Pictures* (1986), *Die Logik der Bilder/The Logic of Images* (1988) or *The Act of Seeing* (1992), the books-of-the-film which frequently accompany his work, and particularly his collections of photographs, such as his *Bilder von der Oberfläche der Erde/ Images of the Earth's Surface* (2001) and *Einmal/Once* (2001), all reinforce his 'weakness' for places. And he recognises a particular, personal response to hotels: "Ich habe kein tolles Gedächtnis für Namen oder Dialoge, aber ich kann mich an jedes einzelne Hotelzimmer erinnern, in dem ich je gewohnt habe." ("I haven't got

all that fantastic a memory for names or dialogue, but I can remember every single hotel room in which I ever stayed.” (Kilb, 2000, p.27.)

Wenders’ filming location in 1998-99 is just that, a location: the Frontier Hotel as a place that anyone can physically find and visit, or, failing that, can believe exists outside of the screen time showing it. It is very different from, say, the CGI Middle Earth created by Peter Jackson’s team from the imagery of New Zealand locations, or from the New York they generated from a studio set in Wellington and their ‘building bot’ software.<sup>1</sup> Creating and manipulating the illusion of space is fundamental to cinema from documentary to fantasy, and with Wenders’ film it is fundamental to any critique.

Place as dependable geographic location and space as the way places are variously structured and constructed by boundaries underlie any notion of identity and its politics. Referring to Wenders and his work, Thomas Elsaesser implies a geographical metaphor between the old and new worlds to site him (with a hint of mockery?) in cinema history as: “... inheriting the ambiguous privilege of epitomizing what a European director is and ought to be” (Elsaesser 1997, p.241). Wenders fulfils a role in US/Hollywood cinema by representing something it is not, while engaging closely with its cultural context. And beyond this cinematic context, David Harvey allots considerable relevance to Wenders’ films by citing two of them, with the aid of Charles Newman from the *New York Times*, in his *The Condition of Postmodernity*:

Excessive information, it transpires, is one of the best inducements to forgetting. The qualities of postmodern fiction – ‘the flattest possible characters in the flattest possible landscape rendered in the flattest possible diction’ – are suggestive of exactly that reaction. The personal world that Wenders depicts in *Paris, Texas* does likewise. *Wings of Desire*, though more optimistic, still replies in the affirmative to the other question which Newman poses: ‘Have the velocities of recent change been so great that we do not know how to trace their lines of force, that no sensibility, least of all narrative, has been able to articulate them?’ (Harvey, 1990, p.350)

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<sup>1</sup> See: “the Making of King Kong”, King Kong, Deluxe Extended Edition DVD No.824 5948.18 (Universal Pictures Germany GmbH, 2005), Disc 3.

Harvey situates Wenders' films in the wide-ranging context of his survey of postmodernism, so affirming them as documents of contemporary cultural history. However, given the scope of his enquiry, he inevitably fails to analyse the detail of how they work as films to secure the relevance he claims for them in his analysis. The more specialist studies of Wenders' output, like those of Ibrahim (1986), Grob (1991), Kolker & Beicken (1993), Cayla (1994) Cook & Gemünden (1997) or Graf (2002) enable more detailed insight into the way his films work and address the identity politics surrounding to his reputation, to justify it or otherwise. In doing so, they refer to the use of the hotel/motel as setting and motif in specific films and make general points about it throughout Wenders' work, but they do not investigate the topic systematically.<sup>2</sup> Something of an exception is Claude Winkler-Bessone's study, *Les Films de Wim Wenders*, which takes a psychoanalytical approach to what it sees as archetypal imagery. Where he focuses on the hotel/motel, he offers a useful insight:

Le caractère à la fois clos et ouvert des ces lieux *de passage* (sic) fait des hotels et motels de véritables espaces de transition qui expriment à la fois le désir du fuite hors du monde, à l'origine de l'errance, et la peur incessante de l'enfermement, de l'emprisonnement.

(The character of these places *of passage* is at once open and closed and makes of hotels and motels veritable spaces of transition, which simultaneously express the desire to flee out of the world, the origin of wanderlust, and the incessant fear of enclosure, of imprisonment.) (Winkler-Bessone, 1992, p.120. All translations by SJ.)

The notions of transition and of the interaction of interior and exterior mark all Wenders' filmmaking. However, as Winkler-Bessone stops at 1991, he has nothing to offer on the subsequent work. On the motif of motel/hotel, he also compromises his interpretation by falsely locating the hotel scenes in one film he deals with extensively. In *Der Himmel über Berlin/Wings of Desire* (Wenders, 1987) he attributes

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<sup>2</sup> See Roger F. Cook on the penultimate scene of *Der Himmel über Berlin*: The evolving narrative reflects itself as cinematic love story at every step, without becoming self-parody, even when the climactic scene—from the lavishly decorated barroom, including a bucket of champagne on the bar (*sic*), to Marion's passionately red dress and matching lipstick says to the spectator at every turn, "This is a romantic scene in a movie." Thus the film both draws attention to the way desire is generated in cinema and also induces the spectator to take the investment of desire seriously. (Cook and Gemünden, 1997, p.177). His essay, "Angels, Fiction, and History in Berlin," interprets the film convincingly, but, despite its title, it does not credit the function of this *mise-en-scène* sufficiently. Such detail might well have figured in M. Jesinghausen's "'The Sky over Berlin as Transcendental Space' Wenders, Döblin and the 'Angel of History'" in M. Konstantarakos (ed.) (2000) *Spaces in European*

them to a former café in the Kreuzberg district (Winkler-Bessone, 1992, p.130), whereas they were shot in a far more significant location, the former Grand Hotel Esplanade on the Potsdamer Platz. Similarly, press reviews of Wenders' films do frequently describe the hotel/motel settings, but as an aspect of a general assessment, which is itself often located in the director's work as a whole.

In Wenders' films, the hotel/motel figures as a recurring motif indicating location, setting, identified place, cinematic mise-en-scène, symbol, metaphor, allegory. How the films treat such places has aesthetic, cultural, even political implications, whilst ethical aspects of representing places raises questions on the notion of the 'authenticity' of a fiction in its setting. Naturally, this study cannot hope to trace all the implications of Wenders' concept of space/place or the way he constructs it in his films. It will concentrate on his *Million Dollar Hotel* from 1999 (hereafter referred to as *Million\$*) and the interaction of the actual existing place with the filmic space Wenders constructs out of it. It then makes reference to other hotel settings in Wenders' films, notably *Der Stand der Dinge/ The State of Things* from 1982 (subsequently referred to as "State"), *Der Himmel über Berlin/Wings of Desire* from 1987 ("Wings"). The hotel/motel also appears in his *Alice in den Städten/Alice in the Cities* (Wenders, 1974), in *Paris, Texas* (Wenders, 1984) and in *Bis ans Ende der Welt/To the End of the World* (Wenders, 1991). However, in these films, the hotel/motel figure is a staging post, which is secondary to the narrative motif and theme of the journey. By contrast, how my main text and the two comparators develop the space of their hotels/motels lends these places much greater significance.

When approaching the questions of the constructions of space and the concomitant identity of place evident in the hotel/motel motif in Wenders' films, a premise from Gardies' *L'Éspace au Cinéma/Space in the Cinema* points to the wider context:

...tout récit, quel que soit le médium qui le prend en charge, ne raconterait-il pas, de manière explicite ou allusive, ouvertement ou en filigrane, l'histoire de l'homme dans ses rapports à l'espace?  
...does not every narrative, regardless of which medium accommodates it, tell, either explicitly or allusively, openly or

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*Cinema*, (intellect, Exeter and Portland, pp 77-92), but the essay pays surprisingly little attention to location and setting, opting instead to use it for a broad thesis on Walter Benjamin's relation to Paris and Berlin.

subliminally, the story of humanity in its relations with space?  
(Gardies, 1993, pp. 142-43)

In the specific case of cinema and the implications of its particular narrative constructions, Gardies offers an analytical approach from notions of 'here/there/elsewhere' to specify the nature of space and place within a film and the function of the spectator in relation to it: "On ne manquera pas de noter qu'il existe, malgré leurs différences, quelques traits communs entre l'ici et le là, tandis que l'ailleurs n'entretient aucun rapport avec le premier." ("One will not fail to notice that there exist, despite their differences, some common traits between the here and the there, whilst the elsewhere bears no relation to the former." Gardies, 1993, p.36). 'Here/there' he sees as belonging to the diegetic unity of any film, the former as the actual image and the latter as the virtual, incorporating the implications of the out-of-frame and the non-diegetic soundtrack. 'Elsewhere' is the Other by definition, either indicated within a film's narrative and thematic structure or as a function of a film's production and consumption, both of which have implications for the position and function of the spectator, particularly in constructing what Gardies deems a "topography" for a film's entire narrative (Gardies, 1993, p.108).

To identify and interpret the wider cultural implications of the space/place displayed in Wenders' films, I shall also apply two analytical schemas proposed by Harvey: firstly "a 'grid' of social practices", (Harvey, 1994, pp. 220-1)<sup>3</sup>, and secondly, to link this to the implications of Wenders' images in time, "Gurvich's typology of social times", (Harvey, 1994, pp. 224-25).<sup>4</sup> With reference to Bhaktin's notion of the "chronotope" and Foucault's of the "heterotopia", I shall then return to Gardies' conclusion:

Si l'on admet qu'il (*space-SJ*) s'oppose au lieu comme le virtuel à l'actuel, il ne saurait être réduit à sa seule dimension physique et géographique, mais pensé plutôt comme un système à construire... il ne se cantonne plus au seul monde diégétique; il révèle son pouvoir structurel et fonctionnel dans l'ensemble de l'acte filmo-cinématographique. Probablement est-ce par là qu'il est susceptible d'entrer dans le champ général de la sémio-

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<sup>3</sup> It sets: "material spatial practices (experience)", representations of space (perception)" and "Spaces of representation (imagination)" against "accessibility and distanciation", "Appropriation and use of space", "Domination and control of space" and "Production of space".

<sup>4</sup> It sets eight forms of time: 'enduring'; 'deceptive'; 'erratic'; 'cyclical'; 'retarded'; 'alternating': "time in advance of itself (rushing forward)"; "explosive" each into four categories: "type; level; form; social formation".

narratologie et d'apporter quelque éclairage neuf à la théorie du récit.

(If one admits that it (*space*) confronts place like the virtual to the actual, it could not be reduced to its sole physical and geographical dimension, but rather considered as a constructive system... it does not barricade itself any more into a single, diegetic world; it reveals its structural and functional power in the entirety of filmic/cinematographic activity. It is probably in this way that it is able to enter the general field of semiotic narratology and to bring some new light onto the theory of narration. (Gardies, 1993, 216))

### ***The Million Dollar Hotel***

“Wenders instaure ici un rapport à l’espace et au temps pertinent et brutal. (“Here Wenders establishes a relation to space and to time that is pertinent and brutal.”

Piégay, 2000, p.77)

When his film opened the first Berlinale film festival of the new millennium, Wenders expressed his response to the showplace:

Nur einen Steinwurf vom roten Teppich entfernt sind wir im Niemansland herumgestolpert... ‘Das hier kann er doch nicht gewesen sein’, an diesen Satz von damals muss ich mich erinnern, wenn ich die Hochhäuser sehe, die Laserstrahlen. Dass mein Film hier gezeigt wurde, ist eine sehr emotionale Angelegenheit für mich.

(It was only a stone’s throw away from the red carpet that we were stumbling around in no-man’s-land... ‘All this here just can’t have been it’, I have to think back to that sentence from those days, when I see the skyscrapers, the lasers. That they are showing my film here is a very emotional thing for me. Löser, 2000, p.44)

Wenders’ comments here reflect identity politics writ large, as he and his film contribute to a spectacle intended to attract global attention to a centre in Berlin as a stage for displaying the German ‘Filmkultur’ and film industry. However, the choice of *Million\$* was not uncontroversial because of its location in LA, the centre of the filmmaking ‘elsewhere’ that dominates German screens, and because it was shot in English. Where *Wings* refers directly to questions of German identity, *Million\$* shows Wenders reprising his role as the filmmaker with “European way of seeing”<sup>5</sup> applied

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<sup>5</sup> In *State*, the writer explains to the director why he, in fact, got the job from an American producer.

to the US. While the festival used the original version, the copy for German commercial consumption is displaced at least one degree from the original cut by dubbing into German language. It then displays the inevitable 'second-hand', slightly surreal quality that comes with a version which implies that the 'here' of the action can shift into an 'elsewhere', namely a cultural sphere where German is the natural language of LA.

Where Wenders talks about the film in press interviews and in the 'making of' accounts accompanying the DVD version<sup>6</sup>, it displays one effect of such ancillary material: the film becomes in an overt, documentary sense, its own subject and acquires another set of 'elsewheres'. For instance, the account of the "One Dollar Diary" shows the director and crew working in his locations as figures in another film and also cuts between the shooting on the sets and the post-production of the musical soundtrack carried out in Ireland. In the same way, his voiceover in the 'Audiokommentar' track to the film text suggests a viewing perspective situated in some time and place after the final cut, so that the director becomes his own spectator to explain his film to his audience.

*Million\$* originated with the reaction of a musician to the aura of its setting. Bono, the lead singer of the Irish band, U2, apparently became fascinated the Frontier Hotel in LA whilst making a music video on its roof. He wrote a story using the location, turned that into the treatment for a film and persuaded Wenders to direct it. In a parallel to the origin of *State*, the filmmaker affirms how the place played on his 'weakness': "Das Hotel hat uns seine Geschichte geradezu aufgedrängt" ("The hotel positively forced its history/story on us." Schnelle and Gansera, 2000, P.19) to influence his decision to direct, and he emphasizes how he consciously intended to depict the identity of its location in downtown Los Angeles. Despite the signage on its roof, the hotel changed its name sometime post-Second World War, when it lost its own glamour as a preferred stop for film stars and politicians and lost the glamour of its neighbourhood (where Chaplin, for example, once had his offices) as the

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See M.S. Jones (1996). "Wim Wenders' *Paris, Texas* and the 'European Way of Seeing'", *European Identity in Cinema*. ed. W. Everett, Exeter, Intellect, 45-52

<sup>6</sup> See, for example: P. Körte. and M. Scholz. (2000), "Berlin ist mir auf den Docht gegangen" (Berlin got on my wires), (p.32). *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 7 February, 2000.



Hollywood producers shifted their premises elsewhere. Compared with the skyscrapers of LA, which are icons in global cinema, at the end of the 1990s the hotel appears in the film and in the ‘making of’ reports as a leftover from the past. Its 11-story, flat-roofed and corniced structure on the corner of its block was meant, with its companion hotel cross the road, to dominate its location. However, in the film it appears small scale set against the city backdrop and its interiors appear eccentric, worn out and gloomy with their plaster mouldings, dirty paintwork and faded wallpaper. In his commentary, Wenders openly describes the conditions for the residents as squalid. At the same time, he maintains that the area is much photographed and used as location for filmmaking but rarely presented in its own right (apparently the Schwarzenegger-vehicle, *End of Days* (2000), was being shot all around their sets). So, he claims for the way the film constructs the setting of the hotel as fiction a deliberate sort of authenticity appropriate to the ‘genius loci’ transmitted by the geographical location it used.

Like the sudden eruption of the director’s voice into the diegesis in *State, Million\$* introduces its spectators to its fiction with a surprise. Its establishing shot is familiar from many US movies, one of those aerial takes drifting past the spectacle of central LA. The sequence cuts to the hotel roof, where it show one of the leads, Tom Tom, jumping to his death. As he falls, the *mise-en-scène* shifts into subjective slow motion to depict his glimpses through individual widows of events in particular rooms. Tom Tom’s voiceover establishes his ownership of the narrative viewpoint, as it declares paradoxically that he never loved life more than in his last moments. But we do not experience the paradox of the dominant narrator exiting with the extinguishing of his consciousness after the first minutes of the film. Instead, Wenders uses a match cut, which simultaneously seeks to shock, showing a bottle breaking on the pavement outside the hotel as it slips from Tom Tom’s hand. With that we are into flashback and the main story proper.

Two weeks previously, Skinner, an FBI agent, arrives in the hotel to investigate the fatal fall of one its residents, Izzy Goldkiss from he same roof. At the behest of Izzy’s father, a powerful media tycoon who cannot allow his son’s death to be publically reported as suicide, he has to investigate a case the police would routinely ignore. Skinner’s aversion translates into initial contempt for the residents, whom he badgers,



photographs, bugs and even deluges with the hotel's sprinkler system in his violent attempts to secure one of them as a murderer. The murder motive supposedly lies in the fact that Izzy was a junkie, who had been stealing paintings and covering them, literally, with tar to pass them off as his own, avant-garde work. A group of the residents claim them as their inheritance and stage a media spectacle around the 'discovery' of a new talent, now tragically cut off. Skinner rapidly spots Tom Tom's fascination with Eloise and plays on his childlike nature to bring them together so he can eavesdrop on their conversation. As that fails, he eventually bullies Tom Tom into incriminating one of his friends. Tom Tom then videotapes a false confession for the TV news and kills himself to get his friend released. *Million\$* closes its narrative circle with Skinner and Eloise comforting each other by the pool of blood in front of the hotel. Wenders pulls us up and pulls us out of the story and the place with a helicopter shot matching the introduction but finally tilting the camera up to the limitless of the sky over LA.

The detective thriller/love story structure incorporates reflections typical for Wenders on the nature of images and on the cynicism of the media industry, which it links with indirect commentary on the 'there' of the actual Frontier hotel, in which he constructed the 'here' of his fiction, with its own 'elsewhere' of LA and the possibly implied 'elsewhere' of the US. The narrative also contains a further remove in time, in that its opening makes it clear who owns the story, but challenges the viewer's identity with that figure by dislocating him from the narrative's 'here/there' structures through a voiceover remembering from the film's ultimate 'elsewhere' in some hereafter. A narrator outside of our concept of time then relates for us, in the space of the film's running time, a story over a specific period in his former life. Whilst Wenders may use the hotel setting to construct a thoroughgoing story, he makes the implications surrounding it complex by creating a complex position for us as spectators. On the plot, our viewpoint is simple: we know its destination, but it becomes difficult because we do not know its itinerary, how and why it will get there, let alone what the bizarre suicide might mean.

The thematic implications of *Million\$* are indeed brutal, but we see them through what one critic described as "l'élégance un peu affectée de la mise-en-scène" (the somewhat affected elegance of the mise-en-scène. J.-M. F. sic, 2000, p.27). The

central group are not ‘guests’ in a conventional sense but residents who live there because they have nowhere else to go. It is an eccentric ensemble: Tom Tom is a childlike, puckish figure, popping up all over the hotel and the surrounding area; his beloved Eloise is a whimsically self-destructive beauty addicted to reading as a defence against her surroundings; Dixie styles himself as the forgotten fifth Beatle, modelled on John Lennon and complete with Merseyside accent; Geronimo is a Mexican constantly slipping in and out of role as indigenous American; Jessica is a former actress capable of surprising with grandmotherly profanity; Shorty is a drunken, ex-agent from Hollywood in an impossible wig; Vivien is an addict styling herself as Izzy’s fiancée. They form a sort of extended family in the hotel because none of them has anywhere else to go but the streets. Into this rejected class of American society, one aspect of the dominant culture, embodied by media tycoon Goldkiss, intervenes, using Skinner, expert in surveillance and discovery, as its tool. The tycoon is seeking to avoid the gaze he arrogantly governs, that of the media, being turned on him, but he fails as the residents take over the TV scenario for their few minutes of fame. They can do this thanks to a languidly English art-critic, who is following the media reporting and descends into their world, where he declares he can validate Izzy’s “garbage” and hence sell it. The hotel briefly becomes their scenario, as they shift themselves from the invisible periphery of society by staging a vernissage in the lobby, which in turn makes them visible for TV. Here they can perform their desired personas and have them validated by broadcasting. Tom Tom’s particular performance is at one remove, his ‘confession’ on tape, which goes to the reporters to accompany the gala. The entire scheme collapses when Skinner literally uncovers the ‘real’ paintings underneath the tar, the tycoon is confronted with the truth of the son he did not want to know, the media spectacle is over, and *Million\$*’s ‘family’ is left where it always was – except that Tom Tom has killed himself.

The immediate cause of his death is his involvement in the death of Izzy. The narrative presents it in a fantastical *mise-en-scène* created by a camera revolving in slow motion around the two of them, as Tom Tom holds Izzy back from the brink, only to release him when his friend claims to have seduced Eloise just to demonstrate her worthlessness. Tom Tom’s ownership of the viewpoint is here complete: this is the memory and associated guilt he cannot escape, even in a successful relationship to

Eloise. Everyone in *Million\$* is a loser, except perhaps the ubiquitous TV crews, although they will now have to seek their next spectacle elsewhere.

Skinner is no exception. He forms the bridge between the dominant society and the underclass. He uses various forms of violence on the residents, but, as he at one point explains to Goldkiss, he knows them too well because he is a freak himself. Wenders acquired the star image of Mel Gibson for this role as the actor himself had had an interest in the screen rights to the original story, although he had not used it. He cast Gibson against type (except perhaps with overtones of the *Mad Max* series) as a scarred and suffering abnormality, self-consciously reminiscent of a 'Frankenstein' monster, rigidly held together by a metal corset and permanently wired in to his mobile phone and laptop. Perhaps the most important 'there' to the hotel's 'here' is Skinner's office, from where he monitors his suspects via his bugs and to which he retreats in pain after he has been attacked by a street gang. In excruciating scenes, he tries to learn what he needs by remotely manipulating Tom Tom and Eloise, while he grimaces at his own suffering reflection in a mirror and tries to reassemble the framework that holds him up.

After the attack on him comes one of the film's key scenes: he slumps in a chair in an underground carpark and tries to persuade Eloise to cooperate in nailing a culprit. He thinks he has rescued her from rapists, but in her self-loathing she is actually offering herself for use. In a black-comic passage, she rejects his proposition and tells him, with a perverse pride in her certification of madness, what her fate is, namely to wind up back in the hotel regardless of what he might do for her. She does finally turn to him for comfort, however, after she bloodies his hands from the pool on the asphalt, and Tom Tom's voiceover, accompanied by a slight acceleration of the sequence by merging edits to simulate his perception, comments how he is really "one of us", although he does not know it. To leave the hotel in its downtown location, the film has a final sequence of Eloise shedding a tear over photos of Izzy and Tom Tom, as she sits reading in her window overlooking the city. From his metaphysical vantage point, Tom Tom comments a last time on how wonderful life is, although we don't realise that when we are in it. For the final images of the LA panorama, the soundtrack then shifts its reference, although remaining in an indeterminate elsewhere, by fading in U2 singing 'The Ground Beneath her Feet.' So *Million\$*

leaves us with a form of music video extolling the reconciliatory power of love to round off the ‘somewhat affected elegance’ of Wenders’ art film.

As a major influence on his images, he acknowledges in his “Filmbuch” to *Million\$* the influence of fictional constructions of place and space in a related medium and from another observer of America, the painter Edward Hopper:

Die Einblicke von aussen nach innen,/durch die Fensteröffnungen,/aber auch umgekehrt, die kargen Innenräume mit den Blicken,/die sie in die Strassen und Gassen freigaben/oder auf die Fensterfronten gegenüber, /dafür gab es ein grosses Vorbild: /Die Malerei des Edward Hopper./Der hat vielen Bildern unseres Filmes Pate gestanden,/auch wenn wir nie eines bewusst nachgestellt hätten.

(The views from outside to inside,/through the window spaces,/but also in reverse, the bleak interiors with the perspectives /they opened into the streets and alleys/or onto the rows of windows opposite,/there was for all that a great example:/the painting of Edward Hopper./He was the godfather for many images in our film,/even though we never consciously set one up in imitation. Wenders, 2000, p.139).

Wenders has written of his admiration for Hopper in the German press (Wenders, 1996, p.29). In Hopper’s work he sees a particular authenticity of response to an environment similar to the one he was using. Such painting is arguably cinematic before its time, as one critic pointed out:

Immer wieder zeigt er Blickwinkel, die erst durch die Benutzung von Kamerakränen in der Filmproduktion möglich wurden; diese suggerieren einen Betrachter , der hoch in der Luft situiert ist, ohne wirklich gesicherten Standpunkt, der sich zudem in einer Bewegung befindet. Danach wird aber auch dem Bildbetrachter eine Gefährdung seiner eigenen Position vermittelt, und natürlich wird so der Akt des Sehens eine Ausdrucklicher. Der Betrachter wird sich plötzlich seiner selbst als Betrachter bewusst.

(He repeatedly shows perspectives which only became possible with the use of camera cranes in film production; these suggest a viewer, who is situated high up in the air, without a really secure location and who is moving at the same time. Hence a sense of the danger to their own position is communicated to the viewer of the picture and, of course, the act of seeing becomes that much more patent. Observers suddenly become aware of themselves as observers. (Liesbrock, 1992, p.25)

*State*'s self-reflexivity certainly has this effect, and the film displays some shots reminiscent of Hopper, especially in its interiors. A similar, but not so pronounced, effect comes from *Million\$*'s images of the media invading the hotel, whilst its camerawork and the composition of many shots shows the influence of Hopper. Wenders is constantly concerned with an interchange of interior and exterior, with many shots incorporating window frames with perspectives leading out over the cityscape. He also uses travelling shots that leave interiors by these windows to reveal a wide shot that places the hotel in its downtown context. The converse also features as the camera travels across the façade to enter one particular room and close down the frame. In this way, he constantly reminds the spectator that there is a 'there' just outside the 'here' of the image in the frame. Even when the interiors become most claustrophobic, as when the 'family' debates what to do about the paintings, the soundtrack maintains the same 'here/there' correspondence by conveying street sounds from outside. Yet it is probably in individual compositions that the painter's example becomes most obvious: Eloise viewed asleep in her window from several floors up outside the hotel and lighted by the morning sun, or her and Tom Tom in a diner on their only 'date', highlighted by the neon and enclosed by a scheme of colour and shadow very reminiscent of Hopper's famous 'Nighthawks' of 1942.

From his director's audio commentary to his film, Wenders describes the final sequence as a "sad happy ending". Eloise is left, in a composition again reminiscent of Hopper, bereft in the hotel, but has learned the lesson about life from her lover's sacrifice of himself. This is Wenders' romantic and idealising imagination applied in retrospect for the benefit of any of his audience. Paralleling the way the plot shows the residents becoming briefly their own subjects for the media, so the 'making-of' reports provide the spectator with at least one other viewpoint on it. From them it is clear that the hotel in *Million\$*, in contrast to that in *Wings* but paralleling that of *State*, is too large to be understood as a chronotope. There are too many narratives running through it simultaneously and it hence contains too many 'theres' and 'elsewheres'. The setting might be seen rather as something Foucault might have defined as a "heterotopia"<sup>7</sup>, that is a space, fictional or actual, set aside from the

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<sup>7</sup> Foucault M. (1986). "Of Other spaces", *Diacritics* 16(1).22-27.

dominant ordering of space and place and often functioning as a refuge, a site for ritual, for celebration and holiday, or as a prison. Arguably, the use of the hotel in the film allows at least three of these interpretations, as does its reality in LA.<sup>8</sup> How Eloise identifies with the place demonstrates its function as a refuge, whilst the TV scenario, Tom Tom's movements around it and the death of Izzy show it as a site for ritual, and then there is the surveillance regime Skinner imposes on it, thereby turning it into a sort of prison. The wider context of the surrounding city figures in many shots, but Wenders always pulls back to the interior or, at most, to the adjacent street, when it comes to displaying an entire *mis-en-scène* so that he emphasises how his hotel is a bounded space indeed set aside from its wider location as a place.

Wenders called the place "ein Narrenschiff, ein Irrenhaus, Ersatz für die abgeschlossenen Asyle" ("a ship of fools, a madhouse, a substitute for the closed asylums", Köhler, 2000, p.45). Constructing the setting for the film meant engaging very closely with the actual location in what was, despite the opening and closing sequences, a very 'closed' shoot. The filmmakers rented the first two floors of the place, built a special set in its cavernous lobby and shot all other sequences but one in the streets immediately adjacent to the hotel block. The 'Production notes' accompanying the DVD text illustrate this concentration on proximity, where Wenders talks about the way one of his production designers sought to recreate the authenticity of the location by physically importing it into the fiction:

Serrell fügte hinzu, dass sich ihre Crew viel Mühe gab, die Sets so realistisch wie möglich zu gestalten, indem sie vor Ort ausfindig gemachte Materialien benutzten und das Hotel selbst als Anhaltspunkt nahmen...Zum Glück durften wir in die Räume einiger Bewohner 'reinschauen und statteten ein paar Zimmer der Figuren nach deren Vorbild aus. Jessicas Zimmer beispielsweise ist eine Kombination aus mehreren authentischen Räumen.

(Serrell added that his crew had taken great pains to construct the sets as realistically as possible by using materials they found in situ and using the hotel itself as reference point... Fortunately, we were allowed look into the rooms of some of the residents

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<sup>8</sup> See T. Kummer (2000). "Im Foyer der Melancholie", *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, 9 February, p.35. This report on the actual Frontier Hotel emphasises the surveillance maintained by the hotel management over the crowded and often squalid conditions. Particularly ironic is Wenders' comment from his "Audiokommentar" on how the poverty of the residents revealed itself in cinematic terms as they recognised Jimmy Smits from his tv roles but none knew Mel Gibson because they cannot afford to go to the movies (in LA!).

and furnish the rooms of some of the figures after their example. Jessica's room, for instance, is a combination of several authentic rooms.)

Wenders describes the hotel as a holding place for the most destitute residents of LA, who otherwise have to live on the streets in the makeshift encampments that appear every night and are swept away each morning by the street cleaners to free the daytime streets for business and tourism. He identifies such poverty as the result of the policies of the Reagan administration and comments in his audio commentary that: "...so ein Hotel könnte in Europa keinen Tag lang geöffnet bleiben." ("...such a hotel couldn't remain open a single day in Europe.") At this point, he is closest to recognising the tension inherent in his fictional hotel as *mise-en-scène*. The 'One Dollar Diary' refers repeatedly back to the difficulties of the location, such as the repulsive conditions in the actual hotel, or the hostility of some of its residents and of some neighbours to the film crew, which led to them wearing safety helmets against the odd missile from the upper floors. Such a report carries a self-reflexive irony in the parallel between the intrusion of the TV crews depicted in the film and the film crew working in the actual location to create those images. To return to Gardies' notion of 'topography' as placing the spectator *vis à vis* a film, viewing the supplementary DVD edition of the film makes it inevitable that we have to ask ourselves from where we view the film: whether we are not here indulging in entertainment as what one critic called the (brutal?) "Poetisierung des Elends" (poeticising of misery, Kopold, 2000, p.33).

Harvey draws on Gaston Bachelard<sup>9</sup> to describe the "poetics of space" (Harvey, 1990, p.221), where the perception of space arises from its identification by the imagination rather than definition by physical means. In *Million\$*, the 'poetics' appears most acutely in Wenders' use of the hotel's signage, a huge gantry on its roof. Throughout the film it features in wide shot, in close up, semi-abstract frame compositions and as the immediate context of Tom Tom's sprint across the roof to his death. It, therefore, labels the *mise-en-scène* as the vehicle for the story (the function then continues in the DVD tracks as the framework for the disc's menu). Like many of the interiors, the signage came in for a significant piece of digital modification post-production, when

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<sup>9</sup> Originally published in 1957 as *La poétique de l'espace*. Paris: Presses universitaires de France.



Wenders had the hundred of light bulbs restored in it, something technically impossible in situ. The filmic image as the dominant identity of the hotel, the 'here' we perceive, is, then, a purely virtual 'there'. Wenders response to the implications of such fictionalising of the location is to point to the conflict between the fairytale quality of his work (in this sense a virtual 'there') and the "unbarmherzigen Realität"/ ("pitiless reality", Kopold, 2000, p.33) of the actual place in the US. He concedes, however, that engaging with the place, becoming involved in the problem of its poverty, is not possible: "Dennoch muss man diese Leute nach dem Drehen hinter sich lassen. Was soll man machen?" ("Nevertheless one has to leave these people behind after shooting. What is one supposed to do?" Westpahl & Jähner, 2000, p.10). The ethics of filmmaking and the ethics of accepting its products as 'mere entertainment' surface through Wenders' use of this particular hotel for a filmic fiction. It can prompt the speculation as to whether his quest for an – aestheticised – authenticity of mis-en-scène in the actual location itself does not ultimately produce something that should be dismissed as kitsch.

### ***Conclusion***

In the framework of his abiding concern with narrative in cinema, Wenders' constructions of this hotel in particular relate to Gardies' (1993, p.216) speculation on the significance of filmic space/place, as "it reveals its structural and functional power in the entirety of filmic/cinematographic activity", for the general theory of narrative. The way he uses his hotels makes us as spectators aware of the dynamic of fiction and actual location, and of our own activity in creating a 'topography' out of the images as site for the narrative. In turn, the locations as sites for fictions become chronotopes, which can then possibly develop the implications of the heterotopia.

*Million\$* is extreme in its implications for the nature of the actual place used for the fiction. Its 'elsewhere' is the US in a broader, social/economic sense than this figures in *State*. Both films share a reference to a 'virtual elsewhere' in the media, although *Million\$*'s reference to the tycoon and TV news goes way beyond the cynical melancholy of the Hollywood presented in *State*. Both films share Wenders' characteristic trait of constant reference to a 'there' as their style and technique point to an 'out of frame' surrounding the hotel setting. *Wings* is, as befits its concentration on the chronotope in its final setting, much more closed and conveys an 'elsewhere'

though its dialogue rather than its imagery. By contrast, the hotel setting in *State* resists functioning as chronotope, in so far as it reinforces the film's self-reflexive theme about the impossibility of transferring the fictional narrative over into the sort of reality it suddenly takes on when it ceases to be a place to construct filmic mise-en-scènes. Regarded as any form of heterotopia, it appears completely negative: the place where the stories stopped because they are no use to the dominant 'elsewhere'. *Wings'* thoroughgoing chronotope works because it is fully embedded in the 'there' of Berlin, both in space and time. Its Hotel Esplanade functions as a site for 'remembering forwards', the complex narrative implications of which imply of the city as a sort of heterotopia where further narratives to come can demonstrate fundamental truths about nothing less than human existence itself. With *Million\$*, the hotel setting for his narrative carries huge implications for the 'there' constantly constructed out of frame and for the narrative and thematic range of 'elsewhere' it implies. It is ironic that the ethical implications of using the real setting of the hotel in this film lead Wenders back to the narrative implications of the abandoned 'guests' in *State*: when you have finished telling your story, can you simply check out of the hotel as if were a virtual space, a 'there', in contrast to your own existence in the actual 'here'?

The place depicted in the *Million Dollar Hotel* is, like those in the other two films above, a peripheral relic. The way it is depicted in and as space offers to us as spectators a 'topography' to suggest that stories can go on, even beyond the film's own fiction. How Wenders uses such spaces in his filmmaking indicates much about how his work has developed, "...engaged on a quest for time" (qtd. in Graf, 2002, p.63), and perhaps indicates something about the possibilities and the limitations of the locations created by this 'painter of space'.

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