Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory/Revue canadienne de théorie politique et sociale. Vol: 8, No. 3, (Fall/Automne, 1984)

THE IMAGE OF THE SELF IN WIM WENDERS' *THE AMERICAN FRIEND*

Stephen Snyder

> We live amid surfaces, and the true art of life is to skate well upon them.
> (Emerson, "Experience")

Structuralism and most recently Deconstruction have exerted immense influence in art and social criticism, partly by bringing into focus a disparate group of emerging attitudes whose common denominator has been dissatisfaction with the traditional notion of "self". For the Structuralists, particularly, the old vision of self as the centre of the personality has been replaced with a new functional myth in which self resides largely within social relationships: the self is relationship; there is no "I" outside of a "We". The worst side of the Structuralist claim is its tendency to become a Behaviorist psychology whose *tabula rasa* models of the mind are at odds with actual scientific work in area of brain chemistry.[1] The better side has been a clearing away of the values associated with the logocentric psychology of absolute self and a subsequent reassertion of the role of human creativity in reality. Derrida, for example, while equating consciousness with signification, sees the activity of signification as a play of "invention" over an otherwise absent universe.[2] The deconstructions of self in either of these systems (or of that in postmodernism) reject the notion of consciousness as a *privileged* "inner" event in favor of a view of it as a life field.

This rejection of consciousness as a sealed inner condition should logically find some validation in film studies, since film, by its persistence in clinging to the surface of man, of envisioning man as a "skin" with an epidermal relationship to his world, inevitably discloses human reality in terms of *exterial* visible relationships and processes. Unfortunately, in film studies, the result of this natural inclination has been the promotion of a film criticism (particularly among semiologists) obsessed with reducing films to a series of coded cultural ideologies. Subjective experience, being no longer a matter of common assumption, cannot be discussed at all: the subject becomes a linguistic text. Perhaps "Plato" has gone too far beyond "Socrates." It may be well to recall that the initial deconstruction of self which have shaped both Structuralism and Deconstruction are the writings of Nietzsche and, looming behind these, the work of his mentor, Emerson: figures who discuss the fictiveness of self as being no greater than that of universe in general. Subjective experience is no less authentic for being fictive, in fact its basis in "fiction" may be the source of its strength in a cosmos

which (as Derrida describes it) is a series of arbitrary, invented signs without origin.[3]

Wim Wenders' *The American Friend* draws much of its power precisely from its concern with the issue of self as it has been demarcated in the Twentieth-century. But the vision of self which emerges in this film is at once more tragic *and* comedic than that of Structurism or Post-structuralisms by virtue of the film's desire to hold fast to the facts of subjective experiencing in the face of the persistent sense of the dispersal of that subjective self around which experience seems to cluster. The self is not merely fictive but a series of fictions often generated without choice through the very act of relationship; while it may serve as a matrix of social texts, it is also a center whose social connections release energies and desires which could be neither foreseen nor understood prior to their emergence. Thus, in so far as the term can be used with meaning, *self* exists in Wenders' world as a succession of ghosts (and their subjective locus of origination) connected through memory, yet always, in their social context, threatening to explode out of control.

The Plot

Ripley, one of the film's two protagonists, is involved in a fraud scheme with a painter (presumably Henry Pogosh Derwatt) who produces paintings, inflated in value by his own presumed death.

Derwatt produces the paintings in a cheap flat in New York City and Ripley sells them at auctions in Hamburg. At one such auction Ripley meets a picture framer, Jonathan Zimmerman, who, disdainful of Ripley (by virtue of Ripley's reputation as a speculator) refuses to shake his hand. Offended by the snub and made aware by the auctioneer that Jonathan suffers from a terminal blood disease, Ripley directs a small time mobster, Minot, to Jonathan as a possible candidate for a murderer in Minot's private war with a group of New York pornographic movie makers. Jonathan, convinced by Minot that he has only a few weeks to live, is cajoled into murdering a member of a New York Jewish mafia, Mr. Brown, and eventually a second mobster, in order to earn a sum of money which he can bequeath to his wife and son. Ripley, attracted to Jonathan and his family visits the frame shop and allays Jonathan's dislike. Somehow divining Jonathan's inability to carry out the second job, Ripley rides the train with him and saves him from certain doom by killing the marked mobster and his bodyguard. In retaliation Ripley's house (a replica of the Whitehouse) is attacked by the remaining gang members, but Ripley and Jonathan, in their blundering fashion, dispose of the invaders. Ripley explains Minot's fraud to Jonathan and the two, accompanied by Jonathan's wife, transport the bodies to the seashore in their own ambulance in order to incinerate them. Jonathan in a final fit of hysteria tries to drive away without Ripley, but dies at the wheel of his car. Ripley is left alone on a pier singing Bob Dylan's "I Pity the Poor Immigrant".

The Complications

The bewildering character relationships have prompted viewers to reject the film as an exercise in pessimism, a political allegory, or a comment upon the chaos of modern life in which form and content unserendipitously merge.[4] And, indeed, the stress upon chaos in the film, coupled with its transfixed gaze upon incertitude and death, insures a degree of untidiness to the story, In addition, the behavior of the characters, prone to baroque inflections, poses a challenge to comprehension: are their motives ever commensurate with their behavior? WHile the actions of the gambler, Minot, and those of his enemies seem logical enough, those of Ripley are textured with unrelenting ambiguities. Indeed, the more we see of him the less we seem to know him. His participation in the intrigue against the picture framer, Jonathan, is given some basis by Jonathan's snub of Ripley at the auction, but the degree of Ripley's revenge seem out of proportion to the offense. Despite these peculiarities, the amorphous nature of his motivation assumes a disturbing credibility as the film ebbs its way toward its vision of the Protean self. For ultimately it is the personality as all-possible mystery which haunts the film, not as a ghost of fatalism but more a spectre of human possibility, tragic in the failure of the characters to achieve the relationships they need, comedic in its insistent affirmation of their freedom to become. Neither self-knowledge nor psychic determinism exist as moral touchstones for either the characters or the viewers; in Wender's film the self can only be discovered in motion, at the edge of unforeseen potential, a stranger to itself, crouched in preparation for metamorphosis, a criminal by its instinct to annihilate every preconception of what one thinks it should be.

To know oneself through a stable relationship to environment is a possibility largely denied the characters, and its contrary impulses, to deal with the radical unpredictability of one's world by understanding its patterns, or locating within oneself an absolute center, results in a detachment from life, and a self-enclosure, which impoverishes the individual and aggravates his sense of solitude. Even as we observe Ripley at his narcissistic rites of self-affirmation — recording his voice, or showering himself with instant polaroid self photographs — we are drawn relentlessly to feel that the underside of "identity," of "understanding" and "self-knowledge" may be as blank as the substructure of the pier on which he sits at film's end and equally vulnerable to innundation by unpredictable tides. The troubling incertitude of Jonathan's terminal illness looms over the film not only as a precipient metaphor of general human mortality, but more acutely as a projection of the collective "identity" anxiety of the characters, made manifest in the urge to establish within themselves a secure decoding structure capable of unsorting the knot of confusion which they profess to experience at an accelerating pace. "I know less and less about who I am" testifies Ripley, "or who anybody else is."

Much of what passes for confusion in the film grows out of the truculent stances taken by the characters toward each other. This hostility, of course is a response to the fear of loss of self, a way of securing one's borders. But these attempts to stave off self-destruction (Minot's scheme, Jonathan's wish to

preserve his memory, Ripley's protective "White House") conceal from the characters the murky interpenetrations of their respective psyches: it conceals from them the reality that possibilities of self may be ushered into being in the very act of relationship, that consciousness may be hungry for a larger piece of reality than can ever be anticipated, and that its consequent bewilderment may be the hallmark of increased experience rather than the entropic death implied in Derwatt's gloomy, "a little older, a little more confused."

Apperance as Reality

If Derwatt's seclusion does not strike us as abnormal, the reason may involve its evolution from the European tradition of the isolated artist which we have come to take for granted (Joyce's artist paring his nails in detachment) and with it the vision of self, as a sealed inner landscape, remote from a general life world. Wenders', however, is surely challenging the validity of this tradition.

While one consciousness may penetrate with varying degrees of success the inner worlds of itself or of others, what it finally lives with is the skin of the world. The more it looks to itself the more it looks through itself. What is peculiarly "inner" comes into being in relationship to what is "outer". Identity evolves "through things" in Wenders' phrase.[5] It is between surfaces that reality is somehow appropriated or given life. "We lack any sensitive organs for this inner world," writes Nietzsche in a phrase applicable to the film, "it is our relation with the 'outer world' that evolved it (consciousness)."[6] Or as Wenders' says: "perception depends on how much you allow yourself to perceive".[7] It is fundamental to the film that the events which set the narrative in motion emphasize the role of surfaces in life: the sale of a painting (suspect of fraudulence) and the parallel operations of some pornographers adventuring in the skin trade. In each case the individual's relationship to the surface of his world is portrayed as a malingering state of prostitution. In reducing the nutrients of consciousness, the visible world, to consumer products, the protagonists of the film mutually conspire in pretending that the external world has no role in their own psychic life. Indeed, each figure is attempting to live in a state of virtual hiding: Derwatt is sequestered in his New York studio, concealing both his identity and the age of his work; Jonathan is retreating from the modern world in his Nineteenth-century shop: Ripley is secluded in his replica American White House, and the Jewish mafia is holed-up in a two room office *cum* studio. To some degree the self-proclaimed identities of these figures, like their treatment of visible experience, are gestures of despair, attempts to protect a sense of self threatened by the instability of the general world. One protects himself by limiting experience and possibilities of growth. Jonathan tries to restrict his identity to the world of his shop, and Ripley, with his out-of-place hat, car, and house, to an archaic cultural identity of Cowboy. Derwatt, similarly, encloses himself in a protective role, pretending to be dead in order to imitate his own earlier work. Worth more dead than alive, he comprises a remarkable picture both of "identity" as self-imitation and of the relationship of consumerism to art, for his enterprise by its nature is an imitation of earlier work, precludes the possibility of personal

change. Converted to a business enterprise, creative energy negates its natural urge to grow and stumbles instead toward blindness and more perfect self-enclosure. Already limited to one eye, Derwatt, as his gestures imply, is becoming blind in his other eye as well. It seems to me that the issue, as presented, is not that these characteres aren't what they appear to be, but rather, that they wish to *limit* radically all that they might bring of themselves to the condition of appearance. Just as Derwatt's painted images are to remain eternally unchanging, so Jonathan will have his own self-image stay forever as he wishes it to be, "framed" in a kind of Pandora's box whose eventual disruption upsets his precarious sanity.

The arrest of Derwatt's images (which refuse, ironically, to resist change) reflects the arrest of spirit in Jonathan and Ripley. The result of this transfixion is made visible, first, in their foundering forms of self-affirmation. There is the strong suggestion that as the horizon of comprehensible self has receded, each character's capacity for empathy has been displaced into the urge to identify with sterile cultural symbols: Jonathan has his Germanic mechanical toys and Ripley his replica White House, replete with coca-cola machines, Wurlitzer jukeboxes and corn flakes. The tenants of his fragile "inner life," his reference points are imported symbols. It is perhaps this inflated need of both men to fix experience into symbolic moulds that endows their handshake adventure with such prodigious proportions: "You did that just because I wouldn't shake your hand" . . . "yeah."

But, if his inflation of the unaccepted handshake suggests Ripley's urge to hold fast to things, it manifests as well his deep desire to open himself to the world, to make an authentic contact with another human soul. It reveals the primordial condition of consciousness — that it comes to much of its being through relationship, that it is, in the philosophical sense of the word, "intentional," bound up with a universe from which it cannot be separated.[8] Such, at least is the implication of the film, for its web of inextricable connections which make detachment, finally, an illusion, also press one inevitably toward a sense that we are engaged in the question, "where are the borders to the self?" Ripley's dilemma is thus larger than any rational account of his "motives;" it discloses the urgency of life to connect with life. Ripley's resentment to Jonathan's snub involves all the nebulous emotional pressures of the conditions of existence itself.

To recognize the intentionality of one's personality, of one's "identity," is to recognize the potential of each human being to participate in or draw from oblivion dimensions of one's self. One senses such an act of mutual self-discovery in the relationship between Jonathan and Ripley. There is, first of all, a basic resemblance between the two. Certainly each manifests a passion to hold tight to stable forms: Jonathan with his narrow old world craftsman's life, Ripley in his imported American environment; Jonathan with his collection of mechanical devices whose attraction lies in their stability (the gyroscope) or controllability (his mechanical moving pictures), Ripley with his self-recording devices and his control of the painting operation (he clearly manipulates the bidding at the auction); and each with his protective seclusion. They relate to

each other as unrecognized alter egos, or, in more psychological terms, as the shadow side of each other,[9] entrepreneurs of a symbolically coded, and therefore static, world.

The shadowing of identity embraces the entire community in the film, revealing itself in the individual actions of the characters as well as in their relationships. Metaphorically, at least, Minot's unscrupulous schemes shadow Ripley as the darker side of the latter's own manipulations. Moreover, the progeny of their scheme returns to haunt Ripley in the figures of the Jewish mafia from whom he must eventually defend his bastion of retreat. Accordingly, Ripley literally shadows Jonathan, keeping tabs on his movements and appearing unexpectedly on the train at the moment of Jonathan's greatest vulnerability. In Ripley is projected the amoral potential of Jonathan which the latter has concealed from himself under a guise of sanctimonious distate for those who "speculate". In Jonathan is projected the dimension of Ripley which esteems life-orderliness as embodied in the home-life of Jonathan. Again, the shadow relationship is not merely dialectical. Both Jonathan and Ripley are shadowed by Minot who makes visible the criminal and huckster in each of them. And yet Minot too "is what he is". His suave manners are less a facade for a determinable hidden "self", than a depiction of his chameleon soul. His proposition to Jonathan is not only extraordinarily "up front" but proves uncannily accurate regarding Jonathan's term of life. Minot is, of course, himself shadowed by the New York pornographers who bomb his apartment. He is liberated from their ambulance accidentally as a by-product of Ripley's efforts to defend his domain from invasion. In the community of thieves, Minot and Ripley carry forth actions which, though taken with the intent of mutual exclusion, remain, nevertheless, reciprocal. The shadow side of each figure is thus, not so much a determined sub-structure but a potential made flammable by each character's supression of his potential creative life.

In the fluid yet collective psyche of the film, the pornographers, although they do not precisely shadow Derwatt, exist as the spectre of his own retreat from the life-world. The commercial filaments in his marketing of imagination, attain a full illumination in the open machinations of their pornography business. Yet like Derwatt they are characterized by their growing blindness. Angie blinded in his dark glasses becomes an easy victim of Jonathan on the ledge of Ripley's house. The Sam Fuller Character, restricted to the backward glance of his rear view mirror falls victim to Ripley disguised in Angie's jacket. His goliath blond body guard, with eyes locked straight ahead, is quickly rushed through the door of a moving train. This decay of seeing is reflected as well in the progression of television screens being turned off (rather than turned on) and in the unattended monitors in the Metro on which Wenders' camera lingers as Jonathan negotiates his escape from the murder of Mr. Brown. Wenders' world is one strenuously editing out visual energy from the life of its consciousness.

The slow extermination of seeing introduces a related dimension of the film which might be characterized as the demise of verbal communication. The break with life symptomized in the cancellation of sight seems to engender the impossibility of language to re-establish connections. Indeed, spiraling on

negative energy, words promote the isolation of the characters instead of abating it. In their most poisonous form words, consigned to the nebulous realm of rumor, are instrumental in initiating Jonathan's paranoia. An unsupported telegram from his friend Allen remarking upon the growth of Jonathan's disease launches Herr Zimmerman on a quest for absolute yet unattainable certitude. Aggravated by his unreflecting faith in Minot's verbal blandishments, the search opens him to the darkest sides of his potential for violence. Jonathan is destroyed, in a significant sense, by a leap into a verbal insubstantiality much like that he had sought to avoid in his life. Thus, his baseless floating state of mind is both characteristic and product of the reality of rumor, of words divorced from the life of experience.

As one of our prime senses, hearing plays a significant role in our consciousness second only to seeing. But the opposition of the two senses makes possible the use of metaphor on Wenders' part in terms of the operations of eye and ear. In that trope the ear by its particular attunement for spoken words is associated with the conceptualizing of experience in roughly abstract terms which imply judgments and the positing of value in rationally verifiable truth, thought to reside outside the realm of change. It is the model to which Jonathan tries to conform his life. In the logic of the trope, to live through the ear is to live in detachment from the immediate experience of the world. This is the metaphysical counterpart to Derwatt's retreat. In the other half of the metaphor, the eye is receptive only to the non-abstract flow of the visible world. It is by nature attuned to change and appearance, the elements which constitute the raw food of consciousness. If Jonathan may be used as an example, the decay of seeing begins with a "blind" surrender to the reality of words, but words, more precisely, taken as keys to the eternal and unchanging. When Jonathan sniggers to Ripley at their introduction, "I've heard of you," he metaphorically discloses his disposition to perceive the world through verbal preconceptions, largely evolved through hearsay. What, in fact, lies behind his urge to treat language as reality rather than function is probably his fear of death and nothingness. He becomes a true Structuralist, a figure, to borrow an Aldous Huxley phrase, for whom

> words are not regarded as standing, rather inadequately, for things and events; on the contrary, things and events are regarded as particular illustrations of words.[10]

We must suppose that our reality is larger than any set of verbal qualifiers can describe. We must suppose that our "self", in all its "intentional" possibilities, must forever elude our verbal hypotheses. We pass, as though in the rear car of one of Wenders' trains, into a reality which always needs to be named anew. The language of 'what is' proves forever unsatisfactory to the reality of 'what becomes'. By the negation of "seeing", of that becoming, we perceive only through the eyes of an already calcified language.

The Narrative Development

Quickly establishing his preponderant urge to gain the interior of things, Ripley makes his appearance in the film by exiting from a cab and coming inside Derwatt's apartment. The composition of the interior is revealed in a peculiar "depth shot": in the foreground we see Derwatt placing a hand over each of his eyes alternately, while in the far background a television screen glows strongly enough to divide our attention. With either subject we encounter a diminution in seeing: Derwatt is losing his sight, the television set goes blank. Large canvasses of sheer blue furnish the room — the color which will betray Derwatt and become associated at film's end with the ocean against which Ripley will sit and Jonathan will die. Derwatt's greeting to Ripley, "you son of a bitch", documents the truculent tone by which their relationship and all others are poisoned in the film. The exchange assumes a more friendly tone as Ripley produces money, certifying himself as a "serious man". The two men seem, at least, conspiratorially friendly yet distrustful of each other. Ripley leaves with the warning, "Don't be too busy for a dead painter". The background to this relationship is almost entirely absent, a matter of implication. The presentation of leads us to focus more upon its quality, an ambivalent interaction of repulsion and attraction, than its source. As with Jonathan's disease, the hostility has no source other than the very anxiety for the self which is so much the subject of the film.

The sense of ambiguity increases as Wenders cuts without conventional transitional devices to Jonathan walking with his child. Our sense of perspective (mimicked in the depth shot of Derwatt's apartment) is further challenged and further upset as we cut immediately to a stark overhead shot of Ripley sprawled drunkenly across some red satin sheets. The cutting not only conflates the three locations but introduces a gradual erosion in perspectival vision (in the ordered appearance of things) which will eventually culminate in the erasure of subject/object distinctions of which it provides an illusion. Wenders reveals the visible world to be militating against our urge to place it squarely in time and locale. The interpenetration of space suggests the merger of consciousness already underway. As though to affirm this inarticulate fusion as well as the troubled emotions of a human caught in an experience larger than himself, Ripley speaks to his cassette recorder: "December 6, 1976. There is nothing to fear but fear itself . . . I know less and less about who I am or who anybody else is". There is no perspective available on oneself; what passes for identity is without the temporal certitude Ripley's preface hopes to impose. We are eavesdropping upon the inner sanctum of Ripley; and appropriately, as though in answer to his remark, we cut to a shot of Jonathan sitting in the eerie light of his shop. He places a picture frame around his head and checks his safe, the innermost sanctum of security. His action, like Ripley's words, suggests an attempt at self-definition, a pinpointing of self in space as opposed to Ripley.s fix in time, but equally characteristic of the urge to locate borders of definition to one's being. Where does the self begin or end? Seemingly, everywhere in this film.

The precarious yet ineluctable connection of lives in the film finds a model in the auction scene. The articulations between characters establishes itself almost clandestinely. Jonathan talks to Allen; Ripley overhears, he in turn signals to a partner to raise the bidding. Thus, Allen unsuspectingly participates in Ripley's fraud. Soon we see that Gantner, seated at the action table, is also connected as is Jonathan's wife who maintains a low profile while observing Gantner and Ripley talk; a fact she does not reveal to Jonathan later when the information might change his course of action. Unknown to each other the characters are already part of each other's world, working with each other, connected unwittingly even in their attempts to deny the power of the other to affect him or her. The disruption of these illusory territorial borders is aggravated by Jonathan's very attempt to affirm them. Hence, his snub provokes Gantner to apologize to Ripley in such a manner that he violates Jonathan's privacy. Yet Jonathan, in refusing contamination by Ripley, testifies to his advanced infection by rumor (a puncture of the sealed self) by his loaded remark, "I've heard of you".

The penetration of one hermetic world by another gives birth to an extended process of self-rupturing which dominates the rest of the film. Following the violation of Jonathan's secret, we cut to an image of Minot trying to break into Ripley's house in the dark through a basement window. The darkness, the secretiveness, the remoteness of the window resonate with suggestions of unconscious penetration, psychic merger; Ripley's paranoic reaction suggests his sublimated dread of losing his sealed coded self through penetration, the fear which infects so many of the characters. They can invade each other only in the least visible way as it conceals the act and allays the potential anxiety of merger. However, in regard to Minot, at least, anxiety is the one characteristic he lacks. His insousience is almost alarming. As Ripley beards down upon him in the dark with a ferocious demeanor and a loaded gun, Minot smiles carelessly and prattles along with a nonchalant "Hi Tom". Tom's threat to "blow him away" is accepted with equal imperturbation. Minot's defense against life, his personal shelter, is a complete dismissal of its threats; this disregard has the surprising power of disarming those threats. But in being invulnerable to threat he also becomes invulnerable to connection and growth. His final image will discover him half bound and alone, physically debilitated, creeping off into the night. Nevertheless, in his first appearance Minot penetrates Ripley's domain and within a few minutes coerces Tom into abetting him. An unconfessed degree of mutual identification joins these men. Minot, perhaps, projects that thoroughly amoral potential of oneself which we would like to believe does not exist and which we fear. At the same time, as he enters Ripley's world from the outside, he evokes, and not merely represents, Ripley's amoralism. In fact, it may be that in this manner he eventually exhausts that capacity by making it visible as one exhausts a wound by lancing it. Accordingly, the departure of Minot from the film may be seen as the emancipation of Ripley, in part, from an unknown inclination within himself. The ambulance of dead criminals Ripley chauffers to the ocean can be understood as vanquished extremes of the theatricality for which he has been an eloquent apostle. The enclosure within the van of a group

of male figures identified as sexual chauvinists, power hungry capitalists, and shadowy figures, like Derwatt, seeking seclusion suggests Ripley may have, like a good cowboy, rounded up a herd of his most destructive alter egos. That he explodes it by the film's end suggests a tentative though unresolved step forward in curing his disease.

If he succeeds in drawing from Ripley his potential for "amorality", Minot virtually catalyses Jonathan's capacity for directly "immoral" action. More than this, Minot's blandishments initiate an unfolding process in Jonathan, not only in regard to his personality but also in terms of his literal relations to the world around him. Thus, in a significant sense, Jonathan's forays to Paris or Munich carry with them the psychological rupture of his sequestered sense of identity. In his "voyage out" he becomes unrecognizable to himself. Wenders captures his de-centering of personality at times in the style of shooting. We see Jonathan packing for his trip to Paris. The camera then assumes a slow tracking shot through the airport, ostensibly, or so we expect, from Jonathan's point of view. As the camera moves in upon a passenger we recognize the person to be Jonathan. The subjective point of view is without a subject; the subject, like his sense of identity, is expelled from his assumed point of reference into the world at large. The shot works almost as an evacuation of internal content, thus embodying the erosion of Jonathan's self-bounded comprehension of his life. This cinematic "blowing of his mind" nearly becomes literal when on his second journey we discover Jonathan with a gun jammed into his mouth with the hammer cocked. The resemblance of this scene to Ripley's earlier posture with his polaroid camera compels us to see that the natural trajectory of narcissistic enclosement is direct self-destruction.

With the killing of Brown the film begins to assume an almost allegorical dimension, a parallel to Hitler's purge. Jonathan, a good solid German citizen (although a Swiss immigrant), for reasons he does not wholly fathom, finds himself killing Jews: Brown, Angie, two Jewish mafiosi and finally the Sam Fuller character. This almost unintentional killing snowballs into a sense of holocaustal nightmare. Virtually hypnotized by his fear of death, his desire to leave an inheritance, and Minot's authoritarian persuasion, Jonathan is no longer able to distinguish between the reality of words and the probabilities of life. His day ends at a Paris bar whose exterior lighting is so obviously artificial as to suggest his complete leap into nightmare fantasy. On returning home he quickly spirits his wife and son to an amusement park as fantastic as the Paris bar. If all this intimates the quality of Jonathan's hitherto repressed fantasy life, that life, at least its pivotal images, is banal and childish. It is not too much to conclude that he is so vulnerable to Minot because he is so immature, that his minatory posture of moral anchorite is an adolescent fear of growing up. His condition supplies inherent criticism of the German mentality in modern history; but, as well, of the morality of inner self-containment as an arrest of growth and form of suicide.

Jonathan's naivety coupled with the stress on Americanism in the film (Ripley's cowboy garb and home) also, invites speculations regarding the film's concern with American male sexuality. The affair between Jonathan and Ripley, while never becoming openly homosexual, forms a Western love story of sorts

on the model of the Lone Ranger and Tonto. In the America depicted in the film women seem almost totally absent from male lives. Woman exists only in the commercial venture of the pornographers where she resides as a peculiar *image* — not even a sex object, but a provocative *image* whose lack of object status is all the better since she cannot be touched. Curiously while women are realizing their nature as "image", males see in their act only an opportunity for commercial gain; women finally counter by walking away into the night. The bonding of male to male suggests not only a fear of women but of growth generally. The all male "buddy" relationship is one particularly germane to adolescence. In evading women man protects himself from a fall into complicated sexuality. He also retains the illusion of a unified personality, a single identity, by denying the female side of himself.

The German side of the coin does not offer a better alternative. The conventional marriage of Jonathan and Simone is as mechanical as Jonathan's many toys. The inability of Simone to tell Jonathan about seeing Ripley converse with Gantner, the inability of Jonathan to speak openly to Simone of Minot's propositions, suggests a great deal of mutual distrust and fear. On what level do these people relate to each other? Is their marriage a vacuous ceremony of mechanical steropticon rituals? Jonathan is embarrassed that his wife is compelled to "work". His perception of sexual roles is basically primordial and betrays, as well, a leisure culture attitude toward working which denies it a part in self fulfillment and condemns it as something that shouldn't exist. Again, since working can become self-growth, and as a marriage without idealized, cliched role functions fosters personal growth, Jonathan, and with him the German middle class, show themselves to be juvenile delinquents, immature by their very conservatism and desire to retreat from active engagement with human beings. In their affection for each other Jonathan and Simone are not charged cells of Whitmanesque libido stammering profusions of love to each other. Marriage European-style is almost as empty as marriage American-style — which seems to exist only between members of the same sex. The question arises, how can men and women, within such sexual identity structure, give anything to each other beyond biological satisfaction? — only, of couse, by emptying themselves of suppressed possibilities and the desire to exist as an enclosed inner event.

For Jonathan and Ripley the externalizing of the suppressed potential of self means first the confrontation with and elimination of oversized male sexuality which on some level conditions their relationships. The second murder thus involves fighting an even larger male figure than the rather humongous Mr. Brown. Sam Fuller's bodyguard is a blond gorilla, a life-sized embodiment of the masculine ghosts (cowboys and lordly husbands) which haunt their dreams. This fellow proves difficult to be rid of. Resilient, he survives his dive from the train to reappear wrapped like a mummy in Sam Fuller's ambulance with enough strength to hinder Minot. He meets his sure demise only at film's end when, with Angie, he is immolated in the ambulance by Ripley. This conflagration of male ego ignites Jonathan's final attempt at returning home to be the person he once was. His effort is a last attempt to assert his independence from his

world, from his relationship with a part of himself. His urge to return home is the desire to find the insular safety of the past life which was illusory to begin with. Cinematically it is this final rupture which provokes Jonathan's death. His Volkswagon skids over the tide wall onto the beach; he dies in the land of "non-structure" which he has carefully sought to avoid.

Jonathan by his occupation as a framer, offers himself as a trope of the modernist view of art which argues that art orders experience. In Jonathan's story this is reduced to placing frames on pictures that, in fact, change under one's eye, even as Derwatt's "blue" does. Ripley, in the same vein, stands as a new kind of artist: someone who shoves you into chaos. And indeed, the power of art more likely lies in its forcing one to experience the disorderly quality of life than in finding some kind of rational code, a soporific comfort which at this point in history may be as illusory as the value of order in a telephone book. Art, Wenders implies, entails not the fixing of self-identity but the destruction of it and in that destruction the ignition of the discovery in each person of the possibilities of himself in others.

Thus we meet in the people that we meet, potentialities of ourselves, potentials recognized only on a preconscious level. We are impelled by motives which we cannot be aware of, motives which may have been called forth almost from nothing. The conscious conceptions we have of who and what we may be incommensurate with our Orphic nativity wherein is concealed a thousand forms, waiting birth. The self, because it is not something lived only between walls of skin and bone, is as large as the world, as large as the possibilities of consciousness through which it may be called into being. In some degree every man is born perpetually anew through interaction. The soul is like an eye gazing out upon a universe in whose creation it participates and in whose unutterable permutations there is always something more to be seen. This is certainly why one can never "go back" in life, as much as he might desire to do so, for the operation would require an amputation of consciousness — of unconsciousness — which cannot be negotiated without killing the organism. But there is also tragedy here for man must suffer himself to being called forth from sources he cannot know and do so or wither. His being in the world retains everything in the sense that he and it have conspired in the creation of something which demands its own life, which, like Derwatt's paintings, change against his will. Man the creator is no longer man the "orderer" of society. The new image of man emerging in films like *The American Friend* suggests, indeed, that he must give birth to many self images, that the demands of birth make his "criminality" almost a necessity, for whatever consciousness demands will predicate exceeding the laws of definition of self. Dangerous literal crime haunts Jonathan because he cannot commit psychological murder against an inherited "framed" idea of who he is. Ripley, contrawise, initially hides in an identity of the past (cowboy) but sheds this "frame" gradually as the movie progresses: his assertion, "I know less and less about who I am or who anybody else is", becomes, by film's end more a symptom of liberation than a cause for depression. I would like to suggest that what Wenders has tapped into in his film, in all its complex ambiguities, is the sense that the new image of the artist we have generated in the 20th century is that of the artist as criminal. The

one destroys ways of seeing, the other society's laws. The latter is to a degree the moral co-efficient, the failure of the former to achieve his job, a deflection of the artistic impulse. The artist murders stable forms (DaDa) and is allied to the criminal in the sense that each feels intuitively the reality of the self to be far greater than can be contained or defined within the given social system. Ripley and Derwatt, the criminal and the artist, are closely allied. In fact, all Wenders' criminals are played by film artists.

The archetypical figure here is perhaps Jean Genet:

> . . . I wanted to be myself, and I was myself when I became a crasher.[11]

The discovery of wholeness emerges as a rebellion against the increasing inter-changeability of people in a world marked by increasing repetition and similarity. Anonymity is the disease from which the experiencing subject seeks liberation and yet anonymity is the key to financial success. Jonathan, because he is unknown, makes a perfect murderer. Derwatt in order to increase profit, converts himself into an assembly line and creeps into comfortable anonymity. It is only Ripley who seeks to live out the human desire for individuation, for the sense of being wholly alive. In this sense he is the real artist of the film and his medium develops from simple con game shows to larger dramas in which he must play the leading role, as well as the function of director, to the destruction of the theatre metaphor itself in the demolition of the ambulance and its "staged" occupants. The criminal/artist realizes a sense of self as fulfilled potential while he eradicates the very notion of identity as either a "stable centre of the personality" or a structuralist vision of an ambiguous text. He makes of himself not a lamentation of signs but a succession of vital images.

The suppression of his fear of growth, which Jonathan nearly attains, capsizes his mind and cauterizes the emotions. Breaking the world into manageable pieces, placing a distance between action and emotion, destroys the illusion he seeks to protect: the immutable self. In some sense the borders of the self can only exist in the imagination, yet that is the source of the peculiar power of self-growth and of the power for one's release from the prison of identity. Self-awareness requires experience, but experience generates new selves or aspects of self, the knowledge of which can never be complete. Although the subject is real enough, his form is not only opaque but always in motion. He is in a significant sense that which he brings into visibility from the abyss over which he glides.

Stephen Snyder
Film/Theatre
University College
University of Manitoba

Notes

1. For example Nobel prize winner Roger Sperry "Some Effects of Disconnecting the Cerebral Hemispheres" *Science* 217 (September, 1982), 1223-1226 and his book *Science and Moral Priority: Merging Mind, Brain and Human Values* (Columbia University Press, 1982) both of which argue for a need to restore the notion of "self" to the study of psychology. "The events of inner experience, as emergent properties of brain processes, become themselves explanatory causal constructs in their own right interacting at their own level with their own laws and dynamics." ("Effects", p. 1226)

2. I refer to Derrida's view of traditional Western metaphysics which he calls "the metaphysics of presence" or the "logocentric tradition" which assumes that "signifieds" exist prior to a human consciousness in which they have value. Derrida upsets the chain of priorities including not only those of existentialism but structuralism, as well; signification is, like everything else, arbitrary, a dance of the mind over nothingness. Language (including image making) is a trace of something which never existed. The universe thus becomes an arbitrary linguistic fiction, present only through our "sign-making" of it, but sign-making not as a code-making which points to an ultimate decodable presence. For Derrida reality, while a system of signs, is not decodable in any absolute way. See, for example, *Positions* or *Of Grammatology* in any edition. Self, as a difference of meanings, is no more or less real than anything else.

3. See specifically, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976) pp. 159, 167, 163.

4. Most essays on the film explore it as a political allegory. Michael Covino, "Wim Wenders: A Worldwide Homesickness," *Film Quarterly* 32:1 (Winter, 77-78), 9-19; Timothy Corrigan, "The Realist Gesture in the Films of Wim Wenders," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 5:1 (Winter, 1980), 205-216; Marsha Kinder, *"The American Friend," Film Quarterly* 32:2 (Winter, 78-79), 45-48; Karen Jaehne, *"The American Friend," Sight & Sound* 47:2 (Spring, 1978) 101-103; Jurgen E. Schlunk, "The Image of America in German Literature and in the New German Cinema: Wim Wenders' *"The American Friend," Literature/Film Quarterly* 7:3 (1979), 215-222.

5. Wenders' direct comments upon the issue of identity can be found in an interview with Jan Dawson, *Wim Wenders* (New York: New York Zootrope, 1976); on page 12 he notes:

> ... the idea of man as an identity started in this century. And I think the cinema is the only adequate way of pushing this idea. Cinema is in a way the art of things, as well as persons, becoming identical with themselves. And foreigness for me is just a throughway to a notion of identity. In other words, *identity is not something you just have, you have to go through things to achieve it. Things become insecure in order to become secure in a different way.*

   Things certainly do become insecure, but one will look long through Wenders' work to see a film in which they become secure in a new way.

6. *The Will to Power*, translated by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1968), p. 283.

7. Dawson, page 12.

8. Especially Edmund Husserl, *Ideas: General Introduction to Phenomenology*, translated by W.R. Boyce (New York: Macmillan, 1931). There is, of course, a Structuralist critique of this as that in Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966) and a critique of both Levi-Strauss and Heidegger in Jacque Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, translated by G.C. Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976) who asserts the nihilistic stance: "that which words name have already escaped, have never existed," p. 159.

9. The term is borrowed from Carl Jung, *Basic Writings of Carl Jung*, ed. by V. De Lazlo (New York: Macmillan, 1959): "The meeting with oneself is, at first, the meeting with one's own shadow." p. 305.

10. Aldous Huxley in the "Forward", to Jiddu Krishnamurti, *The First and the Last Freedom* (New York: Harper Row, 1954), p. 10. This is, of course, the tradition against which Derrida argues i.e. that "things" are ultimately an absolute presence. Huxley has a point, however, that the presence of "symbols" is equally suspect as guarantor of reality.

11. Jean Genet, *The Miracle of the Rose*, translated by Bernard Frechtman (New York: Grove Press, 1966), p. 27.