

Film Genre (CAMF5005)

Narrative and genre in *Paris, Texas*

This essay examines narrative and genre in *Paris, Texas* (Wenders 1984), a road movie directed by Wim Wenders and photographed by Robby Müller, based on a screenplay by Sam Shepard. It starts with a discussion of some general principles of narrative theory, before proceeding to an overview of the narrative conventions of the road movie. This is accompanied by an analysis of the narrative of Wenders' film in light of these principles in order to observe the ways in which narrative and genre interact. The essay also examines the juxtaposition of the man-made and the organic, how this is seen to involve a critique of received notions of technology and progress, and the way this theme is articulated through the cinematography and art direction.

Abbott defines narrative as 'the representation of events, consisting of *story* and *narrative discourse*' [emphasis added], where 'story' can be understood as 'an event or sequence of events', and 'narrative discourse', more commonly referred to as 'plot', as 'those events as they are ordered within the narrative'.¹ *Paris, Texas* is interesting in that many of the key events of the narrative occur several years before the plot begins, that is, prior to the disappearance of the main protagonist, Travis Henderson (Harry Dean Stanton), following the break-up of his marriage to Jane (Nastassja Kinski), who then left their young son Hunter (Hunter Carson) with Travis's brother Walter (Dean Stockwell) and his French wife Anne (Aurore Clément) in Los Angeles before vanishing herself. These events form part of the story, and thus the narrative. However, they are not part of the plot, which starts with Travis wandering alone through the

¹ H. Porter Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p.14.

desert, four years after his marriage break-up and subsequent disappearance.

We have established that narrative consists of story and plot, that is, an event or sequence of events on the one hand, and on the other, the order in which those events are arranged and presented to the audience. However, this does not tell us much about how narrative engages, entertains and gratifies the audience. At the most basic level we can say that this is achieved through the creation of conflict, also known by its Greek name 'agon', and its subsequent resolution, referred to as closure. However, while the resolution of conflict provides gratification, it is actually the lack of closure which helps to keep the audience engaged. This lack is commonly known as suspense, and it is one of two key elements which sustain the narrative. The other is surprise, which occurs when an unforeseen event violates our expectations. The importance of suspense and surprise to narrative is summarised by Abbott, who maintains that 'all successful narratives of any length are chains of suspense and surprise that keep us in a fluctuating state of impatience, wonderment, and partial gratification'.²

If we probe a little deeper, we find that suspense and closure operate on the 'level of expectations' and the 'level of questions', as first determined by the French semiotician Roland Barthes. The 'level of expectations' concerns the way in which the narrative builds anticipation and suspense via a chain of events where the eventual outcome cannot be predicted with any degree of certainty. Barthes called this the 'proairetic code'. Regarding the 'level of questions', this concerns questions posed by the narrative regarding aspects of the story which remain a mystery until they are fully explained. Barthes called this the 'hermeneutic code'.

² Ibid., p.53.

Taking the proairetic code first, in *Paris, Texas*, once Travis has been reunited with Hunter in Los Angeles, he makes a spontaneous decision to go in search of Jane, taking his son with him. This creates expectations, and, as the outcome is unforeseeable, builds tension. Not only is the audience unable to predict whether Travis and Hunter will be successful in their search and how Jane will react when, or if, she is confronted, but it is also unclear how Walt and Anne will respond to the news that Travis has taken Hunter, all of which creates anticipation and suspense. Proceeding to the hermeneutic code, the sense of mystery generated by questions pertaining to Travis's past is one of the defining characteristics of the narrative, especially given that Wenders and Shepard are in no hurry to furnish the audience with answers. The expectations and outcomes, together with the questions and answers of the narrative are examined further below in an overview of the narrative conventions of the road movie.

Each film genre has its own codes and conventions. This applies to narrative as well as to other elements such as character, location, and iconography. The central narrative theme of the road movie is the road itself. It is also the setting where most of the action takes place. In one respect, the road movie is similar to the western in that it is named after the setting, whereas other genres take their names from such elements as the medium (musical), the theme (war, crime), and from traditional art forms (epic, comedy). However, as noted above, the road is not merely the place where the road movie is set, but, in a more abstract sense, it is also the principal narrative theme. As Neil Archer observes, 'the road in the road movie is never just a background: it is typically both the motivation for the narrative to happen, and also the place

that allows things to occur'.³ He goes on to say that '[i]nstead of being just a transitional space between A and B, it is the space itself between A and B that becomes the focus of the road movie'.⁴ Thus, in addition to providing the setting, the road also provides the impetus – the 'drive' – for the narrative, as well as being 'the place that allows things to occur'.

Regarding the 'things' to which Archer refers, we find that these occur internally, with the characters being altered by their experiences during the course of the narrative, as well as taking place externally in the physical spaces of the story world. Interpreted thus, the term 'the road' can be taken to imply two interconnected but distinct kinds of 'journey', one literal and the other figurative; one physical, the other existential. In the sense that its central motif can be interpreted metaphorically as well as literally, and that it is seen to encompass existential issues, the road movie is similar to film noir, where the term 'noir' (or 'black') is similarly complex. Likewise, it resembles the *Bildungsroman*, a literary genre where the 'journey' from inexperience to maturity of the main protagonist provides the primary narrative focus.

This provides us with a broad overview of the narrative conventions of the road movie. Timothy Corrigan is more specific, defining the road movie in terms of four, main elements. These are:

A breakdown of the family unit, a context in which events are acted upon characters and obstacles are constantly being presented in the way, a protagonist who is readily identified with their means of transportation ... and a focus of men in the absence of women.⁵

If we examine all the above points in the context of *Paris, Texas* and apply the principles of the proairetic code, we find 'the road' is central, rather than peripheral or incidental, to the events

³ N. Archer, *The Road Movie: In Search of Meaning* (New York, Chichester: Wallflower Press, 2016), p.1.

⁴ Ibid., p.1.

⁵ Timothy Corrigan, *A Cinema Without Walls: Movies and Culture After Vietnam* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1991), pp.143-5, in Marita Sturken, *Thelma and Louise* (London: BFI Publishing, 2000), p.41.

of the plot, and that the narrative is seen to involve existential as well as physical 'journeys'. Turning to Corrigan's four defining characteristics, the narrative does indeed involve the break-up of Travis's marriage, and events being acted upon characters and obstacles placed in their way at every turn (see the analysis of the opening scenes below). Regarding the identification of the protagonist with a means of transportation, Wenders' film is interesting in that, at first, Travis refuses even to enter a vehicle, preferring his own 'means of transportation', that is, to walk, and it is only later in the narrative that he becomes identified with a car. The reasons for this are explored later in the essay. Regarding the 'focus on men in the absence of women', this is only partly true of *Paris, Texas*, a point which is also explored further below.

Returning to the existential and physical 'journeys' of the film, the narrative is seen to chronicle three, main journeys: the first involving Travis; the second, Travis and Walt; and the third, Travis and Hunter. These either contain key events taking place in the present, or enable one of the characters to divulge details regarding important events from the past, thus answering questions, satisfying expectations, and enabling closure to occur – not simply at the end of the narrative, but at various points within it.

Travis's journey is in progress from the first scene to the last and provides the main thematic focus of the film, which starts with him wandering the desert and ends with him driving into the night towards destinations unknown. During the opening scene, Travis seems an incongruous figure against the rugged West Texas landscape, ill-prepared for the harsh desert climate, dressed in a pinstripe suit and a red baseball cap, and drinking the last drop of water from a

white plastic container, which he then discards. The fact that he runs out of water generates suspense. He continues to wander until he stumbles upon a ramshackle cantina, a place where he is likely to find refreshment and where closure may thus occur. Having searched in vain for a drink, he helps himself to a handful of ice, thereby quenching his thirst. However, upon consuming the ice, he passes out. Thus, as one chain of events resolves in closure, another commences. Travis is tended to by Doctor Ulmer (Bernhard Wicki) who then calls Walt in Los Angeles. Walt flies to Texas, where he is informed by Ulmer that Travis has escaped. The sinister Ulmer (whose name could be a nod to Edgar G. Ulmer, the director of *Detour*, a 1945 film noir that has affinities with the road movie) tries to extort money from Walt in return for information about Travis's whereabouts, but Walt refuses to pay up and goes in search of his brother, leading to more anticipation and suspense.

Walt finds Travis wandering the desert again and persuades him to return to Los Angeles to be reunited with Hunter. Travis refuses to fly, forcing Walt to drive all the way back from Texas to California. Travis remains silent for most of the trip, leaving Walt to do most of the talking and to deliver an involuntary monologue, similar in narrative terms to a Voice-Over Narration (V.O.N.). The journey involving the two brothers enables them to re-bond, and thus is effective in resolving tension. However, it also allows Walt to divulge key details of the story, such as the length of time Travis has been missing, and that Hunter is now living with him and Anne, and is thus also effective in answering questions and dispelling mystery. The journey involving Travis and Hunter, while it is instrumental in enabling father and son to develop their relationship, thereby mirroring the car journey undertaken by Travis and Walt, is also the means by which we discover, finally, the reason why Travis and Jane broke up, and why Travis took to the road.

It is revealed that Travis's feelings towards his young wife turned from love to obsessive desire, to jealousy, and finally to rage, and that Travis became abusive towards Jane, who then left him, taking Hunter with her. Following these revelations, one is able to see Travis's travails in the desert as a metaphor for the psychological and emotional torment he has experienced in life, that is, to equate his literal and figurative 'journeys' – which is to say nothing of the pain experienced by his wife, Jane.

Where the hermeneutic code is concerned, the opening scene poses various questions regarding the identity of the lone traveler and the reasons why he came to be wandering the desert alone, with subsequent scenes, particularly those involving car trips taken together by the main, male characters, providing the answers. One can see that while all narratives ask questions irrespective of genre, the main questions which *Paris, Texas* asks are quite specific to the road, and to the road movie. As with the events of the narrative, the questions raised also pertain to existential issues relating to the traveler and the 'journey' he is making.

There is a further point to be made here in respect of gender. As previously noted, Corrigan believes that one of the defining characteristics of the road movie is its 'focus on men in the absence of women'.⁶ Marita Sturken takes this further, observing of the 'classic road movie' that 'Women were not the protagonists of road movies ... they were not awarded the privilege of travel'.⁷ Given that much of the narrative concerns the journeys undertaken by Travis, Walt, and Hunter, it could indeed be said that *Paris, Texas* focuses upon 'men in the absence of women'. However, this is not strictly the case. The narrative also involves a fourth journey,

⁶ Corrigan, *A Cinema Without Walls*, pp.143-5, in Sturken, *Thelma and Louise*, p.41.

⁷ Sturken, *Thelma and Louise*, p.39.

namely that made by Jane. Leaving Travis, Texas, and an abusive relationship behind her, Jane, in desperation, deposits her own child on her in-laws' doorstep, before returning to Houston to attempt to make a new life for herself. Thus, although her physical journey does not form part of the plot (bearing in mind her monthly trips to the bank in Houston to make deposits to pay towards Hunter's upkeep), it is a constituent part of the story; and, as with the journeys involving male characters, it also concerns existential issues, that is, her 'path' through life. In addition, through its engagement with various relationships, including between brothers, husbands and wives, and parents and children, the narrative gives primary focus to the barriers which prevent meaningful human interaction, and which are seen to exist regardless of gender. *Paris, Texas* also suggests that while love can overcome such obstacles, as in Jane and Hunter's case, it can also be the main reason why such obstacles exist, as with Jane and Travis.

It needs to be stressed that, rather than resolving conflict in a clear and decisive manner, *Paris, Texas* tends to allow audience members to form their own conclusions regarding certain key questions and events. It is therefore distinguished by a lack of closure, pertaining to principal elements of the narrative. For instance, uncertainty hangs over the future of Walt and Anne, whose relationship, it seems, may depend upon the continued presence of Hunter for its survival. This emerges following Travis's arrival at Walt and Anne's Los Angeles home. Seeing that Walt is encouraging Travis and Hunter to re-bond, Anne demands of her husband 'What will happen to us if we lose Hunter?' As neither Walt nor Anne are seen or heard from again after Travis and Hunter arrive in Houston, this question is never answered, leaving the matter of their relationship difficulties unresolved.

While lack of closure is characteristic of the European 'art film', including the work of Wim Wenders and other 'German New Wave' directors, it is unusual in genre cinema. However, although closure is the norm where the majority of genres are concerned, this essay argues that the narrative conventions of the road movie are characterised by a lack of closure, as exemplified by films such as *Thelma and Louise* (Scott, 1991), *The Darjeeling Limited* (Anderson, 2007) and *Paris, Texas*, all of which leave certain key questions and events either partially or wholly unresolved.⁸

Why should this be the case? It is argued that the 'open-ended' narrative is entirely appropriate to the road movie. One of the main narrative themes of the genre is freedom: from the constraints of everyday existence as well as from the authority of the state. Sturken argues that the road movie 'is about the automobile as an expression of freedom and individuality',⁹ observing of *Thelma and Louise* that the narrative establishes 'the road as a site of liberation for the women, an escape from both their dreary lives and the law', and that this 'situates it quite firmly within the genre of the road movie'.¹⁰ The reason the 'open-ended' narrative works in the context of the road movie is because it implies that it is merely the plot which has reached its conclusion, whereas the 'road' continues beyond the limits of the diegesis, indeed, beyond the confines of narrative convention. In addition, audience members are themselves free to form their own conclusions, with *Thelma and Louise* – which ends with a freeze-frame showing the two main protagonists suspended in mid-air over a desert canyon while trying to escape from the police – being a prime example.

⁸ For further detail regarding the lack of closure in the narratives of Wes Anderson, see my essay 'Curating Conflict: Wes Anderson and the Art of Dissonance' (2018).

⁹ Ibid., p.41.

¹⁰ Ibid., p.39.

Thus far, the essay has focused mainly upon formal elements, for instance, drawing upon the 'structuralism' of Barthes to examine the construction and function of narrative. Barthes was not the first theorist to attempt to define narrative in such terms. In the view of Wallace Martin, the Russian formalist, Viktor Shklovsky, believed that 'all aspects of narrative, including the subjects treated, are "formal" elements that can only be understood through a study of the laws of linguistic and artistic construction'.¹¹ These approaches, namely, 'formalism' and 'structuralism', are very useful in helping us to understand how narrative works. However, it is also necessary to examine the road movie in its social, historical, and ideological contexts. As Martin argues, formalism 'may serve as a healthy corrective to theories asserting that fiction is simply a transcript of reality', however, 'neither concept is adequate by itself'.¹²

We have noted how the 'road' in the road movie can be interpreted as a metaphor for human experience, rather than simply as a formal element (the setting). However, as with all genres, the road movie also provides the filmmaker with the means of commenting upon social conditions. For example, regarding the downbeat ending of the influential road movie *Easy Rider* (Hopper, 1969), which concludes with the murder of the freewheeling protagonists Wyatt (Peter Fonda) and Billy (Dennis Hopper), Lee Hill argues that the filmmakers 'seemed to have known instinctively that the notion of the 60s as a decade of idealism, progress and hope for the future was as fragile as a piece of celluloid'.¹³ Hill also makes an insightful comparison between *Easy Rider* and the Western, observing that the narrative begins with 'a rejection of technocracy, an abandonment of the cities built since the West was won', and that Hopper's

¹¹ Wallace Martin, *Recent Theories of Narrative* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1986), p.47

¹² *Ibid.*, p.50.

¹³ Lee Hill, *Easy Rider* (London: BFI publishing, 1986), p.33.

film 'reverses the premise of most Westerns' where '[t]raditionally, the lawlessness of the frontier is shown as being tamed by the individual, family, or state'.¹⁴

There are two points of interest here. First, as Hill identifies, genre films are seen to comment, not only upon society, but upon other genre films. Second, his observation that *Easy Rider* effectively 'reverses the premise of most Westerns' through its perceived 'rejection of technocracy' is relevant to *Paris, Texas*, which, as discussed below, is also seen to critique received notions of technology and progress. In so doing, the makers of *Paris Texas* are seen to engage, not merely with existential issues and social themes, but with the traditions of genre cinema, including those of the Western as well as the road movie.

The Western is similar to the road movie in other ways. As Archer observes, John Ford's Western *Stagecoach* (1939), which focuses upon the journey of a motley group of travelers across a 'visually awe-inspiring but treacherous desert landscape',¹⁵ is seen to anticipate the road movie. The panoramic aerial views with which *Paris, Texas* opens, and which show a lone figure moving through the 'treacherous desert landscape', invite comparisons, not only with *Stagecoach*, but with other classical-era Westerns such as *Shane* (Stevens, 1953), and *High Plains Drifter* (Eastwood, 1973) from the revisionist, 'New Hollywood' period. In addition to cinematography, given that Travis is part-outcast, part-guardian angel, a weather-beaten drifter who emerges from the wilderness to improve the lot of a family of which he himself can never be a part, he resembles Shane (Alan Ladd), and also Ethan Edwards (John Wayne), the conflicted main protagonist of another of Ford's Westerns, *The Searchers* (Ford, 1956).

¹⁴ Ibid., p.34.

¹⁵ Archer, *The Road Movie*, p.16.

There is also a comparison to be made between the ideological position of *The Searchers* and that of *Paris, Texas*. Hill observes that Ford's Western challenges the myth that the 'lawlessness of the frontier' was 'tamed by the individual, family, and state' by showing that such 'civilising forces had their price'.¹⁶ This is due largely to the representation of the character of Ethan Edwards, specifically, his violently aggressive behaviour and his racist attitude towards the indigenous peoples of North America, although as Hill goes on to say, despite his revisionism, Ford still 'assumes that the frontier's taming was inevitable and necessary'.¹⁷

The textual analysis which follows aims to show that *Paris, Texas* also engages in a critique of received notions of progress, in the tradition of the revisionist Western, and in the spirit of the seminal road movie *Easy Rider*, which, as Hill argues, 'reverses the premise of most Westerns' through its perceived 'rejection of technocracy'. It is argued that Wenders' film articulates this theme through the juxtaposition of the organic and the man-made in the narrative, as visualised by Müller's cinematography and Kate Altman's art direction, by means of, respectively, the counterpointing of the natural landscape and the built environment, and the use of colour in the mise-en-scene. It explores the way in which the aforementioned themes, which are abstract in nature, are seen to be made concrete through the use of certain visual motifs. As Abbott points out, 'as a general working rule for the discussion of narrative, a theme is abstract and a motif is concrete'.¹⁸ It is not intended to provide definitive proof that this is what Wenders and his creative team set out to achieve, rather, it is an interpretative reading which links narrative themes with visual elements and is reinforced by theoretical argument.

¹⁶ Hill, *Easy Rider*, p.34.

¹⁷ Ibid., p.34.

¹⁸ Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, p.88.

As noted previously, Travis presents an incongruous figure as he trudges unsteadily through the desert landscape. However, there is also a sense in which he is very much at home. Having shown him as an insignificant speck in the panoramic establishing shots at the start of the scene, Müller then elects a deep focus, medium close-up of Travis, shot from a low angle, with the desert rock formations looming up behind him (*plate 1*). This effectively merges Travis with the rocks in the background. Analysing the cinematography in isolation from the narrative momentarily, it would seem that the shot is making a connection between Travis and the landscape. One might even say that the cinematography suggests an affinity between human beings and nature. Turning now to the events of the narrative, while the visuals may be suggesting that he is 'at one' with the desert, Travis is in a perilous situation due to running out of water. He seems unfazed, however, and, despite the danger he is in, simply carries on his way. It is only when he gets to Terlingua and meets Doctor Ulmer that the trouble really starts.



If Travis appears most 'at home' when travelling, despite the seeming contradiction, and that he gets into difficulty when his venturing is interrupted, then this is much in keeping with the narrative conventions of the genre. As Sturken observes in relation to *Thelma and Louise*, the road in the road movie is a 'site of liberation', and this applies to Travis as much as it does to the heroines of Scott's film. Like all road movie protagonists, they are 'most happy when they

are moving'.¹⁹ Conversely, danger lurks whenever they come to a halt. If *Paris, Texas* is seen to involve three journeys (four including Jane's), then there are also two points in the narrative when Travis stops moving and, consequently, puts himself in danger: the first of these is the encounter with Ulmer in Terlingua; the second, at the Houston club where Jane works, and where Jane's boss, Slater (John Lurie), informs him 'You're in the wrong place'. This line can be interpreted literally, but also figuratively to mean that Travis no longer belongs in the city, amongst the high-rise buildings and seedy clubs, but 'on the road'.

Returning to the determining characteristics of the genre and the fact that the protagonist is identified with a means of transport, at the start of the film, Travis's preferred method of getting from A to B is to walk. In fact, as Walt's failed attempts to get him aboard a car and a plane attest, he has developed an aversion to various means of transportation during his four years on the road – a clear 'rejection of technocracy'. Examining the text more closely, we find that the 'roads' at the start of the film are not roads at all, but undefined paths across the desert scrub. The point is that, while he does eventually start driving midway through the narrative, Travis is identified with movement rather than with a particular mode of conveyance.

It is therefore argued that Travis is associated with the natural milieu and thus the 'organic', and that, in addition to this, the organic is counterpointed with the 'man-made', the 'artificial'. This theory is supported by a corresponding shot of Walt in a subsequent scene which would seem to pair Walt with the 'man-made'. When Doctor Ulmer calls him from the clinic in Terlingua, Walt, a sign-maker by trade, is working on-site, a mobile phone held to his ear, and with a high-tech building looming behind him (*plate 2*). Like Travis, he also wears a baseball cap.

¹⁹ Sturken, *Thelma and Louise*, p.41.

The shot is a graphic match for the shot of Travis in the desert (*plate 1*). The mise-en-scene, which is replete with 'state-of-the-art' technology, and the similarity of the composition of the shot to the one of Travis in the desert, effectively counterpoints Walt with his brother. He is quite literally linked with the man-made, of course, given that he is a sign-maker, but, more figuratively speaking, he can also be associated with materialism, consumer culture, and with the American media industry, considering also that he lives in Los Angeles.

The colour palette is also seen to counterpoint the organic and the artificial. This occurs in several ways. Firstly, the colours red, white and blue often appear together in the same shot. This takes place throughout the film and can be seen as a recurring motif which works in concert with the cinematography to articulate the aforementioned narrative theme. Indeed, the art design is stylised and expressionistic, in the best traditions of Weimar cinema. The most readily available interpretation of the red, white, and blue combination is that it references the American flag. This is endorsed by the fact that the flag appears in a number of shots. In fact, in the sequence where Walt and Travis attempt to find the hire car in which they drove to the airport and which Travis, having refused to fly, is insisting that they re-hire, and which is a veritable symphony in red, white, and blue, the word 'American' – half of the 'American Airlines' logo on the side of a passenger jet – appears in the deep focus shot (*plate 3*).

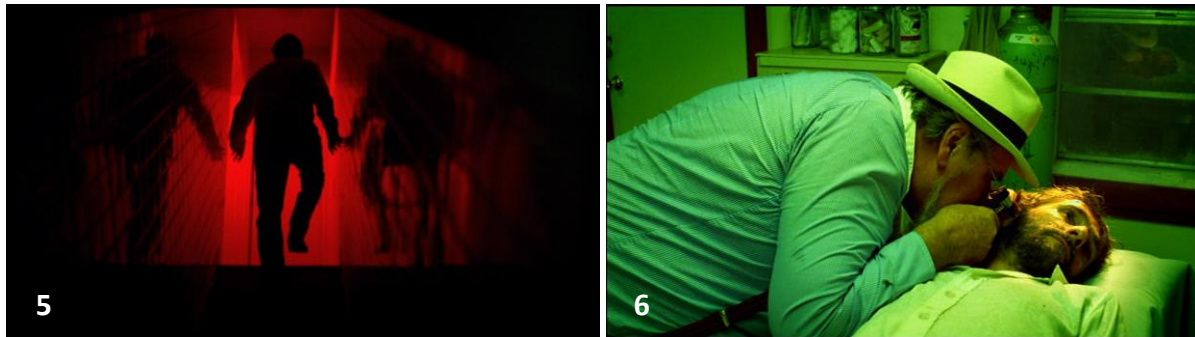
The 'flag' motif, so to speak, could be interpreted as a somewhat whimsical nod to that most American of genres, the road movie, and an intertextual reference to *Easy Rider* and Wyatt's motorbike, helmet, and jacket, which are all adorned with the 'Stars 'n' Stripes' (*plate 4*). However, there are further connotations. In the opening scene, Travis, wearing a red baseball

cap, is carrying a white plastic container with a blue lid. Even though, as noted, the cinematography merges him with the environment, suggesting an affinity between human beings and nature, the narrative tells us that the desert poses a threat to him. However, he also poses a threat to the desert, as demonstrated by the fact that he discards the plastic container at the end of the opening sequence. It is therefore argued that the 'flag' motif is also seen to engage in a subtle critique of consumerism, and to engage with environmental issues.



The film industry depends upon consumer culture for its existence, while the road movie depends upon gas-guzzling cars and bikes for its. It might thus appear hypocritical for *Paris, Texas* to engage in a critique of American consumerism, if, that is, it were contingent upon film directors, screenwriters, cinematographers and production designers to paint everything in black and white (it would also render 'pop art', not to mention Bob Dylan's entire back catalogue null and void). The beauty of Wenders film – and it is very beautiful to look at, irrespective of narrative codes and genre conventions – is that it does not judge, and when it does make a comment, it does so in a balanced and intelligent manner. Furthermore, it is important to remember that whatever social commentary *Paris, Texas* is seen to make, it is an artistic construction rather than simply a 'window on the world', and as such it is in dialogue with its own artistic traditions and generic conventions. Interpreted within these contexts, the

'flag' motif can be understood both as a commentary upon American consumer culture as well as an intertextual reference to *Easy Rider*, a film which, while it may appear inseparable from 1960s counterculture, is nonetheless also an artistic construction.



The colour in *Paris, Texas* is particularly interesting, given that the connotations vary according to context. For instance, while red in combination with white and blue is seen to have the aforementioned connotations, it is also used in a more conventional way to signify both anger, for example, when Travis confides in Anne about the rage he displayed towards Jane, and danger, as when Travis climbs the stairway of Slater's club (*plate 5*) (the chapter title on the DVD is entitled 'Travis Enters the Underworld' for good reason). However, the use of the colour green is particularly innovative. For instance, it is also used to signify danger, as in the scene at the Terlingua clinic when Travis is being attended to by Ulmer and is bathed in a lurid green light (*plate 6*). Indeed, the shade is used to illuminate The Rancho Motel (*plate 7*) and a roadside diner to create an atmosphere of sleaziness and corruption, terms which could also apply to Ulmer and his medical practice, thereby creating a resonance between the two scenes. If any single colour is associated with the organic then it is, of course, green. Green is used in this way in *Paris, Texas*, as discussed below, but first it should be noted that all of the above

uses of colour concern artificial lighting, whether this be the fluorescent lights in the clinic, or the neon lights outside the diner and motel, and inside the club. The palette can, in fact, be subdivided into artificial and naturally occurring colours, which provides another instance of the juxtaposition of the man-made and the organic.



Many of Müller's images imprint themselves on the memory, and one particularly memorable shot is of Travis sitting at the back of his brother's property, watching the airport and the freeway through a pair of binoculars (*plate 8*). Travis develops a penchant for gadgets such as the binoculars, a set of walkie-talkies, and a cassette recorder, but it is a childlike wonder, as if during his four years on the road he has forgotten that such technology exists. He sits amidst long grass, the over-saturated greens and the vibrant violets and blues of the mountains and sky delighting the eye, while the deep focus photography represents, simultaneously, the 'watcher' and the 'watched'. The colour and composition – the mise-en-scene and photography – combine to show the organic and the man-made alongside one another, it being difficult to say whether the natural landscape is encroaching on the airfield, or vice versa. The colour green predominates, on this occasion a natural rather than an artificial hue, and despite the comings and goings of cars and planes and their busy passengers, silence prevails, and the mood is calm.

Paris, Texas, as this shot exemplifies, refuses to judge, rather, it simply presents the audience with an enduring image and lets us decide what we are seeing.

Travis traces Jane to the sleazy Houston club where she works as a 'model', appearing in a booth behind a two-way mirror, unable to see her clients, and talking to them via telephone. Travis never comes face-to-face with his ex-wife. When he sees her at the club standing next to Slater she has her back turned (*plate 9*). The only contact between them is via the booth phone. Travis poses as a client, and although Jane can hear his voice, she does not recognise him until a second visit, when Travis relates details about their marriage which only he could know.



Travis realises that while he and Jane can no longer be together, as perhaps he thought they could, he can nonetheless reunite his ex-wife and their child. It is during these sequences that the narrative theme concerning the barriers to human interaction mentioned earlier is articulated in the visuals, including a bravura deep focus shot from the interior of Travis's booth which shows the truth regarding her client's identity dawning on Jane's face, and on Travis's, a look of solemn acceptance regarding the 'path' he must take (*plate 10*).

This scene echoes the earlier episode when Travis spied on the airport through his binoculars, a further instance of the 'watcher' and the 'watched' – except that Travis is either unable or

unwilling to watch on this occasion. Indeed, his behaviour since returning from the desert has been marked by his inability or unwillingness to participate, for instance, his refusal to enter Walt's car or to fly. In one respect, this can be taken to signify his disenchantment with consumer culture and his 'rejection of technocracy'. After all, he refuses (or is unable) to be a consumer of the 'services' on offer at the club. However, this is too simplistic an interpretation which fails to engage with the complexity of the narrative. As previously noted, the main sources of danger in *Paris, Texas* arrive in human form: the threats posed to Travis by Ulmer and Slater, by Travis to the desert environment, and, of course, by Travis to Jane. Interpreted in this light, the reason Travis has to turn away from Jane is that he feels responsible for her predicament, a conclusion which it seems impossible to avoid.

Further to this, the booth sequences also seem gloomily prescient of today's digital world, where telecommunications and the internet make around-the-clock connectivity between human beings a reality, but where one-to-one contact is becoming less and less the norm, replaced by less personal forms of communication. Indeed, the critique of consumerism in *Paris, Texas* is as relevant today as it ever was.

The final scene involves perhaps the most striking – and stylised – use of colour in the entire film. Travis arranges for Jane to meet Hunter in room 1520 of the Méridien Hotel and watches the reunion in the high-rise building from the car park below. When Travis first sees Jane at the club she is wearing a 'Day-Glo' pink mohair sweater, the very epitome of garish, man-made colours, but during the reunion both she and Hunter wear clothes of the same bottle green, seen to signify the natural bond between mother and son (*plate 11*). Jane approaches hunter in

silence, the sombre shade of green contributing to the solemnity of the moment, but also marking the transformation in Jane's life as she leaves the sleazy underworld behind. As for Travis, the car park is bathed in a lurid green light, which, if our interpretation is correct, signifies that he is in mortal danger (*plate 12*).



However, according to the narrative conventions of the road movie, if Travis wishes to escape trouble then all he has to do is get moving. Which is precisely what he does, the red tail-lights contrasting with the green glow as Travis pulls out of the lot and heads for the open road.

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