

Dejeuner Diary

Postcards from the Old Man on Paris, Texas

by L. M. Kit Carson

Maybe you don't understand. If you want to write a movie for Paramount, you have to write dumb.

—Dawn Steel, Paramount production v.p. (marketing “creator” of *Flashdance, Footloose*)

Hollywood, Hollywood. Never been a place people had it so good like Hollywood.

—Allen Goorwitz, in Wim Wenders' *The State of Things*

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After *Breathless* opened, I was not hot; but I was Lunch. Fall of '83 I went to L.A. for Lunch, Breakfast, Drinks, Dinner, Brunch (repeat) with studio execs—trying to bankroll a script (with no director or star attached, a stunt about as neat as trying to jump over my own shadow). After several weeks of tequila and sushi in that anxious sunshine, I got the idea some people would rather eat than fuck. Okay, but I never cared that much about food.

So I had this problem, but kept chewing and talking “concept.”

Meantime, Wim (*W* pronounced *V*) Wenders had another problem. He was three weeks into a ten week shoot on *Paris, Texas* but with a script that had no end, the last third unwritten. Fine with Wim, this is his method: “It’s *not fair* to know the end of a movie when you start.” But it was not okay with the movie’s financiers. In mid-October they stopped the shooting until Wim had a completed script, at least in outline. Then his problem got further knotted up by Wim’s co-writer, Sam Shepard, going to Iowa to start starring in a Disney movie, *Country*.

[*Historical notes*: 1) Wim and Shepard had schemed to work together since connecting (Wim originally wanted Sam to play Hammett) during the four-year circus of making and re-making *Hammett*, 1978-82. Finally, the hook came out of Shepard’s *Motel Chronicles*, published 1982, a collection of diary-like

fragments. Wim pulled the male storytelling voice out of this book, and made him the central character of a new narrative. By May 1983 they had a couple of 90-page treatments of *Paris, Texas*, which worked to raise money for the production. 2) I first hear about this movie in May '83 when Wim calls NYC to say he wants to cast my son, Hunter, age 7½, in it. Wim explains he’s looking for a non-actor and had heard Hunter was an “honest kid”, was it okay by me? You bet.]

Anyway by mid-October 1983, Wim and I were both stranded on the too-soft streets of L.A. trying to make movies (along with about 59,000 other fools like us). In other words, it was the right time/right place set-up; so what follows here is about some kind of luck again, fortunate travelling. My last diary, on the making of *Breathless*, [FILM COMMENT, June '83] told how a movie almost didn't start. This one's about how a movie almost didn't end.

Jammed Up: October 15-31, 1983.

October 15, 1983: This Saturday Wim's returned from the first three weeks of *Paris, Texas* on the 110° desert moonscape at the lowest Tex/Mex border; tonight he's planned to come talk script. We'd done this a few times since mid-September, mostly notes on father-son stuff, one of the movie's dynamics. I'm typing in front of the fan near midnight when Wim calls, just out of screening the Texas rushes, laughing in real relief: “So far it looks great! Maybe I go get a little drunk.” We agree to postpone, meet Monday afternoon.

Wim deserves to blow off a night. He's carrying semi-do-or-die pressure. Earlier he'd confessed: In the last five years he's made three movies (*Lightning Over Water, Hammett, The State of Things*), “but nobody saw them. I can't make another movie nobody sees.”

October 17, 1983: After a couple studio coffee-meetings (that left me want-

ing to rip the spines out of a couple studio execs, if they had spines), I poke into Wim's office off Sunset. It's all pale gray inside: rug, walls, gray light seeping between the thin horizontal blinds covering the window behind Wim, in a gray suit, sitting alone at a long desk and staring at his hands—an ersatz Magritte shot of a man in limbo.

Me: “How's it going?” (Pause.)

Wim: “I don't like it. (Pause.) The script, it sets up a good mystery then explains it all away (pause) into nothing.”

Then he looks up quickly, sliding his glasses up his nose and squinting over them. This look I'd caught a few times before when we'd discussed the script. It's Wim's silent signal for: “Whaddya think, no bullshit?”

I answer as bluntly: “Dump the last two-thirds of the script.”

Wim nods: “Exactly.”

And launches into The Wim Moviemaking Theory, like this: When you make a movie you actually make two movies at the same time. 1) the movie you write and think you're supposed to make; 2) the movie that comes up, you can't write it ahead of time, it only comes up from the people gathered when you shoot. This second movie is the true movie, you watch for it and make it. This is why Wim works mainly in sequence, beginning to end, so he can see the second movie grow out of the shoot.

(Fact is, this method is not news—it's the *Casablanca* endless re-write legend; it's the seven writers trotting in and out as *Tootsie* went over-budget, over-schedule; it's why we re-wrote, re-shot about 20 minutes of *Breathless*. It basically means staying loose to dig out more about the movie as you go. Tough to do, but happens a lot, and it works. Don't let anyone kid you that it's non-pro.)

But right now, Wim's jammed up, can't see the “true movie” emerging, not yet. The script has a strong start (the Texas section just shot): After a four-year disappearance, a father returns to



The author and son, Hunter, on the set of Wim Wenders' *Paris, Texas*.

find his wife gone and his son living with his brother, and then... Can the man put his family back together? What villains blew up the family four years ago? So far the 182 script-pages don't have the right answers for Wim. Meanwhile he's got a Dutch/French/German/American cast and crew stuck in the smog with the money-clock ticking. \$tik-\$tik-\$tik... Unjam quick, or maybe there's no movie.

Okay: I've learned that the quickest unjammer is a bozo, somebody not afraid to try or say anything just to get the juice jumping again. Easy game for me, so I kick off. Since the script's going wrong, throw it against the wall, reconsider the basics. Maybe he can't find his wife, maybe she's dead? Maybe no villains blew up the family, maybe they blew themselves up? We talk like this for an hour or so; Wim scribbles stuff down.

October 18-21, 1983: Wim meets with me several times the rest of the week, some mornings, some nights. During the days I'm usually at the studios laughing, sliding across cut glass, trying to make a deal. Wim looks like a giant, over-bright kid: tousled brown hair that seems to stand straight up alertly; T-

shirt and suspenders; cherry-red horn-rimmed glasses that look like he doodled on them with a magic-marker. He's got an open-hearted, loopy vulnerability that makes you want to help him. At the same time you can feel he's got a stubborn, stoic core. A tough guy. Maybe this movie is sort of Wenders' last stand, but he's determined to fight his way out of this corner by himself, if he has to. He's checking me hard to see how much truth we share on his "true movie".

Here's a slo-mo replay, my POV: On the one hand, no way I can stop feeling like an intruder here. Remember my status in movieland: I'm Lunch. Wim and Shepard have won Cannes, Venice, Pulitzer, etc. Plus they started this movie.

On the other hand, this movie is spiked if something doesn't change.

On the third hand, at least one part of this movie screws right into my chest: fathering, the father trying to re-forge his link with his son. A few years ago I'd been separated from my son for eight months (another story); I know a little about this.

A touchy sync develops between Wim and me. He phones Shepard to

discuss the re-writes that are coming up bit by bit, and starts inserting them into the next section of the script—the three weeks in L.A. that unite father and son.

Friday, the 21st, I leave for family and business in Texas and New York. Before I head for the plane, Wim says he's ready to phone Shepard about bringing me in on the script, to "formalize" the job.

October 24, 1983: Wim catches me in Texas with Shepard's OK. Plus the news that he's gotten the money un-stopped.

October 31, 1983: *Paris, Texas* rolls again in L.A. I'm turning around fast in NYC. This long October's over.

Opened Up: November 3-29, 1983

November 3, 1983: Land in L.A. about noon. Stop to see rushes before driving to the shoot in the San Fernando Valley. Two things come out of the rushes, and talking with the producer Don Guest: 1) Harry Dean Stanton (looking like the starving coyote in *Road Runner* cartoons) is rendering Travis, the father, so dangerously lost and confused that the mind-set is: *this guy can't have his kid, he's crazy*. Wim's working low-budget (\$1.5 million) with a small, lean team of friends and believers, i.e. cameraman Robby Muller (Wim's brilliant eyes in *American Friend*, three other movies) and Nastassja Kinski (Wim's 13-year-old discovery, pre-Polanski he cast her in *Wrong Move*). When the team is this personally close, what's on-set can seep onscreen, so the anti-Travis atmosphere bothers me; but not Wim. Later I tell him I feel like the only one around pro-Travis; Wim whispers: "Y'know, right now my secret hero in the movie is Travis' brother, Walt [Dean Stockwell]. Travis will have to fight him hard to get his son back." With his typical innocent/crafty combo, Wim's feeding on the conflict, it keeps him exploring.

2) This matters more: somehow my 7½-year-old kid, Hunter, has clocked our unspoken game on this movie—that it's also sort of about us, I'm trying to speak to him through the movie-father some about my mistakes at fatherhood. Just watching film of the first tentative father-son scene, it's clear the kid's putting his guts on the line, he's open-eyed feeling it. My throat clenches. Honest kid.

November 4, 1983: The re-write race starts. We've got about a week to get the script-changes projected at least two weeks ahead of the shooting schedule

now. While Wim films in one Valley house, I work across the street in another one. Like always, part of re-writing is semi-simple, some semi-impossible: deepening the drama and texture between Travis and his son; re-structuring, cutting, simplifying the plot mechanisms that drive the father and son from L.A. to Houston to locate the mother.

November 4-10, 1983: Each night after a 12-hour day we confer on the new pages plus re-examine, change the scenes to be shot tomorrow. It's a semi-chaotic juggling that gradually twists days and nights together. Feels crazy-dizzy, like whizzing in a vortex inside of a labyrinth. Wim requires, revels in this. Vortex-leader, he makes sense out of it somehow with a built-in compass always pointing toward what's story-right. Late night, Wim with his trademark gleeful chuckle: "Once on *State of Things*, the co-writer Bob Kramer got mixed up and rushed to me with a 'new' scene rewrite, but I had to remind him we'd shot that scene two days ago."

This dopey/intense, high/low battlefield rush is the main fun of moviemaking, far as I can guess. This way, every minute of 24 hours stands still, and only the work counts *vitally* (forget TV, newspapers, eating, etc.)—*this* is addicting. It's goofy, but sure takes the edge off real life.

November 10, 1983: Emergency night meet with the set designer, Kate Altman, in Wim's garage-like Glendale motel room. Kate's due for a morning plane to start building the movie's final set in Port Arthur. But build what? It's outlined that Jane (Kinski), the runaway mother, works in a semi-sex club. Wim's image (Wim finds his scene's image first): Jane's job is talking to and listening to men, a removed kind of love-making since this movie's basically about the question of love. Now we've got to make this image real, figure out this club physically, and keep it inside the tight budget. Okay, Kinski's talking in: a bar? a row of booths? phonebooths? is it realistic? surrealistic? feels helpful? helpless? etc. About 4:30 a.m., after 13-15 versions, we've invented what's called the Keyhole Klub. Kate's off for the 6:00 a.m. plane. We're all wrecked but revved up.

November 12, 1983: Saturday noon ends the first lap of re-write race. We've got the new pages to cover the up-coming two weeks of shooting. Just in time, the pages are xeroxed and passed out to cast and crew so they know what's next. Sunday everyone to Houston.

November 13, 1983: From the Glendale garage motel we land in downtown Houston's Euro-swank Meridien Hotel amidst extreme-o, sci-fi, monumental, monolithic, glitter-glass skyscrapers. The cityscape's like a bad cartoon of "alienation." We write it into the movie.

Cast and crew break and re-group. We keep re-working scenes in Wim's suite, like this: The Keyhole Klub segment when Travis trails Jane inside to discover her "work," I write him entering the front door and finding out gradually what goes on in this place, growing enraged/heart-broken. But Wim notes our birthdays are a day apart in August with Hitchcock born on the day between, and suggests a Hitchcockian structure: Travis goes in the *back* door, gets lost, has to figure the place out backwards, then breaks down. Right, Hitchcock plays it better.

After a couple of awkward tries at introducing himself as Wim, the director changes his name to "Bill."

November 14, 15, 16, 1983: Harry Dean Stanton and Hunter are developing a joking pal interplay. Harry (who's got a childlike streak, but isn't sure exactly what a kid is) is forced to open himself up to match the way Hunter naturally opens himself up. Not just for the movie, no faking it. Each night Harry comes to my suite for dinner with Hunter, they run lines together, trick each other in a game called "Battle-ship."

No doubt it's a dumb Pirandello gag: a kid with a triple-decker father (real-dad writer/movie-dad actor/big-dad director); we're actually doing this. Sometimes it feels odd giving private pieces of myself (e.g. an habitual gesture like kissing the top of Hunter's head when I'm going away) to Harry for the role. But Hunter's unphased by this multiple, he's got us straight. Later Harry will tack an insight onto a line I write for Travis to his son: "I came back to show you that I was your father." Harry adds: "You showed me that I was." *Exactly.*

November 17, 1983: Move to Nordheim, half-a-day from Houston for three days shooting. It's the flip-side of space city: one store, one payphone, one

bar with the wind rolling through everything, on one street named Broadway. The cast and crew outnumber the town's population.

The Broadway Bar is a prize—a weathered wood replica of a movie-Western saloon, smells like dirt and rain inside. It's our base, and local farmers drift in here to eyeball the movie-bunch. After a couple of awkward tries at introducing himself as Wim, the director changes his name to "Bill."

This evening between shots Wim challenges me to pinball in the back of the bar. I flub through my turn. Wim grasps the machine, knees half-bent, grinning wildly. Over the flashing, buzzing, beeping (he's racking about 700,000 points on one ball) Wim mock-confides: "Was going to be a priest, then I discovered pinball and rock'n'roll. That saved my soul." Pinball hustler. With the lights flickering up on his face and glasses, Wim looks like Dr. Strangelove.

November 19, 1983: Long Saturday. Partly writing at a table in the bar; partly keeping tabs on Harry Dean and Hunter through a couple underplayed emotional scenes.

Movie-making's telling Hunter a lot—how to concentrate, how to read and memorize fast, etc. And one key lesson: that he's valuable; he can be counted on to do a good job; that if he does something essentially spiritual (act good), he helps a group do something bigger. A sort of archaic lesson today.

Tonight Broadway is packed with farm families in pickup trucks come to drink beer and watch. Wim sets up the last Nordheim shot: a drunken Travis leaning on his son to cross the empty, windy prairie street under the full moon. The little scene touches the crowd. After a few takes, one farmer taps Wim on the back: "Bill, I like that, that little boy walking his drunk daddy down the road. Good movie." Wim laughs: "Thanks. My first good review in years."

As we wrap, Robby Muller buys the entire town drinks-on-the-house at the Broadway Bar. Hard to pull away from this earthy place, its thick chicken-fried steaks.

November 19-20, 1983: On the night drive back to the local motel, Hunter falls apart a bit, suddenly crying. He can't say why. The three fathers try to comfort him in the station-wagon, and he drops asleep okay. It's discussed that he's exhausted; he'll have next week off.

But not exactly tiredness pushed Hunter to tears. He'd worked hard be-

fore on the movie without being upset. No, something else got to him. Early in the evening I'd noticed Hunter playing cars on the sidewalk with a few town boys. It's been about a month since he'd just simply normally played with other kids. I saw a delicate couple of seconds where Hunter almost had to re-learn how to play. *This* odd distance between himself and childhood, this got to Hunter, I think. What he's learning from movie-making is double-edged.

November 20, 1983: Back in Houston. Past midnight pacing around Wim's rocket-shaped Meridien suite we bang together the last part of *Paris, Texas*. Jumping up, finishing each other's half-sentences, wall-bouncing we sketch it up to "The End." Finally the "true movie" works out. Producer Don Guest had told me: "Wim wants to make a movie about love succeeding and transforming people, but realistically not sentimentally. And the story keeps ending up with love failing." We get it right, love stops failing two weeks before the last day of shooting.

November 21, 1983: Houston to Port Arthur, the ultra-funk home ground of Rauschenburg, Janis Joplin.

During the Summer location-scouting, Wim had found an elaborate half-closed bar/lounge in the bummiest part of Port Arthur. The place is uncannily untouched inside: cheesy/plush purple-pink-gold nightclub rooms where a lot of sleazy action suddenly stopped one late hour in 1957. Without actually knowing what would happen here, Wim had picked what's becoming our Keyhole Klub. Again: image first, scenes later.

November 22-25, 1983: Except for Thanksgiving, we work day and night in the Klub, writing, re-writing, shooting the Hitchcockian lead-up to Travis finding Jane.

Wim's been updating Shepard by phone irregularly. Now Shepard starts phoning in scenes at night after his day's shooting on *Country* in Iowa. The script-girl takes them down in shorthand, then types them up. A few of these scenes don't work with the re-do of the story. But others are crucial: the Travis/Jane breakdown when he first finds her; the Travis/Jane climax when he returns to confess he killed their love. These scenes are essentially monologues, profoundly anguishing.

Wim, Kinski, Harry Dean start rehearsing hard.

November 28, 1983: Wim starts to shoot Shepard's scenes. Over the weekend we talked a lot, as the actors wres-



Hunter Carson and Nastassja Kinski.

tled with the monologues. I'd suggested and tried to re-structure the material into dialogues. Wim considered, then rejected this. Harry had talked to Shepard by phone about his problems; but Shepard simply insisted: "It's all there. Just don't act it. Don't act it."

Wim's covering the scenes from several angles. As the crew works almost silently setting up, Harry sits on the set in a chair, meticulously reading his monologue word-for-word out loud.

I'm standing off-set listening to Harry. Over and over, stopping halfway, starting again. Four, five, six times: talking through the story of Travis' and Jane's last night together. Suddenly, I start to hear something under the flow of speech—a heart-breaking inevitable pulse-like rhythm. A tragic sound. It shakes me, sends actual shivers, stands the hairs up on the back of my neck. Shepard was right: *don't act this*. He'd put all the terrible, necessary power of the scenes into just the bare, unhidden sequence of the words. Wim passes, and I catch his eye and nod. He nods back with a little grin.

November 29, 1983: Late night, after two painstaking days of shooting only Kinski and Harry, Wim calls a wrap. Instant tension evaporation. Wim grins loopily: "That's it. With those three scenes I got the movie."

Fogged Up: December 1-3, 1983

December 1, 1983: Back in Houston to shoot the final movie images for two

days. I'm re-writing bits in one hotel room while Wim shoots in the next one: the reunion of son and mother. It's a scene we made without dialogue—too much emotion going between these two characters after four years apart, words could undercut it.

Abruptly, Wim comes yukking around the corner looking surprised. Wim: "Hunter just wrote the last line in the movie. He did it in rehearsal: Kinski enters the room, dropping her coat. She stops, staring at Hunter playing alone. Hunter sees her and stands up. They slowly move together silently. She bends down to him. He reaches up, fingers her hair, says: 'Your hair's wet.' That's it!"

December 3, 1983: Wrap party on this foggy night. The hotel's overdecorated for Christmas with a gigantic tree full of color-coordinated ornaments towering in the lobby. Hunter and I say goodbye to the group downstairs as they pile into cars for a joint called Dirty Dan's (best wrap parties always end up out-of-joint in some joint). My son is sliding and jumping all over the lobby, released; Bonna Newman, his teacher/guardian (who introduced Hunter to Wim when she worked at Zoetrope), gets her first night off in over two months. Tonight everybody blows off.

Later I read Hunter to sleep with his favorite book, *Ramona The Brat*. Then just sit beside him in my triangle-shaped suite shooting polaroids of the icy glass skyscrapers all lit up in the fog outside.

This was how I stopped having Lunch in L.A. this time. ☸