

## Ethical Memento Mori: Wim Wenders's *Notebook on Cities and Clothes*

At first take Wim Wenders's *Notebook on Cities and Clothes* (1989) may appear to be concerned with the obvious front and center topics of fashion, contemporary urban life, and filmmaking. But, more than this, *Notebook* offers its viewers a privileged look into the particulars of the making of a distinctive life, especially by the inhabiting of one's given situation and activity as a mortal in the contemporary world, thus taking up the next spot in our discussion of documentaries as memento mori. The film *Notebook on Cities and Clothes* (*Aufzeichnungen zu Kleidern und Städten*; also known as *Notes on Clothes and Cities*) (1989) is written and directed by Wim Wenders (b. 1945) and features the Japanese fashion designer Yohji Yamamoto (b. 1943). Known for a number of other contemporary masterpieces, Wenders has made a definitive mark on filmmaking, especially as what I would describe as a contemplative of film and of film's primary concern, which is mortal life.

*Notebook* was made in cooperation with Yamamoto as he prepared for a show at the Louvre during the Paris fashion season and for his flagship store's reopening in Tokyo. Wenders makes use of the occasion to reflect upon contemporary life and the filmmaking process with the media of film and video in an increasingly electronic and digital age. He anticipates much of the concern over the so-called death of cinema surrounding the 1995 centennial of its "birth". (As Mulvey [2006] points out, "In 1995, the cinema celebrated its 100th birthday. Critics, theorists, historians and even the public at large suddenly focused their attention on the current 'state of cinema'" [17]. As film scholars are well aware, the "death" of cinema as a medium and institution made news beyond the walls of academia.) In *Notebook*, Wenders's contemplative abilities take the form of an engaging portrait of the life and working process of Yohji Yamamoto.

As Wenders reports in his commentary on the film, *Notebook* was shot primarily by himself on his own as a "one man crew". Some shots, Wenders reports, had help or were shot by Wenders's long-time cameraman Robby Müller, e.g., at the Louvre show. (Wenders reports this and portions of what follows in his commentary on the film twelve years after its making. The full narrative of the film by Wenders is reproduced in text format [Wenders 1989],

and commentary about the making of the film is available through the Wim Wenders Collection DVD.) Part of the time he used an Eyemo camera, a famous war-time camera with no motor and a hand crank that allows it to take thirty seconds of film. The rest of the time, he employed, to his self-reported surprise at the time, a handheld video camera, a video “High 8”, the predecessor to the mini DV camera. “Today”, Wenders said back in 2002, he would have made the whole film on DV. Yet he does cite the unique quality achieved by shooting video directly from screens as Chris Marker did in his influential documentary film *Sans Soleil* (1982).

A central tool in the whole film, as Wenders himself comments, is the use of a split focus lens, which allows both halves of a shot to be completely in focus at the same time, even though the subject matter may be long distances apart from each other. This allows Wenders to shoot, for example, an interview with Yamamoto on the exterior steps of the Pompidou Centre in Paris, with Montmartre and the Basilica of Sacré Coeur in the background, completely in focus. Montmartre, known for being home to artists, including Picasso during his “blue period”, was where Wenders began as a painter and engraver, before turning to film. Wenders notes that one effect of the split focus lens is a double image that runs through the middle of the frame and can be seen in these interview shots with Yamamoto and, for example, the shots out of the car in both Paris and Tokyo. The effect of Wenders’s film technology is a split vision that is focused and, also, a double vision boundary line between what is far and what is close at hand.

As is the case throughout Wenders’s work, *Notebook* includes long-take shots that allow for the viewer’s contemplation of the scene in a way that most other films and television programs, especially in America, do not. Robert Philip Kolker and Peter Beicken (1993) write of “the growing sureness of [Wenders’s] craft and style” in his earlier films and the employment of “extended shots that provide long sequences of uninterrupted observation” (27), something of a signature in Wenders’s work as a whole. His images appear like snapshots, still prints, or slides that one flips or flashes, leaves still, contemplates, and then passes on. While employing extraordinary framing and screening techniques, Wenders muses about personal identity, cities, and the process of carrying out a creative project from start to finish in a way that one does in a paper notebook. *Notebook* has been referred to in an interview as a “diary film” (Wenders 1990, 350). It wrestles with the question of what cinema’s place might be in relation to emerging media forms, including video and especially digital. Wenders candidly ponders, both implicitly and explicitly, where cinema and his work as filmmaker terminate and how the making process is analogous to other forms, including clothes-making.