

Masterclass „A Sense of Place“

I don't know much about you.
You don't know much about me, except maybe a film or two.
Let's try getting to know each other a bit
by discussing a very special subject
that relates to several professions,
but also very much to filmmaking.

Let me first tell you a bit HOW I became a filmmaker.
I learned to trust something inside of me,
and that was NOT principally my storytelling ability.
It was something else. I first didn't even know about it.
It was working unconsciously in me.

It is something so very simple and basic,
that it does not get much attention in film theory,
and is not really taught in any film school.
In my experience not many students (and teachers)
have even thought about the subject.
What I want to talk to you (and with you) about
is one of our senses, one that is highly important for filmmaking,
but also highly underrated.

THE SENSE OF PLACE.

You don't necessarily NEED it,
you can make films without it, I admit that right away.
Some directors couldn't care less about it.
But I recommend it.

I have it, YOU have it, we're all born with it, in various degrees.
Early men and nomads probably had a more acute sense of it.
It is actually a sense human kind is about to lose,
as our spaces become more and more virtual.
Architects, geologists and other people
still need that sense for professional reasons.
And filmmakers, too!

What is that, our "sense of place"?

I hope you understand that expression: "DER ORTSSINN".
Very vaguely I am referring to our ability to relate to a place,
(a city, a landscape, an area, a valley,
a street block, even an interior of a house, whatever)
so that you get a feel for it,
that you sense its uniqueness, what is special about it.

You start understanding how the place changes with the light,
you get an idea for its proportions,
you begin to move in it with confidence,
you might even have an affection for it...

I mean the ability to “read a place”,
to let it enter all your senses, to make it “your own”,
so that you can use it for your work,
for a specific scene, or an entire film,
and let the place itself contribute
to the emotion and the meaning of the film,
in short: to allow the place
to be one of the storytelling elements of the filmmaking process.

You heard me right.
I believe, and know from experience
that places have their own stories to tell,
and that they can help you discover and tell yours better.
You just have to learn to decipher their language, to listen to them.
Yes, that is possible.

Places aren't people, of course,
but they can become the protagonists of a film, just like people.
At least they can be “supporting actors”...
in the very sense of the word “supporting”
they can bring out the best in your story and in your characters.
They can be so much more than just “locations”, or “background”...
You just have to learn how to activate your sense of place,
learn to trust it and use it.

NOW... I'm not a man of theory.
I won't offer you an elaborate “theory of place”
or a whole register of the interaction between “place” and “film”.
I can just instigate your openness to experience.
I just know from my own experience
how utterly important the place, the “setting” is for each frame,
for each scene, for the feeling of the whole thing,
for the story as well as for any character.
And I'm of course willing (and hopefully able)
to give you a few examples how in one of my own films
“Der Himmel über Berlin”
places have contributed not only to the mood or ambiance of a film,
but to every aspect of it, even to its very creation.

Not that I was aware of this sense, initially,
when I started out as a student and young filmmaker.
My own sense of place
worked at first as a very subconscious process.
But then I slowly realized how much of an impact
places had on my imagination.

I also learned it the hard way,
by failing when I did not rely on this sense,
and I learned to appreciate it
by succeeding when I did put my trust in it.
I can now say, in hindsight,
that everything I am remotely proud of as a filmmaker
(or as a photographer) was conceived and finished
with a deep knowledge and confidence of place.
This is the one sense that grounded my films,
my plots and my characters.
With no exception.

Don't get me wrong:
That is not a general rule for any filmmaker.
This is something very personal I am telling about.
It might not work for you.
But you should be aware of it.
And you might end up finding it extremely useful.

So, let's start exploring this underrated ability.
What is a place to you, when you start a film?
Is it just a location, just a simple necessity,
a (possibly) exchangeable element for a film?
Or is it more?

How much time have you spent in that place?
Do you actually like it,
or is it entirely anonymous to you?
Do you know where the sun comes up there
and where it goes down?
Are you aware of its history?
Would you find your way through it with closed eyes?
Do you understand its geography or its architecture?
Does it have a "soul" for you?
Have you dreamed about it?
What can you, what would you actually tell other people about it?

When you look at contemporary films,
you realize that some of them are made
without any need for a particular place out there in reality.
They are shot mainly on a stage and often in front of blue screens.
Places are added afterwards in postproduction.

Or they happen in some anonymous landscape or city,
where it never really matters where you are.
Some films even seem to make an explicit point
of avoiding that question “where we are”.
Their place is NOWHERE or ANYWHERE, but certainly not specific.

A lot of American films seem to work like this, and not only lately.
It's almost as if an exact place would only get into their way.
As they appeal to the largest possible audience all over the world,
they seem to even avoid any recognizable backdrop.
They are happy with the locale to be unidentifiable.
It is often just “America”, or “a foreign country”,
“a city”, “a wilderness”, “a distant planet far far away...”

This formula works well for them, I must admit,
not in all, but in a lot of cases.
If these films are lacking something, like a sense of place,
they certainly make up for that lack with other,
often spectacular means, special effects, “production values”,
thrills, kicks, gags...

Other films make it clear right away where they “take place”,
(that's a good expression, “taking place”,
as it shows an active accomplishment, an act of taking possession)
and that choice of place rarely is arbitrary.
In a very generalized way
you might say that this is a “European” tradition.
We have languages, accents, regional colors,
so we are more used to specificities.
At least we are not afraid of them.
Our European cinema almost by definition
has local flavor, a local touch.

And then finally among these more place-explicit films
there are those that could not possibly happen anywhere else.
They necessarily take place SOMEWHERE exactly
and could not have been made anywhere else.

I'm a declared fan of those,
a member of that fraction of filmmakers.
That's how my brain works,
not money-driven, not story-driven, not effect-driven,
but "place-driven".

If I shoot something, and if I have the slightest feeling
that the choice of place might be arbitrary, or accidental,
or if I have a doubt that I could shoot such and such scene
just as well somewhere else - or worse, anywhere else -
I no longer know where and how to set up my camera.
I can't tell my camera crew where to put the tripod or the tracks
and I have no idea what lens I want to put on the camera.
I get very nervous.
That feeling of randomness drives me mad.
I need to know that this scene and this shot
necessarily belongs here.
Then everything "falls into place", (another great expression...)
At the right place, I can function much better as a director
than in the random, the wrong place.

Actually, almost all of my films
have started with a particular place first,
and with the desire to find the right story for it
that needed to happen HERE.
I found a place, liked it, fell in love with it
and wanted to explore it, get to know it better.
Making a film is the ideal tool for that.

Believe it or not, for most of my films, PLACE was there first,
and then the characters and the story crossed it,
and on that crossing the necessity for a film emerged.
Of course I have lots of stories in my head.
Everybody has. Millions of them.
But for me, a story alone was never a reason to want to make a film.
I needed another form of necessity.

I found that necessity in the way places talked to me.
If you like a place, and if you have a feeling for it,
the sheer pleasure of filmmaking is instantly increased.

And you see nothing more clearly in a finished film
than the insecurity, the hesitation, the frustration,
the lack of fun and enjoyment of the filmmaker.

That always shows, you cannot hide it.
If YOU don't feel sure about a shot,
or a framing, or the way you decide to film your subject,
your audience will also not have confidence in what they see.
That is what your inner eye does:
it guides the inner eye of everybody in your audience.
If you are lost, and unsure of your means,
that will translate into each and every shot of your film.

Getting back to my subject:
Sometimes I worked with a different approach.
I did not work from a sense of place as my primary guidance.
I thought: "My story is so good, it'll work anywhere.
I have great actors and good lines and a great DP and nice lighting,
I can get by if I shoot this at a place
that is not really made for it, but convenient..."
That always turned out disastrously.

You might be familiar with my film "Der Himmel über Berlin"
and I will gladly answer any question
that would touch on the subject of "the sense of place"
in that particular film.
Ask me.

And vice versa:
I'll be glad to look at your own specific problems or questions
regarding your own projects and experiences
with "the sense of place".

Wim Wenders