When the Film Wounds Memory, Not Reality: A Semiotic Reading of Wim Wenders' *The State of Things* (1982)

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Abstract
This paper advances an original critical thesis: that Wim Wenders' *The State of Things* (*Der Stand der Dinge*, 1982) does not represent the death of cinema, as the prevailing critical discourse maintains, but rather inaugurates what this study terms "Visual Memory Cinema" — a cinematic form that produces its meaning inside the spectator rather than outside, through the activation, wounding, and reconstruction of accumulated cinematographic memory. The study employs a dual semiotic framework: Roland Barthes' concepts of the *punctum*, the third meaning, and the death of the author, alongside Umberto Eco's theories of the open work and the visual encyclopaedia. This framework is proposed as a productive alternative to the realist framework adopted by Lúcia Nagib, who reads the film from the outside — through locations, materiality, and apparatus — rather than from within — through spectatorial agency, memory, and meaning production. The analysis demonstrates that the film's celebrated final image of a camera continuing to roll after its operator's death is not a figure for the death of cinema, but the precise visual embodiment of Barthes' "death of the author": the erasure of directorial authority that liberates the spectator as the genuine and sole producer of cinematic meaning. The paper concludes by proposing "Visual Memory Cinema" as a critical concept applicable beyond Wenders to other cinematographic traditions — including North African and Maghrebi cinema — where the tension between colonial visual memory and reclaimed national identity constitutes a structuring force.
Keywords: *Image Semiotics; Visual Memory; Punctum; Open Work; Death of the Author; Wim Wenders; European Cinema; Maghrebi Cinema*

I. Introduction: Where the Prevailing Reading Falls Short

There is a moment in *The State of Things* that has occupied a central place in my memory as a film critic: the moment in which the character Kate weeps before her failed watercolour in the face of the overwhelming natural landscape. I did not read in that moment a proclamation of art's inability to absorb material reality, as Lúcia Nagib reads it in her rigorous and admirable study. [1] I saw something else entirely: a visual wound — a *punctum* — that strikes the spectator in their cinematographic memory and provokes it, compelling them to think not about the material reality existing beyond the screen, but about every cinematic image they have ever stored depicting the failing artist, the sea that resists the frame, the impossibility of correspondence between the eye and the world.

This distinction — between the film that persuades us of an external reality and the film that disturbs the internal reality of our visual memory — is the axis around which this study revolves. It is a

distinction that fundamentally alters the answer to a question many scholars have dedicated their contributions to answering: is *The State of Things* a declaration of the death of cinema?

My own answer is: no. The film is not the death of cinema. It is the birth of a different cinematic form — one I propose to call "Visual Memory Cinema" — a form whose meanings are produced inside each spectator who carries a reserve of film history in their memory, igniting in the instant when that reserve collides with the carefully calculated visual wounds that the film delivers. To reach this concept, I shall draw on alternative critical tools: the image semiotics of Roland Barthes and Umberto Eco, rather than the realist theories of Bazin and Deleuze.

II. The Problematic and Its Critical Stakes

2.1 What the Prevailing Reading Has Argued

Since *The State of Things* received the Golden Lion at Venice in 1982, academic criticism has settled into a reading that classifies the film within the postmodern tradition and interprets its meta-cinematic structure as an expression of the exhaustion of fictional narrative and the bankruptcy of the instruments of artistic representation. Within this framework, Nagib situates her operational concept of "Non-Cinema" *(Non-Cinema)*, which she defines as "cinema's inherent but unachievable mission to become material reality".[2] Despite the methodological rigour of this concept, its epistemological logic consistently expels the spectator from the equation, reading the film from the outside in.

This reading describes, with considerable accuracy, what the film says about itself openly — through its characters' dialogue, through its explicit visual discourse. Yet a major film — and this is among the founding principles of semiotics — never exhausts its meaning in what it states explicitly. There is always, in Barthes' formulation, a "third meaning" *(le sens obtus)* that overflows the communicative meaning and the symbolic meaning alike, residing in that density of the sign which strikes the spectator like a wound before any interpretive intention can take hold. [3]

2.2 What This Reading Overlooks

What the realist-ontological reading — from Nagib back through Bazin and Deleuze — overlooks is that *The State of Things* does not work on the spectator's relationship to material reality. It works on their relationship to their accumulated cinematographic memory. The film's dense intertextuality — its references to Fritz Lang and Murnau, to Godard, to Corman, to Samuel Fuller, to John Ford — is not merely "allusionism" *(allusionism)* in Noël Carroll's sense: [4] a referential accumulation that testifies to the exhaustion of the imaginary. It is, rather, a deliberate summoning of the spectator's visual encyclopaedia with the precise aim of detonating it from within.

Put differently: the film does not say "cinema is dead." It says: "Your cinematographic memory is alive — and I am here to wound it." The wound here is not a metaphor. It is the *punctum* in its precise technical sense as defined by Barthes. [5]

2.3 The Original Thesis

This study proceeds from the following thesis: *The State of Things* inaugurates "Visual Memory Cinema" — a cinematic form that operates through three interlocking semiotic mechanisms:

First: the visual wound (the punctum) — each shot carries a detail that pierces the spectator who bears cinema history in their memory.

Second: encyclopaedic openness (the open work) — intertextuality is not decoration but an invitation for the spectator to complete the text from their own visual reserve.

Third: the death of the director-author — the final scene removes authorial authority and bestows it upon the spectator alone.

III. Key Concepts

3.1 The Punctum: The Wound Without a Name

Roland Barthes introduced the concept of the *punctum* in *Camera Lucida* (*La Chambre Claire,* 1980) as a distinction from the *studium* — the latter describing the moderate cultural interest one takes in an image as a whole. The *punctum,* by contrast, is that small detail which no intention governs, that "shoots out like an arrow" and "pierces" the viewer: a prick, a wound, an affect that precedes any interpretive will. [6] It is worth noting that Barthes develops this concept through the still photograph, and hints that cinema may fritter away this quality through movement.

What *The State of Things* demonstrates, however, is that it operates through the mechanism of the *punctum* — not against Barthes but as an extension of him. The film compresses moments of visual stillness and sonic silence to the point where its images come to resemble, in their affective operation, the photograph rather than commercial cinema. The film's cinematographer, the French master Henri Alekan, [7] who had shot for Cocteau and Huston, treats every frame as a still painting: the wet stone, the broken equipment, the waiting faces. This stillness does not point towards material reality; it activates the spectator's memory, which already knows how to complete what has pierced it.

What most powerfully carries the force of the *punctum* in the film are those shots that foreground the instruments of filmmaking itself: the camera, the cables, the hanging film strips, the tape recorders. These objects do not point, as the realist method would have it, towards "the materiality of the cinematic apparatus." They wound the spectator who knows the history of these instruments, who has seen a camera trained on a camera many times before, who carries in their visual memory the film-about-film of Fellini's *8½* or Godard's *Contempt.* The collision between the spectator's memories and what they are watching — that is the real wound.

3.2 The Open Work and the Visual Encyclopaedia

In *The Open Work* (*Opera Aperta,* 1962), Umberto Eco founded a textual concept describing works of art that contain "an unlimited interpretive possibility," inviting the recipient into active participation in the production of meaning. [8] The fundamental difference from the closed text is that the open work does not end at the boundaries of its material but extends into a network of connections that the recipient activates from their own cognitive and perceptual reserve.

In his later *The Role of the Reader* (1979), Eco developed this logic through the concept of the "encyclopaedia" *(encyclopedia)* in distinction from the "dictionary" *(dictionary):* while the dictionary offers a closed definition of a sign, the encyclopaedia represents the entire network of associations that a given cultural moment invests in a sign's meaning. [9] The spectator who watches *The State of Things* does not arrive with a dictionary; they arrive with an encyclopaedia — the history of German cinema, the French New Wave, Hollywood noir, post-war landscapes of ruin, the faces of legendary directors.

What Wenders does, with great precision, is to activate the spectator's encyclopaedia without dictating how it should be read. A single scene — such as watching the veteran actor Samuel Fuller sit with his cigar behind a broken camera[10] — summons in a film-literate spectator an enormous accumulation of associations: Fuller as the icon of independent cinema; the cigar as the badge of creative certainty; the broken camera as the negation of that certainty. The film does not resolve this tension; it leaves it open. This openness is precisely what distinguishes the genuine work from the merely decorative quotation.

3.3 The Death of the Author — Barthes Against Auteur Criticism

In his celebrated essay "The Death of the Author" *(La mort de l'auteur,* 1967), Barthes argued that meaning is not born in the moment of writing, nor does it reside in the author's intention; it is born in the moment of reading. [11] "The birth of the reader," wrote Barthes, "must be ransomed by the death of the Author." He advances this argument in the context of literary criticism, but its extension to cinema is both inevitable and historically fraught.

It is fraught because the auteur criticism consecrated by the *Cahiers du Cinéma* and inherited by the French New Wave — of which Wenders is one of the most distinguished German exponents — is founded precisely on resistance to this death: the director as author, as the possessor of a vision, as the origin of meaning. Yet *The State of Things* turns against this inheritance from within, in a way that has not been sufficiently noticed.

The director-character in the film, Fritz Munro, does not hold the reins of meaning. He reads aloud to himself from *The Searchers* in an empty hotel room; he weeps in his drunkenness; he travels alone. The attributes of the director-god — the figure who controls every thread — dissolve gradually until he is killed in the final scene. And at his death, the small camera does not stop. [12]

This shot — the most widely discussed in the film's critical reception — is read by the realist method as the liberation of the image from all subjectivity: the camera filming reality as it simply is. The semiotic reading says something entirely different: the camera continues filming because meaning does not reside in the author — it lives in the spectator's eye. Fritz's death is not the death of cinema. It is the death of the author, and the birth of the spectator.

IV. Analytical Axes: A Semiotic Reading of The State of Things

4.1 The Architecture of the Wound: The Punctum in Selected Shots

4.1.1 The Covered Mirror

In one of the film's most resonant moments, the character Anna covers her bedroom mirror with a cloth. Catherine Russell has read this gesture as a refusal of the actor's narcissism. [13] The semiotic reading, however, perceives something deeper: the mirror is the grand metaphor of classical cinema — cinema as mirror of society, cinema as mirror of the self. To cover it is not to refuse narcissism but to cancel the reflective model of understanding the image — a silent visual declaration that the image reflects nothing, but produces something that becomes visible only in the mind of the one who watches.

Here the wound falls: the spectator who carries in their visual memory all the mirror metaphors in cinema history is struck by this simple erasure. A small detail that pierces the visual encyclopaedia and unsettles it.

4.1.2 The Viewfinder Superimposed on the Landscape

Among the film's richest shots semiotically is the one in which the camera's viewfinder frame is superimposed on the natural landscape, demonstrating how the frame amputates the scene rather than containing it. Nagib reads this shot as visual evidence of the camera's inability to "apprehend an object in its overflowing totality".[14]

The semiotic reading, however, goes further: the visible frame is not an instrument for measuring incapacity. It is an iconic sign with a double function — it tells the spectator simultaneously "this is what the camera sees" and "this is what it does not see." The spectator who knows the history of this device in documentary cinema, in television, and in avant-garde film, will automatically complete

what lies outside the frame from their own visual encyclopaedia. The film does not announce its failure — it opens a vacancy and invites the spectator to fill it.

4.1.3 The Super-8 Camera and the Climactic Scene

In the film's closing sequence, Wenders stages a slow night-time pursuit through the streets of Los Angeles, ending with the death of Fritz and the American producer Gordon. The choice that reveals the film's semiotic depth is this: Wenders does not film this moment with the principal camera but entrusts it to a small Super-8 that Fritz had been carrying. [15]

After Fritz's death, the small camera continues filming for a few seconds: blurred, trembling, illegible images. In Barthes' terms, these shots are a pure manifestation of the *punctum:* no *studium* here, no intention, no rhetoric — only the bare visual chemistry of light and lens. Yet this *punctum* does not operate in a vacuum: it operates in a spectator who carries a cinematographic memory, who remembers the handheld trembling of Rossellini's neorealism, who recalls the direct cinema of the *cinéma vérité* movement. The camera that continues filming does not produce reality — it detonates memory.

4.2 Intertextuality as Encyclopaedia, Not Allusionism

Noël Carroll described the intertextuality of 1980s cinema as "allusionism," attributing it to the European critical enthusiasm for auteur criticism which had reappraised the classical Hollywood inheritance. [16] This is a partially accurate description. But it reduces intertextuality to a single function: the celebration of history and the acknowledgement of influence. That is the function of allusionism in Spielberg's polished, crowd-pleasing films — not in a film that announces the death of its own author.

More productive here is Eco's concept of "abduction" *(abduction),* which describes the process of interpreting an unfamiliar sign by moving from available evidence towards the most probable hypothesis. [17] Every intertextual reference in *The State of Things* creates a sign that demands completion according to each spectator's particular encyclopaedia.

Consider: the protagonist's name, "Fritz Munro," compounded from Fritz Lang and Friedrich Murnau. The spectator who knows only Lang will grasp one of two dimensions: the cinema of crime and fate. The spectator who also knows Murnau will add the dimension of Gothic expressionism and the architecture of dread. And the spectator who knows both in the context of their emigration to Hollywood will apprehend a third dimension: the European director whom Hollywood seduces and then devours. Three spectators, three encyclopaedias, three different films within the same film. This is not allusionism. This is the open work.

4.3 The Self-Critique of Auteur Criticism — Wenders Against Himself

The preceding analysis leads to a reading I arrived at through repeated viewings of the film, and which I have not encountered in any of the scholarly treatments I have consulted: *The State of Things* is an implicit self-critique of the very auteur criticism that gave Wenders his critical standing.

Wenders arrived in Hollywood because auteur criticism had made him an "author" — a figure of methodological coherence whose work critics found legible as personal expression. But the Hollywood that welcomed him wanted the author without granting the conditions of authorship: it wanted the style without the freedom. This is the veil the film draws back: authorship in commercial cinema is an illusion. Meaning is not produced at the camera; it is produced at the eye.

The full paradox is that Wenders articulates this through a film that bears all the signatures of the self-confident auteur: the slow rhythm, the extended takes, the procedural silences. He defends auteur

cinema through instruments that subvert auteur cinema. This very tension is what makes the film an open work in the fullest sense.

4.4 Where Nagib Is Right, and Where She Falls Short — A Critical Reassessment

It is important to note that our critique of Nagib's reading does not invalidate it; it redirects its orbit. Nagib is entirely correct in noting that the film is pervaded by what she calls the "pregivenness of the universe to the human":[18] the spectator feels the presence of places and materials as though they precede any creative intention, as though the world was there before the film decided to notice it.

Yet semiotics demonstrates that this sense itself — the spectator's feeling that reality "overflows" the frame — is not an objective datum but an ideologically produced effect. The spectator does not apprehend "raw reality"; they apprehend a reality read through an encyclopaedia of images and concepts. In this precisely, Eco proves more illuminating than Bazin.

The two methods part ways at a foundational question: Nagib asks "what does the film point to?" (answer: material reality). This study asks "what does the film produce in those who watch it?" (answer: a transformed visual memory). Both questions are legitimate; but the second is closer to the actual experience of spectatorship.

4.5 “Visual Memory Cinema": Towards a New Critical Concept

The foregoing analysis invites the proposition of a critical concept that organises these observations: "Visual Memory Cinema" — defined as that cinematic form which:

(a) operates with the activation of the spectator's accumulated cinematographic memory as its primary purpose, not with the priority of representing external reality;

(b) deploys intertextuality as an open semiotic network that invites the spectator to complete it, rather than as icons requiring identification;

(c) distributes meaning differentially according to each spectator's visual capital, producing a different film at each viewing and for each viewer;

(d) converts narrative closure (the death of the director-character) into a total semiotic opening by erasing authorial authority.

This concept does not cancel Nagib's "Non-Cinema" but completes it from the spectatorial side rather than the production side. "Non-Cinema" describes what happens at the director's end: the negation of the medium in order to reach reality. "Visual Memory Cinema" describes what happens at the spectator's end: the detonation of memory in order to reach a meaning that the director alone does not possess.

4.6 The Applicability to Maghrebi and North African Cinema

One of the practical benefits of the proposed concept is that it is transferable to cinematographic traditions where a chronic tension exists between colonial visual memory and a reclaimed national identity — and Algerian cinema in this respect constitutes a particularly compelling case. The Algerian spectator who watches Mohamed Lakhdar-Hamina's *Chronicle of the Years of Fire* or Mohamed Bouamari's *The Wind from the South* does not process these films only as representations of historical reality; they also process them through a visual memory saturated with images from the French colonial cinema that drew Algeria from the outside. [19]

In these contexts, "Visual Memory Cinema" is not an analytical luxury but a critical necessity: it is impossible to understand how such films operate on their audiences without grasping the layered and overlapping strata of images lodged in the spectator's memory. And it is here that drawing on Barthes and Eco, in preference to the Bazin-Deleuze axis, offers its most productive yield for Maghrebi and postcolonial film criticism.

V. Conclusion: The Film Does Not Die — It Resides in Those Who Have Seen It

When the small Super-8 camera films blurred, trembling images after the death of its operator in the closing sequence of *The State of Things,* this scene inflicts a wound on the memory of every spectator who carries film history with them. Not because it presents raw reality as it simply is, but because it releases their visual encyclopaedia without guardianship — because it invites them to become the true director of meaning.

This study does not claim to have read the "complete truth" of the film — the open work by its nature resists closure. What it claims is that semiotics offers the film critic a different posture: instead of asking what the film points to, we ask what it produces in those who watch it. That difference in the question changes every answer.

The realist reading sees in the camera that continues filming a liberation of the image from subjectivity. The semiotic reading sees in it a transfer of interpretive ownership: from the director to the spectator. Not the death of cinema — but the declaration that cinema does not reside in the film. It resides in those who have seen it.

And so *The State of Things* achieves what no realist theory can adequately explain: it remains alive in 2026, wounding a critic watching it in Tlemcen as it wounded a critic watching it in Venice in 1982. The wound does not age because it does not reside in eternity — it resides in memory.

Notes

[1] Nagib, Lúcia (2020), Realist Cinema as World Cinema: Non-cinema, Intermedial Passages, Total Cinema. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, p. 27.

[2] Ibid., p. 2.

[3] Barthes, Roland (1977), "The Third Meaning: Research Notes on Some Eisenstein Stills," in: Image–Music–Text, translated by Stephen Heath. New York: Hill and Wang, pp. 52–68.

[4] Carroll, Noël (1998 [1982]), "The Future of Allusion: Hollywood in the Seventies (and Beyond)," in: Interpreting the Moving Image. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 241.

[5] Barthes, Roland (1981), Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography, translated by Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, pp. 25–27.

[6] Ibid., p. 26.

[7] Boujut, Michel (1986), Wim Wenders. Paris: Edilig, p. 99.

[8] Eco, Umberto (1989 [1962]), The Open Work, translated by Anna Cancogni. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, pp. 3–23.

[9] Eco, Umberto (1979), The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, pp. 16–22.

[10] Russell, Catherine (1990), "The Life and Death of Authorship in Wim Wenders' The State of Things," Canadian Journal of Film Studies, 1(1), p. 19.

[11] Barthes, Roland (1977), "The Death of the Author," in: Image–Music–Text, op. cit., pp. 142–148.

[12] Nagib (2020), op. cit., p. 43.

[13] Russell (1990), op. cit., p. 25.

[14] Nagib (2020), op. cit., pp. 36–37.

[15] Ibid., p. 43.

[16] Carroll (1998), op. cit., p. 241.

[17] Eco, Umberto (1984), Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, pp. 40–42.
[18] Nagib (2020), op. cit., p. 34, citing Rosen, Philip (2003), "History of Image, Image of History: Subject and Ontology in Bazin," in: Margulies, Ivone (ed.), Rites of Realism: Essays on Corporeal Cinema. Durham/London: Duke University Press, p. 57.
[19] Schütte, Wolfram (2001), "Goodbye to the Booming Voice of the Old Cinema: The State of Things," in: Wim Wenders: Essays and Conversations. London: Faber and Faber, p. 200.

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The Searchers (*The Searchers*, dir. John Ford, 1956, USA).
8½ (*8½*, dir. Federico Fellini, 1963, Italy).
Paris, Texas (*Paris, Texas*, dir. Wim Wenders, 1984, West Germany / France).
Chronicle of the Years of Fire (*Chronique des années de braise*, dir. Mohamed Lakhdar-Hamina, 1975, Algeria).

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[1] Nagib, Lúcia (2020), Realist Cinema as World Cinema: Non-cinema, Intermedial Passages, Total Cinema. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, p. 27.

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[3] Barthes, Roland (1977), "The Third Meaning: Research Notes on Some Eisenstein Stills," in: Image–Music–Text, translated by Stephen Heath. New York: Hill and Wang, pp. 52–68.

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