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For citation

Filatova, E.E. (2025). Photographic images and their ambivalent status in Wim Wenders's *Alice in the Cities* and *Paris, Texas*. *Nauka Televideniya—The Art and Science of Television*, 21 (2), 59–77. <https://doi.org/10.30628/1994-9529-2025-21.2-59-77>, <https://elibrary.ru/JFMYDJ>

Photographic images and their ambivalent status in Wim Wenders's *Alice in the Cities* and *Paris, Texas*

Abstract. This paper analyzes two films by Wim Wenders—*Alice in the Cities* (1974) and *Paris, Texas* (1984)—which might be viewed, both narratively and stylistically, as a powerful reflection on photography. Drawing on theories by Susan Sontag, Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard, Marshall McLuhan, Walter J. Ong, William J. Mitchell, and Roger Scruton, the essay provides frameworks for understanding Wenders's commentary on photography and visual media. While both films recognize photography's evidential power—its transparent, unbiased representation of what Barthes calls the photographic referent—they also show nostalgia for unmediated experience and criticize how photography changes human perception. The analysis shows how cameras and other technological “extensions” in Wenders's films limit creative expression and reduce ability for “pure handcraft” (more authentic human expressions like writing). Live communication serves as a counterpoint to camera-mediated experience, helping the main characters overcome their ennui—or what Freud would classify as melancholia.

Published by
Наука
телевидения



Keywords: Wim Wenders, *Alice in the Cities*, *Paris, Texas*, photography, photograph, photographic referent, visual media, electronic media, mediation, secondary orality, hot and cool media

INTRODUCTION

A sense of being lost mentally and sometimes spatially unites Philip and Travis, the main characters of Wim Wenders's *Alice in the Cities* (1974) and *Paris, Texas* (1984). Both appear to experience what Sigmund Freud called *melancholia*—"a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity," where "one cannot see clearly what it is that has been lost" (Freud, 1964, pp. 244–245). While most symptoms Freud describes appear in these characters, they show the opposite of "inhibition of all activity." Both demonstrate an urge to move, and though initially aimless, their movement gains purpose after meeting the child characters Alice and Hunter, who act as transformative figures—emotional compasses guiding the adults through their ennui.

Wenders's films prominently feature photographic activity in various forms: taking photographs, posing for them, examining them in magazines, or exchanging them. These recurring practices, abundant in both films, constitute what Margaret Olin (following Bourdieu) terms their *habitus* (Olin, 2012, p. 15). Beyond this habitus, Wenders explores photography's increasingly significant yet ambiguous role—serving simultaneously as documentary evidence of past events and as a barrier mediating our experience of the world. This paper attempts to decode Wenders's commentary on photography through his narrative and stylistic choices, drawing on theories from Susan Sontag, Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard, Marshall McLuhan, Walter J. Ong, William J. Mitchell, and Roger Scruton. Methodologically, it combines narrative, semiotic, and cultural analysis to reveal the films' perspective on the sociocultural implications surrounding photographic practice and the widespread use of Polaroid cameras.

I argue that these films show how cameras and other "extensions" inhibit creative endeavors and diminish what I call *pure handcraft*—activities relying wholly on innate human capacities and generative potential (like writing). Moreover, at least in the case of *Alice in the Cities*, these devices may cause the protagonists' melancholia by, in Freud's terms, inhibiting other potential activities (like contemplating one's surroundings) and, given their lifeless stillness, failing

to satisfy the need for real human connection. It is worth noting that photography, which has long been recognized as a separate art form, is not opposed here to what I refer to as *creative endeavors*. While equally creative, photography's more mechanical nature invites comparison to the craft of writing and, with some of Wenders's characters casually rejecting the fruits of the former, photography is shown as less valuable than the latter. Another point I examine is the characters' distrust of words in favor of images as the ultimate source of truth. Along with that, as images grow increasingly susceptible to manipulation in our digital age, their status as unimpeachable records of the past erodes—a shift that would undermine the unshakable trust in photographs exhibited by Wenders's characters.

DEFINING THE PHOTOGRAPH: A MATERIAL PROOF, SURROGATE COMPANION OR SUBSTITUTE FOR MEMORIES?

One recurring theme in Wenders's films is the over-reliance on photographed images and an addiction to picture-taking. In *Alice in the Cities*, the German journalist Philip, commissioned to write an article about America, travels across the country while constantly photographing his surroundings with a Polaroid camera. The camera seems to become an extension of his body. This is powerfully illustrated in a scene where Philip arrives at a roadside café: rather than showing the beach through his own eyes via a traditional point-of-view shot, Wenders presents the view through his Polaroid's "eyes." We hear not Philip's voice, but the mechanical sound of the camera ejecting the image. Through this subtle technique, Wenders suggests the camera has effectively "grown into" Philip's perception.

William J. Mitchell (1992, p. 28) conceptualizes the camera as a *supereye*—"a perceptual prosthesis that can stop action better than the human eye, resolve finer detail, remorselessly attend to the subtlest distinctions of intensity, and not leave unregistered anything in the field of its gaze." This tension between the human and the mechanical, where technology threatens to surpass organic creativity, is vividly portrayed in the mentioned scene. However, as subsequent analysis will show, the film ultimately complicates this premise by affirming the irreplaceable value of human craftsmanship.

Andrew Light connects Philip's compulsive photography to his inherent solipsism (Light, 1997, p. 220), interpreting the images as a visual statement and proof that the external world exists independently of his perception. This aligns

with Susan Sontag's observation that photographs serve as "incontrovertible proof that a given thing happened." She also notes how photographic evidence often convinces us of truths we might otherwise doubt (Sontag, 1977, p. 5). Both films dramatize this dynamic. In *Paris, Texas*, Hunter begins rebuilding his emotional connection with his father Travis only after viewing archival footage of their family road trip to the coast (involving the sweet moments like Hunter sitting on Travis's lap and driving a car; Jane, Travis, and Hunter holding hands and running along the coast, and many others), as if he has finally believed that they once *were* a family. Similarly, in *Alice in the Cities*, the protagonist's fruitless search for her grandmother across Germany only resolves when she shows Philip a photograph of her grandmother's house (Fig. 1)—one that had been in Alice's backpack all along. Philip's immediate acceptance of its reality ("How easy everything is!") demonstrates the power of photography to substantiate truth.



Fig. 1. Philip holding the photograph of Alice's grandmother's presumed house. Still from *Alice in the Cities* [1:28:27]. (1974). Directed by Wim Wenders¹

During their way home, Travis shows his brother Walt a photograph of barren land he purchased in Paris, Texas (Fig. 2). As Travis explains, this location marks where his parents first met and where he believes his personal history originated—in his words, where he began. Roland Barthes, similarly to Sontag's perspective,

¹ See the image source: <https://archive.org/details/alice-in-the-cities-1974.1080p-blu-ray.x-264-aac-yts-mx/11.04.2025>.

emphasizes photography's evidentiary power, stating that "the Photograph does not necessarily say *what is no longer*, but only and for certain *what has been*" (Barthes, 1993, pp. 89, 85). He recounts (quite a common) personal experience of receiving the photograph of a certain unremembered event or occasion:

One day I received from a photographer a picture of myself which I could not remember being taken, for all my efforts; I inspected the tie, the sweater, to discover in what circumstances I had worn them; to no avail. And yet, because it was a photograph I could not deny that I had been there. (Barthes, 1993, p. 85)

For Travis, the photograph of Paris, Texas serves as material proof of that, at some point in time, he did start to exist. Philip in *Alice in the Cities* photographs almost everything that happens to him, from selling a car to meeting with his boss at the bureau (Fig. 3, Fig. 4), as if accumulating evidence of his experiences. As Robert P. Kolker and Peter Beicken observe:

Picture taking is the validation of the visible and a method of orienting the self in the world. With it, Wenders creates a paradigm of affirmation. The self, haunted by the transiency of existence, tries to overcome its vulnerable state by establishing an irrefutable representation of being in the world. (Kolker & Beicken, 1993, p. 42)

In one of the most pensive and reflective scenes in *Alice in the Cities*, Philip's New York friend suggests his constant photography stems from his loss of self; that he needs proof that he can still *hear* and *see*. Philip distractedly continues to talk about what bothers him, paying no attention to what she is saying and thus confirming her assumption that he really does not see or hear anything. While sharing his travel observations with his friend, Philip laments the sameness of American cityscapes outside New York. But might that perceived sameness be due to his obsessive picture taking? Sontag argues photography fosters "a chronic voyeuristic relation to the world which levels the meaning of all events," rendering distinct places, equalized by the camera, similarly mundane (Sontag, 1977, p. 10).



Fig. 2. Walt holding the photograph of Travis's plot of land.
Still from *Paris, Texas* [30:22]. (1984). Directed by Wim Wenders²



Fig. 3. Philip photographing his car before selling it.
Still from *Alice in the Cities* [14:10]. (1974). Directed by Wim Wenders³

² See the image source: <https://rutube.ru/video/8ceea2e81f7f624a3d2676d5c99b7370/?r=wd> (11.04.2025).

³ See the image source: <https://archive.org/details/alice-in-the-cities-1974.1080p-blu-ray.x-264-aac-yts-mx> (11.04.2025).



**Fig. 4. Philip photographing his boss. Still from *Alice in the Cities* [18:54]. (1974).
Directed by Wim Wenders⁴**

Sontag contends photography has become integral to travel, giving people the impression that they are doing something meaningful, offering “a friendly imitation of work” (Sontag, 1977, p. 9) while reducing experience to a mere image, a souvenir, to a search for objects and places worth photographing (Sontag, 1977, p. 8). Marshall McLuhan extends this critique, noting how photography transformed the nature of travel from Descartes’s ideal of “conversing with the men of other centuries” into “merely check[ing] his reactions to something with which he has long been familiar, and tak[ing] his own pictures of the same” (McLuhan, 1964, p. 178). The world becomes a museum of objects already seen in some other medium (McLuhan, 1964, p. 178), explaining the absence of wonder and awe in people looking at what is supposed to be new and uncharted. Alongside Philip’s mediated vision, another reason for his inability to be *impressed* by American vistas is that he has already pre-consumed them through films or other media; America no longer seems mysterious or unattainable, and when encountered physically, fails to produce a wow-effect. McLuhan observes that photography affects travelers as books once affected readers—it substitutes live inquiry, conversation, and reflection (McLuhan, 1964, p. 178). Due to their tangibility and materiality, photographs (especially of people) serve, in Margaret Olin’s terms, as a “surrogate companion,” replacing real individuals (Olin, 2012, p. 16). Philip’s Polaroids exemplify this: during his solitary wanderings across America, he lays

⁴ See the image source: <https://archive.org/details/alice-in-the-cities-1974.1080p-blu-ray.x-264-aac-yts-mx> (11.04.2025).

out photographs at beaches or cafés, sorting through them as if (haptically) engaging with an imaginary friend. This surrogate function recurs in *Paris, Texas* when Travis and Hunter stay at a roadside motel en route to find Jane (Travis's wife and Hunter's mother). Travis gives his son a family photograph to clarify Hunter's otherwise blurred image of her. Hunter's treatment of the picture is particularly revealing—he tenderly places it under his pillow to sleep with it. For him, the photograph materially embodies his absent mother, becoming a tactile surrogate (in Olin's wording) to be touched and caressed. As Roger Scruton notes, a photograph acts as “surrogate for the thing which it shows,” faithfully reproducing its subjects (Scruton, 1983, p. 114). If for Philip, the subject of his photographs matters less than their material existence, for Hunter, the photograph captivates him (and later, haptically) precisely because it *depicts* his mother.

Sontag argues that photographs are not merely instruments of memory, as Proust thought, but rather “an invention of it [memory] or a replacement” (Sontag, 1977, p. 145). This idea resonates in *Paris, Texas*. When Travis asks Hunter if he remembers his mother, the boy replies, “Not really, only from that little movie we saw.” The same applies to Hunter's memory of Travis—he “remembers” and recognizes him as his father only through the film they watched. For Travis, whose time in the desert has left gaps in his memory, images become a reference point to recover—or rather, reconstruct—how things once *really* were. To understand what an ideal father should look like, he turns to magazines. However, a housekeeper (working for Travis's brother) challenges this approach, dismissing it as childish and questioning whether such staged, artificial sources can teach anything about reality.

Wenders himself reflects on how photographs displace real memory in *The Logic of Images*. He recounts his trip to Tokyo: “I had a camera with me and did some filming. I have the pictures, they have become my memory. But I think to myself: if you'd gone there without a camera, you would remember more” (Wenders, 1991, p. 61). This aligns with Jean Baudrillard's notion of the *symbolic murder* in photography—the idea that the object we see on the photo no longer exists as it was when captured (Baudrillard, 2011, p. 189). “The image expresses—materially, as it were—the absence of this reality” (Baudrillard, 2011, p. 185). Hunter's reaction after watching the archival footage of his parents underscores this: he tells Anne, Walt's wife, that what he saw was not his mother, not reality—just a movie from long ago. While his words echo Baudrillard's theory, they also suggest that he takes everything literally, probably due to his age—he conflates all mechanically reproduced images with cinema, treating them as inherently *unreal*.

Similar tensions between the real and unreal emerge in *Alice in the Cities*. During their flight to Germany, Alice and Philip play a word-guessing game.

When Alice correctly guesses Philip's word—Traum ("dream" in English)—she objects, insisting they need a word for something that "really exists." Her remark carries unexpected wisdom, recalling Walter J. Ong's observations on orality. In oral cultures,

the meaning of each word is controlled by [...] "direct semantic ratification," that is, by the real-life situations in which the word is used here and now. [...] Words acquire their meanings only from their always insistent actual habitat, which is not, as in a dictionary, simply other words, but includes also gestures, vocal inflections, facial expression, and the entire human, existential setting in which the real, spoken word always occurs. (Ong, 2002, p. 46)

The use of concepts in oral societies was always situational and a priori could not be abstract: they remained "close to the living human lifeworld" (Ong, 2002, pp. 48–49). If an object vanished from daily life, so too did its meaning (Ong, 2002, p. 46). "Traum," lacking a physical referent (dream cannot be touched, seen, or otherwise sensed), belongs to the mental realm and is not the part of what Ong calls *lived experience*. Alice rejects it: probably intuitively or reflecting a better connection with oral ancestral ways of thinking, she feels that this word, lacking Saussurean *tangible signifier*, is not the best choice.

(UN)MEDIATED EXPERIENCE

One of Sontag's most relevant observations is that photography has become a way of experiencing something, of giving an appearance of participation (Sontag, 1977, p. 9). Philip's experience of the world is always mediated rather than direct: unlike Alice, he appears sluggish, passive, and uninterested in engaging with the world firsthand. While Alice actively participates in life and, in Benjamin's sense, absorbs its aura, Philip does not. As his friend remarks, he does not see or hear anything. Sontag further notes that photographs not only provide "an imaginary possession of a past that is unreal, they also help people to take possession of space in which they are insecure" (Sontag, 1977, p. 8). When Philip first meets Alice at the entrance to an airline ticket agency, she plays joyfully in a revolving door. He eventually joins her game. This scene illustrates Light's observation that "things and spaces can be transformed for purposes other than those for which they are designed" (Light, 1997, p. 221). For Alice, the city offers endless possibilities, but the alienated Philip fails to see them. She teaches him to engage actively with

urban space. Notably, during their ferry ride near the end of their journey, Alice points out that Philip has not taken any photographs since they began traveling together (starting in Amsterdam). With Alice, Philip finally experiences life directly, there and then, without the camera's mediation. As Kolker and Beicken observe, child characters in Wenders's films

provide stories and images that offer respite to fatigue and ennui. Living in an immediacy of perception, with a sense of ownership and ease in their experience of the world, they provide an anchor for the adult characters, who are unmoored or too obsessive to yield their subjectivity. (Kolker & Beicken, 1993, p. 52)

Sontag perceptively notes that “having an experience becomes identical with taking a photograph of it, and participating in a public event comes more and more to be equivalent to looking at it in photographed form” (Sontag, 1977, pp. 21–22). While in America, Philip's entire experience is limited to mere picture-taking, listening to recorded music, and watching what he calls “inhuman” television; in Germany, however, his experiences become direct and unmediated. A telling example is the Chuck Berry concert scene: Philip actively engages with the live performance, appearing energized and revitalized—a stark contrast to his depressed state in America, where he nearly “took leave of his senses.” Constantly attached to his camera in America, Philip focused entirely on the technical aspects of photography (adjusting angles, pressing the shutter) while missing opportunities for genuine sensory engagement with the reality. Yet one notable exception does occur during his monotonous American wanderings: in the midst of selling his car, Philip—as if hungry for something pure and electronically unprocessed—suddenly recognizes the sound of a live organ. The car dealer confirms it is coming from Shea Stadium, followed by a panning shot that lingers on the organist. After constant exposure to recorded sounds and images, this unmediated musical experience surprises both Philip and the viewer.

Ong discusses in *Orality and Literacy* how electronic technologies like telephone, radio, and television have created a new age of *secondary orality* (Ong, 2002, p. 133). While this secondary orality centers around verbal utterance as such and returns language to its spoken form, the communication it facilitates remains impersonal, mediated, and lacking real-time shared context. Wenders's films powerfully demonstrate that secondary orality cannot adequately replace primary, face-to-face communication. As previously noted, Philip's American pastime of listening to the radio and watching television only deepens his depression and despair. At some point, frustrated by the endless stream of ads and films, Philip smashes his motel room television. This act symbolizes his rebellion against what

he terms the “inhumanity” of electronic media that trap him. The secondary orality of radio and television fails to compensate for human interaction or alleviate Philip’s loneliness.

In *Paris, Texas*, Wenders further explores the theme of mediation. Except for one flashback scene from four years earlier, Travis and Jane only communicate through barriers—the one-way mirror in the peep show club where Jane works, and via intercom telephone; their contacts are visually and verbally obstructed. This sequence serves as a powerful metaphor: modern media technologies, while ostensibly connecting us, ultimately contribute to our alienation from each other and the world. Wenders employs a signature technique in both *Paris, Texas* and *Alice in the Cities* to visually unite disconnected characters—merging their images into one (Fig. 5, Fig. 6). We see Travis’s face reflected in the window “integrated” with Jane’s body, and Alice’s face partially reflected onto Philip’s image in a photograph. Significantly, Alice initiates taking Philip’s photo so he could see what he looks like (as she reasons it), but the resulting Polaroid shows a hybrid image of both faces. Through this stylistic choice, Wenders suggests our identities are fundamentally hybrid, woven through interactions with people, “filling” our lives, rather than electronic mediation. It is the relations that are precious.



**Fig. 5. Travis’s face superimposed on Jane’s body.
Still from *Paris, Texas* [02:09:54]. (1984). Directed by Wim Wenders⁵**

⁵ See the image source: <https://rutube.ru/video/8ceea2e81f7f624a3d2676d5c99b7370/?r=wd> (11.04.2025).



**Fig. 6. Alice's face reflected in Philip's Polaroid image.
Still from *Alice in the Cities* [53:07]. (1974). Directed by Wim Wenders⁶**

Paris, Texas expresses nostalgia not just for an unmediated era, but specifically for the times when people mostly traveled by car, not by plane. As Elsa Court observes, this nostalgia manifests in Travis's "instinctive refusal to let the plane take off while he is still on it" (Court, 2020, p. 151). Court describes how "on their road trip west, Travis and Walt stop regularly for gas, food and sleep, activities which reveal a somewhat archaic roadside landscape" (Court, 2020, p. 151). Car travel clearly offers more immediate and varied experiences as compared to air travel's physical constraints in activities, movements, and views available. The active participation and engagement, required in driving (both Travis and Walt take turns at the wheel during their trip), contrasts sharply with the passive role of air passengers. Travis's preference for road travel could be interpreted as a grounding technique—a need to physically connect with the world amidst technologies, like the camera, that increasingly mediate our experience. His inexplicable withdrawal into the desert for four years represents an even more radical decision.

⁶ See the image source: <https://archive.org/details/alice-in-the-cities-1974.1080p-blu-ray.x-264-aac-yts-mx/11.04.2025>.

**PHOTOGRAPH VS WRITTEN (SPOKEN) WORD:
ON THEIR COMPARATIVE VALUE AS MEDIA OF HUMAN EXPRESSION,
RELIABILITY, AND FAITHFULNESS TO THE REFERENT**

Alice in the Cities explores the tension between photographs and written or spoken words. Telling is the scene where Philip's boss dismisses his photographs as worthless, reprimanding him for his inability to write a text about America Philip was commissioned to produce. This moment clearly devalues photography relative to the art of writing, which requires more authentically human creative effort. As Sontag notes, there is an immense gulf between picture-taking and endeavors like writing in terms of the efforts they require: although both activities can result in accredited works of art, the former is incomparably easier than the latter, taking just "a single movement, a touch of the finger" (Sontag, 1977, p. 144). McLuhan observes that Joyce saw photography as "at least a rival, and perhaps a usurper, of the word, whether written or spoken" (McLuhan, 1964, p. 173). Apparently, *Alice in the Cities* reflects on how photo cameras, now available to nearly anyone, might encourage creative passivity. Following McLuhan's distinction, compared to the *cooler* arts of writing or painting/drawing, demanding substantial authorial input, photography is a *hot* medium requiring little participation—camera's mechanism does all the work, and the output is already filled with data (McLuhan, 1964, p. 36). Philip's Polaroid camera, with its seductive ease, not only suppresses his creativity but may even be the reason of his melancholia. While interacting only with this gadget throughout his American journey, he achieves no results as a journalist. Only through human connection with Alice (and her mother, who soon leaves their company) does he resume handwritten recording of his feelings and observations from his American trip.

Jefferson Hunter emphasizes in *Image and Word* that to be *legible* and properly understood, photographs require written captions to establish their "relation to localities, time, individual identity, and the other categories of human understanding" (Hunter, 1987, p. 6). Without linguistic support, photographs remain incomplete and ambiguous. Hunter argues captions fundamentally shape how audiences interpret images (Hunter, 1987, p. 7), assigning humans (and their capabilities) the crucial role of providing meanings or filling the gaps. This perspective differs from McLuhan's, with Hunter presenting photography as inherently incomplete and, as he terms it, *inviting*—asking for verbal context. Philip's photographs are rejected precisely because they lack this interpretive framework—without his personal perspective, they remain valueless.

McLuhan's critique of photography as substituting live communication could equally apply to writing. Ong observes that in primary oral societies, unfamiliar with writing, personality structures were "more communal and externalized, and

less introspective than those common among literates” (Ong, 2002, p. 67). While oral communication united people, such *solitary* (though initially communal) practices as writing and reading turned people inward (Ong, 2002, p. 67). As Ong notes, “In composing a text, in ‘writing’ something, the one producing the written utterance is [...] alone” (Ong, 2002, p. 99), engaging in what he terms “interiorized thought” (Ong, 2002, p. 150). Significantly, both Wenders’s films emphasize *human*, that is, oral communication. This narrative choice, along with Philip’s failed writing assignment, appears as an attempt to reconnect characters with others, forcing them out of isolation through communal tasks (finding Alice’s grandmother and Hunter’s mother) that require cooperation and communication.

Theorists like William J. Mitchell and Roger Scruton highlight photography’s supposed lack of human bias or agency—a key distinction from painting (Mitchell, 1992, p. 28; Scruton, 1983). Scruton argues that while painting involves *intentional*, imaginative representation (the artist is free to use his imagination, and the painting does not have to resemble its actual subject), photography maintains a *causal* relationship with its subject—it depicts something materially existing (Scruton, 1983, p. 103). André Bazin similarly notes:

For the first time, between the originating object and its reproduction there intervenes only the instrumentality of a nonliving agent [...] an image of the world is formed automatically, without the creative intervention of man. The personality of the photographer enters into the proceedings only in his selection of the object to be photographed and by way of the purpose he has in mind. (Bazin, 2005, p. 13)

Human involvement here is limited to the choice of what to photograph and why it is worthwhile to do it at all.

Barthes, in *Camera Lucida*, privileges photography over writing, arguing photographs present objects more transparently and accurately. Drawing on Sartre, he claims that in the photograph,

the object yields itself wholly, and our vision of it is certain—contrary to the text or to other perceptions which give me the object in a vague, arguable manner, and therefore incite me to suspicions as to what I think I am seeing. (Barthes, 1993, p. 106)

For Barthes, photography “does not invent” and is an “authentication itself” (Barthes, 1993, pp. 85, 87), unlike language’s fictional nature or painting’s potential deception. We can never be sure that an event described has actually happened, or that a person or thing really existed, no matter how realistic they appear at the picture or in the text (Barthes, 1993, p. 77). Speaking of the evidential value of language versus photography/videography, we should revisit the scene where

Hunter and Travis watch old family footage showing them with Jane. Though Hunter has been told repeatedly that Travis is his father since Travis's return, these verbal explanations prove less convincing than the film, which made everything clear for the boy. Immediately after watching it, Hunter approaches Travis and says "good night, Daddy"—words filled with recognition and renewed affection. This moment shows Wenders, like Barthes, questioning language's ability to adequately convey past reality. Photography and videography, untouched by human fantasy and embellishment, offer a more direct window into the past. Yet in Travis and Jane's reunion scene, spoken words become their only means of reconciliation and retrieval of the shared memories. Separated by a one-way mirror—with Jane's vision nearly blocked—they must rely completely on verbal communication. Through Travis's story about two lovers that initially seems unrelated but gradually reveals their own history, Jane comes to recognize and trust him. Their verbal contact, albeit quite brief, ultimately enables her reunion with Hunter.

PHOTOGRAPH TURNED DIGITAL: THE QUESTION OF AUTHENTICITY AND REFERENTIALITY

With technological advancements, photographic images have become increasingly susceptible to manipulation, casting doubt on their referents' existence, as Valery Savchuk observes (2005, p. 11). Mitchell notes that "images are no longer guaranteed as visual truth" (Mitchell, 1992, p. 57), suggesting the credibility gap between words and images has narrowed. He emphasizes that "computational tools for transforming, combining, altering, and analyzing images are as essential to the digital artist as brushes and pigments are to a painter" (Mitchell, 1992, p. 7). Digital photography now resembles painting in its working principles: like artists, digital imagers construct rather than capture images based on intentions. Photography loses its "causal" relation (Scruton) and is no longer just "a matter of capture and printing" (Mitchell, 1992, p. 7). Daniel Rubinstein and Katrina Sluis argue that "when the photograph became digital information, it not only became malleable and non-indexical, it became *computational* and *programmable*. Whatever seems familiar, homey and continuous with the aesthetics of analogue photography is the design of computations" (Rubinstein & Sluis, 2013, p. 29). Even artificially faded or old-fashioned snapshots may result from algorithms (Rubinstein & Sluis, 2013, p. 29), indicating photography's growing constructedness and weakening connection to real-world referents.

Paradoxically, William J. T. Mitchell notes traditional photography allowed more human input than digital photography today (Mitchell, 2012, p. 47). Previously, photographs depended more on human memory and writing, often requiring captions with details like time and location, whereas now this information is automatically recorded as metadata (Mitchell, 2012, p. 47). It should be emphasized here that the present ideas do not contradict the paper's initial hypothesis about cameras diminishing human creative capacity, since photographic creativity—whether analog or digital—still remains not entirely human's doing and owes something to the mechanical / digital devices that partake in the production of an image. Regarding manipulation, Mitchell reasonably argues that analog photography also lacked pure genuineness, as

every photograph [...] was also a product of manipulation in the sense of technical, material standards, and decisions about what to shoot, at what settings, and how to develop and print it. The concept of the 'genuine' image is an ideological phantasm. (Mitchell, 2012, p. 51)

Beyond manipulation, new deep-learning algorithms can now generate entirely AI-created photorealistic images from other images or text prompts (and vice versa) (Somaini, 2023). These images possess what Antonio Somaini calls *layered referentiality*, understanding their "referents" as "images captured or produced by human beings [...] and then uploaded to the internet, along with the words that accompanied them, as captions," which, in turn, refer to the real photographed objects or people (Somaini, 2023, pp. 95, 106). Text-to-image models particularly concern Somaini for their photorealistic quality, enabling fake, counterfactual, and often misleading imagery (Somaini, 2023, p. 103). As AI technologies advance and become more accessible (especially considering the capacities of text-to-image models), images inspire decreasing trust (Somaini, 2023, p. 103), necessitating new methods of image analysis and fact-checking to verify authenticity (Somaini, 2023, p. 103).

CONCLUSION

Wenders's two films explore a wide range of ideas about photography through both style and narrative. While they acknowledge photography's evidential power and celebrate its transparency and unbiasedness in presenting what Barthes calls the "photographic referent" (as opposed to language's potential fictionality or constructedness), they also reveal Wenders's nostalgia for

unmediated experience and his critique of photography's transformative effect on humans. Philip's excessive photographing, which renders all places and events identical, leads to his inability to truly see or hear his surroundings. His Polaroid camera stifles his creative impulses (particularly his writing) while giving him the false impression of productive work.

Both *Alice in the Cities* and *Paris, Texas* champion the value of direct human connection and exploration: through live communication and engagement, Philip and Travis overcome their ennui or Freudian melancholia. Once Philip and Travis find true companionship in Alice and Hunter—the human connection they have been missing—they both transform positively: Philip resumes his writing, while Travis regains speech and self-care abilities lost during his desert isolation.

Regarding the word-image dichotomy, images have lost their former evidentiary superiority, given the new possibilities for digital manipulation. Moreover, AI-generated images no longer maintain conventional referentiality, instead deriving from a combination of multi-layered referents. Consequently, images can no longer claim greater transparency or objectivity than words—we might say the two media have reached parity. Indeed, considering how text now fundamentally drives image generation in AI models (serving as their foundational input), language appears to be re-establishing itself as the more direct and unambiguous medium compared to imagery.

Between writing (employing human linguistic capacity) and photography (relying on what Bazin called “the instrumentality of a nonliving agent”), *Alice in the Cities* clearly favors the former. The film underscores the limitations of mechanically produced images when Philip's boss dismisses his Polaroid photographs, highlighting both the insufficiency of such images alone and the necessity of human interpretation through accompanying text to provide meaningful context.

For future research, Wenders's treatment of memory merits deeper examination. As previously noted, photographic and filmic images become incorporated into memory almost seamlessly. The semi-amnesiac Travis seeks models of ideal fatherhood in magazine images, and Hunter's recollection of his parents derives entirely from viewed footage. Through these and other instances, Wenders questions the composition of memory itself: in our era of mechanical reproduction, how can we distinguish between lived experiences and authentic memories of visited places and attended events, and those absorbed through mediated representations in films, magazines, and other reproductions?

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