

“Bringing the Beatles Back to Hamburg”: Aspects of National Identity in Wim Wenders’s *The American Friend*

by [Nicholas Mahoney](#)

Tom Ripley – the American – stands behind his pool table without his characteristic Stetson hat. Illuminated softly by a light fixture advertising ‘Canadian’ soft drinks, he drinks German beer, wearing a t-shirt reading “Indian Power.” The room is dim and silent; an ornate jukebox sits in the corner, but Ripley (Dennis Hopper) does not touch it. Instead, he whistles a breathy tune before loading a roll of film into a Polaroid camera. Holding the camera at arm’s length, he turns his head away and shuts his eyes as though this were a Hollywood suicide. As the flash goes off, there is a match cut and his primitive selfie fills the screen. Now he fixes his hair and lowers himself onto the table, lying face up as he takes several more photos, at first expressionless, but then with wild eyes and clenched teeth, as though in pain. The camera clicks and whirs over Ripley’s heavy breathing; one by one the Polaroids fall to the table, cluttering the green surface (*The American Friend* 01:36:04-01:36:51).

In this scene, director Wim Wenders subjects us to a particularly American narcissism, both insistent and contentless. The pool table, its intended function forgotten, serves instead as a canvas for Ripley’s deranged, yet oddly calculated portraiture. Surrounded by advertisements of foreign products and politics, Ripley snaps picture after picture, as though proving his own existence to himself through portraiture – yet he doesn’t look at any of the Polaroids, only lets them fall behind him unobserved. It is the act of being photographed that interests him, the act of being perceived by somebody, even if ‘somebody’ is a lens. Through such images, *The American Friend* (1977) uses its pulpy, neo-noir format to question the myths of American identity in a transnational context.

The American Friend, adapted from an unpublished manuscript of Patricia Highsmith's novel *Ripley's Game*, is one of many filmic interpretations of the novel series featuring this titular anti-hero. The film chronicles the relationship between Ripley, a crooked American art dealer living in Hamburg, and Jonathan Zimmermann (Bruno Ganz), a picture framer and Hamburg native suffering from a slow terminal illness. When the two meet at an auction, Ripley has just sold a forged painting produced by an accomplice in New York. Zimmermann refuses a handshake, shocked by the American's nonchalant dishonesty (00:08:00 – 00:12:10). In retaliation for this snub, Ripley hatches a convoluted scheme to corrupt and ruin Zimmermann. He ingratiates himself to the framer by enlisting his services with an air of friendship, claiming to be an honest businessman who is "bringing the Beatles back to Hamburg" (01:08:44). Ripley then refers the German to a French gangster in need of an assassin, telling the gangster that Zimmermann's illness has rendered him financially desperate. Zimmermann initially declines the proposition, but, nudged on by the American and the Frenchman, soon grows paranoid that death is imminent and accepts it, with the intention of amassing an ill-gotten fortune to leave behind to his wife, Marianne (Lisa Kreuzer), and their son. From there, the mild-mannered Zimmermann spirals into a high-stakes dance with a Pan-European underworld. The plot is convoluted, but when approached as impressionistic, it transforms into a vivid study of both character and culture, anchored by two world-class actors at the height of their powers.

The Polaroid scene of Ripley's narcissism notably follows one of the film's major set pieces, a collaborative hit job aboard a speeding train, executed by Ripley and his meek German counterpart. In fact, both of the murders which Zimmermann is coerced into committing take place either on trains or in metro stations. As such, the persistence of trains throughout the film invokes both American mythology and European, especially German, modernity – that is, John Henry and Hank Williams on one hand, Kraftwerk and Eurorail on the other. This train is the perfect setting for the archetypal European and American to forge their bond in blood.

Paralleling Ripley's near hysterical self-obsession in the Polaroid scene, Zimmermann experiences a domestic fallout after his disappearance from his home during the hit job on the train. As Marianne's pleas for honesty shift to desperate, angry outbursts at her husband, Zimmermann stands motionless, then slaps her, saying nothing besides "Be quiet." (01:34:55-01:35:00). Afterward, the timid German artisan affects stoic machismo in his small Hamburg apartment, while the American criminal breaks down crying in his mansion outside of town. This ironic juxtaposition, however, does not suggest a reversal. Ripley's breakdown is brought on neither by trauma nor cowardice. Rather, Hopper's masterful performance reveals a character whose Americanness conceals and belies a sinister pathology. Zimmermann is in turn displaced from his domestic life and homeland by his entanglements with this American.

Wim Wenders has described Highsmith's novels as being "'about little lies that lead to big disasters'" (Wenders qtd. in Prose); this quality is magnified in Wenders' adaptation of *The American Friend*. The transcultural relationship between Ripley and Zimmermann rests on three lies, of an increasingly abstract nature. The plot hinges on Ripley convincing the gentle Zimmermann that his illness is advancing much more quickly than it actually is in order to enlist him as a hitman. A second deception is suggested by the flimsiness of Ripley's masculinity. A third is the very myth of America, foisted upon the unwitting Zimmermann by the manipulative Ripley.

In an essay published alongside the Criterion Collection's reissue of *The American Friend*, Francine Prose writes that "Ripley's Stetson identifies him as mythically American, so it's ironic and odd and funny that America – in theory, a beacon of democracy and culture – appears here as a rather dim beacon: a not very intelligent psycho." In the film's opening, set in New York City, Ripley emerges from a yellow cab clad in a long black coat and his signature Stetson hat and steps out into a classically dirty SoHo, complete with wailing sirens (00:01:27-00:01:55). He is there on business, ambling up to the sparse loft of a geriatric art forger to purchase the painting that will later bring Ripley to Zimmermann. As the two discuss finances, Ripley stands in profile for a slick waist shot, looking down at the painting, which depicts a speeding freight train. The forger chuckles and asks, "Do you wear that hat in Hamburg?" Ripley, removing and examining the Stetson, responds, "What's wrong with a cowboy in Hamburg?" (00:02:01-00:04:17). His getup is bizarre in Germany, and amusing in 1970s Soho. After all, Ripley does not belong to the country that produced Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid; that country no longer exists, if it ever did. Rather, he belongs to a United States full of crooks, art forgers, underpaid taxi drivers, and the sound of sirens: a postmodern landscape of urban blight where the old symbols of national identity have been displaced.

The film frames American masculine identity as a defiled construct. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, in "Surrogate Americans: Masculinity, Masquerade, and the Formation of a National Identity" understands this construction as a form of "surrogacy." "Surrogacy" indicates that national identities are not formed in a vacuum, but assume aspects of previous identities, usually those which the surrogate has displaced. Smith-Rosenberg arrives at this argument through an examination of New York's Tammany Hall. In their early years, members of the Society of Saint Tammany, or the "Sons" of Tammany, as they called themselves, would adopt bastardized versions of practices lifted from Indigenous nations. She recounts, of the many Tammany societies that sprung up in the early United States, that they "adapted medieval British traditions to New World settings. Erecting imposing maypoles bestrewed with native American flowers, elite Tammany 'braves' danced around them with tomahawks and feathers – in this way laying claim to both a British medieval and an American indigenous world" (1327). In acting the cowboy, Ripley bastardizes an image just as necessary to the process of American mythmaking that helped Europeans lay claim to the continent. Americana

emerged not as a pure product of Man and his environment, but rather from the processes of surrogacy which allowed the American to lay claim to that environment. Smith-Rosenberg writes that the Tammany mummery was “not simply an assertion of European American power [but also] an anxious admission of need” (1330). National surrogacy is not an expression of power, but a transfer. In order for an individual, or a nation, to establish dominion over their environment, a certain level of aesthetic comfort with this environment must be achieved.

Smith-Rosenberg aptly describes surrogacy as a process of masquerade in which everyone engages. Dress, affect, gender, and culture all blend into national identity as processes of elaborate costuming and thespianism. Masquerade, on whatever scale it is practiced, earns its practitioners places within the social ecosystems of their choice. For example, “Just as Philadelphia’s colonial elite used masquerades to assert its cultural equality with the British elite . . . so New York City artisans used their masquerades to establish a connection with this older colonial elite and to assert their right to participate in affairs of state alongside President Washington and his cabinet” (Smith-Rosenberg 1328). Surrogacy appropriates aspects of existent identities in order to displace them. The surrogate simultaneously adopts the role of that which it replaces and asserts power over that ‘original.’ But since he ‘masques’ the cowboy, whose mythical role is to displace the Indian, Ripley’s act of surrogacy is doubled: he is displacing the displacer.

As symbols of Americana, films such as Dennis Hopper’s own *Easy Rider* (1969) loom large over Wenders’s work. Ripley even sings a few bars of Roger McGuinn’s “Ballad of Easy Rider” at one point in *The American Friend*. A parallel may be drawn between the endings of these two films as well. In the final shot of *Easy Rider*, the camera lifts away from the shattered body of a protagonist’s beloved motorcycle (01:36:47). Matt Zoller Seitz, in an essay for Criterion, writes that this shot “could represent the death of a man, or of a dream of revolution. But it may also signify the death of a false dream of comfort. Billy and Wyatt were born to be wild, and they died wild; in its twisted way, it’s a happy ending.” *Easy Rider*, though critical of the culture which produced it, does not question the existence, however unattainable, of an American essence.

By contrast, the national qualities of *The American Friend*’s opposite leads – Ripley and Zimmerman, American and German – blur by the film’s ending. After the two men, Marianne in tow, burn the bodies of would-be assassins on a remote beach, Zimmermann speeds off, leaving Ripley, clad in a flannel and blue jeans, to scream and wave his fists on the vast, flat beach. Zimmermann’s departure is shot in a wide angle, with the German laughing hysterically and twisting his neck to look through his rear window, as though the American and his influence are now fixtures of his past. Soon, however, Ripley’s lies become manifest. As the couple rides down the highway away from the ocean, Zimmermann seems ill, even as he chuckles and says, “He’ll never bring the Beatles back to Hamburg.” As his wife begins to worry, Zimmermann assures

her that “[he’ll] make it back to Hamburg,” as though reassured that he can now return to his own German-ness before his death (02:01:05-02:02:40). Immediately after, however, Zimmermann dies at the wheel, and the car careens up over the steep shoulder of the highway and toward the cold embrace of the North Sea. Marianne barely escapes. Zimmermann dies stateless, robbed of his identity by his complicity with Ripley and his crimes. His German identity is yet another masquerade, no more authentic than Ripley’s cowboy hat. In the hysteria of his final moments, Zimmermann also calls back to Ripley’s own unhinged behavior in the Polaroid scene; these are moments in which his Americana begins to crack open. Through their complicity with each other, the two men, different on the surface, are reduced to a single, hysterical substance.

The American Friend leaves Ripley alive, alone, and rootless on a desolate German beach, singing Bob Dylan’s “I Pity the Poor Immigrant.” Ripley’s answer to *Easy Rider*’s famous line “We blew it” is, then, an enigmatic line to the departed Zimmermann: “We made it anyway, Jonathan” (*The American Friend* 02:03:44). Where exactly ‘they’ have made it to is unclear. It may not be a place at all, but the absence of ‘place,’ a state of being without surrogate identities. In this final shot, Ripley’s Stetson is nowhere to be seen: the cowboy has lost his hat. If the protagonists of *Easy Rider* were “born to be wild” in a fundamentally American sense, perhaps Ripley was “born to be wild” as a stateless subject, in the Rathskeller of raw human nature.

It is through these final scenes, and this analysis of Zimmermann’s death and Ripley’s dispossession, that *The American Friend* may be understood as not simply a manifestation of Smith-Rosenberg’s ‘surrogacy,’ but an expansion of her argument. Surrogacy, as Wenders portrays it, does not begin and end with explicit processes of colonization or displacement. Rather, it is practiced by all those who subscribe, consciously or otherwise, to some form of national identity – that is, everybody. In an interview, Wenders suggests that “As I am really obsessed with the idea of ‘truth’ and ‘beauty’ being identical notions, you can imagine I was attracted by Highsmith’s own preoccupations” (Wenders qtd. in Prose). Wenders’ faith in the existence of truth colors any analysis of *The American Friend*’s ending, and the film at large. The protagonists’ final state, though manifested as hysteria, is real and fundamental. As such, it is both truthful and beautiful, and positioned in opposition to the national and individual lies which drive the film’s plot. Seitz’s ‘happy ending’ reading of *Easy Rider* is in a way mirrored in *The American Friend*, then, wherein the protagonists come to a catastrophic end, yet do so in their truest natural states. Wenders addresses that which lies beneath national mythologies: a substance which Smith-Rosenberg declines to mention in her largely historical analysis of surrogacy. Call it truth, call it beauty, or otherwise, but Wenders’ treatment of the concept of ‘surrogacy’ maintains a deep faith in the existence of something beneath it.

Works Cited

Easy Rider. Directed by Dennis Hopper, Columbia Pictures, 1969.

The American Friend. Directed by Wim Wenders, performances by Dennis Hopper, Bruno Ganz, and Lisa Kreuzer, Filmverlag der Autoren, 1977.

Smith-Rosenberg, Carrol. "Surrogate Americans: Masculinity, Masquerade, and the Formation of a National Identity." *PMLA*, vol. 119, no. 5, 2004, pp. 1325-35.

Prose, Francine. "The American Friend: Little Lies and Big Disasters." *Criterion*, 12 Jan. 2016, www.criterion.com/current/posts/3866-the-american-friend-little-lies-and-big-disasters.

Seitz, Matt Zoller. "Easy Rider: Wild at Heart." *Criterion*, 23 Nov. 2010, www.criterion.com/current/posts/1667-easy-rider-wild-at-heart.