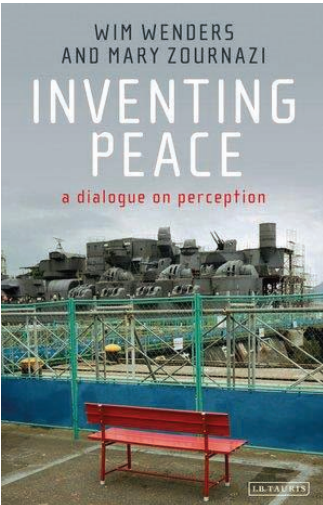


Telling, not selling

Paola Totaro



Filmmaker Wim Wenders and philosopher Mary Zournazi have spent a decade exploring the visual and moral language for peace. Their book, *Inventing Peace: A dialogue on perception*, is published by I B Tauris (£14.99). Journalist Paola Totaro explored further.

At first glance, they seem an odd couple: Mary Zournazi, the little-known University of New South Wales philosopher, and the renowned German filmmaker Wim Wenders. But it is she who has been able to fluidly place into historical and scholarly context his free-flow musings on peace, as he pans here and there, drawing on vignettes and scenes from life, art and cinema to illustrate and explain his thoughts.

Images of war are everywhere but most of us find it difficult to invoke a sensation of peace, let alone a symbol or ideal capable of stirring visceral response. The invisibility is not just an unsettling reality but a profound conundrum that has occupied Wenders and Zournazi for more than a decade. Collated in the book *Inventing Peace*, an intellectual collaboration in the form of a sprawling dialogue, the duo not only ruminate on their own ideas but draw on the artists, filmmakers and philosophers who inspired them to explore a new visual and moral language for peace.

'Horror has not only become a best-selling export article of Hollywood, it is now accepted as legitimate food for the eyes and mind.'
– Wim Wenders

Wenders and Zournazi are in London for an 'In Conversation' at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, an elegant building in the sweep of white-stucco-faced Georgian terraces just off The Mall and Trafalgar Square. It is Thursday night and the presence of the revered filmmaker – and the duo's interlocutor, the glamorous feminist writer and Sylvia Plath scholar, Professor Jacqueline Rose – means the event is a sellout. The building is rammed with people,

the bar full, the café and bookshop buzzing. With the question-and-answer session over, the movie man and the philosopher work patiently through the long queue of people keen for autographs in newly bought books. One fellow has brought 20-plus Wenders film posters he has collected over two decades and the director, without a hint of annoyance, signs each one.

We were supposed to meet for a chat earlier in the day but Wenders' hotel balked because they did not have a private room free: ironically, his superstar status in Europe (the trademark heavy glasses and shock of silver curls are eminently recognisable) allows him little peace in public. At the ICA, a lissome, black-clad event manager whisks us to a quiet room upstairs, away from the crowd.

Seated in high-backed chairs, bottles of still water in hand, the two could not be more different interviewees. Wenders is quiet, contemplative and exudes a kind of benign patience and sense of duty. Zournazi, despite fighting a cold, is radiating excitement.

She says they met, pretty much by accident, on the eve of the Second Gulf War in 2003, not long after she had published a book examining perceptions of hope. It was a time when much of the world had divided itself along the axis of good versus evil and Zournazi was invited to give a talk in Sydney. She remembers a palpable hostility from the audience, which dismissed her questioning of the inevitability of conflict.

'A moral sensibility and vocabulary of what peace might mean were absent from the public debate just as much as they have been largely absent from history ... people thought I was deluded even thinking about peace,' she remembers.

Struck by the realisation that even public discourse mimics the structure of a battlefield, Zournazi became convinced then that her next project must be an examination of peace.

'I was looking for some way to kickstart the project and it came ... Wim was visiting Sydney and I heard him on radio. Nobody else was addressing alternatives to war; he was the only one talking about peace.'

Wenders says the 'moment' for him was during a visit to New York not long after the attack on the twin towers – his contemplative and brutally beautiful photo of Ground Zero still smoking is in the book (see p.52). He vividly describes entering a church to find people of many different faiths in one place, praying together.

'After 9/11 in New York there was a short time when I believed the utopian possibility that something so terrible could lead to something fantastic for

mankind ...’ he says quietly. ‘After 9/11 there was that pause. And then it was all wiped out by Afghanistan and Iraq.’

Wenders is adamant that *Inventing Peace* is not a political work. ‘It is even hard to talk about the book. It is immersive, experiential, a transformative process, internally and in the imagination. It is a form of creativity ... to try and find out why peace is so invisible,’ he says.

He is convinced we are living through a period of existential confusion in which the response to real conflict and war expresses itself in a ‘need [for] entertainment more gory than ever before’.

‘We now accept horror as part of the human condition. It has not only become a best-selling export article of Hollywood, but consumers all over the planet have accepted it as legitimate food for the eyes and mind.’

This is a plague not restricted to the Western world. Shooting a short film in the Democratic Republic of Congo on violence against women for *Médecins Sans Frontières*, Wenders recalls being struck by the absence of men and boys in the village. He and his crew decided to explore and found them – old, young and very young men – crowded into a hut watching war movies on an old video player powered by a generator. His powerful four-minute short, *War in Peace*, is a moving testament to the addictive and deadening effect of immersion in both real – and cinematic – violence. This is one of two short films that can be downloaded with a code published in their book.

Wenders’ profound sadness at this state of affairs is tangible and yet *Inventing Peace* manages to be an uplifting and inspiring book. Zournazi says they are indebted to the work of Martin Buber, the Austrian-born, Israeli Jewish philosopher best known for his philosophy of dialogue, a form of existentialism described in detail in his 1923 book *I and Thou*. Buber’s belief – that the meaningfulness of human life is found in relationships – is a driving narrative in their writing. Equally important to them is the quantum physicist David Bohm’s idea of dialogue as ‘the artful process and flow between people that offers potential for change’.

Unique writing

Inventing Peace is a million miles away from the usual impenetrable academic tome, and its structure allows you to dip in and out. Nonlinear, it is an extended meditation, a kind of email to-ing and fro-ing (Zournazi calls it a ‘dia-flow’) which was honed into book shape during periods of intense face-to-face writing conducted in remote spots, including a cabin in the Mojave Desert.

Wenders extends the debate to the reader, asking he or she to ‘think along, enter the dialogue’. His unique writing style is printed in the book exactly as he typed it, thus:

I am not a philosopher,
not even an intellectual,
and I’m certainly not trying to sound like either:
My writing style (which you see here for the first
time in our book)
does not pretend to look like poetry,
or even try to evoke, let alone imitate it.
It is simply my reflexive style of writing
It helps me structure my thoughts,
and as I am rather a filmmaker and photographer,
therefore some sort of ‘thinker in imagery’,
writing like this helps me ‘see my thoughts’.

The result is indeed visual, as Wenders swoops and flows into the work of the plethora of artists who elate him. Among them are Charlie Chaplin, Michelangelo Antonioni, Akira Kurosawa and Robert Bresson, but most important to him (and the most joyous reading for us) are his observations on the *oeuvre* of the Japanese cinematographer Yasujirō Ozu, whose unstinting gaze on the stories of family unearth the moving and tender universality of human experience.

Wenders says Ozu belongs to what he describes as ‘a lost paradise of filmmaking’ and describes in detail the director’s unique cinematic techniques – 50mm lenses, camera angles kept at the eye level of someone sitting on a tatami floor, dialogues between protagonists but delivered entirely to camera. All these, he says, reduce the distance between actor and viewer, creating a sense of respect in observation, a modest gaze devoid of judgement.

‘Ozu taught ways of seeing the “other” in a different way. His is a loving, gentle gaze,’ he says.

Described with a similar passion is the work of Andrew Wyeth, the great 20th century American painter known for his genial ability to distil tiny, ordinary moments in life and imbue them with a sense of wonder.

Wenders is not, however, bound by an atavistic view of the world. He writes with enthusiasm about the potential for 3D technology as an artistic vehicle for cinematic exploration of relationships and the



Wim Wenders

Ground Zero, New York, 8 November 2001

interconnectedness of humanity, and the making of his 2011 Oscar-nominated work on the German choreographer Pina Bausch, which was shot in 3D.

This exploration of artists that ‘see’ in a peaceful way led Wenders and Journazi to the next step – which is to question the ethical consequences of what we are all guilty of doing and what they call ‘looking and not seeing’. The duo muses that while the war-movie genre is now ubiquitous, no such peace equivalent exists. This void creates an ever more powerful and immersive viewing experience that simultaneously allows audiences to remain distant from indifference and cruelty.

Wenders says that in his own work he tries to find a language that reflects a world defined not by violence but human relationships. As an example he cites *Wings of Desire*, the acclaimed tale of angels in a pre-unification Berlin, and the post-Iraq war *Land of Plenty*.

‘Film is a powerful medium. It is not just stories, it is a language between images that means that you work out in your own life what is between the lines. The subtext can be healing, friendly, or it can be the opposite, confuse or anger you. Every film teaches you a way of seeing.’

‘It is a school of perception, even if it doesn’t intend to be. It conditions you and this conditioning [to violence] is one of the things we look at.’

The right to space

The notion of space is a fundamental ingredient in both Wenders’ and Journazi’s notions of peace, explored through the connections created by – and between – people. In film, allowing the watcher to see what the other is seeing provides a gentle push to take into account and perhaps even momentarily assume the point of view of the other person.

Wenders believes that the true acknowledgement of another’s existential space negates the potential for conflict. ‘As soon as you consider someone’s space and you see that space around him or her, you have in a way eliminated the possibilities of war or violence, because respecting someone’s space almost pulls the carpet out from under any violent act.’

I suggest to both authors that there is a striking absence of opinion or judgement in the book. After an uncomfortably long silence, Wenders says: ‘An opinion is a violent act very often. An opinion is superimposed and very often neglects or denies the space or the right to a space that person has. You have an opinion of someone because he is a foreigner or belongs to that group or that group and immediately that person’s void of their own space. It obliterates them.’

Journazi laughs with gusto and says that Wenders’ statement ‘should be

broadcast all over Australia!’ For her, the book’s publication comes at a particularly poignant time, as Australia struggles with asylum-seeker policies. ‘Maybe we should be asking people to consider their ethical relationship with other people,’ she suggests. ‘It sounds trite and it is not meant to be. But what we all share is our humanity and there is something very special about that. It gets ignored in political discussion: we forget people are suffering and even if connections between people are small, it is those small connections that make the big things change.’

As we prepare to leave – Wenders is keen to join an old colleague for a drink downstairs – I ask him if I’m right to read a subtext of apology, and perhaps even melancholy, about the film industry, his industry, in the book.

The silence is momentarily terrifying but suddenly his hands, clasped quietly in his lap throughout the evening, come to life and the volume of his voice rises perceptibly.

‘My industry is basically devoid of any ethics,’ he says. ‘I’m afraid to say that this was once part of filmmaking, that it was considered an ethical process. But basically today it does not include that anymore.’

‘And, yes, there is a melancholy. Yes there is, because in the time I have lived cinema, most cinema turned from a way of expression to a product. And a product, as such, needs to be sold, whereas an expression needs to be told. Cinema is not about telling anymore, it is about selling.’

With grateful acknowledgements to the author for her kind permission to reprint and to The Saturday Paper in Australia, where this article first appeared.

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*Wim Wenders
and
Mary Zournazi*

