

Memphis, Tennessee, Radisson Hotel, July 16, 1988, while shooting *Mystery Train* (directed by Jim Jarmusch).



Robby Müller's Polaroids

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Above: Meudon, Paris, April 1977, while shooting *Die linkshändige Frau* (The Left-Handed Woman, directed by Peter Handke).
Below: Houston, Texas, with costume designer Birgitta Blenke, December 2, 1983, while shooting *Paris, Texas* (directed by Wim Wenders).

Looking at the list of movies a cinematographer has worked on is sometimes a blunt discovery of why your favourite movies are in fact your favourite movies. The cinematographer, also called the director of photography, is the person on a movie set who physically holds the camera, as well as being responsible for angles and, of course, lighting—it's essentially the person who makes a movie more than just a filmed play. Let me invite you to list your favourite movies. Check who the cinematographer was for each of them. It should be a fun experience, but you should also discover who your favourite cinematographers are. Two names arose from my list, and one of them was Robby Müller. It's hard not to name all the movies he has worked on for you to understand just how essential Robby Müller is to the art of making movies. I will start, however, by mentioning the three directors he is best known to have worked with: Wim Wenders, Jim Jarmusch, and Lars von Trier. Let me add Barbet Schroeder, because he might be one of today's most underrated directors. And one last name: Peter Bogdanovich. Now I can introduce the movies that make me love Robby Müller as a cinematographer: *Paris, Texas*; *Wrong Move*; and *Barfly*. Those movies will change your life. I'm not kidding. And they will do this mainly because of Robby Müller's light and camera work.

I'm sure other people would quote different movies, but I can almost guarantee that anyone who watches *Paris, Texas* by Wim Wenders cannot go back into the world unchanged. I find it hard to imagine a movie more intelligently touching than this one, but Wim Wenders' 1984 masterpiece is also a good way to discover Robby Müller's work. Watch the movie and pay attention to the lights: daylight or lights in the dark, shadows, reflection, and film texture. Pay attention to the image itself. Well, as far as you can, because it is very likely that your attention will be captured by Harry Dean Stanton's eyes or Nastassja Kinski's everything.

Wim Wenders is also responsible for *Wrong Move*, made in 1975 during the first years of what is now known as New German Cinema. It's kind of an intellectual movie, maybe the kind of movie that if you don't get into it, you just might find it boring. I could see how that happens, even if I adore it, but it's also so easy to get sucked into this slow-motion road trip. Well, they don't actually drive a car all the time—even though car shots are one of Robby Müller's specialties—but they rather take the train, ride a bicycle, and go on a very long hike along the Rhine river. A very, very long hike.

My third favourite, *Barfly*, is a very strange movie—maybe because you don't feel you're watching a movie when you're discovering it. It feels more like witnessing something you shouldn't be able to witness. You can read everything you need to know about the shoot in Charles Bukowski's *Hollywood*, which was published two years later, in 1989. Bukowski actually wrote the script for this semi-autobiographical film starring Faye Dunaway and Mickey Rourke. Swiss-French director Barbet Schroeder commissioned it, Francis Ford Coppola was one of the producers, and our own Robby was to be the cinematographer. Robby didn't want the audience to notice the camera and embraced simplicity as a motto. He never tried to develop what could have been the 'Robby Müller style'; instead, he created different ways to shoot each movie, as the style developed itself on set. He enjoyed operating the camera and not planning shots, in order to improvise side by side with the director. This way of working often led to larger-than-life images—especially in the outdoor shots, where there is natural light and an absence of control over the weather conditions. A personal

Above: 1985, while shooting *Down by Law* (directed by Jim Jarmusch).
Below: Austin, Texas, 1979, while shooting *Honeysuckle Rose* (directed by Jerry Schatzberg).



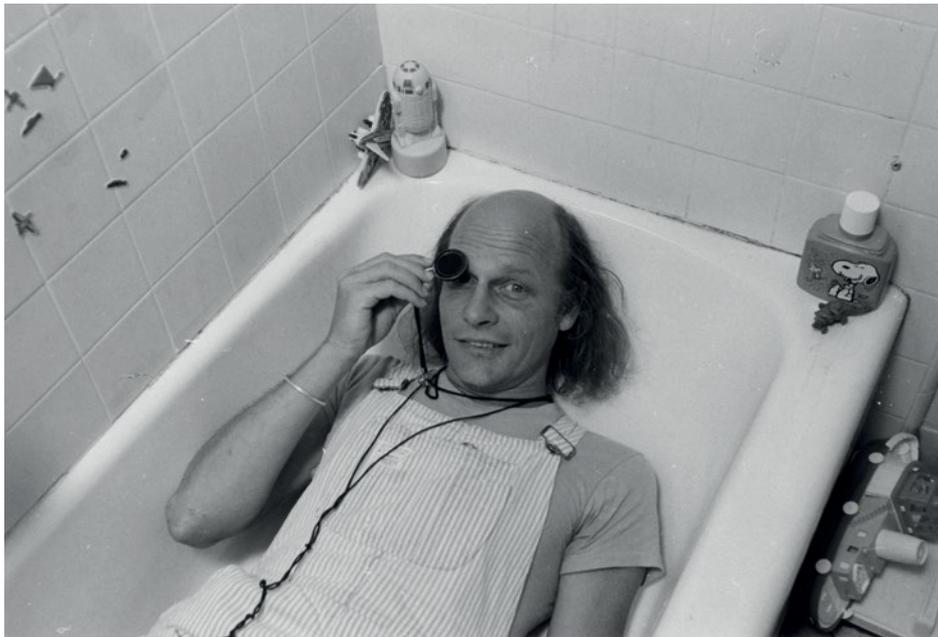
Above: *Possibly Paris*, 1987.
Below: Memphis, 1988, while shooting *Mystery Train* (directed by Jim Jarmusch).

New York, Hotel Mayflower, 1986.



Above: San Antonio, Texas, Holiday Inn, 1979, while shooting *Honeysuckle Rose* (directed by Jerry Schatzberg).
Below: Santa Monica, Los Angeles, Pacific Sands Motel, 1986, while shooting *Barfly* (directed by Barbet Schroeder).

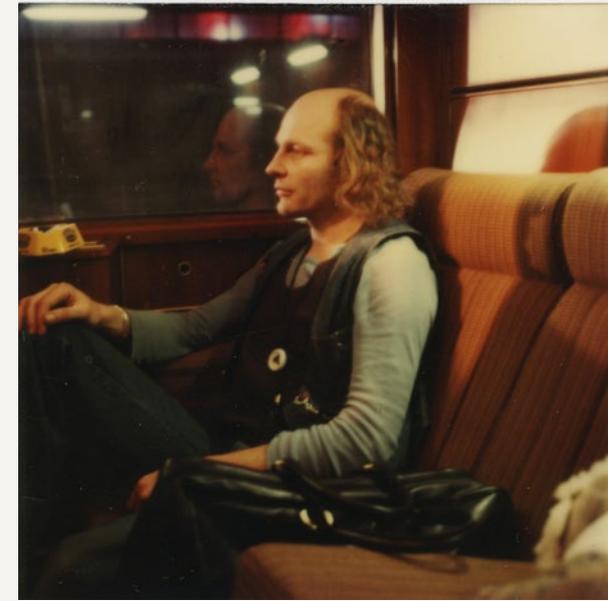
favourite might be the scene in *The American Friend* where the sky is reflected on the wet sand of a beach. Maybe Wim Wenders knew he could trust Robby when it came to shooting during or after the rain. But then, I don't know how I forgot *Ghost Dog* in that list! And *Mystery Train*, *Alice in the Cities*, *Saint Jack*. Recently I also discovered a very sweet comedy he shot, *Mad Dog and Glory*. It's far from being a masterpiece, but who can say no to a movie with Uma Thurman, Bill Murray, and Robert De Niro? Among the last images Robby Müller shot were those for an art installation called 'Caribs' Leap', shown at the 2002 Documenta fair. They were later used as footage in 2014 by a young man named Steve McQueen—who happens to share his name with the older movie star and who you know as the acclaimed director of *Shame* and *12 Years a Slave*. McQueen's film installation 'Ashes' remains the last bearer of Robby's vision, since he has been unable to work since 2007. We can thank his wife, Andrea, though, who has made a wonderful book about



Robby Müller, circa 1980. Photographer unknown.

his Polaroids on the occasion of his work being celebrated by the Eye Museum—the newly built, futuristic-looking *cinemathèque* in Amsterdam. His book of Polaroids is, interestingly enough, two books: one on exteriors and the other on interiors. They seem to be a passion of Robby's, as Andrea Müller explains in her introductions—a passion he developed as early as the shooting of *Alice in the Cities* in 1973. In this movie, the character of Philip, played by Rüdiger Vogler, uses a prototype of the Polaroid camera. Every time he takes a picture, someone says, 'There's nothing on it'. To which he replies, 'Just wait'. Just wait for the light, reflections, shadows, and shades to appear on the square frame of the Polaroid. Their instantaneity makes it worth remembering the exact moment they were taken. Robby would apparently always write the date, the place, and sometimes the movie he was working on when he took the picture. Before he did so, Andrea explains that 'when developing one, Robby would pull the photograph out of the camera and, without fail, tuck it under his T-shirt'. He used different cameras throughout

apartamento - portfolio



Above: Bavaria Film Studios, Munich, December 1976, while shooting *Der Amerikanische Freund* (*The American Friend*, directed by Wim Wenders).
Below: Austin, Texas, with assistant director David McGiffert, 1979, while shooting *Honeysuckle Rose* (directed by Jerry Schatzberg).



Above: Memphis, 1988, while shooting *Mystery Train* (directed by Jim Jarmusch).
Below: Sestri Levante, Hotel Miramare, June 8, 1977, while shooting *Das Ende einer Karriere* (End of a Career, directed by Christa Mann).



Above: Los Angeles, 1984.
Below: New York, 1986.



the years, carrying them in a red shoulder bag: a Polaroid 600 in the '90s and then a Polaroid Spectra, which offers slightly wider images. The interior of hotel rooms while on location or the interior of sets and other rooms make this book what it is: a visit inside the eye of a master. Andrea says that Robby was not interested in interiors for themselves. 'I assume he wasn't interested in the room, he was interested in the light that comes into the room or stayed out of the room, also the shadows and the reflections he found there'. So, after the shooting day is over, when you're back in your hotel room in New Orleans, Los Angeles, or elsewhere, what do you do with yourself? Robby seemed to pass his time on location taking Polaroids of his hotel rooms. Because after the excitement of the shooting day is over, it's true there's not much more to do.

Over the years, Robby apparently took over 2,000 Polaroids. Which he all kept, even the less interesting ones, even the ones that failed. They are all still organised the way he thought they should be: some of the images are in wooden boxes and the others are in the original cardboard packages. Andrea explains she has never altered this organisation and that 'incidentally he wrote some information on the packages or on the back of the images'. By looking through them Andrea noticed a couple of themes: hotel rooms, streets, landscapes, trees, flowers, objects with reflections, self-portraits, and his children. 'He searched for special situations of daylight and he studied reflections. He made a lot of self-portraits in mirrors. He also was looking very much for framing, lines in the square format and a perspective point of view'. Andrea enjoyed looking through them, but 'Robby never thought about publishing his photos'. It was Steve McQueen who somehow triggered the whole enterprise when visiting the master in Holland. 'When Steve came along for visits I was tidying up Robby's photos and showed him a couple of boxes with Polaroids. He loved them immediately and said that something had to be done with them. Actually, Steve was not thinking about a book, he was thinking about an exhibition. But I love to make books. And I kept it in my mind, there was no rush'.

One might feel there is no desire for posterity in those pictures, no ambition of grandeur, since grandeur was already achieved elsewhere, through this other type of camera that captured the moving image. Instead, we get the feeling of someone taking pictures just to pass the time, who never realises he is actually capturing gold. A pureness in representing the worn-away furniture of the American south, often chosen as a location by Jim Jarmusch. That neon light above the bed in Austin or some tea being heated up in Santa Monica. Everything that we see as well, but can't naturally capture, Robby Müller captured for us. In Wim Wenders' *Alice in the Cities*, the main character, Philip Winter, states, 'Not one image leaves you in peace'. It is certainly true of Robby Müller's cinematography and photography. It helps us improve our human eye.



Austin Texas, 1979, while shooting *Honeysuckle Rose* (directed by Jerry Schatzberg).