

Creative Creatures

The ideas and the work of the American and European painters, songwriters, photographers, fiction and non-fiction authors, musicians, film makers, architects, designers, poets, and dreamers I met during my 20 years in America.



#3 / Chris Sievernich, film producer, Hollywood Hills, California

He is true to his profession—he has his first home in the Hollywood Hills, his second home in New York City (or vice versa?) and his third one on the mesa above an old Hispanic village near Abiquiu, New Mexico. From this Medanales house, a well-designed contemporary adobe with a smart floor plan, tastefully furnished in a minimal style, and very private, he has a 360 degree view of high desert mountainlands including the Sangre de Cristo range. Long ago he got involved with making movies, mostly feature films, and at least two of his productions are high on my all time favorite list.

Very, very high on my list is 'Paris, Texas' (1984), a film Chris Sievernich produced for the great German director Wim Wenders. The film opens in the Big Bend of Texas with Harry Dean Stanton as Travis lost in the desert, protected against the hot sun only by his iconic red baseball cap. I will not go into the story, but have to mention that this film (with Natassja Kinski as his ex who, as we learn, *had to* desert Travis) looks at America as only a European film maker can. The film gets an extra boost from Ry Cooder, whose slide guitar continues to cut through my, and anyone's, soul. Harry Dean Stanton contributes to the musical score by singing John Hiatt's 'Borderline' and I get the chills from just thinking of it.

Wenders and Sievernich for many years formed a prolific creative duo. Chris (co)produced 'Lightning over Water' and 'Tokyo-Ga', and much more. Some of his productions (which also include 'The Dead', the last film John Huston directed) were, as is so often the case with film making, real horror shows. Chris as a rule doesn't show any sign of suffering from stress, which is why he is good at his profession, but he tells me stories wild enough to make me hyperventilate just from listening. Such as that one time in Spain, when the money had run out and they needed at least one more week to finish shooting. If a rumor of these dire straits had started, the crew would have disappeared instantly—so Chris made a few phone calls and on Friday hopped on a plane to the Netherlands to talk to a buddy of his, Huub Bals. Huub was to Rotterdam's International Film Festival what Robert Redford was to Sundance—but Huub's festival came many years earlier, and long, long before the days that every city, town, district and village in most countries of the world seemed to desperately need their own "international" film days. Rotterdam's very informal festival was always one big party and had a much respected name in the business, and Huub had real moving power.

Chris and Huub wined and dined well as they always did when they met, and before the end of the weekend Chris received confirmation from the City of Rotterdam that on Monday morning he could pick up \$50,000 or so at the bank, at the time enough for another week of filming. Chris had to sign over one-eighth of a % of the gross or whatever, I don't remember. The film was saved and helped establish Chris's reputation as an unshakable, tireless producer.

Another favorite film of mine to which Chris contributed is the 2002 adaption of 'The Quiet American'. This was a remake of the one from 1958. The film is based on an anti-war novel by Graham Greene and is situated in Saigon in the years before Vietnam became a household name in the U.S., although an American idealist (a covert operator?) is already deeply involved in the divided country's politics. In the "old" Joseph Mankiewicz film Michael Redgrave and Audie Murphy played the leads; in the Philip Noyce remake the leading actors are Michael Caine, who for me cannot do much wrong in any role, and Brendan Fraser. I hesitate at stating which of the two interpretations I like best, but I must admit that I have seen many dramatically worse remakes.

It is a fascinating experience to (re)watch both movies shortly after each other. Over the years storytelling has changed dramatically; acting, too, changed; and of course cinematography went through earthshaking revolutions. But the craziest experience is to be made aware of the enormous differences between the times and I don't mean just fashions or car models. While the first 'Quiet American' presents a rather primitive world, the second one breathes the opposite and has a contemporary sophistication even if the film makers in an honest and serious effort try to re-create the reality of the 1950s. It cannot be done—films made today reflect today more, whatever the historic perfection of the art direction. Even movies in just black and white, and silent, cannot change this. One of the best succeeded trials, by the way, is, for me, last year's 'Tinker, Taylor, Soldier, Spy'. I just don't get it that Tom Brown's astonishing, splendidly conscientious and atmospheric art direction for this film wasn't rewarded with an Oscar. But then I return to the older version, the BBC series with Alec Guinness filmed in 1979, and I still find myself so much closer to the 1960s... For the times they are a-changin'...

Ton Haak, May 2012

Illustration: by Wim Wenders, from his story board for 'Written in the West'