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STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The principal purpose of p.o.v. is to provide a framework for collaborative publication for those of us who study and teach film at the Department of Information and Media Science at Aarhus University. We will also invite contributions from colleagues at other departments and at other universities. Our emphasis is on collaborative projects, enabling us to combine our efforts, each bringing his or her own point of view to bear on a given film or genre or theoretical problem. Consequently, the reader will find in each issue of p.o.v. a variety of approaches to the film or question at hand – approaches which complete rather than compete with one another.

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Introduction

It is possible to distinguish between two very different kinds of storytelling in film.

One makes of the film experience its own *raison d'être*. Scorsese, Coppola and Tarantino are among the contemporary masters of this kind of storytelling, which is totally self-contained and aims at neither more nor less than providing the viewer a powerful and moving experience. These are films which take us on a roller-coaster ride, alternately lifting us to heights of pure cinematic fun and pulling us down into gory fascination with the basest human instincts. The best of these films are made by pioneering directors who bring consummate skill to their filmmaking, and contribute to the renewal and vitality of the medium.

They fall short, nevertheless, of a kind of storytelling which aims even higher by calling upon the viewer to live his or her life more fully. *Wings of Desire* is the purest example we have of a film that does just that, while at the same time providing a cinematic experience unequalled in its originality and beauty. It is a film that makes great demands on the viewer, requiring a degree of sustained attentiveness to which we are generally unaccustomed. But no other film has its magic, and those of us who are responsive to that magic consider *Wings of Desire* a landmark in our lives.

The present issue of **p.o.v.** is respectfully dedicated to Wim Wenders.

Richard Raskin

"It's *images* you can trust less and less." An interview with Wim Wenders on *Wings of Desire*¹

Richard Raskin

RR: *If we could start with what I think is a wonderful innovation in Wings of Desire, there are a number of shots which slip into or out of a character's point-of-view. There are shots in the library, for example, which begin with our seeing through the eyes of Daniel, who then unexpectedly enters the frame. Or the shift can go the other way as well, with a shot in which Daniel – on camera at the start – moves out of frame and the camera then takes on his point-of-view. I've never seen anything like that before.*

WW: It's something I've done in other films, earlier.

RR: *I did notice one or two examples at the beginning of Paris Texas.*

WW: Yes, there's already a shot like it in *The Goalie's Fear of the Penalty*. A p.o.v. turns into a shot where the supposed subject of the p.o.v. walks into it.

RR: *Is this just a kind of cinematic contraction, combining in a single shot what is usually done in two, or does it have a deeper significance, having to do perhaps with getting beyond subject-object distinctions?*

WW: I'm sure we did it several times in different movies, and certainly in *Paris Texas*, because I remember discussions I had with Robby [Müller] about the implications of starting a shot like a p.o.v. and then the person that's supposedly looking enters the shot himself – yeah, not *herself*, it's always *himself* – and we discussed the meaning of it, that strange switch of position.

Most of my films are exclusively designed from somebody's point-of-view, like for example *The Goalie's Fear*, also *Paris Texas*, so to break the pattern every now and then, and very rarely of course,

¹ An earlier version of this interview, containing neither illustrations nor notes, appeared in *(Pré)publications* 145 (October 1994), pp. 26-37.

is a sort of a mental jump. I always liked it because I think it does something to the person watching just as it does something for the character seeing from the point-of-view. It creates a strange distance all of a sudden and it turns the point-of-view from the character back to the audience, i.e. everybody who is watching the film. Every single pair of eyes that is looking at the film all of a sudden becomes the new point-of-view.

The point-of-view is passed on to the audience. They first think this is what Trevor is seeing and all of a sudden it's what *they* are seeing. That was always the thing I tried to do: to pass on the p.o.v. to the audience.

RR: There is at least one shot in Wings of Desire in which the camera behaves as though it were filming a p.o.v., but I can't imagine whose point-of-view it could be: the shot where you track back and forth in front of the dying motorcycle guy. Did it just "feel right" to do it that way or was there a specific reason for this camera movement?²



Shot 2060

WW: I think it had to do with Daniel's pain. The scene comes at the end of the driving shot that precedes it. At first, we wanted to do it in one shot, to come around with the driving shot and stop in front of the dying man. And then it turned out that we just couldn't handle the curve when coming around because the camera was mounted on a camera-car in front and we couldn't manage to

² This shot is discussed in detail in my article, "Camera Movement in the Dying Man Scene," which the reader will find in the present issue of **p.o.v.**

come around all the way. So we had to devise two shots for what was initially planned as only one.

And then we tried to find a position for the frontal shot and we looked at it from the left and right so that the dying man was either on the left or on the right hand. By going back and forth just to find the position – as I did with my viewfinder, from left to right, and then again from right to left – I thought that going back and forth sort of showed more what Daniel was actually doing, in the way that he is – as the man is dying – that he's *taking him over*, so to speak. In a way, in a strange way, this "action" as well as the pain that came with it, were in that camera movement.

But obviously it was hard to explain it and I remember that I discussed it with Agnès [Godard] who was afraid that it wasn't justified because all the other camera movements were so to speak justified.³ But I thought that in that particular case, as it was somehow about a transition between life and death, it did translate something: not so much his p.o.v., more a mental attitude. Daniel's tenderness and his care for the man were in that back-and-forth movement.

RR: Did you use different film stock for the color shots and the black-and-white portions of the film?

WW: In *Wings of Desire* we did use black-and-white negative stock. We used Double X for most of the b/w shots. There are only the two cases when the color desaturizes and becomes b/w that we shot on color stock and in the laboratory then, going over a separation negative, took out the color.

³ My interview with Agnès Godard, which focuses specifically on the camera movement in question, will be found in the present issue of **p.o.v.**

First Henri had devised a way to do that in the camera. Henri Alekan, who is such an inventor, had devised a method whereby we could do it directly – with a mirror and two cameras, one shooting in b/w and the other one in color. And both being in the same axis, where the mirror-one could shoot the scene in b/w and the other in color, so that you could then segue from color film to b/w film. But it turned out to involve too much machinery with the two cameras hooked together with a mirror. For instance, one scene where we wanted to do it was in the trailer, when Daniel has visited Marion and then he leaves and color comes back. In that trailer, we just didn't have enough space to be running two cameras with a mirror. So Henri reluctantly had to give up on it.

So those shots where color comes in or goes out were done on color negative and everything else that's in the film in b/w was shot on b/w negative. And then obviously for the printing of the film, all b/w negatives had to be transferred to color negatives, so all the prints of the film are done from a second generation negative. Obviously, you can't intercut with b/w and color negatives, otherwise you have splices in your print. So the print has to be done on one single color negative. It turned out to be extremely difficult to get good results with color prints from b/w negatives. Black and white always had to have a slight color tone, but depending on the density of the negative, it was either bluer or redder and impossible to correct.

RR: You've already answered one of my questions when you said that color returns when Daniel leaves the trailer. That means that there are at least two or three different things that the passage from b/w to color indicates. One is as you've just said: as a sign that the angel has left the scene. Another one that you've mentioned in a number of interviews is that it's a time where the human feelings take over in the angel. Now if

we think of the scene where Damiel becomes a human, there you chose not to show that he sees in color, but we see him in color. And from that point on, there are also other scenes where the presence or absence of color indicates whether somebody is an angel or human. Had you considered the possibility of doing it the other way around, of having him see in color?

WW: Never, no.

RR: There are other color shots I wanted to ask about. The scene where Peter Falk watches himself on TV is also in color. Was there a special reason for doing that scene in color?

WW: It was a lone, private moment, so to speak. He was not being observed. "Man alone."

RR: There are two documentary shots in color. Did you use them because in these cases, it is humans who are remembering: once when Homer is thinking back and once when the woman extra is thinking back? Or did they just happen to be archive shots in color?

WW: We used film stocks from Russian cameramen and from American cameramen. The Russians had shot an incredible amount of footage when they came into Berlin, while they took the city as well as afterwards, after the end of the war. The Russians shot every-thing in b/w 35mm. All the footage we had from Russian cameramen was in 35mm and everything was done on tripod. Even the action scenes, the tanks going into the streets, everything was clearly done from tripods. Therefore everything looked like it was done in a studio. It's very strange. And some of it was clearly staged. Some camera point-of-views were only possible if the cameraman had already *arrived*. So we then found out that the Russians actually had taken streets, gone back, and shot their arrival on the street once more. It was actually rehearsed, so to speak. Especially the day when they took the Reichstag, they shot that scene with the guy putting up the flag over thirty times!

Whereas the Americans – well, of course they arrived later – when they arrived, they shot everything in 16mm, color. So the strange thing is that the Russians, who really "directed" their shots, and really sort of did fake documentaries, made it look very documentary. And the American footage, although really shot handheld 16mm, because they shot it in color, looked completely as though it had been shot in a studio.

So paradoxically, the American footage that was clearly true documentary footage, looked like it was filmed on the back-lot of an American studio, and the Russian footage that was clearly staged, looked like true documentary. And it felt wrong to interfere there and take the color out of that very early color stock from the Americans.

So it was not quite logical and we considered after the zero print that maybe we should have taken it out, but then the material seemed to forbid that.

RR: I was very interested in the prologue you had written in the first treatment, where God was fed up with mankind and banishes the angels that had taken man's side.⁴ Was

⁴ In "An attempted description of an indescribable film" [1986], reprinted in *The Logic of Images* (London: Faber & Faber, 1991; pp. 73-83), Wenders included his first treatment of *Wings of Desire*, which contains the following passage:

When God, endlessly disappointed, finally prepared to turn his back on the world forever, it happened that some of his angels disagreed with him and took the side of man, saying he deserved to be given another chance. Angry at being crossed, God banished them to what was then the most terrible place on earth: Berlin. And then He turned away. All this happened at the time that we today call: "The end of the Second World War." Since that time, these fallen angels from the "second angelic rebellion" have been imprisoned in the city, with no prospect of release, let alone of being readmitted to heaven. They are condemned to be witnesses, forever nothing but onlookers, unable to affect men in the slightest, or to intervene in the course of history. They are unable to so much as move a grain of sand...

that a kind of framework that you needed at the beginning to get things rolling but that didn't play any role from then on in guiding your work on the film?

WW: Obviously you always have ideas that seem of high importance during the conception, in the very early stage, and that slowly then sort of fade out because some other ideas take over. And that prologue was already obsolete when we were writing the script.

RR: What about the idea of the angels being "unemployed"? Was that idea also eventually dropped?

WW: The angels feel a little useless and they complain about it. They complain about the lack of activity. But their being unemployed was like the prologue – something that didn't hold water and was not really useful once we were shooting. It was more like an intellectual thing in the very beginning when ideas are more important, and after a while, ideas are no longer carrying the film, but concrete feelings and intuitions.

RR: Did the transformation of the character who was originally an archangel into Homer take place during your initial meeting with Peter Handke in Salzburg?

WW: Yes. I think it's basically Peter who didn't know what to do with my archangel idea – the archangel being sort of the storyteller – and couldn't get into it. And in a way, we had already eliminated the character. Then all of a sudden, Peter *did* send pages with dialogue for a storyteller, saying that he hadn't been able to write anything for the archangel but to introduce Homer. Peter's inspiration had come from a postcard of a Rembrandt painting that he had on the wall, in front of his desk.

As the texts that he had written for Homer were so beautiful and as we were already shooting at the point when his pages for

Homer arrived, we reintroduced the archangel, now become "Homer" and cast it with Curt Bois.



Curt Bois as Homer.

RR: The idea of the film-within-the-film, was that present at an early stage, or did you introduce that as a reason for your actor to be in Berlin?

WW: In a way, that idea came with the casting of Peter Falk. Peter had been cast also after we had started shooting. For a while, the idea for the former angel had been somebody else. I had tried to get in touch with Willy Brandt at the time but couldn't. And then, we had been involved with another actor who felt like he couldn't do it for lots of reasons.

And then, with Claire [Denis], my assistant, we were sitting in my office every night thinking that we still had to find the former angel. We were shooting and could only develop ideas at night, and every night, we came back to the same question: do we need that character or do we not need it? Especially Claire insisted that we needed it, and I felt we needed it too but I had run out of ideas, until Claire brought up Peter Falk one night and then it was obvious. I mean we didn't hesitate for a second. I called Peter that very night. How did I get the phone number? I don't know. Cassavetes? I don't know. Probably. Yes. And he was actually on

the phone. The night Claire had the idea, I got Peter on the phone and he actually said "Yes, that sounds interesting, send me something on paper." We translated that night a little treatment because we didn't have a script, at least nothing with that part in it.

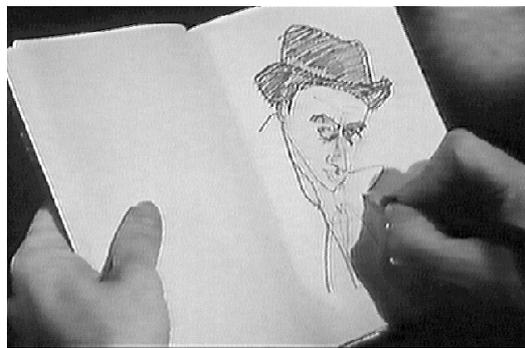
RR: I read in one of your accounts that you directed Peter Falk's voice-over via a long-distance telephone call and you mentioned that the lines that you had originally proposed just didn't work. Do you happen to remember what it was you originally intended for him to say?

WW: I had written some material for Peter because we had already recorded a voice-over with him before he had left Berlin. But it had been done when we were still shooting and I didn't really have a clear idea yet where the whole idea with the voices would take us. When we started editing, the elements we had recorded with Peter turned out to be rather useless. So I wrote a couple of pages of material for him, ideas for the voice-over, and Peter tried some of it when he was in the studio and always sort of took off on the basis of the material I had given him and started to ramble on and improvise around the material. And most of what's in the film is now material that Peter improvised. Most of it. Some lines, I think about 20% or 30%, are lines I had actually written for him and all the rest is stuff that he came up with, probably by just closing his eyes and continuing on his own, just associating ideas.

For instance, the Van Gogh improvisation – about yellow. Somehow he got into it via yellow. Or his grandmother. I mean, how a former angel can have a grandmother is still a rather doubtful matter (*laughter*).

RR: What about the sketching: is that something that he really does?

WW: Yeah, that's something he really does, in his spare time during shooting. We had of course not conceived that, and only when I saw Peter in between takes do sketches of mostly extras and other people, then I asked him if we could use it in the script and he said, "Yeah, why not." And that became the basis for his performance in the new film. He's in Berlin because he has a show of his drawings. He is great at it.



Peter Falk's sketch of the man with eyes like a raccoon.

RR: *I know of two scenes which were cut from the first, long version: the pie-throwing scene, and a scene where a woman cries in front of a church. Can you mention some of the other scenes which were cut?*

WW: What else was cut? I did cut a lot of scenes.

RR: *Do you happen to still have a video copy of the original, long version of Wings of Desire?*

WW: We didn't do that at the time. From the next film on, we did record early cuts but with *Wings* we were strictly working on film. No, I don't have copies of early cuts. Now that we have a[n editing] table with a video camera built into it, we record almost every cut, every stage of the editing, but we didn't at the time, so... That was pre-video. Luckily.

RR: *But none of the material that was cut from Wings was used in the new film?*

WW: No, nothing, not an inch... Oh, yeah, there was once, there was a scene... Oh, no. It was not from the shooting of *Wings of Desire*. There was a day of shooting which I did with Otto [Sander] and with Curt Bois in 1989, just after they opened the Wall, when the Wall was still up and everybody was at it with their hammers, and there were hundreds and thousands of people hammering away at the Wall. We shot for one day with Curt and Otto, but we didn't use it after all. Hm, what did we shoot that we didn't use? I would have to look at my own shooting script in order to remember that.

RR: Did you have Curt Bois in mind for the role of the archangel?

WW: No. When Peter [Handke] had written *Homer*, I remembered the film that Otto and Bruno had done with Minetti and Bois.⁵ That's the only film that Otto Sander and Bruno Ganz had done together as directors. It's a documentary about two old actors, about Minetti and Curt Bois. I had seen this film, and when *Homer* came up through Peter's suggestions, then I thought of Curt Bois and I went to see him together with Otto in order to convince him.

RR: You mentioned also that you ran out of time and money when you were shooting the color scenes. Could you mention any of the color scenes you would have liked to shoot?

WW: Yeah, that's easier for me. I remember more of that. Well, on our wall – because we didn't really have a script except for single scenes – we had all our ideas and the story line pinned up on a big board and the first half of it was b/w and the second half of it was color. So the moment when Daniel became a human being was

⁵ *Gedächtnis*, 1983.

supposed to be half way through. But I really got there much too late, and even had to interrupt the shooting for several weeks and then shoot the last part with Bruno being a man much later because we had run out of money and had used up all our scheduled time only for the b/w part. It was actually two months later that we shot for another two weeks, everything from Bruno's appearance on to the very end.

Also Cassiel was supposed to appear briefly afterwards as a human being. That's when we had the pie-throwing scene. And then Cassiel had a whole development of his own: he very quickly turned into a gangster. While Damiel was falling in love and getting to know Marion, Cassiel quickly sort of tried out everything you can do as a man: he got instantly drunk and went into a whorehouse and got to know some gamblers and became a criminal very quickly. He had nice scenes. At one point he was going mad and running through the city like one of these people you see in streets who are talking to themselves or yelling at everybody. And Peter [Handke] had actually written a long monologue for Cassiel, sort of erring through the city, shouting at everybody. And Otto had already learned it by heart, it was a long, long piece – two pages of shouting at people in the streets, and that we never got to. Which in fact was one of the reasons why we put "To be continued" at the end, because Otto was really sort of pissed off and sad that he could never deliver this dialogue and that he never made it into a human existence.

RR: I see that that connects with one of the things that he says when he and Damiel are in the car. I think he's the one who talks about evil.

WW: Yes. He's sort of attracted by it already then. He sort of imagines that it must be fun – at least the taste of it.

RR: *The dying motorcycle guy mentions Albert Camus among the meaningful things in his life. Do you feel a special affinity for Camus?*

WW: In my youth I was a big fan. At one point, I had studied all his books and his biographies that were available. I actually reread everything in French as soon as I was able to read in French. I was 18 years old at that time. It was part of my adolescence. So in that speech of the dying man, when he lists all things that were important to him, we have Camus there.

RR: *Is Wings an A-film or a B-film?*⁶

WW: I think if anything, *Wings* is one of the B-films. Especially as it was – strangely – conceived as a time-filler, and really done very quickly, very spontaneously when it became obvious that the pre-production of *Until the End of the World* would last another year or two, and my company, Road Movies, was on the edge of going bankrupt. And I was on the edge of having to let everybody go because I couldn't handle the payroll anymore for three people.

⁶ For Wenders, an A-film is characterized by the following: color; a large budget; production planned to last detail; scripts followed very closely; the endings known well before shooting begins; tightly structured; shot in the traditional hopping-around way, with an eye to the exigencies of a production team; production process characterized by discipline; the actors play fictional characters rather than themselves; the story always assumes control, it knows its course, it knows what matters, it knows where it begins and ends. The B-film, on the other hand, has the following characteristics:

black-and-white; low budget; unscripted; never knowing in advance how the film will end; a loose structure; shooting in chronological sequence, beginning from an initial situation that is usually the only known point in the film; a production process characterized by openness; the actors play themselves; the film develops like a daydream and is allowed to follow its own drifting, meandering course in search of its story. See Wenders's "Impossible Stories. Talk given at a colloquium on narrative technique" (1982) in *The Logic of Images* (London: Faber & Faber, 1991), esp. pp. 55-58.

Because we hadn't shot anything since 1983, the shooting of *Paris Texas*. And from 1984 when *Paris Texas* was released, through 1986, we hadn't shot anything. And a film company really every now and then has to shoot something... We also had not produced anything by anybody else. Just working on *Until the End of the World* and hoping to get it together. So in the spring of 1986, it was obvious that it would last at least another year, and that Road Movies just couldn't go on unless we shot something. And that's why I decided very spontaneously to shoot something in Berlin. I guess that is truly the mark of a B-movie.

RR: *In calling the circus "le cirque Alekan," I assume that that was partly a gag, and partly a kind of homage to your cinematographer...*

WW: Yes, very much so.

RR: *...is it also because in some way, the circus is partly a metaphor for film-making, or am I way off?*

WW: No, you're not way off at all. Obviously it was part of the attraction of having the circus. And also because Henri had brought in so much, so much of the film's atmosphere. For instance, the circus. I don't know if I would have even had a circus if Henri hadn't been the cinematographer from the beginning. With the very first idea for the film, Henri imposed himself right away. I think with the idea of the angel, the invisible angel, Henri was the cameraman, from that very first day. That seemed to be exactly what he would love to do and could do best. Because he had suffered so much in *The State of Things* that he hadn't been able to do any of his "crazy" ideas. A lot of what he had suggested was the sort of thing I had to decline because the film was so sober. And Henri always had all these crazy ideas and was going into

more fantastic areas, and each of his ideas for fantastic elements I had to decline. I could see that he was disappointed. And I knew Henri's capacity for invention. So when we had the idea of the invisible angel, that was down Henri's alley. So as Henri was the cinematographer from the very first idea on, I think the circus came a little bit with Henri in mind.

And the circus grew bigger and bigger in the script. In the beginning it had been smaller, and then because Solveig really worked so hard on getting good at it. And then once Henri had lit the circus for the first time, we kept writing more scenes for the circus, because it felt as though Henri was really on his turf there. So, in the script, we never really had intended to shoot so much of the circus, and that's why we called it "Alekan" – when we get to the exterior shots. It hadn't been called "Alekan" before. It was only because we shot so much in it that finally, when we got outside, we said: "Now we have to paint a sign saying "Alekan". Henri really had added a lot to the climate and the atmosphere of the film through his lighting. It would clearly have been a very different film with Robby [Müller] or anybody else. Also because Henri is such a childlike man, in the very best meaning of the word.

RR: Judging from things you said in 1982 [in "Impossible Stories," op. cit.], you were very ambivalent at that time about stories. On the one hand, you said that stories are desperately needed, they give us a sense of meaning and so on – a sense of order. And you also said that they're like vampires, sucking the life out of images...

WW: "The story only exists in stories." Friedrich's famous line [in *The State of Things*]. He writes a little note, it appears as an insert even. "Stories only exist in stories."

RR: ...I was wondering whether you are still ambivalent, or whether your attitude toward stories has become more positive. I'm thinking both of Homer's role and also of

things that Eugene says in Until the End of the World— that he didn't know if there was a cure for the sickness of images, but he knew about the magic and healing power of words and stories. Does that mean that the positive side has become stronger for you?

WW: Very much so. *The State of Things* was a film trying to prove this thesis: that stories just aren't possible any more. And the film itself was the best anti-thesis for it, and *Paris Texas* afterwards was the clear proof that one could really be carried by a story once one believed in it. It was just a matter of my own attitude, not the fault of stories, but only my own attitude towards them, that I lost faith in them. But then they taught me to believe in them more and more, and so I started to trust them more and more. And certainly with *Wings of Desire* and *Until the End of the World*, and now the new one [*Far-away So Near*], I think I feel almost strangely the opposite now: that it's *images* you can trust less and less.

Berlin, 27 July 1993

“If There Is Such a Thing as Real Angels.” An Interview with Henri Alekan, Director of Photography¹

Richard Raskin

Wenders had initially wanted Robby Müller as director of photography for *Wings of Desire*, but Müller declined because he was engaged at the time in the filming of *Barfly*. Veteran cinematographer Henri Alekan, who had already worked with Wenders as his d.p. for *The State of Things* (1981), was then asked by Wenders and accepted the assignment.

Born in Paris in 1909, Henri Alekan had participated in the production of a number of masterpieces of French cinema, such as Marcel Carné's *Le Quai des Brumes* (1938), René Clément's *La Bataille du rail* (1946), and Jean Cocteau's *La Belle et la Bête* (1946). Alekan is also the author of an extraordinary book on the nature of light in the cinema and in painting, *Des lumières et des ombres*, the most recent edition of which was published in Paris in 1991 by la Librairie du Collectionneur. In reference works on film, Alekan is typically described as follows: "He is one of France's most reliable cinematographers, adapting his style to the needs of the script and the director and always capturing the essence of a location" (Ephraïm Katz, *The Film Encyclopedia*).

RR: I noticed in your book a discussion of the shot in which we see Daniel with wings that disappear almost immediately. I assume that this idea – of showing Daniel with wings for a brief moment – was thought of just before the shot was filmed, and obviously after the moment when it was decided that the angels would simply be dressed in overcoats.

HA: Yes, I must say that the history of this shot – and not only of this shot but of the fact that the angels have or don't have wings – was a real problem from the earliest preparations for the film in Berlin, where every Sunday evening, I brought Wenders little sketches I had made while visiting museums and where I said to him: "Here is how such-and-such a master painted an angel with wings, like that, while some other 17th or 18th Century master

¹ This interview was published in French and under the title "Si tant est qu'il existe des anges réels" in (*Pré*)publications 141 (November 1993), pp. 41-58. The present translation is my own.

envisioned the wings this way." And Wim listened to me very attentively because he hadn't yet made up his mind at that point.

Then one evening he said: "We'll have wings made in Paris, since they can't be done in Berlin, and they'll be made of such and such a substance and we'll try them out." But every passing day brought us closer to the date when the shooting was to begin and one day, we were running out of time and the wings which were in molded plastic, I think, were not very beautiful and couldn't be worn. And you could see at a glance that the wings were just stuck on to a character.

Then Wim thought of dressing them in a kind of armor – inspired by the way by a painting – and with wings that were more solid. And that didn't work out either. The days went by. Then all of a sudden, Wim said: "All right, we're not going to have our angels walk around in Berlin with their wings. The wings will disappear right away." So we had been pressed to some degree by the lack of a creation that all audiences would find believable. I agreed with the decision and suggested to Wim that we use a trick effect – one that is actually rather complex – where in a studio, the angels who then were going to wear a large gray overcoat – likely, modern, contemporary – would have wings for a few seconds and then the wings would disappear as if by magic.

The trick effect was difficult because it involved a system of mirrors placed before the camera in such a way that and the angel-actor and his double, dressed the same way and standing in another part of the studio, could each be reflected in the mirror . The double

wore wings but not the angel-actor. And by means of lighting, the wings were either illuminated or disappeared in the darkness.

That is the basic idea of the technique. I had used it forty years earlier in *La Belle et la Bête* [*Beauty and the Beast*] and in a number of other films as well, and knew how to make it work. But this time we could use video monitors, so the actor and his double could see themselves. That made it easier to superimpose the two bodies and the wings. But still it took a whole day to get it right. And from that whole day of shooting, Wim kept only a few images of the angel perched at the top of the cathedral. And once the wings disappeared, the film could continue with the angels looking more like humans walking around in the streets of Berlin than like real angels – if there is such a thing as real angels.



RR: I know that you prefer to create effects in the camera rather than turning over to the laboratory the production of effects. I imagine that there are several factors in play in this preference – such as the challenge for you, and the viewer experiencing a greater authenticity in an effect produced in the camera.

HA: I think perhaps the word authentic isn't fully appropriate. Maybe it's the fact that the tricks done in the camera are tricks carried out by a person. While tricks done in the laboratory –

though obviously also carried out by a person – involve a good bit of science. And there is a difference between scientific, rational thought and artistic, emotional thought. I just don't believe that electronic effects can make the public experience the same communication you can achieve with a trick that is manually executed. The proof is that in the theater, the tricks are almost always done manually. And I think we fully accept the little risks, even the imperfections, that can suddenly turn up in a theatrical trick effect.

Cinematic effects are much more advanced, it's true. The public shouldn't realize that we are using an effect. But they have to feel the same emotion as the person who has created the effect. Then you are dealing with people, with grips, gaffers, cameramen, who play with the effect like musicians in an orchestra. A recorded concert doesn't move me in the same way as a concert experienced in a theater and in the presence of the musicians. And I think that trick effects in the cinema work the same way.

That's why I always prefer tricks that are invented on the set, manual, of the do-it-yourself variety, rather than tricks that are too calculated, too scientific. This all comes down to a difference of sensibility and emotion. I don't think the special effects we see so perfectly executed in American films touch us as deeply as the simpler effects of the kind we saw in the films of Méliès and which we find enchanting. Because I think the creative artist can communicate more directly with the public by means of tricks done in the studio rather than through special effects of a scientific

nature perfectly executed in the laboratory. To me, that is extremely important.

That's why I go on, even if it seems a bit old fashioned, using relatively simple tricks, with semi-reflective mirrors, with lights you turn on or off, and which directly transmit to us what the artist feels.

RR: In any event, that particular effect was wonderful.

HA: Well that's the way I see it. Even for something lasting only the briefest moment, I think we feel something rather magical, rather extraordinary. And it's quite simply a matter of turning on or turning off certain lights which make the wings, that are actually worn by the double and not the angel, either appear or disappear.

RR: There are two shots in which we see first Daniel and then Cassiet seated in a convertible, on display in a store selling cars (shots 1048-1049). At the start of each of these shots, the angel is concealed by the reflections of the overhead fluorescent lights in the windshield, and it is only when the camera moves around toward the side of the car that we can finally see the character. Did you know ahead of time that those reflections would be there in the windshield?





HA: No. That is what's so wonderful about working with Wim Wenders! He's a director who leaves room for sudden improvisation and for the emergence of something anomalous in situations. Wim had expected to use, and had me arrange a rather elaborate trick effect in which one of the angels magically entered the store through the glass window. We spent a day and a half shooting this but the effect wasn't very good. It was all right. But it didn't arouse any feeling.

It was cut out during the editing and replaced by another idea that came to me at the time we were rehearsing with the actors and the fluorescent tubes in the ceiling of this store were reflected in the windshield. And out of the blue I said to Wim: "What if we used a little overexposure of the fluorescent lights to hide the faces of the two characters? And since you want a tracking shot from one face to the other, they'll appear behind the reflected fluorescent lights." Wim said "Bravo!"

And that's simply what we did – it's not a trick, it was a reality. At one point, the fluorescent lights were stronger than the lighting on the characters. Naturally I had lights illuminating the faces as well. Those lights were turned off at the start of the scene. That's why

the fluorescent lights were dominant. And then when the camera began to track, we gradually turned up the lights and the faces appeared behind the windshield.

It was spontaneous and unexpected, and that's interesting. Not all directors would go along with something like that. Some would have refused. Most would have refused, at least those of my hayday. Now maybe there is a greater freedom in creation and more receptiveness to last minute suggestions. But at the time when I worked with Duvivier, for example, everything was meticulously calculated in his screenplay. And we followed his instructions to the letter. The same was true of Carné. They were directors from the old school who had been taught to follow a detailed shooting script, shot by shot, and which left no room for imaginative inspiration [on the set].

Fortunately, with Wim – even though he carefully thinks through all of his shots ahead of time – he leaves room for the sudden looming up of unexpected opportunities. That's what he does.

RR: Did the scenes shot in the library involve any particular problems?

In my experience as a cameraman, it was quite exceptional to have to light up a surface and volumes that were so immense as those in the Berlin library. I was both very impressed and also worried when the decision was made to shoot in that location.

My general philosophy is never to argue with the director. I have only done so very rarely. I can't remember ever refusing to shoot

any given scene – as certain of my colleagues had. Whatever difficulties were involved, I told myself: “Actually, I’m here to try to effectuate the thought of the director. So let’s try to acquiesce to his vision.” And Wim wanted this fabulous decor. But with respect to technical matters, it required a lot of equipment. And it was my good fortune to be working for a company that could finance my own needs, which were enormous. Since there was a lot of current needed, a lot of lights, a lot of gaffers to do the installations. Since everything had to be hidden. And in fact, you don’t see a single light, despite the fact that there were scores of them set up at the location.

And it was difficult because we filmed in the daytime – but since it was winter, at three or four o’clock in the afternoon, it looks light night – we had to take whatever measures we could to prolong the day, even if we continued filming in the same direction as at the start. It was then decided – and this is one of the nice things about working with Wim – that as long as the daylight lasted, we would film in one direction, and when night came, we would change direction, and return a week later (since we could only film there one day a week: on Sunday). So there were in fact immense difficulties.

And in the end, I found that these were beneficial constraints, because something good always comes from having constraints. The same is true of painting. Painters who have no constraints don’t produce anything extraordinary. I think that in all the arts, these constraints are present. And there are plenty of them in the

art of cinema. So I acquiesced to these difficult conditions for shooting, and in the end I was rather happy with the situation.

Our profession can be agonizing. Because it is based at the same time on a balance between a certain artistic vision of the thing to be filmed, and technical limitations as to what can be done. Suppose I don't set up lighting, and as some young cameramen sometimes say: "That's the way we'll shoot. The film is very sensitive, and if there are problems, we'll *overdevelop* it." Those are technical means. But I wouldn't find them satisfying. Because I like it best when there is a personal intervention upon the image. And to ensure this personal intervention, I don't just work with so-called "natural" light. I modify that light. I want to control it. I want it to become a part of my concept of lighting. Therefore, I need to use lights.

And I find that with Wim, and this is extremely rare, I am always given a tremendous freedom, no matter how difficult the scenes are to shoot.

RR: Was it with respect to the placement of the lights that the actors' movements were subsequently determined in the library scenes?

No. First Wim planned the movement. And afterwards we did the lighting. And that's what often opposed me to directors – no, not often, once in a while in my career as cameraman – I have run into directors and especially producers, production managers who wanted me to set up the lighting in the studio or on location *before* the actors came to rehearse. And it didn't do any good for me to explain that I couldn't set the lighting unless I first see what the

action will be. And reading it in the screenplay just isn't the same thing.

Something very concrete happens. It's the actors' movement before our eyes, the way they play their parts, their place a space, on a surface, in a volume, which enables us to find the proper lighting. And this proper lighting can only be made very concretely when we have seen what is going to be shot. But when a director, and especially a producer says: "We're not going to wait two hours or three hours for Monsieur X or Mademoiselle Y to arrive. Go ahead. Set up the lights!" I say; "No. I can't set up the lights." Of course, you can place the lights physically, any which way. Well not quite any which way, but depending on the location...

But I never turn them on. I don't want to be fooled by a lighting that will probably be acceptable in a purely physical sense, because in this physical respect you need a certain level of illumination for the image to be recorded on film. But it must correspond *intimately* with what will happen, with the action. And this is the way I have always worked, on every film.

First of all, and this is what I tell young people, illuminate the action. Then, illuminate what is secondary. The secondary is the background. The décor. Occasionally, of course, the décor is the main thing. During several seconds, it's the décor that will determine the meaning of the scene that will follow. In such a case, you illuminate the décor. But almost always, if it is the décor you illuminate, it's because the décor has a primordial importance at that moment. In other words, you light it as you experience it. The décor is the star for several seconds. But it is almost always the

case that the action supersedes the décor in importance. So you have to imagine layers of lighting which will in turn attribute importance either to the décor or to the actors. And that has been the rule I set for myself for many years and that I would like to pass on to young people. Don't let yourself be distracted, don't let your attention be absorbed by the environment. The environment takes second place. The action comes first. This applies both to the theater and to film. And sometimes maybe even to painting.

But it's different in painting because of the fantastic concept of time. The passing of time in film doesn't allow us the same mastery, because the images are ephemeral. The painter's canvas gives time to the viewer, leaves him all the time in the world to examine the work, to explore it and to experience it. He can spend thirty seconds or he can spend two hours in front of a canvas. That can't be done with film. With film, there is a rhythm imposed by the editing and there is the ephemeral nature of the image. So during the minutes or seconds that this fleeting image is on the screen, you have to enable the viewer to see and especially to experience that there is a very rapid emotional shock. So the lighting has to be designed in such a way that its form can pierce through the screen and travel like an arrow into the viewer's mind.

RR: There is an extraordinary shot in which the dying man and Daniel are seen frontally. In this shot, the camera tracks back and forth, from left to right several times. Did you discuss these camera movements with Wim Wenders?

HA: No. They were determined, I would say, by Wim whose sense of the image is simply marvelous. My sole concern at that time was with the lighting. And he was the eye at the camera. And before

turning over the camera to Agnès Godard who was my former assistant and pupil – she had studied at L’IDHEC when I taught there – Wim himself made all those decisions. Afterwards, I stepped in because the shot continues on the bridge and I said: “It would be wonderful if we could continue the shot on a passing train.” But no trains were passing by just then. Then an assistant signaled to us from a distance that a train was approaching and the shot involved a camera movement that had to be perfectly coordinated. And finally the train went by and the camera caught it on film.

RR: There is another wonderful shot near the end of the film where Marion is performing on a rope and we see the play of her shadow on the wall. Was that shadow planned from the start?



HA: No, it wasn’t planned. Some things are planned, others are improvised. Wim Wenders had chosen that location. It wasn’t done in a studio, it was a real location. And I thought I would use a kind of lighting called zenithal, which comes from high above and falls vertically downward. Then it turned out that the available light interfered somewhat with my original intention [...] I added artificial light and proposed to Wim that we play with Solveig’s shadow on the walls. And I think that worked out fairly well.[...]

RR: *During the filming of Wings of Desire, did you shoot relatively few takes of each shot?*

HA: Yes, except for difficult things. Solveig on the trapeze when sometimes a move didn't work out as planned. Then we did the shot over and over again. But Wim never went overboard with excessive numbers of takes. Three or four takes and he was satisfied. Some years ago, there were directors – I will cite one example since it was so extraordinary: Bresson, who wanted 17 takes, 20 takes, 30 takes! My chief gaffer, who I think made two films with Bresson, was a witness. And he told me: it's incredible, we couldn't understand how he would be able to make a choice later on, with all that footage.

No, people are more sensible now because it's often enough for the actors to rehearse beforehand. Some directors don't go along with that. They want the actors to keep their spontaneity and the instantaneousness of the moment, so they avoid rehearsals. And I think that often they are right to do so. Because the limited experience I myself have had as an actor has taught me that in the two or three films in which I've had a small part, I was incapable of rehearsing. What comes the first time can be improved in one or two takes, and after that you feel that it becomes mechanical and lifeless. Many directors nowadays have rightly understood that it is important not to exhaust their actors and they therefore value spontaneity and the inspiration of the initial moment.

RR: *I think I have read somewhere that the takes for Wings of Desire were relatively long. Does that correspond to your recollection of the shooting?*

HA: Very much so. They were often extremely long. That's Wim's method. I think he likes to have a great deal of footage in order to

have a free hand during editing. He has a wonderful editor – Przygodda – who has such a great sense of rhythm that Wim Wenders never works without him.

RR: Did you make sketches for many of the scenes?

Yes, but not always. I make sketches when I need to work things out, when I don't know ahead of time how things will be done. With Wim, two or three times, I made sketches that were useful, I think, because I could show them to him and ask: do you agree that I should go for such-and-such a main effect and such-and-such a secondary effect. Then there was the case of the bunker where it was fully calculated; it was like a studio, completely dark. And I said to myself: all right, let's imagine that the roof is caved in and that light falls from floor to floor to the very bottom, across – which was true – the beginnings of the demolition of the various levels. Obviously, this could have been done in other ways as well. When I look at my photos of the location, I think: maybe I could have designed things differently. Perhaps I could have produced something more mysterious, more dramatic, more in half-light. But that was the way I did it.

Especially when I think back to the era of German expressionism in 1920, with rather high contrasts, hard shadows and bright surfaces. The word expressionism was spoken and Wim said to me: all right, I agree... And obviously, once you decide on a given kind of lighting, you have to stick to it throughout the sequence. And it required a great deal of equipment, a lot of work to place the lights that had to be installed in this difficult location. But on the whole, I think it worked out pretty well.

And the other occasion when sketches I made were important because they determined how we would shoot the scene, was towards the end of the film when the action is set in a night club in Berlin. Again there was a problem. There was nothing there. We were in a fake night club reinvented by the set designer, but not in a studio. You know, it's always harder when you're not in a studio. There are no scaffolds, no facilities. And the location, set up with its little band stand and the place where people could dance – I had to wrack my brains asking myself: how should this be lit? Then suddenly I thought of something that could give some unity to the lighting, and I said to Wim: what if we imagined that the light comes in from outside this darkened location through a large, square door? Because I rather like light that is well defined. And he said yes. So I imagined that the principal source of light came from the exterior to the interior artificially, since we shot at night. And also that there would be a special illumination on the musicians and a few lighting effects – not too much in the style often seen on television where we are supposed to be continually dazzled by dancing spots of light– but a little bit, as can be found in a night club, to punctuate the music. A few blue and orange effects, and nothing more. It had to be rather discrete. And then the entire sequence was dictated by this concern with seeing the faces of the spectators, the dancers, slightly illuminated by the changing reflections of the colors. And then the entrance with a great horizontal light...

I made a sketch and showed it to Wim. He said: "All right, go ahead Alekan." And that's the way it began. So once again, this shows the complicity that must exist between director and director

of photography. If that complicity isn't there, the work becomes insipid. And that's too bad. I must say that throughout my career, I generally had that good relationship, as was the case with Julien Duvivier when I filmed *Anna Karenina*. That is probably one of the films about which I am most proud of having done the cinematography and about which I have fond memories of having worked with a great director. Naturally, I can also mention Abel Gance. It was different with Gance. Or Marcel Carné. And especially Yves Allégret. I loved working with Yves Allégret. Of the one hundred and fifty films I have made, there are only about ten or twelve that remain really salient. [...]

RR: In naming the circus "Cirque Alekan," Wim Wenders was clearly paying homage to you. But is there a deeper meaning to this connection? Was it a way of saying that making a film is also in itself a kind of spectacle?



HA: I can't really answer your question very precisely. You'd have to ask Wim Wenders about that. All I can tell you is what I remember of this matter. From out of the blue, Wim said to me – at the start of the circus shoot – "Every circus has a name. Would it be all right with you, Alekan, if I gave your name to the circus? That took me by surprise. I was delighted and answered, why not? And

clearly, I think it was a way of paying homage to me, since it happened again in the sequel [*Far Away So Near*], in which he named the barge "Ale Kahn".

RR: *But why did he add the "h"?*

HA: Because it turns out, I believe, that [*kahn*] means "barge" in German.

RR: *You mentioned a while ago that Wings of Desire is a film you like very much. Could you state in a few words what it is that appeals to you most in the film?*

HA: The subject seemed to me quite original in relation to what is made today in the cinema and on television. This overview of human activity on the earth through the intermediary of the two angels. The reflections that the angels exchange. And the adventure of an angel who, because of love, wants to become a mortal. I found that absolutely splendid. Because, in the end, what Wim brought out was how much the relations between man and woman, how much love, friendship and brotherhood count. And everything is made concrete by this character who in the end – even if a heavenly life is something wonderful – prefers to become a mortal and to live like any ordinary person the joys and the passion of love.

Parly, 7 August 1993

"Bringing Images to Life." An Interview with Agnès Godard, Cinematographer¹

Richard Raskin

The first two films Agnès Godard shot as a camerawoman are among those most highly respected for the quality of their images: *The Belly of an Architect* (1987) directed by Peter Greenaway, and Wim Wenders's *Wings of Desire* (1987). Even earlier, as a camera assistant, Agnès Godard had already worked on two other films by Wenders: *The State of Things* (1982) and *Paris, Texas* (1984). And more recently, she has worked as director of photography for Agnès Varda, Peter Handke and Claire Denis.

RR: As I mentioned in my letter, Wim Wenders stated in an interview that you didn't entirely agree as to the way in which the scene with the dying motorcycle man should be filmed, and that in your view, the camera movement in this scene wasn't entirely justified.

AG: I was astonished when you told me that since I had no recollection of it at all. I was so astonished that I tried to think back to what might have been in question, and in fact, it's true and it's connected to several different issues.

To begin with, it was only my second film as camera operator. So I was a bit intimidated by it all. Secondly, it was at the start of the shooting, and I don't think I had realized at that point to what degree Wim knew what the camera saw. Something about the camera movement seemed a bit risky to me and scared me, because I wasn't quite able to see in it as clear and perfectly logical ("Cartesian") a purpose, though that of course was not the nature of the film, which is poetic. But that's what had frightened me.

¹ This interview was published in French and under the title "Faire vivre les images" in *(Pré)publications* 142 (February 1994), pp. 42-56. The present translation is my own.

It was difficult to carry out technically because of the equipment. The camera was on a dolly on tracks, and in order to keep it low enough, that is at the eye level of people seated on the ground, it had to be mounted on what we call a "swan neck" – a brace which enables you to keep the camera in a very low position. The camera moved, it descended, from a rather high to a low position, and I had to do a balancing act. It was quite uncomfortable and I was afraid of not executing the movement in a fluid way.

And also there [in Berlin], I couldn't follow what was being said, I didn't understand [the language] well enough to grasp what was really happening. I think the technical worries got to me most... It was a cause of some anxiety for me.



The need to include the young man within the frame – I had understood him to be the son of the man who was dying – to include him in the image, not in a chancy way but to have him

arrive in view because life is a string of things like that, of things hanging by a thread... that seemed difficult to me. Not a second too soon nor a second too late, but at the one right moment. And I was afraid of not being able to translate that and of losing – in the reframing of the shot – what I had done to capture it in relation to that swaying motion which, after a while, I understood to be like heartbeats that were slowing down.

RR: Do you see those camera movements as open to other interpretations as well?

AG: I never had a chance to discuss these things with Wim during the shooting; obviously, that would have been impossible. My understanding – and this came *afterwards* – is that the camera had to move in order not to be dead before the character. That's what I felt, in the rhythm, like a heartbeat that might stop at any moment. But we don't see it stop, there's no melodrama here.

When I saw the film, I also loved the cut to the following shot: of the angel filmed in a slightly high angle tracking shot as he walks on the bridge. Life went on with that walking, which ends when a train passes, heading elsewhere. Death was part of life.





At the time of the shooting, I had not yet realized to what degree Wim knows what he has within the frame, whether the camera is stationary or moving. I have never seen anyone know the way he did what you see with a 25 mm, a 32, a 40, a 50. He sees where the camera is, he knows where [the visual field] begins and ends. It's quite extraordinary.

RR: When I asked him why the camera moved back and forth, he proposed two explanations: 1) that in some way, those camera movements expressed the pain Daniel experienced; and 2) "I thought that going left to right sort of showed more what Daniel was actually doing, in the way that he's sort of taking over the dying man, so to speak. In a strange way, it was in that camera movement."

AG: Yes, I see. It was somewhat in that sense that I mentioned heartbeats. But like something throbbing. For example, I have on several occasions seen people in psychiatric hospitals, and when their pain is throbbing, sometimes they shift their weight from one foot to another. It's a little like that. And with that pain, it was not an altogether normal heartbeat. Something was ending. And in fact, cutting to Daniel walking on the bridge was in a sense accepting that [the dying man] has passed away, perhaps... But we don't see it end. Life goes on, through Daniel, who knew perhaps before anyone else that it was going to end. That's why we don't need to see it end.

RR: Wenders also said that originally, the shot which began on the bridge was supposed to continue without any cutting, but that it was physically impossible since the camera-car couldn't make the turn as tightly as would have been necessary.

AG: Yes. The shot depended on the route of the car and the movement of the camera. The camera was mounted on the front of the car which had to be driven at high speed. At the place where the wounded man was lying, the road was damaged – the car couldn't really turn – and the maximum breadth of the pan was insufficient. The shot couldn't be done the way Wim wanted it at the end of this ride on the bridge. He must have felt the need to find some other way of enriching what was to follow.

RR: If the camera had not been moved back and forth, from left to right, would the shot have been too static?

AG: Yes, I think so. I think it would almost have been a pleonasm with the text. But being in motion, for whatever reason, something magical happens, it enables the words to breathe and we accept the duration. It's very strange. Because the words are after all quite poetic, even though they are almost everyday words, and it makes them breathe, it brings them to life while evoking the notion of duration. And Wim alone had foreseen that.

And for me, it's also expressive of fragility: one fine day, those words can vanish, without our giving them a thought; at any given second, it can all stop. For me, it also expressed something of that kind.

During the shooting, I didn't enjoy [the spoken words] as fully as I do now because it was in German and I had trouble understanding

it. I should add that when Bruno [Ganz] spoke while being filmed, there was so much music in it that even though I couldn't understand everything he said, I was carried away. But I didn't have any insight into its meaning. So I had some worries that Wim must have sensed. It isn't entirely wrong to say that I didn't agree since I asked myself: "Is it certain that this is the right way to do the shot?"

RR: When I showed this scene to my students, some of them said that the back and forth movement of the camera was an oscillation between life and death, and that even the fact that the action takes place at the end of a bridge is significant in that respect. Does that strike you as entirely mistaken?

AG: No, I don't think it's mistaken. As a matter of fact, the richness of many of the shots and of the "mise en images" in general in this film, springs from the fact that you can sometimes find an unlimited number of explanations or images of that kind, because what is said and the manner in which it is filmed are so perfectly suited to one another. That's truly beautiful. Granted, you can also arrive at some far fetched interpretations, but basically, what really counts is that so many things be suggested that each person can find in it his or her own explanation, and that's magnificent. That means that the implement called cinema is there in all its plenitude, and it's wonderful that each of us can find his or her own explanation. That's what makes images come to life. For me, that's the magic of cinema: that from something lifeless and impalpable, there is a moment in which sensation and emotion are created, and that it is possible to make images live beyond their texture. In this film, I think that that happens to a fascinating degree.

RR: *Was the path of the camera movements in this shot slightly curved?*

AG: No, it wasn't curved, it was a traveling in a straight line. The effects man was really extraordinary. He also knew exactly what was in the frame of the camera. But Wim was there and he was the conductor... For him, there is an intellectual investigation in play, since he knows very well what meaning this kind of thing can produce. Often, and sometimes for extended periods, he asked himself questions. But at a certain point, I think a certain intuition comes and he trusts it. It's quite strong. In that respect, he has a special contact with the space seen through a lens.

RR: *Did you need to do more than one take for that shot?*

AG: Yes, we did several takes. I'm not sure how many. Probably about five or six.

RR: *But all done in about the same way?*

AG: Yes... I wanted to add something about the camera movements and that kind of intuition. The exceptional quality of the "mise en images" in this film is also due to camera movements that are sometimes quite sophisticated, without ever appearing to be so. It was never the camera that set feelings in motion. It's more subtle than that... And I was afraid that in reframing the shot, in going after the young man, *we* were imposing – by the very fact that we went looking for him, that we were reframing the angel and the dying man – that *we* were pulling the strings of the story. It seemed preferable to me that it be the chain of events by themselves, that

Damiel was someone who, by nature, was always there at the right time, and that that was the chain of events.

RR: Another piece of information Wim Wenders gave me: he said that when he realized that he couldn't continue the shot on the bridge, that he stood before the two actors and looked at them through a viewfinder, moving to the right and to the left in search of the right place to position the camera. And in this way, he conceived the idea...

AG: Yes, a viewfinder, that's wonderful. He must have been trying out different positions. Yes, that doesn't surprise me. (*Laughter*). That goes to show that Wim does a kind of preparatory work which reflects a concern for precision. But he is also capable of always remaining open to what is going on at the very moment... And what you are telling me now is the proof of that. I think it's brilliant.⁷

RR: In the library scene, what interests me particularly is the fact that instead of constructing the point of view figure in the classic fashion – first showing the eyes that are looking, then cutting to what those eyes are seeing – here we begin with the point of view shots and then the person through whose eyes we are seeing enters his own point of view. This choice of combining in a single shot what the character sees and the character who is seeing, is extraordinary. Not many directors do that.

Yes. [...] I remember that during the first rehearsal of that scene, at the moment of transition from the woman-angel to the entrance of the two men into the visual field, I discovered something magical [in the shot]. And for the first time (I had not been a camera woman for very long), I had the impression that this required looking in a different way through the camera. In other words, going along with the meaning of the action... It was no longer a matter of technique, but rather a kind of poetry in play. I don't know how to explain it. For me, all of a sudden, an understanding that every movement of the camera had a meaning and that it meant something other than itself.

This was an incredible sensation and it frightened me because I felt charged with a very important obligation: to do it well because it was extremely important in this film. I felt I understood everything Wim worried about when making this film and the questions he asked himself concerning the “mise en images”. [...]

Paris, 27 January 1994

"Wim Invents the Film While Shooting." An Interview with Bruno Ganz on *Wings of Desire*¹

Richard Raskin

Bruno Ganz, born in Zürich in 1941, played the leading role in *Wings of Desire* (1987): that of the angel Damiel, who chooses to become a human being. Bruno Ganz had previously starred in Wim Wenders's *The American Friend* (1977), and had other important roles in films made by such directors as Peter Handke, Werner Herzog, Giuseppe Bertolucci, Claude Goretta, Victor Schlöndorff and Alain Tanner. He would also reappear as the angel Damiel in the sequel to *Wings of Desire*, entitled *Far Away So Near* (1993).

RR: Wenders described *Wings of Desire* as one of his B-films, which would mean that to some degree, the actors in the film are playing themselves...

BG: But that's what they *do* in his films...



One of the main problems we had in making *Wings of Desire* was: how do you play an angel? Usually you play a character and then you think psychologically and you ask yourself, "What is this guy like? What is he feeling, and what is he thinking? How would he express himself, and is he angry? or hungry? or thirsty? or stupid?"

¹ During this interview, Bruno Ganz replied to some of my questions in English and to others in French. When the interview appeared in (*Prépublications* 146 (December 1994), pp. 24-31, portions of it were in French. Here I have translated the French passages into English and added illustrations.

Now this is a problem when you are playing an angel. What can you do? You can try to walk as though you could fly, and otherwise, you are yourself, because you can't *do* anything. You are just there. So he's right. Yes, you can describe that as being oneself. I mean there is just no *acting*. What you deliver is your physical presence. That's it. There's no possibility for psychological problems among angels. And that was really a kind of problem for us.

We met quite often and we discussed the question of how to handle angels. We talked about Rilke, and Paul Klee, and images, and Wim had read a book – a Who's Who of angels, which was an Anglo-Saxon invention, it was amazing in that it showed a great sense of humor and knowledge about the history of the Church and how they treated their angels.

Our problem was: how to express things? Picking up material on angels wasn't so hard. But what does it mean: you, you're an angel and what do you do? Do you fly or what? That was impossible. So you walk in the streets and you're invisible. You hear what people are thinking. But what does that mean? What do you do with your face, with your body? What do your eyes tell? What is an angel?

RR: I imagine that an actor can be more or less attached to a particular role. And I was wondering whether the role of Daniel has special resonances for you, to a greater degree than other roles you have played.

BG: It was quite touching... For example, here in England where the monarchy is very strong and very much alive, when actors play kings, they probably feel superior in relation to what they are normally. And kings are still human beings... But angels are something else.

When filming *Wings of Desire*, it was almost a kind of miracle that happened. It was fabulous, walking around and hearing what people were thinking.

Sure, we did it all ourselves and we were shooting a film. Still, I as an actor, as Bruno Ganz, I sometimes had the feeling that I was doing something extraordinary, and at certain moments even celestial. But what touched me the most deeply was that for several months after the film came out, when people – especially women – recognized me, in Berlin or elsewhere, their eyes opened wide and they said: “It’s the guardian angel” ...as though they actually took me for an angel. And people in planes said: “Ah, no need to be afraid, because with you here, nothing can happen. Now we are safe.” Or a mother said to her child: “Look, there’s your guardian angel.” They weren't joking. Of course they knew we are real men and women, but somehow... It's strange. I don't know what really happened. That was an amazing feeling. I loved that. Because that means much more than people saying, "You are a very good actor," or "I love your work." If they say, "Oh, you are an angel," it's like a miracle. In some way I *became* an angel, and who except me has experienced that in his lifetime?

RR: Do you have essentially the same relationship to *Far Away So Near* as you have to *Wings of Desire*?

BG: No. I don't like remakes. And in *Far Away So Near*, I know I should not say this, but I think the script was really horrible. There's too much in it. All this arms traffic and weapons smuggling, this Russian mafia story, and then back to Hitler, Heinz Rühmann

for 20 minutes, I didn't like that. No, I did the film because before we shot *Wings of Desire*, we had been talking about this pizza business in the second half but we had no time to use it. The first version of the script would have been a film of about seven hours, and so we had to cut it down. And the whole pizza business was removed from the script. So it was a part of the first script that we could transfer to the second film, which would be Otto's story, *Far Away So Near*. I liked the pizza business and my role, which is funny in the film, but I'm not really happy with the film as a whole.

However I regret that Wim was treated very harshly at the Cannes Film Festival. I remember I had to fly back from Cannes to Salzburg very early the next morning, and I read the French and Italian newspapers, *Libération* and *La Repubblica*. "The highly estimated God-like cult figure, Wim Wenders," they just destroyed him. It was a journalists' movement and it was so easy to do because the film was weak. But he didn't deserve that. For example, the rhythm of the editing and the music are exceptionally good. Not many directors in Europe are capable of that. Even if I have reservations about other aspects of the film.

RR: *One of the funniest moments in Wings of Desire is when Daniel comes out of the antique store with his new clothes. Did you know ahead of time that that scene would be so funny?*

BG: No. We talked a lot about the "human clothing" but without deciding anything really specific. The costume designer had put some things together and brought them to Wim's office, and then we returned to the question of the new clothing after we shot the final scenes of Daniel as an angel and we did in fact manage to choose a new suit of clothes.



But one day, I brought in from home one of my own hats, and then I said: "Wim, listen. I think this would be funny." With that slightly weird checked jacket. He hesitated until the last moment, maybe five minutes before the scene was to be shot, and finally he decided to use the hat. For a very long time, he didn't want it. But I wanted it – the rather childlike and comical aspect, because after an hour and a half of black and white, with the seriousness of the angels and Peter Handke's monologues, we needed a change of style. And that's why I chose a slightly weird outfit.

RR: Concerning gestures – for example, in shot 1079 where Daniel is seated in the library, with his hands on the railing, his eyes closed and his head slightly bowed. Was that gesture chosen by you or by Wim Wenders?

BG: No that was me. Wim was concerned about that. He said it looked too much like some kind of "boxer," that it was excessive. And I thought it made a strong contrast with the library space that was so celestial. I found it interesting. I proposed it to him. He hesitated, then looked through the camera viewfinder, said "I don't know", then suddenly he said: "All right, I agree, I like it, we'll do it that way." But the gesture was my idea.



RR: *I have heard about a scene that was included in the rough cut but was eliminated later: a scene in which Daniel et Cassiel throw cream pies at one another. [Bruno Ganz laughs.] It is hard for me to image how this scene could have been part of the film.*

BG: Yes, that's why Wim cut it out. In a way, it was logical for us. And it was fun to do. There is even a German expression: *Die Tortenschlacht* – the pie-throwing battle. It's a very well-known image, since German comedians, whenever they don't know what else to do, always end up throwing pies at one another. We filmed that, and I went to see the rushes, which I don't normally do. But I really wanted to see it, so I went to see the rushes and I found it very good – but at the same time knew that it represented a risk for the film. And Wim told me that he had kept that scene in the film for a very long time, but cut it out after the first rough cut. And he was right to do so, unquestionably. But it was really very funny. [Laughter.]

RR. *The dying man scene is one of the scenes I find most touching. Do you have any particular memories in connection with the shooting of that scene?*

BG: No. I remember really liking Peter Handke's lines, which wasn't always the case. I have a tremendous respect for him, because he is a personal friend and a great writer. But certain lines, such as the dialogue between Otto [Sander] and me in the BMW

[shots 1049-1069] – no, that was all right! But later on, Marion's monologue didn't strike me as very good. But in the scene with the dying man, I liked the lines. I liked the shoot that day. And I recall that it was all really easy because everything worked. We arrived on the location, Wim knew what he wanted to do, everyone was ready and then we began, and very calmly and softly, slowly and with precision, we shot the scene and that was it.



RR: *But you found other lines by Peter Handke too heavy, too serious?*

BG: No, I found that the lines written for Otto and me, since we were angels, could be quite poetic. But Marion was not an angel, she was a human being, and I didn't like her monologue. Too ambitious.

RR: *Concerning Marion's final monologue, certain commentators have discussed the fact that it is the woman and not the man who speaks at the moment of their first meeting. Someone used an expression I found very interesting: he said that the woman was in "the position of discursive authority"² ...*

² In "Angels, Fiction and History in Berlin: Wim Wenders' *Wings of Desire*," *The Germanic Review* 66, 1 (Winter 1991), p. 46, Roger Cook cites a passage from Kaja Silverman's "Disembodying the Female Voice," in which she wrote: "[In classical cinema], the female subject [...] is excluded from positions of discursive authority."

BG: Who said this?

RR: A critic writing about the film said that it was interesting that in this situation, it is the woman who defines the agenda for the couple.

BG: Well it might be that Wim and Handke were thinking in those terms. It is possible. But you know, Wim was in love with Solveig Dommartin [who played Marion] and he did everything he could to elevate her. That's the point.

RR: I have noticed that Homer has a relation to Cassiel while Peter Falk and Marion are more connected to Daniel.

BG: Marion by necessity, since the love story is about her and me... Otto is a comedian, while I am considered more a serious or tragic actor, for reasons that escape me. And Curt Bois [who plays Homer] is like Otto.



Homer (Curt Bois) senses Cassiel's (Otto Sander's) presence in one of the library scenes.

Otto and I did a film together [*Gedächtnis*, 1983] about two actors, because we were afraid they would soon die – Bois is now deceased – and the other [Minetti] was just as old. He must be 90 or 91 today and is still working. Bois was Jewish, the other German. Bois had to leave the country. He went to the United States, where he made films in which he could be seen for thirty

seconds. He was very famous, a big star in Germany. And the other actor had a very big career during the Nazi era. That interested us. So Otto and I made a documentary film about those two actors. And even then, Otto constantly spoke to Bois and I to Minetti. Bois and Otto saw themselves as belonging to the same family. And I am apparently part of the other family. I don't really know why. And also that's the way Wim wanted it. [...]

RR: You have worked with a number of directors. I imagine that working with Wim Wenders isn't quite the same as working with the others. He must have his own way of working, and I know that with Wings of Desire, for example, there was no final script...

BG: Well, even with *The American Friend*, we didn't really have a script. And sometimes – more than sometimes – it was in the evening, after shooting, that we worked out the dialogue for the next day. And sometimes it was in English, other times in German... The way Wim works is far away from industrial film. He invents the film while shooting... which costs a lot of money, a lot of material. He takes risks. But he is his own producer so he can afford it, maybe. But I think he had to sell his father's house when we did *The American Friend*. And he's been a gambler. There is a “poker player” side to him. You wouldn't think so, because he has always given the impression of being a fragile artist, but there is a hard side to him as well. And he takes enormous risks with respect to financing. In making films, as you mentioned, with other directors, my respect for Wim Wenders increases constantly because it is a matter of creating something together. And here [in London, with the BBC], there is a storyboard, there is a studio, and the work is executed. You execute a film. It's terrible, it's a terrible way to work... It's industrial filmmaking. I don't like that.

And Wim is really different. He invents a film while shooting. That's amazing. Nobody else does that.

RR: I was wondering whether the circus in Wings of Desire might be a kind of metaphor for the shooting of a film.

BG: Yes, possibly. But you really have to talk to Wim about that. I'm not sure. I thought more in terms of Fellini... Sure, I understand that Marion has to come from somewhere. And since she is a trapeze artist, all right, it's the circus. That's obvious. But I didn't specially like the whole circus side of the film... And I don't know to what extent Wim wanted to go with that metaphorical meaning in the film. I didn't talk to him about it.

RR: I asked him if the circus was to some degree a metaphor for filmmaking, or was I way off. And he said, "No, you're not way off at all." I thought of it just now because you mentioned the financial risks Wim Wenders takes, and the circus is shut down when they run out of money...

BG: Yes, maybe. But the circus scenes were too sentimental. I didn't like that. But as a metaphor for shooting a film...

RR: Especially since he named the circus "Alekan". Or do you see another explanation?

BG: No, I very much like Henri Alekan just as Wim does. The way he chose all his favorite directors to play the mafia in *The American Friend*. And he made a film on the death of Nicholas Ray, *Lightening over Water*. This whole aspect: "Dedicated to..." That's something I really like a lot about Wenders. [...]

RR: One final question. I read about your reaction when you saw the rough cut of Wings of Desire, in an interview you gave before the film came out. When you saw the final version of the film for the first time, were you surprised? And do you recall your initial reaction?

BG: No, no surprises. The only surprise was that I was happy with [my acting in] it. I thought: that's good work, not bad at all. Because often, when you see a film you have just shot, you say to yourself: "Oh, what was I doing there? It can't be. And everyone is going to see that. Oh, what a mess!" No in that case, I was rather relieved. I watched it and thought to myself: it's not bad, it's OK.

London, 16 October 1994

"Seeing with a Child's Heart." An Interview with Solveig Dommartin¹

Richard Raskin



RR: Were all of your monologues in *Wings of Desire* written by Peter Handke?

SD: No, not all of them. The one in the bar was. Mostly there were inner thoughts, which were largely an amalgam of sentences I had underlined in a book by Peter, *Le poids du monde*,² which Wim had asked me to read. And when I read it, I underlined the sentences that made the biggest impression on me. So a number of lines come from that book. If you ever read it, you'll see what I mean. For example: "Se regarder dans un photomaton et il en sort une image avec un autre visage." All the inner thoughts in the trailer. At the same time, it's an amalgam, since I also improvised when we

¹ This interview appeared in French under the title "Voir avec un coeur d'enfant" in *(Pré)publications* 147 (March 1995), pp. 3-16. The present translation is my own.

² Peter Handke, *Le poids du monde. Un journal* (Novembre 1975-Mars 1977). Paris: Gallimard, 1980. The German title is: *Das Gewicht der Welt. Ein journal.*

recorded the inner thoughts, so there are some completely personal thoughts among them. And finally there are some little things that Wim himself had written. Those three kinds of elements went into that mixture. [Solveig Dommartin looks through Marion's inner thoughts in my copy of the shooting script and is kind enough to indicate which sentences were written by Wim Wenders, by Peter Handke and by herself.] Each time I write "Peter", it's from *Le poids du monde*. Because he didn't write [specifically for the film] any of the inner thoughts. It all comes from *Le poids du monde*. So Peter wrote the song of childhood, the two long dialogues between the angels, and then my final monologue, nothing more. Practically everything else was written by Wim the night before. And all the inner thoughts [of the other characters] were done with the actors, after the shooting was finished, watching the screen.

RR: Wim Wenders said in an interview that in a sense, Marion is the main character in the film, and it would therefore have been fatal for the film if Marion were merely the object of Daniel's desire rather than the subject of the film. Is that also the way you saw Marion's role?

SD: Yes, completely. Furthermore, she couldn't be the object of desire because she didn't know she was being desired, since she didn't see that angel. It was strange for me, because the only scene I actually shot interacting with Bruno was the final one. With the scenes in the trailer, he was there, but I didn't see him. Clearly she had some kind of intuition since she dreamed of him. So there is an intuition of something there, nearby, which is this love that will arrive, for which she is preparing herself, and which she can feel approaching. And that is also why she stays in Berlin. The circus leaves but she remains behind because she has an intuition that it is there that her life will take on its true meaning. But what is

marvelous is that at no moment is she an object of desire, and when she sees Daniel, she recognizes him as the man of her life. It's obvious to her. At that moment, as a human being, she herself makes a choice, every bit as much as he does. Since as soon as she sees him, she says to him: "All right, now it's you. It's serious." And by virtue of this final monologue, anyone can see that she is no mere object of desire, that she is in charge of her own life...

RR: Another aspect of this scene which has struck several commentators is the fact that when you meet Daniel, you are the one who speaks. According to cinematic conventions, it is generally the man who speaks in such situations. But here for once, it is the woman who speaks and who defines the situation. Certain critics have even seen this in a feminist light. What would you say to seeing that final monologue in this perspective?



I don't know about that. I'm not particularly a feminist myself. And I don't think that love has much to do with that. There is however something that is very important for me in the monologue. At one point, she says that their story is the story of new ancestors. That really means something to me. In other words, it may be something new that a woman takes on the speaking role, but it's not just a story of feminism. It's really our story today. Who has become the woman, who has become the man, and the way that love depends today for its construction as much on the woman as on the man.

This is, after all, a fairly recent development. And for me, that's what it's about. A description of something new, belonging to our century, or even to the end of this millennium, where all of a sudden *the woman* can make a declaration of love. The woman can say: "There, it's you. I have recognized you." Fifty years ago, this would have been unthinkable. I find it very encouraging that this new possibility exists. [...]

RR: A Danish critic has said: "It isn't much fun being a woman in a film by Wim Wenders, which is necessarily the *Odyssey* of a man whose vision is limited to a masculine point of view." Is it difficult to be a woman in a film by Wim Wenders?³

SD: That's a rather strange question since in *Wings of Desire*, there is a real turning point in Wim's career in relation to the role he gives to the woman. It's true that before *Wings of Desire*... All right, you feel it already at the end of *Paris Texas*, when suddenly things open up. When Nastasia takes her child in her arms at the end, all of a sudden, there is a new way of looking at the woman. You suddenly say to yourself: At last the woman is there, and you feel that Wim is ready to consider love for the first time. That's what he does in *Wings of Desire*.

For me, it was not a problem. It didn't feel as though I were in a situation that different from that of the men. Maybe also because they were angels, that might have helped. I felt rather on the same level as the other characters...

³ In a review entitled "Enøjet engel" which appeared in *Kristeligt Dagblad*, 20 November 1987, Jens Andersen wrote: "Det er ikke sjovt at være kvinde i Wenders film, der er en mands-odyssé, fortalt af en filmisk fortæller, hvis udsyn som kyklopens er begrænset til et øje."

It is after all a film that tells people: Remember your child-heart and doesn't forget your childhood. And remember that you can live with your heart and that you can see with your heart. And that being a woman makes no difference. It's the beauty of the heartfelt truth that enables you to move forward, and live and make of each day a new miracle and make a wonder of life itself. And for me, that's pretty much what *Wings of Desire* is about. All the characters are so true, so authentic, they all see with the eyes of a child. And I think that that is why he manages [so well] to portray the woman at that time, because he shows her the same way, with a kind of purity that finally attains the purity men have in all his films, because his characters are always pure – with the possible exception of *The American Friend*, but generally, he portrays people who derive pleasure from the smallest things, who are living beings that aren't afraid to look on life with the heart of a child. [...]

RR: In giving to the circus in Wings of Desire the name "Alekan", Wim Wenders was clearly paying homage to his great cinematographer, Henri Alekan. But do you see the circus in the film as to some degree a metaphor for the cinema – the shooting of a film being in itself a kind of spectacle?

I don't know. Henri Alekan is the man who made *La belle et la bête*. I think it's more the circus as an element of dream. And Henri Alekan is the great magician of dream lighting. He's someone who can really make you dream. He lights up a face, and all of a sudden it's part of a fairy tale, like at the time when people really loved the cinema, when there were stars. Because there were little glints of light that lit up in people's eyes, and it was thanks to the director of photography that the actors suddenly became superhuman, godlike. And I think it's an homage to that magic, of light, of

sequins... But it's also the magic of childhood. And Henri is after all the greatest child I know in this profession. You just have to look at his eyes and you've understood everything. He is always so full of life. He is someone who wants to produce beauty to the very limit of the dream. And this is something the actors can sense. When you are illuminated by Henri, you are instantly turned into a deity, you don't have to do anything, you are carried by his light. You have the impression of being totally transported. Agnès [Godard] has the same gift. They are a wonderful couple.

And it wasn't just the actors but everyone, the technicians, the entire crew, everyone was enthralled about taking part in this adventure and gave everything beautiful he could find in himself to make the film as magical as Wim thought it could be, because we all felt every morning that he was like a child all the time.

In any event, Wim is always like a child when he is shooting a film. He's like a fish in water. It's impressive, because he is otherwise a somewhat distressed or serious person. He seems to be always reflecting. But as soon as he begins to shoot, he takes on a kind of grace, everything becomes simple, everything becomes harmonious. It's a wonderful experience, being on his film set. No stress, no anguish, he is utterly happy, completely present and happy with what is going on. That gives everyone else a lot of courage for doing the work, a lot of energy. [...]

Paris, 9 January 1995

The Interim of Sense

Bodil Marie Thomsen

The repetition of the words »Als das Kind Kind war« throughout the film, *Wings of Desire* is a sort of marker with many possible meanings.

First, we have the poetic echoing of the word for Child (Kind) in the recurrent initiating sentence in the ongoing reflection on times past by different voices or voiceovers. The doubling puts emphasis on the »being«, the nature of childhood as existence, as opposed to non-existence or adulthood. It is as if the doubling sets up a space for reflection, a space almost as perceptible as when we ask from within the concept of spirit, using the German saying »wes Geistes Kind ist er?« (»What is his way of thinking like? / What kind of a person is he?«). Childhood is, in other words, seen from within, but testified to by a voice from the outside. In poetry, we are used to listening to the spatial void between the word as readable text and its absent acoustic image. Here, we are presented with the voiceover (in French: voiceoff) figuring as an appendix to the written words on the screen. The time gap between then and now becomes more explicit in the absence of (the) person(s) speaking and/or writing. The paradoxical distance is produced by way of the proximity of sound and image – both presented as objects of language. Although we are looking at writing in its process of becoming, the meaning of this gesture is situated in the language as sense-words, as they bear witness to the past world of childhood.

This composition can also be seen in the childhood section of Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane*. The action (the flux of images) takes place, so to speak, from underneath the organisation of words. It is not a duality between body and language that is presented here in the opening sequence. As Gilles Deleuze teaches us: »the event subsists in language, but it happens in things«,¹ and sense is produced in between. Wenders makes us aware of this from the very beginning, and he makes sure that we do not forget it throughout the film.

Secondly, the sentence »Als das Kind Kind war« presents the second »Kind« to us as if it were an adjective, marking an interim of becoming. The past of the verb is made actual in a virtual time-zone, filled with possible and never closed meanings. The poem activates itself as an event between sensation and thought – marking a resource of possible meanings but also an awareness of »the unthought«, that marks us from the outside. The doubling implies with a Deleuzeian term a »crystalline split« – an active interim of child (as remembrance) and child (as virtual becoming). The words vibrate as if their virtual existence in remembrance could still be activated in a non-melancholic gesture. The doubling of »Kind« could of course be heard as an echo with modernistic pathos, where fullness (or excess) of meaning could only be articulated on the backdrop of loss and distance. But it is difficult not to hear it as the noemata of sense and sensation, presented as event in the poem itself.

¹ Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense* (London: Athlone Press, 1990), p. 24.

This intonation becomes more determinant throughout the film, when different continuations of the first sentence are added by the poet (Peter Handke). Those describe a (still reachable) world of sensations, awareness and direct interactions. It is as if the repetition of »Kind« in voice (and text) becomes a trope, a figure of speech, a rhetorical device to shatter conventional readings and ways of seeing throughout the whole film.

In this reading of »Kind«, it relates directly to the never-ending meaning of »angels«. The metaphysical aspect of angels is made physical by way of the child. And with Wenders as the director, it would not be an overstatement to argue that his aesthetic and political aim is a search for the potentiality of the moving image as happening or event. An aspiration on behalf of the spectator, who in principle is situated like an angel in front of the flux of images: unable to rearrange or change the course of events in filmic time.

It is my belief that Wenders' success with this movie is due to the direct discourse about what it means to make sense or to give sense. In this film, he relates to sense as something already established. Images and words could only be uttered on the basis of an already established sense, not as a metaphysic whole, free of the sensations of bodies, or as eternal or conventional truths, but as something that is part of bodies and texts as set from the outside. That is the function of the voiceover of the poet in *Wings of Desire*. It is situated, like angels, in the sky over the city of Berlin, not as a narrative device, a point of view of the discourse, but as »the outside«, that is the precondition for the production of sense. Sense as event, taking place in words and action as an effect of thoughts that could never be exhausted. Daniel, who forsakes the costume

of angels and descends to this world of grief, pain, passion, blood and colours, expresses the intermediary field of sense as event, as he states: »Away with the world behind the world« or realises the meaning with the sayings: »Let's plunge into time, into death!«, »We are not yet born, so let's descend«, »To look at eye level rather than down from above«. The transmutation from angel to man is like the transmutation from thought to speech.

Mediauras

As every scholar has noted, the film is filled with allusions to the most notorious essays of Walter Benjamin from the late 1930s: »Work of Art in the Age of Its Technical Reproducibility« (1936), »The Storyteller« (1936), »Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century« (1937), »A Berlin Childhood Around 1900« (1938), »On some Motifs in Baudelaire« (1939) and »Theses on the Philosophy of History« (1940).² The predominant questions throughout those works are the loss of aura, the masses, the failures of philosophy in the name of progress, and the consequences of reproduction, all of which are reflected in his remarkable ambiguous notes on the film media:

for the first time – and this is the effect of the film – man has to operate with his whole living person, yet forgoing its aura. For aura is tied to his presence; there can be no replica of it (op. cit. p. 223).

Magician and surgeon compare to painter and cameraman. The painter maintains in his work a natural distance from reality; the cameraman penetrates deeply into its web. There is a tremendous difference between the pictures they obtain. That of the painter is a total one; that of the cameraman consists of multiple fragments, which are assembled under a new law. Thus, for contemporary man, the representation of reality by the film is incomparably more significant than that of the painter, since it offers, precisely because of the thoroughgoing permeation of reality with mechanical

² The mentioned essays are collected in *Illuminations* 1955, paperback edition (London: Fontana Press, 1992).

equipment, an aspect of reality which is free of all equipment. And that is what one is entitled to ask from a work of art (p. 227).

The camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses (p. 230).

The aura of the film actor vanishes, as Benjamin describes it, but the work of the camera lays down new laws regarding representation in altering the subject's relation to time and space: »With the close-up, space expands; with slow motion, movement is extended. The enlargement of a snapshot does not simply render more precise what in any case was visible, though unclear: it reveals entirely new structural formations of the subject« (p. 229-30). This complexity – the loss of aura, combined with the unforeseeable shocks of beauty and ugliness in modernity is maintained as the prevailing centre in his theoretical writings in the shadows of fascism.

As Rainer Nägele states it, Benjamin abandons »representational models of mirror reflection (Widerspiegelung)« as well as »the dialectics of specular selfreflection« to create instead »a graphematic model of reflexive motility inscribing physiognomic traits«. ³ Sense, physicality, and the social and political body of the mass all take part in this description.

It was not Benjamin's concern to alter the classical »philosophy of beauty« to »the modern beautiful« or to lament the loss of aura. He was, if anything, referring to »an earlier Kantian and preKantian notion of aesthetics as a theory of perception« (op.cit.). The experience of modernity in terms of sense-perception is often centred on visual perception in the texts mentioned. Samuel Weber

³ Rainer Nägele: »Poetic Ground Laid Bare«; *Walter Benjamin: Theoretical Questions*, ed. by David S. Ferris (Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 136.

suggests that the extensive use of words like »Bildlichkeit«, »Weltbild« or »Vorstellung« indicates a symptomatic description of modernity, where the world has become a picture – forever inscribed in representations where the place of the subject is fully depicted. But a different reading of the kinetic level of the moving picture as a recording or inscription, where elements are dislocated, cut, and then projected in many places at once inspires to new readings of technology and mass. The absentminded perception gives way to a study of sensations as a bodily and social experience. The moving image is, in this sense, presented as belonging to the level of allegorical pictures, the level of Proust's involuntary memories, or the glance from a woman passing by in Baudelaire's poetry. The spell between appearance and disappearance must be fugitive in order to create sudden beauty or »mediauric« (Weber) effects:

auratic flashes and shadows that are not just produced and reproduced by the media but that are themselves the media, since they come to pass in places that are literally intermediary, in the interstices of a process of reproduction and of recording – Aufnahme – that is, above all, a mass movement of collection and dispersion, of banding together and disbanding.⁴

It seems to me that Wim Wenders is indeed an heir to this kind of kinaesthetic philosophy or »Weltbilde«, that presents us with »Darstellungen« instead of reproductions of the same. Although the English title: *Wings of Desire*, has lost all reference to this auratic trace, this film is apparently showing us that the sky (of Berlin) also reaches to the ground. It can easily be seen as a kind of manifesto of Wenders' work, dedicated as it is to the story of Germany, the

⁴ Samuel Weber: »Mass Mediauras«; *Walter Benjamin: Theoretical Questions*, op. cit., p. 48.

remembrance of material history inscribed in the ruins and places of the city, and in the bodies and thoughts of ordinary people. This perspective will dominate the following reading.

Voices

The voices that rise like a storm of despair, questions, claims, and spiritual aspirations are never calmed in a plot solution or in a unifying orchestration. The single voice of a traffic victim is consoled by the touch of eternity as life expires from his body. The rest of the subsequent voiceovers give significance to anonymous thoughts, which, like the ruins of the city, are scattered at random throughout the film. They are presented as dispersed fragments, and are likened to the concept of »extras« or »extrahumans« by »the fallen angel«, Peter Falk, as he sketches a remarkable face with Eisensteinian traits. The woman is at the same time presented to us by way of her thoughts about the Second World War. Her »internal« voiceover is related to a documentary of ruins in June 1945, and she is first portrayed by the film-camera as a closed entity, her face reflecting the remembrance as folded into her traits. As she is sketched by Peter Falk her face (in close-up) transforms in front of the camera. Her memories and traits becomes accessible by way of her direct and open expression of energy. This force makes the virtual – in its capacity for transformation – understandable, as this provokes a new series of war-images. They now seem much more real to us. The double portraiture by camera and pencil creates an intermediary time-zone, a krystalline section in the picture itself. The past becomes actual, as we see the womans face un-folding in a series of micro-mouvements of passion in the

present(ation) of desire (to own her own portrait). She is related to the presence, as if the stroke of the pencil gives her new life. The close-up of her face is given a new (auratic) meaning of the moment. In a flash, the camera tears her face out of the mass of »extrahumans« and gives her traits something extra; the personal remembrance of the war is made comprehensible.

The portrait of the woman made visible succeeds. On a larger scale, the storyteller, Homer's, ambition to pile all the different voices together fails, as no one ever listens. The »immortal singer«, the »angel of poetry« is, in modern time, telling his story with a cracked voice »on the threshold of No Man's land« exactly as Benjamin states it:

the art of storytelling is coming to an end. Less and less frequently do we encounter people with the ability to tell a tale properly. More and more often there is embarrassment all around when the wish to hear a story is expressed. It is as if something that seemed inalienable to us, the securest among our possessions, were taken from us: the ability to exchange experiences (*Illuminations*, p. 83).



Homer is presented to us as a stranger, an almost invisible old man (with strong similarities to the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur); only the angels notice him. He is related to death, and is, as such, in touch with the Muse as a link to the reminiscences of his personal story as well as to the remembrance of the story as an epic web.

What makes *Der Himmel über Berlin* remarkable as a poetic manifesto is that Wenders is actually using the figure of the storyteller as a germ to link images of today by way of allegorical correspondence. It is, in fact, striking that the revision of the film today, a decade after the fall of the Berlin wall, must deal with this in a sort of wondering: it is as if the film (produced in 1987) shows us (now) the obvious traces to follow (then). The figure of the storyteller, Homer, is (also) a crystalline image that presents to us an heir we should deal with. This heir has an invisible link to the recurrent invocation of the poetic voice on childhood, as well as the eternal remembrance of the angels. In that sense »Der Himmel« can be seen as the light from Eternity, the infinite space meeting with the inhabitants of Berlin, too vulnerable towards time. The picture, *Angelus Novus*, by Klee, interpreted by Benjamin as a figure, »the angel of history« and »progress«⁵ can, by way of Wenders fallen angel, Damiel, now be read as an opening towards the time-image, where the movements and thoughts of human beings have no goal and no purpose and yet are more than just empty markers of time. Time is inscribed in us, not just as the physical death process, or from the viewpoint of eternity, but time as images, as events, that mark the past as virtuality. This is where hope is created: in the realm of time-images and stories with manifold endings, in the realm of events, where time, light and image have the same source, the »many diffuse occurrences« (op. cit., p. 97), that are the origin of epics. The epic tradition before the written story, the epos and the novel, concentrated on one story, »one hero, one odyssey, one battle« (op. cit., p. 97).

⁵ *Illuminations*, op. cit., p. 249.

You're not blind yet

The epic of cinema is new. Narrational schemes in the broad sense are very close to representational clues, where a subject is presented as the beholder of the story told. The relation between *fabula* and *sujet* is also well recorded in cinema. The new tendencies toward a wider sense of time-images, taking the techniques of Proust, Benjamin and Kafka into use, are less well-described. One of Wender's techniques is to create a space of sound between images and voices. The images are taken as from the sky, from the perspective of angels like *Damiel* and *Cassiel*. They are like the »*angelus novus*«: narrators from above, with no sensory-motor determinations. They are not part of the story told. They can recollect spiritual elements in acts and minds, like the camera. But they can not act. In contrast to the angels are the voices of anonymous people of Berlin. They belong to bodies, but they are presented as detached. The only exception is the voice of *Marion*, which is presented as part of her body. On the other hand, she lives in her longing thoughts, longing for a history, a place to belong, for seriousness. We have, in other words, a description from the outside (the angels), a description from the inside (the anonymous people) and a description in between: the poetic invocations of childhood, the monologues of *Marion* and the noisy sounds of the city, the crowd, the traffic or machines. What is common to the external, as well as the internal, description is that the recordings emphasise a distance between recorder and recorded. The descriptions from in-between are pictured in a kind of stasis, where this spatial distance is studied. In the case of the

invocations of »Kind«, the echo resounds, the way voice is used in modern cinema, where the effort to combine the speech act with the visual image is no longer made. On the contrary:

It turns in on itself; it is no longer a dependant, or something which is part of the visual image; it takes on a cinematographic autonomy and cinema becomes truly audiovisual. [...] Thus it is no longer a question of action/reaction, nor of interaction, nor even of reflection. The speech act has changed its status. If we go to 'direct' cinema, we fully discover this new status which gives speech the value of a free indirect one: this is storytelling.⁶

Deleuze is exploring the storytelling voice with reference to Perrault, Rouch, Rohmer and Bresson, but it is hard not to include Wenders, as he continues:

The break in the sensory-motor link does not only affect the speech act turning in on itself and hollowing itself out, and in which the voice now refers only to itself and to no other voices. It also affects the visual image, which now reveals the any-space-whatevers, empty or disconnected spaces characteristic of modern cinema. It is as if, speech having withdrawn from the image to become founding act, the image, for its part, raised the foundations of space, the 'strata', those silent powers of before or after speech, before or after man. The visual image becomes archaeological, stratigraphic, tectonic. Not that we are taken back to prehistory (there is an archaeology of the present), but to the deserted layers of our time which bury our own phantoms; to the lacunary layers which we juxtaposed according to variable orientations and connections. These are the deserts in German cities (op.cit., pp. 243-44, Deleuze's emphasis).

This striking characterisation of *Der Himmel über Berlin*, two years before its release, is very complementary to Benjamin's way of thinking. Perception becomes the centre of seeing an image. We read images today as witnesses to our own perception. We see and hear with analytical eyes and ears because we no longer can relate to the explicatory force of relating images or sounds. The distancing gap makes it possible. »The empty and disconnected spaces«,

⁶ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The time-image* (Minneapolis: The Athlone Press, 1989).

already visible in Ozu's films, function as a »division of labour between presentational image and representational voice" (op.cit., p. 246-47). It is the separation of the two aspects of perception, seeing and hearing, that is used as a technique to recall the auratic figure of Benjamin. The space that separates us from auratic art is virtually present as a germ of remembrance in this non-correspondence of voice and image.

This is where we meet the wondering Marion, most strikingly portrayed in front of her mirror-triptych, where she watches herself think. As the internal voiceover speaks: »So what do you think?«, the camera moves to the back of the mirror. We see the face of Marion in a dark reflection, a shadow on an opaque background. She is presented to us as if in a crystal-image – but this image has the power to transform meaning. She is not portrayed like the old woman (sketched by Peter Falk) in relation to her (and our) past. Marion is portrayed in relation to her virtual future, trying to confront her thoughts with the un-thought. The voiceover is answering her questions so to speak from the backside of the mirror like an automat from the outside. Marion listens to the death inside life, the dread of anxiety, and she becomes alive as the thought from the outside marks her body – as life within death. It is thought, that breaks the spell of the crystal as frozen. The crystal image is broken or unfolded and makes way for a time-image.



Her metaphysical fear of death is transformed to a physical reassurance of her body: »You're not blind yet. Your heart is still beating. And now you're crying«. This time-image transforms an angst for nothingness to a fear of the inscriptions of time in the body. The physical death process is not frightening to Marion as long as it is concrete. On this background, she can return to her spatially disconnected stasis. But she is without fear, and can describe the trapezian figure one last time as an upheaval of gravitation.

The angel, Daniel, makes the opposite movement: from the outside to the inside, from sky to earth, from the world of metaphysical truths to the world of presentations. He descends. That's why there is humour linked to his person. He wants to taste life, to reunite the disconnected spaces. He wants to undo the absence of aura, to become like a child, to undo the passive figure of Angelus Novus. To break open the concept of progress. And he succeeds.

Wenders describes a possible flight into virtual images of the past, re-figured in actual images (the old woman). A flight of thought-creation, that submits to the conditions of time: the present as forever splitting up into past-present and future-present (Marion). A flight of pure events and qualities of sense, sound, image (Da-

miel). Those images might open our minds to a new cinema, where stories could be told without the boundaries of old manners of representation – and in fact they did!.

As a concluding remark, I would like you to look again at the isolated figure of Cassiel, as he, at the end of the film (sitting on the angel-sculpture), suddenly stops his ears and the sound disappears. It is as if the noisy space were more than spatial. Time expands in this momentary silence, and time-space occurs in an almost sensual touch that makes sense. We are suddenly able to hear the passage between sound and its disappearance. The pause is given meaning as an intermediary between camera-noise and thought, between sensation and knowledge – a pure sound-image.



Like a Film, Like a Child Knowledge and Being in *Wings of Desire*

Morten Kyndrup

I

According to Schopenhauer, what characterizes the individual, *principa individuationis*, is its position in time, space, and causality.¹ That is, an individual is subjectively situated in one and only one time, and it is situated in one and only one place at a time, and the following-one-another of events takes place in only one way. This has certain decisive consequences for man's perceptual possibilities in relation to himself as well as to other human beings. One is able to look at other human beings from the outside but unable to see them from the inside. One can see oneself from the inside being the one who sees, but one can never regard oneself from the outside. Consequently, one can never see oneself see. You cannot, as Wolfgang Iser puts it, "be yourself" and "have yourself" at one and the same time.²

Narratives may be construed as a sort of bridge between being embedded in time and regarding oneself being embedded in time, between subjective time and cosmic time – as put by Paul Ricœur among others³ – because all constructions of fiction necessarily establish an access road to the world which they unfold (a world

¹ The Schopenhauer reference here is quoted from Th.W. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie* (Frankfurt am M.: Suhrkamp, 1970), p. 208.

² See Wolfgang Iser, "Representation: A Performative Act", in *The Aims of Representation. Subject/Text/History*, ed. With an Introduction by Murray Krieger (New York: Columbia UP, 1987), pp. 227ff.

³ See Paul Ricœur, *Temps et récit*, t. III, "Le temps raconté" (Paris: Seuil, 1985).

which is fictional, and that also applies to so-called authentic stories). A world has to be seen from somewhere in order to be perceived as a human world.

II

In Wim Wenders's *Wings of Desire* (1987), the access to the human world (Berlin of that time) is effected through characters who do not perceive in an ordinary, human way. These characters, angels, move through space without any physical or mental obstacles. Quiet, grey men and women of indeterminate age, wearing anonymous coats. While they are invisible to all adults, children can see them. The angels themselves have no physical substance and possess the special ability to communicate directly with the internal worlds of human beings. They are able to hear what people think, which is represented in the movie by the voices of individual human beings in this endless monologue, this stream of consciousness working in all of us all the time. The angels may be anywhere, but unable to be everywhere at the same time, they are always in one place. Nor can they hear the inner world of all human beings at one and the same time – actually they could, but they have to tune in to one specific consciousness at a time in order to separate one voice from the choir as a whole.

The angels move around in the space over the city and in the spaces of the city. Spaces full of sounds. They watch what happens and listen to each individual human being's voice of consciousness. They may bring comfort to a human being by their presence, and by trying to turn the inner monologue in an alternative direction, but the angels are unable to change events of the physical

world. They cannot prevent a suicide, a traffic accident, or a vicious action.

The angels write down and mutually interchange the (parts of) individual stories they witness. The angels themselves, however, have no individual history.

III

In *Wings of Desire* the knowledge of the universe presented has been distributed as follows: We have a world full of human beings, each with its own individual history of life lived, from which it looks at the world. Now the angels look at these human beings looking, one by one. The beholder, that is, the position of the implied recipient, sees the angels looking at the individual human beings looking. We follow two different angels, Damiel and Cassiel, on their way through the spaces of the city, experiencing them experience ordinary human beings from within. Thus we experience our own way of experiencing the world, seen from the outside. This position truly knows everything, knows all events, all secrets, all fates; it notices just how every human being is a prisoner of his own story and unable to see anything but that. But on the other hand, this position does not itself know what it is like to be a prisoner of time, space, and causality.

The so-called epistemic competence (knowledge about what goes on in fictional space) of Damiel and Cassiel is on the one hand immensely high: in terms of facts, they are omniscient. On the other hand, what might be called their existential competence as regards the spaces they know so well is infinitely low. They know everything but they know nothing. So on the one hand the movie's

presentation of this Berlin through the experience of the angels is as “realistic” as possible, including everything anybody experiences and representing it on a one-to-one scale, but on the other hand this presentation itself is no real narrative.

IV

The above discrepancy is due to the fact that a narrative must be human, must (re)construct a human gaze at the presented world. A human gaze means looking from a certain position; looking from a certain position implies that there is also something you do not see. A narrative, in other words, requires an act of narrating (one or more narrators), someone who talks. Furthermore, it requires focalizing, “focalization”: one or more who sees.⁴ As a construction of a world assumes this humanoid form in order to become a narrative, it is, however, hit by the definitive condition of such a construction: the closer you are to being in the world, to taking part in the game, the harder it is to regard it from the outside. Genuinely inside the game, you are subject to any individual’s condition of time, space, and causality, that is, “history”. What you see you see exclusively from the inside. You do not see yourself see. In that sense there is an almost constitutional contradiction or complementarity between knowledge and being, between watching and participating. We know that from everyday life. To know anything at all about something presupposes objectivation, distance.

⁴ The distinction between narration and focalization has been worked out thoroughly by Gérard Genette, see his *Figures III* (Paris: Seuil, 1972), pp. 203ff. Seymour Chatman has proposed the terms “slant” and “filter” for roughly the same distinction in relation to film, see his *Coming to terms. The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1990), pp. 141ff.

Conversely, the more subjectively engaged you are in a game, the harder it is to avert your actual position and interest.

The movie *Wings of Desire* establishes a narrative about the angels Damiel and Cassiel regarding the stories of life in Berlin. But Damiel and Cassiel are unable to turn their own regarding into a narrative. To us as well, these life stories present themselves as an infinite, additive assembling of parallel moments. Narrating and studying narratives is not the same thing.

V

This condition becomes unbearable to the angel Damiel. He envies the human beings their history, their “now”, their captiveness, and he decides to become human, to let himself fall. From infinity to finality, from being anywhere to being just where you are, from being immortal and eternal to having exactly one life. In other words, from the prison of total freedom to the prison of being inscribed in a history, in your own mortal story.

Damiel’s action thus corresponds exactly to the movement which any movie goes through. To make a movie always means turning many possible times into one certain time – namely, that of the movie – not only if the movie is to become a narrative, but quite concretely, in a physical sense.

Film as an art form seems to have acquired this knowledge, also historically. From consisting of isolated spaces and places mounted side by side, film gradually became a conscious temporal art. A movie mounts a number of local spaces and times into one time, most often as a narrative. The self-reflexive reference both to this

very movie and to the art form as such stands out explicitly and consciously in *Wings of Desire*. Not only does the movie change from black and white to colour – just like in real film history – as Daniel gives up his angel perspective, but in the credits it is even stated “Dedicated to all the former angels, but especially to Yasujiro, François and Andrej”. There is reason to suppose that this applies to the master directors with the family names of Ozu, Truffaut and Tarkovskij, respectively; a (master) director, it seems, is a fallen angel. To make a movie is to choose a history, to establish one time. To choose a story is also to opt out of the possibility of choosing between innumerable stories. *Jacta alea est*.

VI

Wings of Desire, it seems, is an explicit allegory on the fundamental genesis problematics of film and thus furthermore on this movie's own production. Not only does this movie tell the story of a person choosing to get – and thus engender – himself a story, but the movie also *does* what it tells. It becomes a story like that itself. From paratactical counting of parallel fates seen from a bird's eye view and in black and white, it lands in the middle of one story seen from within that very story, in colour. The incoherent similarity of singular situations organized according to spatial principles is replaced by a narrating *vision-avec* organized according to time, according to the course of events. Marion and Daniel get each other.

This transformation at all levels of the movie is indeed overtly staged. This overtness implies that within the enunciation of the movie, this transformation is not just reflexive. The calculated

exaggeration makes it reflexive in a double sense. The distance between the overt reflexivity of the expression and the implied position responsible for expression creates an objectivation, or redoubling of reflexivity, which is also obvious in the movie as an ambivalence.

VII

“Nous sommes embarquées”, it is stated almost triumphantly in Marion’s voice at the end of the movie. Now the story can begin, and the end title even announces “To be continued”, the classic formula of the *feuilleton*. In other words, the emphasizees of “narrative” are so redundant and so blatant that the picture starts trembling under its own weight. The switch to Technicolor points in the same direction. To be sure, it is also motivated inside the diegetical space (angels are supposed to be unable to perceive colours; a chance passerby has to explain the names of the colours to Daniel after he has become a human being). But this switch also seems closely linked to the implied narrator of the movie as such, among other things because it also represents a clearly technical choice.

The ambivalence is also obvious from the almost too explicit chiasm in the relationship between Daniel and Marion. *He* becomes a child, literally a child, finally a child, with all the implications of, for instance, needing care. *She*, on the contrary, becomes a grown-up, finally – “finally lonely”, as it is put. She is attracted to Daniel as an angel: his quietness, his timelessness, his odour of eternity as a counterweight to her own superficial adhesion to history. He,

however, is precisely attracted by her being captured inside this history of the no-way-out of her inner monologue.

Consequently, the two seem to rush by each other in one and the same movement. This is made immediately obvious in the changed character of Daniel. Having been a creature of reticent, incarnate goodness, of cool sublime quietness, he is changed into a yodelling Tyrolese, into a type talking loudly to himself in the street, contacting strangers in a way which would make most of us cross the street in order to avoid him. Even though the metaphysical attraction across all the spheres does work the first time Daniel and Marion meet physically in the Technicolor reality, one spontaneously questions the possibility of continuation. And, as mentioned, through the end title the movie does so too.

But the movie also gives rise to a different kind of question. Its enunciation includes a sort of framing construction within which Daniel writes down the story (simultaneously narrating it orally, sometimes just as voice-over). Each sequence starts with "Als das Kind Kind war" ("when the child was a child"), itself a paradoxical twisting of temporality and figure. In case the child *was* a child, it is not a child any more. But we may be dealing with a child (Daniel) who has become a child, and who also wishes to have been a child, which it has not; in other words, who wishes to conquer a story, a childhood. Many details confirm that the framing construction is meant to be thorough, that in other words the narrative of the movie is set as an illustration of what Daniel writes; that is, *after* the events, in *vision-par derrière*. One of the sequences is even told in Marion's voice, pointing out a possible common perspective after

the events. If that is correct, it means that the “I-trap” does not only catch Daniel during the course of events; qua the narrative construction he has been caught even before the narrative begins. Thus, the whole story is basically told personally, (intra) diegetically, and from ‘below’ – by a child, so to speak. That raises the fundamental question of the reliability of the narrative, once again emphasizing the ambivalence.

VIII

Further dispersal of the statement is made by one of the subsidiary characters within the fiction, a subsidiary person nevertheless posited as a *leitmotif*, even having the last word of the movie: Homer, the old man and storyteller, again and again stating the importance of telling stories. Or: of history being narrated. Old, senile and broken down, he insists on his mission (although we never hear *him* tell a story himself). In practice, he is tumbling around – just like a child – in the centre of Berlin at what was once Potsdamer Platz, now bombed out *terrain vague* between the two zones of the city.

Homer’s evocation of the narration of history touches above all upon the German problem, at once very present and strangely remote in this movie. In one sense it means everything: the divided city, the cuts to war’s indescribable horrors of loads of bodies and burning houses. And then: the same human beings as extras in an American film production thematizing the Nazi past. Or: the angels’ unworried and uninterested crossing of the border and the wall; to them this historical problem is utterly marginal. As the inner

monologues show, marginal it is also to ordinary people's ordinary stories. Homer's cry of distress is an exception. The angel Cassiel nicely takes care of the demented old man stumbling around at the bomb site. But the message of Homer is not really being treated by the inner plot of the movie. Instead it points out of the diegetical space, out into its bursting greater form, out into its coolly mounted ambivalence, or perhaps polyvalence.

IX

The movie carefully mounts its own discursive disorder as an undecidability. There is no solution to the dilemma. On one side, we have the carefully organized distribution of epistemic competence by the diegetic space, and the story about the transformation of this competence. On the other side, we have the double reflexivity of the whole movie through a self-commenting level along the construction of enunciation and a sort of correcting alternative to it, enclosing it in quotation marks, as it were. "Look, what a movie", it says.

On the one hand, Daniel's story is possible. It is possible to transform olympic, multi-spatial knowledge with all its distance, into personal participation and a story, into one mortal time with all its loss of insight. "Columbo" is a helper. Being a child is good. In other words it is possible to make movies, to create film. This is the movie's celebration of film.

On the other hand, Daniel's story is, nevertheless, not possible. The transformation from self-controlled, chronically benevolent consoler to babbling Tyrolese, primarily absorbed in his own immediate satisfaction of needs – that transformation is neither reliable

nor any probable delight to anybody in a greater perspective. "Columbo" is thus an unpleasant temptator when he keeps trying to persuade passing angels into becoming human beings. In that perspective it is characteristic that only one of the two point-of-view-carrying angels gives in and is transformed. The other, Casiel, resists the temptation, and even proves (diegetically) necessary to make Daniel's transformation work. He has to carry him out of the sight of the VOPOs at the time he is materializing. And he has to see to it that Daniel indeed meets Marion, since the circus has left. Daniel himself has become powerless. Consequently, it is not possible to make movies, save that when the perspective is confined to babbling kitsch, to something vulgar and unpleasantly over-coloured. Being a child is not good. This is the movie's critique of film.

X

This dilemma is kept open. Absolute knowledge and being human exclude each other. You can't have it both ways. But the downward movement, the very de-positioning of epistemic competence to persons inside closed human stories, that is possible, that can be *done*.

In its total gesture, this may be what *Wings of Desire* says. The movie – this movie like any other movie – must in all cases capture the space within a time, make itself a child. This has certain costs. It is, however, possible to construct this movement of closure in such a way that the *process* of this capturing movement itself becomes part of the presentation. Thus the loss of knowledge may be turned into something explicit, into *événement*, into a becoming-

child.⁵ And this turning-explicit itself may create virtual bifurcations of the time designed. These bifurcations in turn may convincingly represent many things, including for instance different spaces. But also this openness has certain costs.

Or, to put it differently: Any movie is always already a meta-film, anyway. This has irreversibly been made obvious, among others by the above “fallen angels” of film history. Therefore, film could first as well as last accept this destiny and calculate these costs at both levels by including them into its filmic expression, making them part of its own aesthetic *gestalt*.

This message of *Wings of Desire* we may have known for a long time. The special thing is that here this knowledge is literally *formed* at all levels. *Wings of Desire* not only knows its own form, it *is* its form; it is congenial with itself without being identical with itself. This movie carries into effect an imposing, reiterated becoming-child, which makes it a masterpiece as a movie, as film, as world experience.

⁵ Événementisation” and the notion of “becoming” as a mode of existence (as opposed to “being”) obviously hints at the philosophy and aesthetics of Gilles Deleuze, see for instance his *Le pli. Leibniz et le baroque* (Paris: Minuit, 1988), p. 71.

The City is More Than Skin Deep: On Translating Wenders in America

Darrell Varga

The making-over of Wim Wenders' masterful *Wings of Desire* (1987) into *City of Angels* (Dir. Brad Silberling, 1998) while on the one hand another chapter in the late twentieth century's long-running saga of American cultural imperialism, offers a useful view of the possibilities and limits of translation in Benjaminian terms. In his "The Task of the Translator," Walter Benjamin posits the act of translation as a striving toward a true language, to that which is concealed in the original. Metaphors of a labyrinth are well-known throughout Benjamin's writings and the act of translation is similarly described in terms that are a movement of continual unfolding:

Though one may gleam as much of that subject matter as one can from a translation, and translate that, the element with which the efforts of the real translation were concerned remains at a quite inaccessible remove, because the relationship between content and language is quite different in the original and the translation. Whereas content and language form a certain unity in the original, like a fruit and its skin, the language of the translation envelops its content like a royal robe with ample folds.¹

The metaphor of the labyrinth must, following Simmel, be understood simultaneously as a matrix of hidden paths as well as the potential to form new networks of connection.² Benjamin declares

¹ Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," *Selected Writings Volume 1: 1913-1926*, trans. Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge and London: Belknap-Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 258.

² Simmel is cited in: Derek Gregory, *Geographical Imaginations* (Cambridge M.A. and Oxford U.K.: Blackwell, 1994), p. 269.

emphatically that a translation should never merely communicate the original for the sake of those who do not understand it, but that it must evoke the essential quality of the work of art in poetic rather than simply communicative terms in order to serve the original through renewal, through the creation of what he refers to as an “afterlife”³ for the work of art, a striving for revelation. While the content of the original is, immodestly, the ruins of European history, *City of Angels* is at a necessary distance from these fragments of empire, yet both films take the city itself as subject as well as setting. The notion of “afterlife” invites this brief sketch of these angel films and their translation from the spaces of Berlin to those of Los Angeles.

If there are so many angels in the Los Angeles of *City of Angels*, it is because they are angels of death—not merely gazing at the passing of history from a free-floating perspective, but stalking the living to the end of mortality where they take possession of the body and, unlike the original, intervene in temporal affairs. These Americanized angels have been literalized as Christian (the angel Seth declares: “I am a messenger of God”) and the film emphasizes belief which is signified as superior to the scientific rationality of the main female character, Dr. Maggie Rice (Meg Ryan)—her faith in medical-technological rationality collapses as she falls in love with a (soon-to-be fallen) angel named Seth (Nicholas Cage). The American angels are not mere witness to history, here they give signification to that which they see, an act of naming which is a striving for redemption, for a return to the garden, realized in mortal-sensual experience, as

³ Benjamin, “Translator,” p. 254.

Richard Wolin explains of Benjamin's project: "The lost paradisiac language of names contains within itself the hidden script of redeemed life, [this] becomes the focal point of Benjamin's critical energies."⁴

The angels of *Wings of Desire* are witness to history, assuming the perspective of Paul Klee's "Angelus Novus" upon which Benjamin projected despair at the culmination of materialist history as horror:

The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.⁵

Angels are preservers and preservations. Images of flight as well as of loss and destruction, reminding us that memory is already framed by other accounts of memory. The gaze of this angel of history extends outward, beyond the frame of its own materiality, gazing toward the past while being forced into the future and is no longer able to intervene in the trajectory of its flight. To look at the Klee angel is to look away, to enact a reversal in order to see what the angel sees. We are forced to look both ways, the Klee angel is looking out at us, for we are, according to Benjamin, the catastrophe of history.⁶ In contrast, the trajectory of *City of Angels*

⁴ Richard Wolin, *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p. 43.

⁵ Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), p. 257.

⁶ Roger Cook points out that a reference to Benjamin's ownership of the Klee painting is overheard by the angels as they wander through one of the many scenes in the Berlin library. Cook indicates that Benjamin's description of the angel is matched by the role played by Wenders's angels: "The angels in *Wings of*

is away from material history, toward a mythologization which, for Benjamin, is a freezing still of emancipatory potential. Here history is not made by humans, even the seemingly “progressive” Doctor (she rides a bicycle in car-obsessed Los Angeles!) is helpless against the forces of myth. The angel’s muse is a trapeze artist in Wenders’ original and the fallen angel Daniel becomes an assistant to her creativity while the latter film concludes tragically, without art and outside of the city—away from that site of medical rationality and corporeal control, the hospital, to a country road where Maggie, while riding her bicycle, spreads her arms outward as if they are wings and dies after being hit by a logging truck.

As in the original, the angels of Los Angeles spend the day circulating through and looking over the shoulders of the readers in a grand old public library. What speaks extra-diegetic volumes is that the production had to move to San Francisco for these scenes as there is no suitable library in Los Angeles. This is a city of surfaces over which the angels glide. Fredric Jameson contrasts American and European understandings of space and history as follows:

Our relationship to our past as Americans must necessarily be very different and far more problematical than for Europeans whose national histories...remain alive within their contemporary political and ideological struggles. I think a case could be made for the peculiar disappearance of the American past in general, which

Desire, as in Benjamin’s account of the “Angelus Novus,” are not able to alter the course of history; they only observe and verify it as they accompany it into the future with a painful countenance.” In “Angels, Fiction, and History in Berlin: *Wings of Desire*,” *The Cinema of Wim Wenders*, ed. Roger F. Cook and Gerd Gemünden (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997), p. 185.

comes before us in unreal costumes and by way of the spurious images of nostalgia art.⁷

While the free-floating movement of the angels is similar to that in the sky over Berlin, in Los Angeles there is no weight of history pulling the angels down to, or beneath, the surface. In fact, the literalization of a Christian belief in angels facilitates a further pull away from material history even as the angels intervene in life on earth (Seth provides the answer to a medical diagnostic problem, allowing Maggie to perform surgery on a suffering child).

Actors are bodies with invented histories, just as the fallen angels must invent a past for themselves to fulfil the twin desires of social integration and the production of narrative. *Wings of Desire* trades on the comic body of Peter Falk as a fallen angel who, like his television detective character 'Colombo', is happily dishevelled and haphazard in his current investigations of angels who wish to come out of the closet of immortality. In contrast with Falk's on-screen amiability, the not-to-be-fallen angel Cassiel in *City of Angels* is played by André Braugher, known for his role as a detective in the television series *Homicide: Life on the Street*. In that TV role Braugher is a stern and hyper-rational detective driven by the moralistic homicide department's mantra: "We speak for the dead." The inter-textual references suggest that mortality cannot be redeemed in the everyday, only by the intervention of an all-seeing myth-figure. That mortality is a sacrifice is stated as such by another TV detective, Dennis Franz (a hard-boiled character on the police drama *NYPD Blue*), who plays the already-fallen angel Messinger

⁷ Cited in Gregory, p. 288.

and admits that sensual life, for all its pleasures, amounts to a loss. These television actors participate in the re-making of this film within the American mainstream system of instrumentalization. In contrast, Roger Cook explains that the free-floating perspective of the original undercuts the conventions of suture and the male-defined gaze, as is especially evident in the exchange of looks between Daniel and Marion—both gazing directly into the camera during the climactic barroom love scene.⁸ In *City of Angels*, Seth, as well-intentioned stalker, restores the gaze into the patriarchal conventions of Hollywood. Likewise, an eternity of voyeurism has enabled Seth to perform perfect and prolonged movie-style sexual intercourse – we mortals have only had a hundred or so years of cinematic pedagogy.

The weight of material history comes crashing down onto Daniel's head when he surrenders eternity for the sake of the sensuous in *Wings of Desire*—his first day as mortal begins with the crash of a suit of armour onto his head from some unseen overhead perspective. He uses the armour, this emblem of nationalist history, to enter the market economy, pawning it for a change of clothes and some money for the much coveted warm coffee. He is then able to ask for, and even give, street directions and find his love. In contrast, Seth awakens as mortal on the concrete slab of a construction site to the jeers of the work crew. He attempts to ask for directions to the hospital but is ignored or assumed to be a threat (or homeless, which in Los Angeles amounts to the same thing), and is lost on the cold concrete overhead sidewalks

⁸ Cook, p. 178.

connecting office buildings throughout downtown L.A. – structures designed to keep the homeless out of the ‘Kodak memory’ gaze of visiting tourists and away from the efficient steps of local office-workers. Seth’s poverty is magnified when he is mugged and his shoes are stolen – so he suffers as an all-too-literal Christ figure in an unredeemed city. He realizes that he requires money to get to his destination, his love, and he has none. Daniel also requires money, but its absence does not, as with Seth, overdetermine him as undesirable.

Are these differences in the two films an effacement of the original’s poetry or the kind of Benjaminian transformation that, in spite of surface differences, strives toward a (however essentialist) essence? Benjamin evokes the transformative potential thusly:

Fragments of a vessel that are to be glued together must match one another in the smallest details, although they need not be like one another. In the same way a translation, instead of initiating the sense of the original, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original’s way of meaning, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel.⁹

These vessels, Los Angeles and Berlin, distinct in historical origins and materialist construction, are similarly divided. The latter (at the time of production in 1987) by the Berlin wall and the ruins of neighbourhoods made incomplete by this authoritarian fragmentation, while the former is divided by a willed disappearance of public space and the fortress-highways upon which individuals move while frozen within metal cubicles. Where the angels of Berlin exist in public space, atop monuments and in open spaces, those of Los

⁹ Benjamin, “Translator,” p. 260.

Angeles are overwhelmingly associated with commercial or private spaces—the “city of angels” has few non-commercialized gathering places.¹⁰ Indeed, the scene of Seth’s mugging reinforces the paranoid desire to fragment the city into militarized zones of privation.

Roger Cook explains that the Berlin of *Wings of Desire* is a spatial link between the past and present, where history is preserved in the flesh of its inhabitants,¹¹ even as the angels remain detached from the everyday.¹² Yet the benevolent scopophilia of the angels heals the fragmenting wounds of history, as Cook suggests: “The story of Berlin, of *Der Himmel Über Berlin* (“The Sky Over Berlin” [–the film’s literal German title]) that unites a divided city and people, also promises a new beginning in the continuing search for a national identity.”¹³ *City of Angels*, set in the epicentre of American myth-making, assumes its own divisions as given and absolute. Images cannot breach its veneer skin. The film’s love story ends in death in the remote countryside—a myth of eternal salvation substitutes for a materialist historical reconciliation.

Recent postmodern spatial theory has characterized Los Angeles as a divided city of surfaces, what Jameson calls a “postmodern

¹⁰ The morning scenes where angels gather at the ocean shore to hear music is the notable exception, but it is a sensual-everyday pleasure absolutely denied to the living.

¹¹ Cook, p. 164.

¹² It is this detachment, this impossibility of representing history, which is David Harvey’s criticism of the film in his: *The Condition of Postmodernity*, (Cambridge M.A. and Oxford U.K.: Blackwell, 1990).

¹³ Cook, p. 181.

hyperspace” in which space is organized so to disorient the individual body, a disjunction which he explains as: “the symbol and analogon of that ever sharper dilemma which is the incapacity of our minds, at least at present, to map the great global multinational and decentered communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects.”¹⁴ But it is Wim Wenders himself who understands the geography of America, and of Los Angeles in particular, as likewise physical place and dystopian dream image. In his prose poem “The American Dream” he describes his experience of America through German-dubbed Hollywood movies which, in their surfaces, convey the dream of adventure and freedom while belying the commodification of images as mass tranquilizer. He describes that drive through the Cinemascope landscape, from the extremes of poverty to extreme excess:

And if nothing coheres any more
and if every concept of nature or civilisation
has been washed away
by that all-consuming artificiality
then you start to understand
a graffito in a toilet in Hollywood:
'people here
have become the people
they're pretending to be.'¹⁵

The re-making of the Wenders film in America does not transform this social excess. The original is instead buried under the trash

¹⁴ Fredric Jameson, “The Cultural Logic of late Capitalism,” *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), p. 44.

¹⁵ Wim Wenders, “The American Dream,” *Emotion Pictures: Reflections on the Cinema*, trans. Shaun Whiteside and Michael Hofmann (London: Faber and Faber, 1989), p. 146.

heaps of image-history. The angels can only watch with mouths agape.

"Warum bin ich hier und nicht dort?"

A view on a vision in Wenders's *Der Himmel über Berlin*

Edvin Kau

The End

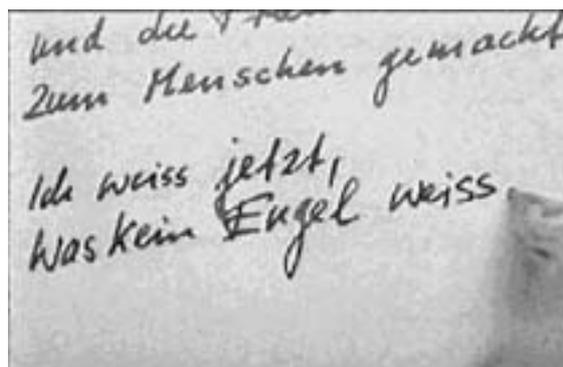


Fig. 1.

These are the last words we hear from Daniel, the angel who becomes a man in Wim Wenders' film *Der Himmel über Berlin*. What we have seen immediately before that, are two scenes with Daniel and Marion, the woman he loves.

Scene no. one: After he has found her, we see them together, standing in a bar (fig. 2). He is silent, while she tells him about her life and experiences. How she has never had relationships of real consequence with other people. But: "Mit dem Zufall muss es nun aufhören... Neumond der Entscheidung. Ich weiss nicht, ob es eine Bestimmung gibt, aber es gibt eine Entscheidung. Entscheide dich. Wir sind jetzt die Zeit." She goes on to say that they represent or are the incarnation of all people, Man and Woman. In fact, what she is saying is that they are living metaphors. "Du hast das Spiel in der Hand. Jetzt - oder nie. Es gibt keine grössere Geschichte als die

von uns beide. Von Mann und Frau". The night before she dreamt about an unknown man - "meinem Mann"; at one and the same time she had felt alone and in total unity with him "im Labyrinth der gemeinsamen Seligkeit. Ich weiss. Du bist es".



Fig. 2-3.

After a cut from the medium close up of them to a long shot bird's-eye view of the set, Daniel and Marion kissing each other, we see the well known statue of the golden angel. From that, a dissolve (fig. 3) brings us to the following morning, scene no. two: In a very low camera angle we see Marion practising in her rope, floating in the air. Daniel is holding and swinging the rope during her exercise. We hear his voice: "Etwas ist geschehen. Es geschieht immer noch. Es ist verbindlich. Es war in der Nacht, und es ist jetzt am Tag, jetzt erst recht. Wer war wer? Ich war in ihr, und sie war um mich."

What does Daniel's statement about his knowledge as opposed to that of the angels mean? What does he know, and what is it that angels don't know? And more importantly, how is a possible explanation related to the way this film itself demonstrates an answer? I believe that the answer has to do with the fact that we hear Daniel say those words as we see his hand writing them.

In the course of my analysis I hope to explain the meaning and the poetic importance of this merging of the moment of the voice and that of the hand; and to get nearer to an understanding of Wenders' vision of the conditions of angels as well as human beings between heaven and earth.

Als das Kind Kind war, I

The first shot in the film - shows a text. And the first piece of speech is Daniel's voice reciting the poem, which his hand starts writing. Already the film demonstrates curious distances and variations between its elements; in this case between the written words and those spoken by the voice. Or perhaps between what Daniel remembers and is trying to express and reflect upon on the one hand, and what he actually feels to be at the moment. What is being written before our eyes on the screen, is this:

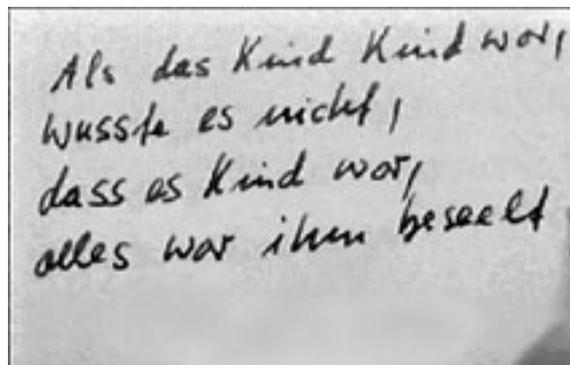


Fig. 4

What is *heard* in Daniel's voice-over recitation, is this (text in italics is spoken, the rest is sung):

Als das Kind Kind war,
ging es mit hängenden Armen,
wollte, der Bach sei ein Fluss,
der Fluss sei ein Strom
und diese Pfütze das Meer.
Als das Kind Kind war,

*wusste es nicht, dass es Kind war,
alles war ihm beseelt,
und alle Seelen waren eins.
Als das Kind Kind war,
hatte es von nichts eine Meinung,
hatte keine Gewohnheit,
sass oft im Schnedersitz,
lief aus dem Stand,
hatte einen Wirbel im Haar
und machte kein Gesicht beim Fotografieren."*

The orchestration of moving picture, written text, sound, spoken and sung words challenges our senses and the audience's minds to see and hear not only the individual elements and their possible meaning, but to take in and reflect upon the (possible) meaning of their resemblances and differences, repetitions and variations.



Fig. 5.

The following sequence shows Daniel's and his angel colleagues' impressive capacities. They can see everything, hear everything, even the thoughts of all living human beings, and they are under no limitations from the laws of nature. Nor time nor space pose any limits to them. They exist endlessly, they can fly and have access to every possible part of space, and any room they want to go to in order to follow the fate of people or listen to their thoughts. From an all seeing eye, a dissolve takes us on a flight around the Himmel über Berlin (fig. 5) and in and out of the lives and minds of people.

This bird's-eye view lets us hear and see everything from an angel's-eye-view.

Als das Kind Kind war, II.

While we follow Damiel on his routinely visits to homes and minds around Berlin, we are presented with part two of his recitation of "das Kind poem". This time we hear his voice, but do not see any text:

*Als das Kind Kind war,
war das die Zeit der folgenden Fragen:
Warum bin ich Ich und
warum nicht Du?
Warum bin ich hier und
warum
nicht dort?
Wann begann die Zeit
und wo endet der Raum?
(...)
Wie kann es sein, dass ich, der Ich bin,
bevor ich wurde, nicht war
und dass einmal ich,
der Ich bin, nicht mehr der,
der Ich bin, sein werde.*

As indicated by the italics, some lines are spoken, others sung. Perhaps we can take it as a sign that Damiel in his angelic distance to human beings in a way is playing with the words and the children's' questions. Also (even though children are the only living people for whom it is possible to have visual contact with the angels), instead of the text we follow Damiel's visits to a couple of apartments, while he is reciting the poem.

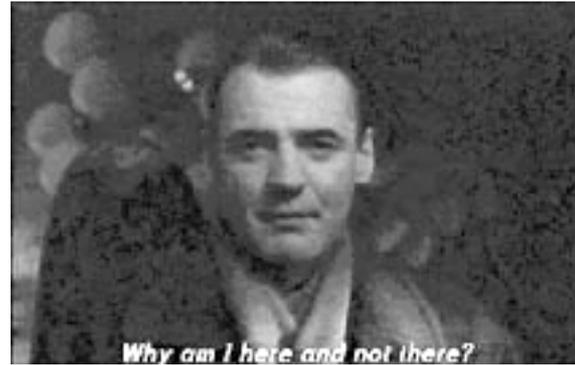


Fig. 6-7.

In spite of his playful performance, the questions that the children pose are pointing in the direction of the conditions of life; a living - and mortal - existence, which Daniel shall aspire to reach. As an angel with unlimited existence in time and space he is precisely not in the position to ask about the difference between Me and You: "Warum bin ich Ich und/warum nicht Du?" Or between Here and There: "Warum bin ich hier und/warum/nicht dort?" Time and space and identity are without limits and consequence to him. The purely spiritual world of the angels leaves no room for identity, individual life, and sensuality.

This is precisely what he complains about to his fellow angel, Cassiel, a little later. After having talked about how wonderful it is to be all spirit ("Es ist herrlich, nur geistig zu leben"), he breaks off this "testimony" and lets his thoughts wander in another direction:

- aber manchmal wird mir meine ewige Geistesexistenz zuviel. Ich möchte dann nicht mehr so ewig drüberschweben, ich möchte ein Gewicht an mir spüren, das die Grenzenlosigkeit an mir aufhebt und mich erdfest macht. Ich möchte bei jedem Schritt oder Windstoss "Jetzt", und ... "Jetzt" und "Jetzt" sagen können und nicht wie immer "seit je" und "in Ewigkeit".

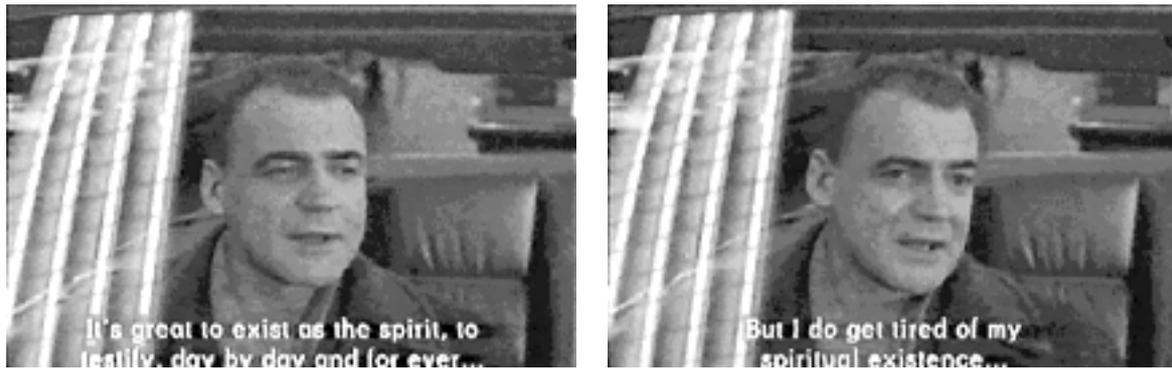


Fig. 8-9.

He wants to experience sensuality and limits like a living, human being. He wants to be committed by the limits of human existence and feel the sensual, bodily response of solid things, smells and temperatures and not just float in the limitless world of the angels. For example; "Fieber haben, schwarze Finger vom Zeitungslesen, sich nicht immer nur am Geist begeistern, sondern endlich an einer Mahlzeit, einer Nackenlinie, ... einem Ohr."

In the world of the angels everything just *is* - endlessly. Neither time nor space has any limits. No real difference to provide a basis for decisions one way or the other in a vast ocean of Being. This may be one way of understanding the film's use of black and white versus colour. When we are in the world of the angels or see the world from their perspective, everything is seen in black and white. But gradually, as Daniel's wish (and his sense of the sensual qualities of the human world, as well as his affection for Marion) becomes stronger, colours appear. First without warning in his view of Marion in her "angel performance" (!) i the trapeze (fig. 10-11), and then for the second time, when he follows Marion to her trailer. He "listens in" on her thoughts about her views on life, her way of thinking, her wish to be *present*, be *in* the world and be true

to herself; in her own words: "Being among colours" and thinking "inside closed eyes ...close the eyes once more. Then even the stones will come alive." (fig. 12) Also, in this chain of thoughts she repeats her "Desire to love" ("Envie d'aimer" in her native language).

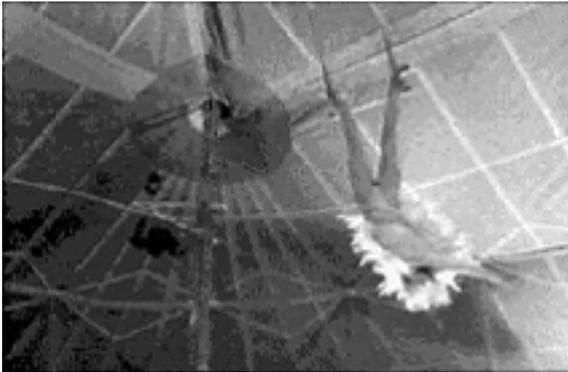


Fig. 10-11. Daniel is the angel, who suddenly sees Marion in flying colours.

So, the chain links together these elements: Her mind or thoughts, colours, stones coming alive, pleasure, desire, love. And, while she is thinking of the stones, their coming alive, and the colours of life, Daniel takes up one of her stones. This gesture is first shown in a double exposure (fig. 10), which actually doubles him, demonstrating his increasingly unstable position between angel and mortal man.



Fig. 12-13.

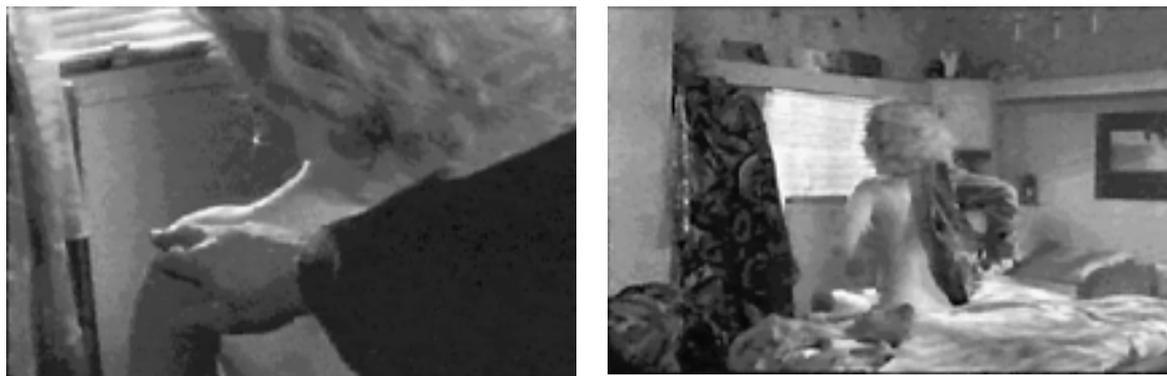


Fig. 14-15. No. 15 is the shot that goes from black-and-white to colours.

During the following shots this doubling and transparency disappears. He is seen as a solid figure, and he holds the stone firmly, feeling it in his hands - and then Marion and the set, all of the scene continues in colour (fig. 12). This shifting to colour escalates and reaches its final state at the moment when Daniel decides to become an ordinary human being. Living and loving – and being mortal. From then on, (almost) everything in the film – its world – is in colour.

The use of colour and other cinematic style practices give body and meaning to the transformation from angel to human being, from separation to meeting and shared life, from immortal to mortal life.¹ The pictures give other meanings to the words; meanings that are found only in the moving images. The mute colours speak about transitions across the barriers, which the words of the poem articulates as questions. The pictures do not just illustrate the words. The combination of the poem's childishly precise questions

¹ It is no coincidence that I frequently use words like "we", "see", "hear" in connection with this film (and others for that matter). This is done to draw attention to sensual qualities that create meaning and inspire decisions about interpretations made by us, the audience. Things which are precisely triggered by Wenders' use of aesthetic and narrative patterns and the results of which can be seen and heard - sensed - in his style.

and Wender's poetic pictures holds both inquiring wonder and the doubtful answer of the vision.



Als das Kind Kind war, III. - "Jetzt", .. und "Jetzt" und "Jetzt" sagen können"

After Daniel has found Marion at a rock concert, and she has felt his presence, it is her turn to recite "das Kind poem" - in her dreams:

"Als das Kind Kind war,
war das die Zeit der ...
folgenden Fragen:
Warum bin ich Ich
und warum nicht Du?
Warum bin ich hier
[Marion (mummelt im Schlaf):
Ich will, dass du bei mir bleibst ...]
und warum nicht dort?
Wann begann die Zeit
und wo endet der Raum?
Ist das Leben unter der Sonne
nicht bloss ein Traum?"



Fig. 16-25. While the questions in the poem about separation and difference are asked in Marion's voice, the dissolve-montage of shots shows her and Daniel's meeting and unity. Wenders' pictorial articulation of the vision establishes the (new) meaning of the poem, or visualizes transformations of its meaning in the course of the moving sequence of shots.

Daniel is with her, and yet another layer of meanings is added to words like "ich", "du", "hier", "da", "Zeit", and "Raum". Instead of separation and difference they suddenly reveal promises of unity and connection. (fig. 13-22). Then - Daniel can make his final

decision and change from angel to man. He dies and disappears as an angel and is "born", appears, as a man. He is now able to say "jetzt" and "jetzt" and "jetzt", to *have been* with his woman the night before, *be* with her still, and *in a future*. "Etwas ist geschehen. Es geschieht immer noch. Es ist verbindlich. Es war in der Nacht, und es ist jetzt am Tag ..." Or as he puts it: "Ich bin zusammen".

They have not conceived a child, but "ein unsterbliches/gemeinsames Bild. (...) Es war einmal./Es war einmal,/und also wird es sein./Das Bild, das wir gezeugt haben/wird das Begleitbild/meines Sterben sein./Ich werde darin gelebt haben. (...) Erst das Staunen/über uns Zwei,/das Staunen/über den Mann und die Frau/hat mich Zum Menschen gemacht." Viewing the picture Daniel is talking about and combining the different versions of the poem with the visualization of both non-existing angels and real human beings on the screen, we may make our guesses as to what this picture is. Perhaps it is, and perhaps the film is, and perhaps the moving images can be – immortal pictures of the joy of Daniel's and Marion's mortal life.

Because, this is where Daniel finally arrives: in colours. He has traveled from eternity to reality, from "nur geistig zu leben" to his senses, from "Zeit und Raum ohne Anfang und Ende " to life with limits in time and space. This transformation is presented through Wenders' "cinema-poetic" practice. Like for instance his use of black and white and its special combination with colours. Not that the shift in colours is a mere illustration of Daniel's history; on the contrary, the angels' black-and-white world *in this case* is a prerequisite to tell this kind of story about his travel into the world

and its life possibilities and limits. This is never spoken, neither verbally, nor in text, it is shown silently, visually.²

The world of the angels is a world parallel to that of the ordinary mortal ones, like us. It does not exist, but it can be filmed in black-and-white, and this is necessary in order to establish a perspective on what it is an angel like Damiel is in search of in our world. It is a kind of detour to reach this poetic sense of/sensitivity towards the world of binding relations in time and space. The vision is in black and white, the moving picture in many colours. Damiel does not exist (*tidligere skal jeg have en passage om, at engle jo ikke eksisterer*). But in *Der Himmel über Berlin* he is here - now - and in colour! Contrary to the first written text (cf. fig. 6) plus the spoken and sung words, the last text (fig. 1) and the voice-over has no distance between them. Damiel is no longer hovering over the world, but present in and with the words he is writing. He is now in a position to claim: "Ich ... weiss ... jetzt, ... was ... kein ... Engel ... weiss."

² Even if my analysis does not in an explicit way deal with the film's references to German history, the relations between past and present, ideological or political perspectives, I think that the dialectic of Damiel's project and dynamics of his growing understanding of the relation between his existence as an angel and his arrival in the Berlin of the real world – all this offers a fruitful framework for interpretations of political, ideological, and historical perspectives of the film as well.

***Wings of Desire:* Space, Memory and Identity**

Søren Kolstrup

Wings of Desire can be understood also as a film about memory, about time and about identity. Which memory for which identity?

The idea of a site

"America" always means two things: a country, geographically, the USA, and an idea of that country which goes with it. [The] "American Dream", then, is a dream of a country in a different country that is located where the dream takes place... "I want to be in America", the Jets sing, in that famous song from *West Side Story*. They are in America already and yet still wanting to get there. (Wim Wenders 1989, quoted in Morley 96, p. 94)

What is Berlin geographically and what is the idea associated with it? Is there a dream of Berlin? Wenders himself, according to Morley and Robins, has pointed out a marked difference between the German "Heim" and the American "home", the German word meaning a fixed place, the American word only "at home" or "where you belong" (see Morley 96, p. 94).

This may seem a pointless distinction, but to belong (to belong somewhere) is the fundamental problem or desire of the protagonists in *Wings of Desire*. How do you belong somewhere? Wenders takes up the problem which other Germans have treated over and over again, where do we belong, what is (German) identity, what is our historical identity or German historical identity? In *Wings of Desire*, it may be noted, none of the protagonists are Germans!

The concept of sites of memory

It is normally said that you have to be fixed in space and in time if you want to belong somewhere. The sites of memory are, in the proper sense of the word, crucial. They are crossroads. They are the points where space and time meet memory. Pierre Nora has

tried to define a difference between *milieu de mémoire* and *lieu de mémoire*. The sites of memory are the “*milieux*”, the real environments of memory, but today, with our lack of memory, we have to be content with *lieux de mémoire*, places which remind us of the past, of a (broken) memory. (cf. Morley, p. 87)

The German film director Edgar Reitz has put it this way:

It is our history that is in our way. In 1945 the nation’s “zero hour” wiped out and created a gap in people’s ability to remember [...] an entire people had been [...] unable to tell stories, because our memories are obstructed [...] we are still afraid that our personal stories could recall our nazi past and remind us of our mass participation in the Reich. (Reitz, quoted in Morley, p. 97).

The implication of what Reitz says is that the *lieux de mémoire* should be of a particular kind in Germany, that there might be a lack of true sites of memory (*milieu*) for a specific period, the years from 1933 to 1945 (or even later, especially in the five new states) because of the lack of memory of this period.

Which sites for which memories?

If Nora is right, we should have no *milieux de mémoire*, only more or less faked monuments, which incarnate the idea of one or other particular nation. Thus even the most memory-loaded space is no *milieu de mémoire*, simply because we have forgotten what we should remember, what we want to forget. Following Reitz we should have to admit that the monuments, even tourist kitsch, have taken over: Copenhagen’s mermaid, Moscow’s Kremlin, St Peters in Rome. They have been created as, or have been turned into, stereotypes replacing true memory. What has Berlin got? The wall when it existed was never a stereotype like the Eiffel Tower. After the unification it has been destroyed as a bad memory, as an unbearable and shameful memory and its remains have been turned into a futile *lieu de mémoire*. Was, however, the wall a *milieu*?

Could we say that Wenders uses these stereotypes by changing them in an attempt to reconcile the monuments with a true investigation of memory? How does he (re)create sites of memory

for Berlin? What is Berlin? Wenders takes the most banal parts of the town, elements which could hardly be turned into national, historical or heroic stereotypes. Wenders' Berlin is as far from heroism as were the painters of the *Neue Sachlichkeit*, who ridiculed heroism and lifted the banalities of our existence into the sphere of significant objects.

The *Gedächtniskirche* is the portal to Berlin, but in the opening scene it is linked to an anonymous town with people walking or riding bicycles. After penetrating the clouds, the camera plunges into a totally anonymous part of the town. It is a town without monuments with these two exceptions: the church and the wall. However, Wenders uses all the elements of the town and turns their banality, their anonymity into *lieu de mémoire*, if not into milieu de mémoire. Which elements? How does he choose them? In fact Wenders constantly returns to specific sites, to specific visual themes throughout the film. This is one of the basic lines of the story. In this context, by pointing out banal houses and other sites, Wenders wipes out the stereotype sense of the sites.



The empty space with the circus.



A space surrounded by anonymous houses and populated by people without roots: the circus artists. The film is filled with an incredible number of houses seen at a distance, houses without inhabitants, houses pointed out at first hand as sites, though not as sites of memory.

No man's land



Above all, however, the empty spaces, the no-man's-land, are the true spaces of memory, a vanishing memory. The non-existent Potsdammer Platz is the true milieu de mémoire, that is, within the framework of the film. Memory creates the site.

The bridges, the canals, the streets



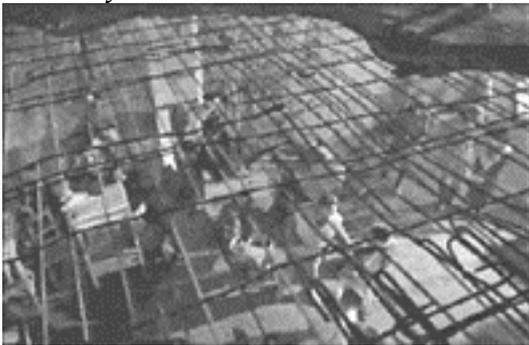
In Berlin, bridges are links and frontiers. They are sites to be filled with symbolic and historical value. Normally the streets are not crowded, as they would be in stereotyped representations of a metropolis; Berlin appears as a jigsaw puzzle of anonymous houses and streets.

The wall



The wall could have become the *lieu de mémoire*. Three years after the release of the film, the wall was pulled down. A sign that too much memory was attached to it is that Wenders makes the wall as anonymous as the rest of his Berlin. It becomes the border, the frontier of an enormous backyard, as dull as any backyard in any degraded industrial city. Only from this viewpoint can the film build up the wall as a *milieu de mémoire*.

The Luftschutzbunker



The ruin appears as a set for film shooting, although it is a genuine ruin from World War II. It's the site for confrontation of today's attempts to grasp the past, with all the problems of *verdrängungen*, of misinterpretations, and it is the place where Peter Falk draws, in an attempt to capture today's thinking of yesterday.

The "concert hall"



This is the only crowded place (as well as the circus), crowded however with totally isolated individuals.

The circus



The circus and its artists symbolise people without any fixed place, people living in mobile homes. They leave, they return, they stay as long as they can, that is, as long as they have paid for their electricity.

The children in the circus are less isolated. They act together, they seek something outside themselves, or they have not yet discovered the frontiers, like the Turkish girl, who feels the presence of Daniel.

The library



This is, par excellence, the site of memory, of any memory, not only of Berlin's past. It is the site where the angels gather; it is the place where Homer seeks the information he already has.

The "imbisses"



The only place where we see people eating, eating the most anonymous food you can get, poor food, as poor as the houses and especially the surrounding ground. In most cases the imbiss is isolated, the only place with human life. However, the imbisses are the sites where Peter Falk encounters the three other protagonists. The imbisses are the sites where the important decisions are taken or refused. The Imbiss is the place where Daniel fully realises his new status as a human. Wenders thus fills the most insignificant and anonymous spots with metaphorical symbolic values!

This is a choice of the sites of the film. By and large we discover that they begin to mean something, that they may have a specific significance, that they are linked together and begin to tell stories. These sites are the opposite of what blocks our stories.

To remember and to forget

So these humble sites are where Wenders builds up, or rather helps us to build up, a memory. He does this by confronting different ways of keeping memory, of building memory, of losing memory. To build up a (new) identity, you not only have to remember, but also to forget. Anderson quotes the French philosopher Ernest Renan:

The essence of a nation is that all the individuals (forming this nation) have much in common and also that they have forgotten many things [...] Every French citizen must have forgotten the night of St Bartholomy, the massacres in the Midi in the 13th century.
(Anderson, p. 199)

This is a film about remembering, *but* there is no remembering without forgetting (see Anderson, pp. 198-201). Forgetting things is as necessary as remembering them.

Homer, Peter Falk and the Angels each have their own way of remembering, as do the readers in the library, and the film itself.

Homer

Homer's project is utopian; he works to tell the stories, the blocked story, as pointed out by Reitz. Homer's problem is the historical element of the story: how to conciliate war and peace in his story.

Meine Helden sind nicht mehr die Krieger und Könige, sondern die Dinge des Friedens, eins so gut wie die anderen.

However, storytelling without anti-heroes is impossible, be it fiction or reality:

Was ist denn am Frieden dass es nicht auf die Dauer begeistert und dass sich von ihm kaum zu erzählen lässt. Wenn ich jetzt aufgabe dann wird die Menschheit einmal ihr Erzähler verlieren. Und hat die Menschheit einmal ihren Erzähler verloren so hat sie auch ihre Kindschaft verloren.

Without memory, there is no humanity. Humanity is childhood, identity. Yet Homer continues his research for at least one site of memory, a true *milieu de mémoire* for him:

Ich kann den Potsdammer Platz nicht mehr finden.

After this he makes a list of the shops of the Potsdammer Platz and of the people walking there, but he stops where he is about to tell a war story with its warriors and victims:

Und dann hingen plötzlich Fahnen, dort. Der ganze Platz war vollgehängt mit. Und die Leute waren gar nicht mehr freundlich und die Polizei auch nicht.
Aber ich gebe so lange nicht auf bis ich den Potsdammer platz gefunden habe!

This is utopia, tragic utopia. He will never find it again. He can look at the photos in the book *Menschen des 20. Jahrhunderts* by August Sander. His story has been wiped out by the flags and the unfriendly people of 1933. History has blocked his story. The rest is, if not silence, at least the meaningless objects in the souvenir shop of the Potsdammer Platz. Yet does he give up? He is a true Sisyphos.

Peter Falk

He is the wise one! He is the one who knows the price of the search for memory. He warns the young boy against the dangers of the easy, sensational story as opposed to the true search for memory. The story about the fake Hitler mentioned by the boy is disgusting and even dangerous. It's stupid, it's dopey.

Peter Falk's drawings are his way of keeping the memory of the past and even of finding memory. Above all, however, Peter Falk knows the value of everyday life, of the apparently insignificant events, like rubbing your hands to be warm.

The angels

The angels keep the memory of things, but in a different way. There is no tragic dimension in their search. Everything seems to have equal importance, with the risk that nothing really matters. (Daniel's problem is that he has realised that to achieve consistency, he must attain human status, he must acquire weight, become attached and be like a child:

ich möchte ein Gewicht an mir spüren das die Grenzenlosigkeit in mir aufhebt und mich erdfest macht.

What the angels notice is from a historical point of view sometimes triviality, whereas from the individual point of view, just the contrary, such as the retreat of the glaciers or the arrival of the first human beings. They remember and notice what people do, what happens or what happened to ordinary people. Everything is of equal importance.

An der u-Bahn – Station Zoo rief ein Beamter statt des Stationsnamens plötzlich das "Feuerland" aus.

Conclusion

The documentary shots of the film are glimpses of memory. If not treated they cause anguish. They are signs that the past has not yet been processed, in German, "Vergangenheitsbewältigung".

These glimpses of the past, the cold shivering houses and the empty places, are the Berlin offered by Wenders, and yet... and yet the film has a moral. It is (also) a film about how to cope with the past, about how to build up an identity that has taken this past into account (dixit Homer). It is not an easy moral, but it is there. In this cold world, look at the past, relate the past and then abandon it, attaching yourself to what is around you, to the people around you. In fact, the film fulfils Homer's project: to make the poem about die Dinge des Friedens. Then we are not blocked by the past: wir sind eingeschifft.

Literature

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Le cadre et le sens dans *Les Ailes du Désir*

Marc Chatelain

L'ouverture du film se fait sur un problème d'ordre moderne : une disjonction entre le cadre visuel et le cadre sonore. Une main écrit un texte qu'une voix lit tout en précédant ce qui s'écrit. D'emblée, on s'aperçoit que le débit de la voix n'est pas calé sur le débit de l'écrit. D'autre part, ce bras vu en amorce ne sera jamais re-situé dans une totalité, on n'en verra pas le reste et donc pas une hypothétique bouche articulant les sons entendus.

Avec Pascal Bonitzer, on voit qu'il y a alors malaise face à ce bras car dans cette optique moderne, il est à la fois montré et à la fois absent (car ne renvoyant à rien du fait notamment qu'il n'appartient à aucun corps total montré). Mais il pose aussi le problème dans le sens où le reste de ce corps est hors-champ, on peut imaginer ce qu'on veut, le hors-champ étant entendu comme zone d'incertitude et d'étrangeté. Ce bras est donc bras mais ne renvoie pas à un corps entier; il est donc signifiant de malaise.

Il en est de même pour la voix qui semble elle aussi avoir sa propre existence. Or une voix entendue sans que l'on en voit la source est appelée acousmètre par Michel Chion. Et ce qui caractérise un acousmètre est qu'il voit tout, entend tout, sait tout, peut tout. Et on s'aperçoit plus loin dans le film que cette voix appartient à un ange. Ces qualités de panoptisme, d'omniscience, d'ubiquité et de toute puissance sont alors confirmées.

On notera quand même que la voix entendue quand l'ange articule des paroles n'est pas perçue de la même manière que quand on ne le voit pas du tout, ou que ne le voit pas articuler puisque dans ces derniers cas la voix est perçue comme intérieure. Il y a donc là un premier enjeu tout à fait particulier de maintenir le rôle de l'acousmètre tout en exploitant ce qui va contre sa nature-même : l'image de sa source émettrice.

Wenders, tout en démontrant les pouvoirs de l'acousmètre, nous prouve aussi le pouvoir du regard, puisque c'est ce dont il va principalement s'agir. Après un plan de ciel nuageux, voici un plan d'œil s'ouvrant et un autre se baladant au-dessus de Berlin. On comprendra alors: un œil appartenant au domaine céleste regarde Berlin. Puis cet œil se promène partout, chez les gens, d'appartement en appartement. C'est un œil qui peut tout.

On note très vite que l'ange est seulement vu par les enfants. Et l'on connaît l'hypothèse qu'émet Wenders à propos des enfants, affirmant qu'ils peuvent porter un regard toujours neuf sur les choses; ils sont détenteurs d'une puissance les rendant ainsi sensibles à la nouveauté. C'est en cela qu'il y a similitude entre les anges et les enfants.

Jean-Luc Godard a auparavant affirmé : "Pour moi, la caméra n'est pas un fusil, ce n'est pas quelque chose qui envoie. C'est un instrument qui reçoit (...)". Or si l'on s'en tient à une telle proposition, on retrouve là la qualité de l'ange, recevant tout aussi bien par l'œil que par l'ouïe, physique ou mentale. Cet œil d'ange se baladant sur et dans Berlin est bien sûr aussi celui de la caméra (et

donc de Wenders comme on le verra plus loin). C'est là qu'on aborde la question du point de vue.

Comme l'a déjà montré Richard Raskin dans le P.O.V N°4, à plusieurs reprises, on a un mouvement d'appareil assez lent et doux, où des personnages, sourient à la caméra. Or dans le même mouvement et sans aucune coupure, l'ange apparaît dans le champ et dès lors on sait que les sourires s'adressent à lui. L'ange apparaît dans son propre point de vue. Et ceci est possible grâce à ce que quasiment chaque plan peut être perçu comme subjectif.

Avec ces mouvements on est donc habitué à ce que, chaque fois qu'un personnage regarde la caméra, on découvre l'ange par la suite. Or, on peut trouver une exception pouvant semer le trouble. Dans un appartement "visité" par l'ange, un père s'interroge sur l'avenir de son fils. Et tout en ayant ces pensées, il offre un regard-caméra, fixant celle-ci. Percevrait-il l'ange? Non, il regarde la télévision, symbole du vide, du non-sens dans l'univers de Wenders. Là où devrait se trouver l'ange figure le néant, car l'adulte a perdu cette capacité à voir que possède l'enfant.

On peut donner un autre exemple perturbant pour le spectateur. Une fois l'ange devenu humain, on le voit déambuler dans la rue, la caméra le suivant. Mais il est dès le début dans le champ et ne précède donc pas ce mouvement par son regard comme quand il était ange. Ici, il est donné d'emblée dans le cadre. De plus, le mouvement est beaucoup plus rapide et saccadé que ceux que nous avons lorsqu'il était ange.

A travers tous ces points (l'ange rentrant dans son propre point de vue, l'homme ne voyant pas l'ange mais regardant la télévision, la

poursuite par la caméra par l'ange devenu homme) on peut se demander quel est le point de vue, quelle est l'instance manipulatrice, aux commandes de la caméra.

Pour diverses raisons, et grâce à deux auteurs différents, on pourra dire qu'il s'agit de la conscience. On se tournera d'abord du côté de Pascal Bonitzer, celui-ci affirmant que le plan est la conscience en tant qu'il fait jouer la tension entre champ et hors champ. Et il s'agit bien évidemment de cela dans le cas de l'ange entrant dans son propre point de vue. Hors champ dans un premier temps, l'ange déléguerait son point de vue à sa conscience et pourrait pénétrer alors dans le champ sans le moindre problème (l'ange peut se permettre de jouer de ces tensions, son mode d'apparaître rejoignant ses qualités citées plus haut). C'est bien sûr le même cas avec l'homme regardant la télévision car le spectateur, sûr de situer l'ange hors champ (hors du champ de la caméra), dans le champ de vision du vieil homme, se trouve absolument surpris de trouver autre chose que ce à quoi il s'attendait, rien à la place du spirituel. Le hors-champ retrouve donc bien sa qualité d'espace d'incertitude. Bonitzer : « la modernité inaugure l'ère des formes précaires et des spectateurs blêmes », signifiant notamment que l'homme perd ses points de repère.

Mais reprenons ce dernier exemple sous un autre angle. Le plan où nous est présenté ce personnage est pris dans un seul et même mouvement. Il y a coupure, changement de plan avec un gros plan de la télévision. Mais le plan de présentation nous donne donc des indications assez nettes sur l'espace dans lequel on se trouve, la profondeur spatiale étant ici primordiale. et de fait la perspective.

Bonitzer: "la profondeur spatiale, scénographique, ouvre sur d'autres profondeurs, provoque le vertige et le doute (...). L'espace prolifère en allusions, en échos, en résonances multiples qui renvoient à l'invisible, défini dès lors comme l'insituable (...). C'est de la perspective que procède le besoin « d'un sol ferme où tout repose », la mise en oeuvre du doute méthodique, le Cogito : (...) c'est l'introduction de la perspective dans la philosophie, ou la réflexion de la philosophie sur la perspective. Et cette réflexion, l'effet de la perspective, c'est qu'il y a dans le monde un trou, un trou qui en est le sujet ou la conscience". La modernité, ici convoquée pour nous éclairer, nous place devant cet état de fait dérangent que la conscience, dirigeant le spectateur, l'attirant, n'est que vide. Ailleurs, Bonitzer dira sous une autre forme que c'est l'inconscient qui agit, que la conscience est donc l'inconscient!

Gilles Deleuze, sur la même idée de conscience, nous apportera un éclairage différent. "Le plan est comme le mouvement qui ne cesse d'assurer la conversion, la circulation. Il divise et subdivise la durée d'après les objets qui composent l'ensemble, il réunit les objets et les ensembles en une seule et même durée. Il ne cesse de diviser la durée en sous-durées elles-mêmes hétérogènes, et de réviser celles-ci dans une durée immanente au tout de l'univers. Et, étant donné que c'est une conscience qui opère ces divisions et ces réunions, on dira du plan qu'il agit comme une conscience. Mais la seule conscience cinématographique, ce n'est pas nous, le spectateur, ni le héros, c'est la caméra tantôt humaine, tantôt inhumaine ou sur-humaine."

Ainsi la conscience agissant dans notre premier exemple (l'ange entrant dans son propre point de vue) est une conscience angélique, c'est l'ange qui régit l'univers présenté à nos yeux, la caméra est infectée de son regard. Tellement infectée qu'elle en est son point de vue, agissant ainsi de la même manière que peut l'ange, la conscience étant celle de l'ange, la caméra possède tous les pouvoirs de celui-ci. Le cadre y est plutôt géométrique, basé sur un invariant, figurant un point de vue absolu et immanent.

Pour ce qui est du point de vue proposé alors que l'ange est devenu humain, la conscience est alors humaine et à son tour possède des qualités humaines. Ainsi les mouvements plus saccadés de la caméra. Ici le cadre serait dynamique, variant selon les actions des personnages, traduisant un point de vue relatif.

Malgré ces exemples modernes du traitement du point de vue, on peut généralement trouver des exemples ayant une lignée plus classique (même si les moyens pour y parvenir ne le sont pas; ceci n'étant pas forcément une critique).

Reprenons le cas des enfants, seuls capables de voir les Anges. On l'a déjà dit, ils y parviennent car ils ont toujours en eux cette puissance de renouveler leur regard. Il est à ce sujet dit dans le film qu'ils peuvent voir le monde derrière le monde. Mais est-ce vraiment un tel rapport qui s'instaure? Le monde est-il vraiment derrière, ou plutôt à côté, ou même ailleurs, figurant une autre dimension ?

Si l'on essaye de trouver des exemples montrant l'univers propre aux anges, il s'agira surtout d'une vue d'un ciel nuageux (comme au

début par exemple). Bien sûr, tous ces plans proposent un cadre tendant à la raréfaction, vidés de tout sous-ensemble (Deleuze). Or qu'obtient-on ainsi ? Comme le pensait Dreyer, plus un espace est fermé, isolé, en d'autres termes s'intéressant au moins d'objets possible, plus on tend vers la quatrième et la cinquième dimension, à savoir le Temps et le Spirituel. Et enfin, rien d'étonnant à trouver une évocation du Spirituel quand on désigne un monde auquel appartiennent les anges. Ici donc, quand les enfants voient un Ange, ils ne sont pas confrontés au vide des adultes mais plutôt obtiennent un sens, ils perçoivent un monde raisonné et ordonné car ils communiquent avec l'Au-Delà (vision religieuse) ou avec le monde des Idées (vision philosophique à tendance platonicienne).

Les enfants ne verraient donc pas un arrière-monde mais plutôt un monde à côté ou au-dessus, de toute façon un Ailleurs. Cet Ailleurs se situant hors du cadre, du point de vue humain (adulte). Car en effet, même si l'ange peut tenter d'intervenir spirituellement dans le cadre des hommes, il ne peut (dans la première partie), l'intégrer totalement, même s'il s'en approche.

On en trouve un très bon exemple avec les faux champs / contre-champs entre Marion et Daniel. A la manière d'Ozu, ils ne raccordent pas réellement, et impliquent ici encore une béance, un trou, du vide. Pour autant, ici cela ne provoque pas le malaise comme plus haut. Car c'est justement dans cet interstice que se trouve l'univers de l'ange, le monde spirituel. C'est dans l'espace apparemment vacant de l'univers humain que se situe le monde de Daniel. Ces faux raccords sont là encore une magnifique démonstration filmique justifiant un point de vue assez audacieux.

L'ange ne partage donc pas le même cadre que l'humain. Ainsi, il ne peut vivre d'histoire, les histoires étant ici réservées au monde concret, réel. Or l'ange veut connaître des histoires, veut apprendre empiriquement et plus de manière immanente, et enfin vivre un amour avec Marion, être de chair et de sang.

Surtout l'ange est limité du fait même que ses possibilités et son essence sont illimitées. Son infinitude est son propre cadre, celui-ci ne correspondant pas au cadre humain. Ainsi il manifeste son désir d'être limité dans l'espace et dans le Temps. (Référons-nous une fois de plus à Jean-Luc Godard: "le cadre c'est: quand est-ce qu'on commence le plan et quand est-ce qu'on le coupe". Il introduit donc là bien une dimension temporelle et non seulement spatiale dans le plan).

Il doit donc changer sa nature, renoncer à toutes ces capacités que nous avons préalablement évoquées pour entrer dans le cadre humain ; il doit se plier aux règles de ce nouveau monde et à ses limites. C'est seulement ainsi qu'il pourra vivre une histoire. Car pour vivre une histoire, il faut pouvoir sortir du cadre, sortir de son cadre d'origine. En effet, le personnage du "narrateur" (le vieil homme) dit que les hommes n'arrivent pas à voir les histoires dans les interstices. Mais dans les interstices humains se trouve le monde de l'ange et lui-même ne peut les vivre.

C'est donc une notion toute relative, l'ange doit se faire Homme, l'Homme doit se faire ange. C'est ainsi que Marion parvient à se faire ange, à pénétrer le monde spirituel dans son rêve. Elle et Daniel sortant de leur cadre d'origine pourront alors vivre une histoire, une histoire commune.

Enfin bien sûr derrière ce film se trouve la conscience de Wim Wenders. Qu'a-t-il exprimé ici? Il relate qu'avec *Les Ailes du Désir*, il voulait filmer à hauteur d'homme. Ceci signifiait tout simplement que son but est le même que celui de l'ange : abolir la distance, ce qui est bien sûr un des enjeux principaux de l'art moderne. Se considérant trop loin des choses, à un niveau trop intellectuel, parvenir tout de même à ressentir le monde sans plus de barrières, aller au plus près des choses et des gens, vivre des histoires.

Comme l'ange qui a dû renoncer à son cadre d'origine, à ses qualités propres, Wenders a dû, ainsi qu'on le voit dans la seconde partie, renoncer à ses lents mouvements très réfléchis et très beaux, mais pris de haut pour adopter un cadrage plus physique, dynamique ayant pour centre l'humain, le représenté, et non une idée, un concept traduit selon des lois du cadre géométrique.

C'est donc là aussi un changement de nature chez le cinéaste qui a dû être opéré et dont le film est la démonstration.

Mais il est aussi une démonstration de la volonté de résistance à un certain non-sens moderne, comme on a pu le voir sous certains aspects plus haut, par une affirmation du spirituel, du désir du sens, ici figurés par les anges et dont les qualités parviennent à combler les diverses béances de toutes natures.

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Grief and Invisibility: How *Wings of Desire* Saved My Life

Sara Irene Rosenbaum

*Man makes a picture
A moving picture
In light projected
he can see himself up close
U2, "Lemon"*

When I first saw *Wings of Desire*, I was twenty years old, and I recognized myself immediately.

The winter of that year, the winter after my stepfather's death, I wore a long black overcoat. I kept my hair, which I had grown long as a kind of protest against my stepfather's chemotherapy, pulled back and bound behind my head. When I had time to myself, I walked through my city, Boston, and watched people. I watched them on the subway, reading the newspaper for which I worked. Often they would be looking only for the personal ads, but I would pray, as they passed my article, that what I wrote would mean something to someone. Then I would become the words I wrote; I would touch people when their eyes scanned a printed page.

It was my third summer working as a journalist. I had spent the summer of the previous year, 1997, working at another minor Boston weekly, writing about high school graduations, neighborhood events, and one suicide. I was still only beginning to learn my work. Halfway through that summer we learned that my stepfather's cancer had recurred, that it had passed through his bloodstream, that it had already entered into his brain.

That summer, I wrote article after article, staying up all night to patch my interview notes into something sensible. I spent my days listening to people tell me their stories, and I wrote them down, and hoped that the stories would inspire those who read them, my stepfather included. I had no friend that summer, no lover; it had been five years since I had last been kissed on the mouth. As a journalist, my interactions with people were disembodied: I was part of the spirit world. Journalistic interaction is not normal human contact. We are taught, for example, never to eat food offered by a source; a rule I remembered from childhood and the myth of Persephone. We are taught to try not to touch a source. To describe that summer I could say, as the poet Homer says in *Wings of Desire*:

The world seems to be
sinking into dusk
but I tell the stories
as in the beginning
in my sing-song voice.
which sustains me
protected by the tale
from the troubling present.

But that would be melodrama. Instead, I mourned, worked, watched tv, ate lunch, wrote late at night, was isolated and exhausted, and listened to the radio.

At the end of the summer my mother phoned me to tell me to meet her at the hospital. My stepfather was dying. But instead of going to him right away, I went to the computer and opened the file which contained the short story I was working on, the story of my

stepfather as I knew him. I had begun it when he was first diagnosed.

After my stepfather's death, I spent the winter finishing this story. He was a reserved man, embarrassed by emotion, and when I learned he had cancer and cried into his chest, he was astounded: why was I so upset? Did he mean that much to me? The story had been meant to answer him, but he never read it. That winter as I finished writing it, and as long as I wrote it was as if I were speaking to him, touching him. Then I finished the story, and it was winter, and he was still dead.

Name me, muse,
the immortal singer
who, abandoned
by his mortal listeners
lost his voice.

There was a night when I woke from a dream in which my stepfather had returned to us, sicker than before, so that he could die again. I had many of these dreams. In this one his eyes had changed color. His eyes in life were like mine, hazel, but in my dream they were blue and didn't see me.

I woke; my eyes were wide open, but all I saw was him dying in my dream. I took the volume of Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet* that I kept next to my bed and opened it to a random page. I read:

... because we stand in the middle of a transition where we cannot remain standing. For this reason the sadness too passes: the new thing in us, the added thing, has entered into our heart, has gone into its inmost chamber and is not even there any more – is already in our blood.

This is how I was when I first saw *Wings of Desire*: I stood in a place where I could not remain standing. In my grief – in my reaction against death – I had become paper, I had become words. I had become a part of the invisible world.

There are, of course, two worlds: the visible and the invisible.

The visible world is everything that touches us through our eyes and our hands. But the invisible world we touch only with the parts of ourselves which are also invisible: the emotions, the imagination, memory. It is the world of text, and of the dead. In Wim Wenders's *Der Himmel über Berlin* it is the colorless world of angels.

Black-overcoated, their hair bound back, Daniel and Cassiel move through a city with which they barely interact, but which moves them deeply. They are there only to assure that nothing goes unwitnessed. They are the perfect journalists, writing down what they see in their thin notebooks, taking notes and moving on.

But at the same time, the angels live as text lives: in black and white, able sometimes to inspire, but changing nothing in the world. They are not writers so much as what is written. They touch people as art touches us: able, as Cassiel says:

To do no more than observe,
collect, testify, preserve!

I quote these lines as if they were poetry, which they are. The film begins with a poem written in Daniel's hand, and this poem continues as a refrain through the scenes to come. As an English-speaking viewer, I read the subtitled dialogue of the film as if it were all part of the same poem, flashing in two-line stanzas across the bottom of

the screen. The movie, for me, is a written text as well as a visual one.

It's a strange combination, because most written texts are invisible. When we read a written text, we scan the black-and-white of words on paper. This is all that exists of the text in the visible world. It is only in our minds that we see light and movement.

Reading, therefore, is the act of a shaman. Through text we see the invisible; in imagination we know people who never lived, just as in memory we know people who no longer live. The invisible world is the inadequate way in which the mind of one person can touch another. It is as inadequate as the angels themselves, who cannot do so much as make love, or shake hands.

Damiel says,

It's great to live only by the
spirit, to testify day by day

for eternity only to the
spiritual side of people.

But sometimes I get fed up
with my spiritual existence.

...

Instead of forever
hovering above

I'd like to feel
there's some weight to me

I realized, seeing myself in Damiel, that I had become text. But worse than that; in becoming text I was living like someone dead. I touched only those parts of the people in the city around me which the dead touched: their minds, their imagination.

To have a fever,

Damiel says;

to have blackened fingers
from the newspaper
to be excited
not only by the mind
but, at last, by a meal
by the curve of a neck
by an ear.

I watched *Wings of Desire* on a hot July night, almost a year after my stepfather's death. In the Jewish tradition mourning is supposed to take one year, but I did not know what to do if I was not mourning. I thought that I would have to try to fall like Daniel, to take hold of the visible world of the present. I would try to step out of the taxing private world of my grief. I would have to train myself to live with open hands. I will have to watch both of my remaining parents die someday, and I want to have hands so open that I can let them go.

The next day I rode the subway in to my job at the newspaper. On the train I watched expression move over the faces of the passengers like wind, leaving a shape, an impression of thought. When I came out of the station it was sunny, and there was heat on my face.

In the newsroom, I was reading over the story I had written the week before, the words I had chosen, changed by my editor and by the fact of their publication. I looked at the story, my paper body.

Then I looked down at my hands, shaped like my mother's, and saw that they were black with newsprint.

What is Peter Falk Doing in *Wings of Desire*?

Richard Raskin

1. Background¹

Peter Falk's 'former angel' role is so central to the story and so essential for the balance of *Wings of Desire*, that it would be difficult to imagine the film without that part. Yet the role was not even conceived until quite late in the pre-production phase, when Wim Wenders met with Peter Handke at Salzburg in September 1986, only weeks before shooting was to begin.

And even at that point, when Wenders knew he needed someone who would be instantly recognized by anyone seeing the picture, the director thought at first that the part might be played by a musician, a painter, a writer, or a politician. He wanted in fact to interest Willy Brandt in playing the role, but gave up on that idea when it proved difficult even to get in touch with the busy statesman.

Eventually, Wenders thought of using an actor, who would have to be American to be sufficiently world-famous for the part. He contacted one actor he thought would be right for the role, but who eventually declined because he felt he couldn't do the part,

¹ An earlier version of this article, containing no illustrations, appeared on pp. 115-120 in *Nordisk Film Forskning 1975-1995. En bibliografi & 10 essays in anledning af filmens 100 år*, ed. Peder Grøngaard. Aarhus: Nordisk Dokumentationscentral for Masekommunikationsforskning, 1995.

and Wenders was so appreciative of his honesty that he has preferred not to disclose the actor's identity.

When shooting began on October 20th, Wenders still had no idea as to who would be cast in the role of former angel. He told me that during those first weeks of shooting, he and his assistant, Claire Denis, returned repeatedly to the same question during their nightly planning sessions: did they or did they not need that character? He said that Claire Denis especially insisted that they needed it, and Wenders agreed but had run out of ideas. Finally, Claire Denis brought up Peter Falk's name one night and Wenders knew immediately that Falk was *exactly* the actor they needed for the role, since he was not only universally known through his televised Columbo series, but also radiated gentleness and generosity to such a degree that there would be an element of credibility in his playing the part of a former angel.

Wenders had admired Peter Falk in Cassavetes' films in the 1970's, and it was probably from Cassavetes that he obtained Falk's telephone number. He phoned one evening, introduced himself, told a little about the film and explained that he needed a former angel, to which Peter Falk replied after a pause: "How did you know?" When Falk asked whether a script could be sent, Wenders said that he had nothing at all in writing about this ex-angel, not even a single page. If anything, that apparently made the part even more interesting to Falk, who answered: "Ah, I've worked like that before with Cassavetes, and honestly I prefer working without a script."

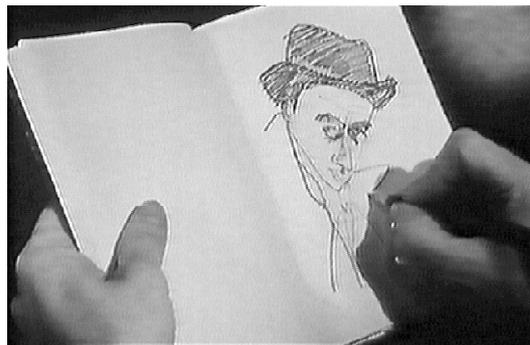
Falk arrived in Berlin one Friday in November and he and Wenders spent the week-end together, developing the role on the basis of taped improvisations. All of Falk's scenes were shot the following week, and Falk returned to Los Angeles.

Some of the most salient aspects of his part in *Wings of Desire* stem from events which actually occurred in preparation for or during the shooting. For example, he said that the one problem he had with the film was choosing a hat, and that of course became the basis for the wonderful scene [shots 3030-3039] in which Peter Falk, observed by an amused Cassiel and Daniel in the bunker, tries on a series of hats while exchanging pater with the costume lady until he finds "the hat that fits the face."



Another unexpected addition to the film resulted from Wenders' noticing that Falk frequently made sketches of extras between

takes. Wenders asked him if it was all right to use that in the film, to which the actor replied: "Yeah, why not." This is the origin of the scenes in the bunker in which Falk sketches two extras: first the woman wearing a yellow star [shots 3055-3077] and subsequently the man who "has eyes like a raccoon" [shots 4025-4031].



The inner thoughts which we hear going through Peter Falk's mind in these and other scenes, were recorded in a sound studio in Los Angeles, with Wenders directing over a long-distance telephone line, months after those scenes were shot. Wenders had sent Falk some pages to use for these voice-overs, but they just didn't work. Instead of reading the prepared lines, Falk then said, "Let me close my eyes," after which he invented the material that would eventually be used in the sound track of the film. Almost all of his inner

monologue was improvised by Peter Falk, including the memorable lines spoken as he sketches the woman with the yellow star:



Shots 3061-3070

Peter Falk (inner voice): I wonder if she's Jewish. What a dear face! Interesting, what a nostril, a dramatic nostril. These people are extras, extra people. Extras are so patient. They just sit. Extras, these humans are extras, extra humans... Yellow star means death. Why did they pick yellow? Sunflowers. Van Gogh killed himself. This drawing stinks. So what? No one sees it. Some day you'll make a good drawing. I hope, I hope, I hope.

Not all of Falk's improvisations make complete sense. For example, when we see him for the first time, seated in a plane flying over Berlin, he says in voice-over [shot 1025]: "If Grandma was here, she'd say: "Spazieren... Go spazieren"!"



Shot 1025

Later in the film, when walking past the ruins of the Anhalter Bahnhof [shot 5033], he again refers to his grandmother, saying in his inner thoughts "I wish you were here, Grandma!" As Wenders

put it when discussing these wonderful though not always logical improvisations, "how a former angel can have a grandmother is a rather doubtful matter."

2. Two kinds of balance

The main story-line in *Wings of Desire* concerns Daniel's choice to give up his purely spiritual existence and become a human being. This is the subject of three dialogues he has with Cassiel, the first of which is set in the BMW showroom, in which Daniel first raises the issue by saying [shot 1055]:



Shot 1055

It is wonderful to exist as pure spirit and day after day and for eternity, to bear witness to what is solely spiritual in people – but sometimes my eternal spiritual existence becomes too much for me. I then want no longer to hover above, I want to feel a weight within me, abolishing limitlessness and binding me to the earth...

Daniel wants to live in time rather than eternity, to have a body, to experience physical pleasure and interact with humans. And of course, once he sees Marion, his quest becomes focused on her, and becoming a man will for him mean becoming *her* man.

How are we to feel about Damiel's desire to exchange his angelic existence for a mortal one? How do we know he isn't making a terrible mistake? After all, we cannot help but like his being an angel, with all the tenderness and generosity he embodies as he eavesdrops on inner thoughts, or places a comforting hand on the stomach of a woman in labor, or smiles at a child looking up at him.

Of course, we want Damiel and Marion to be united: this is a desire that is nourished in us from the first time we see Damiel watching Marion on her trapeze, and it is a desire that will be fulfilled for us when they finally meet in the bar at the end of the film. But long before that fulfillment is achieved, we need to know that Damiel is *right* in wanting to give up his life as an angel to become a man. And even if Cassiel had no reservations about Damiel's plan – which is far from being the case –, that would not be enough to tip the balance in favor of the quest, since Cassiel cannot have in our eyes the status of someone who could know whether or not it is worth sacrificing a purely spiritual existence for the fleeting joys of mortal life.

This is where Peter Falk comes in. If there is a single turning point in *Wings of Desire*, it is the scene at the Imbiss stand, in which – to our amazement – Falk senses Damiel's presence and speaks:



Shot 5037



Shot 5038

Peter Falk: I can't see you, but I know you're here!



Shot 5039

Peter Falk (off screen): I feel it.



Shot 5040

Peter Falk: You've been hanging around since I got here. I wish I could see your face...



Shot 5041

Peter Falk: ...just look into your eyes and tell you how good it is to be here. Just to touch something!



Shot 5042

Peter Falk (off screen): Here, that's cold! That feels good!



Shot 5043

Peter Falk: Here, to smoke, have coffee. And if you do it together it's fantastic. Or to draw: you know, you take a pencil and you make a dark line, then you make a light line and together it's a good line. Or when your hands are cold, you rub them together, you see, that's good, that feels good! There's so many good things! But you're not here – I'm here. I wish you were here. I wish you could talk to me. 'Cause I'm a friend.



Shot 5044

Peter Falk: Compañero!

In this scene, Peter Falk is not only the catalyst for Daniel's actually going through with his plan; Falk is also – in our eyes – the guarantor of the *rightness* of Daniel's plan. And this is what tips the balance for us, in favor of Daniel's becoming a mortal. Falk can do this because he has a special status for us: 1) he enjoys our confidence because we know him as Columbo and as the actor, Peter Falk; and 2) he is the only adult human being in the film who, in this scene at least, can sense the angelic presence we can see. Falk's wishing that Daniel were here becomes our wishing the same for Daniel. For the first time, we can feel, without reserve, that what Daniel is giving up to become a mortal is more than counter-balanced by what he will gain.

This scene also serves as the set-up for the film's magnificent payoff: the scene at the outdoor set in which Daniel – now a man, wearing the sporty outfit he paid for by selling his armor – meets Peter Falk, face to face, and Falk's secret is disclosed for us as it is for Daniel [shots 6020-6034]:



Shot 6019
Daniel: [...] Time!



Shot 6020
Falk: Let me give you a few dollars.
Just to tide you over.



Shot 6021
Daniel: I have money!



Shot 6022
Falk: Ah!
Daniel: I sold something.
Falk: The armor!



Shot 6023
Falk (off screen): Right?



Shot 6024
Falk: What did you get for it?



Shot 6025
Daniel: Two hundred marks.



Shot 6026
Falk: You got robbed, but that happens. Let me tell you something. I'm going back now thirty years! New York City...



Shot 6027
Falk (off screen): ...pawn shop, 23rd and Lex...



Shot 6028
Falk: ...the guy gave me five hundred dollars.



Shot 6029
Daniel: You were...



Shot 6030
Falk: Yeah.



Shot 6031
Daniel: You are...? You, too?



Shot 6032
Falk: Oh yeah! There's lots of us.



Shot 6033



Shot 6034
Falk: [...] You're not the only one!

This revelation – which comes progressively as the lines are exchanged, and Daniel's growing perplexity finally gives way to his (and our) catching on – not only explains why Peter Falk could sense Daniel's presence in the earlier Imbiss scene; it also confirms

that we and Daniel were right to trust Falk's judgment, and that Daniel will *never* regret becoming a mortal, since Falk – thirty years after his own transformation – radiates fulfillment and well-being. Furthermore, Falk's "there's lots of us" helps to generalize Daniel's choice to such a degree that the viewer can play at imagining not only that Falk really *is* a former angel but also that the "us" might include people sitting in the movie theater, even oneself.

One of the functions of the former angel role is thus to assure us that in giving up an angelic existence in exchange for mortal life, far more is gained than is lost. In other words, the balance is tipped in favor of mortality.

However, Peter Falk's presence also helps to establish another balance – largely verbal in nature – within the film, in the sense that the elevated language written by Peter Handke has as its counterweight the irresistibly down-to-earth and street-wise voice of Peter Falk.

Handke's poetry is found, for example, in the childhood poem opening *Wings of Desire* with the line "Als das Kind Kind war," which will recur as a leitmotif throughout the film. All of the angels' lines were written by Handke, because Wenders wanted Daniel and Cassiel to speak "in a special way, almost old-fashioned language," rather than everyday German. Or as he once put it, with characteristic modesty: the angels "should certainly speak better German than I was able to write."

Handke also wrote Homer's inner monologues, the first of which begins [shot 1082]:

Tell, Muse, of the story-teller, the childlike ancient one, who ends up at the edge of the world, and let Everyman be recognized in him...

And Marion's final monologue spoken to Daniel in the bar [shots 7032-7035], was also written by Handke and ends as follows:



Shot 7032



Shot 7033

I must put an end to coincidence! The new moon of decision! I don't know if there is destiny, but there is decision! Decide! We are the present now. Not just the whole town, the whole world is taking part in our decision.

We two are now more than just two.

We embody something.

We are seated at the Square of the People, and the entire square is filled with people

who wish the same as we do.

We decide the game for everyone!

I am ready.

It is your turn now.

You have the game in the hand.

Now or never.

You need me. You will need me. There is no greater story than ours, of man and woman. It will be a story of giants, invisible, transferable, a story of new ancestors. Look, my eyes! They are the image of necessity, of the future of everyone in the square.

Last night, I dreamt of a stranger, of my man. Only with him could I be alone, open up to him, completely open, completely for him, let the whole of him enter me completely, surround him with the labyrinth of shared bliss.

I know that it is you.

A number of critics have expressed displeasure with this monologue, some finding it pompous and operatic, even "crypto-fascist," and seeing this poetry as a denial of the celebration of the everyday embodied by Peter Falk, as though in ending the film in such a lofty manner, Wenders were in some sense repudiating the everyday he seemed to have affirmed earlier in the film.²

Another, and in my view, more appropriate way to understand the relationship between the dimensions of the film represented respectively by Peter Falk and Peter Handke, is to see them as *balancing* and *completing* one another. In this, as in so many other respects, *Wings of Desire* is not an either/or film. It does not suggest that a choice must be made between the spiritual and the material, since Daniel's quest is not a denial of the spirit but a wish to live a life in which spirit and body are united. Similarly, no choice is to be made between the lofty and the everyday, the high culture of Homer and the pop culture of Nick Cave, the beauty of childhood and an initiation into adulthood with its risks and its facing up to mortality. These are not presented as mutually exclusive alternatives, but rather as opposites to be embraced within a framework that is open and comprehensive enough to leave room for them all.

In this respect, what Peter Falk is doing in *Wings of Desire* is counterbalancing with the charm of his plain language and manner, the elevated poetry of Peter Handke, just as the simple pleasures

² See for example David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity. An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989); esp. pp. 321-323; and Robert Phillip Kolker and Peter Beicken, *The Films of Wim Wenders. Cinema as Vision and Desire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), esp. pp. 156-159.

Falk represents in the film serve as a counterweight to the complex spirituality embodied by the characters whose lines were written by Handke.

Camera Movement in the Dying Man Scene in *Wings of Desire*¹

Richard Raskin

Introduction

Whenever Wim Wenders was asked about the remarkably fluid camera work in *Wings of Desire*, he invariably described the mobile camera as embodying the point of view of angels. In this connection, he told of the production team's efforts to use the camera in such a manner that it would "translate the way angels might see;"² and "to seek continually the angel's point of view, the camera becoming his gaze."³

For example, the first library scene begins with the camera aimed at the ceiling and slowly tilting downward as it is lowered. The camera then glides horizontally past people reading at tables, and when it passes a woman in an overcoat with her hand resting on the shoulder of someone reading, the woman in the coat turns and nods a greeting toward the camera, at which point Daniel and Cassiel enter the frame as they return her greeting and continue walking past. The woman's nod toward the camera tells us simultaneously that we are seeing through the eyes of an angel and that

¹ This is a somewhat modified version of my article, "Camera Movement in *Wings of Desire*," which appeared in **p.o.u.** no. 4 (December 1997), pp. 79-100.

² Michel Ciment and Hubert Niogret, "Entretien avec Wim Wenders." *Positif* 319 (September 1987), p. 14.

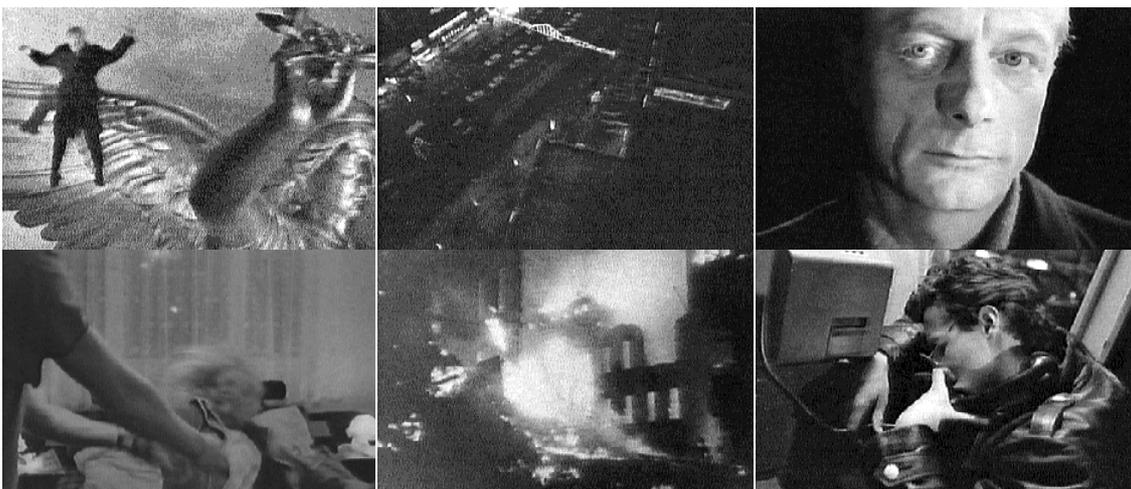
³ Danièle Parra, "Entretien avec Wim Wenders." *Revue du cinéma* 431 (October 1987), p. 35.

she herself must also be one. Then Daniel and Cassiel walk into their own point of view, as we realize that it was through their eyes we had been seeing. All of this is done in a single, unforgettable shot, in which purely visual cues both orient us and take us by surprise (shot 1072).



Daniel and Cassiel walking into their own point of view in shot 1072.

The most spectacular example of camera movement as angelic point of view in this film, is undoubtedly the montage sequence (shots 4047-4083), which is introduced by a shot in which Cassiel plunges from the wing of the Victory Statue (4045), after which the camera takes a similar plunge (4046) and we see – through Cassiel's eyes – and in dizzying succession, a cascade of fragmentary urban images, some of which are quite disturbing,



Camera work of this kind was masterfully orchestrated by veteran cinematographer Henri Alekan, who served as Wenders's director of photography for *Wings of Desire*. And it is certainly the case that virtually every example of fluid or dramatic camera work in the film can be accounted for in terms of an angel's point of view.

There is, however, an intriguing exception, involving camera movement of an entirely different nature, so original and striking in its form that it can be seen as a new cinematic figure, invented by Wim Wenders to fill a specific need. Oddly enough, this camera work has not been mentioned by other commentators on the film – not even by those who have discussed the scene in which it is found.⁴

The present article is devoted to that camera movement, which both Wim Wenders and cinematographer Agnès Godard (who actually shot the footage) graciously agreed to discuss with me in separate interviews that took place in Berlin (July 1993) and Paris (January 1994), respectively, and both of which will be found above in this issue of **p.o.v.**

⁴ Roger Cook, "Angels, Fiction and History in Berlin: Wim Wenders' *Wings of Desire*," *The Germanic Review* 66, 1 (Winter 1991), p. 40; Claude Winkler-Bessone, *Les Films de Wim Wenders. La nouvelle naissance des images* (Berne: Peter Lang, 1992), pp. 27, 198-199; Robert Phillip Kolker and Peter Beicken, *The Films of Wim Wenders. Cinema as Vision and Desire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 147.

An outline of the "dying man" scene (shots 2059-2068)

In the shot with which this scene opens, the mobile camera is of the point of view type already described at the beginning of this article. We see through the eyes of someone gliding rapidly across a bridge, hearing in a whisper the thoughts of a man dying in the gutter on the other side, his back propped up against the curb:



Shot 2059 (20 sec.) DYING MAN (inner voice): *Don't look at me so stupidly. Haven't you seen anyone die before? Shit, is it this easy? I'm lying in a puddle, stinking like an oil tanker. I can't really end up here like a cow shit! Everything so clear! Why are they standing there? Gawking at me like that? The oil puddle...*

At the end of this shot, the camera bears right and comes to a halt near the dying man, whose crashed motorcycle is lying nearby. The driver of the car that hit him stands there, along with other passersby, looking at him from a distance.

The next shot, 2060, is the one containing the innovative camera movement which is the focus of this article. The shot can be divided into five segments (designated here as 2060 a, b, c, d and e), according to criteria that will be evident as each segment is discussed.

The shot begins with Daniel moving forward toward the dying man; we now understand that it was Daniel who had been gliding across the bridge, and that we were seeing through his eyes. As he

approaches the dying man, Daniel kneels behind him, places his hands on either side of the dying man's head, and leans his own head down, listening intently for or tuning into the thoughts trying to form themselves in a deeper layer of the dying man's mind:



Karin, I should have told you



*It can't be that simple, Karin.
I've still got so much to do*

Shot 2060a (9 sec.) DYING MAN (Inner voice): *Karin, I should have told you yesterday... This thing got out of control. ...I'm so sorry. Karin! Now I'm lying here. I can't simply... I have to... Karin, there are so many things I still have to do! Karin, Baby, things look bad for me.*

It is at this point that Daniel begins reciting what is designated in the screenplay as the "invocation of the world" (*Die Anrufung der Welt*), helping the dying man to focus his thoughts on the things that had meant the most to him during his lifetime. As Daniel begins speaking for the dying man, *the camera tracks slowly toward the right*, panning slightly to keep the two actors within the frame:



*As I came up the mountain, out
of the misty valley into the sun*

The fire on the cattle-range...

Shot 2060b (18 sec.) The camera tracks to the right.

DAMIEL (speaking for the DYING MAN):

*As I emerged from the valley and the fog into the sunshine...
The fire at the edge of the prairie...
The potatoes in the ashes...
The boat-house far off at the lake...*

Now, *the camera begins tracking in the opposite direction*, as the dying man joins in speaking the invocation, so that both his and Daniel's voices are heard simultaneously:



Shot 2060c (18 sec.) The camera tracks to the left.

DAMIEL and the DYING MAN:

The Southern Cross,
The Far East,
The Great North,
The Wild West,
The Great Bear Lake!

At the very end of this segment of the shot, we begin to hear the strains of cello music.

Now again, *the camera reverses the direction of its movement*, and as the shot continues, Daniel remains silent while the dying man alone continues speaking the invocation. In the final moments of this segment of the shot, a young man is seen hurrying along the bridge toward the scene of the accident.



Shot 2060d (18 sec.) The camera tracks to the right.

DYING MAN:

The Isles of Tristan de Cunha.
The Mississippi Delta.
Stromboli.
The old houses of Charlottenburg.
Albert Camus.

Yet again, the camera reverses its movement, tracking left one last time, and finally coming to rest when the young man arrives at the scene, scolding the onlookers. In the final moments of this last segment of the shot, Daniel looks up and cedes his place to the young man, who places his hands on the dying man's shoulders. Daniel caresses the young man's head (with an immaterial hand), as he rises to turn back toward the bridge.



Shot 2060e (13.3 sec.) The camera tracks to the left then falls to rest when the young man reaches the scene of the accident.

DYING MAN :

The morning light.

The child's eyes.

Swimming in the waterfall...

YOUNG MAN (out loud, to the onlookers):

What the hell are you all doing there? You see what's happening! Has anyone at least phoned for a doctor?

YOUNG MAN (inner voice): *Too bad! He's bleeding from the ears! His skull must be fractured!*

In shot 2061, Daniel rises, turns toward the bridge and walks back across it. We continue to hear the inner thoughts of the dying man, now spoken in a strong voice, which replaces the enfeebled one heard in the previous shot. The camera tracks backwards in front of Daniel as he advances, then pans right to catch sight of a train passing beneath the bridge on which Daniel is standing.



Shot 2061 (36 sec.) VOICE OF THE DYING MAN (off screen):

*The flecks of the first raindrops.
The sun.
Bread and wine.
Skipping.
Easter.
The veins of leaves.
The fluttering grass.
The colors of the stones.
The pebbles on the river bed.
The table cloth in the open air.
The dream of the house...*

Shot 2062 brings us into the train, looking through the conductor's window, presumably from Daniel's point of view, as the train passes under another bridge and heads toward a tunnel. This shot, during which the voice of the dying man continues, ends with a dissolve:



Shot 2062 (10 sec.) VOICE OF THE DYING MAN:

*...in the house.
The neighbor asleep in the next room.
Sunday's peacefulness.*

In the remainder of the sequence – shots 2063-2068, all executed without camera movement – Daniel is perched on the shoulder of the Victory Statue, and we see either Daniel or what Daniel is

looking at, as we hear the rest of the invocation spoken by the dying man:



Shot 2063 (4 sec.)
The horizon.
The light from the room...



Shot 2064 (3 sec.)
In the garden.
The night flight.



Shot 2065 (6 sec.)
Biking with no hands.



Shot 2066 (4 sec.)
The beautiful stranger.



Shot 2067 (5 sec.)
My father.



Shot 2068 (10 sec.)
My mother.
My wife.
My child.

The camera movement in shot 2060

As should be clear from the description above, from the moment the invocation begins until the time the young man replaces Daniel as comforter of the dying man, the camera tracks to the right (2060 b), then to the left (2060 c), then back to the right (2060 d), and finally once again to the left (2060 e), before coming to rest.

Each change in direction corresponds to a change in the verbal component of the scene. Before the tracking begins, the dying man's fragmentary inner thoughts are heard – those thoughts embedded in the situation at hand. When the camera first tracks right (2060 b), Daniel begins to recite the invocation for the dying

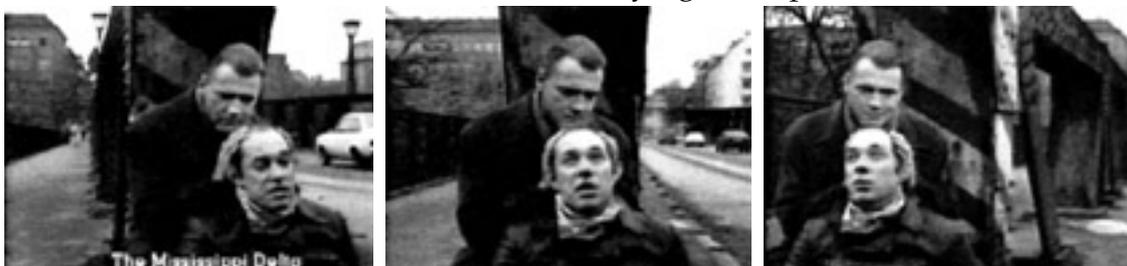
man. When the camera then tracks left (2060 c), the dying man joins his voice to that of Daniel. When the camera once again tracks right (2060 d), the dying man alone recites the invocation. And when the camera tracks left for the final time (2060 e), the voice of the young man is heard, along with the dying man's invocation.



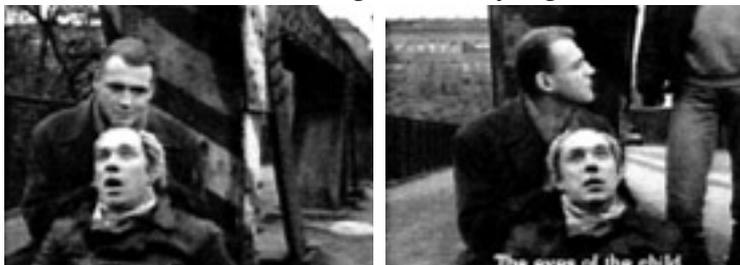
2060 b Camera tracks right. Daniel recites the invocation.



2060 c Camera tracks left. Daniel and the dying man speak the invocation.



2060 d Camera tracks right. The dying man alone speaks the invocation.



2060e Camera tracks left. As the dying man continues the invocation, the young man who arrives on the scene begins to scold the onlookers.

Wim Wenders and Agnès Godard on shot 2060

On pages 6-7 and 38-46 above, the reader will find the comments made by Wim Wenders and Agnès Godard, respectively, on these camera movements.

One way to summarize that interpretative material contained in the interviews provided above, is to suggest that for Wenders, the camera movement in shot 2060 was in some way expressive 1) of Daniel's pain; 2) of Daniel's taking over; and 3) of a transition between life and death; while for Agnès Godard, the camera movement 4) was like a heartbeat, and 5) made the words come alive.

That other commentators who wrote about this scene (see note 3) made no mention of the extraordinary camera movement in shot 2060, is in some ways surprising. At the same time, that very omission suggests that what I take to be one of Agnès Godard's chief worries about the movement – that it risked being obtrusive and drawing attention to the process of filming rather than to what was filmed – was entirely unfounded.

Additional interpretive options

When I showed the dying motorcyclist scene to a group of students and asked what they made of the camera work in shot 2060, some suggested that the camera movement was like an oscillation between the poles of life and death, and in that respect, related to what the bridge in the scene might symbolize; for others, it was a pendulum, showing that time was running out; yet others saw in it the rocking of a cradle, in connection with Daniel's comforting of the dying man.

My own approach would be to supplement what Wenders and Godard have said about the shot, by looking at the camera movement in relation to the verbal component of the scene.

When the scene begins, we hear the dying man's inner voice (shots 2059 and 2060a):

Guck doch nicht so blöd! Hast du noch niemanden krepieren sehen? Scheiße, so einfach ist das? Da lieg' ich in der Pfütze, stink' wie ein Tanker. Ich kann doch hier jetzt nicht eingehen wie 'ne Primel! Alles so klar! Wie die alle dastehen! Wie die mich anlotzen! Der Ölfleck... Karin, das hätte ich ihr gestern sagen sollen... Das Ding ist mir einfach weggerutscht. ...daß es mir leid tut. Karin! Jetzt lieg ich hier. Ich kann doch nicht so einfach... Ich muß doch noch... Karin, ich muß doch noch soviel tun! Karin, Baby, mir geht's nicht gut.

Don't look at me so stupidly! Haven't you seen anyone croak before? Shit, is it this easy? I'm lying in a puddle, stinking like an oil tanker. I can't really end up here like a cow shit! Everything so clear! How they stand there gawking at me. The oil puddle... Karin, I should have told you yesterday... This thing got out of control. ...I'm so sorry. Karin! Now I'm lying here. I can't simply... I have to... Karin, there are so many things I still have to do! Karin, Baby, things look bad for me.

Though there are fleeting references to "yesterday" and to things that will never be done in a non-existent future, this inner voice is essentially rooted in the here and now, in the physical situation at hand.

The "invocation of the world" issues from a deeper part of the dying man. It is not merely his inner voice, but the very wellspring of his being, and although it is in its own way highly concrete, it nevertheless disengages the dying man from his situation in the gutter by enabling him to recapitulate what is most meaningful in his life:

Die Anrufung der Welt

Wie ich bergauf ging und aus dem
 Talnebel in die Sonne kam...
 Das Feuer am Rande der Viehweide...
 Die Kartoffeln in der Asche...
 Das Bootshaus weit draußen am See...

 Das Kreuz des Südens...
 Der Ferne Osten,
 Der Hohe Norden,
 Der Wilde Westen
 Der Große Bärenssee!
 Die Insel Tristan de Cunha.
 Das Delta des Mississippi.
 Stromboli.
 Die alten Häuser Charlottenburgs.
 Albert Camus.
 Das Morgenlicht.
 Das Augenpaar des Kindes.
 Das Schwimmen am Wasserfall...
 Die Flecken der ersten Tropfen des
 Regens.
 Die Sonne.
 Das Brot und der Wein.
 Der Hüpfschritt.
 Das Osterfest.
 Die Adern der Blätter.
 Das wehende Gras.
 Die Farben der Steine.
 Die Kiesel auf dem Grunde des Bachbetts.
 Das weiße Tischtuch im Freien.
 Der Traum vom Haus im Haus.
 Der schlafende Nächste im Nebenraum.
 Die Ruhe des Sonntags.
 Der Horizont.
 Der Lichtschein vom Zimmer...
 Im Garten.
 Das Nachtflugzeug.
 Das freihändig Radfahren.
 Die schöne Unbekannte.
 Mein Vater.
 Meine Mutter.
 Meine Frau.
 Mein Kind.

Invocation of the World

As I emerged from the valley and the fog
 into the sunshine...
 The fire at the edge of the pasture...

 The potatoes in the ashes...
 The boat-house far off at the lake...
 The Southern Cross,
 The Far East,
 The High North,
 The Wild West,
 The Great Bear Lake!
 The Isles of Tristan de Cunha.
 The Mississippi Delta.
 Stromboli.
 The old houses of Charlottenburg.
 Albert Camus.
 The morning light.
 The child's eyes.
 Swimming at the waterfall...
 The first raindrop spots.

 The sun.
 Bread and wine.
 Skipping.
 Easter.
 The veins of leaves.
 The waving grass.
 The colors of the stones.
 The pebbles on the creek bed.
 The table cloth in the open air.
 The dream of the house in the house.
 The person asleep in the next
 room.
 Sunday's peacefulness.
 The horizon.
 The light from the room...
 In the garden.
 The night plane.
 Biking with no hands.
 The beautiful stranger.
 My father.
 My mother.
 My wife.
 My child.

When Damiel leans his head down onto the dying man's head (shot 2060a), it is not to hear his inner voice, which was perfectly audible from a distance while Damiel was still crossing the bridge, but to

tune in to a kind of inner poem, hidden in the depths of the dying man and inaccessible to him. Daniel pulls this inner poem up to the surface, helping the dying man to find it and to speak it. And in the process, the dying man regains control and rises above the situation at hand.

What we have here is a transition from what might be called a discourse of embeddedness ("I'm lying in a puddle, stinking like an oil tanker..."), to a discourse of transcendence ("As I emerged from the valley and the fog into the sunshine..."), from the merely subjective to the spiritual, from randomness to order, from the limited to the all-encompassing, from prose to a kind of poetry, from the harshest of realities to a kind of enchantment.

And in the process, the camera becomes enchanted as well.

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Richard Raskin

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A WENDERS FILMOGRAPHY

As director of full-length features (fiction)

1970	Summer in the City	Summer in the City
1971	Die Angst des Tormanns beim Elfmeter	The Goalkeeper's Fear of the Penalty
1972	Der scharlachrote Buchstabe	The Scarlet Letter
1974	Alice in den Städten	Alice in the Cities
1975	Falsche Bewegung	The Wrong Move
1976	Im Lauf der Zeit	Kings of the Road
1977	Der amerikanische Freund	The American Friend
1982	Der Stand der Dinge	The State of Things
1982	Hammett	Hammett
1984	Paris, Texas	Paris, Texas
1987	Der Himmel über Berlin	Wings of Desire
1991	Bis ans Ende der Welt	Until the End of the World
1993	In weiter Ferne, so nah!	Faraway, So Close!
1994	Lisbon Story	Lisbon Story
1995	Jenseits der Wolken (with Michelangelo Antonioni)	Beyond the Clouds (with Michelangelo Antonioni)
1995	Die Gebrüder Skladanowsky	Brothers Skladanowsky
		A Trick of the Light
1997	Am Ende der Gewalt	The End of Violence
1999	The Million Dollar Hotel	The Million Dollar Hotel

As director of documentaries, short subjects and TV productions

1967	Schauplatze	Locations
1967	Same Player Shoots Again	Same Player Shoots Again
1968	Silver City	Silver City
1968	Alabama: 2000 Light Years	Alabama: 2000 Light Years
1969	Drei amerikanische LPs	Three American LPs
1969	Polizeifilm	Film about the police
1974	Aus der Familie der Panzerechsen/Die Insel	The Crocodile Family/The Island
1980	Lightning over water	Nick's Movie/Nick's Film
1982	Chambre 666	Chambre 666
1982	Reverse Angle	Reverse Angle
1985	Tokyo-Ga	Tokyo-Ga
1989	Aufzeichnungen zu Kleidern und Städten	Notebooks on Clothes and Cities
1990	Night and Day (Red Hot + Blue)	Night and Day (Red Hot + Blue)
1992	Arisha, der Bär und der steinerne Ring	Arisha, the Bear and the Stone Ring
1995	Lumière et compagnie (one segment directed by Wenders)	Lumière and Company (one segment directed by Wenders)
1999	Buena Vista Social Club	Buena Vista Social Club

The Contributors

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Born in 1973. He is studying for his master's degree in cinema (4th year) at the University «Lumière Lyon II». He is presently working on a thesis on "le cadrage visuel et sonore" and is the president of a society for the production of short films (AGLUCINE).

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