



PoMo Desire?: Authorship and Agency in Wim Wenders' *Der Himmel über Berlin* [1987] (*Wings of Desire*)

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And that's really the only thing I have to say about stories: they are one huge, impossible paradox! I totally reject stories, because for me they only bring out lies, nothing but lies, and the biggest lie is that they show coherence where there is none. Then again, our need for these lies is so consuming that it's completely pointless to fight them and to put together a sequence of images without a story -- without the lie of a story. Stories are impossible, but it's impossible to live without them.
--Wim Wenders²

For the first quarter of Wim Wenders' *Wings of Desire*, the viewer lives within the monochrome world of angels in the sky, and on the streets, of 1980s' Berlin.³ The viewer is introduced to a set of angels -- timeless, body-less beings who act as silent witnesses to the history of humanity and to the individuals that inhabit Berlin. The angels re-appear consistently

enough that two (Damiel and Cassiel) emerge as characters within the narrative that begins to emerge from the seemingly endless, random encounters between these otherworldly beings and a ceaseless parade of living humans, whose thoughts the angels (and viewer) can hear. By the latter half of *Wings of Desire*, three humans have emerged as significant characters within the narrative: A former angel (played by Peter Falk), who became human before the film's action began; a circus performer named Marion (played by the director's wife, Solveig Dommartin); and one of the angels introduced early on, who chooses to become human, ostensibly to be with Dommartin.

This "angelic" portion of *Wings of Desire* deliberately invokes in the viewer a set of specific responses. These responses provide the foundation for the transformation that Damiel and Marion participate in. The film prepares the viewer for an analogous transformation, and invites the viewer to participate in this process, through an exploration of authorship and agency.

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Roland Barthes's work -- especially *S/Z* -- provides a useful reference point in this context for processes involving agency and interaction. Wenders appears to model his ideal viewer's interaction with *Wings* on the relationship he depicts between Damiel and Marion, itself a metaphor for the relationship between a person and the world around her. Barthes speaks of texts (Wenders' film is one) residing along a continuum between the "writerly" (*scriptible*) and the "readerly" (*lisible*).⁴ The writerly text lacks a "narrative structure, a grammar or a logic" and is open to many types of construction by the reader (or, in the case of film, the viewer). The readerly text offers a definitive meaning for itself—by fulfilling the conventional viewer's expectations regarding classical (Hollywood) cinema and its narrative. *Wings* attempts to position itself as more of a writerly text. This happens in the film's earlier angelic portions, where largely non-narrative techniques are employed. The viewer is invited to engage in active interpretation. As the film moves to an apparently more readerly mode (as the love story becomes salient), two reactions are likely. First, the viewer may instinctively cling to the readerly exposition. At the same time, however, the viewer is still in the mindset of a writerly text -- meaning that the viewer is inclined to adopt a more writerly stance than might otherwise be applied to a conventional narrative film.

This writerly stance towards the readerly love story is necessary. On one level, much of the dialog in the bar is simply too "weird" to be taken realistically at a narrative level. Having primed the viewer to approach *Wings* as a writerly text, the viewer is sensitized to uncover meta-textual content in Marion's speech in the bar. The tool being proposed, and the tool needed to understand the proposal, become synonymous: Life can be most fruitfully engaged when doing so as if in a loving relationship with a

writerly text. That is, one's process of writing one's own life story is heralded. Succinctly stated, the *means* of communicating one of the key meanings within *Wings* (actively engaging in a relationship between viewer and film) is also one of the key *meanings* one can ferret out from the film itself (actively engaging in a relationship between oneself and the world). The discussion between lovers in the bar implies that writing one's own life, while an act of self-definition, should be engaged in as if participating in a relationship -- as if in love with the world, with the "other" in which one is engaged in the process of creating oneself.

Though he doesn't speak of "writerly" and "readerly" texts, Wenders is aware of the tension between the two.

I dislike the manipulation that's necessary to press all the images of a film into one story; it's very harmful for the images because it tends to drain them of their 'life'. In the relationship between story and image, I see the story as a kind of vampire, trying to suck all the blood from an image. Images are acutely sensitive; like snails they shrink back when you touch their horns. They don't have it in them to be carthorses: carrying and transporting messages or significance or intention or a moral. But that's precisely what a story wants from them.⁵

For Wenders, the notion of "images" is directly associated with non-narrative, documentary, and essay films--in opposition to narrative, feature films. *Wings of Desire* becomes a subversive exercise in that it uses the desire for (born from expectation of) narrative to achieve several goals. In the context of the narrative interlude, the love-story, the viewer is encouraged to approach the film (and the world) as if it were all "images" (not part of a prepared story) and create of it (in it) the story one wants.

Wenders recognizes the essential human desire for stories/narrative. Interestingly, his equation of "stories = God" is reminiscent of Jacques Derrida, and recalls Nietzsche's Zarathustra's "God is dead."

So far, everything seems to have spoken out against story, as though it were the enemy. But of course stories are very exciting; they are powerful and important for mankind. They give people what they want, on a very profound level -- more than merely amusement or entertainment or suspense. People's primary requirement is that some kind of coherence be provided. Stories give people the feeling that there is meaning, that there is ultimately an order lurking behind the incredible confusion of appearances and phenomena that surrounds them. This order is what people require more than anything else; yes, I would almost say that the notion of order or story is connected with the godhead. Stories are substitutes for God. Or maybe the other way around.⁶

Wenders is not arguing against stories, per se, but placing caveats in front of their celebration. In *Wings*, this argument becomes more meaningful and moving than elsewhere in Wenders' oeuvre. *Wings* is a call to the viewer to rend herself from any particular unexamined story and, instead, to engage in the "play" of crafting *her own unique* story from the wide

variety of possibilities offered by the world. There is also the latent call to do this in a manner in which the "play" takes place as if between two lovers -- one's self and the world -- since the conceit the film employs is that of a love story.

This "call to interaction" is deliberate on Wenders' part:

If I look at films I really like most, and if I look at myself as a spectator of other films, then I clearly favor movies that let me discover them. There is that sort of movie where you feel excited from the beginning because you realize that it is because you look at it that the movie really exists, and because you can put some strings together, and it is open to a lot of interpretation, and you have to sort of put in your own experiences or associations in order to make it work.⁷

This call to action is perhaps the most profound level on which *Wings* becomes political. There is certainly a political element to the associations with German history that are peppered throughout the film (the Nazi past, the divided Berlin). And, for Wenders, all filmmaking is a political act, in that it is an expression of the filmmaker's attitude toward the world. Speaking with Peter Jansen, Wenders said, "Maybe not everyone will want to believe me; but I believe that each 'take' in a film also makes visible the other 'take' on things of the man or woman who is responsible for it. Each 'take' shows you what's in front of the camera but also what's behind it. For me a camera is an instrument that works in two directions. It shows both the object and the subject. That why in the end each 'take' shows the 'take' of the director."⁸

But *Wings* might be considered Wenders most political film, in the sense that it champions choice (which can be a critical component of change). The insistence on exercising human agency could be seen as a call to work against the situation Louis Althusser has described in which individuals are "interpellated" by society's ideological superstructures.⁹ In Wenders' construction, "entertainment" in film is what props up the *status quo* (by implicitly not challenging it):

As far as politics goes, the most political decision you make is where you direct people's eyes. In other words: what you show people, day in day out, is political. Explicit political content in cinema is about the least political side of it, as far as I'm concerned. Entertainment is the height [most extreme form] of politics: The most politically indoctrinating thing you can do to a human being is to show him, every day, that there can be no change. But by showing that something is open to change, you keep the idea of change alive. And that for me is the only political act of which cinema is capable: keeping the idea of change going. Not by calling for change. You achieve very little by that, I find. Maybe you need to do that sometimes, to call for change. But the really political act that cinema is capable of is making change possible, by implication, by not gumming up people's brains and eyes.¹⁰

Of course, Wenders *does* sometimes seek a particular kind of change, in his "roundabout" manner wanting to offer a vision of a better world:

Auch in der letzten Vergangenheit, Anfang der 80er Jahre mit Tschernobyl und all den Kriegsherden überall, ist das apokalyptische Bild ja auch das vorherrschende und das bekanntere als das friedliche Bild. Deswegen finde ich es auch fruchtbarer und tatsächlich auch reizvoller und einfach wichtiger, positive Utopien zu entwerfen.

(Also in the recent past, at the beginning of the 80's with Chernobyl and all the war zones everywhere, there is the picture of the apocalypse which is both prevalent and more well-known than the picture of peace. Therefore I find it also more fruitful and, in fact, also more delightful -- and simply more important -- to sketch positive utopias.)¹¹

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Looking beyond the "textual" evidence in the film itself to discussions with the filmmakers, one finds agreement with the inference that Wenders went to great effort to cast the viewer into the angels' point of view.¹² The result of this effort is to remove the viewer from "reality" in a number of manners or to reshape what the viewer thinks of the world. The fact that the viewer is at first manipulated, and then asked to assert her agency, speaks to the quandary at heart of *Wings of Desire*, so a more detailed explication of that process is in order.

The contemporary perception of color photography being "more realistic" than black-and-white photography works to take the viewer out of her complacency with regard to experiencing a movie. Any film not shot in color is something new or different. This sense of the new or different disarms the viewer by thwarting expectations. This destabilization enables the viewer's eventual mesmerization.

Save for a few short shot-reverse-shot episodes that establish the cosmological place of the angels in Wender's world view, the entire depiction of the angel's point-of-view proceeds with little classical (Hollywood) cinematic technique. Key exceptions serve to highlight the rule. For example, there are five situations in which children and Daniel are shown to share in a shot-reverse-shot encounter. These sparse interludes draw attention to the absence of such constructions occurring on a regular basis elsewhere during the "angelic" portions of the film. Sometimes the viewer sees the angels as if she is a child in the film's diegetic space. Often the viewer sees the angelic world as if from the point of view of another angel. But a conventional exposition is withheld.

The fragmentary nature of the experience takes the viewer through three stages during the "angelic" phase of the film, further destabilizing the viewer accustomed to classical narrative. First, there is the expectation that the narrative will not necessarily be clear at the outset. Then, there is the confusion that results when, even after half an hour, the narrative does not seem to appear. Finally, there is the acceptance of this mode of (non-narrative) cinematic expression.¹³

A critical transition occurs when Wenders elicits in the viewer an acceptance of the lack of a narrative structure. This state makes the viewer more of a *tabula rasa*--or, more appropriately for the film's conceits, more child-like--than when the viewer walked into the theater. The desire to return to a child-like state resonates with the way children are privileged in the film. They are the only ones who can readily perceive the angels and the few key exceptions to this trope re-enforce the sentiment behind it. Adults who are themselves fallen angels can sense the presence of an angel in their midst (as Falk demonstrates twice at the coffee stand), because a fallen angel is, in many ways, essentially a child in the world. Marion can see an angel, but only in her dreams. For an adult, the dream state is where the lucidity and creativity of childhood are most likely to manifest themselves.

Childhood is given primacy in other, formal manners. In particular, the framing of the film within the poem about childhood, being written by Daniel, emphasizes a focus on the psychic state of childhood by both the angel and the filmmaker. Finding the attitude of an angel in the filmmaker seems even more justified since the film is dedicated to what Wenders calls three fallen angels, the filmmakers Tarkovsky, Truffaut, and Ozu. In conversation with Taja Gut, Wenders spoke of the centrality of the child's mode of perception in his work:

In my films, children are present as the film's own fantasy, the eyes the film would like to see with. A view of the world that isn't opinionated, a purely ontological gaze. And only children really have that gaze. Sometimes in a film you can manage a gaze like a child's... Children have a sort of admonitory function in my films: to remind you with what curiosity and lack of prejudice it is possible to look at the world.¹⁴

Ruth Perlmutter notes that "Wenders shares [with Tarkovsky, Truffaut, and Ozu] a pedagogical stance towards cinema -- as a consciousness-vehicle, as a transcendent force of romanticism, as a medium in love with human-kind,' especially children, because of their innocence."¹⁵ The "consciousness-vehicle" stance she attributes to Wenders is borne out by the progression in *Wings*, beginning with the destabilization (or manipulation) I have described. First, the slate is wiped clean. Then, it is filled with a set of suggestions.

Wenders further manipulates the viewer by breaking down the viewer's expectation of a distinction between narrative and non-narrative film. The non-narrative stance has a long history in cinema. Two classic examples from the late 1920s come to mind: Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* and Ruttmann's *Berlin: Symphony of a [Great] City* (*Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Großstadt*). Wenders screened three films for the for cast and crew, prior to production on *Wings*, one of which was Ruttmann's film.¹⁶ Why? Wenders is aware of the tension between narrative and non-narrative film.

I dislike the manipulation that's necessary to press all the images of a film into one story; it's very harmful for the images because it tends to

drain them of their 'life'. In the relationship between story and image, I see the story as a kind of vampire, trying to suck all the blood from an image. Images are acutely sensitive; like snails they shrink back when you touch their horns. They don't have it in them to be carthorses: carrying and transporting messages or significance or intention or a moral. But that's precisely what a story wants from them.¹⁷

For Wenders, the notion of "images" is closely associated with non-narrative, documentary, or essay films -- in contrast with narrative, feature films. *Wings of Desire* becomes a subversive exercise in that it uses the desire for (born from an expectation of) narrative to lay the foundation for the transformation at the heart of *Wings*.

Besides being intellectually steeped both in essay films and in narrative, Wenders has made both sorts of films for years. The 1980 essay film, *Lightning Over Water*, preceded the 1982 feature, *Hammert*. The 1982 essay, *Reverse Angle*, preceded the 1984 feature, *Paris, Texas*. The 1985 essay, *Tokyo-Ga*, preceded the 1987 feature, *Wings of Desire*. The 1989 essay, *Notebooks on Cities and Clothes*, preceded the 1991 feature, *Until the End of the World*. In many of these pairings one can see something of an artist engaged in "studies" (via essay films) to move away from one large project (a feature film) and toward another large project (the following feature film). In Wenders' work, the two kinds of exposition interpenetrate. *Reverse Angle* was a response to troubles surrounding *Hammert* (where Wenders would not conform to the Hollywood methods dictated to him). The non-narrative *Tokyo-Ga* laid some of the stylistic foundations of *Wings of Desire*. In conversation with Reinhold Rauh, Wenders said, "If I hadn't made *Tokyo-Ga* after *Paris, Texas*, then I wouldn't have dared to do that thing with voices in *Wings of Desire*."¹⁸ In *Wings of Desire*, Wenders mixes narrative and non-narrative forms more effectively than elsewhere. For example, he has Peter Falk (whose most famous role is that of a TV detective named Columbo) play an actor in Berlin named Peter Falk (who happens to be a famous American television actor whose character on TV was named Columbo).¹⁹ For those viewers familiar with the manner in which Falk was brought into the project, and the circumstances by which his part grew in scope as the filming progressed, the Falk character's comments when the audience first sees him on the plane are full of foreshadowing. "I don't understand this character," Falk the actor/character says in voice-over. "It's amazing how little I know about this part. Maybe we'll discover it during the shoot. That's half the battle."

The treatment of the Falk character/actor is a logical extension of Wenders' long-standing approach to actors and their characters. In conversation with Peter Jansen, Wenders has said that "the actors I work with aren't so much actors as just themselves, in my films. I don't look to them to be actors, so much as to be themselves." In *Wings*, Wenders places his actors at two extremes in relation to this practice. On the one hand, "with Bruno (Ganz) and Otto (Sander) in *Wings of Desire* it was obviously a bit different. As angels, they weren't able to use their life

stories...".²⁰ On the other hand, Wenders took his actor=character equation to its logical extreme with Falk. Dommartin's Marion falls somewhere towards the middle of this continuum. For example, Marion's trailer is decorated with postcards of Nancy, Dommartin's home town.

David Bordwell describes a "core-periphery schema" for a film's "textual structure" in his *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema*. In this useful bull's-eye schema, he presents a series of circles that enclose one another. The very center contains the film's characters (their traits, actions, etc.) set off from the second circle, which encompasses the characters: the diegetic world, which he calls the characters' surroundings. A third circle encompasses the film's diegetic world: the nondiegetic world.²¹ Several more circles can be added to such a diagram. There could be another band for the social, cultural, economic and political circumstances of the film's production, and still another circle for the context and content of a viewer's reactions to (or interactions with) the film. *Wings of Desire* continually blurs the distinction between all these realms. Some such instances of blurring – such as the intermixing of narrative and non-narrative film styles, the use of color and black-and-white film stock, and Marion in the Esplanade bar speaking directly to the camera -- are at the heart of *Wings of Desire's* explorations of issues around authorship, agency, the readerly and the writerly.

In using these various techniques (especially the "angelic" point of view and the mixture of narrative and non-narrative expositions) Wenders wants the viewer to put aside notions of expectation and open herself to a gamut of possibilities. Wenders knows that the expectations regarding narrative will arise, but relies on them being, at least at first, subverted. In essence, he seeks to place the viewer in the role of a child by creating a diegetic context that undermines the viewer's reliance on past experience and places her in the role of a child, learning about the world anew. In this way, the viewer is set up to be born into a new world -- to be willingly but inevitably led into a transformation. The potential irony, or even contradiction, is that the viewer is being "led" into a transformation that is about making choices and exercising agency. One must be careful to bear in mind the colloquial (or ethnomethodological) notion that one can lead a horse to water, but not make it drink: Wenders can offer the invitation, do his best to engender the desire to engage in the transformation, but ultimately what one sees is a persuasive invitation rather than an inevitable acceptance. This does not negate the paradox but may mitigate the contradiction, as will be discussed.

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Wenders begins his first treatment of *Wings* with a quotation from Rilke's 8th Elegy. Commentators have pointed to several of Rilke's Elegies as key sources for excavating *Wings*. For example: Perlmutter quotes from the 9th, David Caldwell and Paul Rea cite the 2nd, Alice Kuzniar

analyzes the 7th and 9th, Les Caltvedt draws out specifics from the 4th, Charles Helmetag mentions the 4th and 8th. Equally as important as the specific cosmology of the Elegies, however, is the general sense in Rilke's work of crafting one's self. As Ruth Perlmutter describes it: "Rilke's exhortation, 'You must change your life' along with his view of art as the therapeutic route to self-recreation, is the same message as Wenders' evangelical notion that cinema can make it possible to be 'born again.'"²² The line "Du mußt dein Leben ändern (You must change your life)," appears at the end of Rilke's "Archaic Torso of Apollo," a poem in which witnessing art -- and being witnessed by it -- brings about the call to make a change or a choice.

As translators describe it, Rilke treats "life" as a woman. Wenders models his ideal viewer's interaction with *Wings* on the relationship he depicts between Daniel and Marion. Each of these relationships is a metaphor for the relationship between a person with the rest of the world (*cf.* the discussion of Barthes, above). Through the combination of these metaphors, the film suggests life is most fruitfully engaged when interacted with as if in a loving relationship. As described above, the *means* of communicating one of the key meanings within *Wings* (actively encouraging a participatory relationship between viewer and film) is also one of the key *meanings* one can ferret out of the film itself (actively engaging in a relationship between oneself and the world). The discussion between the lovers in the bar implies that creating one's own life, while an act of self-definition, should be engaged in as if participating in a romantic relationship -- as if in love with the world, with the "other" with whom one is engaged in the process of creating oneself.

Wings of Desire, then, is: First, a call to the viewer to engage in the "play" of crafting a story from the vast variety of possibilities offered in the world; and, second, a call to do this in a manner in which the "play" takes place as if between two lovers -- one's self and the world. The conceit the film employs is that of a love story, but the appeal to human agency takes precedence. Though the question of the extent to which a manipulated response to assert one's agency in a particular manner is contradictory may be left somewhat unresolved on a formal level, this complex "call to interaction" is certainly deliberate on Wenders' part:

If I look at films I really like most, and if I look at myself as a spectator of other films, then I clearly favor movies that let me discover them. There is that sort of movie where you feel excited from the beginning because you realize that it is because you look at it that the movie really exists, and because you can put some strings together, and it is open to a lot of interpretation, and you have to sort of put in your own experiences or associations in order to make it work.²³

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Daniel, in his descent, does not choose one thing in particular. He chooses to engage in a greater degree of sensory interaction with the

world. He chooses to engage in a far greater degree of social interaction. He also chooses mortality. He desires to be with Marion as a human, but his longing to experience humanness from the mortal side is first expressed in the scene at the BMW dealership, before he encounters Marion.²⁴ Arguably, the catalyst for his fall is Peter Falk, who validates Daniel's intentions by demonstrating a pleasure with his own mortality that Daniel finds attractive. And it is Falk, not Marion, that Daniel chooses to seek out first after the fall. *Compañero*.²⁵

More than anything else, however, Daniel chooses "choice". He chooses agency. He chooses consequences. He chooses to live. In harmony with one of the film's key conceits -- a variation of that expressed through Homer -- Daniel chooses to tell his own story, to write his own narrative, to create his own life. This will be precisely the kind of choice that Wenders wants the viewer to be encouraged to make by experiencing *Wings of Desire*.

Daniel expresses his desire to experience being a human very early in the film, while sitting in the BMW at the dealership with Cassiel. Their conversation suggests that an element of Daniel's desire is an interest in romantic love. He not only speaks tenderly of being moved by the nape of a woman's neck -- something that will happen later in the film -- but he interrupts Cassiel during their conversation to point out a couple kissing on the sidewalk. Marion becomes Daniel's "love interest," but not the explanation for his "fall."

The film underscores the initial encounter with Marion with the first of an increasingly large number of scenes shot in color. The experience of seeing Marion for the first time, and (moments later) seeing her as the subject of the film's first scene in color, does not immediately move the viewer out of the mode of perceiving the film's events from the "angelic" point of view. Color stock will increasingly play the role of denoting that "this scene is being seen as if by a human."²⁶ But the first shots in color serve to keep the viewer in the angel's point of view to the extent that the audience's shock or surprise or joy at seeing (Marion) in color mimics the shock or surprise or joy Daniel feels in stumbling upon Marion for the first time.

The hint that this first splash of color on the screen might lead to a largely color film -- and the implication that the film will no longer be about an angel in the angelic (monochrome) realm but, rather, in the corporeal (color) world, is not immediately apparent. Rather, the viewer's expectation is likely to be that Marion is but another of the many humans the angels come across in their journey. As the story progresses, Wenders' comment that Marion is really the central character in the film, while arguable, becomes understandable.²⁷

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The tension between the angelic point of view and the human perspective never fully recedes, just as Barthes' "readerly" and "writerly" stances continue to co-exist. The last scene still contains a hint of the angelic role in the world, with Cassiel sequestered into a corner of an otherwise color frame, in a black-and-white patch on the screen. The marginalization of the angelic perspective, however, is emphasized in increasing degrees. The amount of screen time devoted to color stock and to more traditional, classical (Hollywood) narrative exposition in terms of mis-en-scene and, especially, montage (such as shot-reverse-shot constructions) lead to the viewer into a more familiar world of color cinematography and nearly conventional story-telling. By the end of the film, *Wings* has become a rather ordinary love story in many respects -- aside from the final, unconventional dialog in the bar. When considered in the context of what has transpired during the "angelic" portion of the film, however, in concert with the dialog in the bar, *Wings* continues to subvert the conventional.

For years, I found the most troubling portion of *Wings of Desire* was the climactic discussion between the soon-to-be lovers in the Esplanade bar near the end of the film. It poses the most likely break in the spell that the film achieves. The dialog in the bar, however, lies at the movie's heart, and deliberately expresses a large portion of the film's central argument -- bridging the gap between direction (readerly elements) and free agency on the listener's part (writerly elements). The dialog brings this about within the story while speaking about the construction of narrative by the characters within the film, and by the viewers outside of the film's world, through the layering described in this essay. The scene amplifies and re-enforces the film's ultimate theme: *Wings* celebrates the risk, the joy, and the critical importance of creating one's own life--a narrative--to fully live in the world. Marion's speech, while an invitation to Damiel to become partners in love, is also an invitation to the viewer from the filmmaker to participate in the process of composing, inventing, or writing one's own narrative--one's life.

How can a viewer reach the dialog in the bar with an understanding of its import? How can the film generate a willingness to reach beyond the world of the film and enter into a dialog with the film about the world beyond the frame -- and to enter into a dialog with the world? As I have elaborated, Wenders uses very specific techniques to cast the necessary spell that can, by the final dialog in the bar, be triggered as if by a hypnotist.

The union between Damiel and Marion is significantly more interesting as a metaphor than as a literal coupling. Assenka Oksiloff gets at this notion, as it becomes salient through the cumulative effect the work possesses. "If Wenders' film is a synaesthetic rather than a purely visual machine, it provides us with a model of the synthesis of the arts [*Gesamtkunstwerk*] that seeks to span the imaginary chasm between

viewer and viewed rather than maintain the fiction of a self-enclosed (organic or technical) artwork.¹²⁸

Wenders has said that the real story of *Wings of Desire* begins after the movie concludes. The enigmatic "we have embarked" ("*nous sommes embarques* ") hints at this notion, as does the "To be continued," which does not refer to a possible sequel (though there was one) but refers, rather, to the love story that likely occurs temporally between *Wings* and *Wings'* nominal sequel.²⁹ While the surface presents a somewhat conventional love narrative by the end of *Wings*, there is a subtext seeking to break through that makes reading the film's final major scene in the bar as a conventional boy-gets-girl conclusion problematic.³⁰ The dialog is only marginally about a conventional romance.³¹ As Ruth Perlmutter notes:

What on the surface appears as a conventional plot device -- an angel in love with a human -- fuels a cinematic subtext: the camera is in love with the world it observes but from which it remains helplessly exiled. Underlying the sentimental story of an angel ready to swap his seraphic insubstantiality is the filmmaker's traditional desire to bridge the separation between the alienated viewer -- represented by the angel, camera, spectators, director -- and the viewed, or the alternative world within the film which represents the lived experience that Marion represents and offers to Daniel.³²

By the time of the encounter in the bar, Daniel has already answered Marion's call to make the decision to live life, to engage in the figurative intercourse with existence that Marion personifies in her role and elucidates in her soliloquy. Before making the final transition to a mortal state, Daniel had said:

'I'm going to enter the river.' [An] Old human expression, often heard, that I just understood today. Now or never, moment of the ford. But there is no other bank, there is only the river. Forward in the ford of time, in the ford of death. We are not yet born, so let's descend.

And, in case there is any question about the role of narrative in the life of humans, the film closes with Homer: "Name me the men, women and children who will look for me, me their story-teller, their spokesman -- for they need me more than anything in the world." *Wings of Desire* suggests but does not demand that they need story-tellers so much that they should create stories themselves -- that, in fact, to truly live life is to write the story of one's life in a way that interacts with the rest of the world.

Notes

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² Wim Wenders, "Impossible Stories," in *The Logic of Images: Essays and Conversations*, Frankfurt: Verlag der Autoren, 1988. This text is from the English translation by Michael Hofmann, London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1991:59.

⁴ Roland Barthes, *S/Z: An Essay* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1970), English translation by Richard Miller, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1974: pp3-16.

⁵ The remarks are from a talk Wenders gave at a "colloquium on narrative technique" in 1982, published as "Impossible Stories," in Wenders' *The Logic of Images: Essays and Conversations*, Frankfurt: Verlag der Autoren, 1988 (English translation by Michael Hofmann, London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1991, p53).

⁶ The remarks are from a talk Wenders gave at a "colloquium on narrative technique" in 1982, published as "Impossible Stories," in Wenders' *The Logic of Images: Essays and Conversations*, Frankfurt: Verlag der Autoren, 1988 (English translation by Michael Hoffman, London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1991, pp53-4).

⁷ Wenders makes these comments in conversation with Ira Paneth in "Wim and His Wings," *Film Quarterly* 42 (Fall 1988): 7.

⁸ The interview with Jansen appears as "The truth of images: Two conversations with Peter W. Jansen," in Wim Wenders, *The Act of Seeing: Essays and Conversations*, Frankfurt: Verlag der Autoren, 1992 (English translation by Michael Hoffman, London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1996/7:p68).

⁹ Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster, London: New Left Books, 1971.

¹⁰ Wenders in conversation with Jansen, "The truth of images: Two conversations with Peter W. Jansen," in Wim Wenders, *The Act of Seeing: Essays and Conversations*, Frankfurt: Verlag der Autoren, 1992 (English translation by Michael Hoffman, London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1996/7:pp52-3).

¹¹ Wenders' comments appear in an interview with Reinhold Rauh in Peter Buchka's *Augen kann man nicht kaufen: Wim Wenders und seine Filme* (Munich: Heyne, 1990): 262 and are reproduced in the original German in Christian Rogowski's "'To Be Continued.' History in Wim Wenders' *Wings of Desire* and Thomas Brasch's *Domino*," *German Studies Review* 15:3 (1992): 562-3. The translation here is mine.

¹² Henri Alekan's discussion of the process of filming *Wings of Desire* appears in Richard Trainor, "Henri Alekan: Black and White Light," *Sight and Sound* 3:6 (June 1993): 14-17.

¹³ Alternately, there may be a rejection of the film's experience, at any point, effectively ending the kind of meaningful engagement on the part of the viewer discussed here.

¹⁴ Wenders' comments appear on page 43 of his interview with Taja Gut, "Perceiving movement," in Wim Wenders, *The Act of Seeing: Essays and Conversations*, Frankfurt: Verlag der Autoren, 1992 (English translation by Michael Hofman, London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1996/7). Childhood forms the basis of the film's re-occurring poem, as well. Wenders and Handke will describe some analogs to the stages of transformation in the film, through both the content and the placement of the film's recurring poem.

¹⁵ Ruth Perlmutter, "Wenders Returns Home on Wings of Desire," *Source: Studies in the Humanities* 20:1 (June 1993): 42.

¹⁶ The tradition stretches further back (to Louis Lumière's works) and forward to the decade of *Wings* (such as Godfrey Reggio's *Koyaanisqatsi*) and beyond (e.g., Jon Jost's *London Brief*).

¹⁷ The remarks are from a talk Wenders gave at a "colloquium on narrative technique" in 1982, published as "Impossible Stories," in Wenders' *The Logic of Images: Essays and Conversations*, Frankfurt: Verlag der Autoren, 1988 (English translation by Michael Hofmann, London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1991, p53).

¹⁸ This comment, made in 1989, originally appeared in Reinhold Rauh's "Ein Gespräch mit Wim Wenders," *Wim Wenders und seine Filme* (Munich: Wilhelm Heyne Verlag, 1990). The translation here is Hora Alter's from her "Documentary as Simulacrum," in Roger Cook and Gerd Gemunden (eds.), *The Cinema of Wim Wenders: Image, Narrative, and the Postmodern Condition (Contemporary Film and Television Series)*, Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1997, p.139.

¹⁹ Although the printed screenplay calls this character "Peter Falk," and the one reference to his TV character's name is spelled "Colombo," whereas the television detective was named "Columbo," I believe that Wenders and Handke intend the construction Falk/actor = Falk/character = Columbo/Colombo. The "misspelling" is interesting in that a slight variation produces *colomba* or *colombe* (Italian and French for "dove," respectively) a winged creature symbolizing peace (akin to an angel?).

²⁰ Wenders comments appear on pages 48 and 49, respectively, of his interview with Peter (W.) Jansen appears as "The truth of images: Two conversations with Peter W. Jansen," in Wim Wenders, *The Act of Seeing: Essays and Conversations*, Frankfurt: Verlag der Autoren, 1992 (English translation by Michael Hofman, London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1996/7).

²¹ See David Bordwell's *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema*, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1989, especially pp.170ff. I believe that some of my suggestions for additions to his schema are implied elsewhere in

Making Meaning but not incorporated into his diagram and discussion because he is modeling a historical convention. Traditionally, in film criticism, "diegetic" (or "intra-diegetic") refers to that which is within, or a part of, the film's world or story space, while "nondiegetic" refers to things that are outside of the story space but that construct the film (such as camerawork/mis-en-scene, editing/montage, music). The labels are most often used in relation to soundtrack events -- usually music, though sometimes narration. For example, music coming from a radio in a scene is diegetic. If the viewer cannot see the radio, but knows that it is the source of the music, then that music is diegetic but off-screen. If the music is part of the soundtrack score, but does not emanate from within the story space, it is nondiegetic. Sometimes, the boundaries are deliberately blurred, as in the opening scene of Stanley Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut*. The music the viewer hears as the Harfords prepare to go to Ziegler's party appears to be a non-diegetic score until William turns off the radio and we learn that the music was diegetic. Mel Brooks' *Blazing Saddles* offers another example. The music that at first seems to be a clichéd score actually emanates from a band within the story space. Brooks' camera discloses the band as his camera follows the characters riding past the band on horseback.

²² Ruth Perlmutter, "Wenders Returns Home on Wings of Desire," *Source: Studies in the Humanities* 20:1 (June 1993): 44.

²³ Wenders makes these comments in conversation with Ira Paneth in "Wim and His Wings," *Film Quarterly* 42 (Fall 1988): 7.

²⁴ I have chosen to exclude the nominal sequel to *Wings of Desire: Far Away, So Close*. However, it is interesting to note that Daniel chooses to literally create a life -- a child -- sometime between the periods in which the films are set. Interestingly, Daniel's first discussion of wanting to be human -- in the BMW dealership -- contains a plain expression on his part that he would have no desire to make a baby as soon as he became human. I read this "contradiction" as a testament to the self-propelling power of the creative urge which, once chosen, takes on a life and direction of its own. Certainly Daniel's lament while sitting in the BMW with Cassiel than angelic actions are all pretense has finally been mitigated.

²⁵ The Falk "character" is particularly interesting, because he is a former angel -- though Daniel does not realize this until after their first (oblique) encounter. "I can't see you, but I know you're here." The convincing greeting (and his statements that follow, about the simple pleasures he enjoys) may owe something to his character's abilities as an actor. The irony between Falk's profession and Daniel's desire -- Daniel speaks against pretense -- accentuates the variety of desires that have wings in *Wings*. Falk clearly relishes pretense -- both in his choice of profession and in the manner he chooses a hat to wear on the streets of Berlin.

²⁶ Or, at least, color footage will indicate that a scene is being portrayed through more traditional cinematic means and is portraying a world in which angels can't be seen.

²⁷ Wenders' comments regarding the centrality of the Marion character appear in Ira Paneth's "Wim and His Wings," *Film Quarterly* 42 (Fall 1988):2-8.

²⁸ Assenka Oksiloff's comments appear in "Eden is Burning: Wim Wenders' Techniques of Synaesthesia," *The German Quarterly* 69:1 (Winter 1996): 39.

²⁹ Wender's comments about *Wings* ending right as the story beings appear in his interview with Taja Gut, "Perceiving movement," in Wim Wenders, *The Act of Seeing: Essays and Conversations*, Frankfurt: Verlag der Autoren, 1992 (English translation by Michael Hofman, London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1996/7). On page 37 of this interview Wenders says, "*Wings of Desire* ends where it really ought to begin. The film is just a kind of prologue, the promise of a story to follow, a love story. And that's also why it says 'To be continued' at the end of it."

³⁰Other commentators have spoken of this "problem". For example, the German critic Wolfram Schütte infers an adolescent sensibility at work here, "in deren schiefer Emphase noch frühe erotische Verklemmtheiten nachwirken" ("in whose unsure phase early erotic fixations still have a lasting grip").

This comment appears in Wolfram Schütte's "Niederfahrt zu den Menschen. *Der Himmel über Berlin: der neue Film von Wim Wenders*," *Frankfurter Rundschau* (Oct 29, 1987): 23.

Such criticisms have been leveled against other passages in Handke's works -- for example, the soliloquies of Nova in Handke's play (directed by Wenders at the Salzburg Festival in 1982) *Über die Dörfer* (literally, *Over the Villages*).

My thanks to Christian Rogowski's "'Der liebevolle Blick'? The problem of Perception in Wim Wenders' *Wings of Desire*," *seminar* 29:4 (November 1993): 398-409, for bringing some of these issues to my attention.

³¹Marion's speech:

It must finally become serious.

I've often been alone but I've never lived alone. When, I was with someone, I was often happy but at the same time it all seemed a coincidence. These people were my parents but it could have been others. Why was this brown-eyed boy my brother and not the green-eyed boy on the opposite platform. The taxi driver's daughter was my friend but I might as well have put my arm round a horse's neck. I was with a man, in love and I might as well have left him there and gone off with the stranger, met in the street.

Look at me, or don't. Give me your hand, or don't. No, don't give me the hand, and look away.

I think tonight is the new moon. No night more peaceful. No bloodshed in all the city.

I've never played with anyone and yet I've never opened my eyes and thought: Now it's serious. At last it's becoming serious. So I've grown older. Was I the only one who wasn't serious? Is it our times that are not serious.

I was never lonely, nor alone, nor with others. But I would have liked to be alone at last. Loneliness means: I'm at last whole. How I can say it, as tonight I'm at last alone.

I must put an end to coincidence. The new moon of decision. I don't know if there's destiny, but there's a decision! Decide!

We are now the times. Not only the whole town, the whole world is taking part in our decision. We two are now more than us two. We incarnate something. We are sitting in the place of the people and the whole place is full of people who are dreaming the same dream. We are deciding everyone's game!

I am ready. Now it's your turn. You hold the game in your hand. Now or never!

You need me. You will need me. There's no greater story than ours, that of man and woman. It will be a story of giants, invisible, transposable, a story of new ancestors.

Look, my eyes, they are the picture of necessity, of the future of everyone in the place.

Last night I dreamt of a stranger, of my man. Only with him could I be alone, open up to him, wholly open, wholly for him, welcome him wholly into me, surround him with the labyrinth of shared happiness. I know it's you.

³² Ruth Perlmutter, "Wenders Returns Home on Wings of Desire," *Source: Studies in the Humanities* 20:1 (June 1993): 40.