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Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Wings of Desire* by Wim Wenders, Ingrid Windisch and Peter Handke

Review by: Adam Bingham

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DVD REVIEWS

Wings of Desire

Directed by Wim Wenders; produced by Ingrid Windisch; screenplay by Wim Wenders and Peter Handke; cinematography by Henri Alekan; edited by Peter Przygodda; art direction by Heidi Lüdi, SFK; music by Jürgen Knieper; starring Bruno Ganz, Otto Sander, Solveig Dommartin, Curt Bois and Peter Falk. DVD, Color and B&W, 127 min., German dialog with optional English subtitles, 1987. A Criterion Collection release of a two-disc DVD edition, distributed by Image Entertainment. www.Image-Entertainment.com.

"When the child was a child, it walked with its arms swinging. It wanted the stream to be a river, the river a torrent, and this puddle to be the sea. When the child was a child, it didn't know it was a child. Everything was full of life, and all life was one." So begins *Wings of Desire*, Wim Wenders's thirteenth feature film and the one that saw the New German cinema luminary return to his native country after an extended period of ten years in the U.S. As such, the film's pointed narrative—about two angels wandering through West Berlin, listening in on human thoughts and feelings and musing on the nature of mortal, earthly existence before one of them falls in love with a lonely trapeze artist—feels very much like an attempt to reconnect with a country that, when last Wenders captured it (in the magisterial *Kings of the Road* in 1975), seemed to have exhausted its social, historical and, indeed, cinematic potentiality.

The opening text, which we see being written as well as spoken in the film's very first image (thereafter sporadically taken up and continued by various characters on the soundtrack), is from a poem created for the film by Peter Handke, Wenders's cowriter and previous collaborator on the existentialist tracts *The Goalkeeper's Anxiety at the Penalty Kick* and *Wrong Move* (1975). And immediately it taps into and reinvigorates the very same vein of social and cinematic potential. It is an auspicious opening, doubly resonant in its privileging not only of a present childhood and a concomitant looking back to the same (that is, of an almost Heideggerian sense of time within time; or in the currency of the film, the world behind the world), but also of the explicit foregrounding of word (image) and voice (narration) as both record and testament: in other words, of the key Wenders theme of storytelling as an index of existence and personal identity, of placing oneself within and attempting to define oneself in relation to something larger than the individual. And

the comfortably prescribed inference of a narrative framework—of beginning, middle, end; order, conflict, closure—provides the perfect means whereby the ambiguous ghost of personal fulfillment or redemption for his alienated loners may at least appear more tenable.

This is one reason for the continuous tension, the push/pull, in Wenders between classicism and deviance therefrom, between America and Europe as competing paradigms of narration and storytelling. In *Wings of Desire*, an altogether broader canvas is imagined for this particular thematic. The frantic cacophony of human thought and feeling that the angels are able to listen to offers but a series of brief glimpses of lives in *medias res*, for which the shape and structure of a story feels conspicuously absent. And, as if to ram this point home, there is an embedded storyteller in the ragged person of an old man named Homer, to whom Otto Sander's Cassiel repeatedly returns to listen. He laments the erosion of grand storytelling traditions, noting at one point that mankind's loss of its storytellers equates to the loss of its childhood. It is a remarkably loaded, pregnant moment, representative as it is of the power of stories to renew and refresh, to create anew—something that obviously carries particular significance for Wenders on his return to his homeland.

From the outset, then, one feels *Wings of Desire* to be a kind of summation, a detailed, perhaps occasionally self-conscious, encapsulation of Wenders's career and cinematic preoccupations to date. This is amply confirmed in the person of the angels Daniel

and Cassiel: two protagonists who, like their twinned traveling companion progenitors in *Alice in the Cities* (1972), *Kings of the Road* and *Paris, Texas* (1984), move through and haunt a particular landscape without being able to really connect with it. The difference for these eternal, ethereal wanderers is, of course, that they can choose to make the connection if they so desire and here we can understand why Michael Atkinson, in an essay that accompanies this DVD release, notes that *Wings of Desire* marks the midpoint of Wenders's career "like a lightning strike cutting across tree rings." It is because it looks forwards as well as backwards, and in so doing opens up new cinematic avenues for its director.

The concept of the angels becoming human thus feels like sly deconstruction or self-commentary on Wenders's part. That is, where the border between self and other is rarely bridged by the director's typical human characters, his angels can and do take such a leap into the unknown. Without wanting to ascribe any overt allegorical or didactic intent on Wenders's part (which, given his setting of a divided Berlin would not be hard to unearth), the angels here do tend to offer themselves as metaphorical beings in a way that is denied in the sequel to *Wings of Desire*, *Faraway, So Close!* (1993), where the messiness of human life and even of narrative form and style takes precedence. Rather than essaying or representing any socio-historical context, they become representative of personal human growth and betterment, of seeing beyond the material world before us and both rec-



Daniel (Bruno Ganz) is an angel who observes and listens in on the inhabitants of Berlin from on high in Wim Wenders's *Wings of Desire* (1987) (photo courtesy of The Criterion Collection).

ognizing and transgressing the imprisonment inherent in the human condition (given this, one wonders quite what Robert Bresson would have made of the material).

If society and especially history ultimately remain elusive in *Wings of Desire*, then the corollary of the history of the cinema, most especially of the German cinema, is very markedly, nakedly felt. Following Alexander Kluge's *The Patriot* (1979), another loaded West German travelogue, Volker Schlöndorff's *The Tin Drum* [1979] and Fassbinder's *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1980), one may take Wenders's film as a definitive final bow for the New German Cinema. One of the salient features of this movement was a looking back to the extraordinary era when the childhood of Germany's cinema was very much still a child—to the heady heights of Weimar-era expressionism and the *Kammerspiel* film. Wenders had hitherto tended to concentrate on textual and narrative father figures—in his protagonists' often protracted oedipal scenarios—as opposed to cinematic incarnations of the patriarchs of Lang, Murnau, Pabst, et al., as many of his contemporaries had already done (Schlöndorff's *Young Törless* [1966] and *Coup de Grace* [1976], Herzog's *Nosferatu* [1979], Fassbinder's *Effi Briest* [1974]).

This film exists, however, very much as a catalog of the art of the German cinema: from its roaming, Walther Ruttmann-like city symphony travelogue transitions, especially trains and airplanes (the film's German title, *Himmel Über Berlin*, translates as *The Sky Over Berlin*, suggesting human as much as celestial significance), to its fantastical world behind the world, a reversal of the spectral plane of, say, Fritz Lang's *Destiny* (1922), or even of Dr. Mabuse, whom Lang conceived of as an overlord looking down on Weimar Berlin, at one remove from its chaotic modernity much as *Damiel* and *Cassiel* are here. One may also read a certain expressionist fervor to *Wings of Desire's* morass of embedded narrative lines and stress on recorded history (seen not only in the brief snippets of newsreel footage but also in the Nazi-era film being made with Peter Falk, who guest stars as himself). Films such as Murnau's *Phantom* and Pabst's *Diary of a Lost Girl* made extensive play on the personal power and perils of capturing lives and stories in, as it were, black and white. And Wenders expands upon this idea to consider a nation coming to terms with itself through records of existence and experience.

What all of this says about Germany and/or Berlin is open to question. Does it posit a picture of a nation whose identity still has to contend and wrestle with its past, as the aforementioned postwar newsreel footage (so contrastive with Alekan's fairy tale monochrome palette) suggests? Is it, rather, an exploration of a populace for whom the narrativization, perhaps the fictionalization, of history has alienated them from their society? In contradistinction, is it



Marion (Solveig Dommartin) is a trapeze artist with whom the angel *Damiel* falls in love in *Wings of Desire* (photo courtesy of The Criterion Collection).

a picture about the ephemerality of the very concept of a coherent national identity? Do we take it from art, from stories? Is there a symbiotic relationship between individual and society? It is to the film's credit that such readings remain open and tangible, depending very much on the viewer him/herself. In the last instance, *Wings of Desire* is a great example of a film that is what we believe and will it to be, a film that in the end we author ourselves, conceiving and creating with our own hands as surely as does the angelic writing with which the film begins.

Wings of Desire was awarded the Best Director award at the Cannes Film Festival in 1988. With hindsight we can all too easily see the seeds of later misfires being sown in some of its abandonment of the compact linearity and measured understatement of earlier Wenders films in favor of high-concept, gimmick-driven ensemble dramas (one thinks especially of his most recent, risible *The Palermo Shooting* [2008], which returns to the idea of a celestial plane of reality, this time in the person of death). Nonetheless, its studious mixture of head and heart, intellect and emotion (art film with a heart), has aged remarkably well, and this Criterion Collection release of *Wings of Desire* is a valuable two-disc special edition DVD. The audio commentary, by Wenders and, sporadically, Peter Falk, is in part carried over from the two previous DVD releases of the film in the United Kingdom, by Anchor Bay and Axiom Films. They were variously edited together by different hands from a series of interviews by independent producer Mark Rance, and, as such, there are some slight differences and discrepancies, though chiefly only of chronology and order. Like

other Wenders's commentaries, it makes for a fascinating, strangely moving experience. The director muses in his usual honest, quiet, reserved manner on the making and the meanings of his work, but as importantly he manages to impart something of the unshamed generosity of spirit that feeds so directly into the film itself. It is one of the rare pleasures of what should be the art of the director commentary (but all too often is not) to be able to offer the audience another version of the film to complement their own, to allow them to see it through different eyes.

Chief amongst the extras on the second disc is a 2003 featurette (forty-three minutes in length) entitled *The Angels Among Us*. Comprised entirely of interviews with Wenders, Peter Handke, Bruno Ganz, Otto Sander, Peter Falk, composer Jürgen Knieper, and U.S. filmmaker Brad Silberling (director of the "remake" *City of Angels* in 1998), it does occasionally repeat verbatim material related in the commentary, but is nonetheless a good opportunity to listen to figures like Ganz and especially Handke, from and about whom one usually hears little. Elsewhere, a short interview with Henri Alekan recorded for an unfinished documentary in 1985 (before he made *Wings of Desire*) is complemented by clips from a completed documentary, *Alekan and Light*, which offer a discussion between the cinematographer and Wenders. An episode of the French television program *Cinéma cinémas* featuring on-set footage and excerpts from a documentary made in 1982 by Bruno Ganz and Otto Sander about the life of German actor Curt Bois (Homer in *Wings of Desire*), round out a great film and a worthwhile DVD package.—Adam Bingham