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Source: *Literature/Film Quarterly*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (1992), pp. 121-126

Published by: Salisbury University

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43797643>

Accessed: 03-05-2019 18:47 UTC

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Berlin Poetry: Archaic Cultural Patterns In Wenders's *Wings of Desire*

Since 1969, the collaborative efforts of the German filmmaker Wim Wenders and the Austrian writer Peter Handke have dealt with aspects of contemporary malaise: communication breakdown, loneliness and spiritual homelessness, the German identity crisis, the burden of history on youth, American cultural colonization, and empty family life all belong to the litany. Handke has even made his own film, *The Left-Handed Woman*, in which urban life is presented as “a long-lasting catastrophe.”

A Berlin film such as *Der Himmel über Berlin* (Heaven/Sky Over Berlin; *Wings of Desire* is the title used outside Germany) would seem an ideal vehicle for continuing to develop these themes. Instead, the two artists have shifted further into what Eric Rentschler calls “[Handke’s] outspoken sympathy for an aestheticism characteristic of earlier epochs” for whose protagonists “seeing is being” (167). Indeed, not only are Handke and Wenders avowedly Rilkean in sensibilities and in specific motifs; this aestheticism is put to use to depart from the modern world entirely, to follow a route back to archaic and primeval forms, to replace narrative with a ritual which begins by depicting “long-lasting catastrophes,” but comes out on the other side as a vision of new beginnings. A recent Handke article by Lothar Pikulik associates Handke’s prose with the “New Age” phenomenon, and points to the post-engagé (*Tendenzwende*) writing which since the mid-70s has returned to myth and used the archaic as something future-oriented (239).

I have approached the film through: (1) the recent works of Peter Handke, the co-author of the screenplay (it seems that Handke is responsible for more of it than Wenders credits Handke in his interview with Ciment and Niogret, [14]); (2) the poetry of Rilke, since Wenders was reading Rilke at the germination of the project, and Handke's works have been influenced by Rilkean themes as well (Ciment 12; Eifler 105); and (3) patterns of archaic culture which link aspects of Berlin to Rilke's poetic motifs.

Peter Handke's aesthetic carries the label New Subjectivity, or New Sensibility, which according to Linda DeMeritt and Eric Rentschler is characterized, in part, by a turning inward, and the use of new cultural and artistic perception models to open the subject's eyes to the multiplicity of the outer world (The second shot of *Wings of Desire* double exposes a screen-sized eye over a bird's eye view of Berlin [shots 1003-05]). This eye's alienated glance (*der fremde Blick*), freed from prescribed systems, can achieve privileged moments of happiness (DeMeritt 25f, 142-52). These aesthetic tenets are of course not new, but rather harken back to writers such as Rilke, and ultimately the subjectivity of romanticism.

The film incorporates many of the traits of Handke's prose works written in Paris (*Weight of the World*, a Paris journal, was quoted in *Wings*), but the perspective has shifted, from Kafkaesque alienation (especially in *Moment of True Feeling*) to a thematic repertory which includes Rilkean sensibilities, pop culture, anthropology, even geology as elements of a perception model of Berlin.

A synopsis of this visually intense and poetically meditative work can only hint at the artistic effect or intent of the film: An angel named Daniel (Bruno Ganz) falls in love with a French trapeze artist, Marion (Solveig Dommartin), while an American crew, including Peter Falk, makes a film about wartime Berlin. Two angels can read thoughts of anonymous Berliners, and can be seen only by children and other angels. We catch glimpses into many lives, and experience Berlin's destruction in World War II through newsreel footage and the remembrances of a narrator named Homer (Curt Bois). The bleakest sequences of the film involve the thoughts of anonymous Berliners suffering generation gap, adolescent depression, broken-down family or marital relations, loneliness, money problems which lead to emotional conflicts, etc.; i.e. the long-lasting catastrophe.

While a politically committed auteur (Kluge or Fassbinder) would (and did) expose the socioeconomic system which produces this alienation, Wenders and Handke seem to approach the subject more as Rilke did Paris; i.e. as a microcosm of the modern condition. Just as Rilke presented his reader with a poetic "creation" of the world through a new perception of everyday objects, the viewer here is asked to adopt a mode of seeing which will lead to a "return to origins" as defined by Mircea Eliade (*Myth and Reality* 34) to arrive at a direct experience of the nexus of art and preliterate culture. On this *tabula rasa* Handke writes a manual for perceiving the world as if new, much as the Romantic Friedrich Schlegel did in his theoretical writings on progressive universal poetry. The Handkean perception of Berlin begins with anonymous masses, whose lives are intimately and immediately perceived by a camera which floats into apartments at critical or telling moments. This "feeling eye" solidarity with the masses is part of his new beginning, but not in the political or social sense of the word. City history is placed into the context of myth, prehistory, even geology, rather than historical analysis. Newsreel footage and stills of dead children are reminiscent of the archaic pattern of ritual retelling. The city is also home (or "home") to foreigners in both Wenders's and Handke's works, and *Wings* stresses the presence of Americans, French, Iranians, Japanese, and Turks. Marion's slowly enunciated French-accented German has a deliberate beauty, especially when she communicates her feelings about Berlin: she feels most at home *because* she is a foreigner.

The film's important motifs illustrate the New Subjectivity depiction of the urban world in archaic patterns. Cities are obsessed with *time*, for example, but in *Wings*,

the two angels are outside of time. Daniel longs to take part in time, and as soon as he becomes human, he wants to know the time. Marion will utter a cliché—"I don't have time" or "Time heals all wounds"—but then corrects herself (or the cliché) with another question, such as "What if Time is itself the disease?" Daniel's desire to enter time serves to make the viewer aware of the poet's ennobling of it; the archaic patterns expressed through Marion belong to a world of cyclical time, as opposed to a world of modern linear time. The perception of time must be changed.

This motif manifests itself also in the linking of the specific history of Berlin to the primitive myth of the destruction of the world. One library patron is studying Henze's musical score, *Das Ende der Welt*, the bombing of Berlin is presented as an apocalyptic event, and the American film crew is recreating the war period. In *Myth and Reality*, Mircea Eliade notes that archaic societies typically believe that the end of the world has already occurred, and that it will be repeated, either in a flood or by conflagration. Ceremonies re-enact this past and future event (54). The World War II newsreel footage used in *Wings* is so well known to its global audience (bombings, death, rubble and its clearance) as to be a ritualistic use of the medium of film to present mythically the presence of the past apocalypse and possible future end of the world in Berlin. In archaic societies, the reliving of events through ritual by a community has a purpose: "To cure the work of Time, it is necessary to 'go back' and find the 'beginning of the World'" (88). Many myths continue from this point with a couple who will repopulate the new world (in some cases a new *sky* [Himmel] is imagined also). This is how we are to understand the conversation between Marion and Daniel at the end of *Wings*. I shall return to this conversation later on.

The film's opening sequence—a hand writing, "Als das Kind Kind war, ging es . . ." (*When the child was a child, it walked . . .*) guides the viewer to draw parallels between children and archaic humanity which recall Lessing (*Education of the Human Race*) and Eliade, both of whom draw an analogy between childhood and earlier stages in human history. Rilke's fourth *Duino Elegy* implies this analogy also, and suggests that earlier ages of humankind are closer to the unified state than is the self-conscious, isolated modern adult. In addition, children are for Rilke models for the poet, for they are able to instill objects with projections from their own imagination. Bugel has interpreted Rilke's notion of childhood as life without time and space (19), and thus the child shares to an extent the timeless quality of the angel (84). Handke makes the same analogy in *Repetition* where Filip's thoughts of dead ancestors are linked to extinct peoples, and in Wenders's other films also, children can transform the high-tech world into magic and myth (*American Friend* and *Paris, Texas*). In *Wings*, children can see angels, enjoy the circus, and achieve a totally subjective sense of time while playing.

The theme of housing and shelter, which is linked to Rilke and to primal forms in the phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space*, figures prominently in Handke's works. *Wings of Desire* features such Bachelardian notions as the shell as *Urhaus*, the circle of light from a lamp as a prehistoric hut; the hermit's hut as centralized solitude, and access to absolute refuge; felicitous space as imagination; the Jungian image of the layered house, which at the top is recent history and below the foundation contains stone tools and glacial fauna; and throughout, the primacy of perception so central to the poetic images of Rilke and of black-and-white film dreams: "Immensity is within ourselves . . . Indeed, immensity is the movement of motionless man" (184).

In Handke's works, the protagonist often finds a welcome shelter in a bus, a train, under a rock, even on the street. In *Wings* and in *Repetition* I believe that shelters allude more assertively to ancient or prehistoric forms than in his earlier works: the tent, the trailer or caravan, the snack wagon are not only prominent settings; they, along with the library and the "cave" (the punk rock club), invite the viewer's empathy

and show the main characters' happiness. Housing (and feeling at home) seems, in fact, to be the strongest link between the central narrative and the depiction of the lives of anonymous Berliners, whose abodes, whether permanent—apartments—or temporary—laundromats, cars, subways—are shown in their unpoeticized bleakness.

The tent illustrates Handke's association pattern. The circus tent is, while the circus survives, the felicitous space of Marion's art. Children scream with delight at her Kleistian grace, and she becomes her totems, a chicken and a cat. When finances force the troupe to disassemble the tent, the angel Daniel returns to the circle of sawdust that remains; the power of the tent seems to linger. The tent is alluded to humorously in the form of a "tent-covered" BMW, a convertible on the showroom floor. The invisible angels sit in the car to compare diaries, while shoppers discuss the (problematic) happiness of using the vehicle to "get out of the smog."

Another "felicitous space" is the state library, which houses angels, a man called Homer, and anonymous patrons. The soundtrack, the angels, the postures of the readers all suggest sacred space, again a prominent theme in *Repetition*, where Filip ponders a school lesson on the Mayans' consecration of a hut as a temple. The library contains in spirit the whole universe, and guides the viewer-initiate to the written word (in the beginning was the Word), "heavenly" music, a small flock of angels who hang around in the stacks, humankind's photo album (August Sanders's anthropological collection, *Citizens of the Twentieth Century*) and a whole collection of globes. This otherworldly space conjures up in the viewer the Bachelardian "immensity within." One problem: like Faust's *Studierzimmer*, it's a bit stuffy, and needs an earthy, noisier counterpart—the cave.

The "cave" sequences, in a punk rock club where Marion goes to experience her music, (Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, Crime and the City Solution are telling names) feature an audience whose plumage and action constitute the tribal solidarity of ritual, and who is liberated from rational, isolated urban life through an invocation of music's primeval form. It is here that Marion and Daniel announce their mythical union at the end.

The snack wagon seems to have magical powers also: humans can almost communicate with angels (Peter Falk is, to be sure, a former angel), and strangers speak to each other as if they are at home. These *Buden* appear mostly at night, and remind one of the American painter Edward Hopper (alluded to in *American Friend*, and an object of study in *The Lesson of St. Victoire*) especially his *Nighthawks*, which expresses the solidarity of the people of the night and the street, as well as the prehistoric, even animalistic quality of nocturnal urban "hawks." The *Bude* makes the street into a kind of shelter.

In German film and poetry since expressionism, the street has been associated with a variety of modern maladies, from decadence and injustice to social Darwinism, to spiritual homelessness. But in Handke's works (*Moment of True Feeling* and *Repetition* especially) the street is a welcome alternative to the prison of roles associated with home and office. In *Wings*, it seems that the street further distinguishes between the "blessed" (angels, former angels, aerialists, and children) and the others. Peter Falk enjoys Berlin the most on the street, rhapsodizing on the word "spazieren," meeting angels, Marion, and on the street movie set, chatting with a German teen-ager who has a 2-Hitler theory. The angel Daniel begins his new human life on the street by tasting his own blood, asking a stranger about colors, and getting coffee. The Handkean New Perception begins. The street—covered by the sky—is the primeval shelter where people can encounter one another. It is also the path back to other primeval forms, such as *mud*.

The circus tent is pitched in the mud, and upon learning that the circus is bankrupt, Marion drops her robe in the mud and performs a number with her coach Laszlo. Also Peter Falk takes a stroll across the mud to see a bombed-out remnant of a train station. En route he encounters some workers, one of whom claims to recognize

Columbo. Another replies that it couldn't be Columbo, for he wouldn't be walking around in the mud. Homer and the angel Daniel walk out in the mud to contemplate the old center of pre-war Berlin. This old and nearly blind Homer, who serves as Handke's mouthpiece, refers to the ritual origins of narration by reminding us that "Earlier listeners sat in a circle . . ." and "My heroes are no longer warriors and kings, but the . . . things of peace, one as good as the other . . ." (Shot #2073). Homer seems to be invoked as the poet on the threshold of myth (*Urdichter*) and master of the poeticizing of nature and simple human behavior, such as seeking shelter. In the real Homer's works, the interaction of gods and humans parallels the angel-human affair of this film. Of course, intercourse between gods and humans is found in many creation myths. This pattern illuminates Marion's announcement near the end: "There is no greater story than that of us two, of man and woman . . . a story of giants . . . a story of new progenitors" (Shots # 7032-34). A (former) deity will have intercourse with a human. The last words of the film, "*Nous sommes embarqués*," refer both to the odyssey of Handkean perception, and to the beginnings of a new world (or "New Age") by the primeval mythical pair.

This sacredness applies not only to literature, but also to language itself: In *Repetition*, Filip states this directly when he decides he needs two languages in order to be freed from the bonds of one, and in *Wings*, the second sequence is an aerial view of the Berlin radio tower accompanied by a soundtrack featuring simultaneous broadcasts of English, French, and German. This aspect of contemporary Berlin *could* lead one to associations with the four-power status of Berlin, but in the context of what follows, it seems rather an embodiment of the Tower of Babel: a mythical representation of the origin of multiple languages (and communication breakdown) in the world. A visual detail, a graffito on a bunker wall reinforces this sacredness motif: "*Warten auf Godart*" (Waiting for Godart) manages to recall at once the French New Wave, the theater of the absurd, and "God art." The film's angels, too, seem to be teaching viewers to reinvest individual words with meaning by naming things. These roles of language are analogous with Rilke's, which attempt to recreate the spirit of archaic language and children's language to eliminate any distinction between subject and object, and inspire the poet to use the language of a consciously created unity that approximates the archaic phase, the unity of the Homeric epic (Komar 160, 170, and 173 re: Homer).

It would be wrong to reduce this many-faceted film to the patterns discussed here; the adaptation of popular culture conventions alone (e.g. "Columbo," the Berlin film genre, and angel films) deserve separate treatment. However, I have tried to show that *Wings of Desire* employs archaic patterns to convey a poetic utopian vision, the recognition of felicitous space and time in the Rilkean dictum: "*Hiersein ist herrlich!*"

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126/*Wings of Desire*

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