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Meditations on Wim Wenders's *Wings of Desire*

Then with your eyes that wearily
scarce lift themselves from the worn-out door-stone
slowly you raise a shadowy black tree
and fix it on the sky: slender, alone.
And you have made the world. . .

(from "Initiation," by Rilke)

In one scene in Wim Wenders's new film *Wings of Desire* (*Der Himmel über Berlin*) a lone tree rises out of a lake, with black branches reflected against gray-white water. This image, perhaps a cinematic quotation from director Wenders's spiritual mentor, Andrej Tarkovsky, could stand as an emblem of one of the themes of this remarkable film: solitude within union. In *Wings of Desire*, moments of the greatest communion are also moments of the greatest emptiness. This duality, paradoxical and yet cyclical, joins Wenders's film with mystical traditions, such as those of the Chinese Taoists, which is a fitting stance for a film about angels. Nevertheless, the scenario skirts any "comfortable" mystical formulas by becoming lyrical, metaphysical, harshly realistic in turn leaving a rich intertextuality that delights even after repeated viewings.

The angels in *Wings of Desire* are primarily men in dark overcoats and pony tails, with and without golden armour and wings. They maintain roles of observing and comforting the humans in postwar Berlin. As in the wartime painting *Le mal du pays* (*Homesickness*) by Magritte, an angel in the form of a man (or a man in the form of an angel) perches on a high ledge above the city, blessed and burdened by the extension of his wings. The camera dizzily assumes the aerial point of view of the angel, and we enter and leave city apartments with him at will.

Invisible except to the most naive—the children—the angels are able to impart a

general salutary sense to humans through a light touch on the shoulder, but are unable to alter fate more than momentarily. For example, one angel named Daniel (Bruno Ganz) can help redirect the thoughts of a dying man to the grand geographical expanses of his past, but he and his fellow angel Cassiel (Otto Sander) can neither draw out evil nor prevent the suicide of a man who isolates himself through his Walkman and earphones from the concerned cries of strangers beckoning him off the roof.

What the angels report to each other from their temporary perch in a convertible in a car dealer's lot are the moments of fullness within emptiness that they have observed: the post office man who, intent on dying, goes to the trouble of placing rare stamps on the envelopes of letters he sends to friends . . . the blind woman who senses the presence of her watch. Emptiness outlined against fullness. Cassiel leans his head against the head of the ancient storyteller Homer (Curt Bois) in the Berlin public library, absorbing a symphony of human aspirations, knowledge and anxieties from this source of the childlike in Everyman.

The film opens with a hand and pen writing the words which form a leitmotif of the subsequent scenes: "When the child was a child . . ." When the child was a child, apples and berries would suffice, but why doesn't the puddle turn into a sea? Why am I me and why not you? In words that will be echoed in a slightly changed form near the close of the film, the offscreen narrator repeats: "At last mad, at last no longer alone . . . At last insane, at last at peace." Like the Berlin Wall which forms another leitmotif, the boundless and the restricted, the light and the dark, perpetually repeat themselves in Wenders's film.

This kind of alternation of opposite forces is an integral aspect of Taoist philosophy. In the Taoist text the *Tao Te Ching*, dating back to at least the first century A.D., pairs of relative opposites—something and nothing, high and low—are used as a means (albeit an inadequate one) to approach a description of the *tao*, that force which existed before the universe came into being and which submits all things to cyclic change.

What is weak inevitably develops into something strong, but when this process of development reaches its limit, the opposite process of decline sets in and what is strong once again becomes something weak, and decline reaches its lowest limit only to give way once more to development. Thus there is an endless cycle of development and decline (Lao Tzu/Lau 25).

One angel, Daniel, decides to "take the plunge" and descend to earth in order to (in his own words) know what an apple feels like; to say "now" rather than just "forever." He has fallen in love with a beautiful trapeze artist Marion (Solveig Dommartin) in the Circus Alekan (named after the director of photography Henri Alekan). Marion, like Daniel, seems to perform most perfectly without the aid of wings. Her trapeze performance is a Taoist act in itself: the fullness of grace and balance through a medium of nothingness, air.

The director's sympathies undoubtedly rest with this fallen angel, Daniel, for whom the taste of his own blood from his first wound is a revelation. When he crosses the wall and becomes a man, color returns to the screen. Daniel trades his dark coat and angel's armor for a gaudy jacket and a watch, marking a trade of anonymity for expression, eternity for the moment. Children can no longer see the fallen angel Daniel as he really is and think him a drunkard or a hungry beggar. A foolish Adam, he eats his first apple and revels in gaining new knowledge (which Peter Falk, another former-angel, informs him is "the fun of it"). Like a child himself, Daniel hungers for union, for non-differentiation. It is up to Marion, the trapeze artist, to teach him—not only the "amazing wings" of passion that no angel knows—but also the unique loneliness of a love beyond coincidence; the only kind which makes one whole.

The love scene takes place in a bar, an island of quiet adjoining a hall where the hypnotic, minimalist sounds of a rock concert blare into the heads of an audience claustrophobically concentrated in space but essentially separate. The vacant stares of the listeners lack self-reflection, as each person faces forward toward the stage or

dances alone, only momentarily aware of not being the only one in the room. Even the lyrics of the rock music are about “one big lonely city.”

As rock music blares, Marion and Daniel turn to each other and share a cup of wine, almost ceremoniously, and Marion insists on speaking serious words of loneliness and necessity. Again, paradoxically, this time of greatest fullness is also the time of the new moon, that most slender sliver of light, unlike the full moon of the night before which had made the trapeze artist fearful of death.

This woman who, according to her own inner thoughts, had wanted to grow up to live “gloriously alone” on an island, has found in Daniel not only that island but also the wings that allow her to traverse both worlds. Pale wing-shaped earrings form a more subtle thematic variation than the “chicken wings” she is asked to wear as a circus performer. In her own words, she and Daniel, as lovers, have become the personification of a plaza full of people, like the former Potsdamer Plaza which the ancient storyteller unsuccessfully searches for in a field of overgrown grasses and mud near the Berlin Wall. The lovers’ story alone is “a story of giants”; both ancient and eternal.

At times *Wings of Desire* seems almost overly-burdened with images. Wenders did admit that the problem with this film was “too many ideas”; over five hours worth in the first version (Paneth, 6). Although overall coherence is a problem, some patterns are nevertheless established which help link the world of the angels with human daily existence. For example, the rock music scenes (too lengthy in themselves) serve as a kind of link which leads the ex-angel Daniel to Marion near the close of the film.

Wenders dedicates his film to his own spiritual mentors: Yasujiro (Ozu), Francois (Truffaut) and Andrej (Tarkovsky). Traces of all three directors are apparent in *Wings of Desire*: Ozu’s glorification of the simple moments of life, with all of their reverberations; Truffaut’s portrayal of children as spiritual vessels, and his *Fahrenheit 451* in which people represent books they have memorized; Tarkovsky’s transcendental black and white *mise-en-scene*. The congenial and outgoing Peter Falk, playing himself, represents the American element of this director who spent years in this country. *Wings of Desire* reaches toward universality within the specific geographical and historical framework of postwar Berlin. Characters speak German, French, English, Hebrew, Japanese, Turkish—sometimes without subtitles—which places the viewer right in the middle of a cosmopolitan urban setting where no one in real life offers subtitles.

In an interview published in *Film Quarterly*, Wenders also claimed inspiration from the poet Rainer Maria Rilke.² In Rilke’s semi-fictional *Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, the writer states that he is just learning to see,³ like the newly enlightened Daniel who must check the names of the colors of the graffiti painted on the Berlin Wall. (“Is it orange or is it ochre?” he asks a passing stranger, with real concern for specificity.) John Berger, in his *Ways of Seeing*, also asserts that “seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak . . . To look is an act of choice.”⁴ The angels know that the child has a very precise view of Paradise about which adults can only guess.

A subtheme in *Wings of Desire* is the film-within-a-film story of Peter Falk (of Colombo fame) travelling to Germany to appear as a detective in a film set in the Nazi period. The set, a multi-leveled air raid shelter, is also full of “soldiers” eating candy as they wait for their time to perform, and Jewish extras with yellow badges on their coats. (While sketching one woman, Falk muses, in a cruel commentary on history, that these were “extra people,” and he wonders, with equal specificity, why the Nazis chose yellow, the color of sunflowers.) Art and fiction blend so completely with reality in the studio that even the angels are confused. The intertextuality provided by the television Colombo character (almost synonymous with Falk himself) opens to the viewer the level of popular art within a basically elitist media, the art-film.

In the occasional glimpses into the ravages of the immediate postwar period in Berlin which the director provides through documentary footage, the past dissolves into the present, and back again. A simple passage down a traffic-lined street becomes a journey into a history of pain. A wing passes over the screen, and military planes drop bombs onto the city. On a metafilmic level, an actor (Curt Bois), trained by Reinhardt and Brecht but who had fled Nazi Germany in the early '30s, reappears—not only as Homer—but also as the former refugee. Images of renewal rise from the ashes.

In this way, *Wings of Desire* is full of both abstract and concrete circular images: The circus ring, finally reduced to a circle of sand in a field when the bankrupt circus is forced to pull up stakes and wait for the next season. The circle traced in the air by the three round oranges Marion juggles as she contemplates her last performance. A library table full of globes and a model of the solar system into which the bard stares for inspiration. One student in the library reads the Biblical description of the beginning of the world, and another studies a text with the title "The End of the World." A crash victim lies in the street dying, and a mother and baby approach him from the distance. A breathtaking flock of birds overhead takes flight in a loose oval. Finally, Marion traces tight circles in the air as her newfound love below watchfully maintains the proper tension on the rope.

In a rather non-Taoistic way,⁵ straight lines are also praised in this film, like the straight line of decision Marion makes near the end of the film, with the camera assuming her point of view as it cuts through the zombie-like rock crowd to approach the bar where Daniel is sitting. The angels recall how the "biped" (that "long-awaited image" of the angel) first ran straight ahead in joy, but when he ran in a zigzag pattern, the history of war began. Both the straight and the crooked histories continue to the present.

Just as the angels are denied sensuality in Wenders's film, so is the old sage denied the traditional role of seer, becoming instead (in his own words) nothing but a lonely organ-grinder without an audience, either ignored or mocked.

The angels themselves are emptiness in fullness; longing in perfection. In their nocturnal haunt in the depopulated library they appear drained in the monochromatic light, trapped in an exquisitely isolated perfection. As Cassiel watches his comrade, the former angel Daniel, become an imperfect lover, he turns his face disconsolately to the wall in a remarkable composition which places him and his strobe-lit shadow at the ballet-like feet of a mural of a dancing woman. Riding alone on the upper level of an empty double-decker bus, or perched on the arm of a winged statue towering over a major boulevard, Cassiel appears older and more tired than earlier in the film, as if he had shared all human sadness and ennui without experiencing any of the joys.

Yet, in many ways Cassiel remains more fully the Taoist sage, the one who refuses to become attached to either form or pleasure but who concentrates instead on Inward Vision.⁶ Even as a fallen angel, however, Daniel is aware of the evanescence of life and states, in a soliloquy, that "the image [of love] we created last night will be with me when I die." (Lao Tzu: "The gateway of the mysterious female is called the root of heaven and earth.")⁷ The daytime scene following his first night with Marion is shot in a revealing tri-toned shade (black, white and sepia) as Cassiel watches Daniel assist Marion in her aerial artistry. Heaven (black and white) has joined Earth (color) in extolling life, a unity made possible by the successful crossing of the walls (external and internal) of different worlds.

Desiring angels—a paradox. The German woman in the burnt-out shell of a building who airs out her bedding as if nothing had happened—a riddle. A wing brushes momentarily over a sleeping form. Memory. In writing of the *tao*, the elusive Lao Tzu explained that "it is empty without being exhausted."⁸ For Marion, the loneliness

of a “transposable” love means that at last she is whole, or, in the words of Rilke:

You make me alone. Only you can I interchange.
Awhile it is you, then again it is a murmuring,
or it is a fragrance with no trace.
Alas, in my arms I have lost them all,
only you, you were born always again:
because I never hold you close, I hold you forever.⁹

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Notes

¹ Andrej Tarkovsky. *Sculpting in Time: Reflections on the Cinema*. Trans. Kitty Hunter-Blair (New York: Knopf, 1987), p. 219. Tarkovsky wrote of his film *Sacrifice* that “I was constantly preoccupied with the idea of equilibrium, of sacrifice, of the sacrificial act, the yang and yin of personality” (217).

² Ira Paneth, “Wim and His Wings.” *Film Quarterly* (Fall 1988), p. 3.

³ Rainer Maria Rilke. *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*. Trans. M.D. Herter Norton (New York: Norton, 1949), p. 15.

⁴ John Berger. *Ways of Seeing* (London: BBC/Penguin, 1983), pp. 7-8.

⁵ Taoist thought stresses the softer, flexible bent line rather than the rigid straight one.

⁶ Arthur Waley. *Three Ways of Thought in Ancient China* (New York: Doubleday, 1939), p. 9.

⁷ Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*. Trans. D.C. Lau (New York: Penguin, 1963), p. 62.

⁸ Lao Tzu, p. 61.

⁹ Rilke, p. 208.