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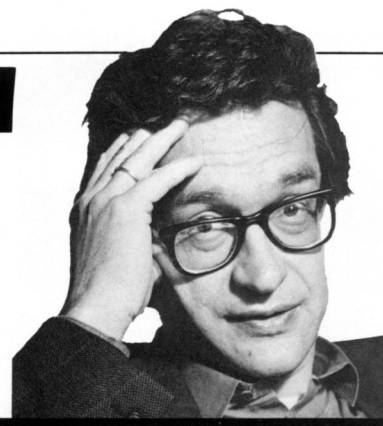
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Angels, History and Poetic Fantasy

AN INTERVIEW WITH WIM WENDERS

by Coco Fusco



Wim Wenders (photo by Carolyn Wendt)

Wim Wenders won eight prizes for his most recent film, *Wings of Desire* (originally titled *Der Himmel über Berlin*, literally *Heavens over Berlin*), including the 1987 Best Director award at Cannes. Combining allegory and document, striking cinematography and multilayered sound, Wenders offers a lyrical reflection on German history and culture that transforms Berlin into a rich, symbolic landscape. After years of filming on the road, Wenders made a film about, and in, one place—it is, as he calls it, his “vertical road movie.”

Wings of Desire marks the king of the road movie's return to Europe after nearly eight years in the U.S., during which he made *Paris, Texas* (1984), *Hammett* (1982), and *Lightning Over Water* (1980). The film also recommences Wenders's collaborative relationship with Austrian writer Peter Handke, who adapted his own novel, *The Goalie's Anxiety at the Penalty Kick*, for Wenders to direct in 1971, and whose *The Left Handed Woman* Wenders produced in 1975.

In the following interview, held in New York in April 1988, Wenders comments on his latest film, also discussing his relocation to Berlin, his situation as a European auteur and a post World War II German.

Cineaste: *Wings of Desire* marks your return to Germany after a long period of work in the U.S. How do you distinguish the issues in *Wings of Desire* from those in the work you did in the States?

Wim Wenders: My very first feature film, made in 1969, is called *Summer in the City*. The title comes from the Lovin' Spoonful song and was in English even in the German version. It was about a man who came out of prison after a year and tried to meet up with some old friends. He was disappointed with all his meetings, however, and decided to leave. The last shot is of him taking a plane, maybe to New York, you don't know. I never shot in Berlin again until I left New York, and that was twelve films later.

Cineaste: Did you leave New York to go back to Berlin specifically?

Wenders: No, I left New York to go back to Europe. I almost decided to live in Paris, but I got stuck in Berlin because I liked it. My office has been in Berlin for ten years, but I never had a place there.

Cineaste: What is it about working there that enables you to make a film you feel unable to make in America?

Wenders: First of all, Berlin is a German city. Second, it's the only German city. I am speaking of West Germany. There are other cities, but they could be almost anywhere. They have lost part of their identity. They are cities that try to look like places anywhere else. Frankfurt could be in Kentucky, I suppose. Hamburg is a very cold place, it almost belongs to Scandinavia. And Munich is a sort of provincial Bavarian place. But if you were raised in Germany after the war, and then come back after a long

absence, you miss something. It's as if something that you knew when you were a kid and that you called home or Germany was not there anymore. A lack of identity. This isn't true in Berlin. Maybe because there is a wall around it. Or maybe because there is a healthier sense of history and of the past.

Cineaste: But Berlin has undergone considerable physical changes.

Wenders: I am talking about things that are only partly physical, and much more of the spirit. There is a spirit of Berlin. It was a very powerful city. I would say that in the Twenties it was, culturally speaking, the most interesting city in Europe, and certainly one of the most interesting cities in the world. Somehow it is as if some of the energy has come back to the city. Berlin is very extreme—even its location on the map is very extreme. It exists between different lines of interest and energies.

Cineaste: After working abroad, why is it important to go back to Germany to make a film?

Wenders: In my seven or eight years in America, I had come to accept that I was a European filmmaker, and that I was never going to be an American filmmaker. And I felt that I should look into this heart of mine and into what it meant to be German in Germany. All the other films I made in Germany were about trying to get out of the place. This time I still had the point of view of an outsider, but I tried to look in.

Cineaste: When you talked about being a European filmmaker, what is the difference you distinguish between a European film and an American one?

Wenders: It's a question of the different attitudes that produce a European or an American film. Of course, these generalizations don't always work. In a way, Jim Jarmusch, Scorsese, and Cassavetes make movies which are not representative of the American movie.

The American movie, in general, is first of all a product, like a car, designed by a company. This big company has lots of engineers, or screenwriters. There are storyboard artists, executive producers, lawyers, and all sorts of other people who design this thing, until they think that they have a product that will have a chance. Then you make the film, but it is almost done beforehand. It's like a car that has been planned. Even after it is finished, you have previews, and a lot of other marketing arrangements, so altogether it's much more of an industrial product.

In Europe—well, there too you can't generalize because there is a type of European film that is industrialized like the American film. Another tradition in Europe, however, a tradition that is stronger and has a longer history and deeper roots than in America, regards films as works of art. A European film is something that is determined more as it is being made, not before. It is much more in the hands of the author, or authors. It is much more independent of its financing, or its financiers. That's the only difference, but it's a big difference in attitudes.

Cineaste: From working within this American system



The angel Daniel (Bruno Ganz) relaxes atop a statue in *Wings of Desire*.

you then move to working with the French.

Wenders: Both *Paris, Texas* and *Wings of Desire* were produced by my own company, Road Movies, as the executive producer and main producing company, with a French coproducer, who had no say in script, casting, or final cut. These partners are really solid, respectful and reliable. Their company, Argos Films, has produced some really beautiful films, including *Hiroshima mon Amour*. Anyway, you can no longer make a film out of just one country.

Cineaste: Because of the impossibility of getting enough funding?

Wenders: Mostly. And in order to stay independent, it's even more important to have money from different places, so that you really don't depend on any one group too much.

Cineaste: Does this move signal the end of your professional relationship with Chris Sievernich?

Wenders: Chris was working as a producer for Road Movies, my company, and as such produced *Lightning Over Water* and *Paris, Texas*. When I went back to Berlin, Chris wanted to stay in America with our company in New York, Grey City. Now it is only Chris, and Road Movies is entirely me. Chris was a consultant on *Wings of Desire*.

Cineaste: Why did you want to make a love story?

Wenders: I came away from *Paris, Texas* thinking that whatever I was going to do next was going to be a love story. I think it came out of the last scene of the film, where the little boy and his mother are united again, and they embrace. Travis has left for good, not only for himself, but for almost all the characters who had been in all my previous films. But he left me with this young woman and her little son. I felt that I had these two people on the stage now, and whatever I was going to do would not be

the end of a love story but would certainly be the beginning of one.

Cineaste: *Kinski in Paris, Texas* is largely a reflection of the fantasies of the men around her. The woman in *Wings of Desire* appears to have some degree of subjectivity of her own. Nonetheless women in general do not have very strong roles in your films. Is Marion any different?

Wenders: First of all, she was the only human being among the main characters, the others being unemployed guardian angels. She was the reason this angel wanted to become a man, so she was going to have to be very much alive. Most important, I had already been living with this woman for three years.

The basic idea for *Wings of Desire* was that the angel would fall in love and become human and give up this boring eternity. I thought, if he meets this girl, it might be nice if she is doing something dangerous. Then, since the whole film also deals with children, I thought of a circus. Suddenly I made her a trapeze artist, because it linked her to the world of children. She could even have wings and fly. So I got really interested in who she was. She is the central character because the angels are so transparent, even if the film is seen through their eyes. They don't have any psychology.

Cineaste: The angel who falls in love with her wants to become mortal so he can stay with her, but what does she want?

Wenders: She's a little lost. She has a very unstable existence and is in a dangerous line of work. She is a little tired and doesn't feel it really amounts to much. She decides to stay in this city, Berlin, which marks an important point in her life. Up to then it had all been a series of coincidences, and she wants to make a choice.

Cineaste: Can you talk about the allegorical aspects of the angels, to get to the political dimensions of the film?

"This is the first time I made a film in one place. I really used to think I was able to work only while I was on the road. It was scary to stay in one place. But it wasn't difficult at all, because there was a strange movement in time which felt almost like a journey. Of course, the film was not linear, like the other movies I've made. They always had horizontal movements. *Wings of Desire* is my vertical road movie."



Wim Wenders (photo by Carolyn Wendi)

Are they protecting the city of Berlin? Do they signal some kind of redemption that you see for the city?

Wenders: No. They were there before the city was there, when there were still glaciers. They saw the city being built, they saw Napoleon come through. They saw the city being destroyed. They saw it all go down the drain. They saw it at its most terrifying, as the capital of fascism. They are witnesses. But they are out of work. The time when people listened to the angels is past. People have no messages for them, and there's no place they should take these messages. They are just going through the motions. They are still there and they witness everything. They write things down, and every now and then they try to talk to people. Politically, of course, they have a strange position. Maybe it's their experience. They have seen too much to be interested in politics.

Cineaste: *They do float through the Berlin Wall, though.*

Wenders: They float through the Wall, yes. They like to walk there because it is quiet. It is without any consequence if they step on a mine—how lucky. The Wall has been there for such a short period of time compared to the

time they have been there. They are not impressed.

Cineaste: *What do you mean to suggest about Berlin through their relationship to it?*

Wenders: Berlin, the divided city of course, was just another metaphor, like the angels themselves. Berlin seems to be a city that well represents not only Germany, but also our civilization. In a way, Berlin really represents the world.

Cineaste: *Do you see the angels as a metaphor for collective memory, or the function of witness that you talk about?*

Wenders: First of all, they don't forget history—it is part of what they know. If there is any reproach to my parents' generation or to the one before it, it is the way they treated history after 1945. They tried to make everyone forget, which made it impossible to deal with.

Anyway, the angels were a metaphor for history and the memory of it. On the other hand, they were metaphorical for an angel inside ourselves, who might be the child that we used to be. They are a metaphor for a certain openness or purity or curiosity before the world.

Cineaste: *So they are innocence and wisdom together?*

Wenders: They are like very old people, like the old man walking around the city who is almost a child again.

Cineaste: *What about the American angel?*

Wenders: He used to be an angel—he did the same thing Damien is doing before he decided to give it up. He exchanges eternity for a beautiful, short but exciting life. He likes his decision so much that he has become a kind of recruiter.

Cineaste: *How did you decide to use Peter Falk?*

Wenders: He is a very special person. I think this was already apparent in the *Columbo* TV series. I was never fond of much on television, but I thought that *Columbo* really exceeded the boundaries of that little box.

Cineaste: *Why is 1953 the date he came to earth?*

Wenders: He made it up himself. That was when he became an actor. He said he couldn't really refer to an earlier period, but everybody knows he had his first acting job in 1953.

Cineaste: *You've made many movies on the road, but the terrain in this film is much more symbolic, and more temporal. It's about memory and history more than physical space. Can you talk about the urban landscape of Berlin?*

Wenders: It is the first time I made a film in one place. I really used to think I was able to work only while I was on the road. It was scary to stay in one place. But it wasn't difficult at all, because there was a lot of other movement. There was a strange movement in time which felt almost like a journey. Of course, the film was not linear, like the other movies I've made, where there was an itinerary. They always had horizontal movements. *Wings of Desire* is my vertical road movie.

Cineaste: *Would you talk about your collaboration with Peter Handke?*

The angel Damiel (Bruno Ganz) ponders Berlin beneath him.





Daniel (Bruno Ganz) falls in love with Marion (Solvieg Dommartin) in *Wings of Desire*.

Wenders: I've known Peter for about twenty years, and he is one of my closest friends. He is really the only contemporary writer whose work I am close to and really understand and have been able to follow. When I had this crazy idea with the angels, I wasn't sure about my two page treatment of the idea. I called Peter to whom I hadn't spoken in two years. And Peter said, "I am exhausted, I just finished a novel. I'm not going to write anything for six months." I told him that I needed him, and that I really had called him because I hoped he could help me with these angels, that we could maybe do the script together. He didn't like that idea at all. He said, "I'm all written out. There is not a word left in me. The last thing I want is to be behind a typewriter." He was very adamant about it, but when he realized how disappointed I was, he said, "Come over and tell me about it at least. Maybe I can give you some advice."

I flew to Austria and told Peter everything I knew about this film. I think I got him hooked on the idea of the angels, and he agreed to work on some of the key scenes. He would write the angels' dialog, no more. That was where I felt I really needed help, because these guys had seen language arrive and get better and better and then deteriorate. So he thought they shouldn't speak like anybody else. They should certainly speak better German than I was able to write.

In the course of the next five weeks, I'd get an envelope at the end of each week with another scene or two. Strictly dialog, no description. We never talked again after that. Even when I got the envelopes, I didn't know where he was, and he only later saw the finished film. He wrote Marion's speech at the end, and the three scenes in which the angels meet. That was the backbone of the movie. For

the rest of it we were in the dark, trying to go from one island to another, and the lighthouses were Peter's dialogs.

Cineaste: You spoke of the need for creative control. How do you feel about collaborating so closely with someone who obviously had a great deal of influence in the creative outcome?

Wenders: I have complete trust in Peter. I knew that if he would do it, he was going to make a big effort. Peter understood right away where the idea of the angels came in and how much it had to do with the children, and the innocent view, and how much of it was a metaphor. The form of this thing was much more that of poetry than storytelling. What he wrote for the film is very poetic and really gave the film a lot of dignity.

Cineaste: How did having poetry as a structuring device for the film affect the way you made it?

Wenders: Well, there is also the poetry of its images. I did this film with Henri Alekan. For Cocteau he photographed *The Beauty and the Beast*, probably the most beautiful and poetic black and white film I know. That's his specialty—poetry. His lighting helped the film enormously to create a poetic universe.

On one hand, the angels and their world are strictly fantasy, poetic fantasy. On the other hand, there is almost a documentary aspect to the film. Two really opposite languages were brought together by Henri.

Cineaste: What direction do you want to take now?

Wenders: I don't know. There won't be any more angels. At the end of *Wings of Desire* I wrote, "To be continued." I felt the film ended with its beginning.

Cineaste: The science fiction film is a love story?

Wenders: Yes. ■