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Angels, Fiction and History in Berlin: Wim Wenders' Wings of Desire

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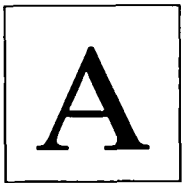
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Angels, Fiction and History in Berlin: Wim Wenders' *Wings of Desire*

ROGER COOK



As in the case of *The State of Things* (1981), the idea for *Wings of Desire* originated while Wim Wenders was working on another film. In 1981, a pause came in the midst of Wenders' most frustrating experiences with the American film industry: between the two shootings of *Hammett*. Drawing from his immediate experiences as a European filmmaker in Hollywood, in *The State of Things* he addresses the difficulty that the director and filmwriter face in maintaining their personal artistic vision when working within the system of profit-oriented Hollywood film production. The German director Friedrich Munro (Patrick Bachau) and the scriptwriter Dennis (Paul Getty III) run up against the Hollywood producer's attempts to control the final film product before the filmmaking even begins. In Wenders' own experience making *Hammett*, the producer Francis Ford Coppola experimented with a computerized video version of the complete film (as did the producer in *The State of Things*) that was to serve as a model for the shooting. The attempt ended with the script, and almost the computer as well, flying out the window.¹

Wings of Desire is not, of course, about the filmmaking process, but the lessons that Wenders learned in America help explain the film's unique composition. Wenders has stated that in making *The State of Things* he worked through his conviction that each film should reflect its own place within a certain tradition of filmmaking. He became less concerned with critical self-reflexivity and more intent on making films that through the strength of their story and narrative form work against the grain of contemporary dominant cinema.² In his work on *Hammett*, Wenders learned that in order to make such films the filmmaker needed to oppose the forces of the film industry at every stage of the project. The intensive negotiations and preparations during the production work for *Hammett* predetermined too rigidly what the film would be and how the director should

shoot it. Coppola, acting on behalf of Orion Studios, radically altered the script by Tom Pope so that it better conformed to the conventional Hollywood detective genre. Yet Wenders knew that his experiences with Coppola were only the tip of an ominous iceberg. The American film industry was becoming almost exclusively interested in existing or "prefabricated" story lines that are already known to the public and that would fill both the audience's expectations and the network of mainstream commercial movie theaters throughout the country.³

The lesson Wenders learned from the making of *Hammett* concerns, however, not only interference by the producer and the studio. He came away with the conviction that the original concept for the film should remain open so that during the filmmaking the director can discover and incorporate into the film new images and ways of seeing. Perhaps more so than in his other films, Wenders remained true to this principle—which he later referred to as his "Arbeitsmethode" for the film⁴—in the making of *Wings of Desire*. Certainly in his road movies of the '70s, particularly *Alice in the Cities* and *Kings of the Road*, he left himself considerable leeway for the shooting of individual scenes. But with his new resolve to tell stories, it became more difficult to balance the advantages of an open, evolutionary filmmaking method against the need to plan the narrative.

The inspiration for *Wings of Desire* came in 1985 when Wenders returned to Berlin to work on the long-standing film project *Bis ans Ende der Welt*. As it became obvious that the preparations for this film would take up to another two years, after a gap of already three years since his last filming, Wenders felt the need to get behind the camera again. After living outside Germany for most of ten years, he returned to Germany with open eyes and aroused curiosity.⁵ Sensing the importance of Berlin both as a bridge to the past and as a pivotal city for peaceful coexistence in the world,⁶ he arrived at the idea for the film: angels living in Berlin preserve the memory and even presence of Germany's his-

tory, while helping the inhabitants bear the burden of their nation's past.

Realizing that an effective poetic language would be essential for the angels' speech, he turned to Peter Handke for a script. Handke agreed to write a number of dialogues based on the story, on the condition that the film would evolve extemporaneously ("ein Film, 'den man aus dem Ärmel schüttelt'") and that he would not have to come up with a complete script. This offer fell neatly into place with Wenders' approach to the film. As Wenders began planning out a succession of scenes, Handke worked on the dialogues and sent them on as he completed them. By the time he began receiving the scripts, Wenders was far along in his preparations for the shooting. He soon realized that, because of the separate input, the film was in danger of becoming too amorphous. Acknowledging that Handke's dialogues followed a single concept more consistently than his own arrangement of shots and scenes, Wenders let the text serve as the guiding light ("Leuchttürme") as the film evolved. Each evening, he met with his co-workers, often late into the night, to work out the details for the next day's shooting, and only occasionally as far ahead as the following day.

Given this course of inception, it comes as no surprise that the final product departs in some ways from the original concept. In his work notes or "Treatment" for the film, Wenders wrote that if he had to give a preliminary summary of the story, it would go something like this:

When God, angered by mankind's inability to learn from the past, was about to leave humanity on its own in 1945, some of the angels intervened, pleading that mankind should have one more chance to redeem itself. Angered by this intervention, God banished these angels from heaven, exiling them to the desolation of Berlin in 1945. There they were doomed only to observe the follies of human existence, unable to intervene in the course of events.⁹

However, in the film this woeful plight of the angels in Berlin does not dominate the story in the way that the original sketch suggests. Although *Wings of Desire* does not offer a cheerful portrait of the city or its inhabitants, it is also neither depressing nor pessimistic. Quite to the contrary, it generates pleasure and gives, as the English title suggests, wings to desire.

Due, I think, to both this "Arbeitsmethode" as well as to his commitment to narrative filmmaking, *Wings of Desire* became much more than the film that Wenders originally had in mind. From a love story set in a Berlin inhabited by fallen angels, it evolved into a film that investigates the role narrative plays in the formation both of individual identity as well as of the national identity of psychically scarred Germany. Moreover, the film suggests that contemporary cinema needs a new form of

epic narrative in order to participate in this process of identity formation.

In my analysis of the film, I will first chart how the film's aesthetic strategies and, in particular, the techniques employed to create the angels' point of view situate the viewing subject within the filmic discourse differently from dominant cinema. Then, I will argue that Wenders incorporates into the story of Daniel and Marion his conviction that, within a sea of textuality, narrative provides the individual a lifeline to authentic needs and desires. *Wings of Desire* offers such a narrative, one that is to activate desire in the spectator while, at the same time, involving the audience in an analysis of desire in cinematic narrative. In the final section, I will show how Wenders' call for a new narrative relates to the city of Berlin and the German history it embodies. In this connection, the film speaks not just to problems of recent German history, but to the concept of historical perspective itself.

SUTURE AND THE DESIRE FOR NARRATIVE

Using the concept of *suture*, film theory explains narrative closure not just in terms of the film and its formal construction, but rather as a process of drawing in and enclosing the viewing subject in the film's textual system. The filmic concept stems from Lacan's account of how in the individual psyche a coherent, unified subject is "sutured" within a symbolic order structured by desire and governed by language. By applying this basic operation of identity formation to the cinematic apparatus, psychoanalytical approaches to cinema have provided insight into the emotional and psychological processes that motivate the spectator's investment in a narrative. Beginning with Jean-Pierre Oudart's article "La suture,"¹⁰ the writers associated with *Cahiers du Cinema* first introduced suture into film theory. In the mid-'70s, the concept began to play a major role in the theoretical discussions in Britain and North America, with the result that psychoanalytical studies of the viewing subject have proliferated. In my reading of *Wings of Desire*, I borrow from several theoreticians of suture, including some who have been at odds with each other concerning the scope and consequence of this concept.

Although my reading of *Wings of Desire* certainly owes much to the French scholars, claims I make concerning Wenders' film run counter to the original polemical thrust of their work. For them, suture denotes the operation by which cinema encloses the subject in ideology. Their analysis bears primarily on dominant Hollywood cinema, and they restrict the scope of suture to the ideological effacement of the cinematic code. They are reductive as well with respect to the semiotic system of suturing, positing at times the shot/reverse-shot system or point-of-view cutting as the fundamental

cinematic articulation of suture. Other French film theoreticians who complement a general semiotics of cinema with Lacanian notions of the subject and signification, such as Christian Metz and Jean-Louis Baudry, have avoided such a rigid application of suture to the cinematic apparatus and, nevertheless, have arrived at the even more pessimistic conclusion that cinema itself functions as a support and instrument of ideology.¹¹

Anglo-American film scholars have expanded on these psychoanalytical theories of cinema without sharing their negative assessment of the basic cinematic apparatus.¹² However, such challenges to the original French position on cinema and ideology have pertained for the most part only to films that resist closure and foreground lack and alienation. Thomas Elsaesser's 1980 article on Fassbinder is an important example of such criticism in the area of German cinema. Focusing on Fassbinder, but also claiming relevance for New German Cinema in general (mentioning by name Herzog, Wenders, Syberberg, and Kluge), Elsaesser responds to the more radical conclusions drawn by Baudry and Metz. He rejects their implication that "the cinema is indeed an 'invention without a future' because it systematically ties the spectator to a regressive state, in an endless circuit of substitution and fetishization."¹³

Nevertheless, suture as well as narrative closure of any kind has remained ideologically suspect. *Wings of Desire* provides, I think, an excellent opportunity to reexamine this bias that, in the wake of Oudart and his successors, persists against identification and narrative (closure). In the discussion of suture, the emphasis has been on processes of identification that position the viewing subject within the filmic discourse so as to conceal enunciation. For this reason, theoreticians of suture have focused heavily on classical editing strategies. The term itself is particularly well suited to dominant cinematic narrative because the filmmaker, at least in most productions of dominant cinema, stitches together a series of partial disclosures with the intention of concealing their discontinuity and disjunctures. On one hand, the camera is unable to disclose the desired perspectives on the story without cutting and splicing, but the cuts also intentionally limit the camera's potential to "see." The constant breaks in the camera's vision produce subliminal anxiety and stir a longing in the spectator to see more, to have more disclosed. The subject, made aware of its inadequacy, seeks a secure position in the filmic discourse that conceals the lack.¹⁴

As the basic operation of subject formation in the individual, suture is always occurring in the viewing subject and thus within the cinematic apparatus that envelops the spectator.¹⁵ However, I propose to show that the textual system in *Wings of Desire* sets the conditions for suture differently than do narrative films of dominant cinema. Not only is the investment of desire motivated less by lack and anxiety, but when narrative closure oc-

curs, the sutured subject maintains more autonomy from any invisible, transcendental Other that controls the powers of enunciation.

As is usually the case in Wenders' films, in *Wings of Desire* the camera follows, at least during the black-and-white part of the film, the protagonist, and in this case both the main figure Daniel and, to a lesser extent, his companion angel Cassiel. Because the protagonists are angels, Wenders had to establish a radically new point of view for the camera, one unique not only to his own work but to cinematic narrative in general. Locating the camera as the eye of an angel presented constant challenges during the shooting and resulted in innovative solutions, particularly in terms of the camera movement, which was to give the illusion of unlimited movement through space and time.¹⁶ It also altered dramatically the emotional interaction between the spectator and the film. Instead of intentionally arousing anxiety, the film put the spectator at ease. In part, the camera's consistent look from the point of view of the angels created this effect, but Wenders has maintained that even more important than all the camera movement was the effort to create a benevolent look ("einen liebevollen Blick") for the eye of the camera.¹⁷

On another level, the angels' point of view limits the system of interdiegetic looks in a way that enhances the viewing subject's sense of security. The initial shot/reverse-shot sequence occurs with Daniel, complete with wings, standing on the tower of the Gedächtniskirche. From his perspective, we see a young girl below who has stopped in the middle of the crowded crosswalk and is looking up at him, while the adults go about their business without seeing him. This shot and the subsequent ones of the two girls on the bus and the child on the airplane establish that the protagonist is invisible except to children and angels. The unthreatened and unthreatening looks that the children direct at the angels, many of them straight into the camera, mirror the benevolence in the look of the angels. The limited visibility of the angels exposes the viewing subject, which has assumed Daniel's point of view, only to such harmless looks, sheltering it from the often critical or even malicious looks of mature humans. Moreover, after this first shot/reverse-shot that establishes the visibility of the observer angels, Wenders avoids point-of-view cutting for the black-and-white part of the film in which Daniel remains an angel.

The technical measures needed to establish the camera as the eye of the angels contribute to the spectator's feeling of security but also create a unique relationship between the viewing subject and the transcendental point of view that unifies the images into a "film." Baudry argues that the relationship between the camera and the subject determines the nature of the transcendental self,¹⁸ that illusory unity in a filmic discourse that constitutes the spectator as a coherent "subject" in its

own image. In dominant cinema, the cuts between different points of view are pieced together so as to generate an "ideal picture"¹⁹ of the film as reality. In *Wings of Desire*, Wenders shot predominantly from a single point of view, employing long takes and extensive camera movement to establish the narrative space normally achieved by editing together different point-of-view shots. Although the beginning scenes clearly align the spectator with Daniel's point of view, the film offers at the same time a degree of freedom to go along with this identification. With the aid of Henri Alekan, the octogenarian cinematographer who cut his teeth in the '20s working with Eugene Schüfftan, Wenders produces a free-floating camera, a modern version of "the unchained camera" ("die entfesselte Kamera") introduced by F. W. Murnau.²⁰ In the sequence that begins in the airplane, Wenders utilizes the mobile camera to establish the angelic point of view of the protagonist. From the aisle of the airplane approaching Berlin, the camera assumes Daniel's point of view as he turns away from the passengers to look out the window of the plane. After an aerial shot of Berlin, the camera frees itself from the confines of the plane, moves through the clouds, passes the radio tower looming over Berlin, picking up a few seconds of the broadcast as it passes, and descends across the freeway toward the adjoining apartment buildings. The illusion of no physical limitations clearly identifies the camera lens with the vision of angels. As the camera moves freely through the walls of the apartments, the motion remains fluid and seamless, even when the rooms are obviously not next to each other. Throughout the film, the camera moves with the spatial—both vertical and horizontal—and temporal freedom of the ethereal angels. It ascends effortlessly onto Victoria's winged shoulder atop the *Siegessäule* and on into the skies above Berlin; it travels back into time with Daniel and Cassiel to view the prehistoric Berlin landscape; and it traverses the physical but also psychic barrier that splits apart the divided *Hauptstadt* of the German nation.

The very nature of the angelic point of view already implies in itself the transcendental position that in dominant cinematic discourse must be sutured out of the successive moments of shot/reverse-shot sequencing in point-of-view cutting. From the beginning, the spectator identifies "primarily"²¹ with the transcendental point of view secured for it, assuming at times a perspective identical to Daniel's, at other times one similarly defined but independent of his. The moment of lack, the knowledge that the camera perspective implies an "Absent One" that must appear in the frame (e.g., in the reverse-shot) in order to suture over the absence, is thus minimized in *Wings of Desire*. The conscious assumption of the angels' point of view reduces the need for successive, complementary shots. In fact, the elated feeling gained in the most fluid moments of the un-

chained camera recall Oudart's equation of the initial shot, prior to the awareness of the restricting frame-lines, with "the field of *jouissance*."²² Particularly the initial sequences of the angels' movements give the sense that such framing lines do not exist or are continually receding away from the look of the spectator.

Yet, even if the Absent One loses its power over the viewing subject, other dominant forms of secondary identification take hold and provide positions of representational unity. British and American theoreticians, building on the work of the French, have analyzed how film narrative sutures over the lack and inadequacies that surface in the viewing subject.²³ Kaja Silverman describes how the gaze of the spectator tends to link itself to the look of a fictional character that promises more control over the fragmented series of images. Typically, one or more fictional characters within the diegesis are endowed with the controlling and enunciating powers of the Other outside the fiction, so as to provide an anchor for the spectator's point of view and, also potentially, to conceal the enunciating moment outside the film. Usually when the spectator seeks out a figure in the diegesis with enunciatory, controlling powers for a "stand-in" relationship, he/she relinquishes to some extent the authority to organize and structure the film images into a story.²⁴

In *Wings of Desire*, the viewing subject clearly situates itself parallel to Daniel and Cassiel. The angels lack, however, precisely that power of authorship and enunciation that characterizes the typical "stand-in" point of view. In the first dialogue between Daniel and Cassiel, they pull out their notebooks and exchange recent observations on out-of-the-ordinary, yet uneventful occurrences in Berlin: "An der U-Bahn-Station Zoo rief der Beamte statt des Stationsnamens plötzlich das 'Feuerland' aus! . . . Eine Passantin, die mitten im Regen den Schirm zusammenklappte und sich naß werden ließ . . . Ein Schüler, der seinem Lehrer beschrieb, wie ein Farn aus der Erde wächst, und der staunende Lehrer . . ."²⁵ Because these simple events are defamiliarized and are made to stand alone outside of their normal context in everyday existence, each points to a whole life story of epic proportions that lies behind it. But the angels can only observe and record them as isolated incidents and are unable to place them in a larger narrative context in which they would gain a particular significance. As angels, they are endowed with a universal vision of human existence in the present and back into the past, but they lack a past of their own and thus any individual investment in the future. They can neither write history nor tell stories. While Daniel, who is beginning to feel the pull of existence, bemoans this, Cassiel accepts it as their place in the world:

Daniel: Es ist herrlich, nur geistig zu leben und Tag für Tag für die Ewigkeit von den Leuten rein, was geistig ist, zu bezeugen.

gen—aber manchmal wird mir meine ewige Existenz zuviel. (19) . . .

Cassiel: Allein bleiben! Geschehen lassen! Ernst bleiben! Wild können wir nur in dem Maß sein, wie wir unbedingt ernst bleiben. Nichts weiter tun als anschauen, sammeln, bezeugen, beglaubigen, wahren! Geist bleiben! Im Abstand bleiben! Im Wort bleiben! (21)

They exist detached from mankind without any stake in what happens (“unbedingt”). Nor can they influence human life (“Geschehen lassen!”), except for their ability to offer a modicum of consolation. Fixed in this form of existence, they lack in every sense the controlling voice and power of the author.

As long as the camera maintains strictly the angels’ point of view, the viewing subject retains a certain amount of autonomy from the narrativization process. *Wings of Desire* fosters this sense of autonomy in the spectator by delaying narrative closure until the viewing subject has learned to relish its maneuverability and depend on its own faculty for creating stories. Because the primary forms of identification discussed above quell the anxious urgency to be sutured within a closed narrative, the spectator can revel in the fragmentary open scenes as the camera moves through Berlin, picking up seemingly arbitrary moments of everyday life as well as snippets of interior monologue. Nevertheless, the spectator tends to become irritated as this free-floating position, without anchor in a controlling narrative, persists. This does indeed occur, I think, in the first third of the film. The spectator conditioned by dominant cinema becomes restless, impatient for the narrative control to assert itself. In this way, the film arouses in the viewing subject a desire for narrative, which it then foregrounds in the story of Daniel’s entry into human existence. Thus, with respect to the spectator’s expectations and desires, the sense of autonomy from narrative is an illusion from the beginning.

Also, the impression during the early part of the film that there is no controlling narrative unifying the various scenes and images is deceptive. For as soon as Daniel senses the urge to experience physical existence, his look loses its objective distance and the film story begins to unfold—before we as spectators are aware of it. Marion, despite her affinities to Daniel, appears first as just another figure encountered by chance in the wanderings through Berlin. Her long interior monologue, which begins with her on the trapeze and continues until the climactic color image in the trailer, reveals how interlocked she and Daniel are by their desires. In this first encounter, her thoughts suggest the leitmotif refrain, “Als das Kind Kind war,” which at the beginning of the film Daniel had already repeated several times in voice-over: “Als ich ein Kind war, wollte ich auf einer Insel leben. Eine Frau allein, machtvoll, allein” (44). But only much later, during the dream sequence, does she speak a

complete stanza of the voiceover poem. Throughout the initial sequence with Marion, desires build in Daniel and subconsciously in the spectator as well. The camera remains objective, with both Daniel and Marion included in most of the shots, until she begins to take off her costume. Daniel, who in the foreground of the frame has had his back to her, turns while the camera moves in to assume his subjective point of view and looks down over her bare shoulder. First, the one hand comes into view, stroking along her neck and shoulder; then the camera turns with Daniel’s look to view the left hand holding the stone that he has picked up in her trailer and is now turning over repeatedly in his hand, as if trying to come to a decision. Both these actions recall his first conversation with Cassiel in the Kudamm automobile showroom, where he had expressed his longing to experience the sensation of weight or to be moved by the graceful form of a neckline. During this sequence, Marion’s interior voice echoes Daniel’s desire as it has been captured in the camera: “Ich muß nur bereit sein, und jeder Mann der Welt wird mich anschauen. Sehnsucht. Sehnsucht nach einer Welle von Liebe, die in mir emporstiege” (49). Daniel’s hand pulls back out of the frame, and the camera retreats to a full shot of Marion sitting on the bed. For a few seconds, the image turns to color, not only signaling Daniel’s arousal to sensuality, but also arousing the same longing in the spectator.

This first scene with Marion serves to extend the identification with the angelic perspective to the realm of desire. The significance of this scene for the film story becomes evident once one has seen the entire film, but in the course of the initial viewing Daniel’s desire remains apart from any narrative scenario. Wenders has asserted that “in a way she [Marion] is the leading character, as she is the only human being in it from the beginning.”²⁶ Based on my viewing of the film, I doubt whether Marion assumes for the spectator, at least consciously, such a central role in the narrative until much later. Apparently, this is due less to Wenders’ intentions than to the way that the film’s structure evolved during the shooting. Even after Marion’s voice-over expression of intimate fears and desires, the spectator remains uncertain whether Marion will play a more involved role in the film or will remain just another one of those figures whose paths chance to cross with that of the angels. After the trailer scene, the film returns to its fascination with the diverse observations from the angels’ point of view. A long sequence of wanderings through Berlin East and West follows the scene in the trailer. The dying motorcyclist, the old narrator reading in the library and seeking the Potsdamer Platz, the prostitute on the street, the chauffeured drive through Berlin of both the present and 1945, the extended sequence with Peter Falk on location, all intervene before Daniel takes his angel companion Cassiel with him to the afternoon circus performance. Another such long sequence occurs before he

then returns for the third encounter with Marion at the evening performance.

While Daniel slowly moves toward his decision “to leap into the stream,” the desire for a narrative wells up in the spectator. The trailer scene aligns the erotic desire for Marion not only with Daniel’s longing to enter the physical realm, but also with the spectator’s need to become invested emotionally in a fictional world. This occurs even while the desire for a narrative is growing. For just as Daniel’s quest for Marion had begun long before he becomes flesh and blood, so too the spectator becomes firmly engaged in a cinematic story line before the film shifts permanently to color and assumes a linear narrative structure. Still, the fragments of dialogue and interior monologue encountered haphazardly in the extraneous wanderings through Berlin reinforce a more autonomous involvement in the narrative development. Because these texts stand alone, outside of any unifying narrative context, the spectator gains some freedom from the cognitive impulse to explain the significance of every shot or spoken text in the film. At one point, it becomes impossible to fit all the text fragments into a comprehensive whole that provides each of its parts with a specific, clearly deducible significance.

Although apparently only coincidentally encountered verbal acts, the conversations, the overheard thoughts or the passages read in the library spur the spectator—even in the fleeting moment before the next text—to start piecing together each “extra’s” story. These repeated beginnings activate the audience’s participation in constructing the narrative. As in other Wenders’ movies, particularly the purer road movies like *Alice in the Cities* and *Kings of the Road*, the spectator must complete the film by adding personal experiences and associations. Wenders has stated that this is the kind of movie he himself likes and the kind he wants to make: “I really don’t like so much the sort of movie where it’s all spread out and you really just sit there and it’s poured over you and you have no choice: you see what they want you to see.”²⁷ In a fashion similar to his road movies, the spectator experiences along with the protagonist(s) and creates the film from a never identical but always comparable point of view. However, because in *Wings of Desire* the camera becomes the eye (and ears) of an angel, the visual and verbal texts flow by at a speed that does not allow the spectator even to pick up all of them, much less to form out of them one big story. Nor do the angels produce a narrative out of the stream of history, for this is not *their* domain but that of humans. Eventually the spectator must give in, not to pre-packaged cinematic narrative of the type Wenders abhors but rather to the flow itself. The spectator who does not become frustrated by this overload is compelled to sit back and let the words flow past, content with picking up those lyrical fragments that strike up a meaningful chord. In this manner, the film generates

between itself and the spectator a relaxed relationship, but one charged with needs, those expressed by the downtrodden Berliners and shared in a personal way by the spectator, and with the growing desire, in Daniel and in the spectator, to be anchored in a story.

The choice of individual texts within the flow of voice-over seems arbitrary, at least with respect to their function for the overall narrative structure. But on another level, these texts reflect on Wenders’ aesthetic strategies in a quite intricate manner. Above all, we detect the filmmaker’s intentions in the thoughts of Homer, the mournful old Berliner who represents the archetypal epic narrator. In the first scene in the library, Daniel strolls through the aisles, overhearing the silent reading of seventeen quite varied texts, until he encounters Homer climbing the stairs. As the aged storyteller pauses to catch his breath on the landing, we hear his thoughts: “Meine Zuhörer sind mit der Zeit zu Lesern geworden, und sie sitzen nicht mehr im Kreis, sondern für sich, und einer weiß nichts vom andern” (30). His lamentation reflects not his own desire for gratification, but rather the needs of the readers. Only in the library do we see angels other than Daniel and Cassiel, and here they are numerous, all actively consoling the isolated readers. On one hand, this peaceful temple for the preservation of books and the solace of reading, the modern and bright Berlin public library, serves as a home and refuge for the angels. Wenders indicated that the idea for the library scenes stemmed from the end of Truffaut’s *Fahrenheit 451*, where the preservers of knowledge and culture wander through an idyllic park, each learning a book by heart.²⁸ Although the library setting provides a refuge for the angels, Homer’s words suggest that the relationship in our contemporary world between the reader and text is deficient with regard to individual needs and desires. The readers sit isolated from each other, and the texts they read are fragments of an ever-expanding body of knowledge that overwhelms the individual and thwarts attempts to find a larger meaning in our existence.

For Wenders, film has become the contemporary medium for a narrative that can create new myths. Homer, who complains in a later scene that as the archetypal epic narrator he has been stripped of his voice, regains his important role in the film. Ironically, however, he is no longer the narrative voice itself, but rather he speaks the self-referential commentary on the need for a new narrative form. In his thoughts on the landing, Homer reassures himself that an age-old narrative still strikes up of its own accord out of the depths, with the narrator functioning only as its mouthpiece, not its creator. He describes such a text as “eine Liturgie, bei der niemand eingeweiht zu sein braucht, wie die Wörter und Sätze gemeint sind” (31). This describes how the film and the narrative it envisions differ from the discursive practice encountered in the library. There the reader steeped in

conventional hermeneutical methods struggles to grasp the meaning of the text, to place it in relation to a world of meaning that lies outside it. The concrete or poetical presence of the text is abandoned for the world behind it. In keeping with Homer's account, *Wings of Desire* itself comprises a liturgy of freely flowing images and texts, whose rhapsodical enchantment eases the ingrained resolve to get at what the film means. Also, texts have at times a similar effect on figures within the diegesis. At one point, Daniel actually performs a liturgy that leads the inner voice of a dying motorcyclist away from his fear of death and into a stream of isolated experiences, phrases or concepts: "Wie ich bergauf ging und aus dem Talnebel Sonne kam/Das Feuer am Rande der Viehweide/Die Kartoffeln in der Asche/Das Bootshaus weit draußen am See/Der ferne Osten/Der hohe Norden/Der Wilde Westen . . ." (52–53). This liturgy stills the fear of death by restoring in some way contact to an authentic, almost primordial level of existence.

The thrust of the film is not, however, simply to defamiliarize in this way everyday experiences. Rather both the film story and the voice-over comments suggest repeatedly that a narrative context is necessary to impart meaning to isolated moments of existence. Although motivated by different pasts, both Daniel and Marion are searching for a life story or individual vision that can sustain them. The key to their dual quest, and thus to the film itself, lies in their ability to form out of their experiences a life story that accommodates their own needs and desires. The first step to such an authentic, unappropriated narrative entails taking language and images out of their predominant contexts and stripping them of the significance that they usually carry. The film itself performs this function for the spectator as well, in that throughout the first half and more of the film we see everything through the eyes of the angels, who only observe and record from a standpoint outside of the world of human interests. In order to actually give flight to their desires, Daniel and Marion must take the second step and regroup the defamiliarized fragments of their existence into their own individual life stories, and, within the context of their love story, into a shared life story as well. Thus, the main film story of Daniel's "fall" raises the question of the integral role narrative plays in human existence, whereas the filmic creation of the angels' point of view involves the spectator in both the desire for a narrative context as well as the contextual freedom for beginning anew.

NARRATIVE AND THE TEXTUALITY OF DESIRE

The description of the film's aesthetic offered above calls to mind the literary theories of German Romanticism. The defamiliarizing look of the camera in *Wings of Desire* has less to do with Brechtian distancing than

with Novalis' notion of "romanticizing the world." Similarly, the film reflects not only the process of defamiliarization, but also Novalis' maxim that life should not be something we encounter but a novel that we write ourselves. However, before making any hasty conclusions about suspect neo-romantic tendencies in Wenders, one should see this aesthetic approach in the context of cinema and Wenders' experiences as filmmaker.

During his work in America, Wenders came to the conclusion that a new narrative cinema must establish itself against the growing dominance of industry-produced films. In 1982, while finishing up the last editing on *Hammett*, he addressed this problem in *Reverse Angle*, a short film made for French television. Including shots from American television, typical advertising images, and some scenes of the editing work on *Hammett*, he documents how predominantly media-produced images and perspectives increasingly dominate not only the filmmaker but the public vision itself. He explains how this awareness led to a fundamental change in his own filmmaking. No longer able to trust images to stand on their own, he had to find stories that through the strength of their constructed (narrative) context give the film images a new meaning over and against the dominant, media-induced way of seeing them.

At that time, he remained skeptical about the potential of narrative cinema. He felt that neither European cinema nor the *auteur* filmmaker has been able to produce more than isolated subjective stories, whereas the need has become greater for an alternative collective filmmaking in opposition to Hollywood. For Wenders, the great classical American cinema of the past had created a form of collective narrative capable of creating life-sustaining myths. He felt that in response to a Hollywood now under the control of a self-propagating media industry, filmmakers would have to work toward a new collective cinema with roots in both authentic individual experience and the age-old traditions of epic narrative. Already in 1982, well before he had conceived of *Wings of Desire*, Wenders had begun to focus on Homer and his epic narrative as a model for the role stories would play in his future films: ". . . im Kino will Geschichten-Erzählen auch ein Wiedererkennen provozieren und durch die Form eine Ordnung in die Kakophonie von Eindrücken bringen. Das Bedürfnis für Geschichten, seit dem Homer, den ich jetzt lese, ist es doch auch: zu hören, daß man Zusammenhänge herstellen kann. Es ist ein Bedürfnis nach Zusammenhängen, weil die Menschen eigentlich wenig Zusammenhängendes erleben."²⁹ In the same interview, he asserted the commitment to narrative filmmaking that led first to *Paris, Texas* and then to *Wings of Desire*:

Da möchte ich wieder ein Erzählen versuchen, das ganz rabiat und ganz selbstsicher den Bezug von Filmsprache auf das Leben hernimmt . . . Damit man eben das Feld nicht den großen

Spektakel-Filmen überläßt, sondern ganz selbstbewußt hingeht und Geschichten erzählt—ohne das Bedauern oder den Rückblick auf das schöne Geschichten-Erzählen, das es früher mal im Kino gab. Nach vornehin erzählen, das will ich.

Wings of Desire does indeed envelop the spectator in a unifying context, but in the course of this narrativization it also opens up to scrutiny the discursive act of narrative closure. The central story itself, Daniel's abandonment of his spiritual existence as angel and his entry into the stream of history, represents allegorically the role narrative plays for Wenders. When Daniel becomes flesh and blood, the film begins to resemble a typical romance. The love story that has Daniel and Marion searching for each other stands as a diegesis of its own within the film. The wandering continues but becomes twofold and takes on purpose and direction. Even Marion, who, as she confides to Peter Falk, "knows nothing" about the man she is searching for, begins as well to move unswervingly toward the dramatic *rendez-vous*. The spectator, whose look in the first part of the film had coincided with that of Daniel's in a more freely associative way, now becomes involved in a more conventional process of suture. Nonetheless, the viewing subject, conditioned by the autonomous stand-in position assumed up to this point, acts not out of anxiety, but rather shared desires. The change to color stock enhances the sensual pleasure and the identification with the characters' desires, at the same time signaling that the film has begun to conform more to the structures of conventional linear narrative. The evolving narrative reflects itself as cinematic love story at every step, without becoming self-parody, even when the climactic scene—from the lavishly decorated barroom, including a bucket of champagne on the bar, to Marion's passionately red dress and matching lipstick—says to the spectator at every turn: "this is a romantic scene in a movie." Thus, the film both draws attention to the way desire is generated in cinema and induces the spectator to take the investment of desire seriously.

The film also, even after it has become a romantic narrative, eschews the male-female roles of the conventional love story. Marion's voice-overs give the audience access to her innermost subjectivity and dispel the mystique that typically shrouds the female inner world. When the circus packs up and leaves, we see Marion, in obvious juxtaposition to the "fictional" persona of the beautiful trapeze artist, as an ordinary person in unassuming dress. Particularly in the scene with Peter Falk at the *Imbißbude*, she comes across neither as a circus beauty nor as a movie star but rather as demystified woman, as an individual in a common everyday context. Daniel as well, even at the height of the romantic fiction, never falls into the role of the typical male lead in a romance. Even though his search for Marion is his only goal once he becomes human, he does not act like the

lovestruck male obsessed by a woman. Although the "bewitched" male of a love story often loses the ability to function normally or even to hold onto reality, Daniel remains wide awake to the world, eager to perceive and experience as much as he can with his newly gained senses. Nor is this the story of a fallen angel, one seduced out of a pure spiritual world into the realm of the senses. Even on the morning after they have consummated their love, Daniel's choice stands as the gateway to an inspiring and rewarding journey. The negativity embodied by the woman in the male-female relationship, which often exists as subtext even in the love story with happy ending, does not appear in *Wings of Desire* at all.

The departure from conventional patterns of romance corresponds to the object of desire that motivates both Marion and Daniel. She exhibits the same desire that leads Daniel to cast his lot with mankind. At the end of the closing night party at the circus, she expresses her resolve to keep alive a guiding narrative informed by her own desires: "Einfach sagen können, wie jetzt gerade: 'Ich bin vergnügt.' Ich habe eine Geschichte! Und ich werde weiter eine haben!" She utters these words in response to an internal crisis spawned by the closing of the circus and the loss of the fictional role of the beautiful woman on the flying trapeze. Her identity crisis peaks as she sits at her dressing table in front of the three-paneled mirror before her final performance. There she asserts: "Manchmal das einzig Wichtige: schön zu sein, und sonst gar nichts" (98). In a wording that recalls an enduring figure of the German screen, the self-contained *femme fatale* of *Der blaue Engel*, Marion reveals how the fictional persona of the trapeze artist provides an anchor for her desires and needs. It is Marion's longing for her own self-sustaining story that attracts Daniel to her and ultimately inspires him to become human. When Daniel first encountered her, she had just lost the fictive role of angel that had enabled her to share such desires with the circus spectators.

The love story climaxes in Marion's speech to Daniel, the moment Wenders has called "the climax of the whole film."³⁰ Her words, and just the act of the woman speaking them in this context, not only break with the patterns of male-female speech in dominant cinema,³¹ but also counteract more familiar processes of suture that might have begun. Although during the first half of the film Wenders had secured an alternative space for the viewing subject, as the spectator gets drawn into the love story conventional patterns of identification begin to form. After Daniel becomes human, the narrative provides within the diegesis a sheltered, invisible and more familiar position that effaces the affirmative, active and self-aware viewing subject generated earlier. The encounter in the barroom undoes this conventional suture dramatically. The camera reflects the gaze of the spectator back at the intercinematic system

of gazes and desires at work both within and outside the diegesis. During Marion's final monologue, the camera catches in successive close-ups of the lovers' faces the intense gaze into the other's eyes. In direct violation of a cardinal rule of classical cinema, the gaze as well as the words of the final two speeches are directed simultaneously at the other and at the spectator. Their eyes do not look past the lens into the eyes of the other next to the camera, but directly into the camera. As the spectator is situated alternately in the place of the man and the woman, the viewing subject becomes acutely aware of the look focused on it. The invisibility granted the viewing subject via suture in Hollywood cinema is destroyed.³²

As the one who at the climactic moment in the love story puts the significance of their relationship into words, Marion takes control of her life (story) and becomes at the same time the figure in the diegesis endowed with the powers of authorial enunciation. During the successive close-ups, her words comment on how cinema draws the spectator into its sphere: "Nicht nur die ganze Stadt, die ganze Welt nimmt gerade teil an unserer Entscheidung. Wir zwei sind jetzt mehr als nur zwei. Wir verkörpern etwas. Wir sitzen auf dem Platz des Volkes, und der ganze Platz ist voll von Leuten, die sich dasselbe wünschen wie wir. Wir bestimmen das Spiel für alle!" (162). Her words here provide insight into the relationship at that very moment between the spectator and the fictional figures in *Wings of Desire*. Just as Marion and Daniel are gazing into the eyes of the other who signifies their desire, we, the spectators, gaze at the film and find our look and our desire mirrored by the camera. No longer are just the two intradiegetic players involved in the play; rather the reciprocal close-ups create a triad of looks that includes the audience. Also the locus for the scene "der Platz des Volkes," as Marion calls it, extends outside the narrative or intradiegetic space and encompasses all those who view the film (and is not restricted to just those in the theater at that moment). It is a space in-between the narrative projected on the screen and the physical presence of the audience, and one charged with the desires of both the fictional film figures and the spectators in the theater.

What Marion, Daniel, and the spectator share is the need for a life-sustaining fiction. Marion's struggle for identity reflects this need, but it is also at the very heart of the main event in the film story—Daniel's crossover into mankind. When Cassiel, after his jaunt together with Daniel back into history, asks whether he really intends to become human, Daniel replies: "Ja. Mir selber eine Geschichte erstreiten" (84). In the context of the film story, we understand that because of his belated birth he must invent a background for himself. But in the larger thematic context, this refers to the personal need for one's own life history as well as to the fictionality involved in any version of history. Life as a

human differs from the free-floating spiritual existence of the angels not only because of its grounding in a specific concrete physical past, but also because our vision or story of that past is what motivates our decisions and shapes our future. When Daniel enters history, the story of his past begins to determine his life, even if it is a purely fictional creation. For this reason, I do not agree with Wenders' remark in an interview that Peter Falk's reference to his grandmother was completely out of place ("verkehrt").³³ The references to a grandmother who logically cannot exist does not disturb the spectator in the least, not simply because the entire story suspends realistic expectations, but rather because human existence would dictate that he create his own life story with a past.

Yet Daniel does not pursue a life story of his own only in order to complement his physical existence. Rather from the very beginning, it is his desire to live in the state of human fictionality/textuality that leads him to "leap into the stream" of physical existence. He does not succumb to the lure of sensual pleasures; rather he is attracted to the stream of images in the human world of representations. As Daniel proclaims in the final monologue, spoken while Marion performs the figure of the siren on the rope above him, their desire has conceived not a mortal child but an immortal collective image: "Das Bild, das wir gezeugt haben, wird das Begleitbild meines Sterbens sein. Ich werde darin gelebt haben" (167). When Daniel chose to step into the stream of time, to sacrifice total consciousness and gain unconsciousness, he chose this alternative despite Cassiel's warnings that none of it will be true. He chose to live in a fiction of words and images, a sea of narrative that compensates for the loss of the child's unconscious existence in the world of the senses. And even here we see the film reflecting that it is not a real state of childhood that fuels this desire but rather an already compensatory conception of childhood. The film itself is inscribed within a written text whose refrain, "Als das Kind Kind war," points to this, in Freud's term "belated" (*nachträglich*) relation to past experience. Daniel embraced, in full intellectual awareness, a fictional world of the senses, not the actual sensual pleasure itself, but that imaginary realm which had enticed him to trade in his angel's wings for wings of desire. With his eyes glazed over from fantasizing, sitting together with Cassiel in the BMW convertible, he put it this way: "Nicht, daß ich ja gleich ein Kind zeugen oder einen Baum pflanzen möchte, aber es wäre doch schon etwas, beim Nachhausekommen nach einem langen Tag wie Philip Marlowe die Katze zu füttern" (20).

When Cassiel warns that none of it will be true, he does not mean just that our plans and hopes often remain unfulfilled. In contrast to the objective, uninvolved point of view of the angels, our vision of the past is also a fiction informed by our needs, desires, anxieties and

hopes for the future. Moreover, this vision is mediated through a collective textuality of words, images and emotions. As Daniel becomes human, those impulses that awakened desires in him will find their expression only in this collective medium of representations. The allusion to Philip Marlowe calls attention to one such, and for Wenders a particularly significant, cultural sphere that mediates our desires and fears. Classical Hollywood film had exerted a particularly strong influence on the young Wenders and inspired his work as filmmaker. It carried for him a myth-forming power that he would, only after his filmmaking experiences in America, be able to put in perspective for his own filmmaking. This power of epic, mythical narrative reveals itself when Daniel is moved to give up his existence outside of the physical world by the single, seemingly insignificant image of Philip Marlowe feeding his cat. Daniel embraces the human capability of representing experience in a fictional, constructed context, even while knowing that this is the human condition per se, and that at the end of his life he "will have lived within" a fictional account that never coincides with the "facts" of one's existence.

EPIC NARRATIVE AND HISTORY

At the end of the film, Wenders clearly situates *Wings of Desire* as a new beginning of narrative epic in cinema. While we view Cassiel perched on the shoulder of the angel Victoria atop the *Siegessäule*, Homer declares in voice-over the great need for the epic narrator in the (post)modern age: "Nennt mir die Männer und Frauen und Kinder, die mich suchen werden, mich ihren Erzähler, Vorsänger und Tonangeber, weil sie mich brauchen, wie sonst nichts auf der Welt" (169). The film closes with the words "Fortsetzung folgt" superimposed over the sky above Berlin, while we hear in voice-over "nous sommes embarqués." Wenders ascribes this momentous role to *Wings of Desire* primarily with respect to the cinema industry. He is mounting a response to what he sees as a mass media industry that threatens to engulf all narrative within a medium of images and words appropriated for advertising and commercial ventures. But the story of Berlin, of *Der Himmel über Berlin* that unites a divided city and people, also promises a new beginning in the continuing search for a national identity. The film invites the spectator at what seems to be a most inopportune time, to join in an epic-making beginning of an alternative, yet affirmative filmic discourse. I say inopportune, here, because of the growing call in the Federal Republic during the '80s for a relativized, if not totally revisionist formulation of German history. In this context, one might argue that the filmmakers are indulging in a somewhat naive and possibly dangerous form of mythmaking, particularly since the film fails to

investigate in any specific way the role Berlin has played in recent German history. And when one considers that its call for the beginning of a radically new form of cinema came twenty-five years after Oberhausen and the founding of a New German Cinema that employed various narrative forms and filmic strategies to examine the German past critically, then the suspicion grows.

However, when one compares the historical perspective presented in *Wings of Desire* with some of those that emerged after Reagan's ill-advised visit to Bitburg in May 1985, it offers an oppositional model to recently relativized accounts of German history. Although the Bitburg incident was instrumental in awakening again the voices of remembrance, it also prompted an outcry for a German patriotism that has freed itself from the past. The Historian's Debate that broke out in the summer of the following year shifted the discussion to a more intellectual and somewhat less accessible arena for the larger public. Thus, the positive effect of raising anew the question of history was not as widely disseminated, while the efforts to relativize the past gained ground. Although some might object to this oversimplified account that lumps these two episodes together, I would suggest that the textual system in *Wings of Desire* brings out problematical aspects of both these attempts to revise recent German history. Even while recognizing the historical significance and potential legacy of Weizsäcker's May 8th speech to the *Bundestag*, I would still argue that the upshot of the whole affair has been to restrict remembrance rather than foster it.³⁴ The enactment of the *Ausschwitzlügegesetz* looks, to this observer's eye, suspiciously like lawmakers washing their hands of the whole matter. This scenario, together with the obvious political opportunism involved in the affair, could help explain the curious overreaction to Jennings's speech on the fiftieth anniversary of the *Kristallnacht* pogrom. In any case, it is clear that German lawmakers were readily willing to follow Reagan's lead, as he responded to Kohl's initial suggestion of a visit to a concentration camp, in "putting that history behind me."³⁵

In one way, *Wings of Desire* fits the pattern of these quests in the '80s for a viable German identity. The film proclaims to be, at least in some sense, a new Zero Hour forty years after the Nazi era ended. During the chaos of the immediate postwar years, many of the questions of Germany's past, and with them an answer to the question of her identity, were tabled for the sake of reconstruction. Although the term *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* came to signify that exactly the opposite had happened, the festering identity crisis was symptomatic of the way the German nation had suppressed memories of its past. Reagan and the *Bitburg* incident offered a new Zero Hour, one that would put away not only the Nazi past, but also the concessions to remembrance that allowed the Federal Republic to become prosperous so quickly. Again the cornerstone of the new, psychosocially more

secure—and politically rededicated to the Atlantic alliance—Federal Republic was to be exclusion of the past rather than remembrance.

When Wenders situates *Wings of Desire* as the beginning of a new form of cinematic narrative, this carries with it, because it is a film about Berlin after 1945, certain national implications. That is, it claims to respond in some way to the nation's need to face the future with restored self-confidence. In his original notes on the film, Wenders remarked that after a long absence from Germany he could and would want to relearn what it means to be German only in the city of Berlin.³⁶ He felt that over a twenty-year period his most enlightening experiences of "Germany" occurred during his visits to Berlin because only there does Germany's history pervade everyday life both physically and emotionally. In the Federal Republic, on the other hand, one senses almost exclusively the absence or denial of the past. Thus, even though Wenders' main concern was to film a story, and specifically a love story, in and about Berlin, *Wings of Desire* would include this history if it held true to its setting.

The scarred city of Berlin that one sees in *Wings of Desire* stands as a symbol of German national identity. In the early sequences of the film, we often see the ugly, scarred side of the city, for example, areas around the wall near the Anhalterbahnhof and Potsdamer Platz, or along the Autobahn or S-Bahn. These are shot almost exclusively from camera perspectives that accentuate the more desolate side of these locations. Even more pregnant with history than the physical scars is the emotional state of the inhabitants, most of whom are lost in thought about the isolation or misery in their lives. The presence of the angels offers indeed little comfort and consolation to this city rent asunder. Other scenes, most notably the BMW showroom on the Kudamm, make it clear that prosperity is not lacking. The problem remains the inability to form a positive and alternative story of Germany that incorporates rather than excludes the bad and ugly past. And at the same time, the film suggests that the historical tradition that led to the Third Reich continues to exert its influence. In their jaunt back into time, Cassiel and Daniel even recall the beginning (the prehistoric "Zero Hour") of a militant human history: "Mit seiner [der erste angegriffene Mensch] Flucht begann eine andere Geschichte, die Geschichte der Kriege. Die dauert noch an" (84). The Zero Hour of 1945, the *Götterdämmerung* of the Nazis, obviously did not signal the last act in this long chapter of history, nor did it lead to a new beginning. Recent claims by a leading member of the Bonn government seem to bear out that much more of a link remains between the BRD and the tradition of aggressive German nationalism than one previously would have admitted. Theo Waigel, head of the CSU and minister of the interior, revived the "German" claim to lands east of the Oder-Neiße line and, in

doing so, asserted that the concept of a German Reich had not necessarily been laid to rest with the defeat of the Nazis.

As he wanders through the desolate Potsdamer Platz seeking in vain the vibrant city square he remembers from pre-Nazi Berlin, Homer bemoans the failure of mankind to strike up a new, alternative form of epic narrative: "Aber noch niemand ist es gelungen, ein Epos des Friedens anzustimmen. Was ist denn am Frieden, daß er nicht auf die Dauer begeistert und daß sich von ihm kaum erzählen läßt? Soll ich jetzt aufgeben? Wenn ich aufgebe, dann wird die Menschheit ihren Erzähler verlieren. Und hat die Menschheit einmal ihren Erzähler verloren, so hat sie auch ihre Kindschaft verloren" (57). This is the role the film sets for itself as a new beginning in narrative, epic cinema. The film depicts as well the past in all its horror. Homer declares the need for an epic of peace as he leafs through a book of photographs by August Sander entitled *Menschen des 20. Jahrhunderts*. Wenders sets counterpoint to Homer's thoughts stills from the book that show survivors of a bombing attack on Berlin identifying loved ones and acquaintances from among the rows of victims. We see a close-up of a baby and then one of two young children, lying next to each other, all victims of the bombing. The epic of war, the traditional form that Homer longs to replace, is itself never addressed or described in the film. But these images stand in for it in its absence and evoke vivid memories of the recent German version of the epic warrior's tale. They recall the Nazi vision of the final victory, the thousand-year Reich and, of course, the accompanying myth of the *Götterdämmerung* that is reflected in real human terms by the 1945 photographs. *Wings of Desire* builds out of these psychic and physical ruins a new story of Berlin and its epic past, one that strives to enthuse through a desire for peace.

In one of the seemingly arbitrary texts overheard in the library, we find a key to the historical perspective needed for such an alternative epic. As Daniel passes the second reader, we hear: "Walter Benjamin kaufte 1921 Paul Klees Aquarell *Angelus Novus* (Abb. 34). Bis zu seiner Flucht aus Paris im Juni 1940 hing es in seinen wechselnden Arbeitszimmern. In seiner letzten Schrift, *Über den Begriff der Geschichte* (1940), interpretierte er das Bild als Allegorie des Rückblicks auf die Geschichte" (23). Although Wenders could not, of course, expect the typical spectator to catch the significance of this passage, if even take note of it at all, it has, I think, particular significance for the question of historical perspective, both on the past of a nation as well as of an individual. Benjamin's interpretation of the painting describes precisely the perspective granted the angels in *Wings of Desire*:

Es gibt ein Bild von Klee, das *Angelus Novus* heißt. Ein Engel ist darauf dargestellt, der aussieht, als wäre er im Begriff, sich von etwas zu entfernen, worauf er starrt. Seine Augen sind aufgerissen, sein Mund steht offen und seine Flügel sind ausge-

spannt. Der Engel der Geschichte muß so aussehen. Er hat das Antlitz der Vergangenheit zugewendet. Wo eine Kette von Begebenheiten vor *uns* erscheint, da sieht *er* eine einzige Katastrophe, die unablässig Trümmer auf Trümmer häuft und sie ihm vor die Füße schleudert. Er möchte wohl verweilen, die Toten wecken und das Zerschlagene zusammenfügen. Aber ein Sturm weht vom Paradiese her, der sich in seinen Flügeln verfangen hat und so stark ist, daß der Engel sie nicht mehr schließen kann. Dieser Sturm treibt ihn unaufhaltsam in die Zukunft, der er den Rücken kehrt, während der Trümmerhaufen vor ihm zum Himmel wächst. Das, was wir den Fortschritt nennen, ist *dieser* Sturm.³⁷

The angels in *Wings of Desire*, as in Benjamin's account of the *angelus novus*, are not able to alter the course of history, rather only to observe and verify it as they accompany it into the future with a painful countenance. They too would like to alleviate suffering in both the present and past, but, as we see when Cassiel fails to deter the young man from jumping off the Europa-Center, they can only watch the human tragedy as it unfolds. From their point of view, they can move back along an infinite time continuum, viewing past moments as if they were in the present. They have in this way a greater potential to see and preserve the past. But in another sense, their perspective is more limited than human vision, for as they move into the future simultaneously with man, they can only look back in time. They lack the embeddedness in the present that is the crux of human history and that always implies a particular vision of the future.

In "Über den Begriff der Geschichte," Benjamin distinguished between exactly these opposing perspectives on history: "Die Geschichte ist Gegenstand einer Konstruktion, deren Ort nicht die homogene und leere Zeit sondern die von Jetztzeit erfüllte bildet."³⁸ Accordingly, the present is not an empty point of transition, such as the fictional point of view of the angels in *Wings of Desire* but rather an active force that constructs out of past experience as needed a picture for the future, a vision that accompanies and forges the future as we repeatedly, in continuously revised form, invoke it in the present. In contrast to the common enlightenment model of history as one continuous line of progress, Benjamin proposes the "tiger leap into the past," back to a particular moment or period of history that can serve the needs of the present. Taking as an example the image of ancient Rome propagated during the French Revolution, Benjamin describes the actual historical continuum as a succession of fashions, each of which finds somewhere in the past that form that fills best the needs for the present.³⁹

As pessimistic as Benjamin's *angelus novus* seems, and as negative as the film's depiction of Berlin's reconstruction since 1945 may be, *Wings of Desire* is a film imbued with a spirit of hope for new beginnings. One finds similar hope in Benjamin's essay. Although written in one of mankind's darkest hours, and when Benjamin

was facing his own impending doom at the hands of conquering evil forces, "Über den Begriff der Geschichte" reaches an optimistic conclusion. Offering his last theses on a central question that had concerned him throughout his entire life,⁴⁰ he argues that the correction of this fundamental misconception in man's view of history holds the potential for ending the errant path of human "progress." The story of the angel who becomes man represents allegorically the shift in historical perspective that offers hope. When Damiel in the first conversation with Cassiel expresses the longing, "'Jetzt' und 'Jetzt' sagen können und nicht wie immer 'seit je' und 'in Ewigkeit'" (20), this echoes Benjamin's position on the role of history. The conception of an even time continuum extending back into time has veritable meaning only for fictional beings like the angels. The free-floating camera in the first part of the film with its arbitrarily recording eyes and ears that could move freely back into time would be the ideal vehicle for the historian steeped in nineteenth-century positivistic historicism. When Damiel becomes human, he can no longer function as a pure recorder of history. Tied to the present with all its personal and collective concerns, he possesses a more restricted and biased point of view, but along with it the basis for generating change. Where the constructed point of view of the angels represents this idealized view of history, Damiel's decision to give it up suggests that hope for mankind lies in other forms of representation. As an angel of peace in a city that lives from day to day with the scars and consequences of the warrior epic, Damiel brings the needed impulse for a new epic whose heroes are, as Homer declares, "nicht mehr die Krieger und Könige" (56).

As a film that exudes affirmation and the hope for new beginnings, *Wings of Desire* faces stiff opposition from that section of the German scholarly community that holds stubbornly to a modernist tradition of negativity and alienation. Some of the initial criticism I have heard expressed by fellow Germanists in America complains that the film does not deal directly with thorny issues of Germany's recent past. It is not surprising to hear such objections coming from the area of German studies in America that in examining the cultural texts of the Federal Republic, particularly in film studies, has so often focused on the representation of Nazi and post-'45 history. But as I have argued here, Wenders does not ignore the issues of Berlin's past. Rather he integrates them into a new aesthetic vision that answers one overriding question: How can Germany *live with* that past? In this regard, Wenders' film fits quite well the description Andreas Huyssen has given for an aesthetics that goes beyond modernism but flies in the face of the convenient postmodern adage "anything goes": "The point is not to eliminate the productive tension between the political and the aesthetic, between history and the text, between engagement and the mission of

art. The point is to heighten that tension, even to rediscover it and to bring it back into focus in the arts as well as criticism." Such a tension exists no more strongly than in a work of art that seriously attempts to revive a form of German epic, while reflecting at every turn the constant danger it entails—in a work that attempts to raise out of the severest ruins of the age-old warrior myth a new myth-forming epic narrative.

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NOTES

1. Wim Wenders, *Le souffle de l'ange*, Special Issue of *Cahiers du cinéma* (Frankfurt: Filmverlag der Autoren, 1988), pp. 30–36. The written text first published in *Cahiers du cinéma* 400 (October 1987): 67–70. German translation in Wim Wenders, *Die Logik der Bilder: Essays und Gespräche*, Michael Töteberg ed. (Frankfurt: Verlag der Autoren, 1988), pp. 110–38.
2. Wolfram Schütte, "Abschied von der dröhnenden Stimme des alten Kinos: Aus einem Gespräch mit Wim Wenders," *Frankfurter Rundschau* 6 November 1982, Feuilleton: 3. This interview was reprinted in Wenders, *Logik*, pp. 53–67.
3. Wenders addressed this problem in a short film that he also made also during the two shootings of *Hammett: Reverse Angle—New York City*, director Wim Wenders, Gray City Inc., 1982. He also comments on this issue in a more freely associative way in the long prose-poem "Der amerikanische Traum," in *Emotion Pictures. Essays und Filmkritiken 1968–1984* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1984), pp. 139–70. See particularly pp. 156–57, 161–62.
4. Wenders, *Logik*, p. 98.
5. Wenders, *Logik*, pp. 133–34.
6. For Wenders, remarks on Berlin as a locus of German history and a seedbed for world peace, see Wenders, *Logik*, pp. 93–98; and Ira Paneth, "Wim and His Wings," *Film Quarterly* 42.1 (1988): 4.
7. Wenders, *Logik*, p. 98.
8. Uwe Künzel, *Wim Wenders. Ein Filmbuch*, 3rd rev. ed. (Freiburg i. Br.: Dreisam, 1989), p. 213.
9. This is an abbreviated translation of Wenders' account in "Erste Beschreibung eines recht unbeschreiblichen Filmes. Aus dem ersten Treatment zu *Der Himmel über Berlin*" in Wenders, *Logik*, p. 99.
10. Jean Pierre Oudart, "La Suture," *Cahiers du Cinéma* 211 and 212 (April and May 1969); Oudart's article appeared in English translation as "Cinema and Suture," *Screen* 18.4 (1977–78): 35–47; see also Daniel Dayan's article, which introduced Oudart's work to English readers, "The Tutor-Code of Classical Cinema," *Film Quarterly* 28.1 (Fall 1974): 22–31.
11. Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*, trans. Celia Britton, Annwyl Williams, Ben Brewster and Alfred Guzzetti (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982). Two important works by Baudry in translation are Jean-Louis Baudry, "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus," *Film Quarterly* 28.2 (Winter 1974–75): 39–47 and "the Apparatus: Metapsychological Approaches to the Impression of Reality in the Cinema," *Camera Obscura* 1 (Fall 1976): 104–28. Both of these articles as well as several other writings that I cite are contained in the collection *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, Philip Rosen ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).
12. Initial responses to Oudart and Dayan include William Rothmann, "Against the System of Suture," *Film Quarterly* 29.1 (Fall 1975): 45–50; Stephen Heath, "On Screen, in Frame: Film and Ideology," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 1.3 (August 1976): 251–65; Colin McCabe, "Theory and Film: Principles of Realism and Pleasure," *Screen* 17.3 (1976): 7–27; Heath, "Notes on Suture," *Screen* 18.4 (1977–78): 48–76. Later writings that have influenced my use of the concept of suture will be documented later in context.
13. Thomas Elsaesser, "Primary Identification and the Historical

Subject: Fassbinder and Germany," *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, ed. Philip Rosen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 537.

14. Kaja Silverman describes suture in a similar vein in *The Subject of Semiotics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 201–06.

15. In his comments on Oudart and Jacques-Alain Miller in *Screen*, Stephen Heath made this point as well: "To say that the system of suture is a particular logic, a writing, is not, however, to say that cinema could be articulated as discourse outside of any suture," "Notes," p. 68. One should add to Heath's statement that to say that the system of suture (in cinema) is "a particular logic, a writing," does not say that it includes only one form of writing. That is, it would be a mistake, one I think that Oudart makes, to place the "logic" of suture in cinema on the same plane with the general logic of the signifier described by Miller. For the system of suture in cinema includes numerous variable factors that structure and alter the "sutured" discourse.

16. Wenders talks about the camera movement in the interview with Paneth, 5.

17. Künzel, *Wim Wenders*, pp. 214–15.

18. Baudry, "Ideological," pp. 45–46.

19. Stephen Heath, "Narrative Space," *Screen* 17.3 (1976): 95.

20. For an account of how Murnau and his cameraman Karl Freund used the "entfesselte Kamera" in making *The Last Laugh*, see Lotte H. Eisner Murnau (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), pp. 62–67.

21. The distinction between "primary" and "secondary" identification alluded to here stems from Lacan's account of subject formation in the infant. Baudry applies the distinction to the way that the viewing subject identifies with the image in cinema ("Ideological," p. 46) and Metz discusses it in more detail (pp. 54–56). In their theories, primary identification refers to an identification attached to the image itself, whereas in the secondary phase identification shifts to the transcendental subject that stages the succession of film images. Neither they nor subsequent critics who speak of "primary" processes of identification would apply this term to the identification with a specific point of view created by the camera or the narrative space of the film. But because of the close correspondence of the angels' point of view with the camera in *Wings of Desire*, it is, I think, appropriate to make the correspondence between the two stages of subject formation and the points of view assumed by the viewing subject.

22. Oudart, "Cinema," p. 41.

23. Heath, "Narrative Space"; McCabe, "Theory and Film"; and Kaja Silverman in her chapter "Suture" in *The Subject of Semiotics*.

24. Silverman, *Subject*, pp. 204–06 and 231–32.

25. Wim Wenders and Peter Handke, *Der Himmel über Berlin. Ein Filmbuch* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1987), p. 19. Hereafter cited in the text.

26. Paneth, p. 5.

27. Paneth, p. 7.

28. Paneth, p. 6.

29. Schütte, "Abschied."

30. Paneth, p. 5.

31. From Silverman's work on the limitations placed on the female voice in dominant cinema, we can see how Marion's speech is transgressive both formally as well as in content: "Classical cinema projects these differences at the formal as well as the thematic level. Not only does the male subject occupy positions of authority within the diegesis, but occasionally he also speaks extra-diegetically, from the privileged place of the Other. The female subject, on the contrary, is excluded from positions of discursive authority both inside and outside the diegesis; she is confined not only to safe places within the story (to positions, that is, which come within the eventual range of male vision or audition), but to the place of the story." Kaja Silverman, "Dis-Embodying the Female Voice," *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*, Mary Ann Doane, et al., eds. The American Film Institute Monograph Series 3 (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1984), p. 132.

32. These two extended looks into the camera also obstruct identification with that look (usually of the male lead), which dominates and coerces the (often female) other in the diegesis. In the close-up of Daniel, he smiles benignly into the camera, not at the object of his desire, but at its source. Marion's speech disrupts conventional patterns of male dominance (see note 22) even more abruptly than the

look into the camera. On the other hand, earlier scenes, particularly the voyeuristic moments in the trailer, tend to place the female subject in subordination to the male gaze in questionable contexts. I am not aware at this time of any feminist readings of the film, but I think that the film raises some interesting issues concerning women in cinema that call for a feminist critique.

33. Friedrich Frey, "Über das Verfertigen eines Filmes beim Drehen. Wim Wenders unterhält sich mit Friedrich Frey über Ankerwerfen, '68, Parallelproduzieren, Engel, Städtisches, u.a.," *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 10 September 1988.

34. An example of how Weiszäcker's speech surfaces in discussions of German national identity is the 1987 edition of *Meet Germany*, a booklet published by the "private, non-partisan German organization" *Atlantik-Brücke*. In an article entitled "The Perennial German Question—Is There a German Answer?" the historian Michael Stürmer, one of the central figures in the Historians' Debate, talks about the "tremendous impact" of and "resounding response" to Weiszäcker's speech, explaining that "the President sought to restore the country's self-confidence, thereby making it possible for Germans to face the future while not ignoring the past." Following the article are some excerpts from his speech under the title: "There Can Be No Reconciliation Without Remembrance." Yet nowhere in Stürmer's article

is there any mention of Reagan's visit to Bitburg, which took place just days before Weiszäcker's address to the *Bundestag*. *Meet Germany*, 19th rev. ed. (Hamburg: Atlantik-Brücke, 1987), pp. 48–51.

35. Geoffrey H. Hartman, ed., *Bitburg in Moral and Political Perspective* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), p. xiii.

36. Wenders, *Logik*, p. 94.

37. Walter Benjamin, "Über den Begriff der Geschichte," *Gesammelte Schriften* I. 2., eds. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1974), pp. 697–98.

38. Benjamin, p. 701.

39. Benjamin goes on to place materialistic conditions for "the tiger leap into the past" that could bring about revolutionary change: "Nur findet er in einer Arena statt, in der die herrschende Klasse kommandiert. Derselbe Sprung unter dem freien Himmel der Geschichte ist der dialektische als den Marx Revolution begriffen hat" (Benjamin, "Über den Begriff," p. 701). Although Wenders does not share Benjamin's Marxist ideology, the optimism shared by *Wings of Desire* and "Über den Begriff der Geschichte" stems from the shift in the view of history.

40. See *Anmerkungen der Herausgeber* in Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* I.3, eds. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1974), pp. 1223–27.

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