VOYEURISM AS AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL AND NARRATIVE DEVICE:
Wim Wender’s Wings of Desire

Les ailes du désir
UN FILM DE WIM WENDERS

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From the very first image of Wim Wenders’ film, Wings of Desire (Der Himmel über Berlin, 1987), viewers are invited to participate in the act of composition. A hand takes a pen to a sheet of paper, writing the first lines of a poem which is also read in voiceover. The verse begins with the words, “When the child was a child...” (“Als das Kind Kind war...”).

The poem (like the film it constructs) is a curious mix of epic, fairytale, and personal stream-of-consciousness. Similarly, the film’s early images invite the viewer to free-associate: the sky or heavens, a human eye blinking open, an aerial view of the city of Berlin, a “man” with disappearing wings atop a tall building (the Memorial Church in West Berlin), the people below (including children, who apparently are the only ones who can see him), a close-up of the sweep of a wing, a bird in the sky, a plane. With the equation of the heavens over Berlin with the eye of the camera obscura—the eye of the soul, seeing as a way of access to entities and to being, seeing which makes us know, the dialectics of seeing, and so forth—Wenders creates a different kind of gaze, hermeneutic, that of the angelic voyeur of his invention who peeks through the cosmic window and eavesdrops on human thought, invisible to all except children.

Wenders has been quoted as saying “An angel falls in love and becomes a man. It is the simplest story I ever had.”1 However, Wings of Desire is an extremely ambitious “histoire,” a cinematic attempt to tell the story of history. It is a poetic parable of epistemology, framed within the voyeuristic gaze of the angel and the obscured diegesis. Wenders’ and Peter Handke’s artistic collaboration is, in fact, a textually rich celebration of language, history, and desire.

We hear many voices in Wings of Desire as the angel Damiel (played by Bruno Ganz), his colleague Cassiel (Otto Sander) and the rest of the angels of Berlin read the thoughts of people. The cacophony of overheard thoughts on the soundtrack enhances the sense of pluralism in the filmic text—its “polyphonic” (to borrow Bakhtin’s term) or “polylogue” (Kristeva) nature.2 Highly reflexive, it is a distinctly narrative film, reveling in the pleasure of the text—visual and written. Christian Metz argues that film is a language without a language,3 yet Wings of Desire continually asserts the linguistic in interesting ways.

According to author Ursula LeGuin, we (humans) tell stories to exist, to sustain desire even as we die from it. In Wenders’ film, an angel gives us eternity in order to become human, to have a “story.” “When the child was a child”—This epigraph written on a white sheet of paper like a tabula rasa or mystic pad in the opening shot recurs as an incantatory refrain throughout the film, as Damiel observes, and ultimately acts out his/story. Not coincidentally, the favorite haunt of the angels is the Berlin public library, a metaphoric storehouse of personal and collective memories, stories, fictions, histories. There we meet an aged writer aptly named Homer (played by Curt Bois, a Reinhart/Brechtmann actor who fled Nazi Germany), a character who is concerned that (as we hear in voiceover): “Once mankind loses its storyteller then it will have lost its childhood.”

The telling of history is, of course, a reconstructive process. Postwar, walled Berlin is a divided schizophrenic city. Henri Alejkan’s soaring cinematography, black and white for scenes which feature the angels, is intercut with newscast footage of wartorn Berlin. Wenders has described Wings of Desire as his “first film that tries to get in or at least dig into German history or...his own childhood.”4 In a published interview, Wenders states that the movie “could take place nowhere else. It is only in Berlin that I could recognize what it means to be German...for history is both physically and emotionally present.”5 In Wings of Desire, the Berlin Wall is a paradoxical symbol. It is a metonym for the divided country and its history. On one side, the wall is pristine and ominously white, guarded by armed men and dogs; on the other side, it is a site of an explosion of artistic creativity and energy. It is comforting in its inescapability; as the trapeze artist Marion observes, one can never really get lost when one always comes back to the wall. However, it also literally presents yet another sense of the outsider looking in (and shut out), another divided frame of vision. It signifies
the difference between angelic knowledge and human experience. Indeed, this is where Daniel wakes up as a human being after making his decision to become mortal. It is also the locus of his initiation into human phenomenology: the sense of taste (of his own blood) and the visual experience of color (of the fantastic graffiti on the wall).

Wenders did not deliberately set out to create a religious cosmology in the film (or a theoretical discourse of history for that matter). His angelic visitor is appropriated from a long tradition of the “visitor” in both high art and popular films and literature. Mining angel (l)ore, we come up with numerous filmic examples—either conscious or unconscious influences. But there is also the angel of folklore and poetry, notably Rilke’s “terrible” angel of the Duino Elegies with all its implications: the symbolic angel as Other, the reflection of the Dark Self which must ultimately be embraced.

There is also Walter Benjamin’s angel of history which functions like the angel of Wings of Desire as conservator, collector, and narrator. As Daniel says to his celestial cohort Cassiel, “I want to enter history, if only to hold one apple in my hand.” He longs to conquer history for himself—which necessarily entails becoming “humanized.” As Maria Nadotti writes, Wenders’ angel is pure gaze upon the world. He does not belong to the world, but he is necessary to it, without his gaze, the world might not exist...Working from above and beyond, the angel rebuilds and weaves together meanings and transcends the here and now of human life.

It is the ultimate omniscient narrator. Similarly, Rilke writes of his Angel “enclasping space and gazing into himself.” In Wings of Desire, the angel Daniel can remember history even before “the biped appeared,” but he only knows it from the outside of human experience. “When the child was a child,” or so the poem goes, “it didn’t know it was a child.” In order to fulfill his desire to become a fully realized
human being, Damiel must embrace his idealized image. Wenders has commented that

By definition, angels are denied physical pleasure. They can’t lift a book, they don’t know what weight or taste or color is. They don’t know the physical. They just know, so to speak, the essence of things. So I thought: This is really boring for them, to not really know feelings... Eternity must be a terrible drag."

Another level of the narrative web is the making of a film within a film, and playing himself as a fallen angel is none other than TV’s detective Lieutenant Columbo, a star of the film-in-progress about Nazi Germany—another attempt at meta-history. Besides the reflexive and voyeuristic pleasures of the making-a-movie-within-a-movie, the Peter Falk sequences provide another distinct voice. We hear him thinking (in English voiceover) as he sketches extras on the set:

  Extras, extra people, these are extra humans. Yellow star means death. Why did they pick yellow? Sunflowers. Van Gogh killed himself. This drawing stinks. Someday you’ll make a good drawing. I hope, I hope, I hope.

There is a tragic humor in these monologues, and Falk also winks at his TV/movie persona. In one particularly amusing scene, we literally see him shaping his image in a mirror, as he tries on hats on the film set, searching for a hat which fits the face—a disguise so he can go about Berlin unrecognized.

If the Peter Falk character is a fallen angel, then there is only one person in the film who can truly claim to have a story: “J’ai une histoire.” (“I have a story and I’ll continue to have one.”) She is the French trapeze artist Marion, played by Solveig Donnmartin. The quest for knowledge of the child involves sexual curiosity, but the angel,
in his innocence, listens to Marion’s thoughts and is inspired, rather than sexually aroused, to abandon his hermeneutic knowledge, his angelic omniscience, to embrace humanity.

Teresa de Laurentis informs us that “As social beings, women are constructed through effects of language and representation.” Wenders’ cinematic voyeurism in Wings of Desire is unique, because it deliberately allows a female character to speak and create herself (through language) with an individual and commanding voice. Together with Daniel, we (the film viewers and listeners) follow Marion’s stream-of-consciousness (or history of consciousness) as she relates her story.

Language has the ability to shape reality. It is also a sexually-charged enterprise. The English title of the film, Wings of Desire, alludes to “one of the master tropes of contemporary criticism.” Wenders uses the “desire” of his film’s title as a linguistic key to the film. Desire, this pleasure of the text, is at once erotic and epistemological.

Marion has lived and created her own story. When we (via the angel’s gaze) first view Marion, she is practicing her trapeze act. The immediate spectators are her circus coworkers (the guys in the band and her coach) and the angel Daniel. Her voiceover thoughts reveal that she is an outsider (She’s from France), that she is really performing for herself—to realize her circus dreams in Berlin. Although she is not pleased with everything (She complains aloud about her costume’s “soup chicken” feathers and the limp choreography), her reverie reveals her solipsism, her general contentment and later disappointment when she is suddenly informed that the season has been cut short.

When Daniel views Marion in actual performance at the children’s matinee, he is like one of the many excited children in the Alekan circus audience—pure of gaze and heart, admiring the illusion of this human’s ability to fly. (As an angel, it is uncanny that Daniel is so attracted to a winged human.) Marion, for her part, seems strikingly autonomous, yet she has her doubts. As a performing artist, she needs her spectators in order for her idealized self-image to be realized. She thinks, “I know so little...I know nothing.” She even wonders if she thinks in the wrong way, because she thinks as if she is talking to someone else.

In Jacques Lacan’s mirror stage in the development of the ego-I, the child incapable of speech assumes the image in the mirror as his idealized identity. Several “mirror” scenes complete the narrative circle in Wings of Desire. (Indeed, watching the handwriting scenes which frame the film, its viewers participate actively in the acquisition of filmic language, the narrative.)

According to Roland Barthes in Writing Degree Zero, all of history stands behind language, yet écriture is always an “ambiguous reality,” at once historically contextualized and referential. This notion of writing is an apt metaphor for this film which ultimately attempts to transcend itself through the act of writing. The theories of language acquisition, its epistemological values, are also significant to Lacan, because he believes the unconscious is structured like a language. Narration, too, operates like a language (according to Robert Con Davis) repeating and representing unconscious discourse.

The audible thoughts or multiple voices in Wings of Desire flesh out this theory.

Furthermore, as Rene Girard informs us, “Literature and psychoanalysis...need each other” to facilitate “a dialogue of equals.”

We can view the scenes of Marion undressing and dressing in her trailer as “revealing” in many ways. A Lacanian analysis of a literary text invites the individual reader to freely associate with each idea—and the text itself. As the only “story” in the film which has already been written and continues to be written (and which, unlike Homer, has not been frustrated by history), Marion is, in totality, a text. The film viewers are invited into her thoughts and desires.

Because of this angelic intimacy, the film viewers penetrate the character of Marion in a “metaphysical” fashion. She is (arguably) less an erotic object of desire than one of the film viewer’s subjective empathy. The fantasy of eavesdropping of thoughts puts us in the position of psychoanalytic truth seekers, so much closer to Marion’s Self. And as a woman, she embodies what Julia Kristeva has called “the last myth of
In identification, we internalize the image of another person. For Freud and Lacan, the act of identification with someone—with the Other—is crucial to the formation of the Self. Not a “real” man, Daniel looks at Marion from the realm of the imaginary, with the pre-Oedipal wonderment of the undifferentiated child. In the creation of the filmic angels, Wenders attempts to create the illusion of characters creating themselves through their thoughts and experiences. This is more than just a story of sexual initiation, although Daniel recognizes that “She’ll teach me everything.” He knows that seeing from above is not like seeing at eye-level. Having only spirit, his phenomenology is not weighted with things, and this is the source of his desire. Ethereal, he would like to become engendered, to experience life as humans do, firsthand.

*Wings of Desire* is essentially a film about looking, which problematizes the notion of the invisible (read here “angelic”) spectator. Daniel watches Marion unseen, while the filmic spectators do the same. And we are allowed the privilege of seeing and identifying with the angel which Marion cannot see. To us, he looks like a man.

In her seminal essay, “Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema,” Laura Mulvey describes how the scopophilic instinct (pleasure in looking at another person as erotic object) and, in contradistinction, ego libido (forming identification processes) act as formations, mechanisms which mold traditional narrative cinema’s formal attributes. The actual image of woman as (passive) raw material for the (active) gaze of man takes the argument a step further into the content and structure of representation. According to Mulvey, the man controls the film fantasy and also emerges as the representative of power in the further sense: as the bearer of the look of the spectator, transferring it behind the screen to neutralize the extra-diegetic tendencies represented by women as spectacle. As the spectator identifies with the main male protagonist, he projects his look onto
that of his like, the screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omniscience.17

In Wings of Desire, the character of Marion is not completely passive, however, because we hear her thinking, and she gains our sympathy and identification. By virtue of her performing status, Marion is an exhibitionist, but then again, she is not: Ordinary mortals would not be able to eavesdrop on her unspoken thoughts or view her dreams. This is the presumption of the analyst and the gift of the angel.

In the first scene in Marion’s circus trailer, she is unaware of her angelic (and filmic) spectator(s). When she unzips her costume and changes into a robe, her back to the unseen audience, the film turns briefly to color—accentuating the essential difference between Damiel and herself. She reveals that she “only need[s] to be ready and all the world’s men will look at me...longing.” She guesses that what makes her communication with people “clumsy” is “absence of pleasure,” “desire to love.” Marion listens to a song on her record player and sings along to herself, consoled by the voice of rock singer Nick Cave echoing her/story. The song, appropriately, is called “The Carny.” Later, she attends his performances at a nightclub. During the second performance, we hear Cave himself thinking (as the angel Cassiel is present), “One more song and It’s over, but I’m not gonna tell you about a girl; I’m not gonna tell you about a girl”—demonstrating the discrepancy between what we think and what we actually say in human communication. Cave, like Marion, must perform for his audience. His song is called “From Her to Eternity.” This song (or story) is more than a bit of angelic irony: it’s an intertextual pun.

When Marion prepares herself for her final performance, she looks in the glass, and there is a double mirror incident. Marion sees herself as the image which arouses desire in her spectators. She thinks, “Sometimes what matters is just being beautiful.” At the same moment, Damiel observes Marion from behind the mirror and views Marion looking at herself and thinking. Each of her “looks” and “thoughts” is followed by a point-of-view shot of Damiel. At the brink of making his decision, and gazing at Marion as a human being, Damiel sees his own idealized mirror image. After all, Marion is a trapeze artist: She, like an angel, can fly with her pair of wings, but she is afraid, it seems, of failing at her last performance—of her own humanity and mortality. Her monologue (in French) at the mirror continues, sounding more like a dialogue between “Selves”:

Looking at oneself in the mirror, one sees oneself think. Well, what are you thinking? I think I have the right to be afraid. But not to talk about it. You’re not yet blind; your heart’s still beating. And now you’re crying. You’d like to cry like a very sad little girl. Do you know why you’re crying? For whom? Not for me....

At one point during this discourse, the film viewers actually see a double image of Marion in the mirror. She winks and smiles away a tear, saying aloud to her mirror image, “It doesn’t matter.” But, of course, it (Marion’s self-identity) does matter. She recognizes, on the verge of being stripped of her feathers, that her trapeze artist image is just that: an illusion, a glamorized image. Damiel and the film viewers are able to see her as more than the mirror image—as a real woman with a story.

The film viewer, observing Marion gazing at herself as Damiel looks on, and seeing the multiple mirror images simultaneously, witnesses the whole unifying identification process. As the mirror stage predates language for the child (to take the Lacanian metaphor further), we know that in order for the characters to be fulfilled within the narrative (and the filmic spectators to be satisfied), Marion and Damiel must both see and speak to each other. Marion’s self-discovery is, in the words of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the moment when the “body simultaneously sees and is seen...it sees the ‘other side’ of its power of looking.”18 While we (humans) think of ourselves as the subject of representation within the

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structure of the look, we are virtually the object of representation also.

Wenders uses the voyeuristic gaze to create a narrative device, the angel, which looks physically like a man and observes unseen, yet is passive in his inability to feel or experience. He is unsexed. On the other hand, Wenders’ female protagonist is the image, the object of the gaze, yet is also the subject: active in her self-creation. It is this life of the mind which distinguishes her from the passive icon she might have been if we did not have access to her thoughts, cogito ergo sum uttered by a woman.

Perhaps most important of all is the fact that Marion is given creative authority. She chooses her man when she is ready for him. In a dream sequence, she literally sees the man she has never seen, Damiel, the soon-to-be-ex-angel. Winged and dressed in armor, he opens his arms to her. This is certainly a highly romanticized vision, but it represents Marion’s sublimated desire for a man who truly wants her, who wants to know her completely. In her dream, Marion participates in the writing of the angel’s story (his poem), repeating the lines

    When the child was a child,
    That was the time of the questions:
    Why am I me and why not you?
    Why am I here and why not there?
    Where does time begin and where does space end?
    Isn’t life under the sun just a dream?

In his essay, “Freud and the Scene of Writing,” Jacques Derrida historicizes dreams. From the hermeneutics of ancient Egypt to Freudian psychoanalysis, the images of dreams have been read as a kind of hieroglyphic writing. Derrida explains that for Freud, the dreamer invents his or her own grammar. How then do we read the language of Marion’s dream? Maybe the child within Marion has sensed the presence of Damiel, her self-appointed guardian angel, in her life, but her dream appears to be an adult fantasy. Marion senses that something is changing within herself
(the evolution of the self) and is now ready. As she finally tells Damiel,

Last night I dreamed a stranger of my man. Only with him could I be lonely, open up to him...completely for him, welcome him completely into myself, surround him with the labyrinth of shared happiness. I know...it is you.

It is a most uncompromising love story. Sleeping on Marion’s breast while she dreams, Damiel waits to be “born” as a man. He tells his fellow angel Cassiel, “ Entirely different wings will replace my usual ones, wings that will at last amaze me.” He has a childlike innocence as he prepares to experience the world as humans do, but his acceptance of humanity has not guaranteed him Marion’s love.

Desire is neither the appetite for satisfaction, not the demand for love, but the difference obtained from subtracting the first from the second.

Jacques Lacan, from Ecrits

She must decide to share her solitude, for loneliness means at last she is whole. Near the end of the film, in the scene in the rock club where Marion and Damiel actually meet, it is her gaze which legitimizes her humanity and her decision which makes their love possible. Without the consummation of human knowledge, Damiel is sent into the world more naked and exposed than a child without words. Looking directly into each other’s eyes in a reciprocal gaze, Damiel listens silently as Marion directs him (in German, “his” language):

Look at me or don’t. Give me your hand or don’t...Decide!...The whole world is taking part in our decision...You need me. You will need me. There’s no greater story than ours, that of man and woman.

This scene ends as Marion and Damiel embrace and kiss. The last time we see the couple, she is practicing her vertical rope routine, and he is assisting her by holding the rope. His words in voiceover reveal that something has happened. They have begun a relationship, and he has become able to feel. Although Lacan places language in the realm of the phallus, Wenders’ parentless manchild defies the law of the father and is born of his own and Marion’s shared desire:

Who in the world could claim that he was ever together with another person? I am together. No mortal child was created but an immortal common image...Only the amazement about the two of us, the amazement about man and woman...made a human being out of me.

Wenders’ provocative answer to the complex epistemological question gives the film’s vision clarity: We can know nothing with certainty except the potential of human love.

The film ends with the hand again writing and the ex-angel’s voice narrating, “Ich weiss jetzt, was kein Engel weiss.” (“I know now what no angel knows.”) As we (the film viewers) have seen, poetic writing is rooted in something ambiguous, something beyond language. Wenders’ “Odyssey” ends with the old man Homer walking toward the Berlin wall and his voice identifying himself as the “storyteller,” then an aerial shot of Berlin with the old man’s voice speaking in French (Marion’s language), “Nous sommes embarques.” On the screen appear the words, “to be continued...” and a dedication “to all the former angels but especially to Yasurjiro [Ozu], Francois [Truffaut], and Andrej [Tarkovsky].”

For Wenders and Peter Handke, this deliberately open-ended narrative is a breakthrough. In previous Wenders’ films and in Peter Handke’s writings and their collaborations, characters have always suffered from an aphasia, an inability to communicate. Wings of Desire is a flat-out celebration of the creative possibilities of human language and love—and the filmic expression of this. As a multi-layered work of art, it breaks apart upon viewing. And it is the voyeur, existing
at various levels of the filmic experience, who puts the pieces together to share in Wenders' vision.

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6Throughout his career, Wenders has expressed a considerable fondness for American genre films and parody. It’s a Wonderful Life, Here Comes Mr. Jordan, and Heaven Can Wait are some possible angelic influences.
9Seidenberg 32.
12In the interview with Ira Paneth in Film Quarterly, Wenders explains that he retained the German title Der Himmel über Berlin (Heavens over Berlin) and the English title, because there is no word in German for desire.