

Entering the Stream:
A Call for Life in the Moment in Wim Wenders' *Wings of Desire*



by Shannan Butler

Presented at the
Mass Communication Division
of the Eastern Communication Association

Portland, ME
2001

Entering the Stream:

A Call for Life in the Moment in Wim Wenders' *Wings of Desire*

Abstract:

This essay argues that the film *Wings of Desire* positions the viewer as a student ready to receive an important fable--a fable calling for a return to a new beginning. Through the use of close reading and mythic criticism I posit that *Wings of Desire* uses formalistic and symbolic techniques to bring the viewer into a position of acceptance of a new mythology. In the end, it is the viewer's willingness for action that constitutes a progression of the film towards an eventual narrative conclusion.

German director Wim Wenders' 1987 film *Wings of Desire* (*Der Himmel Über Berlin* in German) met with both critical and popular acclaim, winning Wenders the best director prize at the 1988 Cannes Film Festival. Most popular reviews were laudatory of this modern-day fable declaring that Wenders had produced his best work to date, and in doing so had stretched the bounds of cinema (Kehr, 1988: 38; Kempley, 1988: B1; Maslin, 1988: C15; Sterritt, 1988: 21). There were of course detractors, even many who liked the film, that questioned the syrupy nature of Wenders' angels, particularly in the traditionally romantic love story that ensues toward the film's close (Kael, 1988: 77; Kauffmann, 1988, 26).

Scholarly literature also has arisen around *Wings of Desire* examining its structure, social significance, aesthetic, allusions to literature, and its place in the New German Cinema (Helmetag, 1990: 251-54; Ehrlich, 1991: 242-246; Jaehne, 1988: 18). *Wings of Desire* is indeed a curious film worthy of scholarly attention, coming into being during the late nineteen-eighties, it captures the expectancy in Germany (and most of Europe and the Soviet Union as well) of something grand about to occur. Here, on the cusp of the end of the cold war and the beginning of a "new world order," we explore the human condition.

We also explore Wenders' creation of a new cinematic experience; a move welcomed by popular and scholarly press alike. This new direction on Wenders' part was no accident, but rather a calculated reaction to work against the grain of contemporary cinema. His last decade of filmmaking, spent in America, had tainted Wenders against the Hollywood production of

movies. In his last film, *Hammett*, he worked with veteran producer/director Francis Ford Coppola. Early on, Coppola insisted that a computer video model of the film's final cut be used by Wenders to direct his choice of shots. This process, according to Wenders, tightly constrained his creativity. He looked for a looser way of shooting that would "remain open so that during the filmmaking the director can discover and incorporate into the film new images and ways of seeing" (Cook, 1991: 34). This new "Arbeitsmethode," as Wenders referred to it, resulted in the original cut of *Wings of Desire* running well over five hours long. A constant struggle persisted between the need for some consistent story narrative and Wenders' muse-inspired shooting.

Wenders' visual images were to be combined with the verse written by his long-time collaborator Peter Handke. Handke had written many poems and monologues somewhat based on the poems of Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke. Rilke is credited with giving much of the impetus to the film as most of his writing concerns the diaries of angels among humankind (Curdullo, 1988: 521). The dialogue and images were developed separately around a loose idea for the story. Most of the dialogue, if one can call it that, exists as monologue or soliloquy. In many scenes we see through the angels' eyes and hear the inner soliloquy of their human charges. Dialogue never occurs between human and angel, but only from human to human or angel to angel. When humans and angels do communicate, it is through monologue, most of the time as voice-over narration. Even when the characters speak to each other or think to

themselves a poem, these utterances have incredible weight--heavy with the pondering of human existence--particularly when juxtaposed with legendary cinematographer Henri Alekan's lilting cinematography.

Wings of Desire's stunning visual imagery coupled with monolithic poems and monologue, and set upon the stage of a people preparing to embark on a brave new journey, makes it an important text for study. Much has been written concerning *Wings of Desire*; however, it seems the rather obvious message suggested in its production, structure, and content has been overlooked. Although Les Caltvedt in his article "Berlin Poetry: Archaic Cultural Patterns in Wenders' *Wings of Desire*" has addressed rather briefly some of the issues I wish to discuss concerning the mythic nature of *Wings of Desire*, I feel these insights could be strengthened in the context of a close reading of the film, which I propose to do herein. In doing so I will also rely upon the structural concerns in Roger Cook's article on "Angels, Fiction, and History in Berlin." Through Hayden White's exploration of the narrative and Mircea Eliade's exploration of the myth I hope to further illuminate the film as a call to enjoin the mythic narrative. Thus, my method is the coupling of a close textual reading of the film with an understanding of the workings of narrative and myth.

It is my endeavor to show that *Wings of Desire* is a call for us to enter the stream of history, to return to a time of beginnings, and to fashion a new primordial myth. It is only

through a return to cyclical time, that we may start anew. I propose that *Wings of Desire* positions us at an already post-apocalyptic time, a time, according to Eliade, ripe for new first stories. By jumping into the stream himself, Wenders has created a film that calls to us, the audience, not merely the characters within the film, to join him. In all of this the absolute need for narrative is reinforced, and the film itself, a chronicle, demands that we must complete it in our own lived existence for there to be a closure or moral, thus narrative. Through the film's structure and content we are met with this proposition, that to be truly alive, to have any hope for the future, is to be alive in the moment.

The structure of the film is particularly effective in creating in us a need for narrative since the first thirty-five minutes of the film are presented without a story line. We are presented with a parade of vignettes bearing out the mundaneness of human existence. In these introductory scenes, we are presented with the despair of the human condition, as well as a delight in the minutia of the everyday. Nothing seems of greater or less worth--all is one, a human ocean. Here amidst the glorious emptiness and revelatory minutia begin our desirings for a story. I will use White's *The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality* to help me set up my argument that the first section of *Wings of Desire* is constructed of annals. It is not until later in the film that these annals begin to form a narrative structure. Wenders, whose project is the creation of new mythic narrative, draws us in by denying us the satisfaction of the

narrative we expect. Cook comments on the film's formal structure:

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. (Cook, 1991: 38)

Cook's comments bring to mind an important question, and that is how much must the viewer invest in the film to come to these understandings? Does the first time viewer realize that he or she is being drawn in as Cook seems to suggest? I think it is likely that we, as first time viewers, indeed, feel this uneasiness, but it is doubtful that we are cognizant of it. *Wings of Desire* is a complex, esoteric film that reveals itself layer by layer. It is only through repeated viewings that a viewer might come to the conclusions I present herein.

The film opens with a close-up of a hand with a fountain pen writing in German. The voice-over is that of a poem, some of which is sung (indicated in italics).

When the child was a child
 it walked with its arms swinging.
It wanted the stream to be a river,
 the river a torrent
 and this puddle to be the sea.
 When the child was a child
 it didn't know it was a child,
everything was full of life
and all life was one.
 When the child was a child
 it had no opinions about anything.

It had no habits,
it sat cross legged, and took off running,
had a cowlick in its hair
and didn't make a face when photographed.

This poem is recalled and continued throughout the rest of the film. The voice, we later learn, belongs to the angel Damiel. After the poem, the film cuts to the credits, which appear as if written on a chalkboard. The film then fades to clouds in the sky as we push in, and the clouds form a circle in the middle, which dissolves to the closeup of an opening eye. The eye, which upon first viewing the film may appear to be the eye of a child, is actually Damiel's. There is a quick fade to the city seen from Damiel's aerial point of view as he scans over it, then we see that he is standing on a ledge looking down at the street below. A child is seen from above in the crosswalk below peering up at the angel; the mass of adults not seeing the angel make a current around the child as if she were a pebble in a stream. We then see from the child's viewpoint that the angel stands atop the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church, left in bombed ruins as a reminder of the war, the clock stopped at the time of its bombing. We then see two kids on a bus who look up to the angel and point. A brush of a wing, presumably an angel's wing, fills the screen.

Here, rather quickly, the film has constructed our position as viewers and the position of our protagonist. First our position to the film is to be that of pupil, we are shown a blackboard which has the effect of placing us in grammar school, as children about to learn an important lesson, or more appropriately hear a fable from which we will need to extract the meaning.

Immediately we are presented with another pupil that is the eye of our teacher who looks from the clouds. The ring of clouds transitioning into the pupil of the old child helps us see Damiel's human-like appearance as merely convention--doubly conventional as for the first few seconds he bears the traditional angel's wings. We then see the city below as Damiel's glance moves across it. Perched on the ledge of the church, he is contemplating plunging into the human ocean below. The child's pebble-like placement in that stream seems to bear out the analogy and focus on the timelessness of childhood, the stopped clock on the church reinforcing that feeling. That only children can see the angels, again, positions us as children, for we too can see Damiel. Thus, our subjectivity is that of child and student.

The film continues as Damiel overhears various conversations on the streets, and then our focus turns to the air. On the plane above, Damiel is seen by a little girl, and we push back through the aisle to hear Peter Falk contemplating the film in which he is to act when he reaches Berlin. His thought, "It's amazing how little I know about this part, maybe we'll discover it during the shoot--we'll get a good costume, that's half the battle," seems to be self-reflexive of Wenders' state of "looseness" in making the film. Falk could be seen as Wenders' persona, for in many respects Wenders is an "American" director. Even the original title of the film was the English *Wings of Desire*; however, in Germany the title was changed to *Der Himmel Über Berlin* (The Skies Over Berlin) because there was no a German expression for desire without vulgar

connotations. As we learn later, Falk himself is a “former angel”--a title of distinction Wenders bestows upon legendary directors during the films closing credits. Falk and Wenders are engaged in the same project-- coercing angels to leap into history. As Falk peers through the window, we follow his gaze. Then, on wings of angels, we float by the cacophony of the broadcast tower and down, down toward the corporate billboards parading as housing below. We pull in through a window to see a detached boy thinking there is, “still nothing decent on TV.” Facing away from the boy, yet back to back, the grandmother thinks, “you trip over your colors and you’re never punctual.”

We then pull in through another window to see a disturbed woman painting and listening to a boom box. Then we cut to a man entering the apartment of his recently deceased mother. He looks through old family photos yet he feels nothing. Cut back to the painter woman and pan outside her window and look down at children running in a circle. Pan and push into the adjoining window with a young man looking depressed and listening to rock music. Cut to the father, watching TV, who is concerned about the boy’s only interest being rock music. Pan to the mother also worried about her son, “maybe he’ll find himself.” Truck to empty stairwell as the poem below starts. Pan to the next room where children are playing Nintendo, then to a girl with thick glasses and leg braces who is playing with a caregiver. The little girl sees Daniel.

When the child was a child
 it was the time of these questions:
Why am I me and why not you?
Why am I here and why not there?
Where did time begin
and where does space end?
 Isn't life under the sun just a dream?
 Isn't what I see, hear and smell
 only an illusion of the world before the world?
 Does evil actually exist,
 and are there people who are really evil?
Can it be that I, who am I
didn't exist before I came to be
and that someday
the one who I am
will no longer be the one I am.

As we follow the parade of animals up the ironing board ramp and out the window, we hear sirens and a baby crying. We fly to the freeway and follow an ambulance. Then we are inside, and we see a mother afraid for her unborn child, yet haven't we heard it crying? We see many people in arguments, yet isolated in their cars on the freeway.

We move over the surface of a sleek car as Daniel and his companion angel, Cassiel, sit inside and discuss work. At first we feel we are still on the freeway but then realize we are in a BMW showroom. They go over a seemingly disconnected list of things that happened on this date in history, then begin to speak of today:

Daniel - A woman on the street folded her umbrella while it rained and let herself get drenched. A schoolboy who described to his teacher how a fern grows out of the earth, and the astonished teacher. A blind woman who groped for her watch feeling my presence. . . . It's great to live only by the spirit, to testify day by day for eternity only to the spiritual side of people. But sometimes I get fed up with my spiritual existence. Instead of forever hanging above, I'd like to feel there's some weight to me. To end my eternity and bind myself to earth. At each step, each gust of wind I'd like to be able to

say “Now!,” now and now and no longer say “since always” and “forever.” To sit at the empty seat at a card table and be greeted if only by a nod. Whenever we did participate it was only a pretense. Wrestling with one of them. . .we allowed a hip to be dislocated, in pretense only. We pretended to catch a fish, we pretended to be seated at the tables and drink and eat and we were served roast lamb and wine. In the tents out there in the desert, in pretense. Not that I want to beget a child or plant a tree right away, but it would be quite something to come home after a long day like Philip Marlowe and feed the cat. To have fever. To have blackened fingers from the newspaper. To be excited not only by the mind but, at last, by a meal, the curve of a neck, by an ear. To lie! Through the teeth! To feel your skeleton moving along as you walk. Finally to suspect instead of forever knowing all. To be able to say “Ah” and “Oh” and “hey” instead of “yes” and “amen.”

Cassiel - For once to be enthused over evil, to draw all of the demons of earth from passers-by and chase them out into the world (Daniel blows). To be Savage!

Daniel - Or to feel, at last what it's like to take your shoes off under the table and to stretch your toes, barefoot, like that.

Cassiel - To be alone! To let things happen! To remain serious! We can only be as savage as we are absolutely serious. To do more than observe, collect, testify, preserve! To remain a spirit! Keep your distance! Keep your word!

Here, I have recounted what is ostensibly the first sixteen minutes of the film. This introductory section is formally representative of the first thirty-five minutes of the film. Of course, had we been watching the film there would have been no exegesis thus far, and we would have been presented, again, with this curious effect, an overbearing suspicion that there has been no story. This is one of the ways the film differs dramatically from what we expect from cinema, a good story. Initially we can accept that there is no direct focus on narrative as this occurs sometimes in the “art film” genre, but we should be setting up for something to happen. No other film that I have viewed draws upon and stirs the desire for narrative quite like *Wings of Desire*. We are

presented with some forty minutes of film without a story, merely pieces of conversation, beguiling images, and poetry. By the time we get to what we hope will be a thread of a story--Daniel's desire to become human--we are exhausted. We have been bombarded with images of personal, isolated, existential angst thus far and we begin to look for a way out.

The angelic motion created by the pans and pushes, trucks, dollies, and pedestals is a feeling of airy lightness, yet the subject of our gaze is, again, despair. We are presented with a world, seen through angelic eyes, of a people isolated and lost--a people with no community. Even the familial ties we are presented with are filled only with worry and frustration; each member is in their own cell or at least their own psychological cell. Only the children seem to be alive, for they are at play. But even the young lad of ten or so years has already lost his imagination to television, which is no surrogate. Albeit beautifully captured on film, this is a world of desperation. Even the film itself, completely in black and white, or rather cool grey and deep green, captures the ghostliness of human existence. These are images seen by angels who cannot see the color or experience the joy and pain of human life--they may only bear witness. The only adult joy we are presented with is that of the expectant mother who, though worried for her child, cannot wait to see what he or she will be like.

To further explain how the film, up until this point, causes a state of anxiety and unfulfillment in the viewer, It is helpful to consult White's work. White saw narrative much as

Roland Barthes did, as, “simply there like life itself . . . international, transhistorical, transcultural.” Yet he focused more on its constructed rather than essential nature. In *The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality*, White looks at three types of histories: annals, chronicles, and narratives. Annals are histories with no story--merely facts. Chronicles are the beginning of stories, but with no closure. And narratives are histories proper, that is history with closure and a moral (White, 1981: 1-4). It seems we as humans need some conclusion to the matter, and it may well be that *Wings of Desire* is frustrating to us because for much of the film we are presented only with annals. As the opening dialogue in the car between Cassiel and Daniel bears out, the angels observe only a list of events that occurred with no moral implication. It is only when Daniel wishes to enter the stream of facts, to have some impact on them, that the film moves toward narration. White explains:

Unlike the annals, the reality that is represented in the historical narrative, in “speaking itself,” speaks to us, summons us from afar (this “afar” is the land of forms), and displays to us a formal coherency that we ourselves lack. The historical narrative, as against the chronicle, reveals to us a world that is putatively “finished,” done with, over, and yet not dissolved, not falling apart. In this world, reality wears the mask of a meaning, the completeness and fullness of which we can only *imagine*, never experience.
(White, 1981, 20)

It is, I believe, this very desire for meaning in life that drives us to the narrative form and makes the absence of such a narrative so bleak. We are reminded by this, of the potency of film, that through its stories we are offered narrative meaning for our own lives, which are at best merely

chronicles.

Soon, *Wings of Desire* takes on the construction of a true narrative when an actual story begins with Damiel's infatuation with Marion, a trapeze artist. We see Marion in her "chicken wings," practicing for the last show of the circus on her trapeze. It is there for the first time that the film bursts into color as Damiel gazes upon her. The film quickly returns to black and white, but we know, from this connection now made between Damiel and Marion, that a narrative will ensue. Damiel follows Marion to her trailer where she ponders her life and the end of the circus season. Damiel looks through photos of her friends and family and picks up the "spirit" of a stone as Marion speaks of desire. Here, Damiel has found the weight he has desired. He turns back to Marion as she undresses on the bed, and the film again slowly becomes color. Damiel strokes her neck. Marion rises and dresses and juggles some oranges while listening to a Nick Cave record. Here, the die is cast--we know what will happen--Damiel will indeed take the plunge for love or desire of Marion. Our recognition of this familiar classic romantic structure of desire in the film, makes any other outcome seem unlikely. So now we have our story, that of an angel and woman in love, but there is also an intriguing meta-story unfolding within the film--a story about the story.

We see the ceiling of the library and tilt down to view many angels like Damiel and Cassiel ministering to the readers. The library seems a haven or sanctuary for the angels.

Cassiel listens to the cacophony of thoughts offered up by the readers. A handicapped boy sees Daniel. The camera smoothly moves about the library continuing the pattern of listening and comforting angels. Daniel walks over to a woman taking notes from a text entitled “The End of the World,” and picks up the “spirit” of her pencil. He looks at it curiously and moves to a corner above the atrium. Placing the pencil in his lap, he makes a cruciform as if carrying the weight of the world. He proceeds down the stairs where he meets an old man who senses his presence. The old man thinks:

Tell me, muse, of the story teller who was thrust to the edge of the world childlike, ancient and through him reveal everyman. With time my listeners became readers. They no longer sit in a circle; instead they sit apart and know nothing about the other . . . I am an old man with a brittle voice but the tale still rises from deep down and the slightly open mouth repeats it, as powerful as it is effortless, a liturgy for which no one needs be initiated to the meaning of the words and phrases.

The monologue shifts to soliloquy as the old man proceeds up the staircase and takes Daniel’s position in the corner chair. The old man is Homer, the eternal storyteller. Not much later in the film Cassiel seems to become a student of Homer, following him around Berlin. Again in the library, we see Homer amid a mass of globes. He is playing with a model of the solar system and thinks of telling the tales of the beginning in a troubled time. We then see him reading a book about Berlin just after the war. Cassiel comforts him as images of a burning Berlin and children killed by the bombings fill the screen. The footage we see is real World War II footage, which creates a jarring juxtaposition to this eloquent, aesthetically molded film. Homer thinks:

But so far no one has succeeded in singing an epic of peace. What is it about peace that keeps its inspiration from enduring and makes it almost untellable? Should I now give up? If I do give up humankind will lose its storyteller and once humankind loses its storyteller then it will have lost its childhood.

Then we see Cassiel following Homer through what used to be the Potsdamer Platz and is now a barren wasteland. He is remembering the past and again we see images of World War II destruction as he recalls, “and then the banners appeared . . . and the people weren’t friendly any more.” Homer again thinks in monologue as he sits on a dilapidated couch in the middle of the Potsdamer Platz he seeks.

Name me, muse, the immortal singer who abandoned by his mortal listeners lost his voice, how from being the angel of story-telling he became an organ grinder, ignored or mocked outside on the threshold of no-man’s-land.

The last line of this monologue is delivered as the old man plays with music boxes on the street, much like a silly organ grinder for the camera.

In his unpublished paper, “To Be Continued: An Angelic Journey from Aesthetics to Politics,” Marco Abel positions Homer as a practitioner of the old histories, narrative history proper. But Abel finds this not as an admirable position, but rather a hindrance for the film. Abel sees Homer’s forgetting of what happened to the Potsdamer Platz as a problem with the narrativization of history, that we drop out what troubles us (Abel, 1997: 20-21). Thus, Homer has forgotten that the Potsdamer Platz was demolished during the war because he doesn’t want to deal with it. Abel does, however, give consideration to other interpretations of Homer’s apparent bad memory. I am inclined to follow the line of reasoning that says Homer has not at all

forgotten what happened here, for we see through the images of World War II that he remembers in vivid detail. It is, rather, a call to community, that which existed in the plaza before the war--a refusal to accept the destruction of community and a desire to renew it.

It is also too easy to see Homer as representing history proper. In White's terms, Homer would represent a mythic narrative since he does not distinguish between the "real" and "imagined" (White, 1981: 1-4). How, in a film of this nature, could we consider that Homer would represent the "real" as the film itself is a myth? And again, to see Homer as a historian at all goes against the allusion to the Greek Homer who was an epic poet. Seeing Homer as a poet concentrating on the mythic narrative is far more in line with the context of this movie. If we see Homer in a more poetic light we can better understand his working in the film. It is not that Homer is old in years; he is weary from abandonment. Turning away from the narrative, leaves us with only annals that reflect the ways of seeing offered by the current postmodern perspective with its emphasis on fragmentation and discontinuity (O'Sullivan, 1994: 234). Without the story, the moral judgment, we are left with lifeless annals of passing time. Homer fears we have lost our childhood, our ability to imagine and play; he wishes for us to reestablish community.

When the child was a child
 it choked on spinach, peas, rice pudding
 and on steamed cauliflower.
 Now it eats all of those
 and not just because it has to.
 When the child was a child
 it once woke up in a strange bed,
 and now it does so time and time again.
 Many people seemed beautiful then
 and now only a few if it's lucky

It had a precise picture of paradise,
 and now it can only guess at it.
 It could not conceive of nothingness
 and today it shudders at the idea.
 When the child was a child
 it played with enthusiasm
 and now it gets equally excited only
 when it concerns work.

We hear this poem recited over images of Cassiel and Damiel at the circus matinee. Here, Marion plays with the children in the tent and inside the ring. Circular imagery abounds with lights and balls. She and the children seem to be having a delightful time. We then see the exterior of the tent with an elephant walking by, then we cut to images of light reflecting on water as Cassiel and Damiel recount the beginning.

Cassiel - Do you recall our first visit here?

Damiel - History had not yet begun (image of a tree reflecting in the water) we let many an evening go by and we waited. . .It took long (cut to water lapping the beach) before the river found its bed and the stagnant water. . .(cut to marsh) began to flow. Valley of the primeval River (cut to grasslands)! One day, I still remember, (tall trees reflecting in the water) the glacier melted and the icebergs drifted north (spindly trees reflected in water). Once a tree floated by, still green, with an empty bird's nest (shot of geese on lake). Only the fish had leapt over a myriad of years then came the moment when the bee swarm drowned.

Cassiel - Some time later the two stags fought on this bank and then the cloud of flies, and the antlers like branches floating downstream. Only the grass grew back again. It grew over the corpses of the wild cats, wild boar, and buffalo (Cassiel and Damiel separate and go up stairs then end up on a concrete bridge above the lake walking along the right rail). Do you remember how one morning, out of the savanna, -- its forehead smeared with grass--the biped appeared our long awaited image, and its first word was a shout: was it "Ach" or "Ah" or "Oh", or was it merely a groan? At last we were able to laugh for the first time and through this man's shout and the calls of his successor, we learned to speak.

Damiel - A long story! The sun, the lightning, the thunder in the sky above, and below on earth the fireplaces, the leaps, the circular dances, the symbols, the writing (shot of river separating two banks). Then one broke out of the circle and ran straight ahead, as long as he ran straight ahead--swerving sometimes perhaps from joy--he seemed free, and we could laugh with him. but then suddenly, he ran zigzag, and stones flew (they proceed to the other side of the bridge). With his flight began another story. The history of wars. It is still going on.

Cassiel - But the first story about the grass, the sun, the leaps and the shouts, that too, is still going on (they arrive at the other rail, shot of lake and birds). Do you still know how one day the highway was built on which the Napoleonic retreat took place one day, (they turn and walk back) and then it was paved (step onto the asphalt)? today it is covered with grass and has sunk in like a Roman Road. Along with the tank tracks.

Damiel - But we weren't even spectators. There were always too few of us (they walk together toward the wall).

Cassiel - you really want. . . .

Damiel - Yes! to conquer a history for myself! I want to take what I've learned from my timeless downward-watching into sustaining a hasty glance, a short shout, an acrid smell, (they fade away, cut to city street) I've been out long enough, absent long enough. Out of the world long enough! I'll enter into the history of the world! If only to hold one apple in my hand! (light post) Look that feather, there on the water, already it has vanished. (truck going down street) look the tire-marks on the asphalt and the cigarette butt, rolling. (skyline with crane) The primeval river has dried, and only today's raindrops still quiver. Down with the world behind the world. (cut to couples embrace). This segment is full of images of creation and myth. The first image recalls Genesis 1:2

with the spirit of God moving across the face of the waters. The tree of life reflected in the water is an image Rilke used to represent the community of man. Damiel's remark that all he wishes to do is hold an apple in his hand may well conjure up images of the violation of the tree of knowledge of good and evil that brought death to humankind. The very desire to know, to experience the transitoriness of life, compels Damiel to join history. This leap into history is not into any real history but the history in myth--that is, the experience of life. It is quite clear that

this is no history proper, distinct from imagination, as recalling Damiel's dialogue in the showroom, his reference to the fictional Philip Marlowe and his cat are mixed in with what seem to be very real historical facts.

Reading this scene more closely, as Damiel and Cassiel rise from below, our attention turns to the creation of humankind. We hear this creation story while we watch them walking along the east railing. When Damiel mentions war we are explicitly given the view of a river running between two banks, and we proceed across the bridge to the west railing. War is the topic of conversation as they move to the other side. It is only when they arrive on the west rail that it is recalled that not only does war continue but so does the creation. The banks of the bridge seem to represent birth and rebirth and the median, or river, chaos. The image of the river separating east from west, birth from rebirth, man from man is a powerful one. The river is no safe haven--it is in itself chaos. Damiel's contemplation is to enjoin that river of humanity in its struggle.

Another symbol of particular interest in the film is the circle; it appears as globes, the solar system, circus tents, circus rings, records, juggled fruit, a stone, and stage lights. These circles seem to affiliate with Homer and Marion specifically. Homer has mentioned the circle as representing community, and Damiel suggests deviation from the circle, or independence, eventually leads to war. I see the circle working dually in the film, representing both a return to

community and an observance of cyclical time. Clearly amid the globes and galaxies, Homer represent a return to a time of beginnings. These globes that represent the earth in various configurations, with changing boundaries, seem to suggest that Homer proposes a myth that transcends cultures and philosophies, and unites us as one. He is afraid; however, that his listeners will not hear him in this troubled time. In the circus tent, we have community among children, adults, animals, and angels. Marion is associated with a return to community both through her matinee performance at the circus, and through her reveling in the primal rhythmic dance of Nick Cave's concert at the club. When Damiel assumes human form and cannot find Marion, it is to these places of community that he returns. He sits downtrodden in the sand that used to be the ring of the circus--now silent--before heading for the club where he finds her amid the cacophony.

If we are to take the film for what it says it is, a new beginning, we must break from our Western, linear view of history. To do so we must enlist a more primitive and Eastern view of history--that of cyclical time. According to Eliade, in cultures that have a cyclical viewpoint, the world has ended and begun again many times (Eliade, 1963: 54). For there to be a beginning there must be an ending, and an ending is constituted by chaos (Eliade, 1963: 89). From the stark imagery of a modern-day Berlin in shambles and the clips of the horrific destruction of World War II, Caltvedt proposes that the chaos needed to constitute an end has already occurred

(Calvedt, 1992: 123). A new beginning is in order, not from a creation perspective, but springing from the need for new first stories--stories of giants--of early progenitors and their deeds. Eliade says of these early stories, "It is a History at once divine and human, for it is the result of a drama acted out by the Ancestors of men and by Supernatural Beings different in type from the all-powerful, immortal Creator Gods" (Eliade, 1963, 108).

Cassiel walks to the wall from the west. Damiel is in the "dead zone" between the walls with the watch tower behind.

Damiel - I'm going to take the plunge, an old human expression, often heard, that I only understood today, Now or never, the moment of the ford. There is no other bank, there's only the river. Into the ford of time, the ford of death. Down from our look-out of the unborn! Observing from above is not like seeing from eye level. First I'll have a bath. (Damiel and Cassiel walk together) Then I'll get shaved by a Turkish barber who will massage me down to the fingertips. Then, I'll buy a newspaper, and I'll read it from the headlines to the horoscope (they look at each other). The first day I'll get waited on. If anyone wants anything I'll say, "ask the next guy." (cut to soldiers on jeep) If they trip over my legs they'll have to apologize. I'll get shoved and I'll shove back. In the crowded bar the manager will find me a table (pan back to the pair walking away) The limo will stop and the mayor will ask me to join him. . . I'll seem familiar to all and suspect to none (turn to each other). I won't utter a word and I'll understand every language. That will be my first day. (they look directly at one another and stop)

Cassiel - But none of it will be true

The guards are framed between them. Then Damiel smiles. We cut to a close-up of Cassial in black and white then cut to close-up of Damiel in color. A black and white close-up of Cassiel then pans to footprints then a glance at the guards. Damiel, in color, takes the stone to his forehead in a seemingly religious movement.

Daniel - I'll take her in my arms (pan to soldiers). And she'll take me in her arms (Pan back to Cassiel holding Daniel pieta like. Cassiel takes him to the West.)

After waking in color, Daniel buys his first cup of coffee and completes the poem about the child as he walks down the city street.

When the child was a child
 apples and bread were enough for him
 and it is still the that way.
 When the child was a child
 berries fell into his hands as only berries do
 and they still do now.
 Fresh walnuts made its tongue raw
 and it still does now.
 On every mountain it had a longing
 for yet a higher mountain.
 And in each city it had a longing
 for yet a bigger city
 and it is still that way.
 It reached for the cherries in the treetop
 with the elation it still feels today.
 It was shy with all strangers
 and it still is.
 It awaited the first snow
 and it still waits that way
 When the child was a child
 It threw a stick into a tree like a lance,
 and it still quivers there today.

Again, the river metaphor presents itself. Here, in the “dead zone” between East and West is where Daniel’s transformation is to occur. There is no East or West bank once Daniel has plunged into human history, only the river of humanity itself. As Daniel slowly takes on the weight of human existence and leaves behind footprints, Cassiel must contemplate the implications for his friend. Daniel now exists in the world of senses, and Cassiel's glance to the

guards indicates for us the first concern for Damiel's well being, that is, not to be shot. Damiel has put his life on the line, literally sacrificing himself as established in the pieta-like form, to follow his desire, Marion, and the world of senses.

Here, the poem of the child is completed. It has presented itself thematically throughout the film, and is broken into four sections: Section 1 (page 5) at the beginning of the film, Section 2 (page 8) at 0:09, Section 3 (page 15) at 1:00, and Section 4 (page 20) at 1:35. The first section of the poem is read over images of a hand writing, supposedly Damiel's hand. This portion of the poem presents the child as self-less, as unaware of its own existence, and separateness from others. The combination of this section with the visuals of the handwriting suggests that it is through observation, not experience, that Damiel knows these things. Although angels and children are strongly associated in this film there is an important distinction: where the angels may only dream of the world of senses, the child is immersed in them. Section 2 of the poem draws upon the difference between angels and children, in that children do not know the answers to the questions posed within. The angels know when time began and space ends, there is no mystery for them. Over images of parenting and childbirth, Damiel desires to enter this world of uncertainty and sensuality. Even the concept of non-being fascinates the ever-being angels.

In Section 3 we are presented with what seems to be Homer's fear that we will lose our childhood. The child is tossed from bed to bed and has lost the vision of paradise. No longer

does the child find all things beautiful. It must also begin to conceive of death, not in wonder as the child of Section 2, but in fear. All that now interests the child is work. This section of maturation seems to stand out strongly against the other four sections for it presents a bleak picture of what might become of the child. This fear of adulthood is diffused; however, by the lighthearted images of the circus matinee, where adults join with children in play. Section 4 is presented soon after Damiel has become human, and now is experiencing those senses he could only observe in Section 1--Damiel has become the child. The images of Damiel walking briskly down the city streets is reminiscent of a child embarking on a day of adventure.

Damiel, searching for Marion, is drawn to a club featuring Nick Cave, to whom Marion was listening in her trailer. There we see her dancing amid the maelstrom. She then enters into the lounge portion of the bar where Damiel is and she walks to him. She is in red, and the entire scene is cloaked in red prescribing a romantic atmosphere. She walks to the bar and stands beside Damiel who then turns to her and offers a glass of wine which she drinks. She turns to him saying:

. . .I don't know if destiny exists but decision does exist.
 Decide! Now, WE are the times! Not only the whole city but
 the whole world (close-up of Marion) is taking part in our
 decision we two are more than just two. We personify
 something. We are sitting in the People's Plaza and the plaza is
 filled with people. Who all wish for what we wish for. We are
 deciding everyone's game! I am ready. Now it's your turn
 you're holding the game in your hand. Now. . .or never!
 (Close-up of Damiel then cut to a two shot)

You need me. You will need me. There is no greater story than ours. That of a man and a woman. It will be a story of giants, invisible, transposable, a story of new ancestors. Look, my eyes! They are the picture of necessity of the future of everyone on the plaza. Last night I dreamt of a stranger, of my man, only with him could I be lonely, open up to him, completely open, completely for him, welcome him complete into myself, surround him with the labyrinth of shared happiness. I know it is you. (They embrace).

Cut then to Daniel on the ground helping Marion as she performs upon the vertical rope.

Daniel speaks:

Something has happened, it is still happening it is binding! It was true at night and it is true in the day. (Cassiel in B&W at the bottom of the screen). Especially now, Who was who? I was in her and she was around me. Who in the world can claim that he was ever together with another person? I AM together. No mortal child was ever created but an immortal common image. I learned amazement last night. She took me home, and I found my home. (Marion's shadow is on the wall with the image of a couple dancing). It happened once, It happened once, and so it will be forever. The image we created will be with me when I die. I will have lived within it. Only the amazement about the two of us--the amazement about man and woman--only that made a human being out of me. I know now what no angel knows.

This, the conclusion of our narrative, slowly begun, is a particularly curious scene. Even though they are both human, the lover's dialogue presented between Daniel and Marion is once more presented as monologue. In what should be an intimate scene between two lovers, the message is directed not at each other but at the viewer, who, by Marion's gaze, is also the intended recipient of her words. We as viewers must decide whether to engage the myth. Marion suggests this is a story of giants. One of the early first stories in the Old Testament tells of the

sons of God, the angels, descending and marrying with the daughters of men (Genesis 6: 1-4 KJV). The offspring of these couplings between heaven and earth were the giants.

We have become the new Potsdamer Platz, the Plaza of the People, and it is our wish that the two should join together. We, as a community, may allow ourselves to be joined by Marion and Daniel's union. Daniel's verbal imagery is decidedly sexual, but the content transcends mere sex. Wenders seems to see the union of man and woman in a particularly mythic way and that is of the completion of the human being. Man and woman separated are only half of the original Adam and must be brought together for a complete human experience. Most biblical scholars concur that the original Adam was neither male nor female, but more like the undifferentiated Brahman of Eastern mysticism. Maybe this view, in our time, seems simple or contrived, but in many mythologies it is an important part of life. It is the understanding of myth made popular by Joseph Campbell where myth is a making of experience from life rather than giving meaning to it that Daniel sacrifices his Platonic state for (Campbell and Moyer, 1988: 5). He has indeed followed his bliss.

As Cassiel sits, melancholy, on the winged victory overlooking Berlin, we hear the words of Homer:

Name the men, women, and children who will look for me--me, their story-teller, their spiritual guide--because they need me more than anything in the world. We have embarked!

As the last line is read we see Homer with umbrella headed toward the west wall. Then we are presented with a shot of the city sky with the caption, "to be continued." Our perturbing annal, which became a narrative through the story of Damiel and Marion, now presents itself to us as a chronicle-- a story that seems to be going somewhere but that ends abruptly without resolution. We have been compelled by Wenders to enter the stream of history, and return to a time of new beginnings. Similarly, we have been propositioned by Marion to begin the creation of new first stories, and return to community. Homer has shown us the cost of not heading this call. It is my belief that Wenders positions us as poised like Damiel on the ledge, we must decide whether to ever observe life as it goes by, or to jump into the stream of life. Only through our embracing of the film's message, to take the leap and enter our own history, our own bliss, can the story of our lives become a narrative. For Wenders, Life as annal or chronicle is a meaningless malaise. It is only through our position within a larger myth that our lives may be perceived as having meaning.

References

- Abel, Marco (1997) *To Be Continued: An Angelic Journey from Aesthetics to Politics in Wim Wenders' Heavenly Cinema*, Unpublished Paper, Pennsylvania State University, pp. 20-21.
- Caltvedt, Les (1992) Berlin Poetry: Archaic Cultural Pattern in Wenders' *Wings of Desire*, *Literature/Film Quarterly* 20.2, p. 123.
- Campbell, Joseph, and Bill Moyer (1988) *The Power of Myth*, New York: Doubleday, p. 5.
- Cardullo, Bert (1988) Artists as Children, *Hudson Review* Fall, p. 521.
- Cook, Roger (1991) Angels, Fiction and History in Berlin: Wim Wenders' *Wings of Desire*, *Germanic Review* 66.1.
- Ehrlich, Linda C. (1991) Meditations on Wim Wenders' *Wings of Desire*, *Literature/Film Quarterly* 19.4, pp. 242-246.
- Eliade, Mircea (1963) *Myth and Reality*, New York: Harper & Row.
- Helmetag, Charles H (1990) “. . . Of Men and Angels”: Literary Allusions in Wim Wenders's *Wings of Desire*,” *Literature/Film Quarterly* 18.4, pp. 251-54.
- Jaehne, Karen, (1988) Angel Eyes: Wenders Soars, *Film Comment*, May/June, p. 18.
- Kael, Pauline (1988) The Current Cinema: Zone Poem, *The New Yorker*, 30 May, p. 77.
- Kauffmann, Stanley (1988) Stanley Kauffmann on Films: Immortals and Others, *The New Republic*, 23 May, p. 26.
- Kempley, Rita (1988) The Wonder of “Wings”, *The Washington Post*, 1 July, p. B1.
- Kehr, Dave (1988) *Wings of Desire* inspires heavenly return to creativity, *The Chicago Tribune* 15 July, p. 38.
- The King James Study Bible* (1997) Thomas Nelson: Nashville.
- Maslin, Janet (1988) *Heaven Can Wait*, *New York Times* 29 Aug., p. C15.
- O'Sullivan, Tim, et al. (1994) *Key Concepts in Communication and Cultural Studies*, New York: Routledge, p. 234.

Sterritt, David (1988) *Christian Science Monitor*, 20 May, p. 21.

White, Hayden (1981) The Value of Narration in the Representation of Reality,
On Narration W.J.T. Mitchell (ed), Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 1-4.