

# **From Berlin to Los Angeles**

The Collapsing of Resistant Spaces in Hollywood's *City of Angels*



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*Filmmakers and painters are philosophical thinkers to the extent that they explore the potentials of their respective mediums and break away from the beaten paths.*

*- translators foreword to A Thousand Plateaus.*

Beautifully wrought, Wim Wenders' 1987 meandering, fragmented narrative *Wings of Desire* struggles and swells into a cacophony of desire that reaches beyond the screen and challenges its audience to enjoin its mythopoetic vision. Much, however, is lost in the film's decade long journey from Berlin to Los Angeles; *City of Angels*, the 1998 Warner Brothers transposition of *Wings of Desire*, denies its avant-garde roots and incarnates itself in the lulling security of Hollywood.

The experimental German film *Wings of Desire* (*Der Himmel Über Berlin*) met with both critical and popular acclaim, winning Wenders the best director prize at the 1988 Cannes Film Festival. 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. *The Village Voice* heralded the film an instant classic, citing the mesmerizing eloquence of its cinematography. *The New Yorker* noted that the muted polychrome was ghostly, only half existing. *The Washington Post* in two separate reviews explored the film's form and structure, considered its binary oppositions and the photography, and focused especially on Wenders' loose approach which reveals itself more like music or poetry than traditional cinema. Both articles comment on the resolution of Wenders' existential film as romantic but were not displeased; in effect they concluded, a romance, of intertwining opposites with no true Hollywood ending.

Scholarly literature has also grown up surrounding *Wings of Desire*, probing its structure, social significance, aesthetic qualities, allusions to literature, and its place in the New German Cinema. Unsurprisingly, three articles from *Literature/Film Quarterly* are all concerned with literary allusions, particularly I Corinthians 14:1, the poems of Rainer Maria Rilke, Homer and even the Tao. The *Hudson Review* explores Wenders' perennial exploration of artist and child through the guise of Rilke's angels. *Film Comment* charted a similar course but focuses on the East/West tension (still quite strong when this film came out). *The Germanic Review* looked at the film from several perspectives specifically Lacan's suture and the narrative opposing the Hollywood establishment and romanticization. And lastly, the *Monthly Film Bulletin* looked at Wenders' turn from the horizontal construction in *Paris, TX* to the vertical view in *Wings of Desire*. *Wings of Desire* is indeed a curious film worthy of scholarly attention; coming into being during the late nineteen-eighties, it captures the anticipation 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," the human condition is explored.

Unlike *Wings of Desire*, *City of Angels* received far less attention from scholars. Many critics make the point that *City of Angels* is not a remake, but rather borrows images and textures and a minor subplot from Wenders' acclaimed masterwork. Roger Ebert for the *Chicago Sun Times* suggests that, "To compare the two films is really beside the point, since *Wings of Desire* exists on its own level as a visionary and original film, and *City of Angels* exists squarely in the pop mainstream." Many, like *Salon*, have found the photography to be a wonderful achievement in popular film, relying on the skills of *The English Patient* cinematographer John Seales. Director Brad Silberling, whose

previous film work was defined by *Casper*, seems to have surprised some reviewers with his maturity.

Even the most kind critics seem to see the film as overly emotional. Considering the romance in the film, the *San Francisco Chronicle* considers it “emotionally manipulative . . . romantic machinery” that works only if you don’t think about it too long. *People* declares the film “a big, soppy love story” while *Salon* warns that the film “dances perilously close to the line between romance and schmaltz.” Roger Ebert criticizes the film for falling into the clichéd Hollywood romance formula of boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl back. In the film he sees the device of romantic separation as unneeded and wholly missing from Wenders' original work. Richard Siskel of *Time* magazine points out the disturbing Hollywood convention that true love must be brief--in this case ending in Maggie’s death. *People* and the *Advocate* see this “dipped-in-honey love story” as watering down its theological import into a “Hallmark-card theology,” and *HBO* declares it “greeting-card whimsy.” At least *City of Angels* gets kudos for being the best of the recent pop trend towards everything angelic.

Many of these seemingly innocent linguistic, formalistic, aesthetic choices will be shown in the following essay to be the very sites of political expression. Refusing Roger Ebert's admonition to keep the two versions separate, it is my intent to show that the seemingly unimportant changes made between *Wings of Desire* and *City of Angels* are very much the spaces where resistive readings and tactical appropriations, are vanquished. There are three primary shifts that occur which de-politicize *City of Angels* and make it less resistive--less empowering--than *Wings of Desire*. *City of Angels* is a modernist text which recenters the narrative structure of the formerly postmodern decentered *Wings of Desire*. *City of Angels* also tends to erase the Other; that is, the

binary opposites tend to get diffused and the marginalized half, that which is different than the culturally accepted norm, gets repressed or deleted. Lastly, much of the viewer's perceived agency in the film is destroyed when the call for a new mythopoetic beginning is completely eliminated. It is useful here to define my use of "modern" and "postmodern." I will rely on the definition offered by Jean-Francois Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition*:

The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable. A postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher. . . . (81)

Lyotard's definition may be summed up more concisely as "incredulity toward metanarratives" (xxiv). Modernism on the other hand sees itself as looking for the prime metanarrative through a uniquely personalized style. Frederic Jameson, in *The Cultural Turn*, derives his definition from specific reactions against this modernist universalism by declaring that the postmodern is defined by pastiche and schizophrenia (3). Pastiche for Jameson is not a parody but an incorporation of multiple anachronistic styles and allusions without the blank irony of the modernist poets. Schizophrenia concerns itself with the dissolution of the subject, and will most closely be related to decentering in this essay.

Although this analysis relies upon concepts expressed by postmodernist theorists, post-structuralists, and film scholars, this is not an attempt to perform a deconstruction of *Wings of Desire*, *City of Angels*, its process of translation, nor is it a

political economy or historical exegesis of these. Certainly these undertakings would be helpful to further understand this transposition more clearly, but the current analysis must concern itself with a smaller endeavor. Here, I intend to explore how the concepts created by these disparate discourses might enlighten the space between these films. Therefore the intent is not to establish causation, nor is it an analysis of economic factors which make necessary the gulf between these texts. Certain causal links and economic factors may, however, be hinted at throughout the ensuing discussion. I hope to use postmodern and post-structural insights without actually entering into a deconstruction of the texts. To deconstruct either, both, or the interstices between would surely lead in directions other than the one I have chosen to follow here.

### **Centering the Narrative:**

*In those days, though, the spring always came finally but it was frightening that it had nearly failed.*  
- Ernest Hemingway, *A Movable Feast*

Much like Hemingway's slowly budding spring, *Wings of Desire* threatens never to produce a narrative sequence. Wenders creates a new cinematic experience through a calculated decision to work against the grain of contemporary cinema. Wenders' last decade of filmmaking, spent in America, had inclined him 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 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.

The structure of the film is particularly effective in creating a desire for narrative, since the first thirty-five minutes of the film are presented without a story line. In these introductory fragments, we are presented with the despair of the human condition, as well as a delight in the minutia of the everyday. The angelic motion created by the pans and pushes, trucks, dollies, and pedestals is a feeling of airy lightness, yet the subject of the camera's gaze is, again, despair. Here is presented a world, seen through angelic eyes, of a people isolated and lost--a people with no community. Even the familial ties presented 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 the television, which is no surrogate. Albeit beautifully captured on film, this is a world of postmodern 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 presented is that of the expectant mother who, though worried for her child, cannot wait to see what he or she will be like. Nothing seems of greater or less worth--all is one, a human ocean. Here amidst the glorious emptiness and revelatory minutia begin the desirings for a story. Roger Cook, in "Angels, Fiction, and History in Berlin" explores this uneasiness within the viewer and examines 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. (38)

To further explain how the film, up until this point, produces anxiety and unfulfillment in the viewer, it is helpful to consult the work of Hayden White. 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 1-4). It seems humans need some conclusion to the matter, and it may well be that *Wings of Desire* is frustrating because much of the film presents only 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.

(20)

Does the first time viewer realize that he or she is being drawn in as Cook and White might suggest? I think it is likely that first time viewers feel this uneasiness, but it is doubtful that they are cognizant of the structural reason behind their experience.

*Wings of Desire* is a complex, esoteric film that reveals itself layer by layer. It is only through repeated viewings and significant scholarship that a viewer might recognize the mechanisms which I suggest are at work. At this point, it will be helpful to look at one of these scenes from the fragmented introductory sequence. The camera moves over the surface of a sleek car as Damiel and his companion angel, Cassiel, sit inside and discuss work. At first it looks like the scene is shot while still moving along the freeway but then the image widens out to reveal the car is 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:

*Damiel* - 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 (Damien blows). To be Savage!

*Damien* - 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 a scene that is representative of the first thirty-five minutes of the film. Of course, for the viewer there would have been no exegesis thus far and, if on Cook and White are correct, the viewer would have likely been presented 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 this absence of narrative could be passed of as the trappings of the "art film," but the film should at least be setting up for something to happen. The viewer is presented with nearly forty minutes of film without a story, merely pieces of conversation, beguiling images, and poetry. By the time the viewer gets to what may be the beginning of a story she is exhausted. Having been bombarded with images of personal, isolated, existential angst, the viewer begins to look for a way out.

*City of Angels* does not attempt this fragmented, decentered approach. *City of Angels* fully sets up the narrative within twelve minutes. There is no interest in creating a state of anxiety within the viewer, rather the viewer is carried directly into the story line. Whereas *Wings of Desire* sets up multiple story lines--Damien, Cassiel, Marion, Peter Falk, Homer, as well as Berlin itself and a host of vignettes--*City of Angels* puts the focus directly on the romance between Seth, the angel, and Maggie, the human. *City of Angels* does allude to its predecessor's structure through short sections showing persons inner thoughts and a brief passage of the angels dialogue considering their heavenly

existence. One of the few scenes that pursues this allusion shows Seth and Cassiel perched over a busy freeway on the civic center exit sign reading over the logbook of human events:

*Seth* - In the elevator of the Bradburry Building, a man touched a woman's bare skin by accident but it made her turn and look at him in such a way.

*Cassiel* - And they . . . ? (hand gesture asking for completion)

*Seth* - Yes.

*Cassiel* - Uh ... That was a good day.

*Seth* - Do you ever wonder what it would be like to touch?

*Cassiel* - No.

*Seth* - Yes, you do.

*Cassiel* - Uh, occasionally, yes ... touch.

This is certainly not the dialogue written by postmodern playwright Peter Handke whom Wenders' relied on for his screenplay. The rich tapestry of allusions in *Wings of Desire* include the self-referential Peter Falk, the poetry of Rainer Rilke (particularly the "Duino Elegies"), radio gumshoe Philip Marlowe, the modernist score "the End of the World," World War II, the Bible, and even Charlie Chaplin's "Circus." *City of Angels* is not a pastiche but references only Wenders' film, Ernest Hemingway's *A Movable Feast*, and a "new age" take on religion. The poetry is gone, the philosophy is gone, the exploration of the divided city Berlin, a metaphor for the world, is subsumed. The atonal, disorienting score is replaced by pop artist such as the Goo Goo Dolls and Alanis Morissette. In the above scene all of the wonder about human existence from those cannot experience it turns to only one theme--touch--sex. Dialogue, here, gets whittled down to its base appeal deleting philosophical and poetic references. The very structure of the film--its splintered mingling of scenes--becomes a run-of-the-mill modern romantic narrative.

Hollywood has been and continues to be resistive to change. This historical/economic observation should be helpful in understanding why such a weak translation of *Wings of Desire* was necessary to meet Hollywood expectations. Film scholar Robert Ray has observed that “Hollywood typically adopted only diluted versions of stylistic innovations, which it subsequently devitalized or discarded. . . . Hollywood sought to fulfill its self-appointed role as public comforter” (29). In *A Cinema of Loneliness*, fellow film scholar, Robert Philip Kolker, shares Ray’s conclusions, “American film begs us to leave it alone, from its beginnings, it has presented itself as an entertainment, as an escape; it is made to give pleasure, to excite, to offer us a surrogate reality” (vii). This Hollywood entertainment does, however, carry strong ideological content as Kolker observes, “American film has a peculiar, contradictory, and self-defeating dynamic. In form and content Hollywood tends to be conservative, always maintaining an ideological dead center” (iv). Both form and content, then, work against any appropriation of the film, other than to say that is the way it is. There is, then, no space for resistance whether inside (content) or outside (production) of the Hollywood film. To further illustrate this lack of choices, the cinematic construction is rendered invisible. Ray suggests, “Conscious ‘style’ would be effaced both to establish the cinema’s illusion of reality and to encourage audience identification with the characters on the screen” (35). Keeping the narrative viewpoint simple and central was paramount as Ray describes:

The components of the invisible style gathered around cinema’s two fundamental means: *Mise en scène* and editing. In *mise en scène*, the invisible style evolved what [Noël] Burch has called the principal of ‘centering.’ Lighting, focus, camera angle, framing, character blocking, set design, costuming, and camera distance all worked to keep what the

ongoing narrative defined as the main object of interest in the foreground and center of the frame. (38)

Ray goes further exploring the necessarily discontinuous nature of editing and how it was brought into submission by the matching shot, action, glances, sound, the 180 degree rule, and most importantly shot-reverse shot based on eyeline match. These “invisible” stylistic choices disguised a “process that ‘naturalized’ the cinematic narrative by concealing the role of the filmmaker” (39).

By diluting the avant-garde structure and composition of *Wings of Desire*, studio director Brad Silberling was able to take a small portion of the film and make from it the storyline for *City of Angels*. Unlike *Wings of Desire*'s romantic story, which develops near the end of the film, *City of Angels* is pure Hollywood. Wenders' love story ends in a noble monologic proposition for a new beginning that challenges the audience to participate. The section below “Eliminating the Mythopoetic” deals much with this deletion. *City of Angels* opts for a more traditional love story that remains center stage throughout the film. As Roger Ebert has suggested, Wenders' original love story is cut to fit into the Hollywood mold by using the Hollywood romantic formula of boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl back. In Wenders' film the union between Angel and human does not occur until near the very end. And it leaves the relationship at its beginning, albeit a serious one.

*City of Angels* has the couple meeting and developing a friendship before Seth decides to take the fall and become human. In *Wings of Desire*, Damiel only contacts Marion in her dreams. In *City of Angels*, Maggie tells Seth to leave after she cuts him with a knife and sees that he is not hurt. This allows the film to return to the standard Hollywood romance formula. Maggie's boyfriend proposes marriage and although Seth leaves, he visits her again but remains invisible. Maggie speaks to Mr. Messinger,

an ex-angel now human heart patient, who tells Maggie that Seth can join the human race if he so wills it. Dennis Franz plays Messinger and is an obvious reference to the Peter Falk (Detective Columbo) character in *Wings of Desire*; Falk's character if more daring, however, as he plays himself, the actor Peter Falk. Seth takes the plunge to humanhood and goes in search of Maggie who has gone to Lake Tahoe with her boyfriend to finalize the engagement. She ends up rejecting her boyfriend's proposal because she is really in love with Seth. Now fully human and able to touch and be touched, Seth and Maggie make love in front of the roaring fireplace in a cabin at Lake Tahoe. The next morning, after sitting by the beautiful mountain lake wrapped in a blanket, and as Seth showers, Maggie, hoping to delight Seth's newfound senses, rides her bike up to the local store to pick up some fresh produce. On her way back she runs into a logging truck, and with Seth at her side, she dies.

Three things are noteworthy in this shift in narrative. First, the Hollywood romance is reinscribed. Second, as Sickel has noted, the tendency for Hollywood romance is towards passion and temporality--in his words, "tragically brief." Most romances burn bright but are quickly consumed. This tendency towards rapture and extinction and its implications for ethical responsibility will be explored in detail in the next section. Lastly, there is an emphasis on consumption at work in the shifting of locale from the city to the resort. In *Creating the Romantic Utopia*, Eva Illouz has explored this connection between romance and consumption suggesting a liminal time and place must be created for true romance to bloom and this space relies on the dictates of class (89-95). *Wings of Desire's* romance occurs inside the city of Berlin--in bars and in circus tents--yet, for there to be romance in the Hollywood version one must move from dirty L.A. to a beautiful Lake Tahoe resort cabin. Whereas Wenders' finds

beauty in the fragmented city of the everyday, here, a liminal time and space must be purchased so that love can be shared.

It is important now to address the political implications of this filmic domestication. Films do not speak themselves nor does “Hollywood” make films, rather it is the producers, directors, cinematographers, art directors, actors, and focus groups, and other personnel involved who create the films which are experienced by the mass public. Films become places onto which viewers maneuver and poach. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau observes that places proper become spaces with the movement of individuals upon them. It would seem that *Wings of Desire* would find de Certeau happily traversing its ground:

For the technological system of a coherent and totalizing space that is “linked” and that have a mythical structure, at least if one understands by “myth” a discourse relative to the place/nowhere (or origin) of concrete existence, a story jerry-built out of elements taken from common sayings, an allusive and fragmentary story whose gaps mesh with the social practices it symbolizes. . . . Figures are the acts of this stylistic metamorphosis of space. Or rather, as Rilke puts it, they are moving “trees of gestures.” (102)

It seems clear from this quote that any terrain can be colonized but it would seem that Wenders’ film, already full of gaps, lapses, allusions, and fragments, would be a welcome space for personal habitation and action. On the other hand, however, *City of Angels* bears the viewer the sign, “no trespassing.” Whether by intent or by habit it seems that persons within the studio system have overtly attempted to quash any possible alternate reading of the film other than the privileged, politically correct, version. Where once there was a space in which to question, to play, to exist, now there

is only another Hollywood romance for one to gauge the quality of their romantic and life through. This is not to say that there is no room for appropriation, only that the space has been restricted, and the moral prescribed. The next section will consider the powerful political and ethical effects of a metanarrative with no space for difference and therefore no responsibility.

### **Erasing the Other:**

*Let us wage war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unrepresentable;  
let us activate the differences and save the honor of the name.*  
- Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 82.

*I don't want to tell a STORY OF UNITY, but something harder:  
ONE story about DIVISION.*  
- Wim Wenders, *The Logic of Images*, 76.

In *City of Angels*, not only is the foreignness of form brought under Hollywood's reign but Otherness itself tends to get elided, that is, there is a tendency to homogenize the heterogeneous. In this section I will rely on the work of poststructuralists Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Michel Foucault to help make clear the damaging, very much political, effect of ignoring the Other. Poststructuralism is often lumped together with the postmodern but in actuality it predates and permeates the postmodern condition. Whereas postmodernism is most interested in the social, economic, and aesthetic culture, poststructuralism is interested in the very language of which such observations are constructed. Poststructuralism is a linguistic practice that attempts to decenter the dominant discourse, particularly through the play of binary opposites, to keep the use of words from becoming rigid and therefore to avoid the tendency towards a natural privileging of one meaning over another.

*Wings of Desire* is rich with binaries. High/low binaries exist throughout the film such as the obvious angel/human love story. Angels inhabit the heavens and have



access to all knowledge; they are not bound by place or class. Humans are place bound, uncertain, and classed. High and low culture is also at work in the romantic story. While angels are drawn to the enlightened culture of the library, Marion is drawn to the lowly circus. The circus as Peter Stallybrass and Allon White examined in *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* is both low and resistive (201). They have observed that “points of antagonism, overlap and intersection between the high and the low, the classical and its ‘Other’, provide some of the richest and most powerful symbolic dissonances in the culture” (25). *Wings of Desire* is one of these places of resistance; *City of Angels* is not. *City of Angels* works to ignore one of the sides of the binary opposition and the one which is elided is of course, the low. In *City of Angels* both human and angel have equal footing--they literally fight over the lives of Maggie’s patients. Here, Marion the lowly, bohemian trapeze artist becomes Maggie the neurotic, overachieving doctor. There are few positions in our culture higher than that of a medical doctor. Not only is Maggie now a member of the highest class, but Seth is brought down a bit from the heights. The camera angles are not as extreme between the high rise buildings and the angels’ perches. It could easily be seen that angel and human are considered equals. Everyone in the film from Maggie's friend to her boyfriend, tellingly are doctors. The only deviation from this is the ex-angel Messenger who has chosen a middle class lifestyle. Economic and power differences get erased in *City of Angels*.

Not only do high/low binaries get collapsed but so do the I/Other binaries. Berlin was chosen because Wenders wanted to focus on the division of the city as a metaphor for a divided world. L.A. is clearly a divided city as well, divided between itself and Beverly Hills, between the “valley” and Sunset Blvd. The not so distant L.A. riots make tangible the racial and ethnic division of the city. But where is difference in *City of Angels*? Scenes that include persons who might be seen as racially, ethnically, or

economically other than the upper class whites and their friends take up less than two minutes of the film and seem to be included merely to say “see, we’re politically correct.” One such choice was in making Cassiel, Seth’s sidekick, black (albeit the only black angel depicted). Yet there is no difference in manner or style between Seth and Cassiel. According to *City of Angels*’ new age spirituality, we’re all the same. *Wings of Desire* presents a film full of foreigners one to another: Germans, French, Americans, Asians, and Arabs. And not only are they racially and ethnically different but they also speak different languages and have different customs. The male/female division also gets conflated and in this case it is, of course, the male that is privileged. Any mention of family gets completely eliminated. Maggie may well be all “woman” but her goals and drives are traditional male ones. She is driven by power and career. I will now relate a scene from each movie, the one in which the angel falls in love with the human, in hopes of illustrating the lack of these binaries and their effects upon the film’s politics.

After successfully finishing up a heart surgery, Dr. Maggie places a phone call only to be interrupted by the news that her patient has gone into cardiac arrest. She runs back into the operating room:

*Maggie* - I’ve got to get back my bypass!

*Male Nurse* - He’s going.

*Maggie* - (looking straight at Seth) He’s not going anywhere. . . . Don’t do this.

Shot over the shoulder of Seth and the heart patient.

*Maggie* - Don’t do this. Tom ... Tom come on (she messages his heart)

The heart patient dies and Maggie tells the news to his family. She then enters the spiral stairway alone.

*Maggie* - On the table, on my table. I’m sorry. I’m sorry.

Seth enters the stairwell.

*Maggie* - I'm sorry. What happened. What happened--The graph occlusion--what?

Seth and Maggie look into each other's eyes.

*Maggie* - It was textbook. It was textbook

Seth waves his hand in front of her face.

*Maggie* - I'm sorry, the room got so big and I got so small.

Seth touches her hands.

*Maggie* - How did I get so small. I should have massaged longer. I lost it. I lost it.

Tears appear in Maggie's eyes and the scene ends with closeups of Seth and Maggie's eyes.

Although the scene is presented as an emotionally moving one and it is clear at this point that Seth has fallen in love with her, Maggie's real fear seems to be one of technology and skill. She does not seem to be interested in Tom the heart patient as a human being but only in her inability to preserve his life. What did she do wrong, technically? "He's not going anywhere" seems more of a conceit than a plea. After this scene, she is given a couple of days off which she sees as an embarrassment in front of her staff. Again, the scene is constructed to touch the viewer and relate Maggie's humanity but all it really does is relate her desire for control over the very life of others.

*Wings of Desire* sets up the romance between Daniel and Marion quite differently. The camera pulls in through the tent flap which frames an elephant passing by. Marion is swinging on the trapeze above wearing wings. The scene is in black and white and we see Daniel looking on, enraptured, throughout:

*Trainer* - Don't dangle there fly. (*in German*)

*Marion* - Damn it! I can't fly with these wings. (*in German*)

*Trainer* - Of course you can it's easier with wings than without. (*in German*)

*Marion* - But not these chicken feathers. (*in German*)

*Band member* - What did she say? (*In French*)

*Other band member* - The chicken wings bother her. (*In French*)

*Band member* - She works pretty hard with those chicken wings. (*In French*)

*Trainer* - Make an effort. (*in German*)

*Marion* - I am making an effort! (*in German*)

The film bursts into full color.

*Marion* - I'd have fallen on your heads long ago if I didn't make an effort.

The film returns to black and white.

*Owner* - Hold everything. We have no money for the rent or electricity. We're broke. That means tomorrow we pull out. To hell with it. The caravans go into winter storage and that's it for the circus this year. I'm sorry. (*in German*)

*Marion* - (Thinking to herself) That's it! Not even a season. Once again, no time to get anywhere. My circus dream: memories for ten years from now. Tonight is the last night with my good old number. And it's a full moon. And the trapeze artist breaks her neck. . . . Shut up! I didn't imagine it like this. The farewell to the circus. no one shows up for the last evening. you play like fools and I fly around the ring like a soup chicken! And then I'm a waitress again. (*In French*)

Formalistically through the use of color, *Wings of Desire* sets up the position of Otherness. The film is presented through black and white when it describes Daniel's lack of senses in the "real world" and is presented in color when there is a breakthrough into human sensation. This convention allows the viewer to keep themselves separate from the angels viewpoint and also see the separation and utter alterity of angel and human perspectives. There are no tears here but it is clear through his gaze and the sudden burst into color that Daniel has fallen in love with Marion. Here, the world is presented as multiple in language, nationality, economic standing, and perspective. Marion does not question her abilities as a trapeze artist, she is interested only in the

experience itself. Her position is one of real economic dependence. Maybe Maggie will get a few days off but Marion will now need to leave her space and look for a new one-- a new career, new friends, new hopes.

This is not to say that male/female, high/low, I/Other, and wealthy/poor divisions are good in themselves, but by intentionally ignoring their existence then the space for work within the language of the film is greatly reduced. Derrida's intent through deconstruction is not to do away with binaries or to synthesize something in between, but to offer up a space of play, of nonhierarchical instability, so that one binary does not take precedence over the other. *City of Angels* presents us with a wealthy educated white male culture without anything other with which to call it into question. It is interesting to note that two binaries seem to have escaped intact in both films. My assumption is that neither of these binaries have, as yet, been popularly politicized. They are so naturalized that they go unquestioned. The first is the primacy of sight and sound over the secondary senses of touch, taste, and smell. Angels and humans both have seeing and hearing abilities but touch, taste, and smell are considered too lowly and sensuous to be allowed the angels. These senses are considered the very essence of individual human existence. Perhaps it is because the mass media has as yet ignored all pedagogical senses other than those readily transmittable through written or televised discourse.

The other allowed binary is one that Foucault long ago noted but which has gained little cultural agency since the technology of science still rules popular culture. Seth and Cassiel relate that it is only the dying, delirious, and children who can see angels. These binaries between healthy/sick and complete/lacking were explored by Foucault in *The Birth of the Clinic* and *Discipline and Punish*. These states of age and health are seen as liminal, crazed, or in need of correction (*Discipline* 294). They are

allowed to be other, and as Foucault suggested literally define the normal. Maggie cannot be allowed to remain unchanged, she must be delirious or dying for her to be able to see angels.

And die, she does. But not really because the most troubling binary that is dissolved by *City of Angels* is the binary of life / death. Here, there is no death, not in any concrete way at least. Three persons are depicted as dying in the film but each one is given a perfect body and carried away to heaven by an angel. For *City of Angels*, death is merely life, "only different than you think," as Seth proclaims to Maggie. There is no hell to worry about for there is no believer / nonbeliever distinction--all go to heaven--"Some things are just true whether you believe in them or not." Recent writings by Derrida and Nancy suggest a certain ethics in what was early on considered the nihilistic endeavor of deconstruction. Both suggest that true responsibility, one to another, must take into account the utter alterity of the Other. Death itself becomes the metaphor for this impossible state of connection. It would be as impossible to become one with God as it would be to truly grasp the Other. In *The Gift of Death* Derrida offers up an ethics of absence:

If God is completely other, the figure or name of the wholly other, then every other (one) is every (bit) other. *Tout autre est tout autre*. This formula disturbs Kierkegaard's discourse on one level while at the same time reinforcing its most extreme ramifications. It implies that God, as the wholly other, is to be found everywhere there is something of the wholly other. And since each of us, everyone else, each other is infinitely other in its absolute singularity, inaccessible, solitary, transcendent, nonmanifest, originarily nonpresent to my ego, then what can be said about Abraham's relation to God can be said about my relation without relation to every

other (one) as every (bit) other, in particular my relation to my neighbor or my loved ones who are as inaccessible to me, as secret and transcendent as Jahweh. (78)

Surely, I am taking *City of Angels* far more seriously than it takes itself. Its whimsical, comforting message of an afterlife where everything can be worked out for the good seems to miss the everyday impact of such a discourse. Why be concerned about the Other (there is no other), about anyone other than oneself, because in the end we all go into the light? By breaking down our unique, individual differences, myths, and perspectives Hollywood constructs a metanarrative that disregards individual agency and personal responsibility. By breaking down these binaries which are the space of political action Hollywood denies an ethics of Otherness.

In *The Inoperative Community*, Nancy takes Derrida a step further and focuses on the construction of the individual as already a part of society in its birth and dying. Individuals are not fused in society but are rather much alone, only touching and being touched by other singularities within their singularity. Subjectivity is in the happening--there is no substance, all is historical and temporal. Singularities for Nancy are not present but they are always presencing. Nancy stresses the responsibility of the singularity in regards to alterity--the ethics of an immanent-less society. There is no community presented in either *Wings of Desire* or *City of Angels*. Whereas there seems no possibility that such a space might arise from *City of Angels*, *Wings of Desire* invites the viewer into the film and offers up a space for the creation of a new myth of community and responsibility.

## Eliminating the Mythopoetic:

*{Why not then continue to look like a child upon it all as upon something unfamiliar, from out of the depth of one's own world, out of the expanse of one's own solitude. . . .*

*- Rainer Maria Rilke, Letters to a Young Poet, 46.*

Although *Wings of Desire* is a postmodern film, it desperately longs to be a narrative and it is this very effect which the viewer is likely to experience. Lyotard squarely defines the postmodern in opposition to metanarrative and Derrida offers up the method of deconstruction for the very reason of keeping cultural mythologies unstable. How then can *Wings of Desire* be considered postmodern and poststructural? The structure of the film which I have discussed earlier creates the desire and the space for one to enter into the film's narrative himself. When the story does get going, it is an unconventional love story that ends with a proposition. Daniel, searching for Marion, is drawn to a club where she is dancing amid the maelstrom. She then enters into the lounge portion of the bar where Daniel 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 Daniel who then turns to her and offers a glass of wine which she drinks. She turns to him saying:

*Marion* - 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

*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 Daniel then cut to a two shot

*Marion* - 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.

Many critics have seen this as the imposition of a metanarrative on the structure of the film and to some a disturbingly Aryan one. But looking closely at this text and at previous mythical accounts in the film, one will see the surface of pastiche rather than any true attempt at a "real" narrative. A sample of this eclectic mythology is a scene where Damiel and Cassiel discuss the beginnings:

*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. 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. 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. 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. Do you still know how one day the highway was built on which the Napoleonic retreat took place one day, and then it was paved? today it is covered with grass and has sunk in like a Roman Road. Along with the tank tracks.

This is no coherent attempt at history, rather it is a borrowing from many histories and myths. Unlike the modernist poets, this is done quite seriously in the absence of sarcasm. Were *Wings of Desire* to impose one particular mythology, then this would surely diffuse whatever postmodern structure there has been, this, however, is not the case. What is occurring here in the scene between Damiel and Marion is the beginning

of a personal mythology which Derrida, Lyotard, and Jameson see as necessary to fulfill humans' needs. Here is the establishment of a relationship of one to another, yet, as evidenced by Marion's emphasis on loneliness, in full comprehension of their individual alterity.

This, the conclusion of the narrative, slowly begun, is a particularly curious scene. Even though they are both human, the lovers' 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. The viewer must decide whether to engage in the creation of the new myth. This perturbing annal, which became a narrative through the story of Daniel and Marion, now presents itself to us as a chronicle-- a story that seems to be going somewhere but that ends abruptly without resolution. That is, without the viewer's decision to enjoy the film. Otherwise, the space is full of agency, empowerment, and potential. *Wings of Desire* is a space of habitation, a place in which to develop new ways of seeing and thinking about the world. *City of Angels* does not offer itself up into this open discourse but rather it closes itself down by killing off Maggie. Through Maggie's tragic death, Seth is freed from all responsibility. Daniel, however, joins Marion where she is and begins a life of responsibility with her through the development of their own myth. The viewers are invited to join in and create their own new myths.

Wenders' act of perruque (doing one's own work on the boss's time) through choosing to "make the film up as he went along," allows *Wings of Desire*-- full of gaps and fragments--to offer itself as a space of resistance for its viewers (Certeau 28). *Wings of Desire* even resists the Hollywood conventions of narrative, structure, and style. Yet,

each of these shifts from *Wings of Desire* to *City of Angels* has negatively affected the political potential of the film by closing down the spaces of resistance it once offered. *Wings of Desire* suggests what can be accomplished through filmic discourse. Unfortunately, *City of Angels* ends up as merely another pop romance based in consumption.

The juxtaposition of these two films should offer up a cautionary tale to directors desiring to enter the Hollywood system and inspire those currently inside to break the paradigm of complicity. It is assumed by this author that many other such filmic translations have occurred and a thorough analysis of their individual cooptations by the Hollywood system would prove insightful into mapping this particular discourse of cultural power. For scholars of resistance, rhetoric, cultural studies, communication, and political economy, exploring the nature, mechanisms, and effects of this struggle would likely be quite intriguing. Overall, more studies directed into this area may help explain the continued overwhelming dominance of the Hollywood system and help illuminate those spaces which it seeks to colonize.

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