

Virtual November 17, 2020 (41:12)

Wim Wenders: **WINGS OF DESIRE/DER HIMMEL ÜBER BERLIN** (1987, 127m)
Spelling and Style—use of italics, quotation marks or nothing at all for titles, e.g.—follows the form of the sources.
Cast and crew name hyperlinks connect to the individuals' Wikipedia entries



[Vimeo link for ALL of Bruce Jackson's and Diane Christian's film introductions and post-film discussions in the Fall 2020 BFS](#)

Zoom link for all Fall 2020 BFS Tuesday 7:00 PM post-screening discussions:
<https://buffalo.zoom.us/j/92994947964?pwd=dDBWcDYvSlhPbk4TkswcUhiQWkydz09>
Meeting ID: 929 9494 7964
Passcode: 703450

Directed by Wim Wenders

Written by Wim Wenders and Peter Handke, Richard Reitinger (screenplay)

Produced by Anatole Dauman, Pascale Dauman, Joachim von Mengershausen, Wim Wenders, Ingrid Windisch

Music Jürgen Knieper

Cinematography Henri Alekan

Film Editing Peter Przygodda

The film competed for the Palme d'Or and won for Best Director at the 1987 Cannes Film Festival.

Cast

Bruno Ganz...Damiel
Solveig Dommartin...Marion
Otto Sander...Cassiel
Curt Bois...Homer
Peter Falk...Peter Falk

Bands:

Nick Cave & The Bad Seeds featuring Nick Cave, Blixa Bargeld, Mick Harvey, Kid Congo Powers, Thomas Wydler, Roland Wolf

Crime and the City Solution featuring Mick Harvey, Roland S. Howard, Harry Howard

Wim Wenders (b. August 14, 1945 in Düsseldorf, North Rhine Westphalia, Germany) started out as a painter, and arguably it was this background that helps to explain his fascination with landscapes, perhaps best exemplified in the recent *The Salt of The Earth* (2014). Wenders first came to the United States in 1972 with his second feature, the New Directors/New Films premiere of *The Goalie's Anxiety at the Penalty Kick* (1972) and he never quite looked back. Wenders has had a diverse career, managing to maintain a reputation as a beloved outsider while also mixing with the great and the not-so-great (the Bono-written,

Mel Gibson-featuring *Million Dollar Hotel* being an unfortunate example of the latter). Music has always been key, particularly in his documentary work, which often features diverse artists such as Pina Bausch, Sebastian Salgado, The Buena Vista Social Club, as well as this film's early incarnation of Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds. Distilling tonight's film to its narrative essence can be a difficult task, however, as opaque and mystifying as *Wings* occasionally is, it's also one of the most staggeringly beautiful films ever made: lyrical, melancholy, severe and laced with penetrating ruminative power. Even decades later, the director's films still grapple with difficult topics. Wenders is also a supporter of other film makers. In the famous conclusion of Montreal's Festival of New Cinema and Video in 1987, Wenders publicly turned over his first prize for *Wings of Desire* to Atom Egoyan for his film, *Family Viewing*, which had been singled out for special mention. Wenders has directed 50 films and tv episodes, among them *Everything Will Be Fine* (2015), *Palermo Shooting* (2008), *Don't Come Knocking* (2005), *Land of Plenty* (2004), "The Soul of a Man" episode in the PBS series *The Blues* (2003), *Buena Vista Social Club* (1999), *The End of Violence* (1997), *Lumière et compagnie/Lumière and Company* (1996), *Lisbon Story* (1994), *Bis ans Ende der Welt/Until the End of the World* (1991), *Paris, Texas* (1984), *Hammett* (1982), *Lightning Over Water/Nick's Film* (1980), *Der Amerikanische Freund/The American Friend* (1977), *Der Scharlachrote Buchstabe/The Scarlet Letter* (1973), *Die Angst des Tormanns beim Elfmeter/The Goalie's Anxiety at the Penalty Kick* (1972), *Alabama: 2000 Light Years from Home* (1969), and *Schauplätze* (1967). In 2017, Wenders debuted *Submergences*, starring Alicia Vikander and James McAvoy, at the Toronto Film Festival. The director told *Variety* magazine, "The sweeping geopolitical tale explores issues of political and religious radicalism." Wenders believes that art and cinema can help people understand their shared humanity. "Art has a very, very important function today to make us see through a lot of lies again. Art can help show that there has to be other weapons against darkness other than more darkness." His most recent film was a documentary about Pope Francis: *Pope Francis: A Man of His Word* (2018).



Peter Handke [from *Britannica Online*] , (born December 6, 1942, Griffen, Austria), avant-garde Austrian playwright, novelist, poet, and essayist, one of the most original German-language writers in the second half of the 20th century. He was awarded the 2019 [Nobel Prize for Literature](#), cited for "an influential work that with linguistic ingenuity has explored the [periphery](#) and the specificity of human experience."

Handke, the son of a bank clerk, studied law at Graz University from 1961 to 1965 and contributed pieces to the avant-garde literary magazine *manuskripte*. He came to public notice as an anticonventional playwright with his first important [drama](#), *Publikumsbeschimpfung* (1966; *Offending the Audience*), in which four actors analyze the nature of theatre for an hour and then alternately insult the audience and praise its "performance," a strategy that arouses varied reactions from the crowd. Several more plays lacking conventional plot, [dialogue](#), and characters followed, but Handke's other most significant dramatic piece is his first full-length play, [Kaspar](#) (1968), which depicts the foundling [Kaspar Hauser](#) as a near-speechless innocent destroyed by society's attempts to impose on him its language and its own rational values. Handke's other plays included *Das Mündel will Vormund sein* (1969; "The Ward Wants to Be Guardian"; Eng. trans. *My Foot My Tutor*) and *Der Ritt über den Bodensee* (1971; *The Ride Across Lake Constance*).

Handke's novels are for the most part ultraobjective deadpan accounts of characters who are in extreme states of mind. His best-known [novel](#), *Die Angst des Tormanns beim Elfmeter* (1970; *The Goalie's Anxiety at the Penalty Kick*), is an imaginative thriller about a former football (soccer)

player who commits a pointless murder and then waits for the police to take him into custody. *Die linkshändige Frau* (1976; [The Left-Handed Woman](#)) is a dispassionate description of a young mother coping with the disorientation she feels after she has separated from her husband. Handke's memoir about his deceased mother, *Wunschloses Unglück* (1972; "Wishless Un-luck"; Eng. trans. [A Sorrow Beyond Dreams](#)), is also an effective work.

Langsame Heimkehr (1979; *Slow Homecoming*) is a three-part story that culminates with a meditation on fatherhood, and *In einer dunklen Nacht ging ich aus meinem stillen Haus* (1997; *On a Dark Night I Left My Silent House*) follows the life-changing journey of a man made mute by injury. *Der Bildverlust; oder, durch die Sierra de Gredos* (2002; *Crossing the Sierra de Gredos*) details the pilgrimage and interior life of a woman crossing an Iberian mountain range. Handke's later novels included *Der grosse Fall* (2011; *The Great Fall*), which follows an aging actor for a day, and *Die Obstdiebin; oder, einfache Fahrt ins Landesinnere* (2017: "The Fruit Thief; or, A Simple Trip into the Interior").

Handke also wrote short stories, essays, radio dramas, and autobiographical works. The dominant theme of his writings is that ordinary language, everyday reality, and their accompanying rational order have a constraining and deadening effect on human beings and are underlain by irrationality, confusion, and even madness.

Handke was involved in filmmaking. He cowrote screenplays for several movies directed by [Wim Wenders](#), including *Der Himmel über Berlin* (1987; *Wings of Desire*), and he penned scripts for the [film](#) and TV [adaptations](#) of some of his books. In addition, he directed three feature films, including *L'Absence* (1992: *The Absence*), which he also wrote.

Handke's literary fame was overshadowed in 2006 by his politics. The writer's public support of [Slobodan Milošević](#), the former president of Yugoslavia who died that year while on trial for [genocide](#) and [war crimes](#), caused controversy after Handke spoke at his funeral. Handke was subsequently selected to receive that year's Heinrich Heine Prize, though he refused it before it was to be revoked from him.

Jürgen Knieper (b. March 15, 1941 in Karlsruhe, Germany) was only 8-years old when when he spontaneously replaced the pianoforte player of the Heidelberg student cabaret and his career as a musician began. After, he worked as a pianist in the jazz bar and came to Berlin with the touring group in 1965, where he studied composition at the Hochschule der Künste. He was playing one night when Wenders discovered him and asked him to compose the film music for his first major feature film, *The Goalie's Anxiety at the Penalty Kick* (1972). Some of this other work includes *The Scarlet Letter* (1973), *Wrong movement* (1975), *Arabic nights* (1979), *Christiane F.* (1981), *The Magic Mountain* (1982), *River's Edge* (1986), *The War is Over* (1989), *Murderous decision* (1991), *The Promise* (1995) and *Dawn of the World* (2008).



Henri Alekan (b. February 10, 1909 in Paris, France—d. June 15, 2001 age 92, in Auxerre, Yonne, France) was intimately linked with the evolution of European cinematography over the past half century, working with directors ranging from Jean Cocteau to Amos Gitai. At 16, Henri and his younger brother, Pierre, became travelling puppeteers. "Behind the puppet facade, there was a small hole through which you could look at the public without being seen," Henri recalled. "There, I could express myself without shyness." Soon the timid Alekan became third assistant cameraman at Billancourt studio. After a spell in the military, he returned to Billancourt in 1931 to find the studio transformed by sound technology. The camera had to frame in such a way as to avoid the microphone boom above the actors' heads and the boom shadow. "In the early days of sound, there were

terrible problems," Alekan's first success as director of photography was René Clément's grittily realistic *La Bataille du Rail / Battle Of The Railway* (1946). Using almost no lighting, he filmed railway workers re-enacting their courageous exploits as résistants during the occupation. Alekan remembered. He lauds the creative use of lighting and shadows, as delineated in his 1979 book, *Des Lumières et des Ombres (Of Lights And Shadows)*. Although he used color, his main contribution to cinema was his black-and-white photography, where he was able to play with light and shadows to create dramatic effect. For example, in Cocteau's *Beauty and The Beast* (1946), when the father of the heroine approaches the door of the Beast's castle, Alekan suggests the passage of time evoked by the actor's shadow. To achieve the effect, he put a light on a crane, which was lowered as the actor approached the door, creating a bewitching transition—all in one shot—from a small midday shadow to a huge one that climbs the door. He was rather left behind by the French New Wave directors, most of whom wanted to break away from the confines of sound stages, film speedily in the streets, and use simple flat lighting. Later, however, a new generation of filmgoers sought out Alekan after he had shot a series of conventional Hollywood color movies in the 1960s and 1970s, including *Topkapi* (1964) and *Mayerling* (1968). In 1981, Raul Ruiz and Wim Wenders both asked him to shoot films. As a tribute, the circus in tonight's film is called the Cirque Alekan, a place of wondrous light and shadows. He shot his last films for the Israeli director Amos Gitai, notably *Golem, The Spirit Of Exile* (1992).



Bruno Ganz (b. March 22, 1941 in Zürich-Seebach, Switzerland—d. February 16, 2019 (age 77) in Zürich,

Switzerland) played Faust, a fallen angel and even Adolf Hitler. As a teenager, he dropped out of school to attend an acting school in Zurich, earned his living as a bookseller, and finished training as a paramedic. He made his theatre debut in 1961 and quickly gained a good reputation. In 1970, along with Peter Stein, he founded the theatre company "Schaubuehne" of Berlin. During the Salzburg Festival in 1972, he was hailed for his performance in *Der Ignorant und der Wahnsinnige / The ignorant and the lunatic* by Thomas Bernhard, directed by Claus Peymanns. Consequently, Ganz became Actor of the Year and remained deeply grateful to Bernhard until his death. Bernhard even dedicated the play *Die Jagdgesellschaft / The hunters' society* to him with the words "for Bruno Ganz—whom else." Ganz's talent as a reflexive actor with tendencies towards introspection was widely known after *Summer Guests* (1976). At the same time, the stage actor built up a remarkable career on screen, where he equally worked with the most outstanding German directors, among them Wim Wenders, Werner Herzog, Peter Handke, and Volker Schlöndorff. For American audiences, Ganz is perhaps most well-known for his portrayal of Adolf Hitler during his last days spent in a bunker in 2004's *Downfall*. The actor has admitted that it was his most challenging role, depicting Hitler as a human being, an old, doddering man with trembling hands who can't help spitting whenever he tries to scream. In an interview with the German daily *Berliner Morgenpost*, Ganz admitted that he continued to be haunted by that strange figure for a very long time. While Ganz is still a bigger star within the German-speaking world than abroad, he has worked with international directors such as Stephen Daldry in *The Reader* (2008) and Ridley Scott in *The Counselor* (2013).

Solveig Dommartin (b. May 16, 1961 in Paris, France—d. January 11, 2007, age 45, in Paris, France) worked for a time as an assistant to the director Jacques Rozier (best known for his nouvelle-vague 1962 classic *Adieu Philippine*) before making her screen debut in tonight's film. The actress learned circus acrobatics in under 6 weeks and performed on the trapeze without using a stunt double. It was on the set of tonight's film that she began a liaison with Wenders, which was to last several years and led to her co-writing 1991's *Until the End of the World*. She

also had a cameo appearance in Wenders' 1993 *Wings* sequel, *Faraway, So Close* and, apart from a role in Claire Denis' *I Can't Sleep* (1994), her film career ended together with her relationship with the German director. Her last credit was in 1998 as the director of a 20-min short, *Il suffirait d'un pont*, starring Romane Bohringer and Catherine Frot. She died of a heart attack at the age of 45.

Otto Sander (b. June 30, 1941 in Hanover, Germany—d. September 12, 2013, age 72, in Berlin, Germany) was best known to foreign audiences for his 1981 turn in Wolfgang Petersen's World War II epic *Das Boot* as a shell-shocked German submarine captain. In the film, Sander famously delivers a drunken speech to his comrades mocking both the British and Adolf Hitler. A veteran stage star, Sander also did voice work dubbing into German the voice of Dustin Hoffman in *Death of a Salesman* (1985) and Ian McKellen in *Richard III* (1995).



Peter Falk (b. September 16, 1927 in New York City, New York—d. June 23, 2011, age 83, in Beverly Hills, California) at the age of three, was diagnosed with a tumor behind his right eye and, in an emergency operation, both the tumor and the eye were removed. He wore a glass eye for the rest of his life. The resultant disability made for a precarious school life, compensated for by his defiant humor. One particularly funny anecdote was once when he was playing in a Little League game, the umpire called him out. Falk thought that he was safe. He pulled his glass eye out of its socket and handed it to the umpire, telling him, "Here, I think you might need this." Unable to serve in the navy because of his eyesight, he enlisted in the merchant marines, working as a cook. After obtaining a Master's in Public

Administration from Syracuse University, he took a job as an efficiency expert in Hartford for the Connecticut budget bureau. By his late 20s, he knew that he had to escape financial administration. His big-screen debut came in Nicholas Ray's ecological adventure *Wind Across the Everglades* (1958), but with his city accent and nervy, method-oriented style he soon specialized in playing hoodlums in films including *Pretty Boy Floyd* (1959) and *Murder Inc* (1960), the latter attracting great attention for his powerful performance as a vicious killer. It earned him an Oscar nomination as best supporting actor, and he became the first person to be nominated for an Emmy within the same year, after playing a heroin addict in the television drama *The Law and Mr. Jones*. In 1961, Frank Capra remade his classic *Lady for a Day* as *A Pocketful of Miracles*, which earned Falk a second Oscar nomination. The following year, he received an Emmy for his performance as a truck driver in *The Price of Tomatoes* (1962). Although he had come to acting late, within a few years he established himself as a significant presence. He joined his friend Jack Lemmon when the actor decided to produce Murray Schisgal's play *Luv* for the screen. Sadly, result was a dismal movie farce. A couple of other duds led to a lull in Falk's career, until he heard that Bing Crosby had turned down the part of a detective in a scheduled television show. At the age of 40, Falk landed the part, making his debut as Columbo in the pilot episode, "Prescription Murder". When a series was proposed he declined, preferring to work with Cassavetes and to return to the stage in Neil Simon's *The Prisoner of Second Avenue*. Eventually NBC convinced Falk to sign on for six episodes. The actor even provided the clothing from his own wardrobe, including the famous raincoat. Later he observed that the dogged, working-class detective sprang from his own personality: "He's obsessive, relentless, meticulous about his work and definitely not a good dresser." Falk became deeply involved with the production, whose format was distinctive in that the murder was shown at the outset, making the mystery for the viewer not a matter of identity, but of explanation. He contributed ideas and directed two episodes, "Blueprint for Murder" and "Etude in Black". Between 1971 and 1978 he starred in 40 episodes, becoming the highest paid actor in television in the process. Falk managed to escape the straitjacket, or in his case shabby raincoat, of

typecasting. In addition to stage work, he made numerous film and television appearances, notably for John Cassavetes in *Husbands* (1970) and *A Woman Under the Influence* (1974). Falk's movie career became increasingly busy and varied. He was the storyteller-grandfather in the whimsical *The Princess Bride* (1987), and took the lead in an enjoyable remake of a Claude Lelouch film retitled *Happy New Year* (1987). He returned to the stage in David Mamet's challenging *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1986) and Moss Hart's *Light Up the Sky* (1987). In 2005 he had a street renamed after him in his hometown of Ossining, New York. To unveil the "Peter Falk Place", he pulled off a trademark raincoat covering the sign. Sadly, he was diagnosed with dementia in 2008, which was most likely brought on by Alzheimer's disease, from which he died on June 23, 2011.



Wim Wenders, from *World Film Directors, V.II.*
Ed. John Wakeman. H.W. Wilson Co. NY 1988.
Entry by Christopher Lambert

German director, scenarist, and producer, born in Düsseldorf, West Germany, the son of a doctor. Wenders was at first ambitious to be a priest, though he repudiates the notion that he is obsessed by his religious upbringing and says that rock music was ultimately a more important influence. The Ruhr district of Wenders' adolescence was surrounded by US military bases, and he stayed tuned in to the American Forces Network, fascinated not only by the music but by all things American. As it did for so many of his generation in postwar Germany, rock 'n' roll provided him with a specific sense of identity, the first thing in his life "that wasn't inherited." He went

so far as to tell Jan Dawson that "rock music actually saved my life." Certainly by the age of eighteen his ecclesiastical ambitions had ended, sacrificed to the dual distractions of the juke box and the pinball machine (which he played just as fanatically).

Possessed more and more by the creative energy—"it has more to do with joy than anything else"—he found in rock 'n' roll, and increasingly immersed in the counterculture of the 1960s, Wenders abandoned his studies in medicine and philosophy and in 1966 went to Paris to study painting. Instead, he discovered the Cinématèque Française, where he was able to view as many as five films a day and often did. He returned to Germany in 1967 and enrolled at the newly founded Hochschule für Fernsehen und Film in Munich, where he studied for three years. Jan Dawson said of the apprentice films he made there that they "combined a descriptive approach with a terror of cutting, or of asserting a point of view."

In his first year at the Munich Film School, Wenders made two 16mm shorts, *Schuplätze* (*Locations*) and *Same Player Shoots Again*. While the former no longer exists (Wenders seems to regard it as no great loss), some of its material is incorporated in the short, precredit sequence of *Same Player Shoots Again*. This otherwise consists of the same shot of a man running, repeated five times—once for each ball of the pinball machine suggested by the title—the repetitions being distinguished from each other only by certain variations in color. In its structuralist concerns the movie is very much in the spirit of the "loop" films fashionable at the time in Munich and Berlin (wherein the film was actually looped into a circle so that it repeated itself indefinitely). What distinguishes it from this vogue is its suggestion, however embryonic, of narrative. In addition, the stylistic echoes of American *film noir* indicate interests that were to become central in Wenders' more mature work.

Two more shorts followed in 1968. Still experimental, they show a growing technical and stylistic competence. *Silver City*, which Wenders describes as an experiment in "missing narrative," divides into two halves. The first studies a series of empty, early morning streets; the second shows the same streets filled with homeward-bound traffic. Made up entirely of extreme long shots taken from high angles, the film evokes a strong feeling of emptiness and impermanence—a sense of

contemporary dislocation and transience that Wenders returns to again and again in his later work.

Polizeifilm (*Police Film*) is of a very different nature—Wenders calls it his Laurel and Hardy film. An ironic comment on the tactics employed by the Munich police in dealing with the 1968 student demonstrations, the film is Wenders' most overt political statement. It provides a continuous commentary in the form of a voice whispering advice for policemen on how to handle the various aspects of a demonstration.

Polizeifilm has a subtlety and sophistication that distinguishes it from the more polemical films of the period, while embracing a similar ideology.

Alabama—2000

Light Years (1969) is notable for being Wenders' first experiment in 35mm film and for the camerawork of Robbie Müller... In *Alabama*, a fatally injured driver climbs into his car and goes on driving until he dies, accompanied by rock music and the sound of the engine. For Wenders, the film is "about the song *All Along the Watchtower*...about what happens and what changes depending on whether the song is sung by Bob Dylan or by Jimi Hendrix." *Three American LPs* is also about the emotions and images suggested by rock music, an element in all of Wenders' later pictures. Produced by Heissischer Rundfunk for German television, the film (which was never shown on television) was the director's first collaboration with the Austrian writer Peter Handke.

Rock music plays a different but equally indispensable role in his diploma film, *Summer in the City* (which originally bore the subtitle *Dedicated to the Kinks*). His first feature, albeit in 16mm, it was made in 1970 on a budget of DM 12,000 (about \$5,000). "To me, now, *Summer in the City* is really a documentary about the end of the Sixties..." Wenders says, "about the ideas people had in 1969 and 1970, the way people felt." The documentary quality of the film is due as much to its long takes, fixed camera, and black-and-white photography as to its slow and sometimes motionless narrative. Hanns Zischler (the

running man in *Same Player Shoots Again*) plays a character who, after being released from prison, journeys in search of his former friends, flying on from one wintry city to another, always failing to rediscover the real relationship he seeks. The rock music in the film provides a bitter counterpoint to the action, evoking summer, heat, and the emotional warmth so conspicuously absent from the narrative.

This lean, raw film marks the transition in Wenders' career from apprenticeship to maturity. Its scale obliged him to bring together a production team attuned to his ideas and working methods, beginning with Robbie Müller as cameraman and Peter Przygodda as editor. With the addition in his next movie of Martin Müller as sound recordist, Wenders had assembled the crew that was to be

responsible for his next six features. Wenders is very conscious of the importance of this continuing collaboration—of what he calls "learning together"—which accounts for much of the improvisational freedom and stylistic consistency in his work.

Developments in the German film industry at this time also had their effect on Wenders' career. The interest shown by German and Austrian television in the contemporary film scene and the government funding of institutions to encourage young filmmakers, such as the Kuratorium Junger Deutsche Film, contributed enormously to the emergence of a new wave of German filmmakers including Straub, Kluge, Herzog, Fassbinder, and Wenders himself. Moreover, with admirable foresight, some of these young directors recognized that it was the lack of appropriate distribution outlets that would hamper their efforts to reach an audience. In 1970, therefore, Wenders, together with eleven other filmmakers, formed the Filmverlag der Autoren (The Filmmakers' Company), based in Munich. The establishment of the Filmverlag allowed Wenders to turn to filmmaking as a career with the knowledge that the distribution of his work would be as much under his control as its creation.

In 1971, after a brief stint as a movie critic



with *Filmkritik* and the *Sddeutschen Zeitung*, Wenders made his first 35mm feature. It had some backing from Kuratorium Junger Deutsche Film but was funded primarily by Austrian television (“the guy who made the contract with us was thrown out of television one month later because of it”). *Die Angst des Tormanns beim Elfmeter* (*The Goalie’s Anxiety at the Penalty Kick*), based on the novel of Peter Handke, is about a soccer star past his prime who walks out on a game in Vienna after an argument with the referee. Bloch (Arthur Brauss) wanders around the city killing time—drifting in and out of movie theatres, checking the football results—then just as casually strangles a girl he picks up for the night. He takes a bus to the border in search of an old girlfriend and, finding the border closed, simply waits for the police to find him (or not).

The film is a study in alienation—an unbridgeable gap that suddenly opens up between Bloch’s sense of reality and that imposed by his society. Wenders calls it “a completely schizoid film, right in the middle of everything,” and the borderlands where it ends are also the borderlands of the mind. As Richard Combs wrote, the movie filters “its sense of the hero’s remoteness from life through the network of alien [American] artefacts—the technology, the songs, the movies—that both fascinate and dislocate....A stream of sixties pop tunes through the film is forever filling in the emotional spaces between people that the images leave blank.” The movie puzzled some of its reviewers, but for some, like Tony Rayns, it achieved an effect which is “richer and more original than in any of Wenders’ subsequent films.”

Der scharlachrote Buchstabe (*The Scarlet Letter*, 1974), an international coproduction, was an experience Wenders would prefer to forget. Starring Senta Berger, Hans Christian Blech, and Lou Castel, it is an adaptation of Nicholas Ray’s *Johnny Guitar*....The producers were so dissatisfied that they actually cut ten minutes running time out of the negative before distribution, an action Wenders will

never forgive: “The film is destroyed now....The producer seemed to be one of the few really good left-wing people in Spain; but I’d rather work with a fascist who leaves my negatives alone.”

With the Filmverlag der Autoren itself acting as producer, Wenders completed his third feature in 1974, *Alice in den Städten* (*Alice in the Cities*). ...This is another of Wenders’ journeys through a sterile, impersonal world, but one that becomes an odyssey of



self-discovery. A German journalist (Rüdiger Vogler) in America suffers a crisis of identity (brilliantly evoked in the empty and meaningless American vistas he obsessively records with his Polaroid camera). ... While it is concerned primarily with the journalist’s rediscovery of personal relationships and identity, the film is also a full-blooded attack

on the America that had obsessed Wenders since his youth; having finally got there, he obviously found it just as bleak and disfiguring as his own Europe. ...

Falsche Bewegung (*Wrong Move*, 1975), freely adapted by Handke from Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, continues Wenders’ exploration of “the notion of identity” in terms of a character in transit, again using as his paradigm a blocked writer played by Rüdiger Vogler....

While Wenders’ narratives contain so little dramatic action that his detractors prefer to call them non-narratives, they are perfectly congruent with the contemplative, explorative nature of his concerns and the improvisatory character of his filmmaking. ...

Not content with having a hand in the distribution of his films, Wenders then established his own production company, Road Movies Produktion. Its first project was his *Im Lauf der Zeit* (*King of the Road*, 1976), winner of the International Critics Prize at Cannes. This picture, which finally established Wenders as a major figure in the New German Cinema, was the third of his trilogy of road films, all starring Rüdiger Vogler. For many it was “the ultimate road movie”—the quintessential product of a genre that includes Dennis Hopper’s *Easy Rider* and Monte Hellman’s *Two-Lane Blacktop*, in which the

distances traversed by the protagonists are as much emotional or spiritual as territorial. In this respect, the train (appearing in all his films as his most obsessive image) is a central metaphor for the possibility of development: “I think motion constantly maintains the idea of change. The people in my films don’t actually change much, if at all, but they are nevertheless maintaining the idea.”

Like most of his films, *King of the Road* is shot in black and white, which Wenders finds “much more realistic and natural than color.” Nearly three hours long, it has even less dramatic content than its

predecessors....*King of the Road* seemed to mark the end of one phase in Wenders’ work. His next film *Der Amerikanische Freund* (*The American Friend*) was his most ambitious project to date. Co-financed by Road Movies, German television, and a French company, the film is trilingual, the actors of three different nationalities, and the script an adaptation by Wenders of Patricia Highsmith’s novel *Ripley’s Game*. Half-a-dozen filmmakers have parts in the film, and there are cameo performances by two of the directors Wenders most admires, Samuel Fuller and Nicholas Ray. It is also one of Wenders’ few color films, although he uses color in a characteristically unorthodox manner, accenting tones and shades most directors try to eliminate...

Wenders’ next two films both took him back to the United States. *Lightning Over Water* (1979) records in agonizing detail the last few weeks in the life of Nicholas Ray, then in the final stages of lung cancer. Ray and Wenders made the film in collaboration and so long as Ray dominates, it is a study of courage. As Ray weakens, however, intellectual command passes to Wenders, David Robinson thought that the latter “reveals himself lacking either in humour or discretion. Thereafter the film becomes voyeuristic and disgusting.”

Hammett (1982) was a more ambitious endeavor but was plagued by problems and proved extremely frustrating for Wenders. Wenders agreed to do the movie for Francis Ford Coppola’s Zoetrope Studios, but once begun its script was revised

endlessly by a series of writers. Then Coppola decided to close the film down when it was ninety percent complete, and novelist Ross Thomas was brought in to rewrite the screenplay yet again. When shooting began on the movie a year later, entire characters had been eliminated—and so, it seemed to some critics, had Wenders’ distinctive cinematic vision....

Wenders’ troubles with *Hammett* would seem to have provided the inspiration for *The State of Things* (1983), made during a long hiatus in the shooting of the detective film. It won the top award at the Venice Film Festival, as well as West Germany’s National Film Prize, given annually by the Minister of the



Interior....

Paris, Texas (1984), written by playwright Sam Shepard and L.M. Carson, dispenses with elaborately detailed plotting to emphasize the inarticulate rituals of American mythic experience. Derek Malcolm called *Paris, Texas* a “beautiful, resonant, and affecting movie...that may well attain the status of a modern classic....I’ve seldom seen such a potent combination of superior talents. Combine Wenders’ existential view and the more cranky complexities of Shepard, and you have the tone of the piece, which deals with love, freedom, reality, and illusions, but is perhaps chiefly about our capacity to deceive ourselves. Despite its length and [slow] pace, the film holds you in its grip like a vice.” It won the Golden Palm at the 1984 Cannes Film Festival.

In the interstices of his career, Wenders has made a number of short “diary films.” *Reverse Angle* (1982) shows the filmmaker in New York for the editing of *Hammett*, brooding over the problems of his craft (“I have the feeling that the story and images don’t belong to me”) and wandering around the city (which is very keenly observed). *Chambre 666* takes its title from the number of Wenders’ hotel room at the 1982 Cannes festival. There he set up a camera and sound equipment and invited his fellow directors one at a time to speak about the probable extinction of cinema (a television set plays in the background; otherwise there is no decor). “For once,” J. Hoberman wrote, “the filmmakers just have to face the camera;

the result is something like an auteurist *Chelsea Girls*. Jean-Luc Godard, Stephen Spielberg, and Michelangelo Antonioni (the only director to look out the window) do the most talking.... Werner Herzog—the only one to take control of his own image—sits down, takes off his shoes and socks, and turns off the set....The only two women...both smoke furiously and cite ‘passion.’....The film is a great time capsule.

...Wenders has written and directed a 92-minute film, *Tokyo-Ga* (*Tokyo Images*), a record of a trip he made to Japan in 1983 and an *hommage* to the great Japanese director Yasujiro Ozu (1903-1963). In the film, Wenders talks at length with Chishu Ryu, who starred in many of Ozu’s films; Yuharu Atsuta, the cameraman whose vision was shaped by Ozu’s vision; and Werner Herzog, the brilliant German director whom Wenders encountered by chance in Tokyo. The film becomes a meditation on Ozu’s filmmaking, in which the decline of the Japanese family and of national identity was a major theme, and on the current state of civilization. “More than anything else,” Vincent Canby observed, “*Tokyo-Ga* is a moving, perceptive critique of the Ozu career, written not in prose but in images extraordinary enough to do justice to the subject....It is a small but important film.”

Wenders lists as the major influences on his work the films of Ozu, for their precision and simplicity and the emotional density of their narratives; American cinema—particularly that of John Ford and Anthony Mann—for its clarity of structure and its development of a unique film language; and the work of Jean-Marie Straub, “the only influence on me coming from inside Germany.” Wenders in his turn has already exerted a substantial influence on contemporary cinema—not only aesthetically, but through the activities of Road Movies Production. In 1977 Wenders produced Peter Handke’s first film as a director, *The Left-Handed Woman*, and in 1979 Road Movies cofinanced (with the British Film Institute) Chris Petit’s first feature, *Radio On*; Wenders has also given support to several American independents.



“Wenders has issues to settle with cinema,...and the ways its innocent reflection of our lives can also become a colonising predetermination...” writes Richard Combs. “But Wenders’ cinema should not be made to sound forbiddingly formalist. It is also, often surprisingly, emotionally direct and involving.” Jan Dawson,

comparing Wenders with his colleagues in the New German Cinema, says that his films “lack the flamboyance of Fassbinder’s, the metaphysical ambitions of Herzog’s, the intellectual intensity of Kluge’s: more significantly, they are totally lacking in aggression. Their pacing

and perspective, their vision of an incongruous universe in which the human characters are seldom the most interesting item on the screen, their emphasis on the language of gesture rather than on dialogue—all of these leave Wenders closer to Ozu than to the conventions of Hollywood narrative.”

Jan Dawson wrote that “the conspicuous isolation of the introspective characters” in Wenders’ films “masks the fact that the films are profoundly political: the fundamental questions of ideology and social values are presented, not in any conventional way, but—like the landscapes, characters, and urban environment—materially, phenomenologically. Like his film and music criticism, his films reflect a purely descriptive approach. The paradox is that in the revelation of objects, landscapes and relationships without any intrusive directorial presence, one recognizes Wenders’ personal vision: the outward sign of a society in quest of both its roots and its future, of the point where object and subject might happily coalesce.”

Wenders maintains that “every film is political, but, most of all, those that don’t want to be: ‘entertainment films.’ They are the most political because they dispel the idea of change in people. Everything’s all right just the way it is, they say with every shot. They are one big advertisement for the *status quo*.” Wenders perceives his own work as more documentary than manipulative. I want my films to deal with the period of time in which they were made,

with the cities, the landscapes, the subjects, the people who work on them.”



from *The Logic of Images: Essays and Conversations*. Wim Wenders. Faber & Faber London & Boston, 1991

Why do you make films? Reply to a questionnaire

Ever since this terrible question was put to me, I've done nothing but think of how to answer it. I have one answer in the morning and one at night, one at the editing-table, one when I'm looking at stills of earlier films of mine, another when I'm speaking to my accountant. And yet another when I think of the team I've been working with for years now. Every one of these different answers, these reasons for making films, is sincere and genuine, but I keep saying to myself there must be something 'more fundamental', some 'commitment', or even a 'compulsion'.

I was twelve years old when I made my very first film, with an 8mm camera. I stood by a window and filmed the street below, the cars and pedestrians. My father saw me and asked: 'What are you doing with your camera?' And I said: 'Can't you see? I'm filming the street.' 'What for?' he asked. And I had no answer. Ten or twelve years later, I was making my first short film in 16mm. A reel of film lasted three minutes. I filmed a crossroads from the sixth floor, without moving the camera until the reel was finished. It didn't occur to me to pull away or stop shooting any earlier. With hindsight I suppose it would have seemed like sacrilege to me.

Why sacrilege?

I'm no great theorist. I tend not to remember

things I've read in books. So I can't give you Béla Balázs's exact words, but they affected me profoundly all the same. He talks about the ability (and the responsibility) of cinema 'to show things as they are'. And he says cinema can 'rescue the existence of things'.

That's precisely it.

I have another quote, from Cézanne, where he says: 'Things are disappearing. If you want to see anything, you have to hurry'.

So back to the awful question: why do I make films? Well, because...Something happens, you see it happening, you film it as it happens, the camera sees it and records it, and you can look at it again, afterwards. The thing itself may no longer be there, but you can still see it, the fact of its existence hasn't been lost. The act of filming is a heroic act (not always, not often, but sometimes). For a moment, the gradual destruction of the world of appearances is held up. The camera is a weapon against the tragedy of things, against their disappearing, Why make films? Bloody stupid question!

April 1987

An attempted description of an indescribable film [The German title of the film, *Der Himmel über Berlin*, translates literally as *The Sky over Berlin*.] From the first treatment for *Wings of Desire*

And we, spectators always, everywhere, looking at, never out of, everything!

Rilke, *8th Elegy* (tr. Leushman & Spender)

At first it's not possible to describe anything beyond a wish or a desire.

That's how it begins, making a film, writing a book, painting a picture, composing a tune, generally creating something.

You have a wish.

You wish that something might exist, and then you work on it until it does. You want to give something to the world, something truer, more beautiful, more painstaking, more serviceable, or simply other than what already exists. And right at the start, simultaneous with the wish, you imagine what that 'something other' might be like, or at least you see something flash by. And then you set off in the direction of the flash, and you hope you don't lose

your orientation, or forget or betray the wish you had at the beginning.

And in the end you have a picture or pictures of something, you have music, or something that operates in some new way, or a story, or this quite extraordinary combination of all these things: a film. Only with a film—as opposed to paintings, novels, music or inventions—you have to present an account of your desire; more, you even have to describe in advance the path that you want to go with your film. No wonder, then, that so many films lose their first flash, their comet.

The thing I wished for and saw flashing was a film *in* and *about* Berlin.

A film that might convey something of the history of the city since 1945. A film that might succeed in capturing what I miss in so many films that are set here, something that seems to be so palpably there when you arrive in Berlin: a feeling in the air and under your feet and in people's faces, that makes life in this city so different from life in other cities.

To explain and clarify my wish, I should add: it's the desire of someone who's been away from Germany for a long time, and who could only ever experience 'Germanness' in this one city. I should say I'm no Berliner. Who is nowadays? But for over twenty years now, visits to this city have given me my only genuine experiences of Germany, because the (hi)story that elsewhere in the country is suppressed or denied is physically and emotionally present here.

Of course I didn't want just to make a film about the place, Berlin. What I wanted was to make a film about people—people here in Berlin—that considered one perennial question: how to live?

And so I have 'BERLIN' representing 'THE WORLD'.

I know of no place with a stronger claim.

Berlin is 'an historical site of truth'.

No other city is such a meaningful image, such a PLACE OF SURVIVAL, so exemplary of our century.

Berlin is divided like our world,

like our time,

like men and women,

young and old,

rich and poor,

like all our experience.

A lot of people say Berlin is 'crummy'.

I say: there is more reality in Berlin than in any other city.

It's more a SITE than a CITY.

'To live in the city of undivided truth, to walk around with the invisible ghosts of the future and of the past. . .'

That's my desire, on the way to becoming a film.



My story isn't about Berlin because it's set there, but because it couldn't be set anywhere else.

The name of the film will be:

THE SKY OVER BERLIN
because the sky is maybe the only thing
that unites these two cities,
apart from their past

of course. Will there be a common future?

...If I were to give my story a prologue, it would go something like this:

WHEN GOD, ENDLESSLY
DISAPPOINTED, FINALLY PREPARED TO TURN
HIS BACK ON THE WORLD FOR EVER, IT
HAPPENED THAT SOME OF HIS ANGELS
DISAGREED WITH HIM AND TOOK THE SIDE
OF MAN, SAYING HE DESERVED TO BE GIVEN
ANOTHER CHANCE.

ANGRY AT BEING CROSSED, GOD
BANISHED THEM TO WHAT WAS THEN THE
MOST TERRIBLE PLACE ON EARTH: BERLIN.
AND THEN HE TURNED AWAY.

ALL THIS HAPPENED AT THE TIME
THAT WE TODAY CALL: THE END OF THE
SECOND WORLD WAR'.

SINCE THAT TIME, THESE FALLEN
ANGELS FROM THE 'SECOND ANGELIC
REBELLION' HAVE BEEN IMPRISONED IN THE
CITY, WITH NO PROSPECT OF RELEASE, LET
ALONE BEING READMITTED TO HEAVEN.
THEY ARE CONDEMNED TO BE WITNESSES,

FOR EVER NOTHING BUT ONLOOKERS,
UNABLE TO AFFECT MEN IN THE SLIGHTEST,
OR TO INTERVENE IN THE COURSE OF
HISTORY. THEY ARE UNABLE TO SO MUCH
AS MOVE A GRAIN OF SAND,,,

An introductory passage might go something like that. But there will be no introduction. All will gradually be brought out in the film, and make itself felt. The presence of the angels will explain itself.

(But that too is still at the stage of scheme and desire.)

...Even though the angels have been watching and listening to people for such a long time, there are still many things they don't understand.

For example, they don't know and can't imagine what colours are. Or tastes and smells. They can guess what feelings are, but they can't experience them directly. As our angels are basically loving and good, they can't imagine things like fear, jealousy, envy or hatred. They are familiar with their expression, but not with the things themselves. They are naturally curious and would like to learn more, and from time to time they feel a pang of regret at missing out on all these things, not knowing what it's like throwing a stone, or what water and fire are like, or picking up some object in your hand, let alone touching or kissing a fellow human being.

All these things escape the angels. They are pure CONSCIOUSNESS, fuller and more comprehending than mankind, but also poorer. The physical and sensual world is reserved for human beings. It is the privilege of mortality, and death is its price....

Wings of Desire

In the last few years, since *Paris, Texas*, Berlin has been the place where I've stopped off. I started to feel at home there, in spite of the fact that I see the city with the eyes of someone who's spent a lot of time away.

Up until now, the stories in my films were

always told from the point of view of a main character. This time, I rejected the idea of some returning hero who rediscovers Berlin and Germany for himself. I couldn't imagine the character through whose eyes I would see Berlin; such a person could

only have been another version of myself. Besides, Travis had been a man returning to a city.

I really don't know what gave me the idea of angels. One day I wrote 'Angels' in my notebook, and the next day 'The unemployed'. Maybe it was because I was reading Rilke at the time—nothing to do with films—and

realizing how much of his writing is inhabited by angels. Reading Rilke every night, perhaps I got used to the idea of angels being around.

After a while I began to doubt whether it would amount to a film. I tried to push the idea away, but it was never quite extinguished.

I filled a whole notebook, but it still didn't add up to a film. Usually a line emerges that enables you to fix on the characters and their relationships. But with angels you could do anything, there were connections all over the place, you could go anywhere. You could cross the Wall, pass through windows into people's houses, and anyone, a passerby, passengers in the underground, was suddenly the hero of a potential film. It was scary: there was too much freedom for the imagination. Even more so because there were going to be several angels. Berlin is still governed by the Four Powers, so I thought you might have four angels: American, British, French and Russian. But that made it too schematic. Then for a time the angels were ex-airmen, a kind of aviators' club, like in Howard Hawks's *Only Angels Have Wings*. By and by, we boiled it down to keep just what mattered: what the angels see. The story's told from the angels' point of view—but how do you show what angels see?

There was also another, completely different, starting-point for *Wings of Desire*. At the end of *Paris, Texas* there's a scene between Natassia and Little Hunter in the hotel: he goes to his mother, she takes him in her arms. There was something liberating



about that scene for me: it was a feeling I was sure would have repercussions on my next film, whatever it was. (The last scene, when Travis walks away: I let him go the way I do, and all my previous male characters left with him. They now live in an old people's home on the edge of Paris, Texas.) So I badly wanted to have a woman as the main character. For a long time I wondered about making one of the angels female. But I wanted this angel to become human, and I thought it was more interesting to have the human being a woman and the angel a man who accepts mortality for her sake.

I wanted to start filming in the autumn, but there was no screenplay ready. I always feel a kind of block about writing anything that's meant to turn into a scene. I tell myself that if I write it, it'll be ruined as a scene, because they'll be nothing left to invent.

The angels had to speak poetically, so language became especially important. Having made four films in English, I badly wanted to return to my mother tongue and I wanted the dialogues to be particularly beautiful. I called my archangel Peter Handke. He had just finished a novel and said: 'I'm completely drained. I don't have any words left in me, everything I had is in the novel.' But then he added: 'Maybe if you come down here and tell me your story, then I can help you out with a few scenes, But no more; nothing structural, no screenplay.' I drove down to Salzburg to see him and told him all I knew about my angels. We spent a week thinking up a dozen key situations in a possible plot, and Peter started writing on the basis of that.

Every week, all through September, I would get an envelope full of dialogue, without any direction or description, like in a stage play. There was no contact between us; he wrote and I prepared the film. There was a growing gulf between the work Peter was doing in Salzburg and the film that was gradually taking shape in Berlin, in discussions with the actors, and the physical preparations. Peter's scenes—though

beautiful and poetic—were like monoliths from heaven. But they didn't fit: there was a complete discord between his dialogues, the scenes we envisaged and the locations we'd decided on.

Preparations for the production were not yet



complete and the sets not yet ready. The angels had no costumes, no make-up, nothing. We began filming, beginning with the children right at the start. I was absolutely convinced that if we went on preparing, we'd lose everything. Yes, we'll know exactly what we are

doing, but it'll mean we'll make a worked-out film. On the other hand, being in a state of confusion will force us to find something for the angels.

The idea for the film had suggested itself to me in black and white; Berlin needed that, and so did the angels: they were unable to touch things, they didn't know the physical world, and so it was logical that they had no colours either. Also black and white is associated with the world of dreams. It was exciting to imagine the world of the angels in black and white, with colour appearing at odd moments in the film, as a new experience. I knew that Henri Alékan, who didn't know Berlin, would reveal a new and unfamiliar view of it: he has the ability to create incorporeal shapes with light, as though he himself had access to this faerie universe through the mystery of light. At the beginning Henri wanted the angels to be transparent. It was difficult to persuade him that it would make it impossible to tell the story from that premise. His idea of transparency has survived in two shots, where the angel Daniel 'steals' objects, first a stone, then a pencil: the objects don't actually move, they stay put on the table; Daniel just takes their essence....

As in *Until the End of the World*, Solveig was part of the film from the start; it was clear she would be in it. She had done tightrope work at the circus school in Paris, but as an amateur. A circus is a privileged spot because of the presence of children, and with all the waste ground in Berlin there is always a circus there: that suggested to me that the woman

would be a trapeze artist. Besides, I wanted her work to be dangerous—so that she would charm Daniel, who was never himself in any danger of falling. And so I imagined the girl as a trapeze artiste, flying under the big top with tinsel wings. When the angel saw her, he would laugh, no question. And perhaps fall in love...

When I told Solveig about it, she wasn't sure if I meant it. But the next day she went back to her trapeze course with Pierre Bergam in Paris. She dismissed the idea of having a double: she wanted to perform the trapeze number herself, like a professional. A few weeks later, I started on the preparations in Berlin; I found a circus and an old trainer, a Hungarian, who'd formerly been a *porteur*. He'd done work on a Shakespeare comedy with Bruno and Otto at the Schaubühne, and had taught Otto tightrope-walking. He was called Kovacs, like all Hungarians. Every day he worked with Solveig in a real circus, five hours a day. And he said to me: 'She's got talent. Give me six weeks, and she'll do the part.' He succeeded in making a trapeze artiste out of her. One day she fell from a height of five metres, on to her back, and Kovacs straightway sent her up again. She went on with her number in a state of concussion. Two days later, we filmed her trapeze routine.

The parts of Curt Bois and Peter Falk weren't added till much later, when the filming was already under way. Bruno and Otto introduced me to Curt Bois. (In 1983 they had made a documentary with him and Bernhard Minetti called *Memory*.) ...

The last person to join the ranks was Peter Falk. His part was sort of a comedy idea: he had to be some extremely famous figure, and you would gradually realize he was a former angel. At first I thought of painters, writers and so on, even politicians, someone like Willy Brandt, but you couldn't film with those people. And he had to be someone so famous that he'd instantly be recognized, and you'd say to yourself: Ah, so he's an angel too...In the end I got around to thinking of actors, and then, by necessity, of American actors. They are the only world-famous actors. One evening I got Peter Falk on the telephone and told him this bewildering story of guardian angels, circuses, a trapeze artiste and an American actor who charms his former colleagues. There was a pause, and then he asked me if I could send him a script. I said: 'No, I can't. There's nothing in writing about this ex-angel. I can't even send you a

single page: he's just an idea.' He liked that; if I sent him a script he might not have accepted. But since there was nothing to go on at all, he said: 'Ah, I've worked like that before with Cassavetes, and honestly I prefer working without a script.'

We spoke only twice on the telephone. He landed in Berlin one Friday night, we talked about his scenes over the weekend, and filmed them the following week. He so liked the crew and the work that he ended up staying another week. He kept hoping we might film some more scenes with him. Since he didn't know Berlin at all, he was forever going for walks. It was a bit like his part in the film: we kept looking for him and he was always off walking somewhere.



from *The Cinema of Wim Wenders: The Celluloid Highway*. Alexander Graf. Wallflower Press, London/NY, 2002

Although a relative late-comer to the movement known as the *Neues deutsches Kino*, or New German Cinema, Wim Wenders is internationally its best known and most successful active member today. In a career spanning almost four decades, he has made eleven short films, seventeen feature films, seven documentaries, two television films, several music videos, and numerous advertising films for television, many of which have been awarded prizes at international film-festivals. His work as a photographer has been exhibited on eight separate occasions in Europe, Asia and America, and he has published nine books.

...The theoretical question most consistently under discussion, and to which Wenders never appears to find an answer with which he is fully satisfied, has been the incompatibility, or conflict, that he perceives to exist between the film image and the filmic story—two elements of film that, together with

sound, represent the aesthetic and technical basis of modern narrative cinema.

The nature of this problem is twofold: on one side Wenders recognises that he has to meet his audience's demand for story in film in order to be commercially viable as an independent director (a precondition in commercial feature film production, as opposed to avant-garde or experimental film production). In a speech given in 1982 Wenders accounts for this audience demand for story as a universal human desire rather than as a personal attitude:

People's primary requirement is that some kind of coherence be provided. Stories give people the feeling that there is meaning, that there is ultimately an order lurking behind the incredible confusion of appearances and

phenomena that surrounds them. This order is what people require more than anything else; yes, I would almost say that the notion of order or story is connected with the godhead. Stories are substitutes for God. Or maybe the other way round.

...On the other hand, Wenders is suspicious of story. He considers it an unstable element within film and attributes to it the potential to create a misbalance with the images in his films.

..."In the relationship between story and image, I see the story as a kind of vampire, trying to suck all the blood from an image."

Wenders' view, that stories bring out 'lies, nothing but lies, and the biggest lie is that they show coherence where there is none,' has dissuaded him from satisfying the demands of an audience that presumably craves the artificial structure and order that a story seems to promise with a traditional filmic narrative.

...Wenders believes that those who generate images—the film-makers—have a responsibility to guarantee their authenticity: the affirmation and preservation of

the integrity of images. Accordingly, the photographic image, the technical basis of cinema, becomes one of the main themes in Wenders' work.

The tendency, as he describes it, for a story to falsify or pervert the truth latently contained within photographic and film images by creating connections that may not exist in the corresponding reality, is a threat to the integrity of the image. This tension is at the centre of the reflexive debate on image and narrative in Wenders' work and writings, namely the declared aim of finding a balance that simultaneously

grants the spectator a story without allowing the story to determine or influence the meaning of a film's images, and that provides a framework structure for the presentation of his images.

Critical analyses of Wenders' films typically praise their images with grandiose terms such as 'a feast for the eye' but express consternation at the lacking

coherence of their narratives.

...More self-assured in dealing with story after the success of *Paris, Texas*, Wenders makes this the subject of his next feature, *Wings of Desire* (1987). Drawing on Walter Benjamin's concept of time and history, Wenders brings this idea down to an everyday level to build a coherent story out of the individual fragments of ordinary people's lives. He raises the status of cinema and its capability of combining word with image into a new myth-making narrative that can give the world an image of itself.... Equipped with the now usual combination of Jürgen Knieper's music and a rock 'n' roll soundtrack. *Wings of Desire* represents a new step in Wenders' experimentation with film sound: 'I've never done anything where the sound alone is like a whole film itself....Where there's so much to hear simultaneously, because so much is told simultaneously.'...

Taken by surprise by the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, Wenders returned to the city in 1993 to make *Far Away, So Close*, an unplanned sequel to *Wings of Desire*. Time is the main theme in this movie, with one of the fallen angels being dragged into a story that develops too quickly for him to cope



with, driving him and the story to a sudden and tragic death. The film was not well received by criticism and represents the beginning of a period in which many, including Wenders himself, began to wonder about his future as a director. Other films produced in this nevertheless extremely productive period were *Lisbon Story* (1994), *Beyond the Clouds* (1995, together with Michelangelo Antonioni), *A Trick of Light* (1996), and *The End of Violence* (1997).

As if testing his conviction that music saved his life once before, Wenders took advantage of Ry Cooder's rediscovery and reinvigoration of Cuban music in 1999 to make the digitally-shot film *Buena Vista Social Club* (1999), which became one of the most successful documentary films ever. His latest feature project, *The Million Dollar Hotel* (1999), also has a strong musical basis: co-written and co-produced by U2 singer Bono, the film continues Wenders' discourse on the commercialisation of images.

Wenders' latest documentary on the German rock band BAP, entitled *Ode to Cologne: A Rock 'n' Roll Film*, was premiered at the Berlin Festival in 2002. He also premiered a ten-minute short at the Cannes Festival in May 2002 entitled *Twelve Miles to Trona* as part of a compilation on the theme of time called *Ten Minutes Older*, involving directors such as Aki Kaurismäki, Werner Herzog, Jim Jarmusch and Spike Lee. Wenders is currently working on two projects: a documentary on the history of Blues music (in association with Martin Scorsese) and a road movie set in the USA, a further collaboration with scriptwriter Sam Sheperd....

Wings of Desire

...It has been described as a road movie of sorts, yet the film never departs from the location of the city of Berlin. It is filmed in black and white as well as colour. It thematises both image and the search for a story and, representing a homecoming for a director who had spent the previous ten years working in America, exhibits a similarly restless tension between

European and American cultural identity as any of the previous films.

At the same time, Wenders explores new

technical and formal possibilities in *Wings of Desire*, for instance the use of a complex multi-track soundtrack to combine sound on several different levels simultaneously: 'I've never done something where the sound alone is already an entire film...where there's so much to hear



simultaneously, because so much is being told', he admits. On the level of the image, this is the first film in which both black and white and colour are used, each stock functioning as narrative devices. In some sequences, the image changes from black and white to colour within a shot, which, due to the restrictions this technique implies in the use of filters, has the effect of a visibly inferior image quality in these shots (quite a sacrifice for a director who places so much emphasis on the image in his films). The simulation of the incorporeal angels' point of view in *Wings of Desire* also meant a degree of technical innovation: the camera had to learn how to fly and to move through solid objects.

...Many aspects of the film itself would seem to encourage an interpretation of the film as an idealistic call for an end to the division of the city—hence of the country and of the Cold War world. It contains the first images of destruction and death during the Second World War in Wenders' films, and the Berlin Wall, which two of the main protagonists, the angels Damiel and Cassiel (and Wenders' Camera) pass through or over with ease, is an ever-present reminder of the city's division....

The word 'angel' derives from the Greek *anghelos*, meaning messenger (Cassiel/Raphaella also refer to themselves in their monologue as 'the messengers' in the sequel film, *Far Away, So Close*). The angel is the bearer of meaning: the signifier. The term consequently also suggest the existence of a space in, across or through which the message is conveyed: the space between the speaker and those to

whom he speaks....

From the opening frames until the middle of the film the camera usually adopts the perspective of the angels. ...

As the messenger, the angel does not just witness these events; he also records them in his memory, or writes them down in the form of notes in a notebook. The identification of the angel's eye with the camera's point of view, and their activity of observing, recording and re-telling, make the angels in *Wings of Desire* personifications of a cinematic ideal: a cinema based on the indiscriminating observation of all kinds of phenomena, in the world of physical appearance, the capturing of the secret of existence in photographic images, and the preserving of these images for the future....

In the translation of the angel's point of view through the camera, Wenders insisted upon an 'attitude to an attitude, a caring attitude', which points towards an attempt at maintaining the respect for ordinary, as well as spectacular. Phenomena in the image, an attempt at accessing the 'mystery valid for all'.... In particular, the timelessness of the angels' existence cements the parallel with the cinematic image due to cinema's status as a recording art.



Michael Atkinson: "Wings of Desire: Watch the Skies" (Criterion Notes)

If ever there was a European art film that could be all things to all people, it's Wim Wenders's *Wings of Desire* (1987). Marking Wenders's career midpoint like a lightning strike cutting across tree rings, the movie is at once audience-seductive and demanding, holistic and aestheticized. It has beguiled the Wenders aficionado

as reliably as it's absorbed the spiritually hungry civilian, the rogue filmhead, the bookish square, and the nondenominational seeker. It seemed upon its release closer to the effervescent fantasias of Michael Powell, Maya Deren, Georges Méliès, and Jean Vigo, as well as Victorian postcards, than to Wenders's earlier New German Cinema existentialism, or to the troubled legacy of German cinema as a whole. Even after the two-decades-plus of global exploration that has followed for the filmmaker, it appears to be *sui generis*, born from its own shadowy nitrate soup.

So, let's think subjectively, you and I, about possible ways to look at the movie, and if none suit you, others are not hard to find. In thumbnail, *Wings of Desire* belongs to a trafficked subgenre, the angel-on-earth ballade (Victorian, modern-comedic, or otherwise, and usually trifling), but it's clear we're a world away from Raoul Walsh's goofy 1945 Jack Benny comedy *The Horn Blows at Midnight* (though perhaps closer, in the first half, to the sylphlike angel presences chaperoning the sermonic fables in Lois Weber's 1915 dream film *Hypocrites*). There's little doubt as to the originality of the experience from the very first airborne camera patrols of autumnal cold-war Berlin. In Wenders's silvery black-and-white view, this is the paradigmatic city wasteland of its age, still war-torn and withstanding a historicized physical and political schizophrenia like no other, symbolized, like the elephant in the parlor, by the wall itself, snaking through the urban spaces covered with graffiti, obliterating your view, wherever you stand, of the city's other half. This cognitively dissonant urban experiment had frequently been the grim arena for sixties spy noir, but never had we seen Berlin become Berlin so clearly, so eloquently before. (The more sober and evocative German title translates as *The Sky over Berlin*.) Of course the city is haunted.

Haunted by angels, that is, like Bruno Ganz's questing hero Daniel, saturnine but benevolent men and women in black coats occupying the thick of human flow, but in a quantum way, in between molecules, present but unseen, and always listening. The details of Wenders's concept are everything: the fact that the angels' eavesdropping is both empathetic and voyeuristic, the precise way the angels exude patience and sympathy (not, say, the detachment of analysts observing human folly), the manner in which they slowly lean in and gently place mollifying hands on human shoulders, the unpredictable weft of

languages and ethnicities they meet, the fact that most of what the angels hear from their earthling subjects is worry, worry, worry. Arguing, silent recriminations, trauma, doubt, an ambulance in which the pregnant mother addresses her unborn baby (“I can’t wait to see you”) as the husband focuses on the wife (“If only I could suffer in her place”), a public library crowded with angels listening to the hum of learning and inquiry, the occasional child who sees the angels outright but only smiles—this all constitutes a genuine vision of humanity, one that at its heart comes bearing a moral idea. Ironically, given the iconography, it’s a passionately humanist film, suggesting by its very texture and rhythm a prescriptive notion of how we should regard our compatriot *Homo sapiens*, and how we should seize the mundane moments as they catapult by. It’s a soaring anthem for everydayness, as Buddhist as it is Christlike, but defined by its own metaphysics.

Still, it’s not a pedagogical work but a poetic one, filthy with Keats’s “negative capability.” The film’s revelation of a heaven and earth infrastructure does not absolve mysteries but compounds them. Nevertheless, despite this spirituality, the film’s mysteries turn out to be largely cinematic. Wenders has always been a quintessential Euro movie-lover of the New Wave generation, and *Wings of Desire* has a rich vein of cinephilic self-reflexivity running through it. After all, although the angels we see can subtly affect human behavior (Daniel steers a suicidal subway rider toward the future, and calms a dying bicyclist after an accident), they, like the moviegoer, are mostly observers.

To watch is to love, as we see in the scene where Daniel, having fallen for Solveig Dommartin’s trapeze artist, Marion, loiters in her trailer, and is galvanized when she begins undressing. He tries to touch her but cannot. Like James Stewart in *Rear Window*, the angel can only watch, and he is as much defined by his helpless voyeurism as we are in the audience. On one level, the angels are pure-hearted documentarians, bearing witness to life (cinema began as documentary, after all), yet their work is not action

but attention. Is there a culpability inherent in the distance of being an observer? (Michael Haneke, among others, has clearly thought so.) Daniel is an idealized surrogate for us and our role, hypnotized and passive and all too human; and if Hitchcock’s film was about the anxiety of viewing, then Wenders’s is about its melancholy, its beauty, its final limitations.

The allegorization of our experience as viewers is bedizened by the spectatorship of the traveling circus (which is regularly breached by the chaos of the active participation of children, something Daniel experiences as rapturous), the film

history references (Daniel explains his desire to mix in by saying he wants to be like Philip Marlowe and “come home to a cat”), the news footage of postwar Berlin’s rubble and ruin, and of course the film being shot within the film, some kind of dire concentration camp thriller starring Peter Falk, who senses the angels because, as

he explains, he converted to humanity himself “thirty years ago” (and 1957 was indeed when Falk made his first appearance on American television). But Daniel ultimately becomes dissatisfied with his role, and his position as an observer begins to dissolve once he sits beside the costumed Nazi-victim extras, who are “living” in multiple time periods at once, self-observing ruminators as well as subjects, for the film-in-the-film’s cameras, for the angels, for Wenders, and of course for us.

As the angels haunt Berlin, *Wings of Desire* also has its haunters—the audience, observing the observers. As it dawns that we, at least in the viewing moment, might be closer to the ineffectual angels than to the people they hover over, Daniel edges nearer to surrendering his angelic immortality and omnipotence for a short life of love, books, coffee, wind, children, and urban messiness—in effect, exiting his own private movie house and entering the throng of unaestheticized life. He desires, in a sense, to leave the movie he’s in and join us on our way home. Is the plot arc of *Wings of Desire* a cry against cinema, even as it equates watching with love? Or does it suggest, to the choir, only a more engaged participation for us, the give-and-take of art film as



opposed to the utterly passive experience of Hollywood dross, the Godardian sense that cinema is not an escape from life but life itself? Once Daniel goes human, awakening in the no-man's-land between the east and west sections of the wall, we as viewers may have an experience akin to Greta Garbo's after she'd seen the Beast in Cocteau's *Beauty and the Beast* transform into the clean-shaven Jean Marais: "Give me back my Beast."

But confronting the prosaic Daniel (in color, dressed like a thrift shop retiree, and as penniless as an illegal alien) is part of the strategy, the

engagement, the awakening away from the dream of cinema and toward contact. Who said watching movies was a simple or responsibility-free act? When Daniel and Marion meet in a nightclub bar (where, onstage, the angel played by Otto Sander listens in to Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds but hears nothing), they launch into a notorious, full-frontal logorrheic climax (a Wenders trademark) that effectively leaves us in the dust. But they're building a mythos outside of the parameters of cinema, and by that point it's not about us, the audience, any longer, or Wenders. It's life, carrying on.

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CONTACTS:

email Diane Christian: engdc@buffalo.edu...email Bruce Jackson bjackson@buffalo.edu...

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