***Wings of Desire* is a Poetry Film**

By Erica Goss

Every Angel is terror. And yet,
ah, knowing you, I invoke you, almost deadly
birds of the soul.

Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Duino Elegies*

When I read that Swiss actor Bruno Ganz died on February 15 of this year, I immediately recalled the iconic photograph of him as the angel Damiel, the character Ganz played in Wim Wenders' 1987 film, *Wings of Desire*. Dressed in a black trench coat that hangs past his knees, Damiel stands on the edge of the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church, looking down on the city of Berlin. Huge white wings erupt from his back.

Wings of Desire is an extraordinary film on many levels – the cinematography, acting, and directing are all of the highest quality. The film's success, however, is not the result of any of these. The film succeeds because it's based on poetry.

Poetry determined the film from the beginning. In an article published in the Criterion Collection, Wenders states

> "I really don't know what gave me the idea of angels. One day I wrote 'angels' in my notebook…Maybe it was because I was reading Rilke at the time—nothing to do with films—and realizing as I read how much of his writing is inhabited by angels. Reading Rilke every night, perhaps I got used to the idea of angels being around."

Needing a screenplay, Wenders approached his old friend and frequent collaborator, Austrian writer and poet Peter Handke. Handke, worn out from having just completing a novel, told Wenders, "I'm completely drained. I don't have any words left in me. 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." Wenders and Handke "spent a week thinking up a dozen key situations in a possible plot, and Peter started writing on the basis of that."

From that initial meeting, the screenplay evolved from weekly dispatches Handke sent to Wenders: "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." Their process sounds remarkably similar to the way in which many video poems arise: one person, usually the filmmaker, creates a film using an existing poem. There is

generally little or no contact between the poet and the filmmaker until the film is completed.

Wings of Desire starts with Damiel writing and reciting the opening lines from Handke's poem, "Song of Childhood:"

When the child was a child
it walked with its arms swinging,
wanted the brook to be a river,
the river to be a torrent,
and this puddle to be the sea.

When the child was a child,
it didn't know that it was a child,
everything was soulful,
and all souls were one.

Gradually, the plot emerges: Damiel (Ganz), weary of his existence as a supernatural being, longs for the messy, sweaty world of humanity. Sitting in a car with his friend, the angel Cassiel (Otto Sander) Damiel imagines what life would be like as a human: "To come home after a long day and feed the cat like Philip Marlowe," – "to have a fever" – "to get your fingers black from the newspaper" – "to lie – through the teeth!" None of these is enough to convince Damiel to make the plunge; that decision comes when he falls in love with the beautiful Marion, an angel-winged trapeze artist performing in a cheesy, one-ring circus.

As Damiel becomes infatuated with Marion, he begins to hover, unseen, around her, influencing her thoughts and moods (the angels in *Wings of Desire* possess the ability to read people's minds). In a couple of unsettling scenes, he enters her circus trailer and watches her undress, once reaching to touch her bare shoulder. Since he's an angel, we assume that he is completely harmless, but once he's developed feelings for Marion, his presence in her private sphere seems at least somewhat improper. In abandoning his immortality for the love of Marion, Damiel demonstrates that he shares that view: he can't keep hovering around, spying on her. He must take his chances in the real world.

Wings of Desire is not only a love story between angel and human, but also a film-poem of place: Berlin in the late 1980s. Angels move freely on either side of the Berlin Wall, a privilege not allowed the city's human population until two years later. Considering its affect on both the film and the city, the Wall imposes limitations as if it were a poetic form, forcing the filmmakers to create within its boundaries. As Nick Bugeja writes in "Discord and new beginnings in *Wings of Desire*," "the Wall towers over the lives of those living in Berlin and Germany, physically and metaphorically constraining them."

Handke's "envelope(s) full of dialogue, without any direction or description," form the overheard thoughts of Berlin's citizens, edited into poetic snippets. I.e., in one scene, a man with a baby in a backpack thinks, "The delight of lifting one's head out here in the

open" while in another, we hear the thoughts of a woman riding a bicycle: "At last mad, at last redeemed." When Damiel and Cassiel communicate vocally, it's in elevated, cryptic speech. To quote Bugeja again, "The effect of *Wings of Desire* is startling. Its poetry seeps from every frame, as feelings of loss, impotency, and later renewal and warmth spill out."

Poetry gives *Wings of Desire* its intuitive leaps and eccentric charm. Poetry elevates Damiel's decision to leave immortality for love beyond cliché and into the sublime. When he says, "Now I know what no angel knows," he means he has found his humanity. This is the value of poetry, and all the arts: they awaken the shared sense of what it means to be human. That seems a fitting way to end a film that began with the word *angel* scribbled in a notebook.

https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/1290-on-wings-of-desire

https://www.acmi.net.au/ideas/read/discord-and-new-beginnings-wings-desire/

First published at *Moving Poems Magazine*, April 2019