



RE-RELEASES

Wings of Desire

(Der Himmel über Berlin)

Few modern films have made the transition to classic status as quickly as Wim Wenders' *Wings of Desire*. His tale of a guardian angel in a still-Wall-divided Berlin who falls in love with – and to earth for – a melancholy trapeze artist is a canny merging of cerebral formal experimentalism and unabashed popular romanticism. It swept up highbrow critics alongside a much larger mainstream audience than was typical for 'challenging' foreign-language cinema of the day. Leading US film magazine *Premiere*'s 1980s wrap-up poll voted it second only to *Raging Bull* (1980) as film of the decade.

Still a quintessential 'arthouse' film, its bold use of style (black-and-white, existential voiceover, languorous pacing) – and content (overt symbolism and culture blending, from Rilke-inspired poetry to Nick Cave's post-punk anthems) fostered an appreciation, even a devotion that endures to this day.

No doubt the snaking Berlin Wall that split east and west, and which would be breached just two-and-a-half years later, epitomised the divisions that Wenders and co-writer Peter Handke explore: temporal and eternal; past and present; and seen and unseen, through the watching, invisible angels, chiefly Damiel (Bruno Ganz) and Cassiel (Otto Sander), who debate the former's desire to 'enter the history of the world', having been outside looking in for so long.

Ultimately, *Wings of Desire* is a visionary film about vision: the act of watching, with all its fascinations and limitations. Here, then, are some of the visual strategies at play.

Angel eyes

Wenders brought legendary cinematographer Henri Alekan – responsible for the haunting gothic chiaroscuro in Jean Cocteau's 1946 *La Belle et la Bête* – out of retirement to shoot *Wings of Desire* (and named the film's circus in his honour). Alekan famously used a silk stocking as a filter for his textured, sepia-tinged black-and-white imagery, depicting the angels' muted vision of the world. Ironically, his rich, creamy monochrome might appear too gorgeously tactile for the angels' non-sensory world, but its silent-cinema feel helps instantly convey their timeless existence.

Bearing witness

Given its central characters, *Wings of Desire* is an exceptionally watchful film, both clinical and voyeuristic. Wenders' unseen angels are basically unable to engage human beings directly. And yet, the very act of quietly watching over them, able to hear their innermost thoughts and desires, and occasionally even offer some kind of palliative aid, is one of the film's most touching aspects.

Wenders' stately drifting camera suggests their detached, exterior position (and later, when Damiel steps into time, is brilliantly contrasted with a more dynamic, street-level tracking). Yet the angels' invisible intimacy and empathy with beings they can never fully understand, somehow makes these divine observers all-too human. In fact, it echoes the essence of the moviegoing

experience itself: spectators unable to affect what they see on screen, and yet so often, unable or unwilling to remain emotionally disconnected.

Symphony of a city

Don't forget that the film's original title is *Der Himmel über Berlin* – The Sky or Heavens over Berlin – and that the project began as an investigation into Germany's then-divided city. Indeed, its angels were only brought in as an inspired afterthought. Perhaps acknowledging the tradition of early 'city symphony' silent films like Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) or even Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin, Symphony of a City* (1927), *Wings of Desire* is also in part a wonderful time capsule of wintry, pre-unification Berlin. Its roving aerial camerawork and ground-level tracking wide shots highlight the city's desolate no-man's-land expanses bound by the ever-present Wall.

Yet the film also diligently looks back at earlier, even more turbulent times, with its archive – and, strikingly, colour – footage of the capital in its ruinous postwar state. For the angels, this may be a passage of time gone in the blink of an eye; but to late-20th-century audiences, German or otherwise, Wenders suggests that the spectre of recent history isn't so easy to cast off.

The American friend

Of all the directors – Herzog, Fassbinder and co – from the late-1960s and 70s New German Cinema renaissance, none showed their love of American cinema and Americana as explicitly as Wenders. Returning to his native country after filming *Hammett* (1982) and *Paris, Texas* (1984) in the States, the appearance of Columbo star (or John Cassavetes favourite, depending on your frame of reference) Peter Falk 'as himself' isn't just another Wenders Hollywood homage, but a further layer to the theme of moviemaking.

Falk is ostensibly in town to shoot a Second World War-set thriller, but his avuncular presence also brings a welcome, grounded warmth to the angst-ridden, ethereal ambience. And the revelation of his true origins delivered late in the film isn't just a wonderful (and perfectly judged) surprise, it connects beautifully to Wenders' themes and his central character Damiel's dilemma.

The colour of love

As the film's English title makes plain, desire is the driving force behind both the film and its angel protagonist Damiel's fervent longing to leave behind immortality and become human. As this wish percolates and he meets Marion (Solveig Dommartin), the wistful circus performer with whom he falls head over wings in love, Alekan's exquisite monochrome gradually gives way to vibrant colour.

The first time is an abrupt cut as she swings on her trapeze (wearing, naturally, angel wings); the second, more tender and deliberate shift comes just after she confesses her innermost feelings in Damiel's presence. As Damiel departs, the image slowly shifts into colour: foreshadowing the union to come in the real world. For a film so intent on conjuring and then conquering a state of timelessness, this disruption of the image is the ultimate signifier that life and love within time are the only true reality. Seeing blood as red. Tasting coffee. Feeling the cold. For Wenders and his characters, the realm of the senses is the one that truly makes sense.

Leigh Singer, bfi.org.uk

WINGS OF DESIRE (DER HIMMEL ÜBER BERLIN)

Director: Wim Wenders
©/Production Companies: Road Movies Filmproduktion GmbH, Argos-Films
Production Company: Westdeutscher Rundfunk
Executive Producer: Ingrid Windisch
Producers: Wim Wenders, Anatole Dauman
Associate Producers: Joachim von Mengershausen, Pascale Dauman
Production Accountant: Inge Ruf
Payroll: Charlotte Läufer-Roll
Production Co-ordinator: Ulla Zwicker
Production Manager: Herbert Kerz
Location Manager: Barbara von Wrangell
Production Wizard: Tilmann Vierzig
Production Consultant: Chris Sievernich
Assistant Director: Claire Denis
2nd Assistant Director: Knut Winkler
Script Supervisor: Gabi Mattner
Screenplay: Wim Wenders
Together with: Peter Handke
Additional Script Work: Richard Reitinger
Adaptation: Bernard Eisenschitz, Anne Head
Director of Photography: Henri Alekan
Additional Photography: Peter Ch. Arnold, Martin Kukula
2nd Unit Photography: Frank Blasberg, Peter Braatz
Helicopter Camera Work: Klemens Becker, Klaus Krieger
Front Projection: Fritz Lehmann, Wolfgang Schmidt
Camera Operator: Agnès Godard
1st Assistant Cameraman: Achim Poulheim
Grips: Dieter Bähr
Gaffer: Bernd Hübner
Best Boy: Klaus Bieling
Still Photographer: Ralf Strathmann
Editor: Peter Przygodda
Assistant Editors: Anne Schnee, Leni Savietto-Pütz
Art Director: Heidi Lüdi
Set Decorator: Esther Walz
Sculptor: Jost van der Velden
The Berlin Wall Repainted by: Thierry Noir
Property Master: Peter Alteneder
Costume Designer: Monika Jacobs
Wardrobe: Brigitte Friedländer-Rodriguez, Irmtraud 'Simone' Simon
Make-up and Hair: Victor Leitenbauer, Regina Huyer
Opticals and Titles: Studio Bartoschek, Berlin
Opening Credits: Uli Mayer
Music: Jürgen Knieper
Circus Music: Laurent Petitgand
Marion's Trapeze Act Coached/Choreographed by: Lajos Kovács
Sound Mixers: Jean-Paul Mugel, Axel Arft
Boom Man: Uwe Thalmann
Re-recording Mixer: Hartmut Eichgrün
Sound Processing: Lothar Mankewitz, Detlev Fichtner
Trapeze Coach: Lajos Kovács
Dedicated to all the former angels... Yasujiro, François, Andrei Tarkovsky
Bird Wrangler: Dieter Koschorrek

Cast

Bruno Ganz (*Daniel*)
Solveig Dommartin (*Marion*)
Otto Sander (*Cassiel*)
Curt Bois (*Homer*)
Peter Falk (*himself*)
Hans Martin Stier (*the dying man*)
Elmar Wilms (*a sad man*)
Sigurd Rachman (*the suicide*)
Beatrice Manowski (*a young prostitute*)

at the circus:

Lajos Kovács (*Marion's coach*), Bruno Rosaz (*the clown*), Laurent Petitgand (*the bandleader*), Chico Rojo Ortega (*the drummer*), Otto Kuhnle, Christopher Merg (*the juggler*), Peter Werner (*the manager*), Susanne Vierkötter, Paul Busch, Karin Busch, Irene Mössinger, Franky

the angels at the public library:

Teresa Harder, Daniella Nasincova, Bernard Eisenschitz, Didier Flamand, Rolf Henke, Scott Kirby, Franck Glemin

air raid shelter:

Jerry Barrish (*the director*), Jeanette Pollak (*the wardrobe lady*), Christian Bartels (*the 'Hitlerjunge'*), David Crome (*the assistant director*), Käthe Fürstenwerth, Werner Schönrock, Bernd Ramien, Erika Rabau, Silvia Blagojeva Itscherenska, Sultan Meral, Olivier Picot, Jochen Gliscinsky, Erich Schupke

in their apartments:

Margarete Hafner, Oliver Herder, Margitta Haberland, Jürgen Heinrichs, Ralf Strathmann, Walter Ratayszak, Charlotte Oberberg, Lubinka Kostic

on the highway:

Gisela Westerboer, Andreas Valentin, Anne Gerstl, Dirk Vogeley, Ruth Rischke, Family Ayik

bands:

Crime and the City Solution (Simon Bonney, Mick Harvey, Harry Howard, Rowland Howard, Kevin Godfrey), Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds (Nick Cave, Thomas Wydler, Blixa Bargeld, Roland Wolf, Kid Congo)

children:

Denis Rodriguez, Dieta von Aster, Gustav Geisler, Paul Geisler, Lorenz Geisler, Sladjana Kostic, Benedikt Schumann, Nicolas Roth, Marcus Stenzel, Benjamin Ferchow, Mario Meyer, Mark Leuschner, Tibor Dahlenburg, Lia Harder, Mascha Noak, Vera Butzek, Donald Behrendt

Patric Kreuzer, Simone Säger, Gerdi Hofmann, Ulrike Schirm, Hans Marquard, Heimke Carl, Klaus Mausolf, Özyer Hüsinye, Jean-Claude Lezin, Thierry Noir, Matthias Maass, Henry Luczkow

West Germany/France 1987©

127 mins

A Curzon release

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Benediction

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Pickpocket

From Fri 3 Jun

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From Fri 10 Jun

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From Fri 10 Jun

Swan Song

From Fri 10 Jun

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From Fri 24 Jun (Q&A with Wim Wenders on Sat 25 Jun 15:00)

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