

ely film society

the notes

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latest news



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Wings of Desire

Wim Wenders, Germany 1987

Script: Wim Wenders, Peter Handke, Richard Reitinger

Bruno Ganz **Damiel**
Solveig Dommartin **Marion**
Otto Sander **Cassiel**
Curt Bois **Homer**
Peter Falk **Der Filmstar**
Hans Martin Stier **Der Sterbende**
Elmar Wilms **Ein trauriger Mann**
Sigurd Rachman **Der Selbstmörder**
Beatrice Manowski **Das Strichmädchen**
Lajos Kovács **Marion's Trainer**
Bruno Rosaz **Der Clown**
Laurent Petitgand ... **Der Kapellmeister**
Chico Ortega **Der Schlagzeuger**
Otto Kuhnle **Die Jongleure**
Christoph Merg **Der Jongleure**
Peter Werner **Der Zirkusmanager**
Teresa Harder **Die Bibilothek-Engel**

Has there ever, in all European history at least, been such a bizarre experiment in urban living as the fort-five years of the inadvertent principality of West Berlin? Wim Wenders has long been the poet-philosopher of people adrift in places beyond their control, and in *Wings of Desire* he moves beyond the small stories of individuals to the greater canvas of a place in its time, and the choices that people make - or think they make - in such a place.

The German title of the film, *Der Himmel über Berlin*, is ambiguous.

Himmel means both sky and heaven, both a plain fact and a concept. Above a city surrounded by barbed wire and concrete, the airspace recognises no boundaries. It is what you want it to be, and indifferent to that wanting.

Damiel (Bruno Ganz, always the most gorgeously watchable of German actors) and Cassiel (respected Schaubühne theatre actor Otto Sander) are angels tasked with watching over the residents of West Berlin. Silently, and invisible to their constituents, they comfort the grieving, witness traffic accidents, drift through libraries and shabby flats, stand on church spires with the pigeons, and wonder what it is that makes humans human. They are forbidden to intervene. Why can mortals not see perfection and grace, or so rarely and only in moments of distress?

Eventually Damiel can stand the bafflement no longer, falls in love with the circus acrobat Marion (Solveig Dommartin) and asks to be sent down to earth and become (irreversibly) human.

In his film criticism and essays (collected as *Emotion Pictures*) Wenders has written extensively of his love of American cinema, of its capacity to imagine beyond limits and just show what people are capable of doing. If



this angelic prelude is a clever reverse-take on *It's A Wonderful Life*, the transformation cheekily references *The Wizard of Oz*. For in the act of leaving heaven, Damiel discovers that he had austere monochrome, but human life is in full colour. Damiel has left God but arrives in an unimaginable promised land.

More precisely, he has arrived next to the Berlin Wall in its ferocious spraypainted solidity. God's people live on both sides: he has to live on one. And so he embarks on a wander into the city to discover what the actions he has witnessed actually mean.

For what do love, hate, fear, hunger, temptation mean to an angel? They are all a (once)great city is for, surely. In 1987, Berlin still had shredded postwar wasteland, locked U-Bahn stations, flatblocks that looked directly over the Wall and tram stracks that stopped directly at the concrete. Wenders' talent for urban poetry sends him out to film the sausage stalls (where Damiel meets The Filmstar, a tongue-in-cheek cameo by Peter Falk, star of *Columbo*, and former fallen angel himself), the lights of the nightclubs, and above all the irreverence and beauty of the circus.

Humans, it transpires, do all these things because they know they must, because it is all they have before they die. Life, like films, is time-based which Heaven can never be. And in due course, Cassiel aches to join him on this great one-way adventure...

Nobody really anticipated the great events of November 1989, but in 1993 Wenders returned to the theme with a sequel, *Faraway, So Close!* (this time an exact translation) in which Cassiel joins the worldly Damiel in the newly-open Berlin. It has its moments but without the intense, squashed world of the walled city it sprawls and shows off in a bid to rake in the moment before it disappears. (It also didn't need to be so long).

Wings of Desire is in that sense a purer film, intently studying people's faces to follow what moves them, refusing to predict what is round the next corner. It doesn't have the rhetoric of *The Tin Drum*, and yet neither does it have the historical obsolescence. Wenders in his often-austere but always beautiful films seems to consider history and nationality as irrelevant, and motivation as an accident: it is enough that people sit in lorries, follow other people through railway stations, get lost in the desert, listen to music, eat and talk. What else can any mortal do?



Twenty-five years after the fall of the Wall, Berlin still struggles with its unsatisfactory urban form: its gaps, its duplications, and its unfinished nature. It is a city that has always been in flux, so complicated by its histories and counter-histories that its urban fabric seems to resist all attempts to reorder it.

Despite this, or probably because of it, Berlin seems to have become a great city again, and no one is more surprised than the Berliners themselves. To them it isn't clear whether they live in a great political European capital, or a charming hippy town of pop-ups and clubs. They don't know whether to be happy that old Tegel lives on or furious they don't have an international airport. They don't know whether they really want the Stadtschloss rebuilt, and they don't know whether the arrival of Frank Gehry and his twisted tower on Alexanderplatz will be the beginning of a bright new future or the end of an innocent era.

They know they don't have a beautiful city, but they feel strongly about how it should be and how it should look. Berliners have maintained a sense of participation and even ownership that seems to have been lost in so many other cities. This is why Berlin fascinates. It is not only poor and sexy but engaged and vital, a reminder of the more messy, contradictory and organic qualities that all cities should have but are elsewhere being replaced by homogeneous commercialism and a more extreme segregation of rich and poor.

London, Doha and Shanghai have become investment centres welcoming development that brings wealth and image but little civic substance. Against this Berlin seems charmingly reflective and suspicious, its citizens rather unimpressed by the apparent imperatives of private investment and global image.

Why is Berlin different? The division of

the city had left West Berlin the task of reorganising its infrastructure. From every point of view this was a complicated process. Having lost, as it were, so many important cultural and symbolic institutions to the eastern side of the city, Berlin had to once again try to reassemble its civic order, to make a whole city out of half of one.

[...] Cities record our fragile attempts to make ideas of society in physical form. They are physical records of our visions and our mistakes. We have always been clumsy in this undertaking. It tends to be a clumsy process, partly because of the decision machinery and partly because of the mismatch between the tendencies of investment and the poorly articulated expectations of the citizen. We are now at a time when image dominates, when we are more susceptible than ever to judge by appearance. Architecture has increasingly moved into this world of consumerism. New buildings seem more concerned with what they look like and less concerned with what they are and what they do.

In Berlin, where appearance isn't everything, where so much seems arbitrary, where the great waves of recent history have done so much damage, we should admire what has been achieved since 1989. In this time, Berlin has found something it didn't expect: that it is not defined like other cities by its wealth or its industry or its commerce, but rather surprisingly by its own fascinating complexity and contradictions.

from a speech given at the Neue Nationalgalerie by architect DAVID CHIPPERFIELD, November 2014

NEXT MONTH'S FILM IS
BICYCLE THIEVES
(Vittorio de Sica, Italy 1948)
Monday 15 December