

Isolation and Otherness in Wenders' *Wings of Desire*

Marion the trapeze artist does not want to go back to her job as a waitress, but her circus is out of money and shutting down. As the camera lingers on a static black and white shot of her ramshackle trailer, sitting alone in a muddy field that is surrounded by anonymous mid-rise apartment buildings, Marion observes in voice over that “Things don't always turn out the way you'd like.”

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Wenders' Berlin in *Wings of Desire* (1987) is filled with people whose lives, like Marion's, have not “turned out” – divorced fathers alienated from their children, fatally wounded traffic accident victims, and the suicidally depressed all inhabit a “city that burned its culture to terrorize Europe” (McMahon 2).¹ Yet Wenders' Berlin is also not without hope, because angels roam its streets, angels who, with a touch, can reorient the perceptions of the isolated, leading them to ponder anew the poem by Peter Handke which accompanies Wenders' visual imagery of isolation and loneliness, a poem which repeatedly asks “Why am I me and not you?” Or, stated

¹ McMahon, “Nostalgia Over Berlin,” etc.

another way, why am *I* not *Other* than I am now? To seek an answer to this question, I will weave together elements of Wenders' film with ideas drawn from two key contemporary thinkers – Martin Heidegger and Gilles Deleuze – in order to construct a multi-textured response to the problem of identity in the contemporary world.

Isolation

A father sits alone in the living room, thinking “My God, what will become of that boy? [...] What more does he want? I already bought him a guitar. Now he wants drums, too? That would cost a fortune. [...] Is he ever gonna come to his senses? [...] I can't go along with this anymore.”

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What has led to this man's isolation from his family? A possible answer comes from Martin Heidegger's “What are Poets For?” (1971 [1936 in German]),² who argues by way of the poet Rilke that living merely as a *productive consciousness*, one founded only on utilitarian, goal-oriented strategies, leaves the subject fragmented from those around him and thus suspended over an *abyss*, a void where no reserve of meaning remains: “What threatens man in his very nature is [...] the uniformity of production, [...which] from the outset destroys the realm from which any rank and recognition could possibly arise” (Heidegger 117). For Heidegger, this utilitarian attitude originates in the Cartesian calculating consciousness, a mind that ignores any possibilities that an object or experience may hold in reserve in order to immediately subsume the world's presentations under a calculation of their utility. As Heidegger himself puts it,

² Heidegger, etc.

“Purposeful self-assertion, with its designs, interposes before the intuitive image the project of the merely calculated product” (Heidegger 127), leading the subject to organize her identity as a utilitarian space of production that faithfully mirrors an objectified, Euclidean external world, a world where “Man becomes [merely] human material, which is disposed of with a view to proposed goals” (Heidegger 111).

With respect to the father in *Wings*, one important implication of a world where objects are reduced to mere utilitarian substitutions for one another, objects to be replaced as their use value is exhausted, is that any identity predicated on those objects itself becomes a directly interchangeable commodity: “What is constant in things produced as objects merely for consumption is: the substitute -- *Ersatz*” (Heidegger 130). Stated another way, because the productive consciousness defines her identity in relation to utilitarian calculations, that identity “should” be discarded when she meets her goal – in Wenders' film, the man's son should “come to his senses” now that he owns a guitar. The father is thus isolated from his son because, as a productive consciousness, his *world* lacks a unified foundation with those around him. And what is more, he cannot even articulate this lack, since his own world is missing a (non-productive) language to express what it might mean to live otherwise.

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A motorcycle accident victim sits propped against a curb thinking “I stink of gasoline [...] How they all stand there, staring at me [...] I should have told her yesterday that I was sorry [...] I can't just sit – I've still got so much to do!”

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Another instance of isolation in Wenders' Berlin, yet one different in kind, the motorcycle rider's isolation can be thought of as an instance of contemporary cinema's tendency to depict a character's present situation as the result of an absent, yet extreme, situation as described by Gilles Deleuze in *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (1989 [1983 in French]).³ Whereas classical Hollywood cinema constructed a subject's identity within “a field of forces, oppositions and tensions between these forces, [leading to] resolutions of these tensions according to the distributions of goals, obstacles, means, detours” (Deleuze 128), Wenders' film depicts the motorcyclist as already having crashed before the camera “reaches” him. As such, there is no longer a “sufficient reaction” to his circumstances as represented in the film, since Wenders' camera does not offer a “most appropriate detour” (Deleuze 128) that can avoid the accident and hence “master” the motorcyclist's current situation. Yet even though the accident has already happened, he continues to think “as if” there were – he continues to order his prior experiences relative to his determinate present, relying on currently irrelevant “causal and logical connections” (Deleuze 126-127) to construct his present identity. And in Deleuze's terms, this mode of thinking ties the motorcyclist to “a *system of [negative] judgment[s]*: even when acquittal takes place” (Deleuze 133), leading to self-condemnation as his last thoughts on earth (“I should have told her yesterday that I was sorry”) and so reducing an entire lifetime of experiences to one negative judgment, regret.

Otherness à la Deleuze

The angel Damien kneels behind the dying motorcyclist, touches the man's head and begins to speak. “As I came up the mountain out of the misty valley and into the sun... the fire

³ Deleuze, etc.

on the range...” As Damiel continues to speak, the dying man's litany of regrets quiets, and eventually he and the angel begin to speak together: “The Far East. [...] Great Bear Lake.” Finally the man himself takes over, and Damiel rise to walk away as the man continues: “Tristan da Cunha Island. [...] The old houses of Charlottenburg. [...] The spots from the first drops of rain.”

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A Deleuzian analysis of the role of the angel Damiel plays for Wenders' dying motorcyclist allows us to theorize the contemporary subject as never simply a helpless victim of historical circumstance, though. Instead, Deleuze argues that the very lack of a “best” remaining outcome in any given situation allows the sense of *touch* to take on a new role in identity formation.⁴ Specifically, Deleuze argues that when the hand no longer exercises a prehensile function (i.e., when there is no longer a “best” remaining outcome), the hand instead can chain together disparate spaces of experience that are not oriented causally or logically.⁵ Through such alternate uses of touch, then, a film like *Wings* strives “to make perceptible, to make visible, relationships of time which cannot be seen [directly] in the represented object and [so] do not allow themselves to be reduced to the [narrative] present” (Deleuze xii).⁶ Thus, a film like *Wings'* non-prehensile use of touch depicts “a single event [that] can belong to several levels: the sheets of past [or duration can] coexist in a non-chronological order” (Deleuze xii), and Deleuze refers to this new type of identity as *crystalline*, an identity composed of experiences that are relationally but not causally connected.⁷ As such, a crystalline identity is inherently

⁴ Raskin, “...Images of Life...” on Agnes Godard on Damiel always being there at the “right time.”

⁵ Deleuze's own example is Bresson's *Pickpocket*, where the camera follows a series of hands as they brush objects, redirecting them (and hence the camera) as a way to link together subjective space.

⁶ Raskin, “Camera Movements...” on angelic touch leading to deeper memories.

⁷ Perlmutter, “Wenders Returns Home...” and two other people on Deleuze, crystals, and *Wings*.

malleable, in so far as its very depiction by the camera “stands for its object, replaces it, both creates and erases it... and constantly gives way to other descriptions which contradict, displace, or modify the preceding ones” (Deleuze 126). And with Wenders' dying motorcyclist, the camera repeatedly pans from side to side, reversing course with each new development in the scene to indicate not only a dying man, but one who has also experienced Great Bear Lake, etc.

A film such as *Wings*, then, stages representation, transformation, and identity as simultaneous events. A crystalline construction of identity thus privileges non-causal relation over evaluative judgment (the motorcyclist's life is more than simply regret) by forging connections through proximity and parallel rather than “organic” cause-and-effect series. As such, no particular level of experience is “really” prior to any other, and so dreams, flashbacks, and the “present” all exist for themselves in non-localized, heterogeneous spaces of experience. Multiple centers (like crystals themselves have) imply multiple, possible identities instead of a single, necessary one. Further, multiple centers for identity imply multiple truths isomorphic on the space of representation.⁸

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Having just found out that the circus is closing, Marion sits on the hood of a car in the circus yard, thinking “It always stops just when it's starting. It was too good to be true.” The angel Damiel reaches out and touches her shoulder, leaning in to listen, and Marion continues “I look up [...] and the world emerges before my eyes and fills my heart.” Across the yard, she sees an elephant standing on its trunk, and she smiles.

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In Wenders' film, angelic touch can also reorient the subject's perception, not just her

⁸ Cassiel mentions that Damiel's experiences as a human won't be True (with a capital T).

memory. In Deleuze's terms, a film like *Wings* constructs “perception” as simply the designation of a “beginning” to movement. Thus, any act of cinematic perception is itself always a motivated selection – perception only “occurs” when other images are subordinated to one specific image as their point of variation. This means that any “center of perception” is inherently changing, and so there is no reason *a priori* to choose one cinematic image rather than another as a focal point – there is no reason for Marion to be hopeless *later* simply because she is *now*. In consequence, a film like *Wings* will constantly vary which image is taken to “ground” the rest, which image is designated as a subjective “beginning” of all others. And Daniel's touch depicts instances where the act of signification avoids the permanent designation of a center, where “possible” combinations of images are allowed to vary more broadly and so any image can combine with any other, “which goes beyond the human limits of the sensory-motor schema towards a non-human world” (Deleuze 1989: 40).

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A camera pans down the isle of an airplane, then across the skies above Berlin, through an apartment window, through a wall, out a window again and into an ambulance, past several cars on the road and finally into an auto dealership, with little connection between people and locations other than their depiction, other than the moving camera itself.

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This “angelic camera” is, in Deleuze's terms, an example of modernist cinema's interest in characters who can only attempt to see their situation more clearly, to attempt to become aware of *options* rather than *solutions* in a traditional sense, because seeking only one solution in a multi-centered system is a vain pursuit.⁹ This perceptual “immobility” despite changing images

⁹ Look, “Angels, Fiction, and History” on floating camera creating a sense of ease in the spectator.

(a lack of traditional motion from a “cause” to a “consequence” in the images themselves) shatters any notion of Euclidean experience as a necessary center of identity, because there is no tension within the depicted situation that can be resolved by an appeal to maximization or other Euclidian logics. Or said another way, in a system with many centers there is literally no goal that is more important than any other, no one obstacle to be overcome through a linear solution, but instead only multi-relational fields of interaction. An individual subject’s experience, in Deleuze's model and in Wenders' film, is therefore constructed out of a set of “non-localizable relations” within situations (Deleuze 129). In consequence, any movement within such a situation is necessarily “abnormal” in some way (like Wenders' use of the camera itself), since it cannot accomplish any of the goals to which movement is traditionally subordinated in referential reality.

In a sense, then, both the cinematic subject and the audiences who participate in a film like *Wings* must learn to “read” anew, because a series of images assembled through seemingly “irrational” cuts requires more from the viewer than a series with a direct, “logical” connection. In a film like *Wings*, then, the image is intended not to be seen, but to be deciphered, “readable as well as seeable” (Deleuze 22).¹⁰ In other words, by not depicting action in a realist mode, *Wings* signals its own internal structure repeatedly, rather than denoting an “objective” outside. Yet while closed, a crystalline film like *Wings* is not static; it is always in a state of genesis or development, of de-centering and re-centering the senses and subject-positions of its signifying acts.

Otherness à la Heidegger

¹⁰ Paneth, “Wim and His Wings,” quotes Wenders as saying “I prefer movies that ask me to see” (7).

With an angel's hand on his shoulder, an old man who gets winded climbing stairs sets off on a brisk walk across Berlin. "I can't find Potsdamer Platz. Here? This can't be it. Potsdamer Platz is where the Café Josti used to be. In the afternoon I'd go there to chat and have a coffee. [...] It was a lively place [...] then suddenly the flags appeared. The whole square was covered with them. And people weren't friendly anymore [...] I will not give up until I find the Potsdamer Platz.

Writing as he was in 1936, Martin Heidegger could not yet see the “absent, yet extreme, situation” central to *Wings*, the Second World War.¹¹ As Gilles Deleuze argues:

in Europe, the post-war period has greatly increased the situations which we no longer know how to react to, in spaces which we no longer know how to describe. These were ‘any spaces whatever’, deserted but inhabited, disused warehouses, waste ground, cities in the course of demolition or reconstruction. (Deleuze xi)¹²

Yet to discuss the poet Homer's walk across Berlin, I would like to return to Heidegger, who might argue with respect to Homer's journey that:

When we are touched from out of the widest orbit, the touch goes to our very nature. To touch means to touch off, to set in motion. Our nature is set in motion. The will is shaken by the touch so that only now is the nature of willing made to appear and set in motion. (Heidegger 1971: 125)

For Heidegger, when touched by a domain that is outside of himself (in Homer's case, the angel Cassiel), the subject embarks on a *venture*, a term Heidegger borrows from Rilke to stress how the subject will dare something in extending herself. In other words, taking part in a venture necessarily includes an element of danger or *unprotectedness* for the subject who participates, because she is committing her will to a force that is literally outside of herself that might disclose someone *other* than who she thought herself to be.¹³ Yet Heidegger argues that it is actually the

¹¹ Vila and Kuzniar, “Witnessing Narration,” on *Wings* and World War II leading to the impossibility of narrative closure.

¹² Wenders, “Urban Landscape,” on gaps in Berlin leading to the angels ability to “see through time” (381).

¹³ Wenders, “An Attempted Description,” past as “parallel world” for angels.

unprotected nature of a venture, the abandonment of personal will to the will as venture, that can eventually make the subject more secure. By taking part in the venture, she becomes more firmly grounded in Being: “The unprotectedness of what is ventured not only does not exclude it, it necessarily includes, its being secure in its ground” (Heidegger 104). The security of a subject like Wenders' Homer, then, comes from his ability to will *otherwise* than his neighbors, neighbors who, by living only as productive consciousnesses, artificially restrict the range of possible wills (and hence of possible subject positions in the world itself) to only those concerned with material gain and satisfaction.¹⁴ By turning himself away from production, however, a poet like Wenders' Homer literally *sine cura* in Heidegger's terms, literally without care for the things of (this) world and so free to define goals (and hence identities) differently. In other words, poets like Homer are always safe because they can become *different* from themselves (Heidegger 120).¹⁵

Yet how will Homer find the Potsdamer Platz? According to Heidegger, by seeking the traces of the divine that are still left in a world of production which actively obscures them: “He among mortals who must, sooner than other mortals and otherwise than they, reach into the abyss, comes to know the marks that the abyss remarks” (Heidegger 93). This, then, is the “function of the poet in a destitute time,” as Heidegger's reference to Hölderlin implies: to mark those traces of a place of now imaginary being (like the Potsdamer Platz) for those whose vision is obscured by the realm of mere production.¹⁶ Poets like Homer thus maintain proximity to Being as both presence *and* absence simultaneously, and this ability to signify absence in presence allows the poet to call new realms of meaning into existence, new worlds (and hence

¹⁴ Look, “Angels, Fiction, and History,” asks “How can Germany *live with* that past?” (186).

¹⁵ Caldwell and Rea, “Transforming Postmodernism,” important because Homer's memory fails “for the years 1933-45” (48).

¹⁶ Caldwell and Rea, Homer know where it *was*, but not where it is *now* (50).

new subjects, as well) that call the dominance of the present into question.¹⁷ Poets like Wenders' Homer thus have access to what Heidegger, again borrowing from Rilke, calls *the Open*, a realm that:

lets the beings ventured into the pure draft draw as they are drawn, so that they variously draw on one another and draw together without encountering any bounds. Drawing as so drawn, they fuse with the boundless, the infinite.
(Heidegger 106)

Heidegger's Open is thus not what is before us as presence, but is instead that which presence actively works to exclude. The subject drawn into the draft of Being is thus immediately drawn into larger connections than she existed in before, into the space of the heart, as described by Pascal rather than the Euclidian interior space of the productive consciousness.¹⁸ For Heidegger, the space of the heart is “beyond the arithmetic of calculation” and so can “overflow into the unbounded whole of the Open” (Heidegger 128). As such, it is unrestricted by the limitations of physical bodies (like Homer's frailty), granting the subject a freedom that is “almost unfathomable” (Heidegger 128). Any subject drawn into the draft of Being can thus transform the objects of the denotable world into an inner topography that is *other*, qualitatively different from the space accompanying the productive consciousness.

Conclusion – Uncertainty

A man sits on a ledge atop the Mercedes building. “This time I'm actually doing it. Funny I'm so calm.” The angel Cassiel walks up behind him and reaches out to touch his shoulder. The man moves away from the angel's touch. “I'd like to fly sometime. The plane circles over Berlin... until it crashes.” Wearing headphones and listening to music, the man

¹⁷ Rogowski, “To Be Continued...” on art as a countermodel [Homer's epic of peace] to trauma (557).

¹⁸ Trussler, “Spectral Witnesses...” on the angels' temporal endurance spatializing time (28).

cannot hear other people on the roof calling for him to come down from the ledge. Cassiel moves to him quickly and leans against his shoulder. “All these thoughts... I'd rather not think anymore.” The man jumps from the roof.

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Yet both Heidegger and Deleuze agree that access to the Other is not guaranteed. For Heidegger, “With the heightening of consciousness [...] man... is not [directly] admitted into the Open” (Heidegger 1971: 108), and for Deleuze “It is not possible to predict” what will crystallize the subject (Deleuze 1989: 90). And even when access is gained, the results might be considered insignificant from another's perspective – Marion is still unemployed, and the motorcycle rider is still dying. Yet I WANT TO SAY SOMETHING ABOUT HOW IT'S IMPORTANT STILL TO TRY, LIKE HOMER WHO WON'T STOP LOOKING UNTIL HE FINDS POTSDAMER PLATZ. PLEASE HELP WITH THE CONCLUSION!