

Brattle Theatre Film Notes: *Wings of Desire*

West Germany/France, 1987.

Rated PG-13. 127 min

Cast: Bruno Ganz, Solveig Dommartin, Otto Sander, Peter Falk;

Music: Jürgen Knieper;

Cinematographer: Henri Alekan;

Producer: Ingrid Windisch;

Director: Wim Wenders

If nothing else, Wim Wenders' *Wings of Desire* is a film that continues to inspire intense, passionate reactions in its viewers. It has been considered by many to be the most beautiful, poetic movie ever filmed. Scores of scholars and historians proclaim its significance and powerful emotional impact. "A true work of art," "a masterpiece," it has been called. Skeptics, however, feel just as strongly that the film is pretentious, overly "artsy," self-indulgent, and tedious. This opinion is most likely due to the film's unconventional style of dialogue, which is not really dialogue at all, but poetry in motion, or poetry set to film (literally, from the poetry by Peter Handke), played out before us. The film reads like poetry, breathes like poetry. It is certainly not an easy read, though, as the words and their meanings are often obscure or hard to follow. One can just as easily imagine reading the dialogue in a book or in a poem, sometimes so much so that the words may seem a bit out of place or contrived in a film context. Despite all of this, one needs only to understand the film as art first, and entertainment second, in order to appreciate its beauty and forgive any complications.

The story tells of a group of contemplative, trench-coat-wearing angels who hover over and among the people of Berlin as they go about daily life, worrying about money, love, and other human dilemmas. Two angels in particular, Daniel (Bruno Ganz) and Cassiel (Otto Sander), roam, unseen, through the streets of Berlin, observing, recording, and discussing with

one another the fragments of daily life that they see and hear. These gentle angels do not intervene so much as try to understand the lives of Berliners and to provide some comfort to those who are suffering.

The angels witness everything, even people's innermost thoughts, but are unable to experience any direct human interaction. Daniel, frustrated by the millions of years he has spent as an angel, begins to feel that he is missing the true richness of human life, which he knows he can intellectually examine but never truly understand without first-hand experience. He longs to taste coffee, see color, and feel cold, even pain. He desires earthly ties, and soon falls in love with a woman who, naturally, cannot



see or touch him. At this point, Daniel considers the option of falling to earth and becoming human, and must decide whether a human life would be worth forsaking his angelic existence.

What is the film about? Well, if ever a film could embody the entirety of human existence, this is it. The film is, in a sense, a tour through the many intricacies of the human condition. *Wings of Desire* is a celebration of what it means to be human, of the little moments, experiences, and sensations that make up our daily lives. Peter Falk's character describes how a person's fingers can tingle with cold, and how holding a steam-

ing cup of coffee wakes the senses, for example, as Daniel listens with longing. His intense appreciation for such sensations serves to remind us of the small joys that comprise the majority of our lives, and how these moments make life worth living. For those of us who need reminding, this film can be life altering. Heavy as it may seem, then, *Wings of Desire* has a genuinely uplifting effect. It reminds us that film, or art in general, need not be tragic in order to be beautiful.

There is much to be appreciated here: the aesthetic beauty in the sprawling black and white cinematography and general look of the film, the lyrical dialogue, Daniel and his universal longing for love and life, and the raw emotion that the film inspires with more intensity than any other film I have ever seen. More than anything, perhaps, the film is an empathetic one; the viewer feels he or she is being led to enlightenment, to a real understanding of the personal joys and tragedies experienced by the people observed in Berlin, and, figuratively, by the whole of humanity.

Wenders directed a follow-up film, *Faraway, so Close*, in 1993, that, though not as critically successful, is one of those rare follow-up pictures that are actually worth viewing. The film takes off where *Wings of Desire* ended, this time following the plight of Daniel's angel friend, Cassiel. *Wings of Desire* also spawned an American remake of sorts, *City of Angels* (1998, Brad Silberling), starring Nicholas Cage and Meg Ryan, but, of course, it could not come close to capturing the essence of the original nor its unique version of beauty.

HELPFUL HINT: Watch for a dramatic musical performance by Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds!

- Written by Jessica Singer