FLIGHTS OF MEMORY: NARRATING THE PAST IN WINGS OF DESIRE

Silia Kaplan

A thesis submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts in the Department of Germanic Languages and Literatures.

Chapel Hill
2007

Approved by:
Alice Kuzniar
Clayton Koelb
Peter McIsaac
ABSTRACT

SILIA KAPLAN – Flights of Memory: Narrating the Past in Wings of Desire
(Under the direction of Alice Kuzniar)

Wings of Desire engages in a dialectic of remembering and forgetting by presenting the inner dialogues and memories of the people of Berlin in the foreground of a physical memory of destruction. The inhabitants wander the city with little attentiveness to its architecture (the Berlin wall and the ruined buildings as a record of jarred collective memory) while being absorbed in their own troubled thoughts, but Wenders reconciles this disconnect in the figure of the storyteller. The film explores the intricacies of memory through notions of storytelling, often reflecting Benjamin’s theories of memory and history. My paper extensively analyzes these concepts as they are portrayed in the postmodern metropolis of Berlin, identifying not only the problems that arise in the attempt to depict a postmodern narrative but also the ways in which Wenders is able to resolve these problems and leave his viewers with optimism and hope for the future.
To my parents for their unconditional support and constant inspiration.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. INTRODUCTION...........................................................................................................1

II. BENJAMIN’S STORYTELLER IN POSTMODERNITY...............................8

III. CREATING PERSONAL NARRATIVES..............................................................12

IV. GENERAL PROBLEMS OF NARRATION.......................................................15

V. TAKING CONTROL: FREUDIAN THEORIES OF MEMORY...............18

VI. COLLECTIVE NARRATION AND PROBLEMS OF REPETITION...21

VII. THE ANGELS AND THEIR MODE OF REMEMBERING......................27

VIII. HOMER AS ANGEL OF HISTORY? .........................................................34

IX. CINEMA AS COLLECTIVE MEMORY...........................................................38

X. THE FRAGMENTARINESS OF SPACE IN WINGS OF DESIRE.........44

XI. CONCLUSION.......................................................................................................51

BIBLIOGRAPHY.........................................................................................................55
INTRODUCTION

Wim Wenders’s image of Berlin in *Wings of Desire* (1987) is one permeated by divisions and boundaries: first and foremost the omnipresent Berlin Wall and no less importantly the inhabitants who wander the city preoccupied with their own everyday concerns in complete isolation from each other. These are penetrating symbols of fragmentation in a film that candidly explores the fragmentary nature of the past in the present. While this past is often not explicitly mentioned, it is continually evoked by the physical geography and atmosphere of Berlin and its inhabitants. In particular, the city’s past is referenced by the constant portrayal of the Berlin Wall, which is a persistent reminder of World War II. Moreover, the camera tends to focus on sites of emptiness and destruction, which function as further indications of the city’s violent past. However, and even more significantly, these sites depict the isolation and alienation prevalent in contemporary Berlin; in this sense they are not only reminders of the past but, rather, have become symbols of the present.

Wenders’s investigation into the fragmentariness of the postmodern condition takes place on two levels: the individual and the collective. On the individual level, Wenders vividly portrays a shattered self-identity and the human need to reconstruct it in the character of Marion. Introduced at the moment when she loses her identity as trapeze artist, Marion is subsequently depicted in her search for a new story. Similarly, the character of Damiel reveals a desire for narrative even at the cost of immortality. Both
characters, therefore, recognize the value of a personal narrative and ultimately strive for a shared narrative in order to rise above their isolated existences. In this sense, the film illustrates the construction of fragmented memories into a unified narrative.

On the collective level, this construction of memories into a narrative becomes highly problematic due to its inevitable alteration of the original memories. Rather than simply avoiding these issues, however, Wenders delves into them by means of a contemplative portrayal of postmodern Berlin. The tensions between fragmentation and narrative are palpable throughout the film, not only in the storyline but in the camerawork as well. My paper will explore these tensions in order to understand Wenders’s proposed view of history and its implications on both the individual and collective level. The city of Berlin and its own particular past is certainly significant here but Wenders transcends its particularity by emphasizing its status as universal, postmodern metropolis. By evoking Benjamin’s theories of narration and Freud’s theories of memory and mourning, Wenders weaves a complex tapestry of history, memory, and narration that leaves his viewers with a hope for unification in a fragmented world.

Although recent literature touches on some of these themes, it tends to focus largely on the roles of perception and gender in Wings of Desire. Assenka Oksiloff argues that the film is an attempt to explore various modes of perception and accordingly follows a journey from a world of sight to a world dominated by an interaction of the senses. She attributes to the angels a “monocular and transcendental mode of perception” and suggests that Damiel’s choice to fall is due to his desire for the human realm of perception which encompasses an entire “sensory continuum” of hearing, feeling and seeing (35). This sensory realm is one in which seeing is not the dominant mode of
perception and Damiel’s fall, according to Oksiloff, is, therefore, Wenders’s criticism of our tendency to idealize monocular sight. The importance of having various modes of perception is clearly portrayed throughout the film by its continual use of voice-overs and songs as well as the angels’ desires to feel a cold day or the weight of a stone. However, Oksiloff does not explore the meaning of these perceptions in terms of the memories they create and their integration into narratives – two important things which angels interestingly cannot experience in their monocular realm.

Roger Cook, in an essay entitled “Angels, Fiction, and History in Berlin,” does recognize the need for creating narratives as well as the angels’ inability in doing so. In fact, he compellingly argues that the creation of a narrative is essential in the formation of self-identity. “Both the film story and the voice-over comments suggest repeatedly that a narrative context is necessary to impart meaning to isolated moments of existence” (39). This need for a narrative is especially evident in Marion’s search for a life story after her identity as a trapeze artist has been taken away and she finds herself alone in a foreign city. She must now integrate the fragments of her existence into a narrative so that she can give meaning to her life. While Cook clearly points out this significant project in the film, he views narration and isolation as givens, and does not elucidate the relevance of a postmodern setting in which the art of storytelling has disappeared. More importantly, he does not explicitly mention the role of memories, which are the building blocks of creating a narrative; it is not our existences that are isolated but, in fact, our memories.

Alice Kuzniar and Xavier Vila also focus on the concept of narration in Wings of Desire and bring another important element into the discussion, namely the need for a witness. They argue that “the passage from immortality to mortality is bound to the
inception of narrative desire” (53). Damiel, therefore, chooses mortality in order to create his own narrative. However, the act of narration only becomes meaningful through the presence of a witness. As the angels walk through the library, it becomes clear that “a witness is needed in order for the particular narrative to rise from the inundation of universal sound” (54). In my paper, I will take this idea one step further and argue that it is not simply a witness who is necessary but rather another person to whom the story is told and who thereby shares it. This sharing posits the possibility of communication and community. Like Cook, Vila and Kuzniar also do not mention the importance of memories in narration and for this reason my paper will bring to light a new perspective.

Wenders’s film clearly emphasizes the importance of memories in our existences, both on an individual and a shared collective level.¹ The significance of memories is revealed by the inner monologues of Berlin’s inhabitants who roam the streets in hopeless despair, as well as the fragmented cityscape depicted in the desolation of the city’s ruins and vast, empty spaces. The fragmented memories of alienated individuals are paralleled by the jarred collective memory of a city reminded of its past at every footstep. Wenders portrays this fragmentation from the aerial perspective of angels and, therefore, allows for a transcendence of barriers (most obviously the Berlin Wall) in a way that would otherwise not be possible. While this unique mode of perception has been analyzed extensively, there is a surprising lack of any comprehensive analyses of the specific role of memory in Wings of Desire.

It is my aim to perform a detailed analysis of the particular way in which Wenders engages in a discourse on memory and reflects the ideas of two well known theoretical

¹ Large portions of the script for Wings of Desire were written by Peter Handke and although I do not want to disregard his important contribution to the film, I will refer to it as Wenders’s film for the sake of simplicity.
thinkers – Walter Benjamin and, to a lesser extent, Sigmund Freud. I intend to show that through these theories of memory, Wenders proposes the co-creation of narration with reflection in another person as means of dealing with our individual pasts. On a collective level, this solution does not suffice and Wenders thus develops a much more complex model for coming to terms with an entire nation’s past. I will begin by addressing the importance of the film’s setting in a postmodern society in relation to Benjamin’s essays on history and storytelling. This section will use Homer’s character as a starting point for an exploration of storytelling on a collective level. Next, I will focus on the importance of storytelling on an individual level and, in particular, the construction of personal memories into a narrative. Through closer analysis of Benjamin’s theories as well as Wenders’s own ideas, problems of narration in general will be identified and explored. These potential problems will lead to an investigation of relevant Freudian theories and their implications in Wenders’s film. In particular, I will examine the characters’ struggles in dealing with their memories and self-identities through the use of Freud’s theories on trauma. The need for another person in creating a personal narrative will reveal itself as a solution for dealing with a troublesome past.

When directed at the collective level, however, these theories will bring to light potentially dangerous problems in Wenders’s attempt to deal with the past. Specifically, the need to alter, or even erase, certain memories while constructing a narrative is a cause for alarm when these ideas are applied to an entire nation and its past. A closer look at this problem will reveal some ideas that might appear unsettling. These ideas include Wenders insistence on a mythical new beginning, which could be understood as reminiscent of Nazi ideology. However, and as the final sections of my paper will
elucidate, Wenders is consciously aware of these potential problems and is able to overcome them through the multi-layered complexities within his film.

These complexities include his meta-filmic discourse, metaphor, and irony as well as his focus on fragmentariness and space. While the first half of my paper focuses on the content of Wenders’s film, then, the second half turns towards a closer, filmic analysis in order to draw out the subtleties of the film. I will begin with a closer analysis of the angels’ perception, which remains spatial and fragmented throughout the film. As Wenders uses the angels to portray collective memory and history, their perception will prove to be highly significant in the context of this paper. Similarly, a closer analysis of Homer and his own memory of the past will reveal an insistence upon fragmented history. Having thus identified Wenders’s proposal for viewing and coming to terms with the past, the last sections of my paper will analyze Wenders’s understanding of film as the postmodern storyteller. Ultimately, the camerawork, metaphors, and other subtleties of Wings of Desire reveal a self-reflexive film that identifies itself as a repository of collective memory. The understanding of film as storyteller leads into the final section of my paper, which analyzes the film’s spaces of absence as the physical counterpart to the film’s discourse on narration and memory.

My treatment of Wenders’s film, therefore, opens up a new approach to Vergangenheitsbewältigung and memory. It would certainly be incorrect to view Wings of Desire as a historical film that depicts a typical way of dealing with the past. Rather, Wenders’s contemplation of contemporary Berlin emphasizes subjectivity and fragmentation in a way that enables a truer understanding of the past. Wings of Desire does not in any way attempt to provide a comprehensive narrative of the past but, instead,
allows the past to remain fragmented and thereby accepts it as what it is. My approach to the film is also unique in that it focuses on spaces of absence within the film as metaphorical spaces of narration. These spaces invoke a contemplative mood within the viewer and allow for a prolonged dwelling in space that is free from the usual narrative urge towards completion. As Wenders’s film acknowledges that history cannot be dealt with in a comprehensive, unified way, it shatters linear thinking and, instead, invites contemplation.
BENJAMIN’S STORYTELLER IN POSTMODERNITY

Although Benjamin’s works deal with modernism, his ideas are nevertheless entirely relevant to Wenders’s postmodern film. According to David Harvey, both modernity and postmodernity are characterized by “ephemerality, fragmentation, discontinuity, and the chaotic” (44). Because of these similarities, then, Benjamin’s discourse on the problems in modern society is largely applicable to postmodern society as well. The difference, which I will discuss in the last half of my paper, lies in their responses to this condition: unlike modernity, postmodernity “does not try to transcend it, counteract it, or even to define the ‘eternal and immutable’ elements that might lie within it” (Harvey 44). Wenders’s film certainly engages in discourse on meta-narrative and its attempt to overcome fragmentation but, ultimately, it accepts and, in fact, embraces fragmentation as the necessary perception of the past. This first section will set up my argument by delineating Benjamin’s theories of storytelling and their relevance to Wenders’s postmodern setting in Berlin.

That the angels in Wenders’s film have chosen the public library as their gathering place is very significant in the film’s depiction of identity problems in a postmodern society. It immediately becomes noticeable that, although this is a gathering place for both angels and humans, there is no interaction or communication of any sort taking place. The readers are entirely isolated from each other; they seem to be striving for the same goal but are all working towards it alone. This picture of isolation is
reflected in the thoughts of a very important figure in the film: Homer. As he walks through the library, he observes: “Meine Zuhörer sind mit der Zeit zu Lesern geworden, und sie sitzen nicht mehr im Kreis, sondern für sich, und einer weiß nichts vom anderen” (30). These lines are especially significant because they are a clear reference to Walter Benjamin’s essay “Der Erzähler,” in which he links the downfall of storytelling with the rise of the modern novel.

The fact that storytelling is an oral tradition is of huge importance to Benjamin because it denotes the necessity of a community and personal interaction. This orality puts storytellers in direct contrast to novelists who are not only themselves isolated but also promote isolation in their readers. Homer’s thoughts clearly reflect these ideas and indicate the film’s setting in a postmodern society of isolated readers who sit alone and know nothing of each other.

According to Benjamin, the key to storytelling lies in its lack of explanation and its ability to communicate Erfahrung. Storytellers always draw on experience, whether it is their own or others, and this is what makes their stories meaningful to listeners. In addition, a lack of explanation enables the listener to interpret the story himself and therefore allows him to integrate it into his own experience. Only by allowing integration into one’s own life can a story be meaningful enough “Staunen und Nachdenken zu erregen” (417). The art of storytelling thereby produces a bond among members of a community by allowing for reflection on similar experiences as well as integration of
these experiences into the self. Benjamin argues that in modern society, experience has radically shifted from *Erfahrung* to *Erlebnis*, which is only about the self and has no extension to another, thereby resulting in an isolated, disconnected self. The shock defense necessitated in modern, urban conditions naturally leads to a constant “Bewußtsein im Interesse des Reizschutzes” and therefore decreases the possibility of real *Erfahrung* (209). This notion clearly has important implications for Wenders’s postmodern society in which these conditions have dramatically increased. It is a world of *Erlebnis* rather than *Erfahrung*, which results in the picture of despairing isolation and incommunicability depicted by the inhabitants of Berlin.

The decrease in *Erfahrung* as well as the subsequent decrease in storytelling is expressed in the character of Homer, who wanders the city searching for his “Helden” (59). More than any other character in the film, Homer is consciously and painfully aware of the change that has taken place in society. He evokes an image of the neglected singer who “von seinen sterblichen Zuhörern verlassen, die Stimme verlor… [und] vom Engel der Erzählung zum unbeachteten oder verlachten Leiermann draußen an der Schwelle zum Niemandsland wurde” (61). This abandonment of storytelling is reflected not only in the image of the postmodern library, but in all of the inhabitants of Berlin, who seem unable to communicate with each other. However, it is only Homer, the storyteller, who seems distressed by these circumstances because only he understands that “die Männer und Frauen und Kinder… [ihn] brauchen, wie sonst nichts auf der Welt” (169). He believes that it is only through the narration of a storyteller that people can come to terms with their past. Essentially, Homer keeps the past alive by integrating the fragmented memories of the past into a comprehensible narrative. (A closer analysis of the way in
which he does this will follow in the second half of this paper.) In this sense, Homer’s existence appears to be crucial in imparting a sense of unity and meaning to a nation’s history.
CREATING PERSONAL NARRATIVES

Just as a narrative gives meaning to the collective memory of a nation, a life story is essential in giving meaning to one’s individual memories. This, of course, is intimately tied to the notion of self-identity. Viewed in isolation, one’s individual memories can do little to help in the formation of a comprehensible self-identity; understood as pieces of a larger picture (or narrative), however, these memories can impart both comprehensibility and meaning to one’s self-identity. In Wenders’s image of Berlin, the evident lack of communication and storytelling has led to an inability to unify one’s fragmented memories into a narrated whole. Marion, the main female character in Wings of Desire, is seen struggling with her self-identity when she “falls” from the angelic position of a trapeze artist and must make her way through the streets of Berlin. Luckily, she, much like the angel Damiel, is aware of the importance of narration and, therefore, makes it her goal to find a story for herself.

Initially, though, we see the same narcissism in her that is reflected throughout the city due to the prominent feeling of isolation. The people of Berlin are overwhelmingly preoccupied with their own everyday lives and, therefore, lack the self-forgetfulness which is necessary in a listener. According to Benjamin, “je selbstvergessener der Lauschende, desto tiefer prägt sich ihm das Gehörte ein” (417). Clearly, it is only once a story has been preserved in memory that it can be integrated into one’s own existence. In postmodern society this has become rare and people no longer learn from the experiences
of others (through a storyteller), but instead simply reflect on their own memories in a way which fails to advance growth. This situation is most clearly portrayed in the scene in which Marion looks at herself in the mirror and has the following illuminating thought: “Sich im Spiegel betrachten, das ist so, als ob man sich beim Denken zuschauen würde” (99). This is a moving metaphor for postmodern society which narcissistically examines itself in the mirror and continually self-reflects. It is interesting that Damiel stands behind the mirror and if the mirror were removed, Marion would be able to see herself in another person rather than an inanimate object. As Vila and Kuzniar have also noted, this other person might be considered the “true mirror from which one can see oneself” (59). In the context of my paper, this notion of a “true mirror” again supports the need for a storyteller who allows one to see oneself in another person (or character).2

In order to suggest a solution for the isolation and narcissism prevalent in postmodern society, Wenders embraces Benjamin’s notion of storytelling and depicts the necessity of creating life narratives. When Marion loses her identity as a trapeze artist, she must develop a self-identity that can integrate all the fragments of her life. In other words, she must create a life story in order to give meaning to all of her fragmented memories. Marion is unmistakably aware of this and explicitly makes the connection between happiness and having a story: “Einfach sagen können, wie jetzt gerade: Ich bin vergnügt. Ich habe eine Geschichte! Und ich werde weiter eine haben!” (110).3 It is only through a personal narrative that she can give meaning to her life and, therefore, be happy. Parallel to this idea is Damiel’s wish to be human so that he too can make his own

---

2 A similar image is portrayed in Wenders’s *Paris, Texas*, in which a one way mirror allows Jane (Natassja Kinski) to see herself while she is communicating with her ex-husband.

3 The phrase “Ich habe eine Geschichte” is especially interesting here because of the double meaning of the word “Geschichte,” signifying both a story and a past.
story. In the end, of course, they choose to make a story together and in this way move past their isolated existences into a realm of mutual experience and reflection. In fact, their long monologue at the end of the film states so explicitly: together Damiel and Marion have conceived “ein unsterbliches gemeinsames Bild” (167).
GENERAL PROBLEMS OF NARRATION

However, along with all of these benefits, there is something inherently problematic in the integration of memories into a narrative (on both an individual and a collective level): namely, the inevitability of changing the memories in order to make them fit into the bigger story. A suspicion of narrative reveals itself throughout Benjamin’s theories, in his warning of excessive explanation as well as his doubts about writing history. His belief that “nur als Bild, das auf Nimmerwiedersehen im Augenblick seiner Erkennbarkeit eben aufblitzt, ist die Vergangenheit festzuhalten,” (270) seems to belie the possibility of accurately preserving the past in a narrative. Similarly, the tendency to provide explanations within stories depicts a further danger in the use of narrative as a preservation of the past. Benjamin’s ambivalent attitude towards narrative therefore seems to indicate a problem with Wenders’s proposed solution.

It is important to note, though, that Wenders believes a story must be “found” and consequently avoids giving too much explanation to the audience and deterring from individual images. He presents his stories to the viewer in such a way “dass er eine Freiheit hat, nämlich die Freiheit, den Film selbst zusammenzusetzen oder letzten Endes selbst zu entscheiden” (42). In this way, he reaches a compromise between presenting a series of images truthfully but disconnectedly and integrating them into a narrative with the inevitable result of altering them. By allowing the members of his audience to find the story themselves, Wenders clearly reflects Benjamin’s negative attitude towards
explanation and, conversely, the desire for personal interpretations of stories. In this way, both Wenders and Benjamin struggle with the benefits and dangers of narratives – their necessity in making fragments comprehensible and their tendency to overpower and distort the individual fragments. However, the concept of a “found story” seems to mitigate these problems by negotiating the binary nature of narration.4

Wenders also focuses on the communication of experience in his films in a way that is reminiscent of Benjamin’s storyteller. In an interview reprinted in The Act of Seeing, Wenders states:

Ich denke, dass die Filme eigentlich immer beides waren, dass sie sowohl Erfahrungen, die ich gemacht habe, gearbeitet haben, als auch Projektionen in die Zukunft waren; dass sie sozusagen immer ein Steinwurf waren, und ich versucht habe, dahin zu kommen, wo ich den Stein hingeworfen habe. Und gleichzeitig waren sie ja auch immer getränkt von der jeweiligen Zeit. Ich habe natürlich nicht ständig nur autobiografische Erfahrungen verarbeitet, sondern auch viel von dem, was ich erlebt oder bei Freunden um mich herum gesehen habe, benutzt. Und von dem Moment an, wo ich gemerkt habe, das ist ein Instrument, damit kann ich arbeiten, damit kann ich selbst etwas erzählen… von dem Moment an habe ich die Filme immer von etwas handeln lassen, was sie sich erst durch das Drehen erarbeiten konnten. (41)

By using his own experience or that of his friends, Wenders engages his viewers in much the same way that Benjamin’s storyteller engages his listeners. “Der Erzähler nimmt, was er erzählt aus der Erfahrung; aus der eigenen oder berichteten. Und er macht es wiederum zur Erfahrung derer, die seiner Geschichte zuhören” (413). Experience, therefore, is at the heart of both Wenders and Benjamin’s ideal art form. Since experience does not require any further explanation, it also helps to alleviate the problems of narration that arise in Benjamin’s theories. Experience must be taken at face value: one either relates to it and incorporates it into one’s own memory or one rejects it. Either way there is no

---

4 Wenders presents this same idea in the introduction of his book, Einmal, in which he hopes that “dieses Photobuch ein Geschichtenbuch wird” within each individual reader (16). The concept of a found story is also explored in various film books, including Sigfried Kracauer’s Theory of Film.
explanation necessary. For this reason, Wenders’s focus on experience as well as his notion of the “found” story both help resolve the problems of narration that arise in Benjamin’s theories.
Wenders’s discourse on narration does not only echo Benjamin’s theory of storytelling but also Freud’s theories of memory. Specifically, Freud’s elucidation of the “Fort-da” game comes to mind, in which a child flings away an object only to pull it back again. In his essay, “Jenseits des Lustprinzips,” Freud identifies the child’s game as a re-enactment of his mother’s leaving and returning. He argues that, because “der erste Akt, das Fortgehen, für sich allein als Spiel inszeniert wurde,” (226) the child’s happiness at its reappearance is not a sufficient explanation for the game. For this reason, he suggests a semblance of control or mastery as a motivating factor. “Bei unbefangener Betrachtung gewinnt man den Eindruck, dass das Kind das Erlebnis aus einem anderen Motiv zum Spiel gemacht hat. Es war dabei passiv, wurde vom Erlebnis betroffen und bringt sich nun in eine aktive Rolle, indem es dasselbe, trotzdem es unlustvoll war, als Spiel wiederholt.“ (226) According to Wenders, the creation of a life narrative does precisely the same thing: it gives the impression that we have control over our lives. This is most clearly expressed in one of the last scenes of the film, in which Marion delivers a decisive monologue about her past and future. While she always had the feeling that her life was nothing but a string of chance occurrences, she now wants to believe that she is in control:

Es muss einmal ernst werden. Ich war viel allein, aber ich habe nie allein gelebt. Wenn ich mit jemandem war, war ich oft froh, aber zugleich hielt ich alles für Zufall. Diese Leute waren meine Eltern, aber es hätten auch andere sein können. Warum war der mit den braunen Augen mein Bruder und nicht der mit
den grünen Augen vom Bahnsteig gegenüber? …Mit dem Zufall muss es
aufhören! Neumond der Entscheidung! (161)

Marion wants to make a decision and play an active role in her life; she wants to create a
narrative and feel that she has control. The fact that this monologue begins her story with
Damiel leads us to the conclusion that narrative and control over one’s life go hand in
hand. Perhaps a narrative provides happiness for exactly this reason.

An important parallel can also be drawn between Freud’s delineation of dreams
and Wenders’s concept of a narrative. In his essay, Freud explains the tendency for
people to have recurrent dreams about original trauma situations, which clearly cannot be
justified by the wish-fulfillment hypothesis. Instead, Freud asserts that these dreams
retrospectively assert control over past experiences. This is a very similar process to the
one of narration – in both, one continuously looks backward in an attempt to assert
control over past occurrences. Both processes also involve a re-imagining of the past in
an attempt to better the future. Creating a life narrative, however, tends to involve
imagination by an integration of many memories into a coherent whole, while trauma-
dreams simply re-imagine a single memory.

This re-imagining can be problematic because it is also a way of changing and
explaining away certain memories. The notion of control, which Wenders’s seems to
suggest by way of narration, is, therefore, put in a rather negative light when viewed
through a Freudian lens. In fact, this continual backwards focus seems to reveal a
repetition compulsion, which, according to Freud, must be overcome through
Trauerarbeit and transference. While Freud’s notion of transference can have negative
consequences, it is ultimately positive in that it can stimulate growth in the patient by
way of reflection in the analyst. This process is essential in working through a
troublesome past. Clearly, narration is an endless working through in the sense that one must continually re-evaluate past memories in order to make them fit into one’s constantly changing self-identity. This is portrayed in the character of Marion when she loses her identity as a trapeze artist and asks: “Wer bist du? Ich weiss nicht mehr. Ich weiss nur: Keine Artistin mehr” (45). The need to create a new self-identity will inevitably result in the construction of a new narrative and, therefore, the modification or elimination of certain memories.

However, Wenders is partially able to resolve these ambiguities of narration and repetition by involving another important factor: the “other.” That Wenders’s film ends with the beginning of a love story is very significant because it reflects the necessity and importance of an “other” in the creation of self-identity and narrative. This is tied in to Freud’s notion of transference as well as Benjamin’s notion of the storyteller. Both posit the necessity for communication with another person in order to truly understand oneself and come to terms with one’s past. The problem in a postmodern society is the lack of communication and resulting narcissism, which prevents people from seeing themselves in an “other.” Narcissism, as a process of continual self-reflection, inevitably results in repetition and the only way to break out of this is to introduce an “other” (thereby allowing transference). By removing the mirror between Marion and Damiel, Wenders enables the co-creation of a narrative that fulfills the requirements of both Benjamin’s model of storytelling and Freud’s model of transference.
COLLECTIVE NARRATION AND PROBLEMS OF REPETITION

When considered on a collective level, re-imagining of the past can, of course, be even more problematic because it is amplified. The re-imagining involved in the construction of a narrative will likely result in a modification or even elimination of memory fragments. While this may or may not be harmful on an individual level, it is certainly problematic in its implications for a nation’s history, namely that a nation could simply deny a part of its past. This is especially significant in light of the present context: postwar Germany. In my discussion of the implications of Freud’s theories on a collective level, I will, therefore, focus my discussion specifically on the German setting of Wenders’s film. This section will thoroughly investigate the dangers present in Wenders’s film and serve as an exploration of where these dangers might lead.

In his essay, “Erinnern, Wiederholen, und Durcharbeiten,” Freud argues that people often act out their memories rather than consciously remembering them. In other words, they repeat that which they have forgotten, without being aware that they are repeating it. This notion is especially interesting when applied to the above-mentioned use of narratives in gaining control or mastery. According to Freud’s model of memory, the attempt to “master” a situation generally denotes a repetition of the original trauma. Viewed on a collective level, then, the use of narrative to gain mastery could be seen as a repetition of the original German dream of mastery. This idea might place Wenders’s film in a completely different light and begs the question whether the film is
unconsciously repeating the very ideology it is trying to overcome. The suggested use of narrative as a means of gaining control would then be a forgetting and repeating of the original trauma rather than a conscious resolution. It reveals a “Wiederholungszwang,” which is an expression of the unconscious rather than a conscious remembering and working through.

*Wings of Desire* contains several themes, which seem to support this idea: most notably, the idealization of childhood and the underlying allusions to myth. The significant notion of childhood, and specifically the innocence of childhood, is introduced in the very first image (and voice-over) of the film:

> Als das Kind ein Kind war
> ging es mit hängenden Armen,
> wollte, der Bach sei ein Fluss,
> der Fluss sei ein Strom,
> und diese Pfütze das Meer.
> Als das Kind Kind war,
> wusste es nicht, dass es Kind war… (4)

This poem by Peter Handke is continued throughout the rest of the film, constantly reminding the viewer of the lost innocence of childhood. In addition, it is immediately noticeable that children are the only ones who can see the angels. In the first few scenes we see a father carrying his child on his back and a mother with her child on the back of her bike. Unlike either adult, both children are looking up towards the sky. It is, therefore, immediately evident that children are highly regarded in Wenders’s film.

The privileged status of childhood in *Wings of Desire* goes hand in hand with the desire to return to an earlier age of innocence, to reclaim the lost origins of a people. Schiller’s famous essay, “Über naïve und sentimentalische Dichtung,” explores this common wish for a return to innocence in the context of poetry. In particular, he analyzes
the idealized status of the Greeks and terms the period of antiquity the “kindliche Alter der Menschheit” (483). The sentimental poetry of modernity continually seeks to return to this idyllic childlike state of mankind. In line with this idea, Wenders also portrays the need to return to an earlier state of innocence through his depiction of children in *Wings of Desire.*

Parallel to this notion is Wenders’s allusion to myth throughout the film. It is surely no accident that Wenders’s storyteller is named Homer and this reference to the ancient Greeks in conjunction with the German setting brings to mind several interesting notions: first and foremost the Aryan myth. The fact that Wenders is alluding to an age of innocence and making overt references to the Greeks seems strangely reminiscent of Nazi ideology. According to Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Jean-Luc Nancy and Brian Holmes, the rise of German nationalism as an “appropriation of the means of identification” took place through the imitation of the ancients and specifically the Greeks (300). This identification with ancient Greece was linked to the idea of a “new mythology” or “myth of the future” (301). The Aryan myth, which was adamantly endorsed by the Nazis, was clearly linked to the ancient Greeks, and Hitler himself maintained that Aryan culture was a fusion of “the Greek spirit and Germanic technology” (qtd. in Herf 821). Wenders’s allusions to the Greeks and mythology in *Wings of Desire* are, therefore, somewhat unsettling in light of the postwar context.

In addition to these Greek allusions, there are several key scenes of the film that center around mythological narrative. After having watched Marion during her trapeze act, the angels Damiel and Cassiel walk along a canal and reminisce about the past. This scene begins with the image of a solitary tree surrounded by water and continues with
several nature scenes before revealing Damiel and Cassiel again. These images indicate the origins of the world and seem to convey the beginning of an epic narrative or myth. The ensuing conversation between Damiel and Cassiel also delineates the origins and development of the world: the melting of a glacier, the jumping fish, the grass that always grows back to cover the animal carcasses, and finally the emergence of man. In particular, Damiel narrates the myth of man:

Ein lange Geschichte! Die Sonne, die Blitze, der Donner oben am Himmel, und unten auf der Erde die Feuerstellen, die Luftsprünge, die Rundtänze, die Zeichen, die Schrift. Danach brach einer plötzlich aus dem Kreis und lief geradeaus. Solange er geradeaus lief und manchmal in Übermut kurvte, erschien er nur frei, und wieder haben wir mitlachen können. Aber dann, anders plötzlich, rannte er im Zickzack und die Steine flogen. Mit seiner Flucht begann eine andere Geschichte, die Geschichte der Kriege. (84)

This recollection clearly constitutes a myth more than a religious history; it is not a song of praise and the name of God is never mentioned. Rather, it is an allegorical narrative that describes the origins of the world. While Damiel’s story does not sound fascist, it is clearly a myth and, in this sense, can be linked with the Nazis own use of myths.

Another key scene in *Wings of Desire* is the one in which Marion and Damiel finally meet each other in person. This entire scene attempts to establish the beginning of a new myth. Marion walks into the bar and goes straight towards Damiel as if she already knows him. Damiel, expecting her, turns in her direction and hands her a glass with both hands as if it were an offering. She also holds the glass in both hands, takes a sip, and begins her declaration of their forthcoming joint narrative. This narrative, however, is bigger than just the two of them: “Nicht nur die ganze Stadt, die ganze Welt nimmt gerade teil an unserer Entscheidung. Wir zwei sind jetzt mehr als nur zwei. Wir verkörpern etwas. Wir sitzen auf dem Platz des Volkes, und der ganze Platz ist voll von
Leuten, die sich dasselbe wünschen wie wir” (162). Marion’s idea of a common dream sounds very much like a common myth. In fact, according to Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Jean-Luc Nancy and Brian Holmes, the power of the myth stems from “the power of the dream” (305). The mythical allusions that have appeared throughout the film, therefore, seem to culminate in this scene, which overtly establishes the beginning of a myth. It is here that the notion of a reconstitution of the folk through the creation of a new myth is most strongly enacted.

Although Wenders is able to resolve some of the ambiguities of narration on an individual level through the notion of an “other,” the problems of repetition which surface on a collective level do not seem to be solvable in the same way. Clearly, the notion of an “other” and the process of transference are not applicable here. However, it may be that the allusions to childhood and mythology in *Wings of Desire* are not an unconscious repetition but rather a proposal for a new beginning that is fully aware of the past. The creation of a myth in itself is not necessarily a negative undertaking. It is only in the context of postwar Germany that it inevitably comes across as dangerous. Yet, this begs the question: If the notion of myth is too dangerous to talk about in a German context, what is the alternative? Should the topic simply be avoided? And isn’t this also dangerous in a sense? In fact, Wenders is able to address the topic and overcome these potential dangers. First, although Damiel narrates “die Geschichte der Kriege,” he and Cassiel are clearly angels of peace. Furthermore, Wenders’s notion of folk is entirely different from that of Nazi ideology in that it is not constituted by a select group of people but, rather, embraces all people. This is most clearly seen in his cosmopolitan depiction of Berlin. Lastly, *Wings of Desire* depicts a “future myth” based solely on love,
not marriage or procreation as in right-wing ideologies: the film ends in the union of Damiel and Marion solely through love and commitment. The last half of my paper will examine in detail the way Wenders is able to overcome the problems of narration on a collective level and leave the viewer with a contemplative but optimistic vision of the future.
THE ANGELS AND THEIR MODE OF REMEMBERING

In order to make sense of these problems, and elucidate the particular way in which Wenders is able to overcome them, I will devote the next sections of this paper to an exploration of collective memory in Wings of Desire, starting with a detailed analysis of the angels. The angels are unmistakably the most visible representatives of collective memory in Wim Wenders’s film and it very quickly becomes apparent that the angels’ mode of perception is highly fragmented, consequently denying linear narrative. This is portrayed in the initial scenes of the film through the short and cursory glimpses we are given into the lives (and inner thoughts) of Berlin’s inhabitants. While these glimpses are fascinating in the way they reveal people’s inner worlds, they remain somewhat puzzling in terms of their ultimate purpose. It is not until the scene in which Damiel and Cassiel exchange their collected information in the car showroom that the spectator becomes aware of the purpose behind the angel’s voyeuristic presence in Berlin. After a moment of silence, Damiel utters a simple “und?” that prompts Cassiel to begin reading his recorded events of the day. These recordings range from simple facts of nature such as “Sonnenaufgang 7.22” to historically trivial yet individually significant moments of people’s lives, such as the following: “In den Rehbergen las ein alter Mann einem Kind aus der Odyssee vor, und der kleine Zuhörer, der dabei ganz zu blinzeln aufhörte” (19). Here it becomes clear, then, that the angels are recording history for humankind. Their
mode of “remembering” is, therefore, extremely significant in the film’s discourse on collective memory.

The manner in which the angels record history is reflected most clearly in the above-mentioned scene. Here it becomes apparent that their accounts of the day do not take the form of stories, but rather short fragments, or brief moments, of people’s lives. In both Damiel’s and Cassiel’s recordings, one observation is followed immediately by another, in a seemingly unrelated and random fashion. Cassiel’s first account takes place in the “Lilienthaler Chaussee,” the next one, in the “Postamt 44… auf dem Mariannenplatz”, followed by happenings at the “Strafanstalt Plötzensee” and the “U-Bahn-Station Zoo” (19). These moments are certainly not linked by a teleological sense of geography, time, or people. However, they are all life-affirming moments, which the angels seem to observe with wonder and delight. By focusing on these isolated moments, the angels bestow them with a much greater significance than the long narratives with which life is generally described. The angels, unlike humans, perceive life as atemporal and fragmented.5

The frustration, which many viewers feel while watching the first half of this film, is precisely due to the fact that the audience is forced to see from the angels’ perspective. In contrast to a traditional narrative, which follows a temporal and sequential unfolding of events, the viewer is forced to see the world in fragments. The way in which the angels are able to traverse space and move through walls is especially conducive to perception of a fragmented world. They can pause to listen in on a grandmother’s thoughts one

5 David Harvey also discusses the pervasive (and highly postmodern) fragmentation in Wings of Desire. However, he argues that both time and space are fragmented and this is where my argument differs from his: I view space in Wings of Desire as largely unified. This I find most plainly expressed in the long, spanning camera movements that are able to transcend barriers and, thus, create a sense of unity in the spaces of Berlin.
moment, and watch a group of children playing video games the next. By continually moving through space, therefore, the angels observe only moments rather than entire narratives. In order to record as many events from people’s lives as possible, the angels must continually move among them, pausing for no more than a minute.

What becomes evident, then, is that the angels traverse and exist in space rather than time. This emphasis on space is particularly salient in Cassiel’s recounting of the day’s events. With each recorded moment, he reveals not the time during which it occurred, but, rather, the location where it took place. Shortly thereafter, Damiel reveals his inability to experience time through his desire “bei jedem Schritt oder Windstoß ‘Jetzt’, und… ‘Jetzt’ und ‘Jetzt’ sagen [zu] können und nicht wie immer ‘seit je’ und ‘in Ewigkeit’” (20). Accordingly, the angels’ perception, as represented by the camera, is generally comprised of long, sweeping shots, which continually traverse the cityscape of Berlin. This stands in stark contrast to the traditional narratives of film, which tend to remain focused on one location, following a temporal rather than spatial series of events. Interestingly, these long takes become more and more frequent as Damiel himself becomes involved in a story and chooses to “fall” into time in order to live out this story.

Damiel’s choice to fall from an atemporal, fragmented world into a world of corporeality driven by narrative is extremely interesting in the context of this paper. First and foremost, it is an inversion of the original, religious myth. This time, rather than portraying a human yearning for the spiritual world of angels, it is the angel who desires to belong to the corporeal world of humans. The notion of duality, the contrast between the spiritual and the corporeal worlds, is represented filmically through the use of both black-and-white and color. The angels exist in a drab world of black-and-white, unable to
experience the pleasures of the senses. Damiel, however, longs to feel the physical law of gravity, and to subject himself to a bounded system. “Ich möchte… nicht mehr so ewig drüberschweben, ich möchte ein Gewicht an mir spüren, das die Grenzenlosigkeit an mir aufhebt und mich erdfest macht.“ (20) This desire to experience life becomes particularly fervent when he sees, and begins following, Marion. At this point, the spectator is presented with a series of shots depicting one location, which allows for the development of a story. It is Damiel’s own individual story that develops, however, and not a (hi)story of an entire collective. Here, the objective and fragmented view of humanity is broken off in order to allow a subjective and individual perspective to take over. This significant change in perspective, plainly indicated by the change from black-and-white to color film, effectively insists upon the distinction between individual and collective narrative. While an individual narrative can be told linearly and in one location, a collective narrative must be highly varied in regards to temporality and spatiality.

The long spatial shots, which Wenders predominantly employs throughout the first half of his film, represent not only the angels’ everyday perception of life, but also the angels’ understanding of history as a whole. Rather than seeing history as a series of events constructed into a narrative, the angels comprehend all of history as “eine einzige Katastrophe” (Benjamin 273). This perception is revealed by the camera’s movements as well as the inclusion of the World War II film footage that appears throughout the film. What is particularly fascinating about this footage is that it often shows up without any warning, as if it were simply another mundane aspect of the Berlin cityscape: one moment we see Homer walking through a desolate field in 1987 Berlin, and the next we are looking at the ruins and immediate aftermath of World War II. Again, when Cassiel
sits in the back of an old Mercedes, he sees not only present-day Berlin, but also the horrible destruction in World War II Germany. While this interjected war footage might portray an involuntary memory that powerfully brakes through into consciousness, it certainly also exemplifies the atemporal way in which the angels perceive the world. Through the angels, then, Wenders is able to portray the continual presence of the past in present-day Berlin and, in essence, depict a spatialization of temporality.

This focus on spatialization is also extremely interesting in relation to Benjamin’s theories of memory. In his *Berliner Chronik*, Benjamin chooses to record his childhood memories on a map of Berlin, rather than in the traditional autobiographical narrative. Clearly, in his desire “den Raum des Lebens – Bios – graphisch in einer Karte zu gliedern,” he is expressing his understanding of memory as spatial rather than temporal (466). As a result, he is very specific about the fact that his book is not an autobiography, despite the intention of recounting his childhood memories, because it focuses on space rather than time:

In order to locate his memories spatially, Benjamin takes his reader through the labyrinth of Berlin, exploring the places of his childhood experiences. Rather than providing his reader with a linear narrative, Benjamin depicts isolated moments of his childhood in relation to the location of their occurrences.

Benjamin’s childhood memories are, therefore, recounted very similarly to the way in which Wenders’s angels record the lives of Berlin’s inhabitants. *Berliner Chronik*
as well as *Berliner Kindheit um 1900*, which consists of a series of vignettes often titled by their locations such as “Tiergarten” and “Siegessäule,” depict Benjamin’s memories in relation to specific locations. Parallel to this is Cassiel’s account of the day’s events, which, as discussed above, are recorded in terms of location rather than time. It is easy to imagine Cassiel’s notes in the same format that Benjamin uses in his autobiographical works, whereas it would be difficult, if not impossible, to organize Cassiel’s notes into a linear narrative. Because Benjamin’s *Berliner Chronik* is organized spatially, the entire work is extremely fragmentary and his childhood memories are recorded as temporally isolated moments. The work clearly conveys Benjamin’s understanding of his life as existing all at once within the space of Berlin. His view of life is, therefore, temporally fragmented but spatially unified. This idea is faithfully mirrored in the way in which Wenders’s angels perceive the world; both the angels and Benjamin perceive the past in present spaces.

It is in the angels, then, that Wenders presents an alternative way of coming to terms with the past. In contrast to Marion’s search for a narrative whole, the angels’ spatial perception allows the past to remain fragmented and, thus, unaltered. As the angels represent a kind of collective memory, this perception is extremely significant in relation to a nation’s collective history. In essence, Wenders is portraying the necessity of allowing history to remain fragmented. Similarly, Jean-François Lyotard argues, “the grand narrative has lost its credibility” in contemporary, postmodern society (37). In other words, the perception of history as fragmented retains the truth, which is eliminated through the creation of a master narrative. The angels, therefore, bring to light an entirely different perspective on storytelling and history. Since Homer has thus far been discussed
solely in terms of storytelling, I will devote the next section to a closer analysis of this character. In particular, I will explore the kind of historical perception that he advocates. Is he searching for a master narrative or does he also maintain that history can only be perceived in fragments?
HOMER AS ANGEL OF HISTORY?

The character of Homer is extremely significant in the film’s discourse on collective memory. He is particularly interesting because he is not an angel, yet he is clearly not one of the multitudes of Berlin’s inhabitants either. In fact, his special status is conveyed in the first moments of his appearance. The viewer is introduced to Homer in the library, which itself has significant meaning as a heavenly or other-worldly realm, but, even more importantly, the camera focuses on Homer as he is ascending the library stairs. As Wings of Desire is a film which largely focuses on spaces (vertical as well as horizontal), the spatial location of a figure is extremely significant. The “in-between” place, which Homer occupies in this first scene, reveals his status in relation to the angels and Berlin’s inhabitants. In addition to these visual clues, the audio track simultaneously asserts the same idea: Homer’s thoughts, unlike all previously heard thoughts, center not on himself, but, rather, on deeper notions of history, memory, and the collective.

Homer’s thoughts also reveal his role as storyteller and, therefore, his intentions to record history for mankind. In this sense, Homer’s intentions are not very different from the angels’ own purpose in Berlin. As previously discussed, however, Homer’s designation as storyteller implies a focus on narrative, rather than a fragmented view of the past as is represented by the angels. Perhaps a closer analysis of his mode of remembering is necessary in order to fully understand Homer’s role as recorder of

---

6 Interestingly, this “in-between” space depicts Homer moving up and Damiel moving down, which might be understood as a foreshadowing of Damiel’s “fall” to mortality.
history. Certainly, his affinity to the angels would seem to demand further investigation before simply dismissing his desire to record history as impossible. This section will, therefore, take a closer look at Homer’s particular mode of remembering as well as the mode of recording practiced by the historical figure of Homer.

The second scene in which Homer appears is very telling in terms of Homer’s own memories of the past. As he sits down to leaf through August Sander’s collection of photographs entitled “Menschen des 20. Jahrhunderts,” documentary film footage again portrays the horrors of World War II. Here, the images seem to depict Homer’s own memories as he recollects people and events of the past century. It is highly significant, then, that these memories do not take the form of a narrative, but, to the contrary, are entirely fragmented. Throughout the scene, Homer’s thoughts revolve around notions of storytelling; however, his memories, as represented by visual shots, belie the presence of any story or narrative. This inconsistency between audio and visual, which is found throughout the film, is highly significant in Wenders’s discourse on memory and narrative, and will receive further attention towards the end of this paper. Clearly, though, this scene expresses the similarities between the angels’ and Homer’s mode of remembering.

The fragmentary nature of Homer’s memories becomes clear, not only in this library scene, but also in subsequent scenes. As Homer wanders through an open field searching for the Potsdamer Platz, the viewer becomes aware that Homer’s memory is missing pieces of information. Certainly, these absences result in a fragmented view of history; if Homer had constructed a comprehensive narrative of history, these absences would not exist. (As previously discussed, a story or narrative tends to perform that
function of filling in absences with information.) When Homer thinks, “Ich kann den Potsdamer Platz nicht finden! Nein, ich mein, hier… Das kann er doch nicht sein,” he betrays his own confusion and lack of knowledge about the past. (58) However, as the angels themselves clearly demonstrate, history cannot be written into a comprehensive narrative but, rather, must remain fragmented. This notion becomes especially clear in regards to the horrors of World War II, which plainly belie the possibility of narrative (and yet are no less powerful for lack of a narrative to explain them). Also, Homer’s fragmented memories are interesting in light of Benjamin’s understanding of storytelling, which also advocates a kind of fragmentation within storytelling; this means that instead of spelling out every detail of a story, the storyteller leaves room for the listener to interpret and even alter the story for himself. Homer’s perception of history would then correspond perfectly, since it is filled with gaps and, therefore, remains fragmented.

Although Homer is named after a writer of narratives, it is important to note that the historical figure of Homer recorded history in a particular kind of narrative form: namely, epic poetry. This brings to light the significance of epic poetry as a recorder of history in an oral context. First and foremost, the space economy of poetry facilitates transmission to memory. In addition, the oral form of epic poetry allows for a setting of a direct, returned gaze from witness to witnessed. As noted by Vila and Kuzniar, Wenders’s Homer “recognizes, unlike the angels, that the witnessed also must become witness to his work” (61). The oral, poetic form thus accommodates the linearly impossible task of telling the story of mankind. Whereas prose narrative generally results
in a tightly sealed story without any gaps or absences, poetical narrative is able to leave these gaps open and, often, leave individual fragments as just that.\textsuperscript{7}

Both Homer and the angels convey a mode of memory and perception that is not only fragmentary but, in fact, highly poetic. Indeed, the entire film is visual poetry. The difference, however, between Homer and the angels lies in the fact that the angels can ultimately only witness human history. They can record an infinite number of observations in their notebooks, but in the end they are not accessible to anyone. Here the crux of Homer’s character is revealed: it is he who must ultimately record and, in fact, \textit{tell} mankind’s history. Only Homer traverses the middle ground between humans and angels, so that he shares the angels’ perception of history, yet is able to transmit it to humans as well. In a sense, Homer is the intermediary between angels and humans, perhaps even serving as a messianic figure for humanity. It is, therefore, highly significant that, like the angels, Homers communicates the impossibility of a complete, wholistic narrative and, instead, perceives (and inevitably tells) a fragmented history.

\textsuperscript{7} While there are significant similarities between Wenders’s Homer and the historical figure of Homer, there are also substantial differences: most notably, the historical figure was a writer of \textit{wars}, whereas Wenders’s Homer is striving to write an epic of \textit{peace}. 

37
CINEMA AS COLLECTIVE MEMORY

As it is now clear that Wenders advocates a fragmented understanding of history, the next section of my paper will analyze the particular way in which this history is to be presented. More precisely, Wenders has dismissed traditional narrative as a means of depicting history in postmodernity; thus, he turns to film as the postmodern storyteller. I will, therefore, continue my analysis by examining the medium of film as a repository for collective memory. According to Tony Kaes, “cinematic representations have influenced – indeed shaped – our perspectives on the past; they function for us today as a technological memory bank” (ix). In order to understand how this notion is represented in *Wings of Desire*, I will investigate the meta-filmic dimensions of Wenders’s film. How is film depicted as the storyteller of the postmodern era? Moreover, how would Benjamin’s theory of art respond to this idea?

Wenders’s highly complex film examines notions of collective memory and national identity in various ways and on multiple levels. The film is openly self-reflexive in its portrayal of a film within a film and in its numerous metaphors of film. In addition, *Wings of Desire* ends with the suggestion of film itself as resolution to the problems of storytelling. It becomes apparent throughout, that it is not just Homer who is a storyteller, but also Wenders himself. In fact, through the meta-filmic dimensions of *Wings of Desire*, Wenders presents the answer to Homer’s search: the epic of peace can be created through the medium of film. However, only a particular kind of film is able to achieve
this and the discourse on film itself within *Wings of Desire* indicates the kind of Brechtian notions necessary in its realization.

Wenders’s depiction of a film within a film clearly conveys his sentiments about the status of film in the postmodern era while taking into account Benjaminian theories of film. The making of a World War II movie within Wenders’s own film is significant in several ways. First, and most obviously, it establishes film as a storyteller of history. More importantly, however, it represents a particular kind of movie: namely, a Hollywood movie. As an American movie starring the celebrity Peter Falk, it is clearly stigmatized as a commercial film and is, therefore, set in contrast to Wenders’s own artwork. In fact, Wenders’s critique of this Hollywood film immediately becomes evident as we learn of the film’s storyline: it is not only a World War II story, but a World War II detective story. The reason for this, in Peter Falk’s words, is that “people like detective stories. So they use an excuse to make a detective story” (66). Clearly, this film is not a thoughtful work of art but simply a medium of entertainment to be consumed in a “state of distraction” (Benjamin 239). Peter Falk, perhaps as a mouthpiece for Wenders’s own opinion, declares the film to be “dopey” and leaves it at that.

Further evidence for Wenders’s critique of Hollywood film is seen in the character of Peter Falk himself. He is clearly representative of Benjamin’s “cult of the movie star” since he is recognized everywhere he goes as the fictive character Colombo. According to Benjamin, a film actor inevitably loses his aura; consequently, “film responds to the shriveling of the aura with an artificial build-up of the ‘personality’ outside the studio” (231). In this sense, the group of young boys who pass by Peter Falk do not see his “unique aura,” but simply the made-up personality given him by the film.
industry. Wenders thus critiques the film within a film as a Hollywood commodity rather than an original work of art. It parallels his own film as a warning against the dangers of film, while he simultaneously attempts to overcome these dangers in his work.

Through metaphors of film Wenders further encourages his viewers to reflect on the nature of film. In particular, the metaphor of circus as film comments on the characteristics, which these two phenomena have in common: most notably, the illusion of reality and coherence. The parallels between circus and film are suggested most directly by the circus’s name: Alekan. By naming the circus after well-known cinematographer Henri Alekan (who is also the cinematographer of *Wings of Desire*), Wenders effectively alludes to an affinity between the two. Clearly, the magic associated with the circus also appears in the work of cinematography, which allows images to be perceived as unmediated reality. In both film and the circus, mechanisms are hidden in order to produce the semblance of reality; moreover, the audience happily allows itself to believe and be immersed in this “reality.” Children are particularly delighted by both art forms, yet adults continue to be engaged by them as well.

Further evidence of the parallels drawn between film and circus is plentiful. The shot in which the Alekan circus is first revealed is particularly beautiful in this respect: by moving the camera through a tunnel, the first glimpse of the circus is presented in a kind of frame. In fact, the circus is always inherently framed by the circus tent. Similarly, film itself is always framed by the camera and, therefore, presents an exclusive reality. The circus and film are both contained within a certain arena, in which, as alluded to above, a particular reality exists. A suspension of disbelief is required in both arenas in order to become immersed in its particular reality. Film is only held together by an illusion of

---

8 In his film *Stand der Dinge*, Wenders similarly critiques Hollywood cinema.
unity despite the undeniable fact that it consists of infinitesimal fragments: each individual shot is made up of even smaller units – frames – which pass by our eyes so quickly we are unaware of their existence. The circus similarly relies on optical illusions to produce pleasure in its audience. Therefore, by pointing out the parallels between circus and film, Wenders reminds his viewers that film is itself a kind of illusion and encourages them to view it critically. Similarly, though perhaps less subtly, Brecht encouraged his audience to engage critically with his plays.

This notion brings to light several other subtleties of the film and, in particular, helps to unravel the strange, mythical ending discussed extensively in the first half of this paper. What initially appears to be a reversion into the typical Hollywood storyline might now be seen as a prolonged critique thereof. Certainly, Marion’s character in a red dress and lipstick comes across as very dramatic in comparison to her presence in previous scenes. Not only has Wenders moved from black-and-white to color, but at this point the color becomes even more intense, clearly signaling a change. Moreover, Marion’s and Daniel’s movements are both very heavy and exaggerated as they move towards each other and share a drink out of a wine glass. As discussed previously, their actions and words are portrayed in very mythical terms; however, their dramatic and exaggerated acting simultaneously offers a critique of the scene. In a sense, the cinematography and editing in this scene can be understood as producing the Brechtian concept of “Verfremdung.” It is, therefore, precisely this complexity and constant tension, which allows Wenders to offer hope for a new beginning in postwar Germany. His constant recognition of the dangers involved in such an endeavor let him move forward without unconsciously repeating the past.
In fact, Wenders himself is undoubtedly aware of the need to recognize these dangers as he elucidates in his book *The Act of Seeing: Texte und Gespräche*. “Filme sind etwas Gefährliches, für den, der sie macht, genauso wie für den, der sie sich anschaut. Aber wenn man die Gefahren kennt, kann man sie auch lenken“ (44). In other words, as long as one is aware of the dangers involved in storytelling and filmmaking, these dangers can be overcome. In this way, film can become the postmodern storyteller. In fact, film *must* serve as storyteller of the postmodern era for “womit sonst kann man heute erzählen als mit Bildern?” (49). Despite the fact that images can clearly be manipulated (as Wenders and the other New German Cinema directors are acutely aware of), Wenders believes that “die Geschichten sind immer ein einziges Manipulieren. Bilder sind deswegen… mehr fähig zur Wahrheit als Geschichten” (60). For this reason, Wenders believes that storytelling must exist in a filmic medium.

Benjamin’s critique of film would seem to strongly disagree with this notion: certainly, his distracted viewer of cinema would not allow for the successful communication of a story by appropriating it as one’s own. However, it has been made clear that a critical audience is essential in Wenders’s understanding of film as storyteller and this enables him to evade the problems that Benjamin elucidated regarding the medium of film. Wenders clearly agrees that a commercialized, Hollywood movie with its distracted viewer cannot serve as storyteller for the postmodern era. Conversely, *Wings of Desire*, when viewed critically, successfully serves as storyteller through its use of fragmentation and awareness of its own limitations. In this manner, it is able to offer hope for a new beginning even in the scarred cityscape of postwar Berlin. The last words of the film – “nous sommes embarqués” – reveal the new position of cinema as
postmodern storyteller (169). Thus, Wenders’s has created a film that not only reveals but also beautifully demonstrates cinema’s role as storyteller.
THE FRAGMENTARINESS OF SPACE IN WINGS OF DESIRE

As Wings of Desire is a film largely concerned with the spaces of Berlin, the last section of this paper will explore the particular kinds of city spaces that Wenders depicts. Clearly, the innovative camera techniques that are used in the film are not only visually beautiful but also deeply meaningful. In fact, and as this section will make clear, Wenders uses the spaces in his film to further portray notions of narration and memory; in other words, the physical spaces depicted in Wings of Desire can be understood as the physical counterpart to the film’s discourse on narration and memory. However, more than simply a metaphorical depiction of these ideas, the spaces also further bring to light the significant role of cinema in the postmodern era. The last section of this paper will, therefore, present the culmination of all previously discussed theories within the spaces of Berlin, and the resulting viewpoint of film as postmodern storyteller.

In the initial scenes of Wings of Desire, it quickly becomes evident that the camera is portraying the perspective of the angels; furthermore, the broadly sweeping birds-eye view of Berlin designates their perspective as objective and overarching. The space depicted by the camera in these scenes is, therefore, entirely unlike the space in which the inhabitants of Berlin reside. The angels view the city of Berlin from above and, therefore, perceive it on a macroscopic level. As the camera begins sweeping down towards the streets of Berlin, it transitions to a microscopic perspective in which individual people are observed. Thus, these initial shots are exceptionally significant in
setting up the film’s discourse on perspective and space. The rest of the film will depict constant shifts and transitions between these two modes of perception and, thereby, explore the tensions between these spaces within Berlin.

The continual variation of distance and closeness in *Wings of Desire* is particularly interesting in light of Benjamin’s discourse on aura and film. In his essay, „Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit“, Benjamin defines aura as „einmalige Erscheinung einer Ferne, so nah sie sein mag“ (15).9 This interplay between distance and closeness, which Benjamin identifies, is clearly significant in the medium of film. The fragmentary nature of film easily allows for the juxtaposition of distant and close perspectives, and Benjamin himself elucidates this point:

Der Maler beobachtet in seiner Arbeit eine natürliche Distanz zum Gegebenen, der Kameramann dagegen dringt tief ins Gewebe der Gegebenheit ein. Die Bilder, die beide davontragen, sind ungeheuer verschieden. Das des Malers ist ein totales, das des Kameramanns ein vielfältig zerstückeltes, dessen Teile sich nach einem neuen Gesetze zusammen finden. So ist die filmische Darstellung der Realität für den heutigen Menschen darum die unvergleichlich bedeutungsvollere, weil sie den apparatfreien Aspekt der Wirklichkeit, den er vom Kunstwerk zu fordern berechtigt ist, gerade auf Grund ihrer intensivsten Durchdringung mit der Apparatur gewährt. (32)

According to Benjamin, then, film is groundbreaking precisely because it is able to penetrate reality rather than simply view it from a distance as occurs in the medium of painting. Wenders’ movement between spaces of distance and closeness therefore achieves dialectical perception, in a way that is only possible through the filmic medium.

In order to further elucidate Benjamin’s notion of “Durchdringung” in regards to film, I will turn to Siegfried Kracauer’s theory of film. In his book, *Theory of Film: The
Redemption of Physical Reality, Kracauer similarly elucidates the unique ability of film to penetrate reality. He argues that film does not only record reality, but, in fact, goes even further and “reveal[s] physical reality” to us (ix). There are certain things, which we do not observe in everyday life, and, according to Kracauer, film serves specifically that function of rendering visible these normally invisible things. While there are many different kinds of “unseen things,” the ones most relevant to this paper are what Kracauer calls “blind spots of the mind,” and “phenomena overwhelming consciousness” (57). As “elemental catastrophes, the atrocities of war, acts of violence and terror, sexual debauchery and death are events which tend to overwhelm consciousness,” (57), film’s ability in making these phenomena visible is clearly significant in Wenders’s postwar Berlin setting. Furthermore, the empty spaces within Berlin, which Wenders’s continually focuses on, might be understood as “blind spots of the mind.” As our perception generally focuses on forms rather than emptiness, the foregrounding of empty spaces within the bustling metropolis of Berlin brings to light a different mode of vision. In this way, then, Wenders uses the medium of film to render visible and, in fact, strongly emphasize, the things that one is generally not aware of in everyday life.

When the angels descend into the streets of Berlin and take a closer look into the reality of everyday life, they are often drawn into the empty spaces within the city. These spaces, generally hidden from the distanced, objective birds-eye point of view, become increasingly visible as the angels wander through the streets of Berlin. Even more importantly, the angels tend to pause longer in these spaces than on the crowded highways or subway trains: while the angels initially move through Berlin without stopping, Cassiel pauses to stay with Homer in an empty field, and Damiel pauses to
watch a trapeze artist in an empty tent. Another extremely significant “empty space” in the film is the sky itself. As this is the realm where the angels are predominantly present, the angels’ affinity to empty spaces quickly becomes apparent. Throughout the film, the angels return almost magnetically to the top of the Siegessäule or the Gedächtniskirche, seemingly in order to rest in the open sky.

Within Berlin, these empty spaces tend to exist around the Berlin wall, a kind of no-man’s-land, and are persistent reminders of the destruction of World War II. These are, therefore, spaces of tension. They are spaces that exist in a state of limbo: without any processes of reconstruction they have no future, yet missing any kind of physical structures, they appear to have no past. In this sense, these forgotten places serve as spaces of repressed memories. This is clearly exemplified in Homer’s search for the Potsdamer Platz, which I’ve extensively discussed in previous parts of this paper. Homer strolls through the empty fields searching for this place as if he were unaware of the circumstances surrounding its disappearance. As his cognitive skills otherwise appear to be in good condition, this gap in his memory must be attributed to repression. According to Freud’s theories, it is not unusual for the trauma of war to result in repressed memories. However, the angels are clearly not subject to this process and are, in a sense, the keepers of these repressed memories. These “empty spaces” are not empty at all through the eyes of the angels, but, rather, are filled with memories of the past; in other words, by virtue of being empty, these spaces paradoxically recall a forgotten past. Clearly, the spatialized, atemporal perception of the angels goes hand-in-hand with this idea as it persistently sees the past in present spaces.
The notion that the film’s empty spaces exist as Freudian spaces of repressed memories becomes especially interesting in light of Wender’s circus metaphor. The circus is located in a large, empty field and, if this field is a space of repressed memory, one might wonder what role the circus itself plays in this space. In fact, the circus apparently serves to fill the empty space with fiction, magic, and illusion; it attempts to replace the lack of memory with memories of excitement and fantasy. There is a very revealing shot sequence, which directly illustrates this idea: the viewer is presented with a scene inside the circus tent, which is filled with laughing, delighted children, and immediately thereafter, is presented with a shot depicting the quiet and empty scene outside of the tent. Whereas the scene inside of the tent is filled with shouting and laughter, the outside scene depicts the complete silence of the empty lot, thereby portraying the circus as a space of temporary fantasy and illusion. As the Alekan circus functions as a metaphor for film, this notion also has significant implications for the role of film in society. In this sense, Wenders is using space to yet again warn his viewers of the potential dangers of (popular) film: the circus and the filmic medium might appear to replace repressed memories but this is only a temporary illusion.10

However, more than simply serving as Freudian spaces of repression, the empty spaces within Wenders’s Berlin also cinematically depict the films discourse on memory and narration. As previously noted, gaps and absences are necessary in the process of narration (both on the individual and collective level, as represented by Marion and Homer respectively). By focusing on empty spaces within the city, Wenders represents a physical counterpart to the notion of absences in narration. In this way, he metaphorically

10 Similarly, Wenders depicts the making of a film as an attempt to fill the empty space of a World War II army barracks.
emphasizes the role of absences in the process of narration: namely, their role in leaving room for interpretation. According to Wenders, “Filme sind sowohl immer über das, wovon sie handeln, als auch über das, wovon sie nicht handeln. Die Abwesenheit in einem Film ist auch immer gleich das Thema des Films“ (67). The idea that the absence of a film is exactly that which the film is about clearly plays into the concept of interpretation. It is precisely the absences that allow for different interpretations, which in turn define the experience of the film for each individual audience member.

Furthermore, not only do the empty spaces in Wenders’s film serve to stimulate interpretation, but the presentation of a spatial narrative itself encourages interpretation. *Wings of Desire* is a film that strives to depict three-dimensional space. It does so, not only through the use of vertical as well as horizontal camera movement, but also through the length of individual shots. Because the camera moves very slowly and the editing is slow-paced throughout the film, a great feeling of space is created. Unlike contemporary Hollywood cinema, which tends to jump from one moment to another, Wenders’s takes the time to capture each object as fully as possible. This kind of a spatial narrative naturally invites, and even demands, interpretation from the viewer, because it leaves ample time for contemplation without simply providing one explanation after another.

Wenders’s focus on “Abwesenheit” and various spatial dimensions certainly also enables his films to become the cinematic poetry they are. The fragmentation and absences within *Wings of Desire* undoubtedly create the very poetic mood of the film, in which not all details are defined, nor all explanations given, but, rather, a contemplative and interpretative state of mind is called forth. In this sense, absences function here the same way that they do in poetry. As the audio track of the film consists mostly of Peter
Handke’s poetry, Wenders effectively parallels this verbal poetry with his visual poetry. Consequently, Wenders film exemplifies Pasolini’s notion that “the language of cinema is fundamentally a ‘language of poetry’” (172). Wings of Desire is a film that candidly moves away from linear narrative, and towards abstractness and open contemplation.
CONCLUSION

As a postmodern contemplation of memory, history, and identity, Wenders’s film, *Wings of Desire*, makes use of Benjamin’s theories in an attempt to portray the isolation prevalent in a storyless society as well as the need to overcome this. While Homer represents the act of storytelling on a collective level, Marion does so on a personal level and specifically portrays the relation between narrative and self-identity. The fact that she begins her own love story at the end of the movie seems to suggest a kind of optimism and hope for the future. By placing her past memories into an integrated personal narrative, she is able to construct a unified self-identity and a happiness that would otherwise not be possible. The worth of a life story is also portrayed in Damiel’s choice of narrative (and meaning) over immortality (and truth). By giving up his angel’s wings, Damiel indicates the importance of being able to create one’s own narrative and together with someone else “ein unsterbliches gemeinsames Bild [zeugen]” (167). The idea of creating a story together is particularly important because it reflects the need for an “other” in order to work through and self-reflect in a progressive manner. This directly mirrors Freud’s theories of memory and *Trauerarbeit*, which are predicated on the process of transference through an “other.” On an individual level, therefore, the combination of Benjamin’s storytelling and Freud’s transference seem to offer redemption in a fragmented world.
On a collective level, however, Freud’s theories of memory elucidate the possibility of a repetition compulsion, which might manifest itself as a result of these narrative strategies. In this sense, Wenders’s allusions to the lost innocence of childhood, mythical origins, and the need for a new beginning might suggest a reassertion of the circumstances of the original trauma. Specifically, the combination of the mythic storyteller, the childhood poem, and the plea for a new beginning seem to indicate this possibility. However, Wenders’s highly complex film proves to be self-aware and is, in fact, consciously foregrounding these problems. Particularly through his use of metafilmic and metaphorical portrayals, Wenders is able to reveal the potential problems of his film and thereby overcome them. Throughout the film he uncovers the dangers of Hollywood cinema in its traditional narrative depictions that leave nothing unexplained. This is conveyed especially clearly through the circus metaphor, which indicates the illusionistic inclination of Hollywood’s seamless narratives, presenting stories as tightly knit and coherent wholes. Wenders’s own cinema takes a completely different path by emphasizing fragmentariness, contemplation, and interpretation. As Benjamin himself elucidated in various essays, these defining characteristics are necessary in the creation of a meaningful story in that they allow for shared Erfahrung and understanding between people.

Throughout Wenders’s poetic exploration of these issues, he identifies the medium of film as a repository of collective memory and, thus, the postmodern storyteller. Along with Benjamin and Kracauer, Wenders understands the unique ability of film to penetrate reality and, for this reason, sees it as the medium of fragmented, postmodern storytelling. Even more than its ability to mimic both visual and audio
aspects of everyday reality, film is able to depict the things that exist all around us but
tend to remain unseen. These “unseen things” are most obviously brought to the forefront
in Wenders’s focus on empty spaces: as in all aspects of his film, Wenders chooses to
highlight the “blind spots” of our minds and bring them into consciousness. While these
spaces of absence openly acknowledge the difficulty in finding answers about the past,
they also serve as the physical portrayal of the absence of explanation throughout
Wenders’s film. In fact, in this sense, *Wings of Desire* is a film that steadfastly denies
answers. In the face of a city that architecturally demands answers, Wenders rejects this
possibility and, instead, opens up a space for contemplation and individual interpretation.

While my paper has dealt solely with these spaces of absence in regards to *Wings
of Desire*, a glance at Wenders’s other films certainly reveals the presence of similar
spaces. *Far away so close!* continues Wenders’s contemplative study of Berlin but this
time the camera focuses predominantly on East Berlin and offers a much more negatively
tinged portrayal of the, by now, unified city. Nevertheless, empty spaces such as the open
sky as well as the ruined and abandoned buildings below still evoke the same
contemplative mood conveyed in *Wings of Desire*. Another of Wenders’s city films,
*Lisbon Story*, depicts an entirely different cityscape with an entirely different past. As in
*Wings of Desire*, though, particular scenes are filmed in black-and-white and, thereby,
compellingly evoke a sense of the past. Furthermore, these scenes are filmed by use of an
antiquated, hand-cranking camera and are deeply reminiscent of early silent films. The
particular way in which Lisbon’s spaces are photographed, therefore, reveals a palpable
nostalgia in the way it locates and cites the past in present spaces. Even Wenders’s
American films largely focus on empty spaces and make use of their remarkable ability to
evoke the past. In *Paris, Texas*, the protagonist persistently desires to find, and return to, his past and does so by searching out the empty places on his map: most obviously, the otherwise insignificant town of Paris, Texas where he was allegedly conceived. Wenders comes back to this idea in his more recent film, *Don’t Come Knocking*, in which the protagonist again rides into the desert searching for his past and finds it in the town of Butte, Montana. Once a thriving city, Butte is now one of the many ghost towns strewn across the American West in which the palpable emptiness almost hauntingly recalls the past. Thus, by focusing on these highly significant yet often overlooked spaces, Wenders is able to create an extraordinary and deeply moving “cinema of poetry.”
BIBLIOGRAPHY


