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“Wings of Desire”

“Wings of Desire” is about two angels who watch over the humans and one decides being immortal is no longer satisfying and wants to experience life. Damiel (Bruno Ganz) discovers an acrobat, Marion (Solveig Dommartin), and realizes he wants to be with her and to do so he is more than willing to become a mortal. It isn’t until he meets Peter Falk (playing himself) who helps justify (or at least helps the audience justify) his decision to become mortal and eventually seek Marion.

The film is predominantly presented in black and white. I originally thought the color was for when the perspective view changed from the angels (Damiel and Cassel (Otto Sander)) to the humans. Although there is a scene when Damiel observes Marion in her trailer after finding out the circus is closing down. Towards the end of the scene, it switches from black and white to color and we are still seeing Marion from Damiel’s perspective. Another scene Cassiel is observing an immigrant woman at a laundry mat. Towards the end of this short scene, it turns to color. Wim Wenders says, “The film is shot in black and white, blossoming into color only when the angels perceive the realities of humankind.” Based on the couple of scenes in color, yet still from the angel’s point of view, this makes sense. Color in Damiel’s and Cassiel’s scenes show they are starting to understand human feelings. It appears others have interpreted this differently. For example, on IMDB it reads, “The Angels cannot see color. Therefore, when the shot is from the angels point of view, the shot is black and white, and when the shot is from a human point of view, it is in color.” On Wikipedia, the thought is the movie is in black and white and when the angels are not looking or present, it is in color. Both of these, I think are incorrect. Towards the end of the movie, Marion is practicing and Damiel is helping. Cassiel is there observing in a cloud of black and white. The black and white is used here to show he is not able to experience life as Marion and Damiel do. In this movie, black and white represents a muted feeling or understanding the angels had on the humans’ world. When Damiel switched over to being a mortal, scenes were in color and this color represents the richness and feelings of human life. These were things the angels were not able to understand.

I thought this was a good story and had great cinematography. The use of black and white was appropriate. The black and white used to represent the angel’s lack of humanity was nicely done. As a viewer, it was fun trying to figure out why all of the sudden we were seeing color and then switching back into black and white. The scene locations seemed real. The filming of the actual Berlin Wall was prohibited so replica was built and used. I didn’t know this until I found the article about it. The settings fit the struggle of the characters. The use of imagery was well done where there were a number of shots with wings and they represented the angel’s wings. For example, the start of a shot shows a wing filling the frame and then Cassiel walks into frame and stops at the other end of the frame. The spot he stops at shows the background wings in a postion where Cassiel’s wings would be if he had them.

The film was shot in German with a little bit of English used when we see Peter Falk. There were subtitles throughout the film for the German. I’m sure the poetry was a bit lost in the English translation of the “Song of Childhood.” Overall, the subtitles worked (yellow text at he bottom mostly, the text didn’t get lost in the images). It was a bit tricky to absorb the film in the first viewing. The English viewer has to concentrate on the text dialog to keep up with the story. But in doing so, it was difficult to take in the images. A second viewing helped and I was able to spend more time on the camera use and the images themselves. The English was a nice break from the German. I think the combination of English and German helped the angel characters. It shows they do know everything (they easily could understand English), yet they don’t know what it is like to be alive.

Wim Wenders had an interesting character’s point-of-view shot. He used it to show the audience what the character was seeing, and then have the character slip into the shot to present an audience point-of-view. This was also reversed where the audience sees the scene with the character in it and then the character slips out and the view turns into what the character is seeing. It was interesting to have the point-of-view passed from the audience’s view point and then to character’s or from the character’s to the audience’s. I thought this technique really helped to engage the viewer.

Overall, I thought this was a very enjoyable film. It had a nice story. The director used clever points-of-view to draw the audience into the film. The editing supported the story telling. Having Peter Falk play himself and portraying an angel that has converted over to being a mortal made the story more plausible and makes the viewer reflect on their own ideas about the world.

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