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“To Be Continued.” History in Wim Wenders’s *Wings of Desire* and Thomas Brasch’s *Domino*

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“Berlin ist das letzte. Der Rest ist Vorgeschichte. Sollte Geschichte stattfinden, wird Berlin der Anfang sein.”

—Heiner Müller

Thomas Brasch’s *Domino* (1982) and Wim Wenders’s *Wings of Desire* (*Der Himmel über Berlin*, 1987) are films about present-day Berlin as a site of history. There are many aspects that link the two cinematic investigations of historical memory: both films are highly complex and enigmatic aesthetic constructs. Both feature exquisite black-and-white cinematography (sometimes alternating with color). In both films, the investigation of historical memory takes the form of an homage to a beloved woman, Katharina Thalbach (Brasch’s Lisa) and Solveig Dommartin (Wenders’s Marion).¹ Moreover, both films are highly self-reflective in their multiple thematization of art, literature, theater, and film making. But most important of all, the two films seem to me to encapsulate specific moments in German history. I am proposing to view the two films from the perspective of Walter Benjamin’s notion of history as expressed in his “Theses on the Concept of History” of 1940 to which they seem to be indebted and to which, for reasons outlined below, they offer different responses.

Siegessäule

In Walter Benjamin’s recollections *Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert* of 1934 one of the lesser known landmarks of Berlin assumes a prominent role: the statue of the goddess of victory, known as the “Siegessäule.” The monument depicts an angel resting on ornaments wrought from the melted metal of canons used in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-71.² To Benjamin, the statue of the angel evokes the patriotic celebrations of the decisive defeat of the

French at Sedan. In Benjamin's memories, the monument is associated with premonitions of the end of history:

Was konnte denn nach Sedan kommen? Mit der Niederlage der Franzosen schien die Weltgeschichte in ihr glorreiches Grab gesunken, über dem diese Säule die Stele war und auf das die Siegesallee mündete.³

The "Siegestsäule" commemorates both the triumphs of Prussia and the unification of the German "Kaiserreich" in 1871. Benjamin, writing in his exile in France, situates the German patriotic emblem at the graveside of history, where it marks the fears associated with the resurgence of nationalism in the form of German fascism. At one point in Thomas Brasch's film *Domino* of 1982, the protagonists Lisa (played by Katharina Thalbach) and Zollner (played by Hanns Zischler) find themselves riding around the "Siegestsäule" on a motorbike. In the wintry night, the statue assumes a gloomy and overpowering presence. In the harsh topography of Cold War Berlin, "Siegesallee," the boulevard that leads to the monument, is truncated by the Berlin Wall, leaving the characters to encircle the symbolic site in a gesture of stagnation. Five years later, the "Siegestsäule" is one of the resting places of the angels that populate the skies in Wim Wenders's film *Wings of Desire*.⁴

Wenders's film of 1987, cowritten with Peter Handke, offers a compelling view of Berlin as a city in which the present reflects constellations of the German past.⁵ In many ways, it is reminiscent of Brasch's film. While Wim Wenders is acclaimed internationally as one of the most important directors of the New German Cinema, the films of Thomas Brasch, the poet and playwright from the GDR, who came to West Germany in the wake of the Biermann affair in 1976, are little known even among specialists on German film.

So far Thomas Brasch has directed three full-length feature films, which are closely interrelated with the work of Wim Wenders. The first film *Engel aus Eisen* of 1981 examines the activities of a criminal gang in the political chaos surrounding the Berlin blockade of 1948-49. It is based on an actual criminal case, that of the so-called Gladow gang led by Werner Gladow, a young petty thief, and Gustav Völpel, a former Nazi hangman. The "angels of iron" of the title are the supply planes that ensure the economic survival of the western part of Berlin. These "angels" make possible the short moment of anarchic wish fulfillment for a group of would-be gangsters. When the blockade is lifted, order is restored, signalling the return of a repressive regime of justice. The book version of the film stresses the connection between the disappearance of the supply planes and the restoration of order: a postscript evokes the legends surrounding Werner Gladow, who was sentenced to death in 1950. The text

ends with the description of a gesture of Lucie Gladow, Werner's mother, who is said to point to the empty skies over Berlin. It is likely that this reference to the "leeren Himmel über Berlin"⁶ inspired, at least in part, the German title of Wenders's *Der Himmel über Berlin*.⁷

Brasch's second film *Domino* of 1982 centers around a successful actress who undergoes a psychological crisis as the safe moorings of her professional existence slip away amidst signs of an impending war. Alongside Hanns Zischler, the actor who played the protagonist of Wenders's first full-length film *Summer in the City* (1970) and of his later *Im Lauf der Zeit* (*Kings of the Road*, 1975), it features Bernhard Wicki, who was to play in Wenders's *Paris, Texas* in 1983. Brasch's third film *Der Passagier: Welcome to Germany* (1988), created in collaboration with writer Jurek Becker, follows an American survivor of the Holocaust who returns to Germany to direct a film about the circumstances of his own escape from the death camps. Like Wenders's *Wings of Desire*, in which Peter Falk plays the role of an American detective in a film-within-the-film, it pits an internationally known American actor, Tony Curtis, against a cast composed mainly of German players. Wenders was involved as an artistic adviser in this film project, which occupied Brasch for over three years from 1985 to 1988 and which was coproduced by Wenders's company "Road Movies."⁸

Engel

The skies over Berlin in Wim Wenders's film *Wings of Desire* of 1987 are populated with angels that evoke not only Rilke's *Duino Elegies*,⁹ but also the writings of Walter Benjamin. Towards the beginning of the film, when the angels Damiel and Cassiel visit the library, they hear among the many internal voices of readers the voice of a woman:

Walter Benjamin kaufte 1921 Paul Klees Aquarell *Angelus Novus*. . . In seiner letzten Schrift *Über den Begriff der Geschichte* (1940), interpretierte er das Bild als Allegorie des Rückblicks auf die Geschichte.¹⁰

As is well known, the angel depicted in Klee's picture *Angelus Novus* was allegorically interpreted by Benjamin as the "angel of history" in his ninth thesis on the concept of history.¹¹ In Wenders's film, the Benjaminian association is later reinforced visually: at one point, Cassiel unsuccessfully tries to prevent a young man from committing suicide. Despite Cassiel's efforts, the young man jumps from the top of West Berlin's "Europacenter." In a gesture of sympathy and despair, Cassiel is seen to jump from the statue of the "Siegesengel" in the manner of the young man. A nightmarish sequence of quick images follows in

which short glimpses of modern urban alienation (a tramp, a domestic quarrel, a scared child, etc.) turn into documentary footage of air raids on Berlin. The images are interspersed with views of Cassiel's distressed face and the superimposed image of the flapping wings of an angel.¹² The sequence is clearly inspired by Benjamin's famous description of the angel of history in the ninth thesis:

Wo eine Kette von Begebenheiten vor *uns* erscheint, da sieht *er* eine einzige Katastrophe, die unablässig Trümmer auf Trümmer häuft und sie ihm vor die Füße schleudert. Er möchte verweilen, die Toten wecken und das Zerschlagene zusammenfügen.¹³

Benjamin's angel is confronted with history as a self-perpetuating catastrophe. He is prevented from realizing his desire to help by a "storm" which propels him away from the scene of debris. I would argue that the explicit allusions to Benjamin's theses on history are a clear invitation to read Wenders's film as a whole as a kind of Benjaminian historical allegory. Cassiel's jump into historical despair and Damiel's decision to give up his status as angel and become human can be seen as two responses to the historical pessimism expressed by Benjamin. Wenders does not attempt to negate the gravity of the historical situation; in his Berlin the current malaise is inextricably intertwined with the catastrophe of German history.

Thomas Brasch's film *Domino* likewise portrays Berlin as a site of history in which the past permeates the present. The film begins with a motto taken from the beginning of Robert Musil's short narrative "Grigia," the first novella in the collection *Drei Frauen* of 1924:

Es gibt im Leben eine Zeit, wo es sich auffallend verlangsamt, als zögerte es weiterzugehen oder wollte seine Richtung ändern. Es mag sein, daß einem in dieser Zeit leichter ein Unglück zustößt.¹⁴

The quotation creates an atmosphere of impending disaster. At the beginning of the film, Lisa sends her young daughter Agnes away to spend the Christmas season at a ski resort. A bystander spreads rumors about secret government efforts to keep the unemployment figures artificially low: the unemployed are supposedly collected at detention camps in order to be deported. The unidentified person claims to be informed about government secrets of utmost significance:

Tatsachen und . . . Dokumente, wies wirklich in Deutschland heute aussieht . . . Nervenheilstätten für welche, die das privatkapitalistische System nicht mehr aushalten. Hier in Deutschland. Wir sind ja n Pufferstaat. Und daß die Amerikaner n Krieg brauchen . . . das ist mir klar. . . .¹⁵

The motto from Musil and the rantings of the stranger put the private crisis in the life of a successful actress in a larger historical and political perspective. The framing prevents us from reading the film merely as a psychological case study. The subsequent action makes it clear that the reference to impending disaster is not restricted to the private problems of Lisa, the protagonist.

Lisa is unsettled by a series of events that she interprets as ominous signs of an impending catastrophe, the kind of catastrophe predicted by the unknown man. Alone for the first time in her life, Lisa loses grip of reality. Her key will no longer open the door as she is trying to leave her apartment. A director asks Lisa to give up her established position and to join him in his risky project of reviving a run-down theater with a production of Goethe's *Stella*. An aspiring playwright pesters Lisa with his theories of a "new aesthetics" in the hope that she might help him see his play performed. Lisa is haunted by childhood memories in which her ambivalent feelings towards her mother, herself an actress, emerge. At the same time, she becomes preoccupied with the question of whether the director may indeed be her father. She has a brief affair with the friend of a fellow actress. Her indecision about the *Stella* project leads to the suicide of the old director. Lisa walks out of a performance at her state-subsidized theater and takes up residence in the dead director's derelict theater. Several times, she encounters a mysterious coalman who helplessly wanders around in search of a street that does not exist.¹⁶ The telegram deliverer enigmatically insinuates that this Christmas season may be the last ever:

Meine Mutter hat zu mir gesagt: Das wird das letzte Weihnachten überhaupt. . . . Vorm letzten Krieg war das genauso, sagt sie.¹⁷

Lisa's psychological disintegration is signalled by her entering the world evoked by the unknown bystander's bizarre theories. The ominous signals culminate in a phantasmagorical sequence in which Lisa walks through the streets of Berlin on the night of New Year's Eve. She meets a black girl who asks her to trade in her warm jacket for a hat. Lisa puts on the hat and the girl comments "Jetzt siehste aus, als wenn du in den Krieg gehst."¹⁸ The film's black-and-white cinematography draws the viewer into Lisa's nightmarish perception of a war that is already going on. As Lisa wanders around, the fireworks displays indeed look like exploding grenades and bombs. Towards the end of the film, Lisa finds the place where the unemployed gather and watches the trek as they are led away for their "deportation"

In her personal crisis, Lisa seems to confront an insight expressed by Walter Benjamin in his eighth thesis on the concept of history:

Die Tradition der Unterdrückten belehrt uns darüber, daß der 'Ausnahmezustand', in dem wir leben, die Regel ist. Wir müssen zu einem Begriff der Geschichte kommen, der dem entspricht.¹⁹

Lisa's fate is subject to a number of ironies: while she may subjectively be experiencing the "state of emergency" evoked by Benjamin, it is clear that she belongs to a privileged minority. Likewise, the "deportees" she encounters in Brasch's film, with their fur coats and attaché cases, are a far cry from Benjamin's oppressed masses. Such ironies make the implications of Lisa's experiences all the more poignant, since the realization of the catastrophic nature of history is shown to affect even those traditionally thought to be immune: affluence and social prestige are revealed to be but vestiges thinly concealing the permanent "state of emergency" that passes for normalcy. In her disorientation, Lisa is far from being able to grasp the nature of her experience conceptually. Yet, through her experiences, the audience is invited to reach conclusions similar to those evoked by Benjamin's reflections.

In the context of Benjamin's notion of history as a perpetual state of emergency, the film's title *Domino* resonates with complex meanings: it refers to the game played by Lisa and her mother, a game that, as Lisa discovers, can only be won by cheating. After her brief liaison with Zollner, Lisa plays a game of dominoes by herself, reinforcing the association of the game with the existential question of control over one's life. A domino piece is the token of recognition for the hordes of unemployed who gather to be deported. Moreover, the film in its emphasis on an impending war clearly evokes the so-called "domino theory" that designates the danger inherent in military conflicts, the danger that such conflicts would, in the context of the tensions between the superpowers, inevitably lead to a global catastrophe.

Vorkriegszeit

Helen Fehervary was the first to point to the affinity between Brasch's aesthetic position and Benjamin's "concept of history and culture as explosion rather than continuity."²⁰ *Domino* can be seen as a filmic attempt to analyze a moment in history which appears to presage a renewed catastrophe. It is relativized through the perspectivism created by its focus on the perceptions of one woman. Brasch's film focuses upon a historical moment in which the post-war era is turning into a prewar era, a fear shared by a large segment of the West German population at the time the film was made.²¹ *Domino* was shot in December 1981 and January 1982. In October 1981, the largest peace demonstration in the history of West Germany had taken place in Bonn in the context of increased tensions over the deployment of American cruise missiles. Brasch's film reflects the atmosphere of widespread concern over the increased

tensions in the Cold War between Reagan and Brezhnev over the so-called Star Wars project.²²

The main point of Brasch's film, however, is not to lament the dangers inherent in the escalating arms race. On December 13 and 14, 1981, Brasch interrupted the shooting of his film to participate in the "Berliner Begegnung zur Friedensförderung," a meeting organized by writers in East Berlin. In his address delivered there, Brasch argues against the tendency to view an impending military conflict as a "Naturkatastrophe" and insists on the tangible structural reasons for the inevitability of military escalation:

Ich habe keinen Krieg erlebt. Ich habe einen Frieden erlebt, und dieser Frieden war schrecklich. Dieser Frieden war kein Zustand, in dem Leute in eine produktive Auseinandersetzung miteinander gekommen sind, in dem sie Produktivität und Kreativität, Kennzeichen der menschlichen Rasse, ausprobieren, die sozialen, psychologischen und politischen Widersprüche frei miteinander austragen konnten. Ich habe den Zustand einer Lähmung erlebt, und dieser Zustand verdient für mich nicht die Bezeichnung "Frieden."²³

Against the endeavor to establish a consensus among the participating writers Brasch adopts an uncompromising anarchist position: in suggesting that the war is, as it were, already taking place, Brasch presents a radical critique of the political and economic structures in which war is not an unfortunate byproduct of the conflicts between the two power blocs, but rather a necessary effect of the existing political and economic systems. War is viewed as an integral part of their *modus operandi*. It is significant that Brasch in his film does not locate the danger of war in a conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union. Rather, the focus is on the tensions within the capitalist system itself: the ominous remarks of the random stranger at the beginning of *Domino* evoke a connection between unemployment and militarism. His critique seems to be directed mainly against the United States that is using West Germany as a "Pufferstaat" in its own power game. Germans, the film suggests, may have deluded themselves into believing to be living in a "Nachkriegszeit" which had been a "Vorkriegszeit" all along.

Yet the real target of Brasch's critique is not so much the United States as a nation, but rather the political and economic system which it represents: the recurring images of brightly lit wintry boulevards through which mindless hordes rush to do their Christmas shopping highlight the alienating effects of consumerism. The first of Lisa's nightmarish fantasies is that of being locked in a department store. She cannot open the door to get out, just as she had not been able to open the door of her apartment. Like much of Brasch's film, the motif of being trapped in a consumerist "paradise" is associated with

autobiographical material from Brasch's own experience, in this case Brasch's expulsion from the GDR to West Berlin in the middle of December 1976. Brasch expressed his paradoxical situation in his poem "Schlimmer Traum," a poem that ironically culminates in the notion of having been "ins Paradies vertrieben."²⁴ In an interview in 1977, Brasch described his political and aesthetic position as akin to somebody observing the traffic who is amazedly asking himself "Wie lange kann das eigentlich noch so weiter gehen?"²⁵ Brasch's bleak view of capitalism is reminiscent of an idea expressed by Walter Benjamin in his *Passagenwerk*:

Der Begriff des Fortschritts ist in der Idee der Katastrophe zu fundieren. Daß es "so weiter" geht, ist die Katastrophe. Sie ist nicht das jeweils Bevorstehende sondern das jeweils Gegebene.²⁶

Brasch's film suggests that the catastrophe is indeed already taking place. Like Benjamin, Brasch rejects the notion of "Fortschritt" in a capitalist system which entraps the individual in vapid consumerism and whose economy rests to a large extent on the production of arms. In this context, Lisa's unnerved reaction at the quarrel between Lehrter and Brunke over a new form of theater takes on a poignant significance:

Der alte Antifaschist und der Junge mit der neuen Ästhetik unterm Arm.
Habt ihr's nicht begriffen: Das Alte geht nicht und das Neue auch nicht.²⁷

Lisa's comments refer not only to different artistic visions but also to conceptual models, including ideological positions. Brasch does not attempt to offer an alternative to the stalemate his film describes.

Nachkriegszeit

Brasch's and Wenders's films investigate the modalities of visual perception. Both films begin with a quasi-documentary view of urban melancholy: the black-and-white cinematography presents modern Berlin as a landscape of human despair and isolation. *Domino* focuses on the drab consumerism of the Christmas season before concentrating on the psychological disintegration of its central figure, Lisa the actress. *Wings of Desire* gives a panoramic series of vignettes of urban alienation before the plot around the two angels Daniel and Cassiel is set in motion; at the beginning of the film, a variety of aerial views of the city and its inhabitants is interspersed with the shot of an isolated eye. The film achieves the feel of a documentary on life in the city, made by an omniscient observer. The camera moves swiftly from perception to perception to create the

effect of what Wenders calls an all-seeing gaze, an "idealen Blick."²⁸

By way of contrast, the field of vision in *Domino* is radically restricted. We first see Lisa as she is being photographed by a press photographer. We share the public image of the actress by looking, as it were, through the photographer's lens. As Lisa poses for the photographer, she is talking about her plans for the Christmas season, the first she is to spend alone. The tone is casual, the unsteady camerawork creating an impression that we are watching newsreel footage. This impression is enhanced as the camera focuses on the bystander who catches Lisa's attention with his loudly proclaimed theories. It is the ideas of this "man in the street," filmed in a manner reminiscent of a random interview during a public opinion poll, which will later contribute to the disintegration of Lisa's psyche as her perception of reality is increasingly dominated by a similar kind of paranoia.

In various ways, both films highlight the endeavor to record and depict psycho-social reality in art: in *Domino* there are multiple forms of a self-thematization of the artistic process, ranging from the photographer taking pictures of Lisa at the beginning of the film to extended debates about drama. Lisa is shown performing the role of Lady Macbeth. Theater director Lehrter, a former antifascist victim of the Nazi-regime, attempts to revive a run-down theater with his production of Goethe's *Stella*.²⁹ To Brunke, the young dramatist eager for recognition, the present does not yield material for art. It is the duty of the artist, he argues, to deal with the past repressed by the previous generation:

Wenn die Alten nicht selber ihre Geschichten erzählen . . .
Einer muß es ja machen.³⁰

Lisa replies "Und wer erzählt dann unsre . . .," implying that there may not be a generation to follow her own. Lehrter's suicide upon the failure of the *Stella* project is another indication that the cultural climate of current Germany is ultimately hostile to art: the old antifascist cannot gain a foothold in the new society but is marginalized as a misanthropic outsider.

In *Wings of Desire*, the thematization of art is initially centered on writing. The first image we see is that of a hand writing the short poem "Als das Kind Kind war" which is to appear in leitmotivic fashion at several points throughout the film. The text evokes a childlike innocence. Spoken by Damiel, it anticipates his desire to enter history, to experience life, to have a "childhood," both as a past and as a feeling of future possibilities. Throughout the film, the angels listen to the thoughts of humans, recording moments of suffering and self-assertion in their notebooks. The library is presented as a sanctuary of memory, as a quasi-sacred space of mental activity.³¹ Later, the filmic medium itself is included in the thematization of art. An American film crew is engaged

in a film project involving a somewhat unlikely plot about an American detective in wartime Berlin. An old man, whom the printed script identifies as Homer, wanders around aimlessly, exhausted and lonely. He reflects on the possibility of a narrative which could give form to the collective experience. While this task is necessary, it is almost impossible, both because of the weight of history and because of the lack of an audience receptive to his art.

Homer's reminiscences of Berlin suggest that he is conceived of as a Jewish refugee who has returned to Germany. Like Brasch's *Lehrter*, he is a victim of the Nazi regime, forced into exile and finding it difficult, if not impossible, to reintegrate himself.³² To *Lehrter*, the traumatic past has become an obsession: he watches old film reels of German soldiers on the Russian front on a film projector he carries with him all the time. The Homer of Wenders and Handke is likewise caught in contemplating the past. As he turns the pages of August Sander's famous photo book *Menschen des 20. Jahrhunderts*,³³ the pictures literally come alive and turn into footage of a bombing raid on Berlin. Interestingly enough, in *Domino*, the wartime footage of *Lehrter's* film is the only part which is in color. This technique anticipates the use of color in *Wings of Desire*, where color stock in part designates moments of heightened intensity in reminiscences of wartime Berlin. *Domino* remains confined in the stagnation expressed by the melancholy use of black and white.³⁴ By way of contrast, Wenders's film changes to color to mark *Damiel's* altered experience once *Damiel* has shed his angelic nature and entered history as a human being.³⁵

Both to Brasch's *Lehrter* and to Wenders's Homer the past is very much alive. *Lehrter's* fixation on the past leads him to conclude: "Nach dem Krieg da, gibts in diesem Land keine Kunst mehr."³⁶ In *Wings of Desire*, the old Homer laments:

Nenne mir, Muse, den armen unsterblichen Sänger,
der, von seinen sterblichen Zuhörern . . .
verlassen, die Stimme verlor . . .
wie er vom Engel der Erzählung zum unbeachteten oder verlachten
Leiermann draußen an der Schwelle zum Niemandsland wurde.³⁷

Forlorn and bereft of his audience, Homer is wandering around in the "no-man's-land" near the death-strip in a divided city in search of "Potsdamer Platz," the bustling center of the prewar metropolis, a center destroyed by the war.³⁸ Homer is left to ask:

Aber noch niemandem ist es gelungen, ein Epos des Friedens
anzustimmen. Was ist denn am Frieden, daß er nicht auf die Dauer
begeistert und daß sich von ihm kaum erzählen läßt?³⁹

Domino suggests that in many ways the war is not over. The alleged “Nachkriegszeit” is revealing itself to be a new “Vorkriegszeit.” No art is possible other than that which confronts this insight. Wenders’s *Wings of Desire*, on the other hand, in all its poetry and its presumptuousness, its beauty and its pathos, can be seen as an attempt at an “Epos des Friedens.”⁴⁰ Art cannot negate the historical trauma, but it can endeavor to offer a countermodel.

Staunen

“Wie lange kann das eigentlich noch so weiter gehen?” Brasch asked in the interview quoted above.⁴¹ To Brasch, Western society is perpetuating its own sickness by working towards its own self-annihilation. His film *Domino* can be seen as an attempt to render the political consternation vis-à-vis an untenable status quo aesthetically productive. Lisa’s amazement at seeing her world fall apart is in many ways a visual realization of Brasch’s own political and aesthetic perspective.

By way of contrast, Wim Wenders asserts the importance of a different kind of amazement, that of a rediscovery of possibilities:

“Der Himmel über Berlin” hat eine Botschaft: Er fordert das Publikum auf, das Staunen zu lernen.⁴²

While Brasch focuses on the encroachment of a catastrophic historical situation upon the individual, Wenders insists on the possibility of human fulfillment. The malaise, his film suggests, can be overcome:

Früher steckte ich in einem finsternen Loch, und meine Meinung war, daß man überhaupt nichts mehr erzählen kann. Daß alles sinnlos ist. . . .

Heute finde ich es wichtiger, aufregender, folgen-reicher, die Dinge mit einem Blick der Zuneigung zu beschreiben. Denn heute glaube ich, daß entmutigende Bilder zur Entmutigung führen - und ermutigende Bilder zur Ermutigung.⁴³

Such a stance is prone to criticism for its apparent naïveté. Both Wenders and Handke have come under attack for the way in which *Wings of Desire* borders on kitsch.⁴⁴ Outside the poetic context of the film, statements like that of Damiel:

Erst das Staunen
über uns zwei,
das Staunen
über den Mann und die Frau

hat mich zum Menschen gemacht.⁴⁵

appear to have little pragmatic relevance. But these texts, written by Peter Handke, should not easily be dismissed as vacuous mysticism.⁴⁶ They do not signal a simple withdrawal from the political into the private sphere. Instead, they attempt to assert the essential inseparability of the two spheres in a new manner. Marion's declaration of love towards the end of *Wings of Desire* makes this clear:

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.⁴⁷

To be sure, the vocabulary employed here is highly problematic to many ears. It is difficult to assess to what extent Handke has succeeded in purifying the German language tainted by Nazism. What is important in the present context is that the viewer is drawn into the exchange, as Marion addresses her soliloquy to the camera, that is to the audience itself.⁴⁸ The declaration of love is thus directed as much to the audience at large as it is to Damiel:

Schau, meine Augen! Sie sind das Bild der Notwendigkeit, der Zukunft
aller auf dem Platz.⁴⁹

Wenders's film can be seen as an attempt to create such a "Platz," a utopian space in which the vision of human fulfillment can be shared with the audience. Marion's words do not naively celebrate her encounter with Damiel. Rather, they encourage the audience to keep the utopian vision of love present in their lives after leaving the shared experience of watching the film. The quasi-religious implications of the scene are evident both in the chalice from which Damiel and Marion drink and in the sermonlike solemnity of Marion's speech. In its inflated rhetoric of allegedly universal human values, Handke's soliloquy will appear suspect to many viewers. Yet the focus is not on a salvation coming from without but rather on a reorientation of perception. At the beginning of the film, only the children can see the angels. Gradually, the audience is invited to accept this basic poetic conceit: the film encourages the audience to view the world, as it were, with new eyes, to take nothing for granted and to rediscover the childlike capacity for "Staunen." As a reminder of the power of the desire within each of the viewers, the film attempts to empower the audience with

utopian energy.⁵⁰

In their emphasis on amazement as a basic category of creative endeavor, both Brasch and Wenders establish countermodels to a historical reality which threatens to suffocate the individual. Both hark back to Walter Benjamin's notion of "Staunen" in his eighth thesis on history:

Das Staunen darüber, daß die Dinge, die wir erleben, im zwanzigsten Jahrhundert 'noch' möglich sind, ist *kein* philosophisches. Es steht nicht am Anfang der Erkenntnis, es sei denn der, daß die Vorstellung von Geschichte, aus der es stammt, nicht zu halten ist.⁵¹

Brasch shares Benjamin's preoccupation with history as a self-perpetuating catastrophe. His film *Domino* can be seen as a contribution to a redefinition of history in Benjaminian terms: history is not viewed as a sequence of developments in pursuit of progress, a progress that may suffer setbacks here and there. Rather, history becomes the accumulated awareness of disastrous tensions wreaking havoc in continual conflict.

Yet Benjamin's notion of "Staunen" is fundamentally ambiguous: it can encompass both the gaze of consternation in Brasch and the childlike openness in Wenders. Moreover, there is another ambiguity in Benjamin's phrasing which belies the pessimistic gist of his argument. Like the English "still," the German "noch" can mean both "at this point" and "even under these circumstances." Something that is " 'noch' möglich" can either pessimistically refer to the barbaric practices of political reality ("sadly even today") or to the still-present utopian possibilities ("despite everything"). Wenders's film is located in the sphere created by the second meaning of "noch."

Wings of Desire features a long debate over history between Damiel and Cassiel. History cannot be confronted in the quasi-masterly stance of what is known as "Vergangenheitsbewältigung," but in constant contemplation of the omnipresence of everything that ever took place. Cassiel asserts that alongside the "Geschichte der Kriege" there is another line of history: "Aber auch die erste, vom Gras, von der Sonne, von den Luftsprüngen, von den Ausrufen, dauert noch an."⁵² Brasch's Lisa had only been able to catch a glimpse of the Eastern part of the city from the window of a discothèque overlooking the Wall. At the end of their conversation, Damiel and Cassiel walk right through it. Damiel's transformation from angel into human being takes place on the death-strip next to a Wall that now no longer exists. It is the coexistence of the two lines of history that ensures the possibility of new beginnings, not in the sense of "Fortschritt" but in the sense of "Fortsetzung." *Wings of Desire* ends with a view of the undivided sky over Berlin with the caption "Fortsetzung folgt," asserting that history is indeed "to be continued."

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¹Both films are replete with autobiographical reminiscences. Like Lisa, Katharina Thalbach is the daughter of an actress, Susanne Thalbach, who worked under Brecht at the East Berlin "Berliner Ensemble." Katharina Thalbach herself was a member of the same company before coming to the west in 1976. Parts of *Domino* were shot in Brasch's apartment whose walls are decorated with posters of productions by the "Berliner Ensemble." Likewise, Marion's room in *Wings of Desire* features postcards of Nancy, the hometown of actress Solveig Dommartin.

²On the history and significance of the monument, see Reinhard Alings, "Die Ständehafte Else. Heute eine Attraktion im Ost-West Tourismus: die Siegestsäule in Berlin," *Die Zeit* 12 (March 23, 1990) 24.

³Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*. Edited by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1989) 4: 1, 241.

⁴Interestingly enough, Wenders reinterprets the statue of the "Siegestsäule" angel as a "Friedensengel," endowing it with utopian elements alien to Benjamin's interpretation. Wim Wenders, *Die Logik der Bilder. Essays und Gespräche*. Hrsg. von Michael Töteberg (Frankfurt: Verlag der Autoren, 1988) 102.

⁵On Berlin as a film topic throughout history, see William Uricchio, "The City Reviewed: Berlin's Film Image on the Occasion of its 750th Anniversary," *Film and History* 18: 1 (February, 1988) 16-25. Uricchio discusses neither *Domino* nor *Wings of Desire*.

⁶Thomas Brasch, *Engel aus Eisen. Beschreibung eines Films* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1981) 245.

⁷Other possible sources for the film's German title include Josef von Baky's film *Und über uns der Himmel* (1947) and Christa Wolf's short novel *Der geteilte Himmel* (1963), both of which are set in Berlin.

⁸Cf. the entry on Thomas Brasch in Hans-Michael Bock, ed., *CineGraph. Lexikon zum deutschsprachigen Film* 4 volumes of unpaginated loose-leaf binders (Munich: Edition text & Kritik, 1984).

⁹Wenders has frequently stated that Rilke's *Elegies* provided the main inspiration for making a film featuring angels. Cf. "Ein Gespräch mit Wim Wenders," in Uwe Künzel, *Wim Wenders: ein Filmbuch*. 3., erw. Aufl. (Freiburg: Dreisam, 1988) 211.

¹⁰*Der Himmel über Berlin*. Ein Filmbuch von Wim Wenders und Peter Handke (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1989) 23.

¹¹On the biographical background of Benjamin's interpretation of Klee's picture see Gershom Sholem's essay of 1972, "Walter Benjamin und sein Engel," translated by Werner Dannhauser as "Walter Benjamin and his Angel," in Gary Smith ed., *On Walter Benjamin. Critical Essays and Recollections* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 1988) 51-89.

¹²Cf. Wenders, *Himmel*, 95-97.

¹³Benjamin, *Schriften*, 1: 2, 698.

¹⁴Thomas Brasch, *Domino*. Ein Film (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1982) 5. Cf. Robert Musil, "Grigia," in *Prosa und Stücke. Kleine Prosa, Aphorismen, Autobiographisches*. Herausgegeben von Adolf Frisé (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1978) 234.

¹⁵Brasch, *Domino*, 19. The colloquial spelling is Brasch's.

¹⁶The motif of the coalman lost in the Berlin “Tiergarten” park echoes the motif of disorientation in the section “Tiergarten” which opens Benjamin’s *Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert*; cf. Benjamin, *Schriften* 4: 1, 237. The name of the street the coalman is looking for is given in the printed script as “Sondannstraße.” In the film, the name — pronounced in the coalman’s heavy Berlin accent — sounds like “Sonderstraße,” evoking the notion of a German “Sonderweg,” a special status of Germany independent of the two power blocs, a status which Brasch’s film seems to imply cannot be found.

¹⁷Brasch, *Domino*, 46.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 187.

¹⁹Benjamin, *Schriften*, 1: 2, 697.

²⁰Helen Fehervary, “Thomas Brasch: A Storyteller after Kafka.” *New German Critique* 12 (Fall 1977) 130.

²¹In 1980 Thomas Brasch, alongside Günter Grass, Sara Kirsch, and Peter Schneider, published an open letter addressed to West German chancellor Helmut Schmidt urging him to resist U.S. pressure to deploy nuclear missiles in Germany, a move, the signatories argued, which could lead to a third world war: “Nutzen Sie die Chance...!” *Frankfurter Rundschau* (April 17, 1980). Cf. *Arbeitsbuch Thomas Brasch*. Herausgegeben von Margarete Häbel und Richard Weber (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1987) 233 ff.

²²The mood of impending catastrophe is perhaps best captured in the film *Krieg und Frieden* of 1982-83, a collective effort coordinated by Alexander Kluge, with contributions by writer Heinrich Böll and directors Stefan Aust, Axel Engstfeld, and Volker Schlöndorff.

²³Thomas Brasch, “Ich will nicht sterben, ist zu wenig” (1982) in *Arbeitsbuch Thomas Brasch*, 234-36; here, 235.

²⁴The poem opens the first volume of poems Thomas Brasch published after his expulsion from the GDR, *Der schöne 27. September*. Gedichte (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1980) 7.

²⁵*Arbeitsbuch Thomas Brasch*, 18.

²⁶Benjamin, *Schriften*, 5, 592.

²⁷Brasch, *Domino*, 129. Significantly, the segment which features the debate over new forms of theater is entitled “Krieg” (122-29).

²⁸“Die Wim-Bibel. Worte des großen Vorsitzenden Wim Wenders. Aus Anlaß seines neuen Films *Der Himmel über Berlin*.” Aufgezeichnet von Bettina Röhl und Claudius Seidl, *Tempo* (November 1987) 86.

²⁹The character Lehrter is partly based on biographical material from the lives of Bernhard Wicki and Benno Besson: Wicki, the actor and film director (*Die Brücke*, 1959) who plays the part, was expelled from acting school in 1938 for political reasons like Lehrter in Brasch’s film. Lehrter’s efforts at continuing the tradition of antifascist theater in postwar Germany echo the work of theater director Besson, the father of Katharina Thalbach, the actress who plays Lisa.

³⁰Brasch, *Domino*, 41.

³¹Jürgen Kiepert’s musical score highlights this aspect. The segment that accompanies this sequence is called “Die Kathedrale der Bücher” on the soundtrack album.

³²The character is partly based on the biographical background of Curt Bois, who plays Homer: from his early successes as a child actor in Berlin, Bois was a well-known comedian. As a Jew, he left Germany in 1933 and never regained his popularity upon his return after the war. In December 1981, Bruno Ganz and Otto Sander, who were to

play Damiel and Cassiel in Wenders's *Wings of Desire*, made a television documentary on the actors Curt Bois and Bernhard Minetti, one forced into exile, the other successful under Nazi dictatorship. The film, entitled *Gedächtnis* and shot in black and white, consists mainly of interviews with the two actors conducted at various locations in Berlin, including some featured in *Domino* and *Wings of Desire*. See Marion Schamuthe, "Gedächtnis. Ein Film für Curt Bois und Bernhard Minetti," *Theater heute* 9 (September 1982) 58-61.

³³Cf. *Himmel*, 56.

³⁴Cf. Brasch's dictum "Das wollte ich so, daß der Frieden schwarzweiß ist und die *Bilder vom Krieg* farbig sind." In Bion Steinborn and Christel Brunn, " 'Im Kino ist der Zuschauer ein Opfer der Einbeutung.' Ein Gespräch mit Katharina Thalbach und Thomas Brasch," *Filmfaust* 30 (October/November 1982), 19 Emphasis in the original.

³⁵In a sequence towards the end of *Wings of Desire*, the black-and-white image of Cassiel, who has not turned human, is integrated into the color footage of Damiel helping Marion practice her circus act. This technique reverses an effect used by Brasch in *Domino*, where the wartime footage in color is inserted into the black-and-white image of the screen onto which Lehrter's film is projected.

³⁶Brasch, *Domino*, 67.

³⁷*Himmel*, 59f.

³⁸On Wenders's treatment of the topography of Berlin see the chapter "Wim Wenders' filmische Stadtlandschaften oder *Der Himmel über Berlin*," in Hanno Möbius and Guntram Vogt, *Drehort Stadt: das Thema "Großstadt" im deutschen Film* (Marburg: Hitzeroth, 1990) 149-64.

³⁹Wenders, *Himmel*, 57.

⁴⁰On the association between the film's Homer and Homer's epic *Odysee* see Charles H. Helmetag, "'... Of Men and of Angels': Literary Allusions in Wim Wenders's *Wings of Desire*." *Literature/Film Quarterly* 18: 4 (1990):4, 251-254.

⁴¹*Arbeitsbuch*, 18; cf. note 25.

⁴²"Die Wim-Bibel," *Tempo*, 90.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 88.

⁴⁴Cf. for instance Janet Maslin's review "The Rage of Angels," *New York Times* (April 29, 1988), C15, 1.

⁴⁵Wenders, *Himmel*, 167.

⁴⁶On Pete Handke's involvement in Wenders's film, see Thomas F. Barry, "The Weight of Angels: Peter Handke and *Der Himmel über Berlin*," *Modern Austrian Literature* 23: 3/4 (1990) 53-64.

⁴⁷Wenders, *Himmel*, 162.

⁴⁸Roger Cook has pointed out that this constitutes an invitation to share the protagonists' desire in "direct violation of a cardinal rule of classical cinema," where the viewer is not directly addressed but rather granted "invisibility" vis-à-vis the cinematic presentation. Roger Cook, "Angels, Fiction and History in Berlin: Wim Wenders' *Wings of Desire*," *Germanic Review* 66: 1 (Winter 1991) 34-37; here, 41.

⁴⁹Wenders, *Himmel*, 163.

⁵⁰See Wenders's statement in an interview with Reinhold Rauh: "Auch in der letzten Vergangenheit, Anfang der 80er Jahre mit Tschernobyl und all den Kriegsherden überall, ist das apokalyptische Bild ja auch das vorherrschende und das bekanntere als

das friedliche Bild. Deswegen finde ich es auch fruchtbarer und tatsächlich auch reizvoller und einfach wichtiger, positive Utopien zu entwerfen." In Reinhard Rauh, *Wim Wenders und seine Filme* (Munich: Heyne, 1990) 262.

⁵¹Benjamin, *Schriften*, 4, 697.

⁵²Wenders, *Himmel*, 84.