

Soul of Cinema: The moving voice in genres and films such as the road film *Paris, Texas*, Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ*, the genre-exploding *The Graduate*, and a film noir *The Long Goodbye*, with the discussion consolidated by Wim Wenders and his film *Wings of Desire*.

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Modern humans in this era of mass society tend to have trouble with believing in their soul, which can be considered a pure essentiality of their humanity, perhaps a source of their intentions, which are responsible for their greatest inspirations and terrific downfalls. But existence of the soul can be proven by listening to its voice, usually in the form of crying out for change and basic fulfillment. This voice can be seen and heard on the celluloid-strip.

Is There Such a Thing?

It seems that most people tend to ignore the soul, or even the word of, for it has fallen under a veil of ambiguity. Perhaps the collective consciousness of the world has forgotten the importance of self-reflection, or since culture has become so complex, perhaps other things that are complex and can be attained for instant gratification outweigh something so essential. Whatever the reason for the ignorance of the soul--the cooling of the heart, the forsaking of the spirit for temporal material comfort--the soul still exists, independent of self-awareness. But one might wonder what is there to gain by becoming self-aware, or what are the consequences if one is not?

It is nearly unfathomable for a human being to focus on all tangents involving the so-called soul. Yet in attempting to discover our essential humanity and its passions, we can benefit from the cinema, which offers a practical means of perception. Director Wim Wenders states:

"Because that's what our century needed, a language that made things visible. And the most beautiful thing you can do in a film is a calm, quiet portrayal of something ordinary from which you grasp something quite universal" (43).

Wenders believes

"It is my conviction that a film has to be preceded by a dream, either a real dream of the sort that you wake up and remember, or a daydream . . . I'm thinking of films that have a soul, a discernible core, that radiate their own identity . . . This strength, which can nourish a film from the moment of its original conception to its finished print is, for want of better word, the 'soul' of a film, its own dream of itself" (18).

Wenders goes on to say, "What else can you show? Or: what other way of telling stories is there today?" (37). Cook comments, "For Wenders, film has become the contemporary medium for a narrative that can create new myths" (39). Even within Wenders' inspiring film, *Wings of Desire*,

"The writer Homer, now an old man, agonizes over the question of whether it is possible to find a narrative voice, to give life to an epic, in a time of peace, and whether a world that has no one telling about it is a world that has lost its childhood" (Nadotti, 10).

What the thought comes down to, as summed up by Antonioni is "The images say much more than any words could" (2). (Chatman ii) Rudolf Arnheim said, "The mere exposure to the visible surface of the world will not arouse ideas unless the spectacle is approached with ideas ready to be stirred up." Michelangelo Antonioni felt that "It was precisely by photographing and enlarging the surface of the things around me that I sought to discover what was behind those things."

One way to look at what is the "soul" of a film is by thinking of it in theoretical terms, as the concept of "suture". Cook, explains the concept in the following way: "film theory explains narrative closure not just in terms of the film and its formal construction, but rather as a process of drawing in and enclosing the viewing subject in the film's textual system." He goes on to insinuate that suture is soul, "The filmic concept stems from Lacan's account of how in the individual psyche a coherent, unified subject is 'sutured' within a symbolic order structured by desire and governed by language" (35). With an awareness of suture, he then connects the spectator's emotional and psychological investment into a narrative by the process of identity formation. When the suture of a film and the soul of a spectator share essential common ground, they resonate; the spectator can identify with and connect to the film.

With the awareness of the essential connection between spectator and film, one can look at cinematic themes and realize the powerful, symbiotic relationship between cinema and the human psyche. In this essay, five films will be discussed: Wim Wenders' road film, *Paris, Texas*, Martin Scorsese's auteur masterpiece, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Mike Nichols' genre-explosion, *The Graduate*, Robert Altman's sabotage of noir, *The Long Goodbye*, then winding back into an extensive look at what is perhaps the soul of cinema itself, Wenders' *Wings of Desire*.

***Paris, Texas*; Journey as Healing Redemption**

Paris, Texas, being a road movie, is a journey as redemption to heal. Although a road movie is a modern Western, the main character, Travis, is not the typical gunfighter hero, but rather a man whose marital problems have left him shattered and mute. He is an anti-hero, not out to save others, instead, he needs saving himself. "Travis and Jane's long conversation at the Keyhole Club involves strong moments of revelation and reconciliation" (Lev, 111). The emotional dynamics of *Paris, Texas* is inspired by the work of Sam Shepard, who co-wrote the screenplay. Previously, his plays

"typically present emotional and highly verbal confrontations within a family. Often, the plays revolve around deeply hidden family secrets . . . [T]he long monologues by Travis and Jane at the Keyhole Club were written at the last minute by Shepard and delivered word-for-word by the actors. Wenders and Robbie Muller contributed the haunting visuals of this scene (e.g. reflections which superimpose the faces or place them side by side)." (Lev, 113-114)

Ultimately, Lev sums up what Travis needs most, as he "tells Jane the story of their life as a couple, including his pathological jealousy and the pain he caused her. Jane recognizes Travis, and forgives him" (111).

It is suggested that *Paris, Texas* can be seen as a combination of Shepard's and Wenders' emotional styles. Lev describes,

"This dialectic between direct and distanced emotion becomes very important in the film's last few scenes. Shepard and Wenders have constructed a situation where the family could be united, since Travis and Jane have confessed to each other and found mutual understanding" (113).

But, Wenders overruled all alternate endings with his own, as paraphrased by Lev,

"During the first visit to the Keyhole Club Travis feels the same destructive jealousy that had wrecked his marriage to Jane. Therefore, he cannot resume family life; he can only bring mother and child together. This ending is impractical and irresponsible in terms of family dynamics, because Travis has taken Hunter away from a stable home with Walt and Anne and given him to a mother who works in a sleazy club. But the ending might make more sense as Wenders' refusal to let go of his own artistic individuality, which in past films had focused on alienation" (113).

After all, it seems the voice of the soul cries for alienation in order to be sincerely fulfilled. Travis and Jane would likely not be anymore fulfilled in a volatile marriage again. He doesn't want to repeat the past, as inflicted by his parents' own marital problems, as it mirrors his estrangement with Jane. He is so separated that he wants to escape and return "home", which is idealized and impossible, as represented by the film's title. "His anguish stems in large part from the impossibility of going back" (Lev, 112).

An Outsider in a Ocean of Outsiders

In *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Scorsese was an outsider in the effort to make this film happen by going through studio and public opinion hoops. "Ultimately, although his efforts were sincere, his film alienated most viewers. They found his artistic decisions disturbing, often distancing the viewer's spiritual experience, and much of it simply came across as too weird" (Connelly, 128). Those who did understand Scorsese's passion into the film and its purpose also identify with the feeling of being an outsider. Fortunately,

there is solace upon discovering that there are other outsiders whose feelings happen to resonate with one's own, instead of being utterly alone.

Connelly commented that Scorsese's Jesus is "simply too neurotic, tormented, and unsure of himself to be not only mortal but also divine" (131). This is perfect to express, because the entire film visualized the journey from doubt to accomplishment. Almost the entire story was filled with Jesus' feelings of doubt; "the feeling begins very tender, then the pain starts." He made crucifixes to disconnect himself from God, and he wanted to rebel against everything while he felt filled with fear. He knew the truth, as Lucifer said to him, "You're not the son of king David; you're not a man; you're the son of man; you're the son of God, and more than that, God." He questioned himself, "I can cast out the Devil, but what if it's not the Devil; what if it is God, and you can't cast out God." Even as he grew to accept God and began speaking to the people, he thought to himself, "God has so many miracles, what if I say the wrong thing? What if I say the right thing?"

Yet his doubt is the same as his soul; he was moved to grow and do as he did; "I want to break the chain of evil by nurturing the soul with love." Eventually, by following the voice of his soul, which is God, his certitude grew, "If I was a wood cutter, I'd cut it down. If I were fire, I'd burn it. But I am a heart; I love." With his solidified certitude, he was tempted by the Devil but refused and moved on. "Today and tomorrow, I shall cast out devils and work cures. On the third day, I shall be perfected." As he continued, he learned he was to die on the cross, and the fear grew back. His humanity became the root of his hesitation, for he naturally did not want to suffer that way, and would rather die quickly by a sword. It wasn't until he was crucified in which the Devil was able to make a last temptation, in which Christ temporarily succumbs to, believing that God would otherwise forsake him. Time passes as Jesus lives as a man, but he inevitably learns of the consequences, seeing atrocity befall the Earth. This ultimate realization is enough to overpower his fear, begging God to place him back on the cross, to fulfill his purpose, as called by the voice of his soul. Transversing backward into time, Christ is led to accomplishment and completion as the last few seconds of film dissolve into abstract and glorious colors, as if a last gasp of voice to show the audience, not in thought, but in image.

Doubt and Self Awareness

The Graduate is a film about a soul who is utterly swept up in his whims and desires, ultimately ending unfulfilled, a consequence of not being self-aware. Ben is done and depressed. He is the graduate, with no purpose to fulfill him. It's obvious that he's realized that a degree isn't enough to quench his thirst. Unfortunately for him, he's not exactly self-aware. He can only run on impulse -- which is initiated by the voice of soul -- but he won't reflect on it and become consciously fulfilled.

He knows the seduction of Mrs. Robinson will definitely shake up his life, so he impulsively goes along. And he participates in the game for months, having no meaningful exchange between them. He only attempts a thoughtful conversation because he's finally getting bored with the routine of pure sex. Inadvertently, Elaine, Robinson's daughter is brought up. A tense discussion ensues, and Robinson requests Ben to

promise not to date Elaine. Ben reluctantly agrees. That was, until his parents goaded him into a date with Elaine. As he goes to pick her up, Ben explains to Mrs. Robinson that his parents were threatening to invite everyone to dinner, which Ben insinuated would be hectic and worse. But, subconsciously, it's his only way at changing the game by rebelling against Robinson and dating Elaine. Ben and Elaine turn out to be a good couple, but Mrs. Robinson threatens to tell her of the affair. So, playing the game to his advantage, he confesses to Elaine first. His soul must be thriving off this fire, for he has become risky and fearless. Even though Elaine shuns him, Ben decides to go and visit her at the University. Knowing that she could very well hate him, he decides to propose marriage to her. This is irrational, but perfect fuel to the fire for a soul; the desire for something that one cannot have is greater than what can. Elaine, being unpredictable, changes her mind about hating him, and can't help but admire him. But she continually changes her mind about accepting his proposal. Suddenly, she disappears, for her family set up a marriage with her and another man. This is the ultimate point for Ben, for he knows that it is a near impossibility for him to get in his car, drive to Berkeley to find out where she is, then drive across country to the cathedral, only to run out of gas and run on foot, then enter the closed wedding and interrupt, inviting Elaine to run away with him. Yet this is what his soul craves, this insane journey, for it is the only thing in his life that can offer fulfillment, even if temporary. And so it is; after the exciting quest, Elaine escapes with him by hitching a bus, and within seconds as the film dissipates, their faces change and the relationship becomes distant; the passion ceases because there is nothing more to fight for. Perhaps the reason why the passion dies is because Ben is not self-aware, nor reflective, for if he were, then he would be able to appreciate what he has and didn't have; a past allows the "now" to build a future.

Psychotic Tendencies

The Long Goodbye is the adieu of a psychotic soul. Belton makes a point by saying, "No wonder audiences become uneasy [when watching this film]. The staple of the industry and the films most frequently identified with everyday motion picture entertainment -- genre films -- had developed psychotic tendencies." Belton also refers to a film such as *The Long Goodbye* as "derivative" or "pseudo-noir", because "screenwriters and directors deliberately set out to make film noir, transforming the disruptive stylistic strategies and disturbing thematic obsessions of postwar film noir into a system of expectations and conventions" (191-192). In other words, whereas a film such as Welles' *Touch of Evil* had dark inspiration from the immediacy of the desolate post-war feeling, *The Long Goodbye* was literally in the wake of the "hippie" era, in which the darkness of life was absurd compared to decades earlier. The only way the soul of the film could respond was by playing the deconstructionist, tearing at the genre to its most basic levels and discovering the absurd. Elliot Gould's character, Phillip Marlowe is a literal Rip Van Winkle, a film noir detective from the 1950s, awakened in the 1970s, living in an idle country, next door to ridiculous hippies, not only having no sincere purpose as his predecessors, but worse, being out of time and an outsider, not able to relate to anyone else; not only desolate, but isolated as well. Isolation is the straw that breaks the camel's back, the weight that shatters the detective's psyche. He walks around in his out-of-fashion black suit, driving an antique car, mumbling to himself through most of narrative. He parodies the police integrations, refusing to cooperate -- after all, why

should he? Plecki sums up Marlowe's purpose, "Altman is not interested in creating a mythic figure. Marlowe is just human. Outrage and revenge are in this case acceptable motivations for him" (63-64). Marlowe wants one thing, the truth, not because it would give him justification as a detective, but really because playing his own smart-ass game is a cathartic experience. And after being dragged around in his own game, taken for a loser, Marlowe decides, upon the ultimate discovery of the truth, to journey to the figure who got him in this mess, and confront him. Not because it's right, but really because it's what's left to do. Marlowe knows the absurdity of his plight, and so does director Robert Altman; so they both make the best of it by shooting their respective best friends who ultimately stab them in the back, Terry and Hollywood.

A Return to the Source

Finally, *Wings of Desire* can represent the soul of this discussion. Rooted in home, filmed in Berlin, Wenders feels that it is "the only place that deals with the past. It's the only place where I find something left of my own memories of Germany" (Seidenberg, 30). Cook adds,

"From a love story set in Berlin inhabited by fallen angels, it evolved into a film that investigates identity as well as the national identity of psychically scarred Germany. Moreover, the film suggests that contemporary cinema needs a new form of epic narrative in order to participate in this process of identity formation" (35).

Nadotti describes the angels as

"... a pure gaze upon the world. He doesn't belong to the world, but he is necessary to it; without his gaze, the world might not exist, might crumble into a stream of minute fragments of existence, disconnected from each other and meaningless. Working from above and beyond, the angels rebuilds and weaves together meanings that transcend the here and now of human life ... who restores dimension to history through a powerful act of witness, of gathering together, of patiently and lovingly collecting what would otherwise fall into amnesia and oblivion ... Without him, without his ability to distill events into memory, the world would have no recollection of itself, and thus no self-awareness, no self-representation" (10).

But they exist detached from humankind without any stake in what happens. Cook fitly sums up, "Fixed in this form of existence, they lack in every sense the controlling voice and power of the author" (38). But the pull of human existence significantly affects an angel, Damiel. "Wenders suggests that the simple activities -- sleeping late on Sunday, drinking a cup of steaming coffee, eating, touching -- are the greatest pleasures of all" (Seidenberg, 30). These pleasures win out over omniscience and immortality. "By definition, angels are denied physical pleasure," Wenders explains. "They can't lift a book, they don't know what weight or taste or color is. They don't know the physical. They just know, so to speak, the essence of things. So I thought: This is really boring for

them, to not really know feelings. They can't burn in their stomach. Eternity must be a terrible drag" (Seidenberg, 31-32).

Wenders also comments,

"I don't believe in angels myself. The angels are only a metaphor, and what they're telling us is really is that anybody can be his own angel and that as children, we all carry in ourselves an angel. We can still be in touch with that child" (Seidenberg, 32).

Once realizing the pull of human existence, Damiel confesses to his friend, Cassiel, "At each step, each gust of wind, I'd like to be able to say 'Now.' 'Now' and 'now', and no longer say, 'since always' and 'forever'." Green proposes that the title, *Wings of Desire*, "suggests the aspirations of mortals and angels alike to be united on a plane of common experience" (127).

Green states that the film is

"Metamorphosis and redemption through love. Damiel's transformation to human form is accomplished through his love for Marion. On becoming mortal, he discovers the visual and tactile splendors about him, enjoys the first warming cup of coffee, the simple pleasure of rubbing his hands together in cold weather. As in any good fairy tale, however, Damiel and Marion must lose and find each other again. When they are finally reunited, one hears the words 'es war einmal . . .' which are the German equivalent of 'once upon a time ...'" (127).

Cook makes a fascinating discussion of the connection between the two major themes of *Wings*, a loving, epic narrative, and the need for epic narrative in cinema:

"Just as Marion and Damiel are gazing into the eyes of the other who signifies their desire, we, the spectators, gaze at the film and find our look and our desire mirrored by the camera . . . What Marion, Damiel, and the spectator share is the need for a life-sustaining fiction. Marion's struggle for identity reflects this need, but it is also at the very heart of the main event in the film story -- Damiel's crossover into mankind" (42-45).

As Damiel proclaims in the final monologue . . . their desire has conceived not a mortal child but an immortal collective image . . . He chose to live in a fiction of words and images, a sea of narrative that compensates for the loss of the child's unconscious existence in the world of the senses. As Damiel becomes human, those impulses that awakened desires in him will find their expression only in this collective medium of representations. An allusion to Phillip Marlowe calls attention to one such, and for Wenders a significant cultural sphere that mediates our desires and fears. Classical Hollywood film had exerted a particularly strong influence on the young Wenders and inspired his work as filmmaker. It carried for him a myth-forming power that he would, only after his filmmaking experiences in America, be able to put in perspective for his

own filmmaking. This power of epic, mythical narrative reveals itself when Damiel is moved to give up his existence outside of the physical world by the single, seemingly insignificant image of Phillip Marlowe feeding his cat. Damiel embraces the human capability of representing experience in a fictional, constructed context, even while knowing that this is the human condition per se, and that at the end of his life he "will have lived within" a fictional account that never coincides with the "facts" of one's existence. When Damiel becomes human, he can no longer function as a pure recorder of history. Tied to the present with all its personal and collective concerns, he possesses a more restricted and biased point of view, but along with it the basis for generating change . . . hope for humankind lies in other forms of representations. The acceptance of the journeys between the goals is a fulfilling life. Green recognizes that the journey is more important to Wenders than the destination, as the final written words in the film reveal "to be continued" (127).

And Nadotti poetically illustrates the essence of *Wings* as

"An extra-ordinary time of self-interrogation, undertaken not so as to know, but so as to describe a meaning for existence within the historical space of the individual geography. An originary time of innocence, of discovery undirected to whatever small apparent benefits may follow. A golden age in which dream has the weight of reality, desire the force of action . . ." (10).

One of the most important inspirations for *Wings* is the presence of children. Upon being asked by he includes them, and if he is a father, he responded:

"But that's often the way of it, that you can best describe what you most miss. In my films, children are present as the film's own fantasy, the eyes the film would like to see with. And only children really have that gaze. Sometimes in a film you can manage a gaze like a child's . . . Children have a sort of admonitory function in my films: to remind you with what curiosity and lack of prejudice it is possible to look at the world" (43).

Upon the subject of the fantasy of cinema and the effect on real life, Wenders comments:

"Real life only happens in real life. That's true, and I happen to believe that the cinema and real life are connected. I believe that cinema gets its ethics and its purpose by offering people help with their real lives, which means that it should have at least the possibility of relevance to life" (51).

In fact, this effect on reality can inspire change for an individual, as Wenders continues:

"But by showing that something is open to change, you keep the idea of change alive. And that for me is the only political act of which cinema is capable: keeping the idea of change going. Not by calling for change. You achieve very little by that, I find. Maybe you need to do that

sometimes, to call for change. But the really political act that cinema is capable of making change possible, by implication, by not gumming up people's brains and eyes" (52-53).

Change is always fuel to a soulful fire. Everything is always in transition; everyone inevitably cries out for change, whether it is for the better or for worse, it certainly shakes up one's human life toward a reality not touched until that moment of breaking free. And the cry that exists within every individual, every nation, every piece of cinema, comes from within. Call it as you will; the heart; the spirit; the essential; the soul. It doesn't matter what word it is, whatever language; ultimately, all people can return to the same context, for all people came from the same source, as did all things. Perhaps this knowledge, this self-reflection, can be a comfort to the worn psyche of the modern human being as it walks to wherever it's going, pausing to look over a shoulder and into nothingness for one second, and then turn into the movie-theatre.

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