

Seeing with the heart

My main motivation to become a filmmaker was a terrible Iranian film by Fradj Cehaderi, called *Barzakh* (which translates roughly as *People from Hell* or *The Doomed*). It was a post-revolutionary film about a group of murderers and thieves who escape from prison, only to find that Iraq has invaded Iran. The group have nothing in common, but they find themselves united in the face of the Iraqi enemy and motivated to fight together against him. It was a cheap action film, which combined war propaganda with the worst kind of B-movie police story plot; and a very hypocritical, opportunistic film because Cehaderi had made horrible, commercial, very exploitative films before the Revolution. Then after the Revolution, he used this patriotic film as a means to break back into the world of Iranian cinema. I mention this to show that ugly, terrible things can sometimes have a positive effect, in that they bring out something good and creative within you.

But a good film that made a great impression on me was Wim Wenders' *Wings of Desire*. I was so overwhelmed that I had pain all over my body after seeing it. No other film ever had that effect on me. It affected me so deeply that it gave me hope that cinema could really be a kind of Paradise.

As a child my grandmother looked after me. She was very traditional and religious. She didn't like cinema and she believed that whoever went to the movies would go to hell. Naturally, because of her influence, I was reluctant to go to the cinema. But to be perfectly honest, a lot of the Iranian cinema at that time was quite hellish anyway. When I first saw *Wings of Desire*, I wished that my grandmother were still alive so that I could show her that not all movies take you to hell, but that there are some that can take you to Paradise – not the Paradise after death but the Paradise within this life.

In Iranian philosophy, human beings formerly lived in Paradise; but they committed the original sin and were condemned to live on Earth. In *Wings of Desire*, this whole idea was turned around. The angel, by falling in love, chooses to become a human being. The traditional Iranian idea is that an angel comes to earth because he has committed a sin, or done something wrong. This film was saying that the ultimate goal for an angel was to become a human being. In most religions, there is a belief that when human beings reach the state of ultimate enlightenment, they can become angels. But here the message is that human beings can actually achieve a state that is higher than the angels, by falling in love.

The main dream of human beings – all film-makers, all artists – is to become immortal. An artist or a film-maker creates a work of art; he knows that when he dies his work will remain. Others have children to continue living through them. We are afraid of death because it disrupts the flow of life. In this film the angel, who is immortal, prefers to be mortal. His choosing love over immortality shows that love is the most important thing: that a human being becomes immortal when he's full of love. Wenders is also saying that to be immortal,

In Iranian culture, angels are tough bodyguards, so the kindly angels of Wenders' 'Wings of Desire' came as a surprise to the Iranian film-maker Mohsan Makhmalbaf, whose films include 'Salam Cinema' and 'Once Upon a Time, the Movies...'

by being an angel, is merely to endure the passage and the length of time. The angel in the film chooses love because he finds immortality within love, not within time. A human being reaches immortality through love, not by simply being able to exist within time.

I particularly enjoyed the way the angels were portrayed. In my culture, the angel is a kind of bodyguard, even a KGB agent, always trying to check up on us, to monitor our activities. He is an authoritarian figure. But in *Wings of Desire*, there was more a sense of the guardian angel who protects us and helps us to go through hardships – not the cop angel who spies on us.

In most religions, the main idea is the opposition/contradiction between earthly life and Paradise. In order to guarantee a happy afterlife, you have to be good here on earth. But in *Wings of Desire*, it was celestial intervention – through the angels – that helped to bring happiness on earth.

One of the simplest technical devices in the film – yet powerful – is the use of black and white to express the angelic dimension, and colour for the human. I also loved the scene when the angel decided to sell his wings to the antique dealer, and he only gets a bit of money – not very much at all. The idea that he preferred to get rid of his wings to hanging on to them intrigued me. And the wings being metallic or iron – very heavy and inflexible, not at all flesh and blood – was interesting too. In all religions, angels are described as being softer and smoother than human beings. In this film we see them more rigid and inflexible than humans, and that they don't see life in colour, only in black and white. They are operating on a more basic, limited level of experience than humans. Their interest in both the beautiful woman and the old man in the library is significant as well. It shows that their love was without prejudice in terms of age or sex or beauty. Both the old man and the young woman felt lonely and were in need of angelic attention.

The main feeling I got from the circus

scene was the sense of the woman being suspended in mid-air, not really knowing where to go, a bit lost. I felt this was like the human condition – we are all floating until we find love. Love brings us to earth: it gives us gravity, grounds us. The beautiful thing is that both the angel and the circus performer are in a similar situation. The angel comes from above, trying to put his feet on the earth, and also the woman comes down from her suspension. Love frees them both from this feeling of suspension – it gives them direction and purpose.

Considering the kind of gratuitous violence promoted in most cinema, I found *Wings of Desire* refreshing because, by showing the possibility that we were once all angels, a message of peace emerges. Why should humans fight together if they were once all in an angelic state? The film promotes friendship between human beings and angels, and brotherhood between men. If an American regarded a Vietnamese as an angel come to earth, how could he possibly kill him? Why should we all get along? Because we all used to be angels and we all used to be in love. If we believe this, or in our potential to fall in love, then it's hard for us to hate or kill each other.

Compared to Wenders' previous films, such as *Paris, Texas* – which offers no solution to life's problems, which says in fact what Antonioni has said before – *Wings of Desire* offers a way, a hope, of overcoming these problems. After watching *Paris, Texas*, or Antonioni, you feel suicidal. But after watching *Wings of Desire*, you feel a sense of renewal, of motivation to get out there and really start living. Some poets waste their words, and some film-makers waste their equipment and facilities, as well as the audience's time, by giving them meaningless cinema that is mere entertainment. I believe what Kurosawa said that we have to see films with our heart. I think that every film should bring something new and fresh into your life. I think that should be the main goal of cinema.

Mohsan Makhmalbaf talked to Hadani Ditmars



Someone to watch over me: 'Wings of Desire'