The Funambulist Pamphlets 11: Cinema

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Wim Wenders’s magnificent movie Der Himmel Über Berlin (strangely translated as Wings of Desire, 1987) is an ode to our humanity. It performs such through the testimony of the weight of our bodies — the circus is particularly useful for this matter — but also the weight of life and history (in the individual and collective sense), which facilitates the enclosing of the self and its defiance towards Otherness, easily manifested in Cold-War Berlin. A taxi driver thinks in the film:

Are there still borders? More than ever! Every street has its borderline. Between each plot, there’s a strip of no-man’s-land disguised as a
hedge or a ditch. Whoever dares, will fall into booby traps or be hit by laser rays. The trout are really torpedoes. Every home owner, or even every tenant nails his name plate on the door, like a coat of arms and studies the morning paper as if he were a world leader. Germany has crumbled into as many small states as there are individuals. And these small states are mobile. Everyone carries his own state with him, and demands a toll when another wants to enter. A fly caught in amber, or a leather bottle. So much for the border. But one can only enter each state with a password. The German soul of today can only be conquered and governed by one who arrives at each small state with the password. Fortunately, no one is currently in a position to do this. So… everyone migrates, and waves his one-man-state flag in all earthly directions. Their children already shake their rattles and drag their filth around them in circles.

Many characters are introduced in this movie, but one strikes us as being able to embody the role of the film’s director himself and, by extension, any poet, writer or other storyteller: der Erzähler (the storyteller). In Wings of Desire this character is old and weak, as he is the witness to the origins of the Berlin situation at the end of the 1980s: war and the partition. Wenders introduces Berliners and the urban space as entities that cannot manage to forget the world wars and their horrible damage. It is through the Erzähler that he attributes this misery to the flags, i.e. the increasing success of nationalist ideology in Europe, and more specifically of Nazism in Germany. We see him in the library, struggling his way up the stairs as his body does not seem to be able to carry him anymore:
Tell me, muse, of the storyteller who has been thrust to the edge of the world, both an infant and an ancient, and through him reveal every man. With time, those who listened to me became my readers. They no longer sit in a circle, but rather sit apart. And one doesn’t know anything about the other. I’m an old man with a broken voice, but the tale still rises from the depths, and the mouth, slightly opened, repeats it as clearly, as powerfully. A liturgy for which no one needs to be initiated to the meaning of words and sentences.

Then later, he wanders along the wall, looking for the Potzdamer Platz that used to be a prosperous part of Berlin and which disappeared at the end of the war and also during the partition. Through this physical wandering, he also goes from thought to thought wondering what his role is in society:

Must I give up now? If I do give up, then mankind will lose its storyteller. And if mankind once loses its storyteller, then it will lose its childhood.

As it is immediately understood in this film, childhood is indeed the state of humanity that embodies the most a Rousseauvian interpretation of life, and its playfulness is celebrated by Wenders through his recurrent psalmody, “Als das Kind Kind war …” (“When the child was child …”). However, through this movie, Wenders also questions his role as a storyteller and reaches the conclusion that this role is fundamental for society, as the old Erzähler finishes the film with this sentence:

Tell me of the men, women, and children who will look for me – me, their storyteller, their bard,
their choirmaster – because they need me more than anything in the world. *Nous sommes embarqués*

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