DO YOU NEED THE WINGS OF EROS TO FLY OR TO LAND? WIM WENDERS MEETS PLATO IN REVERSE FLIGHTS BETWEEN HEAVEN AND EARTH.



The Encounter Between Sculpture and Philosophy: “Cupid and Psyche” by Antonio Canova



Antonio Canova's (1757–1822) Neoclassical sculpture "Cupid and Psyche," the first and celebrated version of which is displayed at the Louvre, uniquely embodies idealism and sensuality, combining the spiritual dimension of love with the beauty of the human body. Carved from white marble, it depicts the breathtaking moment when Cupid awakens Psyche with a kiss. The composition stands out for its pyramidal structure, the flowing lines of the bodies, and the characteristic intersection of the figures, which creates an imaginary "X." The harmony of movement, the tenderness of the gesture, and the sensual rendering of the bodies lend the work an air of divine grace and erotic passion.

Of particular importance is Canova's marble-working technique, through which he achieved an exceptionally smooth, almost translucent surface. Using the final finishing technique (ultima mano), and among other things pumice stone, he gave the marble a soft, almost waxen texture reminiscent of human skin. Light reflects off the surfaces in such a way that the coldness of stone seems to yield to the vitality of the human form.



In a later version of the work, Psyche bears delicate butterfly wings low on her back. In contrast to Cupid’s large, feathered wings, Canova chose this form for Psyche as a direct reference to the ancient Greek tradition, in which the butterfly above all symbolized the flight and immortality of the human soul. In the first version at the Louvre, Psyche has no wings.

The sculpture offers an excellent starting point for our reflection: Can love awaken the soul and transform existence?

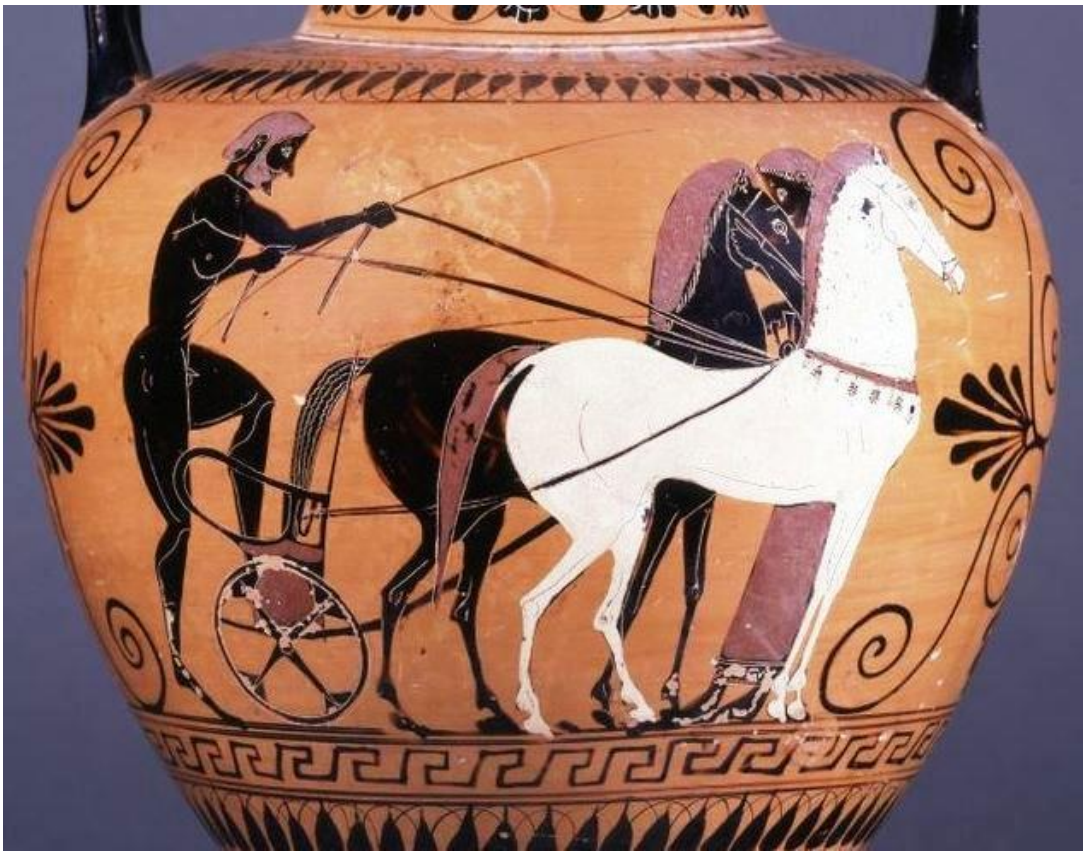
The Love of the Soul in Plato's Phaedrus

In Plato's Phaedrus (see also the earlier exercise of 26 November 2023: [LINK Earlier exercise|https://tinyurl.com/58ks2xmk] and the [LINK Blog post|https://tinyurl.com/5esfdbms]), love is not merely a human desire or a physical attraction to another person. It is a deeper force that can awaken the soul, lead it to self-knowledge, and set it in motion in the search for truth. When a person beholds the beauty of a beloved, their soul is stirred and recalls the eternal Form of Beauty, which, according to the Platonic myth, it had beheld before its incarnation. Sensible beauty thus becomes the starting point of a spiritual ascent: through what is visible, the soul seeks something that transcends it.

According to the myth, souls follow the gods and strive to behold the Forms beyond the heavens, foremost among them Truth itself. When, however, they fail to sustain their upward course, they lose their wings and become incarnate. Embodied life is thus associated with forgetting the vision they once had, without eliminating the possibility of recollection.

At this point, love acquires extraordinary significance. The sight of sensible beauty can awaken the memory of true Beauty and set the soul's wings in motion once again. Plato even recognizes in love a form of divine madness which, when directed towards what is truly beautiful, can become a beneficent force for human existence. Love, then, is not merely an emotion. It is a force that transforms the way the soul perceives itself and the world.

The essence of the Platonic approach lies in the transformation of desire into a search for truth. True love does not confine the soul to the desire to "possess" the beloved; rather, it urges the soul to transcend its self-sufficiency and turn towards the beautiful and the good. To love, in this sense, means recognizing in another person a beauty that calls me to become better.



The Allegory of the Soul's Chariot

To explain the soul's complex nature and its inner journey, Plato uses the famous allegory of the winged chariot in the Phaedrus. The soul is likened to a charioteer driving two winged horses. The charioteer symbolizes reason and the capacity for guidance, while the two horses express different forces within human nature. One is noble, disciplined, and obedient to reason; the other is spirited, unruly, and carried away by desire. The soul is therefore caught in a constant inner tension between its spiritual ascent and the forces that hold it captive to immediate desires. The charioteer is called upon to coordinate these opposing forces and direct the chariot towards a higher purpose.

Wim Wenders' Wings of Desire: Eternity as an Existential Deprivation



Wim Wenders' Wings of Desire: Eternity as an Existential Deprivation



1. THE BEGINNING OF THE FILM.mp4

The central character is Damiel, played by Bruno Ganz. His eternal existence does not offer him the fulfilment one might expect. On the contrary, he increasingly feels the absence of a body and of the senses. He can observe the world, but he cannot taste a cup of coffee, feel the cold, touch another person, or experience the emotion of a real encounter. Rather than being a privilege, eternity gradually becomes an existential deprivation.

Cinematic Language: From Black and White to Colour

Henri Alekan's cinematography is a decisive element of the film's philosophical narrative. The angels' perspective is conveyed primarily through black-and-white images, while human experience is presented in colour. This contrast is not merely an aesthetic choice. It symbolizes the difference between observation and participation, between knowing about life and actually living it. Black and white express the angels' distance from the sensible world, while colour highlights the sensory fullness of human existence.

Berlin, meanwhile, functions as more than a setting. The Wall, the empty spaces, the historic buildings, and the city's ordinary inhabitants compose the portrait of a city divided both literally and psychologically. People live beside one another but are often unable to truly meet. Wenders thus creates a cinematic symphony of the city, in which people's inner monologues, poetic images, and music form a meditation on loneliness and the need for human presence.

The film received the Best Director Award at the 1987 Cannes Film Festival and became established as one of the most important works of poetic and philosophical cinema.

Returning to the Phaedrus: The Soul's Wings and the Desire to Transcend

The philosophical connection between the film and Plato emerges through a shared question: How can love transform existence?

In the Phaedrus, the soul longs to regain its wings and turn towards truth and Beauty. An erotic encounter with a beautiful person activates the memory of the reality beyond the heavens and causes an inner disturbance that may lead to spiritual rebirth. Erotic desire is not exhausted by attraction to another's body.

The sensible becomes the starting point for a deeper quest. Through the beloved's beauty, the soul recognizes something that transcends it and feels compelled to move towards it.

Here lies a fundamental point of connection with Wenders: in both works, love breaks through the subject's self-sufficiency and propels it towards a different mode of existence.



The direction of this transformation, however, is different. In Plato, the soul seeks to rise from the sensible world towards the intelligible realm. In Wenders, Damiel wishes to abandon his transcendent position and enter the sensible world. This difference will become the core of the creative reversal of Platonic symbolism.

Damiel's Encounter with Marion: From Observation to Desire — The Gaze That Gives Birth to Love



Marion, played by Solveig Dommartin, is a trapeze artist living in Berlin. Her everyday life is characterized by artistic creation, loneliness, and existential uncertainty. She seeks a meaningful human connection, someone with whom she could share her life.

2. THE FIRST FLUTTER OF LOVE.mp4

Damiel begins to observe her and gradually becomes moved by her presence. Marion ceases to be merely one of the people he watches from the distance of his angelic existence. She becomes the person through whom he discovers his own desire for a different life.

Their encounter is particularly interesting when considered in relation to the Platonic understanding of erotic awakening. Just as, in the Phaedrus, the sight of beauty can activate the recollection of true Beauty, Marion's presence awakens a deeper desire in Damiel. Her beauty does not merely arouse attraction; it makes him question the very way in which he exists.

Do we fall in love with the person before us, or with the beauty and truth that we discover through that person?

Marion’s Desire for an Encounter with the Other



3. AN EROTIC DREAM.mp4

Marion’s dream is an important poetic moment in the film. She is in a transitional state between dream and reality, in which her desire for love and companionship takes on symbolic form. The dream is not simply an imaginary escape from her loneliness. It expresses a deeper need: to be recognized by another person, to love and be loved, and to share the experience of existence. The scene creates a poetic parallel between Marion’s inner world and Damiel’s desire. Although the two protagonists have not yet truly met, they seem to be moving towards the same need: to transcend isolation through human connection.

The Choice of Mortal Existence

4. FROM ANGEL TO HUMAN.mp4

Damiel’s desire to become human marks the decisive turning point of the film. He no longer wishes to observe life from a distance, but to participate in it. He wants to acquire a body, senses, and the ability to experience love. His decision entails abandoning angelic immortality and accepting uncertainty, pain, decay, and death. He chooses to enter a world in which nothing is guaranteed and every encounter may prove unique and unrepeatable.



This choice takes on particular significance when related to the Phaedrus. While the Platonic soul longs to regain its wings and ascend towards the truth beyond the heavens, Damiel wishes to part with his in order to experience human reality. The difference is fundamental: in Plato, erotic experience can become a path beyond the sensible, whereas in Wenders, love becomes the occasion for a return to it.

Can true love, then, lift us beyond the body or, on the contrary, help us inhabit human existence more deeply?

The Soul's Wings and the Angels' Wings: A Creative Reversal of Plato

The film's title acquires particular philosophical interest when related to the Platonic image of the soul bearing wings.

In the Phaedrus, wings symbolize the soul's ability to rise towards truth and beauty. Their growth is linked to erotic experience, which awakens the memory of the soul's divine origin. Conversely, their loss symbolizes the soul's inability to maintain contact with the reality beyond the heavens.



In Wenders, however, we observe an intriguing reversal. The angels literally possess the ability to fly, yet Damiel wishes to abandon this ability. The wings, which could symbolize his higher nature, also become symbols of the distance separating him from human experience. His desire to relinquish them expresses his need to acquire something his angelic nature cannot offer: the ability to feel, touch, love, and participate in reality. This does not mean that Wenders rejects spirituality or reduces love to physical pleasure. On the contrary, he presents the human condition as a complex experience in which body, thought, memory, desire, and awareness of mortality coexist.

After all, in Plato too, sensible beauty is not an obstacle to spiritual inquiry. It can be its starting point. The difference lies chiefly in the direction taken by the transformation: the Platonic soul seeks to transcend the sensible, whereas Damiel chooses to participate in it fully. We might therefore say that Wenders transforms the Platonic symbol: wings no longer express only the possibility of ascending towards heaven, but also the distance from earthly reality that must be bridged for love to become an actual lived experience.

Mortality as a Precondition of Love

One of the film's deepest philosophical questions concerns the relationship between love and mortality (see also the [LINK related exercise|https://tinyurl.com/3yswyjkw]). Damiel chooses to become mortal, accepting that human life is limited and that any experience may be the last. His decision is not simply a rejection of eternity, but an affirmation of the value of finitude. Mortality lends particular intensity to human relationships. Because an encounter can be lost, the other person's presence acquires unique value. Because the body is vulnerable, touch becomes precious. Because time is limited, moments acquire special meaning.

Damiel therefore prefers the uncertainty of human life to the security of an eternal existence without bodily participation. He accepts pain and the possibility of loss because he discovers that love requires exposure and vulnerability.

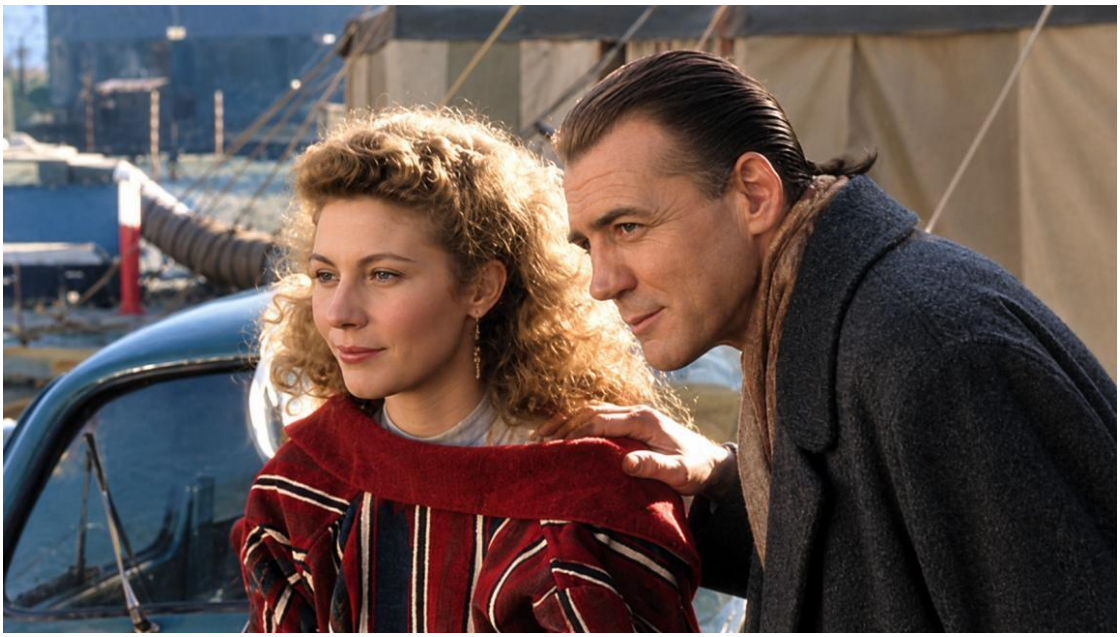
Here an important dimension of the film emerges: transcendence is not achieved by withdrawing from everyday life, but by participating in it meaningfully. For Wenders, love does not offer human beings immortality; it offers them the possibility of experiencing more deeply the time allotted to them.

From Desire to a Real Encounter: Damiel's Union with Marion

5. IN THE REAL WORLD.mp4

Damiel's transition from angelic to human existence culminates in his encounter with Marion. Once he acquires human form, his desire to participate in life becomes a real possibility. He can now meet Marion not as an invisible observer, but as a person exposed to the presence and response of another. Love ceases to be one-sided observation and becomes the possibility of a relationship involving bodily presence, touch, vulnerability, and reciprocity.

This final scene of the film can once again be connected with the Phaedrus. In Plato, an erotic relationship acquires philosophical value when it contributes to the improvement of the soul and to a shared journey towards virtue. Love is not exhausted by the desire to "possess" the beloved; it transforms the way we exist and relate to the world. The Platonic allegory of the charioteer and the two horses also offers an interesting field for reflection. An erotic relationship presupposes harmony between desire and conscious choice. Love means neither an uncontrolled surrender to passions nor their cold repression. It requires recognition of the other's freedom, respect, and reciprocity.



When does love become a path to self-knowledge, and when does it turn into a desire to possess the other?

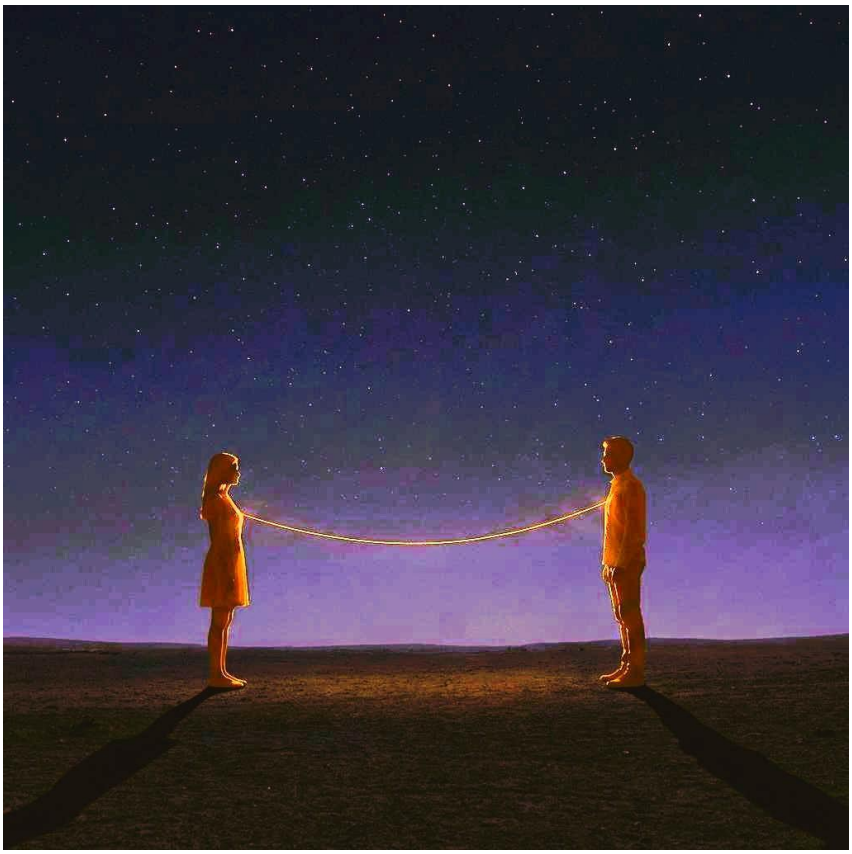
The final encounter between Damiel and Marion is not a conventional cinematic ending, but the promise of a shared journey. Love is not presented as an ideal union outside time, but as an ongoing search and choice.

Cinematic Language as a Philosophical Experience

The philosophical dimension of Wings of Desire is expressed not only through its plot and dialogue, but also through its very cinematic form. The alternation between black and white and colour transforms the image

into a medium of philosophical reflection. Angelic observation is set against human participation, while sensory experience emerges as an essential element of existence. Similarly, the angels' wandering above Berlin creates a symbolic contrast between proximity and alienation. The angels can hear people's thoughts, but cannot truly participate in their lives. Knowing another person's inner world is not equivalent to genuinely encountering them. This is one of the film's most important messages: human communication requires presence, exposure, and reciprocity. It is not enough to know what another person is thinking; we must be willing to meet them. Music, poetic monologues, and silences reinforce this feeling. Wenders offers no definitive answers, but creates a space for contemplation in which viewers are invited to confront their own questions about erotic love, affection, loneliness, and the meaning of life. Cinema thus becomes a philosophical experience in itself: it invites us to feel the difference between abstract knowledge and lived experience, between observation and participation, between desire and an actual encounter.

Conclusion: Love as a Choice for Life



Wings of Desire is a deeply contemplative film about human existence, erotic love, affection, and the value of mortality. Wim Wenders creates a cinematic universe in which eternity does not guarantee fulfilment and human frailty does not entail an absence of meaning. On the contrary, the ability to feel, desire, love, and share life emerges as one of the greatest privileges of the human condition.

The connection with Plato's Phaedrus illuminates an essential shared premise: love is a force that transforms the soul and breaks through the limits of its self-sufficiency. For Plato, erotic attraction can awaken the recollection of true Beauty and lead the soul towards truth. For Wenders, erotic desire impels the angel to abandon his transcendent security and embrace the human fate. The two approaches are not identical. Plato highlights the soul's ability to rise towards the intelligible realm, whereas Wenders emphasizes the value of

embodied presence and participation in the world. Nevertheless, in both, love transcends the mere desire to "possess." It is a movement towards something that surpasses and transforms us.

Perhaps the film's deepest message ultimately lies in Damiel's choice: he prefers an imperfect, fragile, and fleeting life to an eternity without genuine participation. He does not abandon his angelic nature because human life is superior in every respect, but because he discovers that love requires presence, vulnerability, and acceptance of time.

In Plato's Phaedrus, the soul's wings symbolize the impulse towards beauty and truth. In Wenders, by contrast, relinquishing the ability to fly becomes the beginning of a different kind of spiritual discovery. The angel must descend to earth to discover what he could not know from heaven.

And this may be the most essential philosophical meeting point between the two works: love takes us beyond ourselves and leads us to a deeper understanding of existence. Whether as a Platonic recollection of Beauty or as an existential choice of embodied life, it reveals that human beings do not attain fulfilment in isolation, but through their relationship with the Other.

Ultimately, the soul's wings do not serve only to lift us towards heaven. They help us discover what it means to be truly present in life.



