

ARTÍCULOS
DE INVESTIGACIÓN

Byung-Chul Han Goes to the Movies: Phenomenology of Relations with the World in *Der Himmel über Berlin* (1987)*

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Received: January 22nd, 2024 | Approved: February 25th, 2024

Doi: <https://doi.org/10.17533/udea.ef.356043>

Abstract: In this paper we show how the film *Der Himmel über Berlin* (Wenders, 1987) allows for a phenomenological reflection on the bonds of human beings with the world. We submit the hypothesis that the thinking of Byung-Chul Han, functions as a philosophical lens through which such a reading may be advanced. This paper has three sections: the first sees Damiel, one of the film's main characters, as a vehicle to describe the lightness of the world and the angst resulting from not being able to bond with the weight of existence. The second presents Peter Falk as the main trigger that causes Damiel to decide to enter the world of mortals and live a life exiled from eternity. Finally, we present Marion, Damiel's romantic interest, as the main motivation for Damiel to renounce being an angel, as she fulfills the role of an Eros capable of triggering in the individual the vital strength to cause the subject to enter into a bond with the world.

Keywords: cinema, contemporary philosophy, phenomenology, Byung-Chul Han, aesthetics.

* This paper is the result of the research project 2993 (SIVIE code), "Delimitación de la psicopolítica a la luz de los filósofos Han y Onfray. Los conceptos de tiempo, trabajo y libertad como constitutivos de la experiencia neoliberal de control y como Resistencia al *Homo oeconomicus* en la Sociedad occidental contemporánea," funded by Universidad Industrial de Santander (Colombia).

How to cite this article:

Botero-Bernal, A., Aguirre-Román, J. O., & Almeyda-Sarmiento, J. D. (2025). Byung-Chul Han Goes to the Movies: Phenomenology of Relations with the World in *Der Himmel über Berlin* (1987). *Estudios De Filosofía*, 71, 180-197. <https://doi.org/10.17533/udea.ef.356043>

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Byung-Chul Han va al cine. La fenomenología de las relaciones con el mundo en *Der Himmel über Berlin* (1987)

Resumen: Este escrito tiene por objetivo demostrar cómo desde el filme *Der Himmel über Berlin* es posible trazar una reflexión fenomenológica sobre los vínculos del ser humano con el mundo. Para esto se parte de la hipótesis de que el pensamiento de Byung-Chul Han, funciona como lente filosófico para poder hacer una lectura del tipo antes propuesta. Con este fin, el artículo se divide en tres partes: la primera, toma a Daniel, uno de los personajes principales, para poder describir la ligereza del mundo y la angustia de no poder ser capaz de generar una vinculación con el peso de la existencia; la segunda, toma a Peter Falk como el principal detonante para que Daniel tome la decisión de entrar al mundo de los mortales a vivir una vida fuera de la eternidad; y finalmente, se toma a Marion, el interés romántico de Daniel, como núcleo motivacional para la renuncia de Daniel a ser un ángel, debido a que ésta funciona como un Eros capaz de detonar en el individuo una fuerza vital con el potencial de vincular al sujeto con el mundo.

Palabras clave: cine, filosofía contemporánea, fenomenología, Byung-Chul Han, estética

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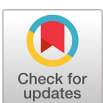
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Introduction

The starting point for this paper is Han's claim¹ concerning his fascination for the film *Der Himmel über Berlin*, directed by Wim Wenders and written by Peter Handke. Beyond pointing out his admiration for the film, as well as for Handke,² Han does not elaborate on the reason for his interest in the work of these two artists; he just hints at it and no other reference to the matter appears in his work.

Consequently, the main purpose of this paper is to explore the way in which the South-Korean philosopher's thinking directly coincides with what can be observed in *Der Himmel über Berlin*. To that end, this paper is divided into three sections: the first section discusses Damiel's (Bruno Ganz) withering body as an angel; we reflect on the protagonist's phantasmagoric materiality and his sense of ennui throughout the film. The second section considers Peter Falk (as himself), as the individual who exposes Damiel to the splendor of everyday things, which can only be perceived by human beings as a result of their complex intimacy with finitude. Lastly, we explore Damiel's relationship with Marion (Solveig Dommartin), where she serves as an incarnation of Eros within the film, as she propels the protagonist's actions and thoughts, which will result in Damiel's transformation from angel to human.

Before we begin, it is important to present an overview of the film. *Der Himmel über Berlin* tells the story of Damiel, one of many angels, who partners up with Cassiel (Otto Sander); together, they are given the eternal task of watching over human beings (in this case, those living in Berlin). They cannot directly intervene in their actions or become visible to them (except for children); the only thing they can do for humans is comfort and encourage them to move on. At some point of his existence, Damiel meets Marion, a woman who—without ever speaking to or having any contact with him—, makes the angel give up his immortality to go look for her. He is talked into becoming human by Peter Falk, an actor who, for some reason, feels the presence of angels and manages to talk to Damiel for long enough to convince him to forsake eternity and live a human life.

1. Damiel, or the lightness of living as a spirit

Der Himmel über Berlin offers the audience a resource through which they can distinguish two dimensions within the film, to wit: the angelic perspective (where

1 As he himself claims: "I live in Schöneberg close to the Langenscheidt Bridge, where the film 'Wings of Desire' is set, one of my favorite films, written by Peter Handke and Wim Wenders. I know the beginning of the film by heart" (Gresser, 2015, min. 5, sec. 48 – min. 6, sec. 4). Additionally, the documentary recreates the film's aura.

2 In Han's own words: "My books often begin with Peter Handke or end with Peter Handke" (Gresser, 2015, min. 6, sec. 38).

Damiel, Cassiel, and the other angels live) and the mortal perception of human beings (where Peter and Marion can be found). The difference between these perspectives is made evident in the film in that the angels' is presented in black and white, whereas the human dimension is portrayed using the color palette individuals perceive in their everyday lives. Throughout the film, and almost all the way up until the end, Damiel is trapped in his inability to *perceive* in the strict sense of the word; his only way of interacting with the world is through his sight, some kind of pseudo-sense, as he cannot really *touch*, *smell*, or *taste* the human world. As a result, the angel finds his life meaningless, eternal though it is—a major detail which makes him a spectator, rather than a *contemplator* of the human world.³

The situation described above implies that Damiel's experience is biased, as a result of his God-given task of anonymously watching over humanity. His angelic condition places him in a position through which the *sensuality* with which he interacts with the world provides no *openness* of any sort. As a result, his existence becomes pure living, lacking any direction. Damiel serves as an example of how the regime of the ego makes the experience of the Other asymmetrical: "Eros concerns the Other in the strong sense, namely, what cannot be encompassed by the regime of the ego. Therefore, in the *inferno of the same* [...] erotic experience does not exist. Erotic experience presumes the asymmetry and exteriority of the Other" (Han, 2017b, p. 1). While his task is certainly critical, what Damiel points to is the fact that angelic life implies a sacrifice that directly affects the ontological structure of what an angel is; such an event leads him to wondering whether eternity is worth it in exchange for recovering the ability to *wonder* as an existential category: "Wonder is a disposition, being attuned to the wonderful. At the end of the ascending ladder, the adept of beauty 'all of a sudden' catches sight of the 'wonderfully beautiful' (*thaumaston kalon*), of 'divine Beauty' (*theion kalon*)" (Han, 2021a).⁴ Such an absence, which also guides the protagonist throughout the film, may be described as a *withering sensation*, which is reinforced by the angels' inability to see colors. It results in the need to create an onto-phenomenal opening within Damiel (that is, a reflection on his own existence, as a result of being-with), which is characterized by the desire to understand what makes human life what it is—a question answered by Peter (and to which we will return) later on.

As a result of such a worldview, Damiel neglects his task as an angel: watching over humans (unlike his partner Cassiel), only to wander aimlessly and carelessly

3 This process implies the revitalization of contemplative life in the face of a prior condition of passivity, an issue that Han has explored in his apology of *vita contemplativa* (2024b)

4 The fact that Heidegger serves as a precedent in the matter of *wonder* should also be considered: "Curiosity has nothing to do with the contemplation that wonders at being [...] it has no interest in *wondering* to the point of not understanding. Rather, it makes sure of knowing, but just in order to have known" (Heidegger, 1996, p. 161; italics ours).

around Berlin, looking for a respite from his weariness. Furthermore, the *withering perception* that assails the angel presents the audience with a vision of what eternal life may be like. As Daniel himself would confess, such a life is encumbered by eternal boredom caused by having to watch over others living their lives, not knowing what it is that makes it worth living, especially considering all the suffering that pervades life.⁵ The latter point is relevant, as it could be said that perception withers, and as such, it results in a withered life; a perception of positivity is pervasive: everything is the same, there is no suffering, negativity does not interfere, there is no *body* that feels. In this sense, as Han points out:

The negativity of the *Other* provides form and measure for the *Selfsame*; without it, the *Same* proliferates. The *Selfsame* is not identical to the *Same*; it always appears in tandem with the *Other*. The *Same*, by contrast, lacks a dialectical counterpart that can limit and form it, and thus proliferates into a formless mass. (Han, 2018c, p. 3)

Daniel's sense of withering, the feeling of invulnerability that surrounds his life as an angel, causes him to feel that he is not in possession of life, of a *proper name* to which a narrative may be assigned (Han, 2024a). The absence of a story of his own becomes especially evident the moment he understands that his life, if it could in fact be called a life, lacks the *weight* of finitude. Daniel is a spirit, a ghost who moves from shoulder to shoulder displaying a spectral lightness that turns him into pure positivity.⁶ The angel is unable to live in this world; he can only be a spectator of what occurs in it. The way in which the film shows a black-and-white perspective of life points to the idea that Daniel is at odds with the meaning of his own existence, if such a category may be attributed to an angel. Daniel's *tiredness*, in this sense, results from his desire to bind himself to the world, in the same way that the humans he watches over. His attitude may be contrasted with that of Cassiel, who finds no problem in carrying out his millenary task; quite the contrary: he feels at ease doing his job, whether it goes well or not (in some cases the task of an angel may not come to fruition as the human being they are watching over kills himself or dies a natural death). Consequently, Daniel is portrayed as an angel who is tired of watching humans living their lives, without being a part of life; his exhaustion opens the way for a

5 This idea is crucial to Schopenhauer's philosophy (1969): "essentially *all life is suffering*" (p. 310, italics in the original). Likewise, concerning *eternal boredom*, it could be said, as Zuleta (2017) would put it, that Daniel sings "the eternal hosannah of contented boredom" (p. 20, translation ours). These ideas can be found in Han's theses on *tiredness and burnout* (2015)

6 A concept associated to that of positive violence, positivity can be understood as a disposition of being which, in Han (2018d), manifests itself as a type of systemic mechanism to exert violence over the subject: "Violence isn't merely an excess of negativity; it can also be an excess of positivity, the *accumulation of the positive*, which manifests as overachievement, overproduction, overcommunication, hyperattention, and hyperactivity" (p. viii).

sense of curiosity regarding the finitude of humanity compared to eternal divinity,⁷ an operation that may be related to the logic of burnout as presented by Han:

But another kind of tiredness exists, too; here, the ego abandons *itself* into the world [*das Ich verläßt sich auf die Welt hin*]; it is tiredness as “more of less of me” [*Mehr des weniger Ich*], healthy ‘tiredness that trusts in the world’. I-tiredness, as solitary tiredness, is worldless and world-destroying (Han, 2015, pp. 35-36).⁸

We can see here how the withered nature of Damiel’s existence reflects a lack of bonding with life and the world where it takes place; in other words, Damiel’s presence—which, as a spirit, may be in fact more closely related to the phantasmagoric—,⁹ implies a type of *existence* for which there is no such thing as a world to which one can relate or with which one can bond. The *lightness* of the angel, the lack of weight and physical and bodily dimensions, his absence from time, turn him into a hollow figure, and at the same time, into an entity that lacks any discomfort.¹⁰ His existence outside of this world makes him a subject of perfect performance, trapped in pure positivity. This becomes evident in the pseudo-life Damiel has lived since the moment he was created.

What becomes evident, then, is an angelic perception that stands out as a fundamental paradox within Damiel’s existence: he exists but, at the same time, he has no life or a world where he can be located. His presence, lacking negativity, is lost in some sort of second world, where he can only observe and watch, in fulfilment of his eternal duty. What this dissatisfaction points to is that the angelic being can hardly stand purely positive life; the absence of negativity turns him into a dead-living being, a specter with a single function who cannot stop accumulating as he continues to watch. Damiel’s inability to *feel pain* (feeling human), as represented in the film, manifests itself in his love interest: it produces a lack of true happiness,

7 This idea, derived from Han’s Hegelian influence, may be related to Hegel’s Law of the Heart (2018, pp. 213-219). The radical otherness of human life before angelic life allows for such an approach relating the concepts advanced by Han and Hegel.

8 It should not be forgotten that such logic is influenced by Handke’s work (2022b) about *cosmic tiredness* and *solitary tiredness*.

9 As a specter, Damiel is trapped in a specifically phantomatic logic of indeterminacy, hence his lack of a bond to the world and existence itself: a “hauntology,” as Derrida (1994) points out. “The spirit, the specter are not the same thing, and we will have to sharpen this difference; but as for what they have in common, one does not know what it *is*, what it is presently. *It is* something that one does not know, precisely, and one does not know if precisely it *is*, if it exists, if it responds to a name and corresponds to an essence. One does not know: not out of ignorance, but because this non-object, this non-present present, this being-there of an absent or departed one no longer belongs to knowledge. At least no longer to that which one thinks one knows by the name of knowledge. One does not know if it is living or if it is dead” (p. 5).

10 *Lightness* should be understood here as a condition desired by mortals, but which is seen as a threat by Damiel, an immortal angel. As Lipovetsky (2015) points out in his analysis of hypermodern society, “lightness is no longer associated with vice, but rather with mobility, virtuality, respect for the environment. These are the times when lightness has its revenge: it is now admired, desired; it conquers dreams; it carries with itself great promises, but also terrible threats” (p. 8, translation ours).

resulting from a life where he is trapped in the reification of perpetual happiness. As Han points out,

Happiness is not just a collection of positive feelings that promises enhanced performance. It cannot be captured by the logic of optimization. What characterizes happiness is the fact that it is not at one's disposal. Inherent in it is a certain negativity. True happiness is only possible as *fractured*. What stops happiness becoming reified is precisely pain, and pain gives happiness endurance. Pain bears happiness. *Painful happiness* is not an oxymoron. Any *intensity* is painful. *Passion* binds pain and happiness together (Han, 2021b, p. 10).

Losing any bond with the human world causes Damiel to feel there is no experience in itself that may give meaning to his existence. While it is true that angels remember everything, things do not have any meaning or value to them. Following up on this, Damiel and Cassiel, as well as the other angels, accumulate information, data and so forth, but since they are not experientially related to the world—where those memories and knowledge were originally acquired and colorized—, these lack any meaning for them; in other words, they go from collecting memories to accumulating data. Therefore, the experiential lightness that defines angels turns them into beings who are incapable of generating *relations* with elements that are exclusive to the human world, such as time and space. Consequently, these divine beings perceive themselves as lacking any (hi)story, as entities that cannot find themselves within reality and who cannot establish a life, which necessarily requires a shared presence with the fundamental otherness that constitutes the world. Hence the impulse to see colors, as a metaphor of the impossibility he faces. As Han points out in his reading of accumulation:

On its own, a mass of information generates no truth. It sheds no light into the dark. The more information is set free, the more confusing and ghostly the world becomes. After a certain point, information ceases to be informative. It becomes deformative. Likewise, communication stops being communicative; henceforth, it is only cumulative (Han, 2017a, p. 60-61).¹¹

This point is relevant since, as we shall see later, it is this otherness that makes it possible, in a certain way, for *the heart to beat*, that is, for it to have a fundamental negative experience such as *encountering* other individuals. Even more important is the fascination with everyday life, as a space-time where bonds with life, both old

11 Arendt has commented on this in her discussion of the weight of the world and the existence that gathers us together as humans: "To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it; the world, like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time" (1958, p. 52).

and new, are constantly being formed, occurring in disruptive scenarios which are not made up of positivity and sameness (black and white), but rather of colors, flavors, and sounds, which result in an experience of being alive that is overcome by *wonder*.

2. Peter Falk and the awakening of everyday wonder

The character that best personifies the ability to wonder is actor Peter Falk. At some point of the story, this individual, who lives in the human dimension, establishes contact with Damiel, who finds himself in the angelic dimension. In the following dialogue, which astonishes the angel for the second time (we will discuss the first time in the following section), the actor introduces him to that which he is missing:

I can't see you, but I know you're here. I feel it. You've been hanging around since I got here. I wish I could see your face. Just look into your eyes, and tell you how good it is to be here. Just to touch something. See, that's cold... that feels good. Here... to smoke, have coffee. And if you do it together it's fantastic. Or to draw: you know, you take a pencil and you make a dark line, then you make a light line and together it's a good line. Or when your hands are cold, you rub them together [he rubs his hands]... you see, that's good, that feels good! There's so many good things! But you're not here—I'm here. I wish you were here. I wish you could talk to me (Wenders, 1987, 1h. 24min-25min).

In this short dialogue, Falk describes to a divine being *that which he is missing*. It should be noted that the conversation does not refer to great moments in human life, such as great achievements, goals, or accomplishments; it rather calls attention to the fact that the joy of living as part of humanity revolves around small everyday events surrounded by a particular aura. Damiel's life lacks these thresholds, in opposition to Falk. Han (2020b) refers to this in his reading of time: "Thresholds, as transitions, give a rhythm to, articulate, and even narrate space and time. They make possible a deep experience of order. Thresholds are temporally intense transitions" (p. 35).

This idea should receive special attention because Damiel's interest to be a part of humanity resides in the mode in which experience combines with wonder to create colors and scents that are specific to life, *scents* that are not expressed as "major" landmarks, but which come together in everyday life.¹² In his own way, Falk stands for the scent of time as conceived by Han, for which there is something beyond a world full of pleasures and joys; the feeling of *being alive* is characterized by the everyday encounter with wondering in the face of things, that is, being confronted

12 In this sense, what lies beneath the everyday enjoyment of things is their scent, as Han (2017c) has claimed, directly influenced by Heidegger (1981).

with the possibility of contemplating the world as world: gazing upon negativity to get a break from the positivity that deceives the true human spirit (burdened with the weight of the world).¹³

Falk's influence is crucial since he is the first to guide Damiel during his transition to the human world. He also reveals a truth to him: that he, too, was an angel, which is why he can perceive angels when they are close to him (even though the film does not explicitly back up this claim). Falk's lesson to Damiel—when the latter asks him how he should find any guidance now that he is mortal—carries with itself all the existential burden that the angel had been unaware of up to that moment: “Falk: So, what are you going to do now? / Damiel: There's a girl. / Falk: A girl! Great! / Damiel: Hey, wait! You wanted to tell me more. I want to know. Everything! / Falk: You need to figure that out for yourself. That's the fun of it” (Wenders, 1987, 1h, 37min, 20 sec.-40sec.).

What the actor hints at is the fact that it is precisely by engaging in *contemplative wondering*, so to speak, how he may come to understand his place in the world for the first time. Consequently, one can see how Damiel understands the weight of his decision by looking at the way he wonders at everything that seems new to him. His process of encountering the world is charged with negativity resulting from his first encounter with the other, with that which disrupts the monotonous, black-and-white perspective of his withering perception. The world that opens up allows him to form an inter-subjective bond, marked with the ability to write a (*hi*)story of his own, with its own colors and scents.

Writing such a (*hi*)story is the reason why Damiel wants to become human: only humans are allowed conquer their own (*hi*)story, hence his interest in presenting himself from a *creative* perspective,¹⁴ one that allows him to create his own identity trajectory within the human world. In other words, he wants to become human to be able to create his own life, and from then on, to conquer a (*hi*)story of his own (Han, 2024a). What we learn from Falk is that the only way of modeling oneself as an individual is through bonding with the world at its most specific and subjective, so that the life form that emerges may be willing to find the sublime in the little things: “Enlightenment is an awakening to the everyday. Any searching for an extraordinary *There* leads us astray. What we are after is a leap into the ordinary *Here*” (Han, 2022b,

13 Hegel's words concerning the role of negation in the process of movement from consciousness to self-awareness are relevant here: “The living substance is the being that is in truth *subject*, or, what amounts to the same thing, it is in truth actual only insofar as it is the movement of self-positing, or, that it is the mediation of itself and its becoming-other-to-itself. As subject, it is pure, *simple negativity*, and, as a result, it is the estrangement of what is simple, or, it is the doubling which posits oppositions and which is again the negation of this indifferent diversity and its opposition. That is, it is only this *self-restoring* sameness, the reflective turn into itself in its otherness. – The true is not an *original unity* as such, or, not an immediate unity as such” (2018, 12).

14 Deleuze's words here are relevant to the discussion: “Believing and inventing is what makes the subject a subject” (1991, p. 85).

p. 23). Thus, Falk's advice is that he should engage in a specific form of living, i.e. wondering—, which should be understood as a phenomenal-existential expression that makes enjoyment possible.

Falk, then, plays a peculiar role in the film: pointing out to Damiel the kind of experience he is missing by being trapped in his task as an angel. The scent that surrounds everyday things, as Falk keeps explaining, leads human beings through the threshold of suffering in such a way that they keep on living. In other words, there is, within human everyday life, a way of unfolding life that causes it to respond to the events that occur in it as a dance between suffering and joy, in such a way that an *enjoyment of the world* emerges, which at the same time *afflicts* the human spirit. As Han (2017c) has observed,

If all contemplative elements are driven out of life, it ends in a deadly hyper-activity. The human being suffocates among its own doings. What is necessary is a revitalization of the *vita contemplativa*, because it opens up spaces for breathing. Perhaps the mind itself owes its emergence to an excess of time, an *otium*, even to a slowness of breath (p. 113).

Damiel certainly understands this idea, but since he is not able to live it in his own flesh, he cannot fully comprehend it within his own reason. One should not forget that while angels have been helping and watching over humans during their whole existence, they are incapable of understanding the modes of being within the world of the living; both Damiel and Cassiel are isolated spectators of—but at the same time actively participate in—the process of living within the human world.

Thus, we could at least partially explain Damiel's interest in the way in which human beings generate intimate and subjective bonds with things and subjects that *are-there*. The angel is incapable of having *his feet on the ground*, which would allow him to understand the weight of gravity surrounding human existence in the world.¹⁵ At this point, we go back to an idea we had previously explored: the lives of angels lack any wondering, even though they take note of everything that has occurred in the history of humanity and witness countless stories. As a result, they are unable to experience an *affliction of the heart* indicating a subjective interest for the daily events in an individual's life.

In a manner of speaking, Damiel's withering body indicates an irregular functioning of the heart. It is suggested in the film that angels *feel*, as Cassiel feels sad after one person commits suicide, and just as Damiel falls in love with a mortal. Nevertheless, it looks as though the hearts of these angels only functioned as a spasmodic organ that limited itself to generating vague affects and emotions

15 Not unlike the symptomatology of the subject described by Kundera (1984).

towards human beings, which, in turn, would be a product of processing some form of angelic perception as it is represented in the film. This would mean, based on the film's logic, that the heart requires some raw material to be able to feel the presence of a feeling surrounded by wondering, color, and scent. It is at this point that Eros emerges as a fundamental concept charging the heart with enough otherness to fulfill its role of being a *life source*.¹⁶

We will further develop this idea in the last section of this paper; for the time being, it should be noted that Falk wishes Damiel to observe the everyday rituals that make human existence worth living. Rituals endow everyday life with a sense of the sacred; through them, individuals can create inter-subjective bridges with the rest of the world, that is, with the reality of a *worldliness* that fills everything in it with something beyond mere matter: "Rituals are symbolic acts. They represent, and pass on, the values and orders on which a community is based. They bring forth a *community without communication*" (Han, 2020b, p. 1).¹⁷ Falk's life is lived ritualistically all the time: from drinking his coffee to smoking a cigarette, everything for him implies a detailed way of encountering *things* in a manner that only individuals who have an intimate bond with existence can do.¹⁸

At the end of the film, it will be the scent of the world that convinces Damiel to leave his immortality behind. Nevertheless, the capacity for self-awareness did not result only from Falk's interaction with the angel. Quite the contrary: it may be said that he only let himself be convinced by Falk after his own encounter with Eros. In other words, as we have pointed out before, the film suggests that it is only after his encounter with Marion, a young trapeze artist¹⁹ he meets while wandering around, that Damiel is able to feel his heart *beating*, which will lead him to considering whether immortality is worthwhile.

3. Marion and the force of Eros

Marion's role in the film is intimately connected to Damiel. She is the one who—after so many years—, makes the protagonist experience wonder and the incontrollable *desire* to know more and to feel. Marion's (hi)story stirs in the angel the need to forget everything else and to find himself with no one else but her. It is her (hi)story that draws Damiel

16 Such a concept carries within itself a theological meaning: "My son, attend to my words; incline thine ear unto my sayings. Let them not depart from thine eyes; keep them in the midst of thine heart. For they are life unto those that find them, and health to all their flesh. Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life" (King James Version, Proverbs 4:20-23).

17 A similar approach to the symbolic may be found in the works of Cassirer (1965).

18 As Han himself points out when discussing the concept of *thing*: "The terrestrial order, the order of the earth, consists of things that take on a permanent form and provide a stable environment for dwelling [...] They give stability to human life" (2022a, p. 1).

19 Another metaphor for daring to live, often used in literature (in Kafka's work, to give an example) and in film (*A Rabbit Hole*, for instance).

to her. However, it is her *presence*, her *being-there*, that makes Damiel's heart glimmer and, consequently, *beat* as if an existential force propelled him to go find Marion.

Damiel's *heartbeat* is profoundly related to his own soul, to the way in which he finds himself in the world and with others. The latter is especially true, since when one thinks of the mythological relationship between Eros and Psyche,²⁰ it becomes clear how Eros fluttering around creates a sense of *wonder* and *bewilderment* in one's *mood*. In other words, the back-and-forth between Damiel and Marion describes a *cartography of the heart*, where this organ serves as the phenomenological meeting point of the different moods a human being can go through. To this effect, Han reminds us that "the 'heart' shelters moods; it works as a 'guardian of moods.' The 'heart' hears—in a non-metaphorical way—the 'silent voice' of being, allowing itself to be tempered and defined by it" (2021a, p. 107, translation ours).

In Damiel's case, the heart does not beat at all; it is Marion—covered by the wings of Eros (bearers of otherness)—who *moves* the angel and places him in a new perspective before life, and this is so because "[i]nterrupting the isolated perspective of the One, [Eros] makes the world arise anew from the vantage point of the *Other*, or *Difference*. Love, as an experience and an encounter, is marked by the negativity of upheaval" (Han, 2017b, pp. 44-45). Mood, as a phenomenological condition of possibility to act, goes through Damiel's thinking and inclines him towards meditative thinking where consciousness of his own angelic suffering emerges.²¹ That explains why, as we said before, Falk serves only as an instigator, and not necessarily the initiator of the feeling of ennui experienced by the angel, which ultimately leads him to forsaking immortality. The presence of Eros, personified by Marion, generates in Damiel's heart a sense of desire for true freedom, which can only be reached within the limitations of human life, as Han observes:

Finitude elevates man. It makes it possible for him to experience time as a gift. Whomever has limited time will not guard the remainder of his time as his most valuable asset, because he has given everything until the end, he as emptied *himself* (Han, 2018a, p. 260, translation ours).

Damiel is pure spirit, hence his potentiality to bond with Eros, as a vital force, actualizes itself with the phenomenal-mythological logic we have described before. Damiel's decision does not emerge as mere frivolous desire to live, feel, suffer, and so forth. It is, rather, a choice, maybe the first one he makes of his own free will, and which results from meditative contemplation before the world, on the one hand,

20 This relationship is addressed in Apuleius' *The Golden Ass*. There we can see the intimacy between these two concepts that goes beyond attraction, portraying instead a profound affinity of the souls. The double nature of the fallen demigod should also be considered (Plato, 2001, 186a-e).

21 For Heidegger (1966), meditative thinking is to be distinguished from mere calculation, which is marked by reasoning.

and the mood-induced, existential presence of Eros as a figure that deconstructs the self and rebuilds it into a new presence, on the other. Thus, Marion represents the human capacity to *forsake* something which seems predetermined and to begin anew.²² In the end, Damiel does precisely that, an underlying theme of the film: it is not just that the angel is tired of the eternal repetition of the same which envelops angelic life; Damiel has been inter-subjectively interpellated by the otherness in Eros and he is impelled to pursue that *feeling*, that *heartbeat*, which demands a (hi)story to be conquered, to be able to finally live outside of *the same*, turning to *the other*. In this context, as Han (2020a) observes, the heart should be seen, or thought of, as the organ that sees the truth of the world: “Only the ‘heart,’ which guards ‘modesty,’ embraces the highest fall and the highest fate as the greatest gift. The gift falls unto the heart. It is *in-apparent* to the point of being non-existent. The heart would be the organ that embraces the in-apparent” (p. 156, translation ours).²³

In Damiel’s case, the desire for a (hi)story of one’s own implies a desire for a shared (hi)story. Marion triggers the angel’s need for forsaking an eternity without narration for the sake of the narrated finitude experienced by human beings. Bonds with the world can only emerge in the form of a narrative, and so humanity may access the splendor that is present in everyday things when they are contemplated and appreciated in their most humble forms. That is what we learn from what happens to Damiel: trapped in the repetition of the same forever, eternal life is doomed to the absence of narration, without the experience of *hearing*, *speaking*, and *touching* which are present in the bodies and hearts of humans. It is, then, preferable to abandon the divine.²⁴

22 Damiel’s case is reminiscent of what Han (2008) calls drawn-out time, which allows for no closure, only for the continuity of the same: “The antithesis of fulfilled time is time drawn out into an empty duration with no beginning or end, which runs fruitlessly through one’s hands as in a sleepless night, the worse kind of infinity, the empty duration of noises coming from outside, so typical of insomnia” (p. 288, translation ours).

23 In this sense, the heart’s force obeys a vitalist impulse: beating is life *directed at*, as Nietzsche (2002) observes in his discussion of the genius of the heart: “The genius of the heart, as it is possessed by that great hidden one, the tempter god and born piper of consciences, whose voice knows how to descend into the underworld of every soul, whose every word and every glance conveys both consideration and a wrinkle of temptation, whose mastery includes an understanding of how to seem – not like what he is but rather like one more compulsion for his followers to keep pressing closer to him, to keep following him more inwardly and thoroughly: – the genius of the heart, that makes everything loud and complacent fall silent and learn to listen, that smooths out rough souls and gives them the taste of a new desire, – to lie still, like a mirror that the deep sky can mirror itself upon –; the genius of the heart, that teaches the foolish and over-hasty hand to hesitate and reach out more delicately; that guesses the hidden and forgotten treasure, the drop of goodness and sweet spirituality under thick, dull ice, and is a divining rod for every speck of gold that has long been buried in a prison of mud and sand; the genius of the heart, that enriches everyone who has come into contact with it, not making them blessed or surprised, or leaving them feeling as if they have been gladdened or saddened by external goods; rather, they are made richer in themselves, newer than before, broken open, blown on, and sounded out by a thawing wind, perhaps less certain, more gentle, fragile, and broken, but full of hopes that do not have names yet, full of newwills and currents, full of new indignations and countercurrents” (§ 295).

24 These elements are part of human *experience*, from a phenomenological perspective; they constitute the very aesthetic of life (Han, 2018b).

The appearance of Eros is no coincidence. Precisely due to the mood created at the moment Damiel and Marion meet, it is possible to dispel the *modes of the same*, which characterize the way angels live and which hegemonically condition existence with the phantomatic nature of that which is withering. *Fundamental Loneliness* emerges as an experience of isolation at its highest. It is the basis for the experience of being an angel. While they are connected, they have no bond to the world, or among themselves that makes fallible life available to them. Han (2024b) proposes the following distinction between connection and bonding: “Being connected is not the same as being together. In fact, unlimited connectivity weakens our ties. A deep relationship requires an *other* who can make themselves unavailable” (p. 55). In this sense, Damiel and the other angels are (inter)connected, but what the protagonist needs is a bond to the world.

Thus, what Marion makes possible is a kind of dance in which Damiel’s task has no place. Instead, Eros opens the way for a shared *there*, felt by the angel as the seed of what later will be his idea to become human. Damiel’s meditation is the result of the logic of *logos* that Eros’s fluttering makes possible.²⁵ In fact, what Marion causes in the angel is a *spasm* in his pure spirit (Damiel is nothing but). His heart is pierced by her weight, and this opens the way for an inter-subjective way of thinking about himself from the perspective of Marion’s otherness. Thus, we can now understand a basic element of Damiel’s becoming: it was necessary not only to be convinced; he also needed an existential rupture resulting from his encounter with otherness to turn the self into a being-in-the-world-with-others in order to generate a true sense of *kindness*. In Han’s own words: “Kindness is full ‘participation,’ i.e., it is an intensive form of the *spirit*. Only an ear trained for kindness enables the *spirit* to perceive diversity, adjacency” (Han, 2019, p. 154, translation ours).²⁶ To Damiel, Marion is the heartbeat that is required within the ontological structure of the subject that has been thrown into suffocating sameness. It is love—but not childishly romantic love—²⁷ that ultimately triggers a truly free choice on Damiel’s part, perhaps the first one in a very long life. To be able to love her, he must become a mortal, and so he makes his decision. There is a special symbolism there: the first act of freedom on his part is an act of love, and it is the first in a complex network of feelings and moods that surround the dynamics of Eros within the individual’s subjectivity.

Marion is much more than just a romantic excuse for the protagonist’s transformation. She embodies the very idea that it is only through the phenomenal-

25 Following Heidegger (2008), such fluttering causes thinking.

26 In this sense, kindness is a practice (Almeyda, 2022; 2023).

27 As Kristeva points out, “It is revealed as such in the wandering of metaphorical connotation. Indeed, in the rapture of love, the limits of one’s own identity vanish, at the same time that the precision of reference and meaning becomes blurred in love’s discourse” (1987, p. 2).

existential experience of openness that a withered body can make a recovery. The nourishment of the body through breath, the dawn of a successful day,²⁸ occurs insofar as an intersubjective relationship with otherness may be articulated. Eros becomes, then, a basic requirement to think the core of human bonding with the world. Only when the decision is made to forsake angelic perception—a state of experiential numbness—is it possible to find the splendor in everyday life, in what was always already there.

Falk's lessons can only be meaningful if they are preceded by Marion's presence. Her presence alone provokes in Damiel the mood to forsake eternity of his own free will to go find that lost otherness. It is important to return to this idea so as to avoid misunderstandings when one is watching the film: what leads to Damiel's decision is not just a selfish desire to possess Marion; but rather the wonder of seeing her in the vulnerability of everyday life, even through the limited lens of angelic perception. In the end, his choice materializes—once he becomes human—when he meets Marion by chance in one of the bars she used to go to. Together they decide to share their lives, without attachments or prior engagements, only the heartbeat resulting from a bond between two individuals, whose love served as the driving force for a colorful, scented life.

Conclusion

The minute Damiel goes from angel to human, he is, literally, *thrown into the world* (Heidegger, 1996). Far from causing any angst or despair in him, such condition awakens in him a primordial state of wonder, which serves as the driving force behind the first steps of his existence. His being beaten by some children, causing him to bleed, carries within itself an experience of encountering pain for the first time. Everything that takes place later during his process of becoming human is a learning and discovery process. Falk himself gives him a small sample of this when they meet, so that as the actor tells him: *that's the fun of it*.

The film, then, can be interpreted as a transition from a withering, black-and-white life to a scented, colorful one. Such as state, as we have seen in Han's work, is crucial to understanding the internal logic of human beings, as it requires us to consider the very essence of the human experience. It could be said, then, if we look at the film from Han's perspective, that the scent is the essence, which requires us to look at the concept of scent and the set of concepts that occur with it: time, body, heart, colors, and so forth. All these elements are critical if we are to understand Han's fascination for this film.

28 To use Handke's expression (2022a).

While the film does not advance a critique of neoliberalism, it does present us with a deeply interesting approach to the modes of being within a society. In the case of *Der Himmel über Berlin*, what we can identify is the presence of a *scented ontology of the subject*, which, in turn, calls for a reading of the way in which Han's project focuses on finding the scented core that makes humans human. This is a major contribution, especially considering that Han's critique in his work as a philosopher seeks to establish a distinction between what is essentially human from its digital or technical counterparts, in the Heideggerian sense.

To sum up, *Der Himmel über Berlin* poses an extreme scenario where an angel, a heavenly being, decides to forsake eternity, the divine, for a worldly, mortal, fallible life. Following Han's thought, we have reflected on the reason why Damiel renounces those privileges, which any individual would presumably covet, to enter the game of mortality. In the process, this situation leads to the question of the very essence of humanity, as it is that *something* which the angel perceived as only existing as part of worldly life.

As we have explained, that something is the scent of time and the color of space; the gravitational force of the world that materializes in everyday life and in the vitality of Eros as the existential driving force behind human actions. By looking at the film side by side with Han's work, we could find in it a philosophy in which scent serves as an onto-phenomenological form that opens the way for an existential horizon in which the human being can find a way to live in the condition of having-been-thrown-into-the-world without it leading necessarily to angst and despair. It could be said, then, that the beauty of *Der Himmel über Berlin* resides in its ability to place the audience in a privileged position, as it portrays an immortal being willing to forsake the divine for something else, something which is to be found in a being that may be considered inferior to him: a human being.

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