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Clipped wings, beyond bandaging

BY J. S. PORTER

WIM Wenders's *Wings of Desire* is a film about angels and a storyteller in the city of Berlin, and how they can witness, but not prevent, the pain around them.

I too feel like a witness sometimes, witness to a great snookering, witness to a whole generation, no less bright than any other, coming down from a bad acid trip. Teen-agers seem spent not so much from burning out like meteors as rusting out like unused engines. And schools, where much of the rusting takes place, seem like a combination of Cézanne's card players, Lichtenstein's enlarged comic strips of pop emotions and Warhol's films on sleep.

Like a Wenders angel who misses the smell of coffee and the touch of flesh and wants another chance at being human, we need to begin again and re-erotize learning. Everything needs to be put on the table: the question of core curriculum, school uniforms, sports, alternatives to school (not just alternative schools), inflated grading, dumbsizing, the carnival atmosphere, the need for historical perspective and critical thinking.

Patching the dike won't work. The leaks now threaten not only the system-spawned mall bunnies and space cadets, but the vivacious and the vigorous who every day become a little more enervated and defeated. Without intellectual stimulation and demanding standards for achievement, we will lose more and more of our young to sloth and sluggishness.

At the end of a class, a student very pointedly said to me once: "You're like a surgeon walking away from the operating table." I could measure the truth of what she said by the shame I felt. I had walked away, given up, left her bleeding. I had lost confidence in my scalpel. My hand had begun to tremble. I thought her wounds were beyond bandaging.

How in 20 or 30 years have we gone from having a very good educational system to having a very poor one — a system in which the teachers long for retirement and the students long for escape? Maybe Mr. Wenders has something to say here, too. The old storyteller throughout the film wonders to himself what will happen to the children without a story to keep them whole. How will they hear the angels and resist the ersatz and razzmatazz around them? Without knowledge of the human story and their place in it, children are ill-equipped for becoming the best they can be. Without memory and vision they limp blindly through the junk and trivia, looking for an angry fix.

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RICHARD DA MOTA

In contrast to this aimlessness, I remember Ivan Illich, a student of technology, saying how he often returns in his mind to the 12th and 13th centuries of Europe for a calm monastic counterpoise to the present hurly-burly. He's anchored, a citizen simultaneously of the new metropolis and the ancient human heritage. He has the resources of memory and the power of vision to withstand the media sirens to easy street. I remember too my own emotional and spiritual dependence on a poet-monk named Thomas Merton who died in Bangkok in 1968. He has been a kind of parallel life for me, a counter-life to my own dizzying experiences. To what visionaries do our children turn?

THEY need a refuge, too; a little quiet in the din, a pause in the march of things. They need roots and wings, but their roots have been pulled and their wings have been clipped. Their elders have sold them to rapacious merchants and an insatiable market.

The bus to educational funland kidnaps all the little Pinocchios and cheats

them into thinking that achievement in sports, socialization and being tolerant constitutes an education. The pursuit of excellence is considered to be an elitist delusion, and those so deluded are labelled nerds and dwebes. Infotainment shapes school life just as it shapes life outside of school: amusement unto death.

School life is a music video, flashes of this, bytes of that, nothing contextualized, nothing cumulative, no historical grounding. By the time the system finishes with Pinocchio he has reverted to pulp. Bored stiff and skull-numbed, he has inklings that something isn't right. But he puts on his Walkman, goes home to his Nintendo, and cranks up his heavy metal. If he can't fill his emptiness, maybe he can freeze it.

Pinocchio has been lied to: told that discipline and hard work are not necessary for push-button learning; duped into seeing no connection between self-esteem and achievement; flattered into believing that the nascent mind and experience are the equal of the seasoned wisdom of elders; shushed into "going along" and not "making waves." If I pretend to teach, you pretend to learn.

That's the bargain. And I'll give you a good grade so long as you don't hassle me.

I sometimes think we ought to give teen-agers a choice: either a school system of ever-new bells and whistles or a plane ticket to the Yukon with a reading list and a to-do list — say, Emerson's *Self-Reliance* and Yevtushenko's *Lies* combined with community service. The one route would end in a diploma to certify adaptive capaciousness; the other would start with Greek mythology, the first telling of the stories we all live out, and end with students finding what they're best suited to do: whether welding metal, baling hay or caring for infants.

Meanwhile, we need to remember what we have done to our children; how we have taken bright, curious minds and made them dull and leaden. And if, like the Wenders angels, we are powerless to stop the hemorrhaging of their talents, maybe we can bear honest witness to the pain of their snookering.

J. S. Porter teaches English at Mohawk College in Hamilton.

