

# *From Wings of Desire to Fox Angel: A Postmodern Narrative Discourse Woven with Generalized Intertextuality*

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**Abstract:** Meng Jinghui's theatrical work, *Fox Angel*, draws on Peter Handke's poem, *Song of Childhood*, originally written as the theme for the film *Wings of Desire*, set in Berlin. *Fox Angel* responds to this three decades-old film through its narrative style and thematic presentation. By amalgamating, reproducing, and rewriting a series of Western literary works, the play encodes the possibility of text reproduction through flowing and unstable theatrical symbols. Using polyphonic voices, *Fox Angel* writes personal narratives and integrates the vague ideal of "self" into the vital network of "others". The play weaves a text space of multiple subjects within the broad intertextual network, highlighting the post-modern aesthetic characteristics of drama with fragmented and subversive narrative discourse.

## 1. Introduction

Renowned Chinese avant-garde playwright Meng Jinghui responds to his predecessor, Austrian postmodern playwright and 2019 Nobel Laureate in Literature Peter Handke, in his latest work *Fox Angel* (2021). The play draws inspiration from Handke's theme poem *Song of Childhood*, which he wrote for the film *Wings of Desire* (1987), and constructs a polyphonic discourse through a one-man show consisting of five parallel texts: "Car Accident," "Waiter," "Green Cup," "Electrocardiogram," and "Telephone." Meng Jinghui identifies the theme of the play as "searching," and thus *Fox Angel* can be seen as a continuation of the "angel's search" plot in the film *Wings of Desire* that transcends time, geography, and genre over three decades. As a classic example of a postmodern text [1], the film highlights the aesthetic features and philosophical concepts of postmodernism in its narrative style and thematic presentation, becoming an important foundation for the narrative discourse in *Fox Angel*.

The examination of intertextuality between the film *Wings of Desire* and the play *Fox Angel* opens up the possibility for a broad interpretation of intertextuality in the play. Approaching the play from this perspective reveals that the mixing, representation, and rewriting of a series of Western literary classics in *Fox Angel* become the preset symbols, consciousness, and experiences in the play, providing the possibility for various interpretations of the play's themes. Therefore, a comprehensive grasp of the play's themes requires a return to the theoretical issues of the concept of "intertextuality". In academia, Julia Kristeva is generally considered the inventor of the theory of "intertextuality" [2]. The General Intertextual Theory (GIT) was proposed by Kristeva, which synthesizes Bakhtin's

perspective on the social background of language and Saussure's hypothesis on language system characteristics, and is based on the theoretical foundations of many literary criticisms such as Roland Barthes' "textual polysemy" and Bakhtin's "polyphonic novel". Therefore, instead of being considered a literary criticism technique, the intertextual examination can be seen as a speculative concept that simultaneously controls the text, author, reader, and social-cultural context as a whole. In 1968, Kristeva defined intertextuality as "a mosaic of quotations" in her article *Word, Dialogue and Novel*. She explained: "Any text is the absorption and transformation of another. That is why the interpretation of poetic language is at least twofold" [2]. In collaboration with her teacher Roland Barthes, Kristeva introduced the concept of "general intertextuality". According to her, a text cannot be understood in isolation, as its meaning is built on multiple texts, and the referential and symbolic meanings in a text are not fixed, but rather, they are fluid and subject to change with the cultural and historical context. She further posits that intertextuality, as a process of meaning-making, possesses productive and subversive power. It can be seen as a network that is intricately woven together in both temporal and spatial dimensions.

Revisiting the play *Fox Angel* from the perspective of intertextuality in text production can enrich the interpretation and expand the thematic scope of the work. At the same time, by examining the play's unique narrative techniques, one can find an exploration of a pluralistic subjectivity within the drama. The play incorporates personal narratives into a larger network of "others" and constructs an intertextual space for postmodern storytelling. This approach provides a solution to the challenge of defining intertextual networks in contemporary intertextual studies and avoiding the trap of "vague intertextuality". Furthermore, tracing and reinterpreting Western literary classics in the play can provide innovative inspiration and international direction for domestic theatrical performances.

## 2. Hybridization, Representation, and Rewriting: The Intertextual Network of Fox Angel

The play *Fox Angel* is composed of five seemingly parallel and unrelated stories, which tell a polyphonic discourse in the form of a monologue, and use long blackouts between scenes as a separator. Thus, the play points to the postmodern narrative discourse through the fragmentation of the subject and the ambiguity of interpretation. Meng Jinghui mentioned that the inspiration for the play came from the theme poem *Song of Childhood* created by Peter Handke for the film *Wings of Desire*. Moreover, in terms of expressive means and coding media, the play follows the production methods of *Wings of Desire*, such as setting a screen in the upper left corner of the frame-like stage and filling it with lyrics, using multiple languages including English and German in the theater, and frequently introducing band music as a thematic hint during the performance. It can be said that *Wings of Desire* as the starting point of *Fox Angel* presupposes the consciousness of the existence and experience of the theatrical world. Therefore, to interpret the abstract and divergent dramatic themes of *Fox Angel* from its narrative style, one first needs to start with the film *Wings of Desire*.

*Wings of Desire* is a German-language film directed by Wim Wenders. It was released in 1987 and was nominated for the Palme d'Or at the 40th Cannes Film Festival. The film tells the story of an angel named Daniel who roams the earth in spirit form, listening to the innermost thoughts of humanity. After falling in love with a trapeze artist named Marion, he decides to become human so they can be together. The film was made during the Cold War era, 32 years after Germany's defeat in World War II and three years before the fall of the Berlin Wall. As a result, the film is imbued with a melancholic, alienated tone from the start, and the polyphonic narrative is linked by streams of consciousness monologues. The camera follows two angels, Daniel and Cassiel, as they travel around Berlin, listening to the innermost thoughts of people. In the film, the angels serve as both the narrative perspective and the narrative medium, echoing the famous line from Rainer Maria Rilke's poem *Duino Elegies*: "Who, if I cried out, would hear me among the Angelic Orders?" [3]. This

intertextuality with *Duino Elegies* gives the film an epic sense of weightiness. In terms of narrative technique, the film uses a murmured monologue in the style of Alain Resnais, which expresses resistance to traditional dialogue editing through a “dialogue-like monologue” and portrays a romantic, dreamlike feeling.

The play *Fox Angel* inherits the melancholic and romantic narrative tone of the film *Wings of Desire*. The theater is set in a classic picture frame style, with the stage extending backward in a stepped manner, presenting a concrete embodiment of multiple dreams. In this surreal theater atmosphere, Huang Xiangli, a well-known actress in China and known as the “Queen of Monodrama”, played multiple roles, successfully creating another form of “angel” portrayal: by deepening the subtle connections between the protagonists in different stories, the five parallel protagonists form a “unity of five” as both narrators and witnesses, constructing intertextuality within the dramatic text.

Kristeva’s intertextual theory emphasizes the placement of a text’s semantics within the context of social ideology and interaction with social texts. “Drama” in China is an import, renamed “Huaju” (Spoken drama) after being brought over from overseas. However, to this day, many expressive techniques used in Chinese drama stages are guided by Western theatrical thought, incorporating certain cross-cultural characteristics in their creations. Meng Jinghui’s dramatic works are a prime example of this. Whether in his earlier works such as *The Bald Soprano*, *Waiting for Godot*, and *Twelfth Night*, or in adaptations such as *King Lear* and *Shakespeare and the Wolves*, the “reproduction” and “rewriting” of Western literary classics is a common sight in Meng Jinghui’s theatrical stage.

As a typical performance practice in intercultural theatre, mimicking and representing heterogeneous theatrical cultures refers to the appropriation of different theatrical traditions. In terms of narrative studies, “rewriting” is a special text created by using a classic text as a “pre-text” and employing narrative strategies such as reversing character relationships, reshaping character images, and switching perspectives. From this perspective, the intertextuality of *Fox Angel* is not only reflected within the text itself. Through the fusion of numerous Western literary texts, either by “reproduction” or “rewriting”, the drama has established a network of mutual verification, interrelation, and intertextuality with a series of literary works, such as the Argentine writer Cort ázar’s short story *House Taken Over*, Austrian poet Rilke’s poem *Duino Elegies*, Brecht’s poem *On the Infanticide Marie Farrar*, and Handke’s early anti-play *Self-Accusation*. This has established the connotation and extension of drama symbol compounds and fusion within a broad intertextual network. At the same time, the reinterpretation of Western classic texts and the five parallel themes within the drama form an important metaphorical relationship, which not only eliminates the thinness and powerlessness of individual narrative discourse, but also deepens the richness, mystique, and attraction of the dramatic text.

From a narrative perspective, the performance of the “car accident” in the first act of the play opens up the intertextual network of the play and echoes the theme of “child” and “guilt” in the film *Wings of Desire*. The “car accident” tells the story of a successful and happily married protagonist who accidentally hits and kills a young girl while driving. This event causes a huge psychological trauma, destroying her spirit and entire life. It is worth noting that in this story, the protagonist, who suffers from severe mental illness after the crime, receives treatment from a psychologist who claims to be “non-Freudian”. In pain and self-doubt, she cannot help but ask the audience, “How should this psychological drama end?”

The narrative approach of self-referentiality in the play gives it an experimental and avant-garde character, with clear traces of Handke’s “post-theatrical” behavioral model, which “opens the text to the theater”. In the following performances, *Fox Angel* continued to develop its avant-garde character by engaging in a dialogue with Brecht’s poem *On the Infanticide Marie Farrar* through shocking language and “estranged” stage actions. It not only reproduced the theme of “infanticide” with its deep guilt but also responded to Brecht’s call in form. The play adapted Handke’s “disdain for the

audience” performance form, attempting to explore the construction problem of this broad intertextual text and continuously pushing the extension of the theme toward its relationship with other texts. During the stage performance, the actress not only used taboo words such as “shit,” “fart,” and “death” without restraint but also frequently made obscene onomatopoeic sounds. Secondly, when the protagonist repeated the action of “car accident simulation” according to the prescription provided by the psychologist, the actress violently smashed eggs on stage, splattering tomato sauce everywhere, and even onto the front row audience. Overall, these actions collectively achieve the goal of “estrangement,” challenge traditional moral concepts, and question the separation of the “sacredness of child life,” aiming to rid oneself of the rational alienation caused by false social ideology [4], and help the audience to observe everything on stage with a different perspective.

The play *Fox Angel* incorporates itself into a web of intertextuality, manifesting as a three-dimensional, mosaic-shaped image with boundaries in time and space. This characteristic endows the text with a carnival-like quality of uncertainty, fragmentation, non-principle, egolessness, irony, and mixed genres, enlarging its potential for interpretation and expression. The first act of the story comes to a sudden stop, leaving a lasting impression on the audience and setting the stage for the intertextual exploration of the remaining four acts.

### 3. From the “Otherness” to See the “Self”: Binary Narrative and Its Subversion

As one of the cornerstones of postmodern theory, Lacan’s “mirror stage” explains the process by which individuals establish a sense of “self-awareness”. The theory posits that during the mirror stage, infants become aware of the completeness of their bodies and “self”, at which point “I” is thrown into a primordial form before it is objectified in the dialectic of identification with another. From this stage, the infant establishes a dichotomy between “self” and “otherness”. In other words, only by recognizing who the “other” is through the mirror can the infant become aware of who “oneself” is. Through seeing the “otherness”, the infant sees the “self”, and the gaze of the “other” becomes a mirror for the infant to recognize the “self”. Eventually, through the gaze of the “other”, the infant internalizes the mirror image of the “self”.

“Mirror” is the starting point of the visual imagery in the film *Wings of Desire*, as well as an echo of the poem *Song of Childhood*. At the beginning of the film, the angel opens his eyes and sees the Berlin sky shrouded in mist. The poem, voiced over by director Peter Handke, slowly leads the film into the main plot: “When a child is still a child, he always has these questions: why am I me, and not you?” (*Wings of Desire*, 1987). The poem inspires a binary discourse of “otherness” versus “self” with “you” and “I”, asking questions in a childlike voice, forming a sharp contrast with the melancholic tone of the Cold War era in the film and demonstrating a powerful dramatic tension.

In the film, the angel first arrives at the top of a tower and overlooks Berlin. At this point, a child notices him, and the angel and the child gaze at each other from afar. The narrative perspective here needs particular attention: the angel first “sees” the sky, then comes to a high place and overlooks the city, and is “seen” by the child. This binary relationship between “up” and “down”, “looking” and “being seen”, is juxtaposed with Handke’s poem, which lays out a series of binary opposition concepts in the film’s textual space, such as earth and sky, soul and body, children and adults, angels and humans, black and white and color, male and female, past and present, war and peace, words and images, etc. Later, the film uses the narrative technique of the “angel falling” episode, with its clear symbolic meaning, to draw the boundary of binary subversion, highlighting its postmodern philosophical ideas.

Before Daniel falls, the film sets up an interesting scene that suggests his “mirror stage” of self-awareness. After the two angels finish their observation of Berlin, they sit together and exchange what they have seen and heard during this period:

Cassiel: And what about you, what do you have to tell?

Damiel: A passerby who folded up her umbrella in the middle of the rain... and let herself get wet. A student who described to his teacher how a fern grows from the earth. And the astonished teacher. A blind person who felt for her watch when she sensed me. It's wonderful to live only in the mind and day after day bear witness to something spiritual... for eternity, from people. But sometimes my eternal existence in the mind becomes too much for me. I don't want to float above everything forever. I want to feel a weight that cancels out my boundlessness and makes me rooted to the earth...

In this dialogue, Damiel's narration gradually shifts from a third-person omniscient perspective to a first-person retrospective perspective, as he uses the term "I" for the first time in his storytelling, prompted by the blind woman's perception of him. He then discusses his own feelings and the narrative perspective shifts to first-person narration. Damiel's three shifts in narrative behavior and perspective mark the beginning of his "self" narrative, which is the starting point of his "angelic fall." Initially, the omniscient perspective is consistent with Damiel's "angelic" identity, which shows the narrator's power relationship over the narrated character. According to Shen Dan's observation, "there are usually two perspectives at play in the first-person retrospective narrative: one is the perspective of the narrator's 'I' reminiscing about the past, and the other is the perspective of the 'I' being remembered who is experiencing the event." As these two perspectives represent the narrator's "I" cognition at different times, the change in perspective can demonstrate the growth process of the "I" from ignorance to intellect. Therefore, in the process of narration, Damiel's self-consciousness suddenly "emerges." Finally, Damiel's use of "I" in his narration marks the formal birth of his self-consciousness. Thus, the scene at the beginning of the movie where the angel and the child face each other has a deeper meaning. This scene not only implies that the child "sees" the angel and the angel "sees" the child, but also shows that Damiel "sees" himself through the eyes of the child.

By participating in the "other" and making the "self" present, *Wings of Desire* writes the discourse premise of intertextual narration. As a continuation of the "angel searching", *Fox Angel* completes the "self" with the story of the "other," and explores the consciousness of the "other" by pursuing the "self," showing the process of seeing the "self" from the perspective of the "other" in the five acts. Firstly, the "Car Accident" story begins with an accident, while the "Waitress" story ends with a Car Accident. Secondly, in the "Car Accident" story, the ending is the same as the "Green Cup" story, with the female protagonist's pregnancy, while in the final act "Phone Call," the protagonist becomes a mother and is gazing at the baby in the crib. Finally, *Fox Angel* supplements the main theme of the drama by rewriting the classic as a metaphorical representation.

The second act of the performance *Fox Angel* is a rewriting of Peter Handke's early "anti" drama *Self-Accusation*. Handke's *Self-Accusation* presents the external process of consciousness experience from blankness to establishment through the "play of words". Through exploration of the proposition that "reality is constructed by language", it expresses his "infinite introspection and self-feeling". The story of "Waiter" reverses the theme of the original work with a plot structure of "blankness-establishment-breakage". Meng Jinghui excerpts part of the play and embeds it in *Fox Angel*, shaping "language" as a powerful force that subverts subjectivity. The excerpt from "Self-Accusation" writes a fable of a "Car Accident". At first, the waiter had already awakened his self-consciousness and often couldn't restrain himself from speaking out of turn. But with a car accident at the end, the waiter's speech narrative came to a sudden stop. The same plot of the car accident alludes to the spiritual crisis in the first story, ultimately delivering a devastating blow to the character and returning her from an individual continuously generating self-awareness to a "frozen mind" waiter. However, rather than the accident being the cause, it is more of a "metaphor for the cause". The driver's words "drunken dream" are the root of her destruction. The driver's "language" is a tremendous impact on the protagonist's mind and is metaphorically expressed through the form of a car accident in this real

and imaginary psychological drama. The language system belongs to culture and society, and is the carrier and manifestation of collective consciousness. “The so-called truth means using the conventional metaphor”. The driver’s language reveals the subject consciousness hidden behind social evaluation, and the birth and destruction of the waiter’s individual consciousness are not isolated events, but occur under the influence of the “other” power.

In the theater, the drama introduces multimedia projection and screen collage digital technology, shaping symbolic images beyond language text. In the story of “The Waiter”, after the protagonist has a car accident, white figures without features (created by German new media artist GolemKlonVIII) continuously fall on the multimedia screen above the stage. The band STOLEN secretly plays music “Chaos” at this point, expressing the protagonist’s chaotic and crazy mind after the impact. The constantly walking out and falling figures pile up into mountains in the waiter’s mind, adding heavy weights to the social training balance, while on the screen, the collapsed bodies of the stacked figures symbolize the self of the protagonist ultimately being drowned and silenced by the public.

#### 4. Constructing a Textual Space of Multiple Subjects

The German title of the movie *Wings of Desire* is *Der Himmel uber Berlin*, which translates to “The Sky Over Berlin.” Vila and Kuzniar point out in their article that the emphasis on the relationship between “up” and “down” spaces reflects the movie’s “emphasis on narrative interstices” [5]. Whether it’s the opening scene where angels overlook Berlin from above while children look up at them from the ground, or the scene where the angel falls from the sky to the earth and the film uses a shift from black and white to color to illustrate the layered narrative, or the ending where Damiel supports a rope from below while Marion rotates in the air, the various changes in the narrative perspective construct the textual space of the story.

In her 1968 article, Kristeva argues that interpreting poetic language requires at least a “double-layered” reading. She uses horizontal and vertical axes as metaphors to depict the “double-layered” structure that constitutes the textual space: on the horizontal axis, the words in the text belong to both the writing (narrating) subject and the narrated object, while on the vertical axis, the words in the text point to the “past and synchronous literary totality”. Kristeva further points out that the intersection of the horizontal axis (subject-object) and the vertical axis (text-context) reveals an important fact: every word (or text) is the intersection of words (multiple texts) (237). The interweaving of the horizontal and vertical axes constitutes the textual space of literary narrative, which simultaneously points to a three-dimensional space of coexisting synchronic and diachronic, intra-textual and extra-textual relationships, reflecting the dialogue and conflict between various subjects and consciousnesses.

Multiple subjects and texts coexist in the textual space, and subjects are not fixed but are constantly influenced by various forces and in a state of change. Subjects are “thrown into a vast space of intertextuality, shattered or powdered, and then enter into a process of communication with their own and other texts”. Therefore, intertextuality is not only a different way for one text to exist in another text, but also a different way for the polyphonic voices of different consciousnesses to exist, and the textual space woven by intertextuality is filled with the voices and consciousnesses of multiple subjects. Multiple subjects do not mean the disappearance of the subject, but rather a new form of subjectivity. In the movie, an old man named Homer travels around Berlin, telling stories of humanity, and the angel meets him in the library and follows his slow steps to explore Berlin. Homer tells the epic story of humankind, while the angel writes poems that express his own self through his observations of humanity. Therefore, *Wings of Desire* is not only a historical narrative but also a narrative that gives birth to self-expression. Inspired by the interweaving of personal and grand

narratives in *Wings of Desire*, *Fox Angel* shapes the structure of multiple subjects in the textual space through the narrative strategies of the text, the parallel interweaving of inner texts, and the intertextual dialogue between texts and external texts.

In this context, it is important to note that intertextuality is not a one-way street. It is not just a matter of texts influencing other texts, but also of texts being influenced by the wider cultural context in which they are produced. As Roland Barthes famously pointed out, “every text is a tissue of quotations,” and this is true not just of literary texts, but of all cultural products.

Therefore, in order to fully understand the construction of the text space in *Wings of Desire* and *Fox Angel*, we must also take into account the wider cultural context in which they were produced. This includes not just other literary works, but also historical events, social norms, and political ideologies.

For example, the emphasis on the relationship between “above” and “below” in *Wings of Desire* can be seen as a reflection of the historical division of Berlin into East and West, with the Wall serving as a physical barrier between the two. Similarly, the fragmented and unstable narrative structure of *Fox Angel* can be seen as a response to the postmodern condition, in which traditional narratives and identities have been destabilized by technological, social, and political changes.

Thus, by examining the intertextual connections between these works and their wider cultural context, we can gain a deeper understanding of the complex and multifaceted text space that they create. We can see how these works engage with and respond to a variety of cultural influences, and how they use intertextuality as a tool for constructing meaning and identity in a world that is constantly in flux.

This special narrative approach precisely explains the view of “double-voiced discourse” advocated by Bakhtin when discussing the concept of intertextuality. Monologue is not a singular discourse, but contains the desire for dialogue. Behind each stream of consciousness monologue that the angel listens to, there is a personal narrative, which is a piece of Berlin’s history. The film was shot in black and white, and the use of montage technique flashes back to the ruins of war and the tiny bones of children, adding a melancholic mood and a sense of historical vicissitudes to the film. When the angel stands on the banks of the River Spree, silently recalling the flow of human history, the film completes the writing of the grand narrative.

In addition to intertextuality in form and theme, the play also inherits the exploration of linguistic ontology in *Wings of Desire*. In the film, two angels speak German in Berlin, while Damiel communicates with the American director in English, and he also listens to the voices of those speaking Japanese and French without any barriers. The theater in *Wings of Desire* is also filled with various languages. Actors speak in Chinese, sing in English and German. The mixture of languages constitutes a dialogue and response between parallel texts. Outside the text, it reflects a global value system and demonstrates a profound way of connection between many individuals.

## 5. Conclusion

*Wings of Desire* can be seen as a dialogue and rewrite of *Wings of Desire* in the broad sense of intertextual network. However, whether it is tirelessly showing the sins brought by the fragility of human spirit, recording the process of individuals breaking free from regulated discourse, or imitating the solitary individuals in modern society, the affirmation of human nature distinguishes this play from typical postmodern works. The play adapts and quotes many works, recodes symbolic meanings in the theatrical space, deepens the connotation of the play, and broadens the topic of exploration in this avant-garde drama. As director Meng Jinghui mentioned, *Wings of Desire* is themed around “seeking”. Just like the angel in *Wings of Desire* seeks a story that belongs to oneself, *Wings of Desire* creates a multi-subject textual structure through its five female protagonists, seeking a resolution for

history and individuals in a three-dimensional textual space. After numerous attempts, the protagonists finally touch the core of “love”.

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