



RE-RELEASES

Alice in the Cities

(Alice in den Städten)

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away the film's ending.

Wim Wenders' first road movie contrives a situation whereby an emotionally detached photojournalist ends up chaperoning a precocious nine-year-old girl from New York to their native Germany via Amsterdam. Inspired by a single moment of unplanned chemistry between actors Rüdiger Vogler and Yella Rottländer in Wenders' earlier *The Scarlet Letter* and largely improvised for that reason, it attempts a fusion of Antonioniesque alienation with the humanist spirit of a Renoir or Truffaut, and actually pulls it off. It's since become a fascinating time capsule shaped by early-1970s urban landscapes and artefacts – notably the Polaroid camera with which Vogler obsessively tries to capture each significant moment in their journey.

Michael Brooke, *Sight and Sound*, August 2008

A homing jet crosses the sky. When we first discover him, at the start of *Alice in the Cities*, Philip Winter, a forlorn young German, played by that most forlorn of actors Rüdiger Vogler, is slouched on a vacant American beach, far from home, taking Polaroid pictures of the grey Atlantic. Try as he may, however, the photographs obstinately refuse to reflect what he sees. They will not confirm his own reality. He is on assignment from a German magazine to gauge the State of America, or some such, and his problem with the pictures brings into focus a more general difficulty: he is drifting, blocked, unable to finish the article. Philip subsequently reports to the magazine's New York office. He has missed his deadline, but being, it seems, wholly self-centred as well as forlorn the thought of an apology never crosses his mind. He will finish the text back in Munich. As this hopeless baggy 'investigator' backs, blank-faced, out of the door, one feels for the irate man who was fool enough to commission him. One would like to give Philip a really good shake.

Philip is one of life's mooners. Earlier, having ordered a drink at an eatery in the middle of some suburban nowhere, he looks blankly out of the window, deaf to the voice which is offering him change. A moment later, we see the director of the film, Wim Wenders, another transient, putting money in a jukebox and then staring equally blankly out of another window. Look, the scene seems to say, the director and his leading player ask nothing more than to ride in a hired automobile with the radio on while the scenery of the other side of the tracks slides past the windscreen. Wenders is there to be recognised: his braces, for the cinephile, are as familiar as Hitch's profile. A glimpse of a newspaper obituary of John Ford is another signpost for the devotee. To the paying public at large, who might enjoy a John Ford film but would not recognise the director's face, the leisurely beginning to *Alice in the Cities* is if not downright trying at least cause for restlessness. But then matters are remedied. Someone *does* give Philip a really good shake. It is, of course, Alice, the blonde nine-year-old tomboy, who jolts the picture into life.

The principal achievement of *Alice in the Cities*, photographed by Robby Müller and edited by Peter Przygodda, is one of transformation. The commonplace becomes intensely, vividly real: the view from a hotel window;

children leaving school; an airport concourse; a street of detached middle-class houses; an elderly couple taking the air, surprised to be asked directions. And it is the singular talent of Wenders and his collaborators to invest this subtly choreographed 'documentary' realism (no matter that we never discover how Alice gave the slip to the police) with an understated but nevertheless universal melancholy poeticism. What, however, makes the film consistently watchable is that old device of the two mismatched individuals thrown together on the road. Alice, for all her self-possession, will still duck beneath the covers when Philip, asked for a bedtime story, angrily shouts that he does not know any. But she is, for all her childishness, at home in the modern world of TV slot machines in airports, of cellophane-wrapped meals on international flights, of motel rooms and hired cars – in a way that Philip is not. She is too, of course, the daughter he has never had; the chance, that old fashioned humanist chance, for him to redeem himself by returning her to her family – and thus perhaps losing her himself.

John Pym, *Sight and Sound*, Autumn 1984

Like *The Goalkeeper's Fear of the Penalty*, *Alice in the Cities* is a film about alienation, or what Wenders calls 'everyday schizophrenia'. Developed without the intellectual punctuality Peter Handke brought to his very concrete metaphors – the mechanism of a jukebox, the pile of rotting fruit on a pavement, even the notion of a goalkeeper as the player whom nobody watches – it is at once less satisfying and more rewarding: a statement of the schizophrenic theme that allows life to spill over and spoil the enigmatic patterns so neatly codified in the earlier film. Superficially, at least, *Alice* is more immediately accessible, not merely because it provides a conventional dramatic narrative (even though one without much dramatic action), but because it offers explanations in easily digestible words and images. The alienation theme, for instance, is openly and simply stated by the former girlfriend with whom Philip tries to spend his last night in New York, and who tells him he is trying to confirm his own reality through the photographs he takes so obsessively; while the reconciliation is conveyed equally directly by the image of the American girl with a child in her arms whom he photographs (having by then almost forgotten the lure of his camera) at the end of his odyssey, and which is totally devoid of triteness because it is the positive of the cold, distant, negative images of children that have punctuated the film hitherto.

Having got the message out of the way, as it were, Wenders is free to concentrate on Philip's relationship to the world he lives in, with Alice acting as a medium between the two. Mention of *Paper Moon* is almost inevitable, given the similarity of the two stories; but the difference between the two films is the difference between sentiment and sentimentality. *Paper Moon* is sentimental because the initial hostility of Bogdanovich's hero to his unwelcome ward is a put-on, designed to highlight his subsequent affection. No one really believes, or is meant to believe, that he would abandon the child. Philip Winter, on the other hand, very well might; and it is significant that although he gradually assumes responsibility for her, he treats her with no more and no less affection and understanding at the end of their journey together than he did at the beginning (having discovered not her, nor their relationship, but himself in the process).

The point is beautifully made in the scene where Alice suddenly turns up after escaping from the police station, climbs into the car, and smilingly announces

‘Now I know where grandma lives’ while producing only slightly less vague directions than before. Wenders has warned that the title should not be read as implying a connection with Carroll’s *Alice*; but Philip’s sudden, delighted laughter at this moment as he simply drives off without a word, suggests that he has at last found a way through the looking-glass, signposted by Alice’s faith that in wonderland life’s little difficulties will somehow resolve themselves for the best.

Suddenly his return to Munich, effected with simple though circuitous logic by the intervention of Alice’s magic, no longer seems a matter of such desperate urgency. Philip’s earlier error lies in his dependence on objective correlatives, ‘in his assumption that the dreary American landscapes of motels, highways, neon signs and deserted beaches that he photographs (or for that matter the Amsterdam he ignores as a tourist attraction, and the Germany he is too familiar with really to see) necessarily reflect either his attitude to them or the life that is absent from them and that he assumes to be arid and meaningless. Sitting in the train at the end, he reads without comment a newspaper containing an account of the death of John Ford, and the camera lifts to reveal a bleak, open landscape with the train rolling past far below like one of Ford’s wagon trains. It could be a celebration or lament; or it could be nothing at all, just a landscape through which the train happens to be passing.

Tom Milne, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, October 1975

ALICE IN THE CITIES (ALICE IN DEN STÄDTEN)

Director: Wim Wenders
©: Westdeutscher Rundfunk, Pifda
Production Company: Produktion 1 im Filmverlag der Autoren
Producer: Joachim v. Mengershausen
Production Managers: Peter Genée, Veit von Fürstenberg
Unit Production Manager: Chris A. Holenia
Location Manager: Ben Wett
Technician: Honorat Stangl
Assistant Director: Mickey Kley
Screenplay: Wim Wenders
Script Collaborator: Veit von Fürstenberg
Directors of Photography: Robby Müller, Martin Schäfer
Editors: Peter Przygodda, Barbara v. Weitershausen
Music: Can
Sound Recording: Martin Müller
Sound Mixer: Paul Schöler

Cast

Rüdiger Vogler (*Philip Winter*)
Yella Rottländer (*Alice van Damm*)
Elisabeth Kreuzer (*Lisa van Damm*)
Edda Köchl (*Edda*)
Ernest Böhm (*policeman*)
Sam Presti (*car salesman*)
Lois Moran (*airline girl*)
Didi Petrikat (*girl*)
Hans Hirschmüller
Sibylla Baier
Mirko

West Germany 1974©
112 mins

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