

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Alice in the Cities 1974

Wim Wenders. (1945-

STORY

While 'gentle' the story of this film is rich in themes, landscapes, and personal studies, and governs the audience interest throughout its long two hours. The faces of the two principal characters have a lot to do with our interest, for they grow constantly in expressiveness to one another—a forty year old journalist and a nine year old girl—and within themselves reflect deep engagement with the emotionally congested world they are experiencing together.

Plot. We first meet the protagonist, Philip, sitting under an American railroad bridge, humming to himself a tune about lying on the beach with his baby. He is a West German journalist, several weeks into a work assignment—to write about (not photograph) the United States. As we meet him he is running out of emotional gas, has taken pictures of odd corners of America, but written almost nothing. He checks in with his publisher's boss, confesses to having been unable to do anything but photograph this country, and is told to get out, and not to return until he has a story to show.

Realization. At this point the real difficulty sets in for Philip. He goes to the Airport, to book his ticket for a return trip to Germany—which is where he wants to go, to freshen his mind for the essay on America, and to pick up the main thread of his life. There he meets a couple of surprises. It seems there are no flights to Germany for a week—due to a strike action—so that in order to get home to Germany, he will need to enter Europe through another country, probably Amsterdam. At the same time, in the airport, he encounters a German woman and her nine year old daughter, who are in the same pickle; they want to return to Germany.

Complications. The German woman is in the midst of a dissolving romantic relationship, which she is determined to leave, and in the midst of her own preoccupations, she manages to leave her daughter, Alice, with Philip, on the understanding that he will return to Amsterdam with the girl, while she will return the next day to meet Philip and her daughter in the Amsterdam Airport. You can guess what happens. Mom does not return when expected, and Philip is left with Alice. The little girl cannot bear to be left alone, so Philip and she decide they will go to Alice's grandmother's house, in Wuppertal, to leave the girl there. The remainder of the film involves the complex, and oddly comic, efforts of the pair to find Alice's grandmother.

The Search. After driving up and down the streets of Wuppertal—whose fascinating transit system had intrigued the real guy, Wenders—and found nothing, Alice remembers that her grandmother lives in the Ruhr region, not Wuppertal, and the two of them start off for the Ruhrgebiet, which is also Philip's (and Wenders') native area. (The director, very sensitive to landscape degradation, takes the opportunity to indicate the urban decline of the region the plot is tracking.) Finally, after many quixotic efforts—driving a rental car up and down the streets of Duisburg, asking at doors—they discover the grandmother's house, but learn that she has moved.

At that point, approaching despair, Philip decides to leave Alice with the police, and let them solve the problem. They do eventually solve it, bringing Philip the news that Alice's mom and grandmom have been found. The journey is complete for Philip, who (but just how we struggle to grasp) has found out a lot about himself, by the persistence with which he maintains his implicit obligations to Alice and her mother.

CHARACTERS

Philip. Philip is a West German journalist, who has taken on an assignment, for a German journal, to write a heartfelt essay on his travels in the United States. As we first meet him, he is about to give up on

this assignment; he has taken many pictures of the American landscape, but he has been unable to write about America or Americans. He is about to return to Germany, when he runs into issues at the airport, and comes into contact with a Mother and daughter pair, who also want to return to Germany. Unfortunately, the Mother has problems of her own, and leaves her daughter with Philip, who feels it incumbent on him to take the girl home. From that point on, we follow Philip's careful and often funny efforts to return the girl to her home.

Alice Alice is a nine year old German girl, who is with her mother, in America, when her mother leaves her in the care of a just made acquaintance, a young German journalist. In the care of Philip, whom her mother has turned her over to, she makes her eyes wide, and takes a self-empowered journey back to her grandmother's house in Germany.

Alice's Mother. Alice's mother is going through a difficult time, in her personal relations, and at the last minute needs to send her daughter back to Germany in the company of Philip. At the end of the film, she is reunited with her daughter.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

PHILIP

Character The main character is Philip, a German journalist who has been working in America, assigned to writing an article on the look and feel of the United States. He is having trouble with writer's block, or perhaps, more deeply, with self-expression, and instead of writing he is obsessed with photography. For whatever reason, Philip is through with the American experience, and ready to return to Europe, when at the airport he meets a German woman and her daughter, themselves ready to return to Europe. As it turns out, the German woman leaves nine year old Alice with Philip, whom she arranges to meet in the Amsterdam Airport in a couple of days. When Philip arrives in Amsterdam with the girl, there is no sign of Alice's mother, and with the help of the girl's faulty memory, Philip sets out to look for the girl's grandmother. In the course of achieving this noble goal, that he sets for himself, Philip gains control and power over himself, and readies himself to recommence his writing career.

Parallels. One's mind turns to Steinbeck's *Travels with Charley* (1962), for another quest to see, discover, and describe America; not to mention *Blue Highways* (1982) in which William Least Heat Moon heads for the back roads, attempting a fresh verbal account of America. Both men, like Philip, struggle with the effort to deal with the vast and various American landscape. *Lolita* (1965) is Vladimir Nabokov's effort to describe the American travels of an older man with a nymphette—with results that in its time brought surprise and shock to the American reader.

Illustrative moments

Discouraged. Philip is frustrated and discouraged when he finally realizes that he has writer's block, and cannot complete his American assignment. He is out of money, at his lowest point, and he cannot get a direct flight to Germany.

Confused. Philip is not only discouraged but confused, when he finds that he has been left alone with Alice, and is responsible for getting her back to Europe.

Desperate. Confusion gives way to desperation, when Philip realizes that Alice does not know how to find her grandmother. At this point Philip turns the matter over to the police.

Conflicted. Philip experiences conflicting feelings, when he learns that Alice's mother and grandmother have been found, and that he has to leave Alice.

Discussion questions

Does Philip fall in love with Alice? She with him? Is there any suggestion of sexual intimacy between the two of them?

What keeps Alice's mother from taking the girl back to Europe? Do we know the answer?

Has Philip truly overcome his writer's block, by the end of the film? How can you know? What, within the film's events, would have freed Philip from this block?

THEMES

Fidelity. Philip remains true to the mission fate has dropped in his lap, to return Alice to her home. Alice's mother, who enters the film at a distracted time in her own life, is unable to explain to Philip, how he should handle the burden of her daughter, but Philip assumes the responsibility willingly. He does so although he, too, is off track and distracted, having proven himself incapable of completing his writing assignment, and having come to realize that he clings to photographs as a way of retaining his own identity.

Nationality. Philip has been unable to set his imagination free in America, as he moves from motel to motel attempting to capture the spirit of place. As he searches for the meaning of America, he gradually gives us a sense of the meaning of Europe and Germany, which come off as parts of the global setting—old fashioned and innovative both, bedeviled by urban sprawl and commercial ugliness. The personal presence of Philip, a global citizen himself, does a lot to keep the world focus before us.

Photography. As in many fine 'new wave' films—by Godard, Herzog—reflection on the photographic processes of film making are incorporated into the construction of films themselves. (The camera becomes an extra actor in the film, an eye with a personality of its own.) Struggles with his camera, Philip comes to see, are life and death struggles for him, challenges to shape and dignify his whole personality. His achieved reality, at the end of the film, is reflected in a polaroid image of himself and Alice together.

Affection. It is true that Alice is eager to separate Philip from the German lady whom he has met in the park, and who shares her bed with him, and yet Wenders seems to be using the Philip-Alice journey as a careful study in fine affection.