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Alice in the Cities

Robb Baker *Soho News*

Alice in the Cities
Jean Renoir Cinema

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Despite the fact that most New York liberal-intellectuals still consider it fashionable to despise anything Germanic (it runs a close second to "anything Arab" in the Acceptable Prejudices sweepstakes), the fact remains that five of the seven or eight best films playing regular runs in the city as of this weekend all bear the Made-in-Germany label: Werner Herzog's *Aguirre, the Wrath of God*, Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Chinese Roulette*, Wim Wenders' *Alice in the Cities*, Frank Beyer's *Jacob the Liar* (the only one of the six made in East Germany) and Hans Geissendorfer's *The Wild Duck*, a screen adaptation of a late play by Henrik Ibsen.

The German Renaissance is on, and it's no coincidence, for all the films reflect a particular German aesthetic, a particular way of looking at the world that is heavily sardonic and ironic, mixing pragmatic philosophy with a sweeping romanticism that tends towards a kind of ecstatic vision at times (and one that is, almost without exception, highly visual).

With the right exposure, Wim Wenders may yet give Fassbinder a run for the money as the most original talent on the movie scene in West Germany. Their styles differ rather radically: Fassbinder's camera moves with icy deliberation, painting pictures with each frame; Wenders prefers quick, black-and-white snapshots, trying to grab it all, or as much of it as possible, before it slips away. Fassbinder focuses on interiors, bouncing off tables and wall, peeking through doorways, reflecting (often literally) the empty objectness of things; Wenders goes outdoors instead, moving, moving, moving, down streets and by-ways, travelling the bleak landscape of human consciousness.

The protagonist in *Alice*, for example, is a magazine reporter who travels across the United States taking Polaroid pictures of the American scene. He returns to New York with boxes of snapshots, almost all of them of buildings or signs. No people, as a publisher I know is fond of lamenting. And no story. The words won't come. He's blocked, left with cold, blank images of a string of motel memories.

Philip Winter (that last name is no coincidence, of course) has the same problem as a person that he does as a photographer. He never gets more than snapshots of the world around him, and he's more interested in places than people. On his return to New York, he is coolly surprised when his former girlfriend (whom he had neglected to write or

road) refuses to let him move in on her. He's coolly surprised, too, when his publisher refuses to give him another advance, and again when a pretty young German woman he picks up at an airline ticket counter won't have sex with him after she invites him to spend the night. His coolest surprise of all, however, comes when the woman (with whom he has bought tickets to fly to Germany the next day) disappears, leaving him in charge of her 10-year-old daughter.

The girl, Alice, becomes the catalyst for Winter's re-immersing himself in life, for his beginning to feel some sort of human emotions once more. They return to Germany and begin a strange odyssey in search of the child's only remembered relative, a grandmother who may not even still be alive. All the girl has is a snapshot (again the snapshot) where the old woman used to live. She and the man drive through city after city looking for the house. Chance-in-a-million time, with the real object of the search being the act of searching, perhaps (which may be the best way to look at the way Wenders sees the medium of film itself).

Alice, like *Kings of the Road* (where the protagonist is a travelling movie-projector repairman), is a movie about moviemaking, about movies (and omnipresent popular music) as a metaphor, a symbolic construct, for contemporary life. Photographs (and moving pictures, too?) are "proof that you really saw something," the protagonist says at one point, but at another time he insists, "The trouble with photographs is that they never show what you've actually seen." American television is terrible, he says, not just because everything is "chopped with advertising" (i.e., commercials), but also because "every shot is trimmed" (a repetition of his earlier complaint about the selective ordering of an at least three-dimensional reality in a two-dimensional medium).

As a filmmaker, Wenders himself is doing his best to revolt against that kind of artificial ordering, that confinement, by positing a kind of visual freedom instead (one which, of course, still has its own order and logic because it, too, is a film, a structure). His movies move constantly — down streets and sidewalks and hallways, on subways and buses and escalators, along airport runways, across bridges, past crossroads, over rivers and lakes, up, out into the sky. The neon racket of life is everywhere (as in an Altman film), including the programmed (television, radio, jukebox) and the unprogrammed.

"It's a blank," says Alice (wonderfully played by young Yella Rottlander) when Winter (Rudiger Vogler) hands her a Polaroid that he's just snapped and which is still developing. "Just wait a few seconds," he replies. "You'll see."

Curiouser and curiouser, as another Alice used to say...