

## A Study of Everyday Aesthetics and (De)Alienation in Wim Wenders' *Alice in the Cities*

Zakia Kalam

### Introduction

This article is a study of Wim Wenders' film *Alice in den Städten* or *Alice in the Cities* (1974) — the first of his Road Trilogy, which also includes *The Wrong Move* (1975) and *Kings of the Road* (1976) — where it attempts to explore the aestheticisation of the everyday images and investigate how the aestheticisation renders the everyday as a site of psycho-political transformation through the intertwined relational concept of 'alienation' and 'de-alienation'. The article appraises *Alice in the Cities* as symptomatic of the *Neues deutsches kino* or the New German Cinema of the 1970s. Film historian Thomas Elsaesser talks about two cinematic experiences of the New German Cinema, one he describes as the 'cinema of experience' wherein the films are akin to realism both in content and form, and the other as the 'experience of cinema' wherein the films create a reality of their own as they subjectively mediate through time, memory, spaces, durations, places and occasions (207-208). Wim Wenders' cinema conjures the 'sensibilism' of the second by virtue of their intense cinematic experiences and aesthetics very different from his contemporaries. The article thus enquires into Wenders' film aesthetic and propounds the dialectical interplay of cinematic and photographic images crucial to his methodology. It also examines how the aestheticisation of everyday images paves the path for an analysis of everyday modernity as a site of alienation before venturing into the consequent study of de-alienation as the transformative and emancipatory potential of the everyday. The article draws upon Nick Malherbe's theory from the field of psychology, where he politicises the psychological understanding of alienation by combining Karl Marx's concept of 'alienation' as an oppressive social condition with Jacques Lacan's concept of 'alienation' as fundamental to human subjectivity in order to forge a psycho-political interpretation of de-alienation (Malherbe 264). Moreover, Malherbe argues that de-alienation is a relational concept, and understanding it requires an understanding of alienation first because de-alienation as a concept functions only dialectically by embracing, rejecting and reconstituting facets of alienation (Malherbe 264). While themes related to homesickness, technology and space, experience and memory, American presence, and identity politics have long been explored in the films of Wenders, a more determined focus on his everyday aesthetics and its psycho-political implications remains unexplored.

The film is about a German journalist, Philip Winter (Rüdiger Vogler), who has been appointed with the task of writing a story on America, the details of which are never specified in the film. Stunted with a writing block, Philip aimlessly drives through one state to another, from North Carolina to New York, in search of words that would embody his experiences in the form of a story, but he fails. He resorts to taking pictures on his Polaroid camera obsessively in the hope of stimulating words through images, but the images only add to his sense of alienation from himself and the material reality around him. The long shots of empty roads and the wide camera angles establish Philip's alienated mindscape and loneliness. A chance encounter with a nine-year-old Alice Van Damm (Yella Rottländer) at the Pan Am Airport begins to thwart Philip's emotional and creative inertia when he finds himself unexpectedly saddled with Alice's responsibility as her mother (Lisa Kreuzer) disappears under strange circumstances. Left with an ambiguous note from her mother, Philip and Alice begin to travel from America to the Netherlands to Germany. The journey in Germany unfolds through a road trip as Philip now drives around German streets in search of Alice's grandmother's house with only figments of Alice's vague memory as their aid. The article argues that in spite of the film's loyalty to the American road genre in the plot's lay-out, the film indulges in an aesthetics of everyday life that reimagines and reconfigures the everyday, allowing it to emerge as a site for both the alienation and later the transformative de-alienation of the characters. In its first section, the article will attempt to discuss the

aesthetics that Wenders has stimulated in this film to depict everyday life and the techniques of defamiliarisation that he uses as a part of his aesthetics. Since this film navigates through different registers of everyday modernity and its impact on the consciousness of its characters, the article will borrow the philosophical insights and approaches of Henri Lefebvre, Walter Benjamin, and Georg Simmel, who have attempted to theorise the experience of everyday in the context of modernity. In the second section, the article will examine how the everyday experiences generate the inevitable alienation under conditions of post-war capitalism or, more specifically, the colonising forces of Americanisation, as concretely portrayed in the initial segment of the film. In this regard, the article will rely upon Walter Benjamin and Henri Lefebvre's critique of capitalism penetrating everyday life alongside Malherbe's psycho-political reading of 'alienation'. Causally, in the third section, the article will investigate the subtle de-alienation that the film maps along the progress in the plot and its visual regime of the everyday aesthetics in an endeavour to affirm Lefebvre's hypothesis that the everyday contains within it the seeds of its own transformation (Highmore 113). Attempting a microscopic study of the small fragments of everyday life as woven into the filmic narrative and the cinematic language of the film, the article will, therefore, explore the transformative potential of everyday life.

### **Wenders' Film-Aesthetic: The Aestheticisation of Everyday Life**

Central to Wenders' filmic aesthetics is the conflict between the dominance of 'images' and that of the 'story' — Wenders believes that the demand for the story is a universal desire of the viewers for a sense of order underlying the incoherence of life (Graf 2). The dominance of the story often manipulates the images, bending them in order to serve its narrative coherence and structure. Within the apparatus theory of cinema which was proposed by Jean-Louis Baudry in the 1970s, this dominance of the story can be further elaborated in technical terms and interpreted as an ideological effect generated by the cinema. The apparatus theory challenges the ideological neutrality of the technology involved in the cinematic process that transforms the objective reality into an illusion which constitutes a film (Branigan and Buckland 14). Baudry analyses how the transformation of a material product into a performative event of a film eludes the viewer and thus generates an ideological effect conveying a continuity and equivalence where there is discontinuity and disparity (Branigan and Buckland 15). He illustrates this by emphasising the homologous relation between narrative continuity and the cinematic image that creates an illusion of continuous movement and time as the film projection negates the differences between the individual frames, turning differences into relations — while narratives entangle places, characters and events into a network of relations, the moving images turn segments of time and space into vectors of motion and time (Branigan and Buckland 15). In other words, the story of the film and the cinematic images reinforce each other and create a nexus of meanings that only serve the ideological purpose of the cinema. But Wenders agrees with the idea of the film theoretician Béla Balázs, who envisions cinema as a medium that must record reality as it is through the photographic image, liberating the image in the process from any demand made upon it by the story (Graf 4).

Aware of the need to ensure his film's commercial viability as an independent production, Wenders negotiates a middle path between the cinematic images and the photographic images, thus prioritising the film's plot but only as a framework to merely hang his aesthetic photographic images upon. The form of the movie is thus loosely orchestrated through episodic narratives and an abundance of photographic images filling the in-between spaces. In *Alice in the Cities*, these images are suffused with everyday life — the images of streets, gas stations, and railway tracks; with everyday artefacts — the television, the telephone booth, the jukebox; and everyday activities — walking, talking, eating, story-telling, swimming. Wenders' choice of images occasions a remembrance of André Bazin's famous essay "Ontology of the Photographic Image," where Bazin propounds his realist

theory of film art, arguing that cinema is, at heart, a realist medium. Bazin's major argument is that "Photography and the cinema ... are discoveries that satisfy, once and for all and in its very essence, our obsession with realism" and the explanation for this is not to be found in the way a photograph looks but rather in the way they come to be or in their ontology (Branigan and Buckland 303). For Bazin — "The Photographic image is the object itself, the object freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it" (Bazin and Gray 6). Wenders' filmic aesthetics, therefore, is reliant upon a dialectical relation between the photographic images and the cinematic images, where the images of everyday life cut through the narrative continuity of the film's story and, in the process, lay bare the potential of everyday life to affect changes at a psycho-social level.

After completing his films for television, Wenders started shooting for his first feature film, *Alice in the Cities*, in 1973, and Alexander Graf, in his book *The Cinema of Wim Wenders*, notes that this was the first film where Wenders found his own unique style and independent voice in the art of making cinema (13). Different from his contemporaries, Wenders' film aesthetic is grounded in his photographic images rather than a story to the extent that Wenders used to draft the script for his film *Kings of the Road* on the evening before the shooting, hoping to find the story when he saw the location (Graf 14). Much like Balázs and Bazin, Siegfried Kracauer in his film theory and Pier Paolo Pasolini in his book *Empirismo Eretico* (Heretical Empiricism) also emphasises the documentarian quality of cinema in capturing the reality in an unbroken continuity (Graf 21). Wenders agrees with this, which is clearly reflected in his oeuvre; his films have the quality of being part-documentary and part-fiction. For his photographic images, he chose to capture ordinary details of an ever-flowing incessant everyday life. In the first seventeen minutes of the film when we follow Philip in his car around the streets of America, we are confronted with images of highways, motels, neon signs, underground tunnels, soda bars, the jukebox, gas stations, beaches both empty and crowded, a close-up of the American dollar, images of city light at night, streets washed in a stormy evening and the melancholy pervading it all. These are but the 'taken-for-granted' images from everyday life that Wenders craftily sneaks into the cinematic experience of his film despite the negligible contribution that the images make towards the plot. In her "Introduction" to *Everyday Life* Rita Felski writes that everyday life epitomises the quintessential quality of 'taken-for-grantedness' as it bespeaks our indifference to events that unfold right under our vision (608). She draws upon Victor Shklovsky's diagnosis of this disease and the cure he extolls in the realm of art — "(A)rt exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things; to make the stone stony" (Shklovsky qtd. in Felski 608). Felski concurs with Shklovsky in her statement that aesthetics induces a sensitised acuity of perception and is the antithesis of everyday inattentiveness, a thread of thought that Henri Lefebvre and the Situationists promoted too within the idiom of French criticism (608). So aesthetics becomes a "loose ensemble of techniques, performances, and intensities of experience that can revive and even revolutionise the everyday by registering its rich and mysterious peculiarities" (609). To this end, Wenders also uses the techniques of defamiliarisation as a part of his aestheticisation of images in rerouting his audience towards everyday life and its peculiar beauty that the tandem of habits unconsciously represses.

Though the aestheticisation of everyday life appears throughout the film, some examples stand in stark contrast to others. When Philip takes Alice to the observation level in the Empire State Building in New York, hoping to meet her mother there, a promise she fails to deliver, we see Philip agitated as he skims through the streets of Manhattan through a pay-telescope (see Fig. 1). But Alice cherishes her aerial view through the telescope and as the camera depicts her point of view, the audience begins to observe with her the sharp edges of the Manhattan skyscrapers and the dense traffic below. A white bird suddenly flies into the frame, and the camera starts following it until it loses the bird amid the labyrinth of skyscrapers. Graf notes how objects lurking at the margin of the film's diegesis are allowed

to drift into the frame even though they appear to have made no contribution to the plot (85). Although a desire to read the shot symbolically in terms of the characters' consciousness cannot be entirely ruled out, the shot nonetheless is self-sufficient in its beauty and elicits a response worthy of its majestic freedom and openness. Further, the telescopic view of the busy streets and the by-lanes only adds to the defamiliarisation of the ordinary. The telescopic view correlates with one of the eight major conceptions of the camera laid down by Edward Branigan in his history of film theory, where the camera functions as a sensory form and the technique of unmotivated shots, such as this, serves to defamiliarise the familiar leaving in its wake a more socially and politically conscious art form (Branigan and Buckland 70).



Fig. 1. Wim Wenders, *Alice in the Cities* (37:24).

The film spans two dominant settings — one against the cityscapes of America and another against Germany with a brief interlude in Amsterdam. As promised in the brief note she left, Amsterdam is where Alice's mother was meant to join them after her strange disappearance in New York, but she fails again, and Philip finds himself strapped with Alice's responsibility. With a laboured memory, Alice recalls that her grandmother lives in Wuppertal in Germany, and Philip and Alice set out on the search thereon. But as the film progresses, it becomes clear that Alice had led the two on a wild goose chase — from Wuppertal to the Ruhr region and through the streets of Oberhausen and Gelsenkirchen — the search for Alice's grandmother's house becomes a pretext for a journey that materialises into an acute observation of the ordinary everyday life as the camera indiscriminately records every street, every house and the humdrum of daily life playing itself out. It is also imperative to note that the German towns selected for location are quintessentially industrial in nature, taking us back to the aesthetics of the metropolis that emerged in the nineteenth-century Germany as a response to modernity. Lothar Müller, in his essay on the aesthetics of the metropolis,

writes that technology and industry, “which in all pathographies of modernity was considered the monstrously ugly antithesis of nature, now appeared a locus of beauty” (37). Wuppertal, famous for its overhead suspension monorail that runs around the city centre, also reminds one of Karlheinz Stierle’s study on the central role of iron and glass architecture in the aesthetic of industrial modernity and its capacity for poetry (Müller 41). Indeed, the wide-angled camera shots capturing this glass and iron structure overhead add to the subtle mystification of a drab industrial every day town as Alice and Philip continue on their quest for the grandmother’s house (see Fig. 2). The view from inside the rail is analogous in kind if not in degree with the defamiliarising view from above the Empire State Building, subtly coaxing us to look at the city from the outside and with a sharpness of an outsider. However, Wenders’ aesthetics of modernity are not without contradictions and antinomies. If he beautifies the modern experience through subjective and objective shots of the cityscapes, his photographic images also bemoan the beautiful old houses in the suburbs of the Ruhr region that were being torn down for not bringing enough rent, another poignant aspect of modernity. Wenders once quoted Paul Cézanne in his interview — “things are disappearing. If you have to see anything, you must hurry” (Graf 23). For Wenders, the act of filming sometimes becomes a ‘heroic act’ because it enables the redemption of the transient by capturing the moment in the photographic image, and so the art of photography comes closest in granting immortality to something (Graf 23). In capturing old houses that silently await their own demolition, Wenders grants the old traditions and the obsolete everyday lives of the past an immortal existence in his cinema. “House-Graves” is the term Alice uses out of pity to describe the emptiness of the houses as Wenders pays his homage to the past through his filmic aesthetics.



Fig 2. Wim Wenders, *Alice in the Cities* (1:06:30).

Brenda Austin-Smith called this film a ‘vertiginous cinema’ for its ability to transform the everyday movement into something so inexplicable that it disorients us both physically and emotionally (Austin-Smith Web). Picking up a specific shot that shows a young boy riding a bicycle parallel to Philip and Alice riding their Renault, she argues that the shot has the potential to catch us off-guard for the limited time and space it occupies in the cinema. The boy looks straight into the camera, fixing his gaze too directly and steadily as he tries to catch up with the car, aware of his presence in the frame, and the shot lasts for a few

seconds, focusing on him (see Fig. 3). In the absence of any reverse shot that could confirm Alice or Philip as his object of gaze, Austin-Smith argues that the boy looks at us, the viewers and inadvertently his real afternoon world collides with us through the fiction of Alice and Philip, allowing us to become a part of his monotonous afternoon while he becomes a part of ours. It may be added that as the boundary between art and real life collapses, the real life of us viewers momentarily transforms into art and the art into reality, leaving in its wake a mystified experience of the everyday. Austin-Smith calls the shot a *trouvaille* (a lucky find), one among many with which Wenders creates the enchanting possibilities of his film (Austin-Smith Web). This specific observation strengthens the central argument of this article that the everyday is a potential site of transformation, and Wenders' aestheticisation of everyday life in his cinema foregrounds this transformative potential in myriad shades. For instance, when we focus on the images of everyday modernity, the transformative potential takes on a psycho-political hue as it is felt in the consciousness of the characters as 'alienation' compulsively conducted by capitalism and the attendant modernisation. The next section now investigates the same.



Fig. 3. Wim Wenders, *Alice in the Cities* (1:33:46).

### **Everyday Modernity: The Site of Alienation**

Most of the films for which Wenders is best known — like *The American Friend*, *Paris, Texas*, *Wings of Desire*, and this road trilogy — are tied to the cultural and national opposition between Germany and the USA and have male protagonists who are hypersensitive men (Elsaesser 230). America often appears in a dual role in these movies, both as the resented other and a liberator (Elsaesser 231). The ambiguity towards America as a surrogate culture after the Second World War figures in *Alice in the Cities*, too, where in the first seventeen minutes, the New York sequence triggers an uneasy mood of alienation, leaving Philip with a writing block and the failure to experience his everyday surrounding authentically, but paradoxically later in Germany it is an American Rock and Roll concert of Chuck Berry that liberates Philip and gives him a desire to live. What complicates Philip's experience with America in this film is its disenchanting spell of capitalism imbued in the everyday images that deadens Philip's creative ability, estranging him from his work, his everyday surroundings and himself. The movie opens with a shot of an empty beach and Philip sitting alone under a boardwalk, taking pictures on his Polaroid. The camera shot

gestures Philip's attempt to compare the vision before his eyes and the picture he captured. The disparity between the two is confirmed when, a few shots later, we hear Philip grudging, "It just never shows what you saw!" Philip drives to another part of the beach, this time crowded with people and ball games, but we only hear the sound of the camera shutter, and Philip never appears in the cinematic frame, confirming his alienation from his immediate material surroundings and, by extension, from his everyday experiences. Philip continues to drive around cities, taking random pictures of streets, towers, lamp posts, and, on one occasion, a boy in front of the gas station who literally does not appear when the Polaroid image is formed, heightening the difference between the reality and the image to which Philip clings on most desperately. As he later confesses before his former girlfriend:

I got completely lost. It was a horrible journey. Once you leave New York City, nothing changes anymore. It all looks the same, you can't imagine anything more. Above all, you can't imagine any change. I became estranged from myself. All I could imagine was going on and on like this forever. (Wenders, *Alice in the Cities* 24:58)

Philip's alienation can be studied dualistically within both the Marxist and the Lacanian frameworks, as proposed by Malherbe. The four aspects of alienation that Marx postulated for workers under the oppressive structure of capitalism are alienation from the product of their labour, from the process of their labour, from the species-being and from one another (Malherbe 266). For Lacan, alienation remains constitutive of subjecthood, first observed during ego-formation, whereas the second develops when the subject is inducted into the symbolic order — the symbolic order perpetuates the subjective alienation through language-driven socio-sexual relations and societal structures that fail to possess the subjective fullness, leaving the subject split between consciousness and the repressed desires (Malherbe 267). Interestingly, Malherbe, drawing upon Marxist scholarship, argues that Marx's four aspects of alienation are implicated in Lacan's model of subjectivity, where the product and process of labour fall under subjective alienation from the symbolic order (Malherbe 269). In other words, the symbolic acts alongside the material existence in mutually constitutive ways; this dual binding of the material and the psychological lies at the heart of Philip's experience, too. That Philip suffers through creative inertia under the oppressive capitalist culture of America is reflected in his brief encounter with the publisher who, undervaluing the emotional involvement of Philip with his work and his write-up, refuses to give him either an advance or more time and terminates his contact with him. The other side of Philip's creative inertia is integrally tied to a subjective lack of being, as is reflected in his obsessive attempt at capturing his everyday experience in America, unconsciously seeking his existence in the polaroid images, but the consequent failure to do so only adds a dent to his affective emotionalism heightening his alienation. When Philip confesses before his former girlfriend that he had completely got lost driving around New York, not knowing what hit him, the friend most incisively sums up his alienation from everything. She replies:

You don't have to travel across America for that. That happens when you lose all sense of your own self. And you lost that long ago. That's why, you always need proof, proof you still exist. Your stories and your experiences — you treat them like raw eggs. As if you were the only one to experience things. And that's why you keep taking pictures. They're something you can hold on to, more evidence that it was you who saw these things. (Wenders, *Alice in the Cities* 26:04)

Malherbe's theory echoes Henri Lefebvre's insistence that the everyday is a totality of relationships where even a minute humble event has two sides; one spans through individual chance events, but the other spans across infinitely complex social events like capitalism, and by extension, its attendant modernisation (Highmore 143). The 1950s and the 1960s particularly can be seen as a period of hyper-modernisation, a process that hit France and Germany more forcefully than most of the other Western countries, and this massively accelerated modernisation left in its wake a panoply of social symptoms

(Highmore 131). The experience of everyday life in the context of America is thus rendered as a site of psycho-political alienation, as depicted through the cinematic narrative and the photographic images.

The alienation generated by everyday modernity in the context of capitalism is further compounded when the film turns towards images of advertisements. Lefebvre's voluminous criticism of the everyday emphasises the inescapability of the post-war extension of capitalism penetrating every detail of daily life and advertisement as its most insistent voice (Highmore 113). As countries entered into a new colonial relationship with the US after the war, modernisation blended in with the consumer culture. "Blue jeans, electric cookers, fridges, washing machines, Coca-Cola, television and so on" became the American temptation colonising everyday life (Highmore 113). In his poem, "The American Dream," documenting his first visit to America, Wenders writes how he perceives America as a land where one is so surrounded by advertising images that vision becomes eroded, and Philip echoes his sentiment in the film (Graf 77). While many hyper-commodified images of Americanisation flit in and out of the cinematic frame, Wenders particularly channelises his resentment towards televisions as they not only capture everyday life but manipulate it most damagingly. There are two instances where Philip's acrimonious relation to the television stands out starkly against the general rhythm of the film. The first instance is of Philip spending a night at a motel, and we see a large glass window with advertisement lights flashing through it as the backdrop and a television placed in front of it. Philip starts watching a film on the television and falls asleep. When he wakes up next, it is due to the crackling sound of the television, soon followed by advertisements, and Philip aggressively gets up and smashes the TV. Alexander Graf comments that the advertisement lights reinforce the theme of the television as an 'optical toxin' (80). The second instance occurs when Philip is in a New York hotel room with Lisa and Alice, and he scribbles the following note while watching advertisements on the television:

American television is inhuman not because it's all hacked up with commercials, though that's bad enough, but because, in the end, all programmes become commercials. Commercials for the status quo. Every image radiates the same disgusting, sickening message, a kind of boastful contempt. Every image wants something from you. (Wenders, *Alice in the Cities* 33:25)

Here, as elsewhere in the film, televisions and commercials as a part of everyday modern life incite alienation where the subjective experience dissolves in the deluge of inflated commercial images.

Walter Benjamin, in his study of modern everyday life, also finds evidence of major trauma in advertising, which he explains through his inability to translate experiences into communicable knowledge (Highmore 67). In German, *Erlebnis* stands for experience as lived through and *Erfahrung* as experience that can be accumulated, reflected upon and communicated or that which grants *Erlebnis* a social meaning — according to Benjamin, the senses of the 'fragile human body' are so assaulted daily by the modern urban life that it completely blocks the sense-making process or the necessary expression of *Erfahrung* (Highmore 66-67) This also explains Philip's writing block, his frustration with the Polaroid images that never show what he sees or experiences and implies a sense of alienation as both a symptom and a consequence of the everyday modern life. The inability to express one's own experience sufficiently or coherently gradually extends to a collapse of communication with one another. The conditions of modernity decentre the human subject and puncture human relationships by robbing the subjects of their agency to communicate, express or experience their everyday wholeheartedly in the face of the obsolescence that modernity produces in its continuous demand for a change. The temporal experiences of the modern everyday are always in flux, so all the characters in the movie appear to be drifting along indefinite paths. Philip is unable to find refuge at the apartment of his former girlfriend



in New York; Lisa is determined to leave New York because the man she has been romantically involved with (and who is not Alice's father) would die but not leave New York for her. The relationships are strained, and everyone is enwrapped in alienation from the other. Even the nine-year-old Alice appears acutely aware of her peculiarly adrift position. Her rhetorical joke about how four elephants can fit in a red Volkswagen betrays a sense of alienation and an understanding of her own problematic position.

A compulsive consumer of American culture, Alice wears a jacket with Alaska written on it and is fond of hot dogs, hamburgers, cellophane-wrapped meals at the airport and paid TV slots. Within the Lacanian paradigm, commodification only heightens the fundamentally alienated subjectivity because it capitalises on ego formation, offering it a promise of subjective fullness or promising to return what had earlier been repressed (Malherbe 270). In the case of Alice, who is somewhere in between the mirror stage and the symbolic order, the grasp of the fetishised commodity appears nearly complete, and her resultant subjectivity is thus alienated. The nightmare that she discloses to Philip at the Amsterdam hotel, in which she is tied to a seat in front of a television and forced to watch a horror movie, further confirms this because it is a sublimation of her own unconscious traumatic experiences in New York and the alienation that the fear of getting abandoned by her mother imposes upon her mind. But it is again Alice who — because she is yet to be inducted into the symbolic order completely and thus evades symbolisation by it — becomes the conduit to a new experience of everyday as she and Philip travel to Germany in search of the grandmother's house. Following Lefebvre's avant-garde sociology of the everyday, critical attention to everyday life as an alienated reality requires an alienating perspective because in Lefebvre's terminology "It is then that consciousness of alienation — that strange awareness of the strange — liberates us, or begins to liberate us, from alienation," for alienation is the condition of being alienated from one's alienation (Highmore 143). So in a dialectical twist, any route to de-alienation begins through alienation first since it is only by defamiliarising the everyday that the everyday can be recognised as alienation (Highmore 143). Therefore, having discussed everyday modernity as the site of alienation against the context of America, the next section will now examine the gradual uncoiling of both Alice and Philip's alienation as they arrive at an authentic experience of their self and the resultant de-alienation in Germany. The section probes into the newly founded de-alienating solidarity between the two with the help of Malherbe's concept of de-alienation as well as George Simmel's philosophical approach to everyday and the subsequent transformative potential of everyday as accrued through its micro-units.

### **De-Alienation: The Transformative Potential of Everyday**

Nick Malherbe, in his theorisation of the term 'de-alienation', observes that the prefix 'de-' usually signifies the complete reversal of a word — in this case the reversal of 'alienation' within a capitalist paradigm — and it also signifies a toning down of some attribute or lowering the intensity and that the dual meaning of this prefix opens up de-alienation to a psycho-political interpretation through a synthesis of Marxist political praxis and Lacanian psychoanalysis (Malherbe 272). What is of interest here is Malherbe's proposition that interlinked dimensions of alienation and intersubjective lack can serve as a point of mutual connectedness (Malherbe 273). In the film, the alienation of both Alice and Philip thus can be seen occasioning a solidarity between the two, which blooms as they negotiate through their everyday experiences in Germany. Malherbe's psycho-political approach towards de-alienation resonates with Lefebvre's and Georg Simmel's philosophical approach towards the emancipatory experience of the everyday, and when taken together, they constitute an effective methodology to probe into the transformative dynamics of everyday experiences in the film. To begin with Lefebvre's hypothesis, he proposes that despite the neurasthenic experience of the modern everyday within a capitalist structure, it has immense transformative potential, and as a romantic, he seeks energies within the everyday that could

be used to transform it (Highmore 115). As a philosopher, he understood everyday life as a 'lived experience' and had similarities with Georg Simmel when he speculated about "the social as the totality" (Highmore 113). Before Lefebvre, Georg Simmel indulged in a project of sociological microscopy where he employed impressionistic descriptions of everyday life within a philosophical approach to register more general social forces in the particularities of the everyday and in his microscopic approach, he identified the encounters of everyday life "as the genuine and fundamental basis of life" (Highmore 37). Simmel's motif was not to produce or reproduce grand narratives of society through his attention to the specificities of everyday. Instead, he was more interested in the micro-politics of everyday life, which cannot be easily assimilated into predetermined or pre-existing political categories and structures. Alice and Philip's temporary sojourn in Amsterdam and then their journey through Germany in search of the grandmother's house ushers in many such microscopic events of ordinary everyday life that are capable of revealing glimpses of human bonding in the nooks and crevices of the mundane and outside any socio-political discourse. The events reveal a warm chemistry between the two, which can never be assimilated into any given category of social relations and initiates a process of subjective de-alienation, enabling Philip to experience his everyday again and Alice to find a metaphorical home in her daily activities with Philip. When the chemistry is looked through Malherbe's critical lens, what transpires is the political de-alienation underlying the subjective process since the characters (un)consciously begin to disinvest in identities and social structures endorsed by patriarchal capitalism (Malherbe 274).

That Alice will emerge as the catalyst to this process of de-alienation has been subtly established in the scene where Philip meets Alice for the first time at the airport and, caught in a turnstile with her, playfully follows Alice around the revolving door. Her role as the anchor in this process is established more firmly when, on their first day in Amsterdam, Philip and Alice are waiting for a bus, and Alice asks Philip to tell her something about himself, but he fails to do so. She takes a picture of him on the Polaroid and hands it to him with the words "So at least you know what you look like," and as the camera zooms in on the picture, the reflection of Alice merges with the image of Philip. Alice's uncomplicated understanding of things, her unapologetic nature when she makes demands on Philip, and her stocktaking of their surroundings all lead to new habits that cut across the previously alienating experience of the everyday. Within the philosophical tradition of American pragmatism 'habit' — "the effortless custody of automatism" — is understood as a protective cushion against the multiplicity of choices, decisions, indecisions, and sensations of everyday and according to William James, when individuals change their lives, they do not abandon 'habit' so much as replace them with new ones (Felski 615). So, on their new journey in search of the grandmother's house, both Philip and Alice embark on new habits to help them sail by. Their stay at different hotels, eating meals together, Alice's insistence on not eating at cheap hotels, and their habitual teasing of each other with names — are but some habits through which both Philip and Alice begin to experience their everyday anew, allaying their hidden anxieties and their alienation. The new habits sensitise them both towards each other's vulnerabilities too, and so if Alice can hear Philip's confession that he fears 'fear', Philip also ensures that a light is on every time Alice goes to sleep because she is afraid of the dark. A subtle de-alienation works itself through these micro-units of everyday life within the plot of the film and along the character graphs, but the implications extend to the viewers beyond the cinematic fringe as Wenders engages them through his aesthetics of the photographic images.

Alice has no memories of her past — she does not know her grandmother's name or what her mother's maiden name was, and as it would later turn out, she misremembers that her grandmother lived in Wuppertal. In the absence of a concrete memory, she only remembers that there were trees around the house and that the staircase was dark. With this vague memory of Alice, the two go driving around the streets of Wuppertal. Both in

Wuppertal and later in Oberhausen, the camera sometimes follows Philip and Alice inside the car, and at other times, it indulges long tracking shots from inside the moving car to imply the perspective of Philip and Alice. These tracking shots in Wenders' cinematography encourage a foregrounding of observational activities, "the act of seeing" (Graf 71). In Wuppertal, the camera captures an array of everyday activities like school kids rushing out at recess, people loading garbage cans onto the garbage trucks, maids cleaning window panes, and later in Oberhausen, the camera captures people out on a stroll, an old couple sitting under the shade of a tree, and old houses lined along the street. Though the monotony and stillness of everyday life are dialectically opposite to a road trip, in Wenders' cinema, such images of everyday life float in the background as the unconscious component of the conscious trip that the characters are undertaking. The juxtaposition makes way for the concept of 'life-world', which, as Rita Felski elaborates, is used to theorise the everyday in the fields of phenomenology, sociology and philosophy (613). First developed in the work of Edmund Husserl as *Lebenswelt* and later taken up by Jürgen Habermas, the term refers to a linguistic, cultural and intersubjective phenomenon that can be understood as "the invisible sea in which we swim, the pregiven, tacit context of our conscious activities" (613). Felski argues that as a concept, *Lebenswelt* is less critical of the 'taken-for-grantedness' which it sees as an inalienable feature of human existence and not solely a consequence of capitalism, thus encouraging that much of our unconscious thoughts must remain opaque, recalcitrant and beyond the reach of understanding and critique (614). The rhythm of everyday life as it unfolds within the cinematic frame becomes an unconscious background, a 'life-world' against the conscious trip of Philip and Alice.

The psycho-political de-alienation of the characters, particularly of Philip, is further confirmed as the plot progresses. Unlike his previous aimless drives across the American streets, Philip now drives across Germany motivated by a search for a concrete house, and unlike his previous obsession with capturing his immediate surroundings on his Polaroid, he no longer feels the need to do so. The obsession with capturing pictures in America reflected his alienation from his immediate everyday experiences, and the pictures served as a proof of his existence to himself, but the change in his approach suggests that he is no longer (or perhaps less) alienated from his surroundings and can experience it more authentically. The consistent pace of the filmic narrative takes a dramatic plunge when, in a café, Alice admits to Philip that her grandmother does not live in Wuppertal. Offended at the least, Philip leaves her at the police station, but as he walks back to the hotel, he comes across a poster of Chuck Berry, and he spontaneously heads towards a Rock and Roll concert. According to Andrew Light, the concert plays a crucial turning point in the film because it revives Philip (223). The live music of the concert, unlike the monotonous radio stations or pre-recorded music, allows the listener a direct interaction with the site of the performance, heightening his or her experience of it (223). According to Light, the everyday experience of attending the concert reawakens Philip to his immediate surroundings, and it may be argued that it reconciles him to life itself. This reminds us of Lefebvre's insistence on the instance of the medieval festival, *la fête*, which was both separate and also a part of life, as a critique of the alienation of the aesthetic from the social or art from life and his belief that transformation is grounded in creativity (Highmore 119). The concert, therefore, revitalises Philip, de-alienating him from his creativity or his labour, which Marx rightly calls as the 'life energy', because it is through our labour that we show ourselves as humans (Malherbe 265). The transformation also encourages him to accept Alice wholeheartedly when she stealthily sneaks into his car on the same night after evading the vigilance of the police. Seeing Alice return, Philip is both happy and relieved, and together, they once again set out to search for the house. Lefebvre also talks about 'moments' in the everyday that are imbued with an intense experience, vivid sensations of disgust or shock or delight which, though fleeting, hold the promise of a transformed everyday life (Highmore 115-116). The reconciliation with Alice after the concert bespeaks Lefebvre's 'moment'. Reinvigorated, Philip and Alice finally succeed in locating the house, but to Alice's disappointment, an Italian lady turns out to

inform them that her grandmother does not live there anymore. Protecting her from the fear of being abandoned, Philip takes Alice swimming, and the ordinary act not only tones down Alice's mood but once again revitalises the experience of both Philip and Alice with regard to their present reality and everyday life.

It is also important to evaluate the symbolic implication of the grandmother's house. Located in the German Ruhr, the conscious search for the house may also be interpreted as an unconscious winding of Philip's own scattered self, for Ruhr is also the site of his childhood or an originary point of his identity. Arriving at the house, therefore, liberates Philip from his tiring search for his true self and the unbearable alienation of his own life. A house is also the most conventional site where the everyday plays itself out. In the cinematic narrative of the film, the house becomes a historicised site of everyday where the past of Philip and that of Alice come together in what Benjamin calls the 'Now of Recognisability' (Highmore 62); an awakening that arrests the flow of history and is born out of both a 'dream consciousness' and consciousness of a new realisation of the present. The house, therefore, serves as the final catalyst to the de-alienation of Philip and also of Alice to an extent, as the search for the house strengthens her bond with Philip. In addition, de-alienation, according to Malherbe, is also a process that attends to unconscious emotional knowing or ways of understanding the world, some of which elude symbolisation or undergo repression and delegitimation under capitalist social relations, which deny the legitimacy of emotionalism and human bonds (Malherbe 278) The journey through Germany to find the grandmother's house and the everyday which Philip and Alice experience in their search becomes a part of this unconscious emotional knowing that liberates them both in the end. When Philip and Alice board a ferry, now heading to his parents' house, Philip tries taking a picture of a co-passenger — a mother humming softly to her child with Alice in the frame and his de-alienation to his art and to his self appears nearly complete. The movie ends with Alice and Philip heading to Munich and, from thereon, on their respective paths since Alice's mother has returned as informed by the police and since Philip must now finish his assigned story (which very well may be on everyday aesthetics). The last panoramic camera shot, which zooms out at Alice and Philip peeping out of the train window, appears to once again aestheticise an ordinary everyday image of a train passing through a German landscape, but not without implying the enormous transformative potential that everyday life has.

### **Conclusion:**

In the 1970s, when most of the film directors of the New German Cinema were busy making films that addressed the problematic German past following the Second World War or the social issues that plagued the German present in the wake of the past, Wenders chose for his cinematography a language of everyday aesthetics. The German question figures in his films, too, as his characters restlessly cross borders or aimlessly drive around cities with tattered identities, but as Alexander Graf records, instead of dealing with political themes in his cinema, Wenders chose to make films politically, and the essence of his politics is grounded in the aesthetic images of the everyday that he wove into the cinematic narrative of the films. In *Alice in the Cities*, Wenders explores the potential of everyday aesthetics through his photographic images and delineates the transformative potential that small and seemingly insignificant micro-units of the everyday carry within them. Through a dialectical formulation of cinematic and photographic images, the film draws upon alienation as engendered by everyday modernity and then resists, accepts, acknowledges, and ultimately reconstitutes it for the purpose of rendering the same everyday as a means of de-alienation with its psycho-social transformative and emancipatory potential. Philip and Alice are still journeying when the film ends. But the metaphor of the journey at the end of the film paradoxically reinforces everyday life as the real site of social and psychological transformation, and to conclude, it thus confirms Lefebvre's hypothesis about the same.

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Zakia Kalam  
Department of English  
Chakdaha College  
zk.eng@chakdahacollege.ac.in

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