

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## Kings of the Road 1976

Wim Wenders. 1945-

### STORY

*Kings of the Road*, 1976, is the third release in Wim Wenders' trilogy of open road films. (*Alice in the Cities*, 1974; *Wrong Move*, 1975; *Kings of the Road*, 1976). The three works all deal with the issues of movement over space, landscape, with its variable lights shapes, contrasts between cityscapes and extended black and white and bleak scapes of simply passing land, as seen from a train or oversized van or rented car. The relative muteness of these Wenders films is given full hearing, in these place tales, in which time too, like land, is drawn out and dwelt upon.

**History.** Time is the counterpart to place here. The land dwelt on in this film is bleak and only minimally rich on the rare occasions when we find ourselves driving into an old Hanseatic like northern German town, in which cobbled streets and gabled houses in rows imply another world, perhaps the world of Mann's *Buddenbrooks*. For the most part the land traversed by Bruno and Robert is a blasted post war landscape in which the benign traces of time have been expunged. Those traces are shapeless and full of debris, the broken up remnants of the lives of people who once lived in history.

**Plot.** The plot of the present film is simple, seemingly haphazard, and at times endless. The narrative moves jerkily from one episode to another, as two guys, brought together by fate, travel together, in a big van, along the border between West and East Germany. That rather shapeless plot setting is itself grounded in a long interview with which the mutual encounter of the two men, Bruno and Robert, is preceded. That interview, which takes place between Bruno, a film projector equipment repairman, and an old time film technician from the silent era, intersects with those themes—history and technology, communication, the places of writing and depicting, in social development—which add Wenders' distinctive philosophical complexity. On that foundation, then, Wenders moves us over into the world of uncontextualized exposure to the given world. I mean the chance meeting that brings together Bruno and Robert, and that sets in motion the machinery of observation which the film becomes.

**Chance.** Bruno, you see, will almost never tell us who he is or what brought him to where we meet him. He is sitting in a huge rented furniture transport van, which he is using as a projector equipment storage container, and private house, when a VW beetle comes roaring down the road beside him, and plunges into a flooded marsh where it overturns, immediately threatening to drown its driver. As the driver swims back to shore, seemingly lucky to be alive, Bruno comes slowly to realize that the guy is trying to commit suicide. In a nearly wordless exchange, Bruno takes Robert into his van, and they drive off together—en route toward Bruno's next repair stop.

**Development.** We are underway. We have before us almost three film hours, during which Bruno and Robert are for the most part—in the action of the film—together riding through the landscape of northern Germany at the point where the borders between East and West Germany meet. (Over the entire film hangs the specter and danger of the Two Germanies.) We are going to visit small towns with the two men, accompany them as they work together on Robert's repair job, and as they very slowly disclose to one another who they are. (Bruno is fatherless; his dad was lost in the War, and we surmise that he was a Nazi party member; Robert is a pediatrician, specializing in the pre linguistic thinking of the young child, and divorced from his wife, of whom he had developed a terrible fear, that she would kill herself and the responsibility would fall on him.) Vast stretches of space and time elapse, as we follow these two on their routine repair tours; it having happened, and we barely question it, that the two men have simply subsided into riding and working together, and into making us interested in what has to seem a basically eventless series of episodes.

**Digression.** The most significant digression, to break the pattern just described, presents itself as the pair come into a small town where Bruno has a projector to fix, and where Robert, who was brought up there, has unfinished business to take care of with his father, who is editor of the town's newspaper. Our two protagonists spend the night apart, Robert berating his dad for mistreatment of Mom, and Bruno sleeping with the lady at the projection booth of the local theater.

**Finale.** There can be no end to this film, nor, oddly, to the ongoing interest the film is calculated to evoke. The ride through the countryside is inexplicably interesting—the bus is fascinating, the local adventures that accrete around the pair and engaging, and above all the on the road bondingness, of these two guys, is as attractive as is the whole sense of a world to discover. The very very end, consequently, is unlikely to seem like an end—and in fact doesn't. The men approach the East German border, careful to avoid being shot, and spend the night near the birthplace, it seems, of Bruno. Somewhere in the night the guys finally quarrel after drinking too much Tennessee mash; they brawl in a stupefied way, and in the morning find that they have separated

## CHARACTERS

**Bruno** is the center of the tale, though he is careful to keep his identity hidden. We know virtually nothing about him, except that he seems happy as a freewheeling 'king of the road,' servicing superannuated film projectors in provincial theaters. He is drawn toward the East German border, which seems to have been his birth place, but seems rigidly apolitical, and without 'ambitions' within his own society.

**Robert** is the initially suicidal figure who enters Bruno's life, when he tries drowning his VW beetle, with himself in it. Robert joins Bruno, as an on the road traveler, helping out with the work of film projector repair. Robert is by profession a pediatrician, but has left his profession—as well as his wife—behind.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

### BRUNO

**Character** Bruno is the key figure of the film, the eye through whom we see the on the road events, and the planner of direction and operations. The part is played by Bruno Ruediger, a standard go to character actor for Wenders; a self-deprecating, farmer garbed, shaved, tousle haired guy in his late thirties. He has a ready smile, which he exercises freely, and an open spirit. His job suits his personality, not too exigent, always on the move, and full of surprises.

**Parallels.** In some ways Bruno resembles the non or anti-hero of Robert Musil's *The Man without Characteristics* (1930), or even the mechanically competent Tao or Buddhist minded protagonist of Robert Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (1974). One can even think, here, of Albert Camus' existential version of the little man, the antihero of our time, value free and wondering: Meursault, in *The Stranger* (1942).

### Illustrative moments.

**Inquisitive** Bruno is manifestly curious, as he opens the film by questioning the elderly movie mechanic about how films were reeled and projected 'in the old days.' As always, Bruno is susceptible to reviewing the human condition.

**Startled.** Bruno is startled when he sees a small VW shooting down the road past him, and driving into a lake. Bruno is welcoming to the half drowned stranger, as he extracts himself like a rat from the water.

**Bonding.** Bruno has a slow but definite bonding nature. As he gets used to his passenger, Robert, he takes more explicit interest in him, asking for details about his life, although he, Bruno, withholds any information about himself.

**Passionate.** In his final hours together with Robert, Bruno lets Tennessee whiskey get the better of him, and he lets a latent brawling sensibility outward. The two men fight. But Bruno characteristically forgets the issue, and is soon at peace with himself again.

### Discussion questions

Robert gives a complex account of his personal history, to the extent that he unfolds it at all. Do you accept his self-depiction as a pediatrician? Does anything make you think he is fabricating a history for himself?

American music, and references to life in America, pepper Wim's script, as they do scripts of Fassbinder and Bergman. What is the implication of America for the two on the road riders. Has American Romantic connotations for them?

### THEMES

**Landscape.** The flat, easily flooded landscape of Northern Germany forms a perfect non-assertive and sterile resource in the present quiet drama. In *Wrong Move* Wenders immerses us in the mindset of a young wanderer whose omega point is the tallest and most isolatedly romantic mountain in southern Germany; in *Kings of the Road* there is no omega point at all; one just rides, and bonds, and deals with the ordinary.

**History.** It has, in this film, been thirty years since the end of the second World War, quite recent enough that almost all the participants in the present film were born well into the Nazi period. As has been pointed out, the historical descendants of the Robert-Bruno generation have a weight on their shoulders. They are surrounded by reminders of the destruction of their country and its history, under the ravages of one of history's most demented social experiment.

**Bonding.** The large van Bruno uses, for his business and his personal life, is well calculated to promote the bonding between Bruno and Robert—or any pair of cross country travelers. There is room for intimate conversation, or silence; one would have to look hard for a better bonding-setting; perhaps to the horse drawn closed carriage of Victorian days—Dickens' novels take full advantage of these vehicles—in which intimate and formative conversations proliferate.

**Fatherhood.** The two protagonists have father issues, and may in fact be working through those aggressions, as they bond over the unchallenging isolation of a long road trip. Bruno's dad is dead, having 'gotten lost in the war,' probably as a Nazi soldier; while Robert's father, the newspaper editor, comes in for his son's bitter recriminations—for mistreatment of Mom.