



Big Screen Classics

Kings of the Road

Kings of the Road Im Lauf der Zeit

Director: Wim Wenders

Production Company: Wim Wenders Filmproduktion

Presented by: Filmverlag der Autoren

Producer: Wim Wenders

Production Manager: Michael Wiedemann

Unit Production Manager: Heinz Badewitz

Technicians: Hans Dreher, Volker von der Heydt

Assistant Director: Martin Hennig

Script Supervisors: Gretl Zeilinger, Brigitte Thoms

Screenplay: Wim Wenders

Directors of Photography: Robby Müller,
Martin Schäfer

Editor: Peter Przygodda

Art Directors: Heidi Lüdi, Bernd Hirsborn

Music: Improved Sound Limited

Composer: Axel Linstädt

Sound Recording: Martin Müller, Bruno Bollhalder

Sound Mixer: Paul Schöler

Truck Driver: Michael Rabl

Cast:

Rüdiger Vogler (*Bruno Winter*)

Hanns Zischler (*Robert Lander*)

Lisa Kreuzer (*cashier*)

Rudolf Schündler (*Robert's father*)

Marquard Böhm (*man who has lost his wife*)

Dieter Traier (*garage owner*)

Franziska Stommer (*cinema owner*)

Patrick Kreuzer (*little boy*)

West Germany 1976

176 mins

Digital

A three-hour study of two men who are on the road, servicing the projectors in failing movie theatres, *Kings of the Road* is full of film references and the situation of a Hawksian bond tested against the newer threats of tedium and cultural deterioration in which Germany has become a satellite of Americana. The pace is leisurely, and the action is not emphatic, but *Kings of the Road* is one of the best films of the seventies. It seemed to predict Wenders' future: an increasingly existential concern underlying the unforced dealings between lonely people.

David Thomson, *A Biographical Dictionary of Film* (Andre Deutsch, 1994)

The increasingly strong 'family' resemblances between Wim Wenders' feature films have begun to create the impression that his 'travelling' movies (like Bergman's psychological odysseys) can be phrased, if not resolved, in terms of their similarities. Like *The Goalkeeper's Fear of the Penalty*, *Kings of the Road* takes place in border regions, which have clear implications for Wenders' heroes, fretting about the need for some breakthrough in communication or perception; like *Alice in the Cities*, it takes the form of an overtly Oedipal quest to penetrate and come to terms with the past, and looks to children for the kind of innocence needed to reinvent old and 'used up' forms of language (here, cinema and the printed word).

Summing up the films as neatly as anything, there is a line of dialogue in *Kings of the Road* in which Robert Lander, having earlier told his travelling companion that he is a children's doctor, confesses that this is not quite true: 'Actually, I work on the borderlines, linguistics and paediatrics' (he goes on to describe how at first 'figures are an adventure, later writing becomes a routine' and talks about one boy for whom lines were paths along which letters moved by motorbike – a pen). The similarities also include a network of details, such as the photograph of a house which Alice belatedly produced in the earlier film to guide her reluctant guardian to her home, and which Lander is seen tearing up (hard to say if it is the same photograph) in the opening scenes of *Kings of the Road* in his mock suicidal charge away from his broken marriage. There is even some repetition of names – 'Winter' played by Rüdiger Vogler both here and in *Alice in the Cities* – and such odd stylistic traits as the unexpected, interpolated aerial views of a landscape – which is otherwise 'naturalistically' incorporated as part of the plot.

The achievement of *Kings of the Road* is both the limpid assurance with which such elements are combined with a straightforward narrative (by comparison, say, with *Wrong Movement*) and the extraordinary complexity with which the mechanics of the 'buddy' movie are converted into a double reflection on language. On a psychological level, Bruno and Robert's brief association leads to a rediscovery and to some extent a resolution of their personal histories: Bruno returns to the island home where he grew up with his mother, and achieves a kind of liberation from the isolating 'bunker' he has made of his travelling workshop, as he puts it, 'For the first time I see myself as someone who has gone through certain time. And that time is my history. This is quite comforting'; Robert returns to his editor-publisher father, and airs his grievances about the domination of his past by the printed word by tapping out a special edition of the old man's newspaper.

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Big Screen Classics

Candy Mountain

Wed 1 Jul 18:15 (+ intro by Jason Wood, BFI Executive Director for Public Programmes and Audiences); Sat 11 Jul 20:45

Vagabond Sans toit ni loi

Fri 3 Jul 18:10; Tue 21 Jul 18:00; Tue 28 Jul 20:45

The Wizard of Oz

Sat 4 Jul 12:10; Sun 26 Jul 12:00; Mon 27 Jul 14:30

North by Northwest

Sat 4 Jul 18:00; Sat 18 Jul 12:10; Mon 20 Jul 20:25;

Thu 30 Jul 18:10

Platform Zhantai

Sun 5 Jul 14:45; Sat 18 Jul 14:40

Planes, Trains and Automobiles

Mon 6 Jul 20:40; Fri 17 Jul 18:20

My Own Private Idaho

Tue 7 Jul 20:45; Sun 12 Jul 12:15; Tue 21 Jul 20:45;

Fri 31 Jul 18:10

Happy Together Chun gwong cha sit

Wed 8 Jul 18:00 (+ intro by curator and writer

Ying-Di Yin); Fri 24 Jul 20:55; Thu 30 Jul 21:00

Stranger Than Paradise

Thu 9 Jul 21:10; Mon 13 Jul 20:50;

Wed 22 Jul 18:10 (+ intro)

Mad Max 2

Fri 10 Jul 18:10; Thu 16 Jul 21:05

Bhaji on the Beach

Wed 15 Jul 18:10 (+ intro by Bhavini Goyate,

BFI Inclusion Manager); Sat 25 Jul 20:45

Kings of the Road Im Lauf der Zeit

Sun 19 Jul 17:30; Sun 26 Jul 17:30

Radio On

Thu 23 Jul 20:40; Wed 29 Jul 18:10 (+ pre-recorded intro by director Christopher Petit)

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Re-enactments of a kind of birth trauma turn out to be as common in the film as images of travelling, from Robert's emergence from the water at the beginning, having driven his car more thoughtlessly than self-destructively into a river, to Bruno's prowling round the derelict home of his childhood at night. As he stands alone in morning mist near the end of the film, wrapped in a blanket, having spent the night in an old American army emplacement right on the border with East Germany, Bruno lets rip with something akin to a primal scream.

On a figurative level, their journey is an examination of the means and limits of cinema and the written word, and also involves varieties of discovery, from Robert picking over every scrap of printed matter he encounters on the way, to the delightful sequence of the 'invention' of silent comedy, when the two men are repairing a speaker behind a cinema screen, before an audience of impatient children, and after the screen is suddenly flooded with light, they go into a routine of acrobatic shadow-mime.

The film concludes even more pessimistically on this level than on the psychological, or at least ends by insisting on a similar return to degree zero and a new beginning. As Robert simply wanders away, to continue his journey by train (he has always been the more concerned with actually going somewhere), he encounters a small boy noting down straightforward descriptions of the things he sees around him, and Robert trades his few remaining possessions for the notebook. Bruno is last seen where he began, repairing a projector in a smalltown movie-house and listening to an elderly projectionist lament the death of the cinema. The lament, of course, is also Wenders' own, but in a way its purpose is as much a psychological purging as the characters' experiences in the film: the oft-invoked figure of Lang (as with Ford in *Alice*) serves more as a necessary but finally perishable father figure than he does for specific filmic reference. The final image seems to imply that this aspect of Wenders' career – as well as his nostalgic phase of black-and-white movie making – is over: the cinema's illuminated sign, 'Weisse Wand' (White Screen), is malfunctioning so that only three letters, spelling 'end', are alight, next to the cinema's entwined initials, 'WW'.

Richard Combs, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, July 1977