



Big Screen Classics

Radio On

Radio On

Director: Christopher Petit

©: National Film Trustee Company Ltd

Made by: British Film Institute Production Board,

Road Movies Filmproduktion GmbH

In association with:

National Film Finance Corporation

Executive Producers: Renée Gundelach,

Peter Sainsbury

Producer: Keith Griffiths

Associate Producer: Wim Wenders

Production Supervisors: Patsy Nightingale,

Paul Sparrow

Continuity: Renée Glynn, Margaret Jordan

Casting: Esta Charkham

Screenplay: Chris Petit

Director of Photography: Martin Schäfer

Camera Assistants: Paul Bond, John de Borman,

Patrick Duval, Michael Tomlinson

Chief Electrician: John Devine

Key Grip: Olly Hoeben

Editor: Anthony Sloman

Assistant Editors: Stefna Smal, Stuart De Jong

Art Director: Susannah Buxton

Title Design: Christopher Petit

Titles: Rank Post Production Services

Sound Recording: Martin Müller

Sound Re-recording: Paul Carr

Cast:

David Beames (*Robert B.*)

Lisa Kreuzer (*Ingrid*)

Sandy Ratcliff (*occupant of Bristol flat*)

Andrew Byatt (*soldier*)

Sue Jones-Davies (*Robert's girl*)

Sting (*guitarist at petrol station*)

Sabina Michael (*Ingrid's husband's aunt*)

Katja Kersten (*Ingrid's companion*)

Paul Hollywood (*boy at hotdog stall*)

Adrian Jones

Cyril Kent

Bernard Mistovski

Nina Pace

Joseph Riordan

David Squire

Kim Taylforth

The Crystal Theatre

Tilly Vosburgh

Sally Watkins

UK-West Germany 1979

104 mins

35mm

The screening on Wed 29 Jul will include a pre-recorded intro by director Christopher Petit

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**SIGHT
AND
SOUND**

In an interview accompanying the DVD release of *Radio On*, director/writer Chris Petit uses the word 'autistic' on three separate occasions to describe the mood he was aiming for. Embarking on his debut screenplay while still *Time Out's* film editor, Petit was less concerned with plot or character, dialogue or drama, than with 'buildings and weather'. The minimal narrative – a man, Robert B. (David Beames), drives from London to Bristol to investigate his brother's mysterious death – is a mere ploy to introduce the principal character: the urban landscape of late 1970s Britain. Somewhere between Martin Parr's *Boring Postcards* and Anton Corbijn's *Control*, the movie has, as Petit notes, a documentary value first if not foremost. These clapped-out vistas of service stations, flyovers, industrial estates and business hotels rarely made it into UK cinemas of the period. *Radio On* is not picturesque, then, but it is superlatively filmic, thanks to Martin Schäfer's cinematography, so high-contrast that darkness often swallows up the screen, while during night scenes electric lighting burns through the murk with magnesium ferocity.

Radio On was an Anglo-German production, jointly funded by the BFI and Wim Wenders' Road Movies company. Interviewing the German director for *Time Out*, Petit had plucked up the courage to say, 'Actually, I've got this script.' Amazingly, his hero not only part-funded *Radio On*, he also loaned Petit his cinematographer Schäfer, and his then wife Lisa Kreuzer took the female lead. The influence of Wenders' road trilogy is strong, but equally important is another crucial mid-1970s trilogy: J.G. Ballard's *Crash/High-Rise/Concrete Island*. The latter, a short novel about a modern-day castaway trapped on scrubland beneath the Westway flyover after being injured in a car crash, leaps to mind during the long aerial shot of Robert driving out of London, the camera lingering lovingly on the gash-ugly industrial wasteland that surrounds the flyover. Another literary reference point is Margaret Drabble's *The Ice Age*, a novel often aligned with punk as a document of the malaise and bunkered-down anomie of mid-1970s Britain. Filmed in the month of January, *Radio On* exudes a coldness both physical and emotional. One song on the marvellously apt and evocative soundtrack sings plaintively about being 'free from the frozen years at last'.

Petit uses pop songs to externalise the feelings that his taciturn characters can't or won't express. That's not especially radical in itself, but music is deployed in an unconventional way. A tune, ostensibly played on the in-car stereo, might abruptly dip down in volume but continue to play without fading away; Devo's stilted subversion of '(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction' is made even more disjointed and alienated by being chopped into shards. Petit says he consciously reversed cinema's vision-over-sound hierarchy, aiming to make 'sound with pictures'. You could almost imagine *Radio On* as a series of promo videos responding to the potency of the era's vanguard pop.

Radio On's title itself comes from the Modern Lovers' proto-punk anthem 'Roadrunner', a hymn to the American dream of perpetual mobility. Jonathan Richman sings 'I'm in love with the modern world,' but *Radio On's* vision of modernity is unlovely and loveless. Robert's motto could be 'only disconnect'. There's a series of brittle interactions with aggrieved-seeming English women, from Robert's live-in girlfriend who moves out without him even noticing, to the

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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dead brother's lover (who bears a striking resemblance to post-punk ice queen Siouxsie Sioux). Even doing his job as an all-night DJ at a factory, Robert lacks empathy. Reading out a female worker's request for 'Help Me Make It through the Night,' he says 'Here's something better' and plays Ian Dury's 'Sweet Gene Vincent' instead.

Radio On's permafrost thaws slightly only a couple of times. Intimacy of a sort develops between Robert and Ingrid, a German woman (Kreuzer) searching for her daughter. The other moment occurs at a derelict petrol station, where Robert meets a rockabilly-obsessed singer (a cameo from the then not-very-famous Sting) and the two men duet on 'Three Steps to Heaven' (originally by Eddie Cochran, who died in a car crash on the nearby A4 – how Ballardian is that?). But these are ships-that-pass encounters. 'Last night I hoped we would sleep together,' says Ingrid. 'But we won't.'

In *Radio On*, the car is an ambiguous symbol, promising not the freedom of the open road but the emptiness of a life unmoored from emotional ties. The road movie, as Petit knew from the off, wouldn't translate to the UK's spaghetti junctions and bypasses, but that was the point. Just compare the word 'motorway' – as dourly, phlegmatically British as 'mustn't grumble' – with 'highway' and 'freeway': it simply doesn't set off the same utopian resonances of liberation.

Radio On shies away from a political reading – Petit was adamantly opposed to social realism – but political reality leaks into Robert's bubbleworld nonetheless, as the radio drip-drips endless bad news from the IRA and Baader-Meinhof, reports of heavy snow paralysing the country... Society is falling apart but Robert is all uncomprehending detachment: as he tells a hitchhiker, 'I never understood what the problems were.' At one point he strolls past a wall advertising shock absorbers. Cars have them, but they can also be them, insulating their occupants from the real and the social. 'Here in my car/I feel safest of all,' sang Asperger's sufferer Gary Numan in 1979's 'Cars'. 'I can lock all my doors/It's the only way to live.' Is there a glimmer of hope at *Radio On's* end when Robert abandons privatised transport (as favoured by Margaret Thatcher) for the shabby, inefficient but resolutely collective British Rail? Perhaps that's to read too much into this resolutely oblique, brilliantly opaque film.

Simon Reynolds, *Sight and Sound*, June 2008