The Long, Dusty Highway:
The German Postwar Generation in the Road Films of Wim Wenders

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The opening sequence of the best-known road film of all time, Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider* (1969), is like a fantasy of finding freedom on the open road, with sex, drugs and rock and roll guiding the way. The main characters, Wyatt — who is also known as "Captain America," and whose motorcycle and leather jacket display the American flag — and Billy — who wears what looks like a dime-store replica of a brushed leather western outfit — begin the film by snorting a line of cocaine and then finishing a drug deal. Highly sexualized shots of their motorcycles end with the phallic image of Wyatt stuffing tubes of money into the hole of the gas tank. Finally ready to embark on the road, Wyatt and Billy drive off down a straight highway, owning the road, the majestic scenery of Monument Valley to their right; the only sound is of the motorcycles revving their motors. As the camera cuts to a medium close shot of Wyatt, the soundtrack to Steppenwolf's "Born to be Wild" begins its first guitar riffs and continues to express lyrically the credo of the travelers — "Get your motor runnin'/Head out on the highway/Looking for adventure/In whatever comes our way…" The two actively put themselves on the American road, ready to experience as much as they can.

Compared to the beginning of *Easy Rider*, which pulsates with activity, beautiful landscapes and even illegality, the opening sequence to a German road film produced only three years later, Wim Wenders's *Alice in the Cities* (1973), seems decelerated, passive and dull. The film begins with the sound and image of a plane flying in the sky and flows into a lonely-sounding string melody and the image of a man sitting under an American boardwalk looking out to and taking pictures of a deserted beach. The string music fades out, as sounds of waves and wind fill the viewer's ears. Phillip, the wandering, emotionally-confused German protagonist of the film, begins to sing the song "Under the Boardwalk": "Under the boardwalk/Down by the sea/I'm on a blanket with my baby/That's where I'll be." The song, dealing with fun and love on a beach, contradicts the loneliness of the scene. Gathering up his belongings, Phillip leaves the beach and the film cuts to an image of him in an old, clunky car. He drives through an ugly strip of road with

commercial signs, parking lots and motels to the left and right as a fuzzy song plays from the radio only to be cut off by the disc jockey's voice.

While *Easy Rider* speaks to the hopes and fantasies of its generation, Wenders's *Alice in the Cities* wades in the sad, lost and disillusioned consciousness of its generation, the German postwar generation, by using the overall construct of the road film and deconstructing its conventional affirmation of freedom, the open road, action, landscape and togetherness. Like *Alice in the Cities,* which follows Phillip's solo wanderings in America and then with a young girl named Alice from New York through Holland and Germany, Wenders's *Kings of the Road* (1976), explores the journeys of postwar generation characters — Bruno, a movie projector repairman, and Robert, a man recently separated from his wife — across the divided German landscape.

As Wim Wenders and his postwar generation came of age in the late 1960s and 1970s, they found themselves plagued by their cultural inheritance, particularly the abusive legacy of the Third Reich in images and in the postwar social and familial dynamics. Wenders struggles with this legacy in his films by constructing references to the Nazi abuse of images and the parent generation's values and expectations, and by deconstructing these allusions in much the same way as he deconstructed the road film in *Alice in the Cities.* Wenders also plots the journeys of postwar characters, in a sense seeking on behalf of the postwar generation, ways in which to deal with and shed its cumbersome cultural inheritance. In doing so, he takes into consideration three possible ideological paths:  going away to America, combating the lingering history through protests and terrorism, and dropping out of society. In the journeys that Wenders creates for his postwar generation characters, do these paths lead towards the necessary personal development to move beyond the lingering, inhibiting effects of the Nazi legacy?

## The Nazi Legacy

As a filmmaker, Wenders expresses the legacy of the Third Reich in terms of images and language.

> I speak for everyone who in recent years, after a long drought, has started once again to produce images and sounds in a country which has an unceasing distrust of

images and sounds that tell its story, which for this reason has for thirty years soaked up all foreign images, just as long as they have taken its mind off itself. I do not believe there is anywhere else where people have suffered such a loss of confidence in images of their own, their own stories and myths, as we have. We, the directors of the New Cinema, have felt this loss most keenly […] There is good reason for this distrust. Because never before and in no other country have images and language been abused so unscrupulously as here, never before and nowhere else have they been debased so deeply as vehicles to transmit lies. (qtd in Rentschler 127-28)

These reflections clarify his distrust of images and sounds even as they shed light on his antiauthoritarian style in general; both a deep sense of loss as well as rebellion are inherent in his films. Wenders addresses the abuse of images by critiquing them, by consciously attempting not to manipulate or abuse them and by focusing on ordinary images for inspiration within his films.

Wenders's explicit critique of images is evident in both *Alice in the Cities* and *Kings of the Road*. In *Alice in the Cities*, Phillip's Polaroids always fail to represent reality in his eyes. Phillip's stacks and stacks of seemingly empty photographs all fall short of articulating what he sees and at the same time what he experiences. Wenders also speaks subtly to the violence possible inside of an image when Bruno and Robert put on a light show behind a projection screen. Despite the fact that they create a slapstick comedy routine for the audience full of children, the shadow of one of the ropes hanging behind the screen looks like a noose. The noose reflects Wenders's belief in the potential, unintended dangers of the image.

Wenders warns against tightly controlled, made-to-be-beautiful images when he says, "the better something looks in a film, the more wary you ought to be: you might be being deceived" (321). He counteracts this danger of deception through spontaneity and a focus on ordinary images. One way in which Wenders does this is by allowing unintended environmental influences on the image; for instance, in *Alice in the Cities*, when Alice views New York from binoculars at the top of the Empire State Building, a bird flies into and out of the shot. Furthermore, his stories come out of ordinary images; he explains the

origins of *Kings of the Road* as the sight of two male truck drivers pulled over to the side of the road, not talking to each other. Wenders writes,

> There were two men in the cab, and the driver had opened the door and was dangling his leg out in order to cool off. This image, seen from the corner of my eye when driving past, impressed me. I happened to stop at a motorway caff where the lorry also stopped. I went up to the bar where the two men from the lorry were standing. Not a word passed between them; it was as though they had absolutely nothing in common. You got the impression they were strangers. I asked myself what do these two men see, how do they see, as they drive across Germany? (216)

Watching life as well as "places, cities, landscapes and roads" triggers Wenders's imagination. His fascination translates into a gritty realism in *Alice in the Cities* and *Kings of the Road*, and Wenders finds a tentative redemption for the fallen state of the German image. Instead of highlighting beautiful scenery, he focuses his roadside shots on the gritty and real: commercial strips of motels, car dealerships and a radio station (*Alice in the Cities*) and seemingly repetitive land- and cityscapes (*Kings of the Road*).

Beyond its legacy of abuse of images, the Nazi past and the physical destruction left by World War II greatly affected the postwar climate, particularly in relation to the postwar family. Michael Schneider, in his 1984 article titled "Fathers and Sons Retrospectively: The Damaged Relationship Between Two Generations," contends that the effects of the Nazi legacy, seen in the quest for survival and the strictness of parents and authorities in the immediate postwar periods and the largely unacknowledged historical guilt of the older generation, sowed seeds of damage in the relationship between the postwar and parent generations. The seriousness of life inherent in the postwar and reconstruction periods encumbered the postwar generation's childhood. The heaps of physical and "historical rubble" of Germany, the loss of family members in World War II, and the severe economic breakdown of the immediate postwar period contributed to the "collapsed" world of the parent generation. For five years after the war and before the start of reconstruction, under conditions defined by hunger, cold and a lack of sufficient food and medicine, parents were barely able to meet the

primary needs of their children, not to mention their "spiritual needs for affection, security, love and play" (Schneider 33).

The reconstruction period found a collective repression of the past in exchange for blind hope in economic and social progress in West Germany. Wenders expresses the way that this played out in his childhood:

> Behind us was a black hole, so everybody looked straight ahead for all they were worth, busied themselves with 'reconstruction,' worked for the 'miracle,' and that economic miracle, it seems to me now, couldn't have been achieved without a colossal effort of oblivion […] (439)

Here, Wenders characterizes a key factor often identified for this period, the inability to deal with the past or even acknowledge its influence on the present. It would seem that economic progress excluded examination of the past. This tendency to forget he remembers as rather joyless.

> Growing up in the 1950s, I experienced the German labour of repression or sublimation primarily as an absence of pleasure, of the senses, or simply, of joy […] I grew up in an atmosphere that was obsessed with life as a 'serious business.' (Wenders 439)

Much of this "joyless atmosphere" played out within the postwar German home. The obsessively focused, serious and repressive environment highlighted by Wenders took expression in a strict enforcement of the parent generation's values within the German home. Throughout the postwar and reconstruction periods, parents ruled with an authoritarian style, espousing such virtues as order and cleanliness to a compulsive degree; holding rigid codes of appearance and manners; sacrifice, frugality, achievement and the postponement of gratification; monogamous compulsory marriage; and a culture of inwardness. Many of these collective virtues of the parent generation reflect the shared expectation to cover up the messiness and difficulty of reality with pretenses of health, happiness and prosperity (Schneider 43).

One way in which this played out was in the tendency of the postwar German family to project a 'healthy' family image of togetherness. Behind this illusion, the typical reality was full of tension,

authoritarian parental control and rigidity of life. This internal atmosphere stemmed not only from the economic situations that surrounded the German family, but also from the father's "authoritarian compulsion to command respect" (Schneider 33). Indeed, the stereotypical postwar German father was known as an overly powerful, punishing, intimidating and crippling authority figure, part of which came from the loss of control over and connection to the family and denial of historical guilt (Schneider 24).

One key to understanding the damaged relationship between the generations is, then, in Schneider's words, "the collective blackout used by the older generation to obliterate its monstrous past" (5). Mothers and fathers denied their own involvement in the Nazi Party. Fathers took great pains to be seen only in their current role as breadwinners and heads of the family; when they did volunteer information about the war, it remained mostly anecdotal, often portraying themselves as "defenseless receivers of orders" or militarily or morally courageous (Schneider 3-6). This repression took a toll. As Schneider explains, "the obscured past of the parents was shared subconsciously by the children precisely because of the fact that it could not be discussed" (8). This was probably most influential in setting up the feelings of betrayal that members of the postwar generation would later experience with regard to their parents during the late 1960s, when they realized the truth behind the parent generation's hidden history.

## Criticizing the Parent Generation

Feelings of betrayal prompted members of the postwar generation to challenge the parent generation and its way of life, and in both films, Wenders creates subtle and poignant critiques on a number of fronts. With his road films, Wenders found an outlet to challenge the parent generation by deconstructing their future-oriented work ethic, strict values, authoritarian rule of the family, repressed historical guilt and Germany's ignored fascist history.

Wenders confronts the directed work ethic of the parent generation by showing motion in his films that is not necessarily moving towards something. His characters often wander for the sake of wandering; it is the state of motion that is more important than the endpoint of the motion. They are not working toward a goal, or, if they are, the goal seems pointless. Wenders even goes so far as to subvert the

spectator's expectations of movement, as seen in the beginning of *Kings of the Road.* After four establishing shots of a Volkswagen speeding across the countryside, the camera then cuts to four close-up shots of the driver, Robert, taking out and tearing up a picture of his home. Soon thereafter, Robert drives off the highway and plunges into a river. According to Timothy Corrigan,

> In this rapid and rather cryptic series of shots, a journey is visually established, but at the same time, its direction is quickly aborted and transformed into no direction as the VW sinks into the river […] The journey that is constructed in one movement is deconstructed in the next. The motivation becomes rejection, rejection of a past, a home and, in one sense, of desire itself. (21)

Wenders's way of storytelling counteracts the work ethic and controlled life set out by the parent generation for those in the postwar generation. By constructing and abruptly deconstructing a journey, he contradicts the parent generation's fixation on reconstruction and building economically for the future and by using episodic plots, he removes a sense of a tight and coherent narrative. In many episodes in *Kings of the Road,* little or nothing takes place; Wenders lingers on shots of Bruno attempting to shave or on Bruno singing along to a song on the radio. Furthermore, Wenders opts to assume little control over the narrative journey. Instead of using a set-out story as a guide, he yields his own rational control to a more intuitive and emotional faculty, what he calls a daydream. He explains, "every dream is going somewhere, but who can say where that is? Something in the subconscious knows, but you can only discover it if you let it take its course, and that's what I attempted in these films" (217).

Wenders also defies the parent generation's focused, forward-looking work ethic through characters who are all essentially dropouts of society or living on the periphery. He films the travels of a roving journalist whose attempts to write about America result in a notebook full of scribbles and a stack of Polaroid pictures (Phillip in *Alice in the Cities*), a mother and daughter who have lived in five cities in the past four years (Lisa and Alice in *Alice in the Cities*), a movie projector repairman who travels from town to town throughout Germany despite the fact that his job is becoming obsolete as cinema after cinema closes or resorts to X-rated films (Bruno in *Kings of the Road*) and a man with marital problems and a failed suicide attempt under his belt who takes a

break from society (Robert in *Kings of the Road*). Rootless, his characters have no base in society.

Wenders expresses a defiance of the parent generation's value of ordered familial relationships and monogamous marriage; he features both casual sex and casual relationships between characters, highlighting a refusal or inability within the postwar generation to accept meaningful contact with others. In *Alice in the Cities*, for instance, Wenders alludes to a casual sexual encounter between Phillip and a woman whom he meets at the beach. Wenders further deconstructs the rigid moral and sexual code of the parent generation by subtly hinting in *Kings of the Road* at a latent homosexuality in the travel partnership of Robert and Bruno. Wenders loosens the parent generation's strict definition of family and as well as the pressure in the postwar and reconstruction years to maintain a healthy family image. Lisa and Alice's family reflect the breakdown and lax reconstruction of family ties in the postwar generation. Not only is Lisa leaving her husband, but also this man is not Alice's father. Furthermore, Lisa rejects the parent generation's value of maintaining a healthy family image while repressing real emotions. She is honest with Phillip, telling him about her troubles with her husband and reveals that she has just separated from him. She also expresses her own vulnerability by asking Phillip for help with her marital problems. The note for Phillip that she leaves at the hotel reads, "I can't take the plane today. Hans is at his wits' end. Take Alice for me or else I'll never get away." By involving a stranger in such intimate aspects of her life, Lisa exhibits the opposite of the parent generation's reliance on pretenses and also, on keeping everything "in the family."

The converse, however, may also be true. Without any prodding, Robert admits the failure of his marriage, telling Bruno, "In Genoa I separated from my wife." But Bruno's curt response of "I didn't ask. There's no need to tell me your stories," expresses a distinct poverty of sympathy and empathy. The German woman whom Phillip visits while in New York also professes an inability to help Phillip talk through his problems. She tells him, "I can't help you. So I'd like to console you. I don't know how to live, either. Nobody ever showed me how." The woman indirectly points to the parent generation and the postwar childhood as not giving her the means to help Phillip through his distress. Both Bruno and the woman replicate the parent generation's inability and unwillingness to communicate personal or intimate issues.

Wenders lambasts one father in *Kings of the Road* for his authoritarian ways and otherwise creates characters who turn away from authoritarian tendencies. He thereby stands against the authoritarianism

of parents and authority figures of his childhood and also questions the effects of this abusive authority on members of the postwar generation. During Robert's homecoming scene in *Kings of the Road*, Wenders allows Robert to confront his father's authoritarian dominance over his house, represented in his control over language. "Father" Robert begins, "just listen to me. If you start talking, I'm leaving. Last time I tried to talk to you, I had to listen the whole time. Mother couldn't get a word in either. That's what I wanted to talk to you about — that life with you didn't get her anything." Robert's father's job as the editor of his own newspaper further symbolizes his voice of authority. Instead of seeing the newspaper as a place of information and possible enlightenment, Robert sees it as oppressive because of his father's claim on the written word and abuse of language. Robert tries to explain this to his father, saying "Whenever I think about something I keep imagining, I see it all in print, at once. Keep seeing you imp…printing it!" To finally get through to his father, Robert turns to the printing press, creating a special edition newspaper for his father only, with the headline of "How to Respect a Woman." In his first real uprising against his father, Robert addresses this central problem of authoritarianism in the home, co-opting his father's power over language to do so.

Wenders further deconstructs this fatherly authoritarianism in *Alice in the Cities*. During their journey to find Alice's grandmother, Phillip and Alice spend a night in a small hotel room, where the burden and stress of taking care of Alice spark a brief burst of frustration and anger in Phillip. When Alice asks Phillip to tell him a story, he yells at her. She reacts with a mixture of fear and sadness and begins to cry into her pillow. Soon thereafter, Phillip reconsiders his harsh reactions towards the young girl's request and tells her a story. Though Phillip's initial reaction is to act in a gruff and commanding way, he dislikes the way he acts and relents. This is the turning point in his development within the film; by rejecting this authoritarian impulse, Phillip frees himself to accept and grow within a relationship.

Not only does Wenders challenge the parent generation's parenting style, but he also deconstructs parental legitimacy as a whole. Wenders creates an almost complete absence of the older generation, reflecting the way in which his generation reacted to the parent generation's ignored historical guilt. The absence of the parent generation in Wenders films illustrates a state of "fatherlessness" in the postwar generation, which Alexander Mitscherlich, a German psychologist famous in the early 1960s, defines as "the loss both of a primary relationship and of a model that has to be outgrown" (116).

Michael Schneider explains this diagnosis, writing, "the paternal role-models which had been discredited by fascism and the war could no longer exercise any lasting influence on it [the postwar generation]" (4). Further, Schneider writes, "The term also expressed the idea that the younger generation had 'rid' itself of its fathers, and had 'overcome' them," referring to the active role that members of the postwar generation took in discrediting the influence of their fathers and cutting familial ties, an impulse that exists in Wenders's films (4).

In the rest of Wenders's films, the parent generation is physically absent, and yet present in the consciousness of the postwar generation characters. *Kings of the Road* highlights the physical absence of the parent generation when Bruno returns with Robert to his childhood home. When they arrive at night, to Bruno's surprise, there is no sign of his mother to be found anywhere. The silvery moonlight that enters the house through the windows softly illuminates the emptiness of the house, emphasizing the parent generation's haunting absence in the lives of members of the postwar generation.

## The Search for Alternatives

With no one to help guide the postwar generation into German adulthood, its members pursued alternatives to life in Germany in an attempt to shed its cumbersome inheritance and grow from there. Wenders considers three of these ideological paths:  movement to America, political protests and terrorism, and isolation from society.

In the repressive and depressed postwar climate, America presented itself to the German postwar generation as an alluring alternative and escape early in its youth. Wenders explains:

> I grew up in an atmosphere that was obsessed with life as a 'serious business.' Otherwise I could never have given myself with such abandon to imported joys, such as American comic strips, American films and American music. They had one thing in common — they were fun, they were obvious, and they were absolutely in the present. That sense of living for the moment and being utterly content with that was unknown to me […] That's what I learned from the American cinema. Instead of being wrapped up or half-ashamed of itself, it was

'there' and 'upfront.' No dissembling, no secrets. There was expansiveness, my own country was mean. I discovered the horizon from watching American Westerns, which while they may have falsified history, were still able to tell stories that were rooted in that history. I was an easy prey to those American myths, living as I was in a country that liked to think it had no history and no stories. (439)

In contrast to West Germany, which was weighed down by and at the same time repressing recent history, American culture and by extension America, seemed light, free and fun while reveling in a sense of its history. America found a place in the hearts and dreams of many in the West German postwar generation during their youth, and its mythicized history and images, found for example in *Easy Rider*, lured numerous postwar Germans, including Wenders and his characters, as adults to the United States.

In his first film partially set in America, Wenders tests America as a place for the postwar generation to flee the inhibiting effects of the Nazi legacy. Through Phillip's journey in America, however, Wenders rejects relocation to America as path of growth for the postwar generation. *Alice in the Cities* introduces Phillip towards the end of his travels in America, highlighting his disoriented and disconnected state. Phillip blames the monotony and commercialization of America for making him take leave of his senses. However, his friend's reaction to Phillip complicates his claim. She tells him, "But you lost them a long time ago. No need to travel across America for that. You take leave of your senses when you lose a sense of identity. And that happened to you ages ago." In reality, America does not put Phillip in his disoriented state; however, it fails to help him out of it and even further alienates him.

Though Phillip's decision to return to Germany hinges on his need for money, his return is more significant than this economic necessity. Phillip, like Wenders, finds in America a "lack of identity: insufficient spiritual sustenance," which Wenders defines as "whatever enables us to survive morally and physically" (428). The film affirms this almost immediately after Phillip's arrival in Amsterdam. In his hotel room, Phillip is soothed by classical music on the radio, a stark contrast to the segmented and commercial-heavy music in America.

When Phillip attempts to spend the night at his friend's apartment in New York, Wenders alludes to the complexities of sadness and hope which would bring a postwar generation German to America.

Wenders captures the woman's sad and blank face, as well as a book on her coffee table, Peter Handke's *Wunschloses Unglück*, next to an image of Dumbo — representing the postwar generation's hope that America will provide it with the happiness that its cultural products brought to its members during their youth. While enjoyable and fun, the Dumbo cartoon, and by extension America, cannot counteract the depths of sadness and loss felt by the woman and other members of the postwar generation, represented by Handke's *Wunschloses Unglück*. Handke's book, written weeks after his mother's suicide, records his memories of their life together during the postwar misery, as well as his rage over the problems that his mother left for him to solve after her death. Michael Covino explains in his article, "Wim Wenders: A Worldwide Homesickness," that at the heart of Handke's presentation of his mother, "her own codified life is seen in terms of […] a story which never took off" (14). By referencing Handke's book along with the Disney image of Dumbo, Wenders makes a subtle, yet important statement about America's inability to heal wounds or give direction; he discredits America as a place where future stories of the postwar generation can take off.

Another dismissed hope presented itself on the domestic front. Like their contemporaries throughout the Western world, members of the postwar generation came of age politically in the late 1960s and began to assert their voices through political activism. During a burst of political activism between 1967 and 1970 (what would become known as the Student Movement), many in the postwar generation believed that they could create change in Germany. At home, they attempted to do so by confronting their parents concerning their past under or with the Nazis. On the political front, though generally opposing the Vietnam War and West Germany's political support of the war, the Student Movement also focused on creating structural changes from within the West German academic institutions through protests, sit-ins and other actions. This movement and the idealism it once held faded at the end of the decade as the political concerns of the postwar generation found little support in the general public.

Though many in the postwar generation gave up politically after the dissolution of the Student Movement, a small minority of left-wing postwar generation Germans carried on the political battle through much more severe means — terrorism. Their goals were hopeful in terms of addressing a major concern of the postwar generation: the legacy of fascism. Groups like the *Rote Armee Fraktion* (RAF), whose height of activity ranged from the late 1960s through the early 1980s,

aimed to extort changes from the government and force the state to "show what the RAF felt was its true face, its general essence — fascism" (Schneider 14). Though these goals were sympathetic to many in the postwar generation, the way that the RAF and other groups, such as The Second of June Movement and The Revolutionary Cells (RZ), attempted to carry them out were not.

Wenders himself initially supported many of the concerns of the Student Movement and the terrorist movement, but he was soon disillusioned by the way that they put these ideas into action. He writes,

> I came out of that period in a very troubled state myself. […] I ended up feeling I had to start all over again, so to speak, and the only things that had any value were personal things […] It was the opposite of what the '68ers believed, that they could speak in universals — the whole time they claimed they could speak on behalf of everyone — but I thought they were doing violence to themselves and to people in general. And so I started making films that were almost confessional, like a diary. (308)

Within his films, Wenders does not directly reject overt political activism and violence as a way of dealing with the lingering German past. However, Wenders does consciously turn away from those methods in creating his own narratives. His filmic response to the universal claims and the violence of the '68ers was to return to a personal level, to create intensely personal films, which at the same time reflected many of the concerns of the postwar generation on the whole. He explains, "I felt that only private experience could be the basis for anything I had to say," and so he created for his characters isolated journeys on the road (308). Though Wenders's films depict numerous dropouts from society, Wenders creates two characters, Phillip and Bruno, whose isolation represents both a hope to free oneself from a heavy social and historical inheritance and, in the wake of his generation's turn towards violence, a fear of the potential violence inherent in his characters. Wenders tests the possibilities of this seclusion from society, using the road and perpetual motion to isolate his characters.

Wenders does this first with Phillip, who drifts through America alone. He is a background traveler, never really causing a stir, and is therefore allowed to wander without impediments. During his travels, Phillip only speaks to three people: a young kid, a used car dealer and

himself. None of his outside conversations move beyond small talk. Though Wenders portrays Phillip's isolation on the road more extensively than he does Bruno's, the latter is the one with a long history of traveling alone. Bruno's isolation from society is represented in the physical fact that his truck acts as his home. When asked where he lives, Bruno replies, "The truck's registered in Munich." Munich, of course, is no more of a home than any of the small towns through which he drives. Furthermore, Bruno wishes to steer clear of personal history, as he attempts to defend his context-free life by not recognizing Robert's history as valid or necessary.

Wenders ultimately rejects extreme isolation as a life style for the postwar generation. Phillip's lonely travels through the United States only further alienate a lost and confused man. At the end of *Kings of the Road*, Wenders shows this rejection through Robert's indictment of Bruno. Robert yells, "You sit in your truck like in a bunker, laying these heavy monologues on me about being alone. Nothing can happen to you!" Bruno defends his choice to be alone, saying, "Much enough happened to me." Early in the film, Bruno's way of life seemed hip and comprehensible. Here, however, Bruno's reason for living on the road, away from others, seems cowardly and insufficient. Robert points this out, yelling, "No longer! You're as good as dead!" This extreme form of isolation, from context, people and one's own personal history, Wenders argues, prohibits personal development.

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## Conclusion

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Wenders accepts the fact that the Nazi past and its influence on the postwar youth is not something that one can "get past." He concedes that one cannot simply flee from it by moving to a different country or by sheltering oneself in a car and that one cannot replicate the violent nature inherent in the Nazi legacy to fight it from the radicalized left. Though rejected as ideological, all-or-nothing paths, the movement to America and deconstruction of idealistic images of America, the questioning of motivation and legitimacy inherent in the Student Movement and terrorist scene, and the character maturation within the cocoon-like car all play a part in this journey by setting up Wenders's characters for development. As he attempts (and ultimately succeeds) through his filmmaking and the assertion of his own distinct images to redefine and tentatively redeem the German image from the

'fallen' state in which he finds it, Wenders sets his characters on a parallel path of slow, tentative reconstruction of their postwar generation identity, whereby they develop a consciousness and life beyond the confrontation of and intrinsic ties to the legacy of the Third Reich and the parent generation's values.

Essentially, through the subtle changes of his characters, Wenders explores the postwar generation's identity, challenges and experiences against the context of the parent generation's values. He refrains from preaching to his audience, but instead gives the audience a snippet of the lives and the subtle development of Bruno, Robert and Phillip, allowing each audience member to dig up what meaning and advice he or she may extract. Wenders justifies his focus on the personal journeys of his characters, believing that these "would somehow transcend the private and acquire general validity" (308).

Inherent in this journey is a recognition of the roadblocks — primarily the postwar generation's distrust of most things German — created by the lingering Nazi influence in postwar Germany, which stand in the way of the postwar generation's path towards maturity, growth and redefinition. One such roadblock is the power held by the legacy of the Third Reich over the German language. The postwar generation characters, like Wenders, express an uneasiness with language and often an inability to express themselves in German. Robert's interactions with his father point to this most poignantly. As Robert finally addresses his father's oppressive abuse of language, he reclaims the German language for himself (and by extension, the postwar generation) as a means of expression and for establishing connection with his fellow journeyer.

Though most of the postwar generation characters seem wary of seeking community with one another, Wenders's characters establish a new sense of connection and community based on their common journey. Both films affirm positive new communities with the friendships of Bruno and Robert and of Phillip and Alice. These characters incite their travel partners to open up to complexities of emotion, and a reevaluated sense of community and of self, essentially allowing for change of outlook and identity and the ability to move forward on their personal journeys.

Both films end on a bittersweet yet hopeful note. At the end of *Alice in the Cities* Phillip seems both sad and ready to end his travels with Alice, yet the development from disenchanted loner to a confident father figure and friend that she has helped him make is remarkable and is likely to continue. *Kings of the Road*, too, ends with realistic optimism.

After spending a drunken night in an abandoned American World War II bunker, in which Bruno and Robert challenge each other and reevaluate the direction each is going in his life, Robert wakes with the realization that he communicates to Bruno in a note: "Everything must change. So long. R." He takes his suitcase out of the truck and walks down a dirt road. After having redefined his identity during his travels with Bruno, he is ready to return to his estranged wife. Bruno wakes to find no sign of Robert, except for the note. The man who has spent much of his time sheltered from change finally accepts it as necessary, responding, "Good. I'll do my best." One cannot help but hope that postwar generation audiences would have learned from this subtle vow.

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