

The Nation.

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Su Friedrich's latest concoction, *Rules of the Road*, is currently making the unremunerative round of film festivals. It debuted in New York at the New Directors/New Films series, after which it graced with its presence the Women's Film and Video Festival at the WOW Cafe. Sooner or later, the film will pop up near you, which is reason enough to check the calendar of your local media center. Friedrich has in the past made essay films (*Sink or Swim*), polemical films (*First Comes Love*), films that resemble lyric poems (*Gently Down the Stream*). With *Rules of the Road*, she creates a film like a perfect short story.

The details of the story are utterly specific and yet universal—we've all gone through something like this. An off-camera narrator (the voice is Friedrich's own) tells about the dissolution of a love affair: the spats over nothing, the slow growing apart, the reluctance to admit that what's over is over, the longings and fantasies after the fact. That the love affair is same-sex and takes place in Brooklyn does not narrow the story's interest, but those details do account for the narrator's initial tone of amusement. The vehicle for this love affair and its subsequent breakup—the literal vehicle—is a secondhand white station wagon with fake wood trim and a luggage rack on top.

Rules of the Road begins with the story of how the narrator's lover bought the station wagon—such a sensible, conservative, family-friendly car that the narrator has to laugh. Who else (among Brooklyn's lesbian population) would have bought such a thing? There couldn't be another one anywhere on the road! On the screen, a clunky white station wagon glides into view. We see it parking by a Brooklyn sidewalk, being loaded with bulky objects (the lover is a builder by trade), cruising over New York's bridges. The narrator is right—it's a thoroughly drab machine.

But is it one of a kind? As the story unfolds on the soundtrack, an alert viewer begins to notice subtle differences among the objects on the screen and so comes to recognize that there are many station wagons, not one—though all are white, with fake wood trim and a luggage rack on top. So the film gradually elicits through visual perception what the narrator has learned by much harder experience. Friedrich's voiceover recounts how all the physical details of the love affair seemed to soak into the station wagon, till its very

scent was the lover's unique smell. Meanwhile, the images reveal the truth that every disappointed lover must face: You're not the only one. The most touching moment? I'd say it comes when the voiceover comments on the aftermath of the breakup, while the camera, making a 360-degree pan of a corner in Brooklyn, discovers no fewer than four white station wagons, each one setting off another pang of memory, each one proving again the world's indifference.

A musical theme, Arnold Schoenberg once wrote, is not the same thing as a melody—though a composer may choose to reduce the theme to a melody, as “heroes belittle their wounds.” In much the same spirit, Su Friedrich reduces the loss of a lover to the loss of a station wagon; she pares down the visual complexity of *Rules of the Road* to a moment like that 360-degree pan, or a few others that would be merely clever in the work of a lesser filmmaker. The heroine jests of her wounds; and yet the light, almost whimsical tone of *Rules of the Road* should not blind us to the part of the film that really is irreducibly personal. Station wagons are everywhere; everybody's got a sad love story. But only one filmmaker, to my knowledge, has Su Friedrich's eye.

Although she likes to present scenes as if in a casual glance, each shot in *Rules of the Road* is distinctive, and each has been thought out. Consider the implication when Friedrich shoots through the window of a station wagon. In effect, she has put a second frame inside the frame of her camera's viewfinder. Then, when she shows us someone behind the window of a passing station wagon as seen from inside her own car, Friedrich brings into play three frames, all of which are in motion. You can get dizzy thinking about these things, and about how Friedrich chose her sequence of images—the way she follows a long shot of the Hudson River, looking serene and stable, with a shot of roadside trees, their leaves filling the whole screen with a jolting green blur.

Perhaps *Rules of the Road* is not quite a perfect short story. It does sag a little, about three-quarters of the way through. But the only thing really wrong with it is that it won't be shown widely enough. Watch for *Rules of the Road* at New York's New Festival and San Francisco's Frameline festival, both in June, and wherever finer films are shown.

FILMS.

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