

A KISS BEFORE TOWING

BY SUSAN GERHARD

LOVE IS OK and everything, but it won't necessarily get you to work on time. By the end of Su Friedrich's sort-of-new film *Rules of the Road*, which plays during the SF International Gay and Lesbian Film Festival later this month, you might reach the conclusion (a pretty standard one) that cars are the better long-term investment.

Putting fresh mileage on an old metaphor, *Rules* uses the car as a vehicle to mourn lost love. Between tender postcard shots of the family station wagon, a woman plays a lot of solitaire and reminisces about the girlfriend gone by.

She is actually longing for that 1983 Oldsmobile wagon, of course, the one that transported the romance from Brooklyn love to vacation arguments and, finally, back to the comfortable isolation of heavy traffic. It was an '83 Olds only an ex-girlfriend could love: Stale, smoke-soiled faux fuzzi interior, fake-wood panel exterior. But we all know the wistful feeling, right?

I DO

About 10 hassled minutes into my daily wait for the 22-Fillmore, I usually remember that I owned a car once, too. An ugly Datsun 210; rusty, painted a rainy mud brown with a fidgety sheepskin seat cover. Sort of the *Flashdance* of used autos — too few years out of style to be marketable as kitsch, just enough years out of style to be an embarrassment — the kind of driveway impediment a father might kindly pass along to his college daughter.

But I paid for mine — over and over again — when it was excised of its expensive stereo equipment

and left for dead in Redwood City; when it fritzed out in the desolate Hwy. 1 maze near Bolinas. Finally, the parking tickets overtook it, and I gave it a long good-bye drive over the Bay Bridge in rush hour traffic to deliver it to safe East Bay retirement.

Now, I walk. Or, more frequently, I wish: for buses to arrive, for rides to materialize, for taxis to notice. I stop and smell the sidewalk, kill time in kiosks, buy extra cups of coffee, accumulate free publications to redistribute on bus seats. And I find the time once gainfully spent flipping off fellow drivers and seeking timed lights taken up in nostalgia for an unreliable Datsun.

ANOTHER CHRISTINE

Friedrich's film replaces this kind of lost-car-induced self-pity with comedy. Her wagon wears many hats: at once a generously proportioned babe ("She's a Super Freak" plays on the radio sound track as the car is described) and co-parent in a nontraditional family (car = Mom; narrator = Dad; ex = kidnapped child on vacation). After the breakup, the car flips roles to become the disputed child, visited on weekends.

The narrator loses custody, of course, at which time the car is just another sad face on the side of a milk carton — it's sighted at every stoplight.

Eventually, as you might guess, the car loses its place as the pitied: It's converted into paranoia. The car is stalker, the embodiment of her fear — something that *might see her before she sees it*. (And it does.)

Suddenly, everything's coming up station wagon. The editing speeds up and wagons

move faster through traffic; the narrator can't escape that tantalizing fake-wood paneling even in a New York crowded with BMWs. The '83 Olds clones are omnipresent, nagging weeds that, unfortunately, she can't just happily yank from the ground.

THE SCAPEGOAT

It's lucky we have cars to blame. One lost Datsun, and I have a life-long excuse for lateness. One lost station wagon, and Friedrich has an excuse for nostalgia. It was *the car* that took another little piece of her heart, now, baby — *the car* that she never can say good-bye to, etc.

But she makes elegant road kill of her emotional fixation by panning that innocent station wagon to death. The car is the subject of so much discussion in this film that it becomes an object of ridicule rather than desire. And even if the ridicule is only harmless teasing by the film's end, it's still a Stage of Grief — it has been passed through, conquered.

Rules of the Road is a study in the kind of separation anxiety that never makes it to the therapist, a funeral parade for a love that gets comically, ironically, stuck in traffic. ●

Rules of the Road plays with *Greetings from Out Here*, directed by Ellen Spiro, Sat/19 at 4:15 p.m. at the Roxie Cinema, SF, and at 7:30 p.m. at the Pacific Film Archive, Berk.