

Roads, a Review

The film *Roads* was released in 2019 and first shown at the Tribeca film festival in April of the same year. The film is a Franco-German coproduction, but the language chosen by the filmmakers was English. It was directed by German filmmaker Sebastian Schipper (*Absolute Giganten*, *Victoria*), after a script by the director himself and fellow writer Oliver Ziegenbalg.

The two main characters William and Gyllen are played by Stéphane Bak and Fionn Whitehead respectively. They meet one fateful summer night and quickly get warm with each other when Gyllen offers his new acquaintance a beer from the top of his newly-acquired vehicle. They are two very different people: William is a young refugee from the Congo who's made it all the way to Morocco, and wants to find his older brother in France whose tracks he's lost a while ago. Meanwhile Gyllen is a British boy who grew tired of vacationing with his family and decided to make a run for it, perhaps to find refuge with his biological father who lives in France?

The film follows these two teenagers on a roadtrip in their 'borrowed' camper van. In this sense, it's a typical roadmovie that is also part coming-of-age-story. The two boys bond together, they laugh, they run into scammers, criminals, and all around loons. They also make some new acquaintances along the way. There's plenty of lows but also some highs— partly of the drug-induced kind.

Unsurprisingly, journeys are at the heart of this tale. Journeys of any kind, that is— William's flight from the Congo, Gyllen's from his own dysfunctional family, but mainly their journey together, which takes them from their starting point Morocco over Spain and into France, where they have to face the trials and tribulations that await upon arriving at their destinations. The film thematises the refugee crisis that we are currently facing, shedding a light on the suboptimal conditions many people have to live in and showing the actions of the police in places like Calais in a relatively unembellished manner. Furthermore, it addresses issues of racism, overall bigotry, and privilege— William makes it abundantly clear that he just cannot afford to defend himself against the racist and homophobic attacks he has to endure in Europe because getting involved in such trouble would shed unnecessary light on him, which is the last thing he is looking for when trying to stay underground in a country that appears largely hostile to people like him, refugees, that is. Hence, they must stay in the shadows.

Retreat into obscurity is a Leitmotiv all through the film. Low-key lighting is used to symbolise this in lots of shots, with William's face almost disappearing into the darkness at times and large chunks of the boys' journey taking place during the night nonetheless. This is a particularly striking aspect of the cinematography, which is otherwise fairly unremarkable. The film conducts some interesting experiments with subjective camera, but there aren't really all that many memorable shots in the film and if there are, it's mostly towards the end.

Some road-movies take the premise as an excuse to bombard the viewer with gorgeous shots of landscapes bordering on geographical pornography; but this film is almost utterly devoid of picturesque scenery just for the joy of it: During the trip one is almost perpetually exposed to vast strips of gravel and sand which turns into wet, graffitied highways going further north. Whether this wins it points in the realism department or dulls down the imagery is probably up to where the individual viewer's sympathies lie when it comes to matters of the aesthetic.

Despite the bonding and banter it becomes abundantly clear that this hardly a feel-good film, riddled as it is with gut-punch realism, disappointments, and the bleak disillusionment of growing up and out of one's hopes and dreams. Towards the end it becomes rather depressing, which isn't as much a criticism of the film as a complaint towards the system— the Calais scenes bear more than a passing resemblance to the news stories one can see everyday. There's kind souls and organisations who have good intentions and genuinely want to help, but the situation is still overwhelmingly dark and at the ending of the film, not even William and Gyllen's heartwarming 'found family' moments can quite alleviate the pit in your stomach you may take away from this.

There's a final nitpick from my side I have to mention, even though it is virtually inescapable in almost all scenarios of middle-aged writers portraying the younger generation : The banter between the two boys, while portraying true and honest friendship, isn't *quite* accurate and true to real-life Gen Z banter. This is a rather minor criticism but therein, in my opinion, is presented the true and inescapable curse any author faces, has faced, and will continue to face in portraying people younger than them, which is that you're never *quite* as 'down with the kids' as you may like to think you are.

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