

# Hope Isn't Something I Deal With

## An Interview with Fred Kelemen

Andrew J Horton

After two screenings at the London Film Festival of his third and latest film *Abendland*, director Fred Kelemen met with CER at the Covent Garden offices of Artificial Eye, the company which will be distributing the film in the UK, to discuss why hope is so negative, Kelemen's approach to actors, why his teaching work in Barcelona is important for him and the future prospects for art cinema.

**All your films are quite bleak, they are set at night, slowly paced and have cold and unwelcoming titles - *Verhaengnis* (Fate), *Frost* and *Abendland* (Nightfall)- are you a pessimist?**

No, I think as long as someone is doing something, and especially something as difficult as film-making, they cannot be a pessimist. It is a very optimistic thing to make a film, because when I make a film it means I believe that there will be people there to watch the film. If I were a pessimist, I wouldn't make be making films.

**Do you expect your films to change people's lives?**

No, I think film can never change anything, but the film can focus somebody's view on some special problems or points, and a starting point for thought, for reflection. But a film can never change anything. The person themselves has to change, the change has to come from inside

**At the screening last night you said "Hope isn't something I deal with," why is hope such a negative thing for you?**

I think hope is a very much associated with something positive in the society, but I think it is used. For me there is a very strong difference between hope and vision, for example, hope is something you wait for. While you hope you are waiting - you are sure it will come, so you wait and wait and wait, but you don't do anything while you are waiting.

I think in our society, when you look at culture, the arts or television or the theatre, music and so on, there is really an ideology of hope. People are forced to hope, to be happy and not to give up their belief that something really good, but it is a way of exploiting people, a way of making keeping people down and making them tolerate misery. But I think that exactly the opposite is what we need. Not to wait until something will happen, but to make it happen.

And to me that's why the idea of having a vision is much more active. Hope is something very passive. So when you have a vision you fight for it and you are willing to do something for it. When somebody is really starting to do something, fight for what he wants to be real, then, maybe, hope is something that comes out of this, because then I can hope that really something can change. But hope just without this very active element of fighting for a vision or dream is nothing, completely empty. In *Abendland*, all the characters have a desire or vision and they want to escape. Even if their dream is just to have more money.

**So your first film is called *Verhaengnis*, surely that is an ironic title. If you are fated you can't change anything.**

No, I don't think so, because fate is a mixture of things. There are those things which follow a strict order of things. So if I do something it will have a consequence - if I jump from the roof the consequence will be that I am dead. Once I am falling there is no way to alter this fact, and if I change my mind as I pass the fifth floor, it is too late. But at the moment I jump, I can decide. So, there is freedom in the moment of jump whether not to jump. But the moment I jump, everything is decided. I think there is a mixture of things that follow an order, and the freedom to decide what I do. And if I don't want to have the consequence, I have to do something else, so that is exactly what happens in *Verhaengnis*. You can stop the film at any point and if the person did the opposite, something else would happen. So they always have the chance to decide to go left or right. But once

somebody decides to go left, he has to go this way and has to experience the way which waits for him on the left side until the next point where he can maybe decide.

**All these ideas of freedom and choice and the power to decide your destiny, they lend themselves to labelling you as an existentialist. Do you resist that or do you accept it?**

Generally I have problems with labels, but maybe I see the world from this point, yes.

**Moving from the theory to the practicalities, how was the script for *Abendland* developed and to what were the actors involved? Last night you were speaking about the actor who played the bell-founder and that you had to take him to the bell foundry so that he could understand his role fully. Does this imply your scripts are improvised?**

Yes, there is a lot improvisation in the film There's a script, but in the script I never write dialogues. But there are some parts where it is written what the characters talk about without saying how they have to talk about it. That's something I develop with the actors.

The script was written before I knew all the actors, and after knowing who will be in the film I changed a lot of things because the people who are acting in the film are a big influence on it. We sit and talk with the actors about the whole thing before we shoot. But I never make rehearsals out of the shooting or after the shooting, just the shooting day, the day of creation. So, it's really work I do together with them. Being an actor in this film is very creative thing for them.

Even in the shooting I change things - I take scenes away and make new scenes because maybe I have an idea in the morning which is much better than what I had written. It would be stupid to shoot just what is written and not to change it.

**Some of the takes are exceedingly long and require complicated camera movements, how long does it take get a scene right?**

Some of the long scenes were done in two or three days. The first day was only arranging the lighting and camera rehearsals, because there are many lamps in some scenes and because when you do a very long travelling shot, you see the whole room, you cannot just light a corner or a face and then cut, and then light another corner, the whole room is to be there, illuminated, completely ready and without any lamp in shot. The real place actually looked like it looked on the screen. It has to be done, because film is something very practical and everything you want to have on screen you have to realise before.

The second day I worked with the actors, and maybe we shot it immediately if everybody was completely present or it was not too exhausting. If we had been working too long we came back the next day and shot the scene the next day. And maybe I change some little things after rehearsal, so it's really a process of creation during the shooting. It's never like here is something on the paper and then just doing it like it was written.

**The acting approach is ultra-naturalistic in some senses. Do you use non-professional actors or are they all professionals?**

No, the actors are professional, but most had no experience of film. So *Abendland* was the first feature for the main actress, Varena Jasch, but she has done a few theatre things before.

**Was that a preference? To have actors were fresh and did not have their own ideas about film?**

I don't have any fixed ideas about it. For example, the main actor, Wolfgang Michael, was for many years one of the important actors of the Schaubuehne Theatre in Berlin. So he is a really experienced actor in theatre, but this was the first feature film he has made. I just liked him a lot.

But for sure, if someone is comes from a completely different background like theatre, there are many things you have to destroy. For example, the overacting, which is very pronounced normally in theatre actors. It's hard work to reduce the acting to minimalise their gestures.

**The film in some ways is made up, not from the dialogue, but the spaces between the dialogue. Did you decide how long these pauses should be or did you leave that to the actors?**

It was a result of the rehearsal. In the rehearsal we fixed the whole rhythm of the scene. Usually it came out too fast, as they are used to being pushed it seems, to not make pauses and to talk a lot and what I did was exactly the opposite. It took some days for them to enter this world and to feel comfortable. Sometimes actors have the feeling they were very bad in a scene because they didn't do anything and it took a little time to give them the confidence that they don't have to do so much. But after a while they gained a feeling for the rhythm of the film and I just was observing them and left it completely to the actor.

***Verhaengnis* was very lo-fi and that was very much part of the atmosphere of it. With *Abendland* you are using sharper images, although you do still inter-cut them with hand-held video shots. Is this a change of artistic philosophy or do you just have more money now?**

No, it's not a question of money. I know before how much money I will have, and then I make the film which is possible with that money, but on the other hand I know the film I want to make and then I look for the money to make it. I just wanted to do it this way this time. Next time I'll do it differently.

When I made *Verhaengnis* I was very interested in shooting the whole film on video and then to transferring it to film, doing it all handheld and doing it very rough. This time I was very interested in making these very long sequences which are all done with the dolly and very smooth and I didn't want to repeat myself. In every film there are some things I want to discover.

And also to tell the people I don't know if these things will work - we just have to try. It was like this for the video images in the film and the inter-cutting of close ups, it was an idea I had but I wasn't so sure it would work, but I had the feeling it would work.

**Do you think it did?**

Yes. I think it is very effective. Even I had the feeling for some hours after watching the first version of the film I was looking at things differently. I was much more conscious about the way we look around, the jumps our eyes make. I was much more focused on details.

**You worked in Portugal and the co-producers were Portuguese, how did that come about?**

We were in a very old abandoned factory in east Germany while looking for shooting locations, and in one office there was an old calendar from years ago hanging on the wall and the first image on the calendar was a bridge, a very famous bridge in Portugal. I had the idea that it was a sign, let's go to Portugal. We had to go to Portugal because we found this image and we believed very strongly that this image was there and it was. It was a good decision.

So we went to Portugal looking for places and we really found beautiful places in one city in Portugal in Porto in the north and we wanted very much to shoot there, since I couldn't find anywhere else. Then I tried to find a co-producer in Portugal and I found one, but before that the first idea was just going there and looking for places.

**You've constructed this city as an imaginary city. It's a mixture of places - Germany, Poland and Portugal - did you conceive of this city as an imaginary German city, or is it an archetypal European city?**

I think it is a European city. The signs are in German, they speak German - it is Germany, but Germany is also part of Europe. I could even make a film in London and really show that it was London, but at the same time it wouldn't be specifically about London. Every film which is about human beings, human relationships and human feelings is universal and can happen anywhere in the world. But we don't live in abstract areas, we live in very concrete places - both concrete and universal at the same time. The city which is shown in *Abendland*, for sure it is Germany, but it doesn't have to be Germany.

**So, are you tempted to set your next film in another country?**

No, the next film I would like to shoot in Germany in Frankfurt. Next summer.

**Can you tell us more?**

It is very simple, the English title will be *Escape*, I think. And it just shows the last seven days in the life of the man before he commits suicide in a supermarket after killing several people in a supermarket in Frankfurt's main train station. It will be a reflection about modern society in general. It's Frankfurt but it's really talking about a modern society and how someone can be provoked, destroyed and hurt to bring him to a point like this.

**Are you familiar with the Michael Haneke's films?**

I think my project is not connected, the whole idea is based on a novel of a contemporary German writer, Mattias Eisenberg, and I hope it will be different from Haneke's films - which I like. If it wasn't different, there would be no need to do it.

**I'm a bit confused about your filmography *Abendland* is billed as your third film, but on the Internet Movie Database there are references to two other projects, one called "Cafe Solo" and one called "Galgenblume."**

That's wrong information, because "Galgenblume" was just the working title for *Abendland*. It's not another project. Cafe Solo is not a feature film, it's a video I made because I teach at the film school in Barcelona. I give some workshops and it was one of the films I made during the workshops with the some acting students. I don't know how that information got onto the Internet.

**Do you see teaching as an essential part of what you are doing? Does it feed into your ideas?**

It is interesting for me because it forces me for two months (because the years I do it I am there for two months) to think very carefully about film and to be confronted with all the problems you have when you start, to rethink them again and again and again. And it helps me to avoid falling into some sort of automatism. Every problem a student has questions my own methods. It always opens my conceptions about film. And it helps me also to bring my ego down to size, because for two months a year I have to serve others, to help them, to bring out what they want to do and to help them to be strong to keep their ideas. And that's a big help to be the servant of other people's creations

**What are the problems of film-making in Germany?**

The problem is that there is a lot of money but this money goes to the same films. For sure these films are very commercial and there is not so much space for films which do things differently. And that's a very sad thing for sure because I think film is a very rich art and so there must be many kinds of films because they are possible.

But I think the whole film culture will die, if the money only goes to the films which are commercially orientated or are part of a very capitalist free market. That's for sure a very sad fact because a rich garden is one with many flowers, different flowers, different plants and a garden with only one plant after only a time will die.

**You criticised people who use hope as a way of keeping people down and the films which get all this money are exactly those films. So do you accept these films as part of your rich and varied garden or do you think you think they are a bad thing in what they do philosophically to keep people exploited?**

I think every film should exist, so for sure these films should exist. I have no problems with films made in Hollywood or wherever, which have only the aim to take the money from the pocket of the people for the tickets. For me it would not be a problem if these films existed if other films would have a chance as well, not just to be made but to be shown in the same technical conditions, and not just a screening in the back room of a bar with a bad projector.

**Is distribution is getting better or worse?**

I think in Germany it is getting worse because there are only a few distributors who handle films which are not strictly commercially orientated, and some of them are giving up or are being bought by big companies who then turn them into a department for art films. But these art films are not the same art films that were distributed before. Jarmusch is an art film for them, and for me it is not an art film any more, for example. I think he is much more commercial than the films which they were dealing with before they got bought up. These art films they show are already accepted in the commercial market, and not much different from it. - just smaller budgets. They don't have a different form, for example, or difficult subjects.

**What about distribution of *Abendland* here in England?**

I am very happy that Artificial Eye are distributing this film, and I know there are some other companies here who distribute films which are not just following the cynical capitalist way of film-making

I think the situation that I have described is very bad and very difficult, but I think it would be worse if film-makers gave up. So, this comes back to your first question, if I was a pessimist, I would give up immediately, because the situation is so horrifying and depressing that any normal reasonable person would give up and not start making films. So that is why I think it is a very optimistic attitude to make a film which is not just commercially orientated. I think it is worth doing because film is a very young art, just 100 years old, and it would be so sad if it would die so young. I think it is the most beautiful thing that this century has invented. It shouldn't be given up and thrown away or lost to the industry or to something like the market or the capitalist ideal.

Andrew J Horton, 22 November 1999