

Night of the Fallen

Fred Kelemen's *Abendland*

Andrew J Horton

Londoners who saw Kelemen's *Frost* (1997) at last year's London Film Festival, or those who caught his first film *Verhaengnis* (Fate, 1994) during its limited release earlier in the year would have had no hesitation about attending this year's London Film Festival screening of Kelemen's latest offering, *Abendland* (Nightfall, 1999). As in its predecessors, *Abendland* takes place in a cold, bleak, nocturnal world of the dispossessed, in which fractured lives are painted through a fragmentary narrative.

The film is set in an imaginary town created from scenes shot in Germany, Poland and Portugal and the "plot" concerns a young couple, Anton and Leni. After an argument, the two part ways and wander through the night, continually crossing each others' paths and running into other desperate outcasts from society in a succession of seedy all-night bars. Through these encounters the characters grapple with their own dreams and aspirations and try to make some sort of inner sense of this harsh and unrelentingly oppressive world.

In some ways, Kelemen's approach is hyper-realistic, focusing on every awkward pause and every nervous gesture so they become larger and more important than the dialogue itself. In the absence of speech, we are uncomfortably left with the detritus of sound that fills public spaces, intruding melodies, the neighbour's dog, and the hum of distant industry. Even the camerawork creates a disturbingly detailed view of this nightmare world. Smooth panning movements and crisply clear film shots suddenly lunge forward into grainy hand-held video shots - a process, as Kelemen explained to the festival audience in a post-screening discussion, that aims to mimic the human eyes' obsession with detail.

However, *Abendland* is not merely a piece of depressingly gritty social realism, and it shows that Kelemen is becoming progressively more interested in bringing to the fore the deeper symbolism of his work. Religious imagery, for example, is appropriated as Kelemen dissects the mechanisms we use to make unbearable lives bearable. Kelemen himself offered an analysis of this interest in religion in the film to the festival audience, contrasting the futility of grand symbolic gestures with the more simple and essential task of making love work.

Abendland is European film-making in its most weighty and intelligent form, and it will no doubt consolidate Kelemen's already formidable reputation. But although he is experimenting with the use of music, editing, picture quality and symbolic meaning, Kelemen has in fact moved on very little from the substance of his first film. *Abendland* is, therefore, a welcome variation and exploration of an earlier theme rather than a radical quantum leap in his ideas. In the long term, the film is unlikely to displace *Verhaengnis* from its position as Kelemen's masterpiece.

Andrew J Horton, 22 November 1999