# INTERVIEW

## Nikolaus Geyrhalter

*In a text on ABENDLAND you describe this Europe at the beginning of the 21st century as a "paradise that must be protected". This term protection or cordoning off can be extremely ambiguous: On the one hand, seeing your images of maternity clinics, hospitals, retirement homes and suicide prevention centers involves the question of what protecting individual life entails. On the other hand, there is this idea of a fortress, this bulwark intended to block out certain influences, various types of fundamentalism, etc. Was that an important element of the research from the very beginning, this idea of security, or did it come to the fore more gradually?*

The intention was that the film could be interpreted in two different ways. On the one hand, there's the old question of how we live, in the sense of the historical idea of the West, "Abendland", according to which this part of the world supposedly represents a superior form of culture. Taking a look at what it has become, where we are today, whether or not it's still true. And then of course there's this conclusion that, OK, this is how we live, but why do we believe that no one else should be allowed to participate in it? What are we protecting? And how? No explanation is provided for the why, but you can see the mechanics behind it, in terms of both protection of the internal and protection from the external.

*As Karl Kraus wrote: "The longer you consider a word, the more distant is its return gaze." What do closeness and distance mean for the working assumption used for your film ABENDLAND?*

Capturing Europe in a film: That has interested me for a long time now. A number of different attempts have been made to approach the theme. One course that we followed for some time, for example, was the concept of searching for non-places in Europe. But that eventually turned out to be not powerful enough, and too limited to tell a story about Europe by itself. Maria Arlamovsky, who developed the film with me, then began to use "Abendland" rather than "Europe" as a working title. That alone sharpened a number of contours immediately, and also gave birth to our method of interpreting the title in its two senses, as the West and evening land, and shooting after dark exclusively. In the beginning that was a pragmatic decision made to reduce the complexity of this huge theme to a simpler story, specifically a film about Europe at night. As a result the film became more tangible for us, and at the same time we began to find locations that were much more effective for saying what we had originally thought about in the form of vague ideas.

*Wolfgang Widerhofer, who made an important contribution to the film through his editing and also as your dialogue partner, once spoke of the*

*practical nature of the services portrayed in the film. Indeed, instead of nostalgic portrayals of ideas about the West we're shown many extremely pragmatic activities, basically from love to death, from birth to crime fighting. Doesn't that relate in part to these non-places, which could be anywhere?*

Yes, we were lucky with that. Even if the search for non-places was no longer a priority in terms of the concept, they somehow popped up again. Also, this is probably because a lot of what happens during the night and what's necessary to keep Europe running are functional activities designed to maintain the system, and they require functional spaces.

*How does a dialogue such as the one between you and Wolfgang Widerhofer work? In a sense you represent a branch office, the reporter or hunter of images who creates material, and he's the main office, he sorts and assembles.*

Yes, you could describe it like that. Wolfgang and I have been working together for ages. With a single exception, when he didn't have time, he has edited all my films, which is why he's familiar with the way I shoot. In the same way, I know how he edits. So there's been a high degree of convergence from the very beginning. Not much discussion is necessary, and Wolfgang also serves as a corrective. That's why we always start editing new material right away, and Wolfgang takes another look and evaluates it, and then we proceed logically. It's often the case that I failed to notice something, overlooked a detail in the material which points out the direction we should work in. Or there are scenes that I think fit perfectly, though they just don't work at the editing station. That's how the dialogue takes place throughout shooting. In the case of this film it's a little more complex because this one's extremely associative and almost like a personal journey, and I set it up as a search. And because of the distance at the editing table, many things don't make as much sense. With this film Wolfgang had a more difficult time than with others such as 7915 KM and OUR DAILY BREAD, because they at least had concrete themes. In this case extensive, complex shooting was involved, and it developed into this film at the very end. It was a long search at the editing table, and this grasping of an almost intangible theme took a lot of time—during both shooting and editing. But you can sense when a film's finished and when it isn't. And before it's finished, you can't give up. In the end it became the film I was searching for the entire time, though I wasn't able to formulate it more precisely.

*When you say that this is an extremely personal film of a long journey through the night: The trademark in your films is the camerawork, the attitude when you photograph the world. In this*

*film another aspect is that a number of other (surveillance) cameras are at work at the same time. What was the dialogue with them like? How do you see your visual grammar compared to these multiple recording systems?*

The cameras we found, the monitors that define the nighttime image, on the one hand as workplaces and on the other as surveillance monitors, they're all functional cameras used for a certain purpose. Monitoring somebody, or observing somebody. And the images I tried to produce are precisely the opposite: They're open, broad images where you can lose yourself in nuances, and they're not limited to depicting what's happening at the time the image was created, they also offer the observer an opportunity to discover things in the periphery. I always consider that a kind of stage. What I try to do when arriving at a location is perceive the reality simultaneously as a kind of play, and as a stage on which reality plays out. And the image should reflect that. You always sense the filmmaker, even though I'm never present. I don't talk, we stay in the background, but the observer can still sense that someone's there, looking through his camera at that same moment. We don't try to pretend that we're secretly filming anyone, that the subject isn't aware they're being filmed. That's why it all has a theatrical aspect, though the theater is placed in the reality.

*You filmed at so many different locations that your Europe is in a sense an aggregate in which the places are thoroughly mixed up. What do you consider this film's "geography"?*

One of the working assumptions was that Europe is one. Europe has grown together, we have the EU, which at least politically acts is if it were a single entity. We didn't really find any major regional differences within Europe, in the same way that you can travel wherever you want without restriction, film wherever you want, we selected many of the locations on the basis of their function rather than the actual place: a maternity clinic here, a retirement home there. And when a retirement home in Vienna wouldn't let us shoot, and it was the same in Paris, we just found one in Germany. Those are places for which the actual location is for the most part interchangeable. Where the language that's spoken isn't really relevant. There are other places in the film that can be recognized immediately, that stand alone, such as St. Peter's Square in Rome and the fence at Spain's border with Morocco. Those are things that should be recognizable, and they play a role as locations. Most of the places are however, I don't want to say backdrop, but their actual identity isn't as important as how they symbolize something that happens throughout Europe in the same way.

*What kind of actor is something like your camera in this ambience, and to what extent does it alter the acting of others? An example would be that a nurse normally spends the night alone, then he is placed in a different situation when accompanied by a camera crew on their rounds through a geriatric ward. What does "direction" entail for documentaries?*

Firstly, the camera probably plays my role. I see myself as someone who observes but doesn't react immediately or directly. And who needs time to process what he sees. And the camera functions in the same way, it observes, it's present, of course, in the same way that I would be present, and there's no doubt that the camera's presence has an effect on the scene. We thought about whether a geriatric nurse is just as friendly to his patients when we aren't there. We'll never know. But because everybody automatically thinks about that, it's not really very important.

*What are the main things one could learn from the concrete experience of Europe in the course of this kind of shoot—beyond the boilerplate concerning fortification for security purposes, a prosperous society, a consumer society and Western European society?*

I don't think that the shooting has produced any groundbreaking new knowledge, but I believe that the combined effect of a number of different impressions confirms suspicions and fears in a stark way, uncompromisingly, without offering the possibility of excuses. We've read about and know about Fortress Europe, but it's different after you've really seen it, because you have an image to go with your ideas. That's why the prolonged gaze over the border fence at Africa, at the end, was important to me. I want people to finally see these things that they know happen in the background, and which are normally blocked from your view intentionally. As an impetus, to provide the basis for discussion. This is where the actual film begins.

Nikolaus Geyrhalter
in an interview with Claus Philipp