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# Deadweight

## Axel Koenzen

**Producer** Benny Drechsel, Karsten Stöter, Mark Lwoff, Misha Jaari. **Production companies** Rohfilm (Leipzig, Germany), Bufo (Helsinki, Finland). **Director** Axel Koenzen. **Screenplay** Horst Markgraf, Boris Doran, Axel Koenzen. **Director of photography** Alexander Gheorghiu. **Editor** Benjamin Mirguet. **Music** Pessi Levanto. **Sound design** Markus Krohn. **Sound** Johannes Schmelzer-Ziringer. **Art director** Diana van de Vossenberg. **Costumes** Chiara Minchio, Michael Kleine.

**With** Tommi Korpela (Ahti Ikonen), Ema Vetean (Second Officer/ Katia Martinescu), Archie Alemania (Chelito Sumulong), Manuelito Acido (James Agpalo), Frank Lammers (Eric van de Gejn), Loes Luca (Waitress), Teun Kuilboer (Docker), Jeanne Balibar (Françoise Kettler).

DCP, colour. 88 min. English, Tagalog, Dutch.

**Premiere** 14 February 2016, Berlinale Forum

Ahti Ikonen is the captain of a large container ship. When pressed for time while moored in Savannah, he violates regulations by ordering his crew to help the local dockworkers unload the cargo. When a crew member dies as a result, Ahti has to accept responsibility. News of the incident spreads, and at the next harbour Ahti is faced with union workers calling for a boycott.

This remarkable debut exhibits great calm in depicting the story of a solitary, ambivalent hero, whose feelings of guilt erupt in highly emotional moments – such as when Ahti picks a fight in a Rotterdam harbour pub with workers who refuse to join the boycott because they don't care about the fate of the dead crew member. Or when he struggles to maintain his composure while singing "A Horse With No Name" in front of his crew. Along the way, *Deadweight* also explores the tough working conditions in the globalised shipping business. This is reflected in the cinematography, which avoids romanticising life at sea and hones in on details rather than working with wide shots. At the end of the film, Ahti is in the Philippines: "It felt good to be out of the rain... Cause there ain't no one for to give you no pain."

Hanna Keller

## You're not allowed to dream

'You're not allowed to have dreams, or, you can't falsify reality. You have to work in this reality in order to free yourself from it, in order to change it, but you must always accept it. You're in prison and not anywhere else. There are spaces in which you can work, also inner spaces, but you can't imagine being anywhere else, otherwise you injure yourself too much because you are immediately thrown back into reality. That's why you're not allowed to dream, because each time you dream you're without protection.'

Antonio Negri: *The Cell*

Angela Melitopoulos, Dvd-project, Actar, Barcelona/New York 2008

## "Endlessness seems threatening"

**Deadweight** is your feature film debut. What got you interested in this material?

**Axel Koenzen:** My uncle was a captain and later a pilot in Hamburg. I often went on board with him. As a child, I thought: this is the freest person I know; he sails around the whole world. In the course of researching for the film, it turned out that this freedom on board is not what it's cracked up to be. The sea is a realm of illusion. In reality, endlessness seems threatening.

What is your relationship to people working in this world of container ships?

If you take an interest in these people and listen to them, you'll come together with them. There's no black and white. Basically, each of them has understandable motives – whether a Hamburg ship owner or an ordinary seaman from the Philippines.

What kind of research did you conduct?

From the beginning, I had contact with a Hamburg shipping company that supported my research as well as the shoots. The ship owners knew what I wanted: to depict a ship from the inside. The research was a mini-occupational training for me; you don't rest until you know every button. The same went for the characters: casting and research went hand in hand, and the preliminary stages took us to Romania and the Philippines. The starting point was always the ship and the people who work on it.

How would you describe the place where your film is set? An international or universal place? Or no-man's land?

In principle, the ship is all of those: international, anyway; universal, too; and no-man's land because these ships are usually re-flagged. That means they are almost a legal vacuum, because it is hard to get your rights in the countries where they are registered. There is a great essay by Foucault about heterotopias. He speaks of a 'place without a place that lives from itself and is simultaneously self-contained and at the mercy of the endlessness of the sea'; and he calls the ship the ultimate heterotopia. For me, seafaring was an object of yearning that exposed itself in the end. In a certain way, the process of research was like the destruction of my own personal utopia. Not a reversal of our contemporary circumstances, but their culmination.

*Harbour, ship, steel – you show an analogue world. There are a great many machines we are not familiar with. It's fascinating to watch. Can you tell us more about them and about your thoughts about them and fascination with them?*

That the world and especially our work have been completely digitalised is a false conclusion from our modern Western perspective. In principle, the 'analogue' work has merely been outsourced. What goes on in the engine room is like the undercity in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*. The machine, the engine, is actually the heart that drives everything. It fascinated me how seamen on board have to wrestle with this steel construction in order to survive. Max Weber uses the term 'iron cage' to describe early capitalism. He also calls the system of bureaucratisation and efficient social order 'the polar night of icy darkness'. When I read that, I immediately thought of Film Noir. The mercilessness of this vertical structure contrasting with the horizon and the vastness of the sea interested me. Life on board is regulated by strictly determined rhythms of work and leisure. In principle, it's like in a monastery or a work-obsessed cult. After a few weeks on board, space and time become very relative. Things begin to be suspended. Solitude prevails, and it is somehow also always an encounter with death.

**Deadweight** is a fictional film with strong documentary elements. How do you see the relationship between these two levels?

Cinematically, that's difficult, of course. It was clear to me from the start that I wanted to shoot on a real ship and that that would be the only way to convey what it feels like on board. The fiction had to follow this mode of staging. For me, the actors were agents in this world and the fiction was a way to view the system. My favourite scenes today are those owed to chance. But the question is: what is really coincidental? I believe strongly in being informed in advance, otherwise you don't see things. The situation on board was extremely difficult for Alexander Georghiu's camerawork: extremely narrow spaces and constant vibration. So the decision in favour of the hand-held camera was almost automatic. Benjamin Mirguet's editing was very enriching. We wrote the script practically anew, and in particular we reconceived the development of the leading character. In the end, the film now consists mostly of improvised scenes.

Who are your cinematic models?

In my early twenties, it was Cassavetes, later Antonioni, whom I didn't understand at first. I recently saw *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* again after a long time and thought it was great.

*Big ships are also a mythological theme. One thinks of Moby Dick, the Ship of Fools, Odysseus' journeys and those of the Argonauts. Did such things play a role for you?*

There's a drawing by Hieronymus Bosch titled *Ship of Fools in Flames*: it shows a ship growing through a man's body. I was interested in this state of a ship and a body growing together, in which you can no longer distinguish between your own body and mind and the vehicle transporting you. But in the drawing, it's the man who walks; it's not the ship moving him. It's just in his head...

*What's the meaning of the end of Deadweight?*

During my research, the first time I stood in a simulator I had to think of Plato's allegory of the cave: someone escapes his fetters, returns to the cave and tells the others about the sun outside. But they don't believe him. They think he's crazy. They prefer to continue believing in the projection of their shadows. It's easier. Sometimes that's how I feel when I leave the cinema.

*Interview: Rüdiger Suchsland, Berlin, January 2016*



Axel Koenzen was born in Hilden, in the Rhineland region of Germany, in 1972. Between 1993 and 1994 he studied Photography at the International Center of Photography in New York and worked as a freelance photographer and visual researcher. He studied at the German Film and Television School Berlin (DFFB) between 1997 and 2002. *Deadweight* is his first feature-length film.

**Films**

1999: *Waxandwane* (15 min.). 2006: *Firn* (39 min.). 2009: *Drang* (45 min.). 2016: *Deadweight*.