



OFFICIAL SELECTION
UN CERTAIN REGARD
 FESTIVAL DE CANNES

**Meinhard Neumann
 Reinhardt Wetrek
 Syuleyman Alilov Letifov
 Veneta Frangova
 Vyara Borisova**

A film by **Valeska Grisebach**

WESTERN

FILMS BOUTIQUE PRESENTS A KOMPLIZEN FILM PRODUCTION IN CO-PRODUCTION WITH CHOUCHKOV BROTHERS, COOP39, KINM AND ZDF-DAS KLEINE FERNSEHSPIEL. IN COLLABORATION WITH ARTE. FUNDED BY MEDIENBOARD BERLIN-BRANDENBURG, MINISTER OF STATE FOR CULTURE AND MEDIA, MDM MITTELDEUTSCHE MEDIENFÖRDERUNG, GERMAN FEDERAL FILM FUND, BULGARIAN NATIONAL FILM CENTER, AUSTRIAN FILM INSTITUTE, MEDIA AND GERMAN FEDERAL FILM BOARD WITH MEINHARD NEUMANN, REINHARDT WETREK, SYULEYMAN ALILOV LETIFOV, VENETA FRANGOVA, VYARA BORISOVA. PRODUCERS JONAS DORNACH, JANINE JACKOWSKI, MAREN ADE, VALESKA GRISEBACH, MICHEL MERKT. PRODUCED BY BORIS CHOUCHKOV, VIKTOR CHOUCHKOV, ANTONIN SVOBODA, BRUNO WAGNER. PRODUCED BY BEN VON DOBENECK. PRODUCTION MANAGER DAVID KEITSCH. ZWANGSARBEITEN CLAUDIA TRONNIER, MEINOLF ZÜRHORST. ASSISTANT DIRECTOR LISA BIERWIRTH. DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY BERNHARD KELLER. EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS BEATRICE SCHULTZ, VERONIKA ALBERT. CASTING KATRIN VORDERWÜLBECKE. ORIGINAL SOUND UVE HAUSSIG. EDITOR FABIAN SCHMIDT. RE-RECORDING MARTIN STEYER. EDITOR BETTINA BOHLER. WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY VALESKA GRISEBACH.



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A film by Valeska Grisebach

2017 - DCP - 1:1,85 - 5.1 - 119 Min

German/Bulgarian/English

with English, French or German subtitles

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SYNOPSIS

A group of German construction workers start a tough job at a remote site in the Bulgarian countryside. The foreign land awakens the men's sense of adventure, but they are also confronted with their own prejudice and mistrust due to the language barrier and cultural differences. The stage is quickly set for a showdown when men begin to compete for recognition and favor from the local villagers.



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A CONVERSATION WITH VALESKA GRISEBACH

Was the impetus for this journey, the genre or a specific topic?

Several different paths led to this film that, increasingly and by association, joined together to form a story. One was the Western genre. I grew up with it during the 1970s, sitting in front of a TV set in West Berlin. It never ceased to captivate me in a strange, cozy way, and eventually triggered my desire to return to it – as if to a place I'd been before. As a girl, I identified with the male heroes of Western films and at the same time had crushes on them, so I was always excluded from the start. Perhaps this conflict also contributed to my wish to explore this per se “male” genre. I wanted to get closer to the solitary, inflated, often melancholic male characters of the Western.

All of this corresponded with the subject of latent xenophobia – something I've long wanted to explore in a film. I was interested in this idea of “German-ness,” which sometimes manifests as an indistinct feeling of strength, of superiority. The impulse to place yourself in the highest status, to differentiate yourself. The moment in which contempt supersedes empathy.

The idea of relocating a group of German men to a jobsite in a foreign country – to unfamiliar territory where they themselves are strangers and find themselves confronted with their own prejudices and mistrust – suddenly gave me a means to access this subject, as well as a fitting starting point for a story.



Which elements of the Western genre attracted you to the idea of transferring them into a modern setting?

I'm touched by the multi-layered, contradictory, colorful aspects of the themes of the Western – aspects the genre itself constantly reflects on and challenges. I'm interested in the significance of this ambivalence to the here and now, as a social construct.

I was interested in the duel as a principle by which you live your life and form relationships, as something very lively, through which you come into contact with people and in a sense – if you dare – look the other person in the eye. At the same time, it propagates the idea of power and control, of aspiring to strength, of contempt for the weak – even if that's a part of you, as well. I found it interesting as a theme for Meinhard, the protagonist: His fear is what he finds it hardest to forgive himself for.

The duel creates distance and at the same time closeness. A moment of mirroring, anticipating how the other person sees you, or a fantasy of how you must present yourself to them. Identifying with your rival. The intimacy, the inversion of "love at first sight."

The quest for independence and freedom, embodied by the heroes of the Western, the idea of leaving everything behind, or at least being untethered and free for a few moments: I saw this as a universal, romantic theme that expresses something about the longing for adventure and the meaning of personal destiny.

These elements are particularly embodied and internalized by the main characters, Meinhard and Vincent.

Western movies are also about the "staging" of a face that doesn't express its feelings, but behind which lies a great deal of emotion. Including the fear of losing face. The fear of being recognized by the other person. The fantasy of subjugating and extinguishing the other person. The fear of losing control.

I wanted a hero who's no longer all that young, who feels that life still owes him an adventure, an experience. A hero who must battle with his opportunism and fear. A big man whose airs and attractive exterior draw gazes, who looks like a leader, but inside of which the "small man" also resides who wants to disappear into the crowd and remain inconspicuous. Someone who's had to stomach a great deal, but who's still dreaming all the same. He's a character who also has an anti-social, narcissistic side. This tension, between the person you wish to be and the person you are in your actions and impulses: I wanted to expose the character to this tension.



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How did the cowboy of the Western become a German construction worker on the border between East and West?

I was looking for the iconography, the pin-up nature of Western heroes in the everyday world, and I very quickly ended up with the idea of men on a construction site. The physiques, the clothes, the tools on the belts... At first, it was a really superficial starting point: What kind of man can I picture on a horse? I talked to lots of men and women from a huge range of backgrounds about duels and the "Western situation" in everyday life, but I stuck with my initial idea. I was interested in the old-fashioned masculinity that's celebrated on the construction site, this closed universe of men, with its own rules. A world in which women are absent but – in the fantasies of the men – ever-present. I was impressed by their humor and wit, which is so full of creativity. It's a totally distinct kind of prose and, when you're trading barbs with someone, the aim is to always go one step further. I was touched by the tenderness and intimacy that – whatever the crudeness – links the men to each other.

Nonetheless, the choice of setting is really a superficial, formal decision. It's not about pinning anything on anyone, the setting could also be elsewhere.

Something that was important for the movie was the idea of "being away on a job": In the foreign landscape, through the big machines and physical labor, the men get to know the place. I liked the idea of the German men, with their claim to technical superiority, arriving in Bulgaria and sharing the experience of communism with the people in the villages.



After BE MY STAR and LONGING, this was your first time shooting in a foreign country. How was the shoot for you?

For me, shooting this movie in a foreign language in places where I'm not at home was a very positive exercise in giving up control. The improvisational talent of the people in the villages, their unassuming trust in a project – that it'll work out somehow – I found that to be very productive, and it was also a relief. It really suited my often spontaneous approach, which can be a challenge for everyone involved.

During our research, we made several trips to Bulgaria. Initially, despite all our efforts to prepare, they were journeys into the unknown. You know roughly what you're looking for, but not where to find it. At the same time, you're utterly clueless, open and full of anticipation, and you find something different, and it's suddenly important to the story. There were several encounters on these trips, several stories that don't feature in the movie. Suddenly you get stuck somewhere and form a relationship. That's how we came across Petrelik village as our location. While we were scouting, I was drawn to the border regions: Beyond them, the next country, the next sense of wanderlust or the next adventure is already waiting. But in those regions, it's also about identity and separation, or amalgamation. Through the Germans' trip to Bulgaria, I wanted two different European perspectives to encounter each other and, in the process, I wanted unconsciously internalized perceptions of status to be distributed like weights in a balance of power.

The decision also had a lot to do with the people who welcomed us extremely warmly and were hugely supportive of everything we did. I don't want to romanticize it, but I was really struck by the way they faced the challenge of earning their livelihoods: with a great deal of improvisation and commitment. Bulgarian humor is wild and self-deprecating, and it often muses on personal destiny. People laugh about themselves, not about others. You get the sense that, thanks to Bulgaria's recent history, the idea of being able to rely on things doesn't hold much sway in society. In every family, someone has gone abroad to earn money or to study. A large proportion of the younger generation is leaving the country. The rest of the world – Germany, England, the USA – is very present.



A film is also defined by the “how” of the working process, the direction, the shots...

I’ve never set out to make a film with a story in mind. Instead, there’s always a relatively abstract theme that I approach through a process of highly associative, personal research. For me, this act of going out and seeking contact is a fundamental part of writing and shooting.

For me, it’s important to use documentary methods at every stage, because that’s how you let the unexpected in: the things you can’t make up. I find it very fruitful to repeatedly confront a fictional narrative with reality as a sparring partner for the imagination, a productive challenge to the things that have been thought out – but also as an ally, something that grants the story an additional rationale. To do that, I need a stable dramatic scaffold. That gives me freedom when it comes to the content, working out subtexts and going on a journey of discovery.

The basis for the shoot is a comprehensive treatment. For me, on the one hand, it’s a concrete description of the plot, but the text should also transmit something like an atmosphere and sharpen people’s sense of what the story and the scenes should ideally deliver. Sometimes it also carries a haziness which better describes what I’m still looking for. In the whole process, lots of details and scenes then develop further and intensify through the actors and actual locations. Through them, the story acquires its own reality. I’m always really happy when the narrative detaches itself from the page. Another crucial stage is the edit with Bettina Böhler – conceiving the film “anew” once more, and condensing it.



How do you develop the visual concept with the cameraman Bernhard Keller, who has shot all your films?

I wanted a calm, unobtrusive, handheld camera at normal and long focal lengths together with static shots that sharpen viewers' sense for the scenes' level of abstraction. We wanted to find a simple, colloquial style in which "Western" spaces occasionally open up. Because the subject matter is about projection, open and secret glances, and the duel, we wanted the "shot – reverse shot" theme to play a role, but also the explanation and division of the space – not only the public space that the characters share, but also the one they have to themselves. Meinhard's world.

I didn't see the German men's journey to a construction site in a foreign country as a purely realistic situation, a naturalistic account. I was interested in this theme because of its exaggeration: At first glance, I wanted the landscape to seem alien and intriguing. I wanted it to immediately focus attention on the men. Suddenly, they seem different to how they did at home. For a brief moment, they can indulge in the illusion that they're alone and taking ownership of the landscape through their exploration. Through the mise-en-scène and composition, we wanted to open up a timeless, adventurous space that above all, along with the work on the construction site, tells the story of Meinhard's and the group's fantasy worlds and projections.



PRODUCERS NOTES

Valeska Grisebach doesn't work like other directors. For her, it all starts with a subject, a topic. In this case, she wanted to make a modern-day Western exploring how everyday communication can become a potential weapon for a duel. Valeska always starts with a long period of research, casting, scouting and searching out her locations and characters. But there's never a classic shooting script: She works from a treatment. That poses a challenge for the preparation, production and shoot – and, of course, for financing the movie. Funders always prefer to see a script.

Valeska Grisebach's films are characterized by their intensity and disarming simplicity. Their heroes move us to our very core and touch on something fundamental. Valeska always works with non-professional actors. The construction workers in the film are construction workers in real life, too. The casting process took a few years: We auditioned over 600 people in Germany in order to find our lead actors Meinhard (Neumann) and Vincent (Reinhardt Wetrek), along with the rest of the cast. Most are Berliners, largely from former East Berlin. For most, it was the first time they had traveled outside of Germany. We found all the Bulgarian actors on location in the village of Petrelik, where we shot the movie.

"Western" was completely different to every other film we've ever made, for which we've always had scripts to work through. Valeska waits to see what she finds on location, and



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that shapes her story. She remains attentive and receptive to the people, conversations and stories around her. We shot this film in southern Bulgaria, near the Greek border. The location is a central character. Initially a real step into the unknown, it immediately felt like a homecoming: We were met with curiosity, generosity and hospitality and were able to smoothly marry the needs and infrastructure of a crew with the needs and support of the village.

We worked with a small team and shot in a kind of documentary style. The film has only two interior scenes – after all, a Western has to take place outside – so we needed good weather, and we were lucky. The sunlight was beautifully bright and dense. We had 43 shooting days, and every day was a challenge. We shot chronologically to give the non-professional actors the chance to grow into their roles. We worked from a kind of shooting schedule divided into three different phases: arrival, discovery and duel. Whenever a shooting day involved special requirements such as a stunt, we asked Valeska to inform us three days in advance. For the team and the cast, it was demanding because everything and everybody always had to be on standby.

In Bulgaria, you have the feeling that you're on the edge of civilization, and that's also an element of the classic Western. But there's also that fantasy, that longing for freedom... There's that feeling: "I'm my own hero. Can I start over, start a new life, here in this foreign land?" And that's also part of the film.



VALESKA GRISEBACH

Valeska Grisebach studied Philosophy and German Studies in Berlin, Munich and Vienna. In 1993 she began studying to be a director at the Viennese Film Academy under Peter Patzak, Wolfgang Glück and Michael Haneke. Her graduation film *BE MY STAR* was nominated for the Adolf-Grimme-Award in 2002 and received the Critics' Award at the Toronto International Film Festival as well as the Grand Jury Award at the Turin Film Festival.

Her second feature film, *LONGING*, premiered in 2006 in the Berlinale Competition. The film received several awards, including the Special Jury Award in Buenos Aires, the Grand Prix Asturias at the Gijón International Film Festival and the Special Jury Award at the Warsaw International Film Festival.

FILMOGRAPHY

2017 **WESTERN** - Feature film, digital

Festivals: Un Certain Regard, Cannes 2017

2006 **SEHNSUCHT / LONGING** - Feature film, 35mm

Festivals: Berlinale Competition 2006

Awards: Special Jury Award at the BAFICI International Film Festival, Filmkunstpreis Ludwigshafen, Best Film at the Pesaro Film Festival, Prix l'Age d'Or at the Brussels Film Festival, Best Film and Fipresci Jury Award at Gijón International Film Festival

2001 **MEIN STERN / BE MY STAR** - Feature film, 35mm

Awards: First Steps Award for Best Feature Film, Special Mention Fipresci at the Toronto International Film Festival, Best Film at Torino Film Festival, Nominated for Adolf-Grimme-Preis



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ACTORS

Meinhard Neumann
Reinhardt Wetrek
Syuleyman Alilov Letifov
Veneta Frangova
Vyara Borisova

Meinhard Neumann was born in Erfurt in 1968. In 1986, he began an apprenticeship in road construction. Two years later, he moved to Zittau, Saxony, where he married for the first time. A chance encounter at a fairground landed him a job with a showman, and Neumann spent the next nearly 20 years traveling around the Lausitz region with him. In 2010, wishing to spend more time with his family – including his four children – Neumann settled in Bautzen. There, he turned his attention to his passion for selling secondhand goods and spent his weekends traveling to a wide range of markets. In 2012, at a horse market in Havelberg, he was invited to audition. Since 2014, alongside preparation and rehearsals for “Western,” Neumann has worked in the automotive industry.

Reinhardt Wetrek was born in East Berlin in 1971. He began his career as an apprentice painter and decorator. In 1993, he was called up for military service. The following year, he began working as a scaffolder – a job that, at the time, did not require an apprenticeship.



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Drawn by extreme challenges, he soon specialized in building scaffolding at dizzying heights, including on industrial chimneys, churches and ships. In 2011, Wetrek completed further training as a foreman and since then has directed teams of scaffolders. He was spotted while constructing scaffolding for Berlin's U1 subway line and invited to audition for "Western." He attended the audition only because he wanted to show his twelve-year-old daughter the importance of courage. Had she not accompanied him, however, he would have turned back around.

Syuleyman Alilov Letifov was born in Satovcha, Bulgaria, in 1965 and lives in Kotchan. He graduated from the Razlog Vocational School for Transportation. In a small village near Blagoevgrad, he then spent six years working as a school cook. Once again, he then switched to an entirely different line of work: For the last 20 years, he has traded car parts in Satovcha, where he now owns a dealership. Since 2002, he has also worked in a quarry. It was there, in 2014, that he was invited to audition for "Western." His passions are ancient history and archaeology.



CREW

Written and Directed by **Valeska Grisebach**

Producers

**Jonas Dornbach, Janine Jackowski, Maren Ade
Valeska Grisebach, Michel Merkt**

Co-Producers

Boris Chouchkov, Viktor Chouchkov, Antonin Svoboda, Bruno Wagner

Line Producer **Ben von Dobeneck**

Production Manager **David Keitsch**

Commissioning Editors

**Claudia Tronnier, ZDF - Das kleine Fernsehspiel
Meinolf Zurhorst, ZDF/ARTE**

Assistant Director **Lisa Bierwirth**

Director of Photography **Bernhard Keller**

Production Design **Beatrice Schultz**

Costume Design **Veronika Albert**

Casting **Katrin Vorderwülbecke**

Original Sound Recordist **Uve Haußig**

Sound Design **Fabian Schmidt**

Re-Recording Mixer **Martin Steyer**

Editor **Bettina Böhler**



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