

# WESTERN

A film by  
**Valeska Grisebach**



119 mins / Germany/Bulgaria/Austria 2017 / with English subtitles / cert tbc

Un Certain Regard, Cannes 2017

Release April 13<sup>th</sup> 2018

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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 prejudices and mistrust due to the language barrier and cultural differences with the native villagers. The foreman Vincent and the mysterious Meinhard also start to fall out.

The stage is quickly set for a showdown when the German workers begin to compete for recognition and favour from the local villagers.

Further information and downloads [here](#)

Photo set can be downloaded [here](#)



## CAST

Meinhard  
Vincent  
Adrian  
Veneta  
Vyara  
Vanko  
Mancho  
Tommy  
Jens  
Boris  
Helmuth  
Marcel  
Wolle

**Meinhard Neumann**  
**Reinhardt Wetrek**  
**Syuleyman Alilov Letifov**  
**Veneta Francova**  
**Vyara Borisova**  
**Kevin Bashev**  
**Aliosman Deliev**  
**Robert Gawallek**  
**Jens Klein**  
**Waldemar Zang**  
**Detlef Schaich**  
**Sascha Diener**  
**Enrico Mantei**

## CREW

Script and Director  
Producers

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

Co-Producers

**Boris Chouchkov, Viktor Chouchkov,**  
**Antonin Svoboda, Bruno Wagner**

Line Producer  
Production Manager  
Commissioning Editors

**Ben von Dobeneck**  
**David Keitsch**  
**Claudia Tronnier, ZDF - Das kleine Fernsehspiel**  
**Meinolf Zurhorst, ZDF/ARTE**

Assistant Director  
Director of Photography  
Production Design  
Costume Design  
Casting  
Original Sound Recordist  
Sound Design  
Re-Recording Mixer  
Editor  
Production  
In Co-production with

**Lisa Bierwirth**  
**Bernhard Keller**  
**Beatrice Schultz**  
**Veronika Albert**  
**Katrin Vorderwülbecke**

In collaboration with  
Funded by

**Uve Haussig**  
**Fabian Schmidt**  
**Martin Steyer**  
**Bettina Böhler**  
**Films Boutique Presents A Komplizen Film Production**  
**Chouchkov Brothers (Bulgaria) Coop99 (Austria)**  
**Knm and Zdf-Das Kleine Fernsehspiel**  
**Arte**  
**Medienboard Berlin-Brandenburg, Minister of State For**  
**Culture and Media, Mdm Mitteldeutsche Medienförderung**  
**German Federal Film Fund, Bulgarian National Film Centre**  
**Austrian Film Institute, Media and German Federal Film Board**

2017 - DCP - 1:1,85 - 5.1 - 119 Min  
German/Bulgarian/English  
with English subtitles

## 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 - Un Certain Regard, Cannes 2017

2006 SEHNSUCHT / LONGING - Berlinale Competition 2006

2001 MEIN STERN / BE MY STAR

## INTERVIEW 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, colourful 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.

**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 humour 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 labour, the men get to know the place. I liked the idea of the German men, with their claim to technical super 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 humour 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 then 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