

Focus on Western

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Western: A place and a face

It's summer, a heatwave has hit hard in the gorgeous wooded, lofty landscape of the Bulgarian nature reserve of Ali Botush, not far from the Greek border, and a group of men are hoisting their national, German flag on top of a great hill where they have set up their base camp, as workers in charge of preparing the site for the construction of a hydroelectric power station. Diggers, chainsaws, sleeping quarters, a river that needs to be diverted, alcohol-fuelled virility around the campfire: German director **Valeska Grisebach** plunges into this very male-dominated world with Western [1], unveiled in the Un Certain Regard selection of the 70th Cannes Film Festival [2]. However, the filmmaker, who rose to fame at Toronto with Be My Star [3] in 2001 before taking part in the Berlinale competition with Longing [4] in 2006, is certainly not lacking in finesse and, as the title of the film suggests, has decided to take a realistic, contemporary story and skilfully inject it with all the ingredients of the cowboys-and-Indians classics, with the ultimate aim of subtly addressing the issues of economic immigration and integration.

Our laconic anti-hero, Meinhard (**Meinhard Neumann**), discreetly breaks away from the ten or so German workers led by the authoritarian Vincent (**Reinhardt Wetrek**), who have no consideration whatsoever ("Everything's messed up here", "It's just like travelling through time, going back to the past") for the inhabitants of the neighbouring village, whose language they don't understand and with whom they have relationships tinged with paranoia ("We'll have to keep our wits about us, keep a lookout") and disrespect (they whistle at the girls and

bother them somewhat). With his mysterious past as a former legionnaire who served in both Afghanistan and Africa, Meinhard embodies the very prototype of the character that has come from nowhere and has no ties at all. He approaches the locals (some of whom are also a little reluctant to collude at first), is accepted despite the language barrier, and begins to share things with them: a car ride in the night, odd jobs, a few drinks, poker games, meals, a friendship with Adrian (**Syuleyman Alilov Letifov**) and even a brief fling. The white horse that he rides serves as a link for establishing contact, and he then continually makes the trip from the camp to the village. But his compatriots, especially Vincent, who has his eye on the same girl, are not happy about his "defecting to the enemy", particularly as the crucial question of access to a vital and limited resource in the vicinity – water – soon rears its head.

While nonetheless retaining a minimal level of suspense, Grisebach carefully toys with her endeavour of transposing a genre that usually tends to take a violent route, relying on a very well-structured screenplay (which she wrote herself) with its free-flowing succession of sequences. Each of these scenes makes its own useful contribution to the movie, and what we eventually see is the true face of the whole – the face of a possible brotherhood, even in a world where the notion of "survival of the fittest" constantly tries to exert itself, but where the reversal of these values is still possible. The director unravels this sentiment at a steady, controlled pace that perfectly matches the beautiful natural surroundings where the story unfolds, and the setting also becomes a proper character in this film imbued with intelligence and a fantastic, creeping charm.

Produced by German outfit Komplizen Films [5], *Western* was co-produced by Austria's Coop99 [6] and Bulgaria's Chouchkov Brothers [7]. The movie's international sales are handled by Films Boutique [8].

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Links:

- [1] <http://cineuropa.org/f.aspx?t=film&did=326936>
- [2] <http://www.festival-cannes.com/fr/>
- [3] <http://cineuropa.org/f.aspx?t=film&did=1790>
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