

LUX FILM DAYS

3 FILMS
24 LANGUAGES
28 COUNTRIES



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WESTERN

A film by Valeska Grisebach
Germany, Bulgaria, Austria



WESTERN

A FILM BY VALESKA GRISEBACH

A small group of German workers is sent to Bulgaria to install a hydro turbine in the middle of a dry mountainous region in the south, not far from the border with Greece. They set up camp near an isolated village and make their presence known by planting their national flag, a conquering gesture which is a little provocative for the local inhabitants.

This is the beginning of a difficult cohabitation between the two groups, where virtually nobody speaks both languages. However, Meinhard, an alleged ex-soldier who has become a construction worker in order to make some money, takes a first step by making overtures to the villagers as a sign of his good will. This leads to his becoming increasingly estranged from his colleagues, who are inward-looking and convinced of their superiority, as well as lacking empathy. Progressing from clumsy approaches to genuine moments of sharing, Meinhard, an anti-hero without a family or any other commitments, enters this world, so different from his own, as well as he can.

CONTEXT

By placing a group of German workers and the inhabitants of a small remote village in Bulgaria in a confronting situation, the German film-maker Valeska Grisebach invites the audience to consider the wide socioeconomic and cultural disparities that exist among the countries of the European Union. Her film is set in a young Europe that is still under construction and is full of contrast. And while the exchanges are clearly of human value, they also reveal values, codes and behaviours which differ and lead to more or less latent misunderstandings and conflict.

These exchanges are marked by a palpable dramatic tension that is eased only at the end of the film, when the villagers go to the Germans' camp for a party where music and dance serve as universal languages. The need to overcome prejudices and the need for respect and openness towards strangers are the themes of this western, which denounces condescending attitudes and the conquering mentality over poorer partners.

ONCE UPON A TIME IN THE EAST

Until it joined the European Union in 2007, Bulgaria was to Western countries a kind of terra incognita, still very much associated with the former Soviet Bloc, even though it had already been dismantled a quarter of a century beforehand. In its treatment of human relations, *Western* effectively expresses the gap that exists between two worlds that have not yet succeeded in finding a common European identity. It is remarkable, for instance, that from the outset the German workers install themselves as if they were in a territory that they had conquered: they raise their national flag to indicate their occupation of the small piece of land on which their camp is temporarily located while the project is under way. Meinhard appropriates a horse he believes to be wild, but which in reality belongs to Adrian, Vanko's uncle; Vincent adopts an inappropriate attitude towards the girls who come to bathe in the river and does not hesitate to divert water away from the village for the incomers, as if their needs took priority over those of the local population; they noisily drive around





the village in an all-terrain vehicle during the night so as to impose their superior presence and to discourage any potential intruder from approaching their installations; and so on.

Valeska Grisebach's film includes some features reminiscent of the classic Western: Meinhard, a solitary cowboy riding bareback, with an expressionless face; infertile, desert land with sublime landscapes; a small village with dusty streets and a café that serves as a saloon where people kill time by drinking raki and playing cards for money; and two groups in conflict, each regarding itself as superior to the other in terms of development and civilisation — 'These villages are like a journey back in time', says one of the Germans, as he views the settlements from his all-terrain vehicle.

In this context of mistrust, Meinhard's character fortunately takes the edge off an encounter tinged with hostility and incomprehension. Despite the language barrier, he succeeds in establishing ties with the locals and in developing a kind of empathy that his German colleagues do not appreciate. In particular, he argues their case when Vincent proposes to divert the water that belongs to the village. Meinhard explains that it is rationed and is already being divided between three different settlements because it is in such short supply. Vincent ignores his arguments and physically attacks him as he walks off into the darkness; in his view, the mere fact that Meinhard even mentions their neighbours' difficulties means that he is taking up a position against his own camp. Consideration for other people's interests, which never occurs to the project leader, actually appears to be the fruit of exchanges that have gradually been established between Meinhard and the villagers, clearly indicating the importance of dialogue, which is essential on a human level but also socially, as it makes it possible to obtain vital information, without which no cohabitation would be possible.

A DIFFICULT ENCOUNTER

The construction site is soon at a standstill, and the men have nothing to do. The truck that was supposed to have delivered the 40 tonnes of gravel needed for the work to continue has been delayed and the main sources of activity within the small German

team have become the sunshine, the river and alcohol. Long shots of the countryside, filmed slowly for its own sake, and the sound of insects accompany the men's wait, as their lives continue in slow motion. Except for Meinhard, who spends much of his time in the village and participates in the local activities: constructing a stone wall and drying tobacco leaves, among others. Life seems to have changed direction for this rootless man, who is rather enigmatic and whose identity is unclear — he claims to be a former soldier, without a home or a family, but nothing in the film ever confirms this for sure — and who does not feel at home either in the camp or in the village. On several occasions, his constant journeys to and fro, mostly in the evening or the dead of night, prompt the director to introduce unexpected turns of events and violence, which are in stark contrast with the general torpor of the film.

The scene where Meinhard is attacked as he walks alone in the dark is repeated three times, each time slightly differently. The first time Vanko jumps down on him from a truck and the two roll around on the ground; however, the situation quickly turns and the young man faints. While he remains unconscious, his motives are questioned and it is unsure how the locals are likely to react when they find Meinhard returning his inert body to the village. When he awakes, it turns out that he was just playing

a joke on somebody he now regards as a friend. So this is an entirely gratuitous episode with no serious consequences, yet at the same time it reveals the constant tension that exists between the two communities. Towards the end of the film, Meinhard falls victim to another assault under the same nocturnal conditions. After he refuses to pay back a villager what he had extorted from him through gambling, three men pounce on him and beat him up before throwing him into the river and fleeing. Soaking wet, Meinhard spends the night there before being picked up the next day by the side of the road by some villagers on their way to the party at the Germans' camp. Finally, when the evening is in full swing, one of the locals takes issue with Meinhard, accusing him of having slept with a girl from the village. The two men start a tussle, and once again Meinhard finds himself spreadeagled on the ground. 'That is what villages are like ... anything can happen!' Adrian tells him, comforting him after the fight.

Western seems to thus be divided between two different times: daytime, which is fairly fluid and in which relationships are contained and controlled, and night-time, when a certain savagery reigns with sudden and brutal irruptions of the tensions that have been accumulating around the central character. At times, Meinhard is distrusted by his colleagues and particularly by his boss, Vincent, who feels betrayed, while at other times he is distrusted by the villagers, who do not understand his tenacious desire to become integrated and who in a way object to his failure to keep his distance. Meinhard effectively crystallises the real issues at stake in the film, which are all the difficulties involved in a genuine encounter between groups of people who are forced into opposition by all kinds of circumstances despite a common political identity that at first requires, in addition to an open attitude towards others, a good deal of respect and circumspection.





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SOME POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

In addition to the points analysed above, several aspects of the film *Western* are worth further discussion.

- At the beginning of the film, Vincent confiscates a hat that belongs to a young Bulgarian woman and that has fallen into the river, and uses it to tease her, going so far as to plunge her head under water. At the end, a similar scene is enacted around the German flag, which the Bulgarians have carried off. How do you interpret the parallelism between these two scenes, which are both symmetrical and analogous?
- 'What are you doing here?' Adrian asks Meinhard at the very end of the film, when returning him the knife he had given to his nephew Vanko as a souvenir. In light of the film, also consider this question: what can Meinhard be looking for in this inhospitable place where nothing happens outside the village, where no news seems to arrive from the outside world and where people are short of work but also of comforts and cultural or sporting activities?
- Without it being clearly evoked, the film contains a number of allusions to the country's great history or to its economic situation. Can you remember these allusions? What do these contextual elements add to the little story about an encounter between Bulgarian villagers and German workers?

les grignoux



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BRINGING FILMS FROM EUROPE TO EUROPEANS

After last year's edition, which marked the 10th anniversary of the initiative, the LUX PRIZE continues to bring together an astonishing variety of genres and tones through films made by talented young European directors. The European Parliament is pleased to present the three films competing for the 2017 LUX FILM PRIZE:

BPM — BEATS PER MINUTE (*120 battements par minute*), a film by Robin Campillo, France

SAMI BLOOD (*Sameblod*), a film by Amanda Kernell, Sweden, Norway, Denmark

WESTERN, a film by Valeska Grisebach, Germany, Bulgaria, Austria

Adopting a sympathetic and intelligent approach, the films deal with topical subjects and reflect on what is going on in Europe at the moment. They show characters who open their eyes to the world around them in order to understand reality and the societies and communities to which they belong. By showing our stories sublimated by the emotions of film, the quality and diversity of European cinema will be displayed, as will its importance in constructing social values and cultural communities. We invite you to see the films during the sixth edition of the LUX FILM DAYS.

LUX FILM PRIZE

Culture plays a fundamental role in constructing our societies.

With this in mind, the European Parliament launched the LUX FILM PRIZE in 2007. By doing so it aimed to increase the distribution of European films across the continent as well as to encourage a European debate on major social issues.

The LUX FILM PRIZE is a unique initiative. While most European co-productions are shown only in their country of origin and are rarely distributed elsewhere, even within the European Union, the LUX FILM PRIZE gives three European films the rare opportunity to be subtitled in the EU's 24 official languages.

The winner of the LUX FILM PRIZE will be chosen by the Members of the European Parliament and announced on 15 November 2017.

LUX FILM DAYS

The LUX FILM PRIZE gave rise to the LUX FILM DAYS. Since 2012, the three films competing for the prize have been shown to a wider European audience during the LUX FILM DAYS.

During the LUX FILM DAYS, we invite you to enjoy an unforgettable cultural experience that transcends borders. From October to December, you will be able to join cinema-lovers from across Europe in watching screenings of the three films in one of the EU's 24 official languages. Do not forget to vote for your favourite film via our website, luxprize.eu, or our Facebook page!

AUDIENCE MENTION

The Audience Mention is the LUX FILM PRIZE people's choice award. Be sure to vote for one of the three films before 31 January 2018! You might get the chance to go to the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival in July 2018 — courtesy of the European Parliament — and announce the winner of the Audience Mention.

WATCH,
DEBATE
AND VOTE!



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LUX
PRIZE
.EU

DIRECTOR: Valeska Grisebach

SCENARIO: Valeska Grisebach

CASTING: Meinhard Neumann, Reinhardt Wetrek, Syuleyman Alilov Letifov, Veneta Frangova, Vyara Borisova

CINEMATOGRAPHY: Bernhard Keller

PRODUCERS: Jonas Dornbach, Janine Jackowski, Maren Ade, Valeska Grisebach, Michel Merkt

PRODUCTION: Komplizen Film, Chouchkov Brothers, Coop99 Filmproduktion, KNM, ZDF- Das Kleine Fernsehspiel

YEAR: 2017

RUNNING TIME: 119'

GENRE: Fiction

COUNTRIES: Germany, Bulgaria, Austria

ORIGINAL VERSION: German, Bulgarian, English

DISTRIBUTOR: New Wave Films (United Kingdom, Ireland)

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