

Aus einem nahen Land

From A Nearby Country

A film by Manfred Neuwirth

Music Christian Fennesz

Österreich 2015 | 80 min | 1:1,77 | Dolby Digital 5.1

The film's first image, its first shot, is a puzzle already: some sheep are taking shelter from the glaring sun in the shade of a tree on top of a hill. Their bleating drowns out the whisper of the gentle breeze rustling the branches of the tree. Where can this scene be set? In Greece? Italy?

Manfred Neuwirth's films may be stringent in their formal design: all the greater is the freedom we enjoy later when watching them, as we look on, listen, are free to associate. In terms of its structure, *Aus einem nahen Land* continues Neuwirth's series of "experimental documentaries": each of the film's 24 shots is exactly three minutes in length, separated by black frames. The image is slowed down by two-and-a-half times. Recorded simultaneously, the sound touches on the image without duplicating it, adding events off-screen; four of the more abstract shots – a corn field, a stack of firewood, a snow-covered forest road, dense floodplain woodland in dappled sunlight – also have an additional soundtrack with music by Christian Fennesz.

Within this stringent framework, however, things really get going. Even the camera begins to move here, slowly traveling to the left, keeping close to the ground, and then back to where it started. Even though this slow gliding movement goes all but unnoticed at first, its effect is amazing: the slight shift in perspective alters the spatial dimensionality of the images, lending them an almost three-dimensional quality.

Shot in 2013/14, the film is set in and around Kritzendorf, a small village by the Danube northwest of Vienna. The Vitovec family, neighbours of the filmmaker, make a living growing wine. We see the men in the vineyards, laboriously pounding iron stakes into the ground, pruning vines, harvesting grapes and filling bottles; we see the women weaving vines into a large crown in preparation of a harvest festival and making food for a wine-tavern buffet. Hard work, all of it. Creaking softly, two roast pigs slowly turn on a two-spit rotisserie.

Manfred Neuwirth explores familiar territory even though some images of *Aus einem nahen Land* seem so unreal they might be science fiction. Once, it is the middle of the summer, a tractor suddenly materialises in a field next to a bale of hay; another time a ship goes by in the background, shot as if it was cutting straight through the landscape; and sometimes it is the camera itself that provokes the most beautiful irritations. Then, someone looks straight into the lens of the camera; whispers into the ear of the person sitting next to them at Sunday Mass in the forest, or abruptly changes direction when walking.

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