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slow immersion

manfred neuwirth's experimental travel films

1. "been there, done that"

Whoever is familiar with American filmmaker James Benning's work cannot help, after no more than a minute or two into Manfred Neuwirth's most recent film *scapes and elements* (2011), but be reminded of Benning's *13 Lakes* or *Ten Skies*.[1] What connects them is that both filmmakers limited themselves to a minimum of topical, formal, and stylistic choices. They trained their cameras at largely natural scenes (land-, water- or skyscape) and devoted either an entire ten minute reel of 16mm film or selected an equally long digitally recorded section to each, making scene and shot coincide. Both selected a wide shot scale and both used ambient sound, either partly or exclusively, to plant the image in a wider environment, natural (e.g. the sound of wind in trees, the twitter of birds) and/or cultural (particularly the sounds of air, rail or road traffic), while both avoided voice-over narration.[2] And both combined several of such scenes into categorical films of (almost) feature length. For these considerations to be effective, both anticipated their films, I assume, to be screened in specific, art-oriented venues (e.g. festival, art house, cinematheque) before film audiences willing to accept the invitation to watch and listen closely and continuously. Those who do will find themselves engaged in unexpected ways: not only will they perceive an increasing amount of detail as a scene proceeds, but they will also discover that it is actually quite difficult, if not next to impossible, to keep track of all that happens in it. Even though the films are shown on standard size screens, and even though the shots remain fixed, at times spectators may nevertheless be surprised by what seem little discontinuities (e.g. a cloud that has changed shape) or sudden occurrences (e.g. two hikers that have materialized on a mountain slope). But that is only because they had been looking at another spot in the image momentarily, or they had let their mind drift away for a while. For all their bareness the scenes exceed our information processing capacity. Both filmmakers have set out, one might say, to immerse their spectators by the scale of their images and by their length.

Benning's and Neuwirth's can be called a quiet, contemplative immersion, in spite of Alison Griffiths' recent study of the immersive sensation which she defines as "entering a space that immediately identifies itself as somehow separate from the world and that eschews conventional modes of spectatorship in favor of a more bodily participation in the experience, including allowing the spectator to move freely around the viewing space (although this is not a requirement)."[3] One of her examples, the panorama, a nineteenth-century, spectacular form of entertainment, may serve as illustration here. The panorama, or cyclorama, was—in fact, still is[4]—a huge, realistically painted canvas hung in a circular construction, the rotunda, within which a small viewing platform held spectators at a distance in order to achieve its effect: by concealing the upper and lower edges of the canvas and by constantly appealing to the periphery of the spectator's vision, making him endlessly turn to inspect the entire 360° painting, the panorama made "the spectator more likely to accept the realism of the visual field" and "attempted to create the sensation of the spectator's relocation into the center of such a space."[5] Neuwirth's and Benning's films, by contrast, are anything but spectacular. Nor is their immersive quality the

result of unconventional recording or exhibition technology (no anamorphic optics, curved screens or sensurround sound, to name a few of the more familiar devices). Nevertheless, their spectators, conventionally seated in front of the screen, might equally "accept the realism of the visual field". That is to say that where their work corresponds with Griffiths' definition is in the notion of excess. But excess in their films, rather than being pre-programmed or built-in, is *allowed* to occur: the films' very lack, of camera movement, of change in focal length, of decoupage, can dazzle the spectator as much, albeit on a different plane, as a panorama or a film screened in IMAX 3-D. Instead of bodily, even viscerally overwhelming the spectator, their films slowly draw him in by appealing to his attention. Indeed, Neuwirth described *scapes and elements* as "[a]n exercise in seeing, hearing and concentration".[6] In other words, what the rotunda is to the panorama the art cinema theater is to his and Benning's films. Their extreme topical focus finds its counterpart in the highly concentrated mode of spectating in that type of theater, a space where spectators, ideally, do not bodily move in a significant way; only their eyes and ears are being addressed. And by implication their cognitive faculties.

Despite their many resemblances, though, there is a difference between what the two filmmakers want to accomplish with their method. Obviously, both have traveled to record their scenes—to thirteen lakes, for instance. But as far as James Benning is concerned, travel is not his subject matter nor are his lakes and skies an occasion to unpack travel imagery per se; in fact *Ten Skies* was shot in the region of his residence, Val Verde, in central California.[7] Benning's contemplation is rather philosophical and environmental, inspired by the writings of Henry David Thoreau.[8] Manfred Neuwirth, on the other hand, consciously calls to mind a tradition of visual travel records, as each of the five scenes that comprise *scapes and elements* shows the traces of travel, or rather: tourism. In the scene called 'Water', for instance, shot in Greece, the view opens on a seascape, in which two ferries can be seen crossing the water. Or in the scene 'Earth', shot in Switzerland, an imposing alpine landscape is cut through by a railroad over which, at some point during the shot, a train passes.

In the travel film, or travelogue, the inclusion of transportation infrastructure within the image was for a long time quite uncommon. Until recently such films typically showed trains, boats or planes, if at all, at the opening, as if to vicariously allow the spectator to embark, or disembark. For the rest, he was led through the films' destinations like a phantom, magically skipping distance and time in "motionless travel"[9] from one site to another. In its heyday, the 1910s and 1920s, the genre commonly featured 'unspoiled' scenes, either natural—such as waterfalls, mountains or lakes—or cultural—such as ruins and monuments—, drawing on the eighteenth-century pictorial tradition of the picturesque.[10] If there was any other sign that modern means of transportation were involved to get to the scenes depicted, it was the tracking shots made *from* them, the aptly named phantom rides; makers of travelogues tended to prefer un-modern scenes. Yet, the ferries and the railroads were very much part of the scenery, and have been for a long time. In Switzerland, for instance, the rapid

construction, between the 1860s and 1890s, of a network of railroads, funiculars, and tunnels purposefully opened up the country for tourism, which gained it its contemporary epithet "the playground of Europe" for its appeal to "a broad range of visitors".[11]

Being coincident with the rise of mass tourism, the travelogue held out a promise. Since the mid-nineteenth century, in an interlinked process, an increasingly large proportion of people, not just the well-heeled, familiarized themselves with the idea of visiting other parts of their country, or other countries, as tourists, while an emerging travel industry, led by the guidebooks of John Murray and Karl Baedeker and the organized tours of Thomas Cook, in the 1830 and 1840s, enabled more people to actually venture on extended leisure trips. Improved and standardized transportation networks, more comfort and safety, cheaper fares (it has been estimated that by the early 1880s, for example, some twenty million tourists traveled by train in Europe and the United States) and the rise of the hotel and restaurant business signalled the growing crowds and attracted more.[12] Inevitably, travel became commodified: not just the trips and their seats on trains or cabins on ocean liners, rooms in hotels or meals in restaurants; the sites that were the ultimate goal of all these displacements, too, became commercialized and standardized in postcards, illustrations in high-circulation magazines, lantern slides for stereoscopes and illustrated travel lectures, and films. As Jennifer Peterson argues in her study, the early filmed travelogue in particular could put spectators in a state of reverie and create a desire. Still, as the majority of spectators, the rise of tourism notwithstanding, had *not* visited the places reproduced on the screen this desire remained to a large extent a fantasy (or in the case of expats, perhaps, nostalgia) until well after the mid-twentieth century.[13]

scapes and elements can therefore be seen as symptomatic of a drastically changed situation now that people of virtually all social strata, certainly in the affluent western and westernizing worlds, are wont to visit—typically during the eventual mainstream outcome of the abovementioned developments: the legislated paid vacation—just about any country on the map as a matter of course.[14] Neuwirth, therefore, need not tell us about other sites, other sceneries, because we have all "been there, done that". So, under no obligation to create desire he is free to de-commodify the travel image and replace the fantasy world with the minutiae of reality we tend to overlook. The particular scenes he selected, their anonymity,[15] and their sheer length force the spectator to adjust his expectations and refocus his attention. Take 'Water' again. The seascape may well be picturesque were it not for the mist that draws a grey veil over the distant scene. So what is one to look at, besides the water gently lapping at the rocky beach in the foreground? Relief comes after a minute and a half, when a high speed ferry appears from behind a misty rock in the distance and crosses the image from right to left. And that, it turns out, is not all. It takes a full three minutes, but then we notice the effect of the ferry's wake as increased surf activity at the beach where the camera is positioned. While this is going on, another ferry, bigger and slower, also enters from the right frame. And its wake, too, lets itself be felt, more forcefully even, after a couple of minutes.

So, two ships pass and create turbulence on the shore, a somewhat baffled cataloguer might put in the plot summary box. Of course, what really matters here is not so much what happened, but these trivial events' trivial implication: that things, and connections between things, take time—time to happen and time to see them happen. The scene may therefore be taken as preparing the spectator for the subsequent ones, because its cause-and effect structure alerts him to the delay, the span of time between them. Hence the following scenes, although in many ways identical to the first one, can do without a chain of events: things just happen. Or not. And while one waits, one experiences the opportunity to let one's eyes roam over the image. In Switzerland, besides the train, two groups of hikers, specks on the mountainside, can be seen at various points, while passing clouds constantly change the scene's aspect. The scene titled 'Fire', a snowy landscape with a geyser in Iceland, has no visible human presence (there are traces of tourism, though: the roped-off area around the geyser and two benches from which to watch its spectacle); now and then the geyser spouts (a seemingly causeless effect), while various clouds drift into the image. "Are these ordinary clouds or is it the mist from geysers off-screen?", is among the things one finds oneself wondering. 'Air', set in Spain, shows two observatories on hill tops (their telescopes searching the sky for events that have a delay of an eternity); while clouds roll by just one car passes down on the roads that have been cut in this mountainous area. 'Space', the final scene shot in Austria, is the stillest one: a snow-covered park. In the middle distance a bare tree is clearly visible as are the branches of another one, but it is impossible to discern whether the elevation in the background is a hill or a forest, or perhaps even the contours of a city, as out-of-focus snowflakes on the lens obstruct the view. Here, your eyes are the only things that move.

What makes the film not merely categorical but also cumulative is that the scenes gradually slow down, ending on a standstill—well, almost: the melting snowflakes on the lens slowly change shape, obstructing one's view even more. It is no coincidence, I suspect, that that final, most composed scene partly hides what it might have shown on a clear day. The scapes, scarred as they are by leisure travel, are in the end not what matters. As the film unfolds it sensitizes the spectator to the many small things that often get lost in the big picture. Although ours is called the age of the image, most images that vie for our attention are easy to notice and easy to process. For many of today's spectators, used to real-time delivery and instant gratification, a three-minute delay, let alone a ten-minute shot, is quite a stretch to concentrate one's ears and eyes and maintain one's attention. More importantly, then, *scapes and elements* provides an alternative experience: by virtue of the time allowed, watching itself has become the event.

scapes and elements is the provisional highpoint in a small series of reflective travel films Neuwirth has made. These works date back to the late 1980s, starting with *Tibetische Erinnerungen* (1995), based on footage shot between 1988 and 1994; *manga train* (1998), shot in Japan; and *magic hour* (1999), shot in Lower Austria; collectively these films are called the *[ma]-Trilogie*. In 2005 he returned to Tibet and made the feature-length *Tibet Re-*

visited. All these works distinguish themselves by their increasingly expanded shot length (beginning with shots lasting thirty seconds in *Tibetische Erinnerungen*, still well above average practice); by their attention, as far as travel films are concerned, to unconventional occurrences and details; and by their discreet authorial presence. And each, in their own way, addresses the commodification of travel films and their imagery in ever wider contexts. In the abovementioned trilogy each individual film is a variation on making spectators share Neuwirth's personal travel experiences; in *Tibet Revisited* the idiom developed in the former three films is maintained, but it is overlaid with an implicit critique of the cannibalization of travel images for news and other topical programs and films; *scapes and elements*, as we have seen, extends its reflective stance to include the age of the audiovisual, the experience of time in particular, reflections, incidentally, that Neuwirth also put to paper.[16]

2. impressions from the contact zone

Tibet Revisited consists of twenty-eight scenes. Here, too, as in fact in all the works mentioned, scene and shot coincide, while the soundtrack seems to consist exclusively of synchronously recorded ambient sounds. The shots, a considerable three minutes each, assume the spectator's concentration. And while the film as a whole has the length of a feature, its great variety of topics provides a kaleidoscope of small, even minute occurrences, virtually all involving people in both private and public settings in or around Tibet's capital Lhasa. Varied, too, is the scale of shots, from extreme close-ups to extreme long shots. Significanty, though, there is no establishing shot that, topically or iconically, sets the scene or identifies where we are. Instead the film opens with a narrowly framed shot in which appear the legs and heads of a number of kids jumping on a trampoline while they repeatedly interrupt their play to make faces and funny sounds to the integrated camera and microphone, which are level with the trampoline mat. Where we are is apparently considered unproblematic. After all, doesn't everybody know what Tibet looks like?

A quick search on YouTube reveals, indeed, the types of establishing shot that are frequently and typically used. For instance, *Tibet Situation: Critical*, a recent, explicitly anti-Chinese propaganda compilation, opens on a close-up of the Dalai Lama, Tibet's spiritual (and erstwhile political) leader, in prayer, the introduction to a scene of a Buddhist assembly. Ironically, of course, this scene had to be recorded outside Tibet, as the Dalai Lama has lived in exile since 1959.[17] In a similar vein, episodes of the BBC documentary series *A Year in Tibet* (2008) open with stock-like shots of mountains and Buddhist monasteries. The series was recorded in and around Gyantse, a small county capital. In the narration the town's Han-Chinese presence is acknowledged, as are "new ideas" and "modern technology". Yet the series' makers have focused on "ordinary Tibetans", to whom they have gained "unique and unprecedented access" in "one of the most remote and mysterious places on Earth".[18] Both cases exemplify, despite their titles, the apparent need for establishing shots, not so much to show us where we are, but as a way to position the documentaries. For various reasons—political, educational, commercial, possibly diplomatic[19]—both compilation and

TV series clearly emphasize, if not salvage, a traditional Tibet, "harmonious" and "untouched". As if travelers or film crews were indeed mere phantoms, their presence unnoticed and ineffective.

In skipping an establishing shot Neuwirth, then, refuses to be pigeonholed; in matters concerning Tibet, today if not for decades, the selection (or omission) of a certain type of image seems to have been indispensable, an act tantamount to presenting one's credentials. Nevertheless, his opening shot puts the spectator in the middle of things. But it does so in an ambiguous, slightly enigmatic way, nudging him to ponder these things. Who are these kids on the trampoline? Given the sinocization of the region through China's population policies, this spectator couldn't tell whether he was watching Tibetan or Han-Chinese children. What *is* clear and more thematically relevant is that what Neuwirth shows here is in a sense neither one nor the other. The kids' hip hop-derived dress—enhanced jeans of one type or another, sneakers, baseball hats, and English-language lettering apparel—makes them indistinguishable from kids anywhere; one little boy greets the filmmaker with "Hello". So, if there is anything the opening shot can be said to do it is disarm the (western) spectator of his deficient knowledge provided by news media at those few moments when events in Tibet, or rather Lhasa, were deemed newsworthy. In other words, by avoiding a conventional opening Neuwirth avoids a conventional discourse, one in which Tibetan traditions—if not tradition tout court—are invariably represented as "persisting" in the face of modernization (which is equally nonsensical as saying, for instance, that religion persists in the face of science). Such an impression of things is part and parcel of journalistic schemata that serve the production schedules of news and current affairs programs. This is not to deny that economic and political forces affect the embracement or rejection of changes. Nor that it is obvious that China's forceful presence has been behind many changes in Tibet. But that doesn't necessarily imply, firstly, that all these changes are Chinese in origin; the signs of a market economy and a consumer society that Neuwirth registers in this film (and, albeit less prominenty, in *Tibetische Erinnerungen*) reflect multifarious global developments and influences, including Hollywood and Bollywood. (China is credited with numerous inventions, but capitalism and consumerism are not among them.) Change, in Tibet as elsewhere, is not a matter of mere victimhood, but also of agency. Secondly, this prepackaged, schematic impression of things, although it is apparently considered sufficient for updating foreign TV audiences, is unable to tell what happens 'on the ground', such as which elements have been noticeably selected for adoption or preservation in everyday life.

On the ground is precisely where Neuwirth is in this film, as he often keeps his camera conspicuously low, while his framing not seldom focuses on a mere detail right in front of it. Partly I take this as the correlate of a modest stance, a repudiation of the role of the self-appointed expert giving us an overview of the state of things (of course, "the state of things", or the political or economic "situation", are matters too abstract to be recorded on film; no wonder that narration-led news and documentary programs commonly reduce "visuals" to questionable illustrations). And partly I take this as an 'instruction' for the spectator to adjust his focus

on a rather different sort of unique access. *Tibet Revisited* allows one to observe a succession of everyday occurrences. Some of these might be taken as instances of compliance, appropriation or defiance, but whether or not they actually have a political dimension cannot be unequivocally settled; without the copious commentary we are so used to, Neuwirth effectively forces the spectator to rely on his own devices. Religious rituals performed in front of the Dalai Lama's former palace doubtlessly signal the 'wrong' allegiance, yet their observance appears to be permitted. But the children and adolescents skate dancing to sino-pop in a skating rink may not care less about these things one way or the other, as young people do. (And do adolescent boys holding hands, not just to keep each other from falling, suggest that the rink may also be some sort of haven?) Other scenes—e.g. a shot of a whitewater stream, of a woman behind a lit window on a rainy night—escape conventional schemata altogether; some of them may rather have cinematographic references (Hou Hsiao-hsien's work comes to mind, for example).

A similar openness characterizes the links between scenes. For example, the second scene, showing a dice game, is connected with the preceding one through graphic continuity, with the round leather pad on which the dice are being thrown recalling the trampoline mat, while the juxtaposition of dice and dice game—which, it should be remembered, are of Asian origin—and one of the players' sneakers more emphatically foregrounds the theme of easy heterogeneity (and that in an even more complex way than a simple dichotomy of East v. West, as the manufacture of the sneakers could well have been contracted out to companies in Indonesia, Vietnam, or China). One might even venture that the manifold links—graphical, aural, behavioral, etc., some introducing similarity, others contrast—reflect this diversity. Yet at the same time their variety forewarns us that the filmmaker refrains from imposing a hard-and-fast method on his film: some of these links come in pairs, but soon this seeming 'system' breaks down again. The film retains an open-ended structure.

After repeated visits to Tibet, Neuwirth is no doubt better acquainted with the region than most of his spectators. Still, his modest stance reflects the position of the traveler and what can be learned from its vantage point. As a matter of fact, his earlier film *Tibetische Erinnerungen* more explicitly demonstrated that he is only passing through: quite a few scenes were made from within vehicles—buses, cars or taxis—, while most, if not all, scenes were shot in (semi)-public places, with similar glimpses of everyday scenes in streets, cafés or workshops. Its prologue, a clip from a newscast showing Chinese soldiers kicking and beating Buddhist monks, certainly establishes where we are. But the fact that he had not—and *could* have not—made that up-close shot himself also set that prologue apart and underlined the limitations of being a foreign filmmaker. The shot certainly won't have failed as a reminder of similar images illustrating Tibet's political situation, but it also created a contrast with the subsequent scenes (as well as those in *Tibet Revisited*) in that Neuwirth consistently abstains from information relayed through news media, knowing full well that such information is largely rhetorical, *irrespective* of its origin. Think back, for instance, to the most recent extensive news coverage on Tibet, that of the

crackdown on Tibetan activists after the publicity surrounding the 2008 Olympics in Beijing was seized on to stage protests against the region's occupation. Reports came from all sides, including the opposition. The access to international media by local activists in Tibet or in other Chinese provinces, as well as through communities of exiles and international support groups, points up the very global connectedness Neuwirth hints at in this film. In anthropologist Arjun Appadurai's terms, this access is an instance of the rapid "indigenization", or appropriation, of metropolitan ideas, technologies or resources that has made the unilateral movement—center to periphery—and dichotomous structure—modern v. traditional—of media schemata so glaringly inadequate.[20] But in order to make this access effective the same sort of distortions were being created, notably an urban slant through a focus on Lhasa. (And from there, of course, it is but a small step to the domestic production of exoticism.) In that sense Neuwirth's Tibet-films, *Tibet Revisited* in particular, clearly serve as a defiance of and an antidote to the framing of the information we are being fed: demonstrations, police brutality, self-immolations or any other of the dramatic incidents so familiar by now. His scenes of workshops, meals, or children counterweigh both the political spins of news programs and the widely exploited traditional imagery in documentaries and feature films. Neuwirth's film demystifies and suggests to us—more he cannot do—the value attached, not just to the Dalai Lama and Buddhist religious rituals, but also to such mundane matters as having a job, a family, a home. And these, of course, are ever so many un-exotic and un-mysterious reasons for people to accommodate or passively resist rather than rise up.

Tibet Revisited, then, can be seen as a series of impressions from a "contact zone". The term was originally introduced to characterize interactions within a colonial context, but it seems to fit Tibet's recent history pretty well. A contact zone defines a situation "in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict".[21] "Contact" emphasizes the term's interactive aspect—i.e. on the ground—and how differences in power are handled in day-to-day encounters. As Neuwirth trains his camera and microphone on trampolines and skating rinks, on workshops and market stalls, on parks and streets, he gives us glimpses of how such encounters may slowly take the edge off the region's terrible contradictions. Tibetan culture will never be "mysterious" or "untouched" again. If ever it was.

3. cherry-picking

Tibet Revisited obviously has much in common with *Tibetische Erinnerungen*, yet it is not simply a follow-up film or an update. The everyday scenes it registered were set against an implied background of unmistakable social change. *Tibetische Erinnerungen*, on the other hand, is precisely what it announces: memories of a place that the filmmaker visited; the film collects thirty-five brief scenes that were recorded during several trips over a number of years. But their diversity is less thematized, as their heterogeneity is not as prominent as it is in the later film. Its prologue, mentioned earlier, of course reminds one of the political context, yet the shots that follow largely captured

uneventful, commonplace moments that are hard to construe as being affected, or unaffected, by it. In many of them nothing much happens. We see light falling through a window, a stove fire or a beer bottle standing on a table; we see the practicing of crafts as well as the routine handling of objects, a handpump for example; and—before the reader imagines there are only 'traditional' scenes—the film also includes a shot of a TV set showing a Chinese opera or a counter full of the cheap seductions of consumer goods in wrapping paper with pictures of scarcely-clad young women. A few scenes are more anecdotal or end on some sort of denouement, like the one containing a close-up of a car driver's hand holding the transmission clutch only to reveal, after he finally releases it, a picture stuck to the dashboard featuring Rambo. But all in all, the scenes' content is less compelling and the film's thirty-second shots are less leading than in the films discussed above.

Tibetische Erinnerungen is actually reminiscent of a slide show. No ordinary show, but one that replaces conventional imagery with a more personally colored selection of things that struck the filmmaker along the way. Besides the length of its shots and the fades to black separating them, the feel of a slide show is reinforced by the film's signal stylistic element: its entire visuals have been rendered in slow motion.[22] That pace, in combination with Neuwirth's fascination for everyday, not seldom motionless objects, make his shots look like cutouts of the real world. It is this stylistically invasive measure that unites the film more deeply with the two subsequent films that Neuwirth made and collected under the title *[ma]-Trilogie*, as both *manga train* and *magic hour* have been subjected to the same treatment. The films' releases at intervals of a year or more accentuate that the stretching of their shots to incremental lengths of thirty to fifty seconds was no afterthought but a well-considered choice. And ever since the three films have been available for screening in one program (or on the DVD edition) these considerations can be brought more into relief. For one thing, their stylistic similarity undermines any connotations of exoticism and encourages one to consider what is nearby or far away, familiar or unfamiliar, with the same eyes, the same attentiveness, the same wonderment perhaps. Shot in Tibet, Japan, and Lower Austria (where Neuwirth grew up and where he still lives), respectively, they emphasize a banal truth: that people everywhere mostly just go about their daily business in their own ways. Exoticism (or mysteriousness) is only in the eye of a myopic beholder from elsewhere.

What unites the trilogy, furthermore, is the word "*ma*" of its title. Put simply, this Japanese concept denotes space or time that is situated in-between. And although *ma* is considered as being imagined—a function of the elements that compose, or the units employed to measure, space or time—, I take the films' slow motion also as serving to put the spectator into closer touch with such moments and spaces, particularly by its focus on unassuming details. An example is the abovementioned shot of a stove fire, filmed before something is put on it, that is to say before it performs the task stoves are made for—the only relevant time for stoves. In *manga train*, the 'empty' shots of train compartments and escalators share a similar purpose, as they interrupt our habit of taking such spaces for granted, merely carrying us from

one place to another (a reason, I suspect, why some people just sit out a train ride with no book or game or conversation for distraction, as if the train ride doesn't take time, doesn't take place even). However, there is a risk that Neuwirth took: by adopting a less compelling form to show details that were of particular interest to him he might not win over and impress spectators in the same way, or in any way for that matter. The shots of train windows or compartments, for instance, evoke the boredom familiar from train travel, a reason to perhaps dismiss them as boring, too. Of course, there might also be moments when they connect to Neuwirth's fascinations, even though they may have different reasons for doing so.

Whether or not that actually happens is something that every individual spectator will find out for himself. But in the *[ma]-Trilogie* that risk has been made an intrinsic part of the work: in each subsequent film a way has been sought that accommodates for 'times-out' (like the near-inevitable lapses of attention in *scapes and elements* without losing the spectator permanently. *manga train*, for example, is a record of a trip to Japan. However, its rather unspecified itinerary doesn't give the spectator much to go on; Japan, like Tibet, is not presented as a travel destination in any conventional sense. But as the film proceeds another stepping stone is suggested as it references—here and there quite willfully—Chris Marker's 1982 film *Sans soleil*, shot predominantly in Japan.[23] *Sans soleil*'s title, so its narration tells us, refers to a film its director wants to make but probably never will; meanwhile one is looking at the very images that, it says, would be part of that other film. *Sans soleil*, I venture, is the closest thing to a film in the subjunctive mood. And by that it points up the importance of the placeholder images in Neuwirth's film, images that represent, reflect, substitute or abstract. *manga train* is replete with images within images, with images (often shot through reflecting surfaces) that overlay each other or seem to do so, and with completely abstract electronic images (taking Marker's CGI one step further). Again, this relatively short, twenty-one minute film is extremely varied, from multifocal scenes to narrowly framed shots of single objects, e.g. the wet steps of a set of temple stairs or a detail of an escalator in a station—shots that, in their turn, set up a relation between the traditional and the contemporary; from shots of real profilmic events to shots made off TV screens and electronic billboards; and, finally, between shots of scenes that one can identify (at least to a certain extent) and those of scenes that remain impenetrable—as anyone who has traveled to Japan will remember having experienced. Here, then, Neuwirth shows us, once more, the limitations of being a traveler in a foreign country, a country, moreover, that keeps even its familiarity at a distance, hiding behind plate glass. Perhaps it was smart after all to dismiss the boredom and loneliness of those train compartment scenes.

By taking Marker's film as reference and support, *manga train* clearly positions itself in a specific niche in the film market, whose spectators are expected to be familiar with *Sans soleil*. It may well be, of course, that some aren't.[24] (There remains, incidentally, a puzzling incongruity in that Marker's film's very assertive authorial presence, the alter egos notwithstanding, is quite the opposite of Neuwirth's travel films: *Sans soleil* mainly

allows its spectators to wonder at the images for themselves during the few moments when the narration falls silent.) But this is part of the risk mentioned above. The fact that each of the trilogy's films, despite their stylistic resemblances, is conceived in a different way displays Neuwirth's continuing search for a balance between openness and direction, between enabling spectators to inspect and reflect on his images and the need to structure their spectating in order to make it meaningful. The final film in the trilogy, *magic hour*, demonstrates this strategy, to my mind, most successfully and, through its evocation of the world of a sensitive child, most movingly. As it was shot in Lower Austria, one may think of it as being autobiographical. Although that knowledge is not essential, it is helpful in creating a framework for the spectator to organize his viewing experience. The opening of the film, the sound of a needle put on a record, followed by a scene of a little boy holding a flickering light in his hands (echoed in later scenes of lightning, Chinese lanterns at Martinmas, and other "magic hours"), sparks the idea of times past and of reminiscences of childhood. Although spanning the experiences from being a toddler to being an adolescent, there is no strict chronology. Moreover, there are simply too many scenes, or more correctly: too many *unrelated* scenes, to pass for straight autobiography. Some seem quite generic (e.g. a rainstorm, snow-shovelling and its sound), others seem to belong to a certain age group and its fears (e.g. the entrance to a ghost train on a fairground) and ambitions or fantasies (e.g. watching a road worker behind a plate compactor, a junior league soccer match or the profile view of a girl), while again others seem idiosyncratic (e.g. water dripping off a plank, a shrub swaying in the wake of a helicopter rotor). So, while *magic hour* is presumably steeped in the filmmaker's carefully selected, present equivalents of his personal memories, the point of the film, for the spectator, is not to reconstruct his life. One might see the film, rather, as an invitation to consider what is an almost Proustian, nonhierarchical jumble of occurrences that may or may not have been of great significance. The film's sheer amount and diversity of scenes offer ever so many opportunities to cherry-pick those scenes that appeal to the spectator most—because they remind him most vividly of his own childhood, for example—, while feeling less engaged by others, and find a way into the film and maintain his interest in it. The film triggers rather than tells. To call *magic hour* (or the other parts of the trilogy), therefore, subjective is correct, but not correct enough. That term usually puts the filmmaker center stage, while leaving the spectator's involvement contingent. Here, on the other hand, the film's very openness and its refusal to flaunt a pronounced authorial presence allow the filmmaker's and the spectator's personal memories and associations to share the stage.

4. the richness of the moving image

The strategy of slow immersion is a constant element in Neuwirth's travel films. Other than more common forms of immersion it is a means to genuinely activate the mind, rather than the body, of the spectator. There is an almost scientifically experimental aspect to it, insofar as it changes the normal conditions of watching film: by paring off as many stylistic and formal elements his films set the spectator at work by appealing

to his attention, imagination, and his problem-solving skills in uncommon ways—uncommon even in the venues where his films are usually shown. The *raison d'être* for this strategy is what I identified as Neuwirth's modest stance: he shows us a selections of things that interested him for one reason or another, without telling us what reasons precisely. By withholding them and thereby encouraging the spectator to engage more deeply with the film, there is risk involved—and taken. It is significant, I think, that after *magic hour* Neuwirth abandoned the use of slow motion and the more aleatory way for spectators to relate to his travel films. At forty-five minutes it is the longest of the trilogy and with that length and the relatively large number of scenes his approach of allowing time-out had reached its upper limit. If Neuwirth wanted to share his experiences, there was no point in overwhelming his spectators with even more of the same lest they got lost—and didn't care. In retrospect it is telling that *magic hour* is much less about travel than the preceding two films, even for those who have never been to Austria, let alone Lower Austria, and more concerned with a journey to one's past, which is easier to connect with.

That may also explain a shift from withholding motives to withholding information. With *Tibet Revisited,* a structuring theme—the heterogeneity of local and adopted elements in everyday life—was suggested from the very beginning. But what the situations and events were in which this heterogeneity occurred (or not) remained in many cases puzzling. Neuwirth is deliberately unhelpful when it comes identifying activities or locations. Partly this may be because such information may dispel uncertainty only to be replaced by false reassurance, as spectators will be none the wiser for being told the name of a town or a river in a faraway country. But more importantly, I think, it is meant to encourage spectators to look more closely and independently. Neuwirth's posture as an uninformative, stern taskmaster is simply imperative, because leniency would frustrate his goal: to contribute, in his modest way, to weaning spectators from the fare and the framing by broadcast media. *scapes and elements* subsequently demonstrated a comparable lack of cooperativeness by not telling in an ordinarily relevant sort of way where its five scenes were recorded (of course, it is immaterial for this film whether the ferries were shot in Greece or, say, Sweden). Its appeal to the spectator's concentration, with shots lasting ten minutes featuring images pared off to almost a minimum, was meant to emphasize, and isolate, the activity of watching even more.

With *scapes and elements*, it seems to me, Neuwirth has reached a new upper limit, although, other than James Benning's 16mm camera, his digital camera can record even longer slices of the real world. But after having slowed down the pace of the shot, after having extended its length, and after training his camera to the barest of profilmic spaces, he may be thinking of a new way to continue exploring the seeming contradiction that is the productive crux of these travel film experiments: to challenge spectators' cognitive faculties, whether they are a matter of perception, concentration or memory, by immersing them with moving images that remain rich and elusive, whatever one takes out.

Notes

1 13 Lakes; USA/D (James Benning, WDR) 2004, 16mm,135';
Ten Skies; USA/D (James Benning, WDR) 2004, 16mm, 102'

2 Not all of these sounds are actually ambient and/or synchronous. The soundtrack of Ten Skies, for instance, is compiled from ambient sounds Benning recorded for other films; see: Scott MacDonald, 'James Benning's 13 Lakes and Ten Skies, and the culture of distraction', in: Barbara Pichler, Claudia Slanar (eds.), James Benning (Vienna: Österreichisches Filmmuseum-Synema, 2007), p. 229; see also: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=55Q9tTRUD9M for Benning's comments on sound for both films during a Q&A session at the Los Angeles Filmforum, in October 2007.

3 Alison Griffiths, Shivers down your spine: cinema, museums, & the immersive view (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), p. 2.

4 For her research Griffiths visited three surviving nineteenth-century panoramas (the Panorama Mesdag, completed in 1881, in The Hague; The Battle of Gettysburg or Gettysburg Cyclorama [1883] in Gettysburg; and the Cyclorama of Jerusalem [1895] in St. Anne, Canada), but a few more have survived and are on display in Europe, the United States, and Australia. New panoramas are being made as well, notably in China; see: http://www.panoramacouncil.org/en/what_we_do/resources/panoramas_of_the_world_database/

5 Griffiths (2008), p. 39.

6 Quoted in: Stefan Grissemann, 'Sensual certainty: on Manfred Neuwirth's scapes and elements', liner notes to the DVD edition of scapes and elements (Vienna: loop media, 2011).

7 MacDonald (2007), pp. 228-229.

8 Benning's method for 13 Lakes and, more pronouncedly, for Ten Skies uncannily echoes the following quotations from Thoreau's journals: "A man must generally get away some hundreds or thousands of miles from home before he can be said to begin his travels. Why not begin his travels at home? (...) It takes a man of genius to travel in his own country, in his native village; to make any progress between his door and his gate." (from entry for 6 August, 1851). And: "I perceive why we so often remark a dark cloud in the west at and after sunset. (...) There is a pure amber sky beneath the present bank, thus framed off from the rest of the heavens, which, with the outlines of small dead elms seen against it,—I hardly know it far or near,—make picture enough. Men will travel far to see less interesting sights than this." (from entry for 8 August, 1851). See: Bradford Torrey, Francis H. Allen (eds.), The journal of Henry D. Thoreau, in fourteen volumes bound as two: volumes I-VII (1837-October, 1855) (New York: Dover Publications, 1962 [1906]), pp. 238; 239.

9 Jennifer L. Peterson, Education in the school of dreams: travelogues and early nonfiction film (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013), p. xii.

10 Peterson (2013), ch. 5.

11 Lynne Withey, Grand tours and Cook's tours: a history of leisure travel, 1750 to 1915 (London: Aurum Press, 1998 [1997]), pp. 196-197.

12 Withey (1998), chs. 5 and 6

13 Peterson (2013), pp. 230-233. See also: Tony Judt, Postwar: a history of Europe since 1945 (London: Vintage, 2010 [2005]) pp. 341-343, although his use of the term "mass tourism" stresses the number of post-World War II tourists and their backgrounds rather than industrial age tourist infrastructure and image production.

14 And it is just one symptom. Another approach was taken in the 1990s TV program series [der ARD] Die schönsten Bahnstrecken Europas. Featuring uninterrupted, full-length train rides, it took the phantom ride to its extreme by focusing exclusively on its kinetic aspects, sucking the spectator into the image's ever-retreating vanishing point, while places along the way were merely mentioned in pop-ups. Effectively, each episode is a nerdy, surveillance-camera version of the travelogue.

15 It is only at the end of the film that the spectator is informed where the scenes were shot, albeit in an intentionally unhelpful way, with references that are either too precise or too imprecise (e.g. "37°45'N 23°25'E Greece").

16 Manfred Neuwirth, 'Mission statement, 30 Jahre Medienwerkstatt: Anmerkungen zur Zukunft des Audiovisuellen' (2008), at: http://www.manfredneuwirth.at/texts/texts_by/mission-statement.pdf

17 Tibet Situation: Critical (by Jason Lansdell, Australia 2012) consists of "clips compiled from a wide range of documentaries and news organisations"; more definitive metadata were impossible to come by. The Dalai

Lama, or Buddhist monks, feature also in the opening shots or The Sun Behind the Clouds: Tibet's Struggle for Freedom (2010), Fire Under the Snow (2008) or The Spirit of Tibet: A Journey to Enlightenment (1995).

18 Only the first two parts of A Year in Tibet (The visit and Three husbands and a wedding), can be uploaded at YouTube. Similar landscape shots open Journey into Tibet (2008), The Lost World of Tibet (2006), Die Salzmänner von Tibet (1997) or Seven Days in Tibet (n.d.).

19 One should expect, if not suspect, that as A Year in Tibet's unique access was "unsupervised by the Chinese authorities", so the narration informs us, this will likely have had its price.

20 Arjun Appadurai, Modernity at large: cultural dimensions of globalization (Minneapolis-London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997 [1996]), pp. 32–36. See for a related argument: James Clifford, Routes: travel and translation in the late twentieth century (Cambridge, MA-London: Harvard University Press, 1997), 'Prologue' and ch. 1

21 Mary Louise Pratt, Imperial eyes: travel writing and transculturation (London and New York: Routledge, 1995 [1992]), p. 6

22 In fact, shots have been reduced to a fifth of their normal speed; see: Marcy Goldberg, 'magic hour', liner notes to the DVD edition of the [ma]-Trilogie (INDEX: Vienna, n.d.), p. 13. The soundtrack has been retained in its original form.

23 Sans soleil France (Argos Film) 1982, 35mm, color/b&w, sound, 99'.

24 For those not familiar with Sans soleil, an English-narrated version can be uploaded at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r_pNvd_fV5w