

## Tibetan Recollections

Since the beginning of film, picture-making has been closely associated with travel. The spectrum runs from ethnographic study to adventure blockbuster via personal travel document and has ensured that curiosity about the foreign, the excitement of the exotic, and the desire for the unknown have persisted up to the present as an inherent characteristic of film - the picture medium as a continuous expedition.

Manfred Neuwirth's filmic travel diary *Tibetan Recollections* is a particularly private variant of the way to document the distant in sound and pictures. From 1988 to 1995 Neuwirth made frequent, lengthy visits to Tibet where he shot, more by accident than design, a large amount of material. The material is distinctive in its avoidance of the spectacular and the obvious. Instead, the picture collection concentrates on the daily occurrence and the apparently unimportant - an advertisement hoarding, a kettle and a water pump, lucky charms and prayer hangings, and on voices, faces and glances.

These apparently unconnected travel impressions of Tibet are, however, strictly structured and edited - each of the 35 selected pictures is exactly the same length; each scene is noticeably slowed, brought into rhythm. As in photography, each picture stands for itself: no sequence of events is created in the process of editing. As in a photo album, one turns from one picture to the next without a specific 'meaning' forcing itself on the viewer. No chronological order, no story and no 'pictures on the theme'. However, the attentive viewer will not fail to realise that the pictures are concentrated round a motive, namely the 'cultural transformation' of the country. The powerful beginning in the prologue, which starts before the picture sequence itself make this abundantly clear. Chinese soldiers arrest a Tibetan monk, and that with considerable violence. This picture, which has become embedded over recent years as the media picture of Tibet, this systematic oppression of Tibetan culture by occupying China, is introduced by Neuwirth as a single image which sets the tone for all that follows. Thus the camera travelling through boring new housing estate gullies (principally in Shigatse and Lhasa) is not just the view from a passing car, but rather stands witness to a radical urban destruction; the hoardings are not only picturesque graphic experiences, but reveal the banality of Chinese propaganda; the pop kitsch on television sung by an uniformed beauty is thereby transformed in a symbol of cultural hegemony. In this strange mix of cultural intrusion by modernity and propaganda, *Tibetan Recollections* nevertheless registers the astonishing resilience of tradition. As if in a stubborn alternative world, pictures of religious ornament, traditional ritual and venerable handcrafts are mixed into the visual flow - the all-pervading lucky charms, the well-known sacred texts, the ritual prayer memorabilia. With the slowed-down movement of images, which has less to do with the time-lapse shot and its always immanent pathos, than with the necessity of a receptive concentration, this cultural resilience is absorbed into the film material itself. Time is slowed in order that seeing has more space.

Perhaps this is the reason for the melancholy that is inherent in Neuwirth's *Tibetan Recollections*, in any event the end is farewell - a journey into dusk of the country with one's eyes on the horizon, looking out over the world. *Constantin Wulff*

[https://www.manfredneuwirth.at/works/tibet\\_en.php](https://www.manfredneuwirth.at/works/tibet_en.php)