

## **Sensual Certainty.**

On Manfred Neuwirth's "scapes and elements".

Manfred Neuwirth's "scapes and elements" presents the viewer with a series of five panoramas of nature - five prolonged glimpses of open landscapes. One sees, hears, thinks: The impression is lavish. Neuwirth's standards are rigorous, paying close attention to the precision of composition and timing. The film is built upon five image blocs of 10 minutes runtime each. The camera's position is fixed, stoically recording the events - the raging forces of nature as much as the almost disconcerting quiet of isolation of the locations selected.

The five tableaux are dedicated to the elements: In Greece one looks out on *water*; in the Swiss mountains at the sway and texture of the *earth*; in Iceland the *fire* burning deep inside the earth makes the geyser fountains spout to the rhythm of some unknown agreement; in Spain the *air* beneath an ice-blue sky (and around an observatory) is revered. The last shot refers to the idea of *space*, which in Tibetan and Japanese culture is considered an additional element: an unreal winter scenery in gray and white, as if conceived by De Chirico. "scapes and elements" explores the difference between the first glimpse and all further views. In all five instances, the seeming simplicity of entering into a given image of nature turns out to be a chimera, as views and sequences become more intricate, many-layered, iridescent, and increasingly intangible.

The "scapes" in the title refer to the visual layer, but also to the sound: The imagery of the *landscapes* is joined with the *soundscapes* of musician Christian Fennesz, with subtly expressive sounds distilled from recordings made on location. His work, too, takes place in the borderland between documentarism and alienation: As soon as the second segment of the film begins, initially minimally reconfigured sounds are dimmed to smouldering, ominous, at times subliminally rhythimized music. Fennesz's soundtrack dissolves towards the end into a synthetic noise of sorts - into Minimal Music, which - in sync with the layer of images - appears increasingly enigmatic to the attentive beholder. The dark roaring of the music generated from everyday life here and there even seems to hint at a drama that might be hidden in the images (or just beyond them). These off-sounds exist even where they were less obviously manipulated, not easily connected to the visible. For instance, the dripping, cracking, trickling and rustling in the Spanish episode prompts questions: What is happening beyond the image field? Is construction work going on? Where does the passing smoke come from? Neuwirth leaves a couple of riddles that he poses prudently unsolved, keeps paths open, protects his secrets.

Manfred Neuwirth himself calls his film "an exercise in seeing, hearing and concentration" – and indeed: One seems to see and hear films anew, while immersing oneself into these worlds of image and sound – even more: to learn to accept. One sees with new eyes: the waves rolling onto the beach in the introductory shot, set into motion by little turbulences by boats cruising at a distance both here and there; a mountainous landscape cut across by a railway or sporadic hikers; the puffs of smoke moving across Iceland's frosty landscapes, and - a few frames further on - over a Spanish mountain road – moving and dissolving; finally, raindrops on the lens blurring the view somewhere in the no-man's land of Lower Austria, while twigs sway softly into sight and a tree in the background is transformed into a phantasm by the fog's indeterminacy.

"scapes and elements" is a work of highly sensitive cinema that records the fluctuations of daylight and meticulously documents the metamorphoses of the clouds drifting across the sky. And when the light moves over the landscape it radically changes the impression of the landscape as in a soft dissolve. Manfred Neuwirth is a documentary-structuralist honing his art by way of the immense precision of his view of the world, translating the givens of the outer world into his inner visions. He enacts by way of choosing, he produces by granting things their own time. The basis of his work is sensual certainty. The ensuing paradoxes and ambivalences are part of his design: the concurrence of ice and fire, of snow and heat, of light and darkness in the Icelandic tableau, for instance, when the sun pierces dramatically through the towering clouds. Obviously, for Manfred Neuwirth, the "right" image is always merely a question of concentration.

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