SNOW | SCHNEE

As if by an invisible hand
Cable cars, piste bullies, frenzy: On Manfred Neuwirth's Snow/Schnee

White, one might argue, is the primary colour of cinema: the screen's sheen before the projection. Manfred Neuwirth's video work Snow/Schnee begins with close-ups of textures found in the white of snow-covered landscapes: transient traces inscribed on snow reflecting the shadow of trees and branches. The brightest of all colours stands for innocence and peace, but for some cultures it also symbolizes mourning (e.g. in Buddhism), death or the spirit world.

The sequence of frames lends a tinge of the unreal to Snow/Schnee; these movements unfold as if in a dream. Following the prologue, a fragmented story unfolds, beginning with the first of a series of 23 three-minute movements, accompanied by Minimal organ music: a night trip through a wintery landscape in slow motion, snow gently falling; the trip takes us from a deserted road in the woods to the center of a health resort in Lower Austria – a shot of the local ski piste closes the scene, before fading into black. This will be the only scene not fading into white at the end.

Neuwirth is rigorous in keeping a distance, looking with an outsider's eye at the spectacle of winter sports, for instance the current ski world cup. Blurred public announcements in a distance remain cloudy, drenched in pathos, linger as background noise; the floodlit piste of the Magic Mountain, viewed from the parking lot, sets the scenario for an elusive thriller. Subjective views of movements on snow form a leitmotif. On a sleigh we race from light into darkness, and the scrunching steps of an anonymous camera man, moving on snowshoes through the landscape, provide the necessary contrast to the whooshing sounds of a downhill race on the iced up race track, as does the slow motion descent on a snowboard.

Several tourist facilities are captured like exotic phenomena: a sightseeing platform beneath a sky filled with drifting clouds, and a telescope, set in motion as if by an invisible hand, are transformed into wuthering winds; the wooden façade of a shop shut down a long time ago, bearing the name "Louvre"; a lit up tunnel for sleighs yawns like a neon-coloured gap in the night; a listless or alcohol-inspired to and fro in front of apres-ski discos, their blasting pop sounds mutually drowning each other out competing for attention; and the shadow of a man moving up a staircase to catch a view, with a camera dangling from his arm. Winter tourism machines are running at the command of an invisible hand: the cable cars in their incessant see-saw up and down; a snow gun spouts jets, while a lonely piste bully grooms the white upon a hill.

Repeatedly the camera's eye drifts off people's bustle to gather impressions of nature: snow covered trees against the backdrop of idyllic bell chiming; the sun breaking through a bunch of clouds drifting slowly across the sky; the foggy landscape seen from a terrace; a glimpse into the forest, into the tree crowns, light flashing from

between the trunks, only the sound of a car bruising the forest's silence; barely visible, a few hikers pass through the frame in a distance.

In this production, shot in the Semmering region, life in and with snow is fathomed in an almost systematic manner. It is, like all other films of Neuwirth, the work of a trained and honed eye, a work that subtly balances speedup and slowdown. A high-end sound system is indispensable for best experience of Snow/Schnee: From field recordings on location, Christian Fennesz has composed a mysterious soundtrack, oscillating between Dark Ambient, Drones and Musique concrète, painting a sinister atmosphere, fusing echoes of pop music with scraps of conversation. This mood piece on winter sports, alpine and ski tourism, is a study of a latently spooky biotope, where people are but peripheral, fleeting appearances.

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