

Berlinale  
72<sup>nd</sup> Internationale  
Filmfestspiele  
Berlin  
Competition

# A Piece of Sky

by Michael Koch

# SYNOPSIS

In a remote Alpine village isolated from the outside world, young love is put to the test. Anna comes from the village and has a daughter from an earlier relationship, while Marco is an outsider from the flatlands hired by the mountain farmers to work the rugged land. Together they experience the joy of new love and the closeness of family. But when Marco suddenly starts losing control over his impulses and behaving erratically, a new tension rises in the community. Through the changing seasons and the harshness of life, Anna fights to preserve a love she believes can outshine even death.






## INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL KOCH

by Marta Bałaga

***A Piece Of Sky's* rugged Alpine landscapes feel very far away from the polished, idyllic image many people have of Switzerland.**

I wanted to set my story in a mountain world that is more interesting than the postcard image many have in mind when they think of Switzerland. Life in the mountains is rarely just lovely, it's often harsh and brutal. The valley we shot in is narrow, the slopes steep, the work hard. In winter, the village church lies in the shade for a month because the sun does not rise over the top of the mountain. Such a place radiates a completely different energy for me than a pretty village in a mountain idyll dressed up for tourists. I was also looking for a place where people live primarily from alpine agriculture and not the usual tourism. I think this makes their relationship to nature – to the land they work so hard to cultivate – closer and more intense. In essence, the film revolves around the issue of how our relationship with nature influences our approach to death, to being ill. So to this end, a place where the force of nature can be felt directly seemed very interesting to me.



**The nature that surrounds them is bound to make the characters feel small. What did you want to convey about the special relationship that binds the community to nature?**

In the film, you often see the characters at work. I believe this physical labor in a harsh environment is the reason why people who live in the mountains have a close connection to the nature surrounding them. No matter what the season, no matter what the weather, they work with it and within it: a nature that time and again also reveals its destructive potential. And anyone who grows up in the mountains grows up with the awareness that in the end, nature is always stronger than us. Avalanches, snowstorms and rockslides all bear witness to this power. Alpine people have to deal with it and are exposed to these forces of nature. I think these kinds of experiences shape us, they become noticeable in our attitude and in the way we deal with difficult situations in life. And of course, compared to the mountains, this world that has existed for thousands of years, our own existence can seem quite insignificant.



**Was it a challenge to balance the film's naturalistic approach with the film's more formal elements and structure, the changing of the seasons and the choir? Was there a specific tone you were looking to find or explore?**

The film is strongly rooted in documentary through the non-professionals, the chosen locations and scenes. But my attempt was to combine this documentary approach with a fictional story and a clear, formal design. The choir structures the entire film into different chapters and almost every scene is filmed in long, choreographed sequence shots. This means the formal design is quite present and perhaps contradicts the documentary approach at first glance. But this kind of friction interests me. It's the formal emphasis that, at least to me, brings out the authenticity of my non-professional actors. It brings out a new level, and I strongly believed I needed to create a stage for the non-professional cast on which they could develop their characters. Always with the aim of depicting the essence of each person before me as purely and authentically as possible, so that something true was transferred to the screen.

From the start, I didn't want to make a film „about“ the people in the mountains – instead I wanted to create one together with them. I let myself be strongly guided by the locals. I saw the kind of work they did, how they handled their animals, and then integrated these scenes into the story, shooting them with a small team. We got many great scenes this way, such as the one where the hay bales zip down a line from misty white Nirvana. It's not that we were there by chance when it happened, but that we didn't know about it until just before. And it worked thanks to the right production structure in addition to good preparation. A small, very accomplished team and a lot of time. The film was shot in three different seasons in 70 days, with a crew of only 12 people on the set. Many of them had dual roles. This was challenging, but it was also great to see crew members thinking outside their box and taking on new responsibility. We were rewarded with scenes that I couldn't have thought up at my desk at home.



**What had originally inspired you to write this specific story?**

I had just heard a story about a young woman whose husband changed dramatically due to a tumor and later died on the radio. Around the same time, my cousin, who was the same age as me, passed away due to a tumor. I was very struck by this. I think it's obvious that if someone from your close family dies, you are immediately confronted with your own mortality. I started to think about this topic a lot and during this process I came across three different stories of people who all lost their partners to illness at a young age. In my research, I collected different material from all the conversations and the trips I have taken over the years, then I wrote the script out of it.



**Did you intend for the performances of the non-professional cast in the film to be subtle, almost reserved?**

The silence and the tranquility of the mountain world is unique and I am sure it also shapes local people accordingly. I had the feeling this was often expressed through a certain calmness and restraint in their behavior towards each other, but also towards me. It was in this tone that I wanted to tell the story and approach the locals.

I dislike films that immediately "sell" the feelings of their characters. I think there is a lot to discover in the faces of the non-professionals. Maybe I'm as interested in the real mountain people I have in front of me as in the characters depicted in the script. And I also consider it part of my job not to dramatize their feelings, because the emotions of mountain people are often hidden. You have to search for them, just like you would for a hidden treasure.



**How difficult was it to find non-professionals dedicated enough to take on the roles of Anna and Marco?**

The casting of the film was extremely complex. It took me almost three years. Michèle Brand, who plays the role of Anna, got in touch in response to an ad we placed in the local newspaper. Because I knew she had to carry the film, I kept doing test shots with her over a long period of time. And we met and talked again and again, in order to build up a strong relationship of trust. For the role of Marco, I spoke to – and photographed – over 250 men. Those I found interesting I would then meet again on their farms, in the village or even in alpine meadows, where they would take their cattle in the summer, and we would have long conversations. We found Simon Wisler at one of the “Schwingfests” – it’s an event dedicated to this old style of wrestling, popular among the farmers in Switzerland. I had to persuade him for over a year until he finally agreed to participate in the film. I still remember his first reaction when I asked him if he could imagine doing it at all: “Maybe for two, three days – if it rains,” was his reply! Working as a farmer in the mountains is extremely intense, especially in the summer. You can’t afford to waste a single day. I am very grateful to Simon for taking on this adventure anyway.





**Is it also important that Marco is an outsider from the valley?**

I liked the idea of having someone from outside come to the small alpine village, someone whose presence and effect on the village muddies the waters. The locals react differently to the outsider, this newcomer. Some are skeptical from the start. Others, like Alois, meet him with openness, appreciating his energy. Still others feel confirmed in their prejudices. The village has a wide range of reactions, as can be observed in every society when something new is announced, changes are imminent or danger approaches. There are skeptics, warning voices, but also people who react openly and calmly to the changes. For Anna, Marco means great happiness at the beginning, but later, due to his illness and change of character, he turns out to be a difficult test for her as well.



**Was Marco's physicality important for you, both in terms of the character and the performance he was able to deliver?**


Simon (Marco) is probably one of the most massive and strongest men I know! But even he is not immune to the danger of disease – which attacks, weakens and ultimately destroys him. I think that's an important aspect of the story, that we are exposed to things in life that are beyond our control. It's about how we deal with them. And that's what I think the film is about.

To return to Marco's physicality: I also found it interesting because I believe there is a great melancholy slumbering in this large, powerful body, as a sensitive core of being comes to light. I was consciously looking for a contrast to Anna's physicality, which is very fine and delicate, but in the end defies adversity with great composure and strength.



**Let's talk about the music in the film. It's very interesting; be it your use of the Eurodance hit What is Love, or the choir that narrates the whole story. Did you want it to feel like some kind of Greek chorus?**

I think the story of Anna and Marco shows a strong kinship to Greek tragedy, even in its basic structure. We have this illness, his tumor, which like a blow of fate puts this couple – and Anna in particular – to the test. My idea was to have the village choir act as a narrator, commenting on what is happening. This allows the audience to sort out what they have seen so far and to reflect on what has been shown. The story is told in ellipses, through the change of seasons. I find this connection to Greek tragedy very interesting.



**Despite its tragic element, the film makes it clear Anna is not a passive victim of circumstance, or of men. Besides the power of 'true love', what was intriguing about the extremely difficult choice faced by Anna?**

What fascinates me is when a person succeeds in not blaming his or her partner for their illness, even if the consequences are sometimes difficult to bear. On the other hand, there is also a responsibility that you have towards yourself and your social and family environment. I think it's a very fine line and the question about how to act in such situations and what decisions you should make cannot be answered easily. Also, in the end, I don't believe that there is something like "true love". Love can change its forms.

I find great beauty in the fact that Anna never loses her poise despite the adverse circumstances she faces and fights against. She lets neither the village community nor religious obligations dissuade her from following her own compass. I think this makes her very strong, in a special way. She manages to accept that she is at the mercy of her husband's illness but does not despair over it. For me, this shows an enormous human greatness that touches me and makes me happy.



## DIRECTOR

MICHAEL KOCH

Born in Lucerne (Switzerland) in 1982. From 2003–2008 he studied at the Academy of Media Arts in Cologne. His short films have been shown at over 100 international film festivals and won several awards. His graduation film *Polar* received a Special Mention at Berlinale 2009 and won the German Camera Award as well as the German Short Film Award. His debut feature film *Marija* had its world premiere in Competition at the International Filmfestival Locarno 2016. The film was internationally screened at several festivals such as Toronto, Busan, Angers and Gothenburg, winning numerous national and international prizes. *A Piece of Sky* is his second feature film.

# CREW

## ARMIN DIEROLF – DOP

Armin Dierolf was awarded the German Cinematography Award while still a student in 2006. His work has been screened at Cannes, Camerimage, Sundance, Venice and Berlinale.

In 2012 Armin's dffb thesis film *Headlock* (Johan Carlsen) won the New Berlin Film Award for best mid-length feature and in 2013 the documentary *Dancing Alone* won the New Berlin Film Award for best feature documentary. In 2013 the feature film *White Shadow* got the Luigi de Laurentiis Award for Best Debut Film at 70th Venice Film Festival and in the following year *Sivas* got Special Jury Prize at the 71st Venice Film Festival 2014. *Petting Zoo* had its Premiere in Panorama at 65th Berlinale 2015, while *Sarah Plays a Werewolf* was screened in Venice`Settimana della Critica at 74th Venice Film Festival. Armin's latest film *A Piece of Sky* by Michael Koch will premiere in Berlinale Competition in 2022.

## TOBIAS KOCH – MUSIC AND SOUND

Born 1986, in Basel, Switzerland, Tobias is a composer and sound artist working across performance, visual arts, film, and music. He previously scored works presented at MoMA New York, documenta 14, Frieze Art Fair, Tate Modern, Centre Pompidou, Volksbühne Berlin, and others. His sound design and music compositions were featured in several award winning feature and documentary films presented at Locarno Film Festival, Berlinale, Toronto International Film Festival, IFFR Rotterdam and IDFA amongst others. He exhibited and performed his own work at the Leopold Museum Vienna, Lateral Roma, CND Paris, and various theaters throughout Europe.

For *A Piece of Sky* Tobias created a rich soundscape and wrote all original compositions for the choir, together with Jannik Giger. They are inspired by traditional Swiss folk songs.

## FLORIAN RIEGEL – EDITOR

Born 1978 in Berlin, Germany. After longer stays abroad in Israel and South America he started studying Political Science at the FU Berlin before graduating at the Media School of Arts Cologne in 2010, specializing in documentary filmmaking. Since then he mainly worked as an editor of both documentary and fiction films. His Films have been shown at numerous festivals around the world and he is an honoree of the Deutscher Kurzfilmpreis in Gold and was nominated for the Grimme Preis.

*A Piece of Sky* is the second close collaboration with Michael Koch after *Marija*. Florian accompanied the project already during the script phase and was a close partner of the project through the entire development of the film.





## CAST

MICHÈLE BRAND

Born 1991 in Altdorf, Switzerland. She studied architecture at the ETH in Zurich and worked for various architecture offices. She often also works as a waitress in restaurants, cafés and pubs in the canton of Uri.

The shooting of *A Piece of Sky* was Michèle's first time in front of a camera. She lives in Altdorf, loves nature and likes to be out in the mountains.



## CAST

### SIMON WISLER

Born 1981, is a mountain farmer in Parpan, Switzerland. His farm includes 10 cows, 60 calves and cattle, 40 chickens, 5 goats and 8 cats. The farmland he cultivates covers 50 hectares, ranging from 1500 to 2000 meters above sea level.

He grew up with 3 siblings on a farm in Willisau. After his apprenticeship as a farmer, he worked on an alp in Binntal and took over the farm in Parpan in 2006. He is the father of two sons, Alpine herdsman and dairyman and president of the Parpan alpine cheese dairy. Since 2007 he has been selling his products directly from the farm. One of his bestsellers is the whiskey-cheese-bratwurst.

Simon took over a year to think things over before agreeing to take part in *A Piece of Sky*.



A wide-angle landscape photograph of a mountain range. In the foreground, a person wearing a red shirt and dark pants stands on a grassy ridge, looking out over the valley. The ridge is bordered by a simple wooden fence. The middle ground shows rolling green hills and valleys, with some patches of snow on the higher peaks. The background features a vast mountain range under a clear blue sky with a few wispy clouds. The overall scene is bright and sunny, suggesting a clear day in a high-altitude environment.

# PRODUCER

HUGOFILM FEATURES GMBH

Hugofilm has produced over 30 award winning feature and documentary films as well as several series for the national and international market. Since the release of *Vitus* (Shortlist 79th Academy Award / North American release by Sony Picture Classics), hugofilm is one of the most renowned players in Switzerland. Its current slate consists of films like *Jill* (starring Tom Pelphrey and Juliet Rylance) *A Piece of Sky* by Michael Koch, *Preparations for a Miracle* by Tobias Nölle and *Early Birds*, the first Swiss Netflix Original feature film.

# PRODUCER

## PANDORA FILM PRODUKTION

In 1997 Pandora Film Produktion was established as production division based in Cologne. The courage to also produce unusual film projects has been awarded during the last 20 years with numerous awards from all major film festivals and film prizes. Company's goal is to work continuously with filmmakers who develop their own distinctive film language for cinema. Today Pandora Film Produktion presents itself as an independent production company with a catalogue of over 120 films.



## FESTIVALS

World Premiere: Berlinale Competition 2022

## FILM INFORMATION

Original Title: Drii winter  
English Title: A Piece of Sky  
Genre: Drama  
Country: Switzerland  
Languages: German, English,  
French  
Year: 2022  
Duration: 136 min.  
Picture: Color  
Aspect Ratio: 1.37  
Sound: 5.1  
Available Format: DCP

## CAST

Michèle Brand  
Simon Wisler  
Elin Zraggen  
Daniela Barmettler  
Josef Aschwanden

## CREW

Director: Michael Koch  
Screenplay: Michael Koch  
Cinematography: Armin Dierolf  
Editing: Florian Riegel  
Production Design: Sara Giancane  
Costume Design: Sara Giancane  
Sound Design: Tobias Koch  
Music: Tobias Koch,  
Jannik Giger  
Production Company: Hugofilm Features  
Co-production Companies: Pandora Film Produktion,  
Swiss Radio and Television /  
SRG SSR,  
Arte  
Producer: Christof Neracher  
Co-producers: Claudia Steffen,  
Christoph Friedel  
With the support of: Zürcher Filmstiftung,  
Bundesamt für Kultur (BAK),  
Swisslos-Fonds  
Basel-Landschaft,  
Swisslos-Fonds Basel-Stadt,  
Film – und Medienstiftung NRW  
Kanton Uri,  
Swisslos,  
Florian Frey  
Awards: TRT Award at First Cut Plus

*A Piece of Sky* participated in the Torino Film Lab,  
First Cut Lab and First Cut Lab Plus and was  
selected for the Films After Tomorrow section of  
the Locarno Film Festival 2020.

## PRODUCER'S CONTACT

Hugofilm features GmbH  
Christof Neracher  
Zypressenstrasse 76, 8004 Zurich  
cneracher@hugofilm.ch  
www.hugofilm.ch  
+41 44 240 40 77

## WORLD SALES

New Europe Film Sales  
Puławska 152/5  
02-670 Warsaw, Poland  
www.neweuropesales.com

## FESTIVALS

Natalia Dabrowska  
festivals@neweuropesales.com  
+48 698 903 038

## INTERNATIONAL SALES

Jan Naszewski  
+48 600 173 205  
jan@neweuropesales.com  
Katarzyna Siniarska  
+48 698 900 936  
kat@neweuropesales.com

## INTERNATIONAL PRESS

WOLF Consultants  
Gordon Spragg,  
Laurin Dietrich,  
Michael Arnon  
+49 157 7474 9724  
hello@wolf-con.com  
Press Material available at  
www.wolf-con.com/download