

CAPITALISM: At the heart of the capitalist world, the Swiss mountain town of Davos finds a delicate equilibrium and contrast.

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Davos

Director(s): **Daniel Hoesl, Julia Niemann**

Producer(s): **Georg Aschauer, Julia Niemann, Daniel Hoesl**

Country: **Austria**

There is an eerie uncanniness underlying daily routines in a sanatorium high atop a mountain in Thomas Mann's literary classic *The Magic Mountain*. Its protagonist Hans Castorp, a young man whose relative and, his own health failing with a lung ailment, ends up staying for many months in the resort town's cocoon, feverish, from looming mortality, time and a sense of reality blur. Outside world lurching toward war recedes. When the book came out in 1924, the resort town was less than happy about it, we hear an art museum guide explain. They were tired of being known as a retreat for ill people, and publicity that only reinforced that image. The documentary by Vienna-based filmmaking duo Daniel Hoesl and Julia Niemann has its world premiere in **Visions du Reel**, a Swiss festival forced to close during the world's current lung disease crisis.

A century on from Mann's novel, the town of **Davos** now has a new claim to fame: resort, it is also the annual host venue of the **World Economic Forum**, a meeting of the most influential of global leaders and business elites. But who gets to define the event — those who can import an event and attract the most media fanfare through marketing, or those who subsist there year-round? And is Davos really, as the WEF's organisers claim, where the globe's good work gets done and its newest wars averted, or is it still in part an out-of-touch bubble of creeping malady, where something's not quite right?

A forum?

It's instructive to watch *Davos* in counterpoint to *The Forum*, Marcus Vetter's 2019 film on the World Economic Forum, which opened **DOK Leipzig** in 2019, to reflect on how different two documentaries inspired by the same phenomenon can be. To some extent, the films have been determined by access. The WEF sessions are invitation-only, their attendance controlled to satisfy security, discretion, and an air of exclusivity. Vetter's was the first independent film team permitted behind the scenes in the event's fifty-year history. In his film you would think that the Forum *is* Davos. It presents as nothing more than the backdrop for the event, a whirlwind bustle of flashbulbs and big names shown with a breathless, high-stakes gravitas it is hard to imagine an off-season reversion to normal moments. *The Forum* is not simply a glossy promotional vehicle for the WEF — whether its model of spoken **diplomacy** through civil niceties is out of date and creaking, or shoring up a status quo of global power abuses — but, as it shadows founder and CEO **Schwab** and interviews those with a vested, participatory stake in the event, trying to capture as much of the frenzy of touted significant moments as possible, its deference to Schwab and a sense of wary debt to the access given is apparent.

who gets to define the essence of a place...?

By contrast, the exclusion (we can assume) of the Davos crew from the more closely observed power-brokering was perhaps a creative blessing. There is room to breathe and to see the village in this film, as we are taken into spaces of the village that do not exist solely to give the Forum. On a cattle farm, a calf is still-born. The milking is done; members of the village rue the tough economic times. Asylum seekers meet at a centre. Undocumented immigrants welcome is insecure, at the opposite end to the world's most exclusive guest list. Tension over the presence of the Forum bristles in many quarters. A member of a local fishing club voices his reluctance to eat trout from the lake, given the «piss and puke» of the attendees ends up in there. Activists gather to prepare outright protests. «Assholes» sums up one sign on **Trump's** inclusion. At a town meeting to confirm WEF's record budget, a long-term resident says he has come to increasingly doubt over the debt-to-benefit ratio of playing host is worth it for Davos, as it's made the seat of the foreign secret arrangements. A glimpse into WEF happenings is also afforded us. Schwab

around a reporter's questions on Trump and delegate representation, saying he is «diplomatic». Young climate activist **Greta Thunberg** has claimed the people who attend Davos are «weird,» says a news anchor. «**A Day in the Life of a Refugee,**» theatre simulation, subjects participants to border-crossing humiliations, so that they imaginatively identify with those who bear the brunt of power-broking. Will they show empathy away with them, or simply a reinforced complacency, confirming Davos a resort for the corrupt and ailing of spirit, pedaling false worthiness?

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