



## Man on Wire Discussion Guide

Director: James Marsh

Year: 2008

Time: 94 min

### You might know this director from:

Project Nim (2011)

Shadow Dancer (2012)

The King (2005)

## FILM SUMMARY

MAN ON WIRE is the story of French tightrope walker Philippe Petit who, on August 7, 1974, broke into the newly constructed Twin Towers of Manhattan. After months of painstaking preparations, he managed to enter the buildings during the night and string a wire between the two towers. For the next 45 minutes, Philippe Petit walked, danced, kneeled, and laid down on the wire - an experience he had dreamt of ever since he read about the Twin Towers six years before.

Using contemporary interviews, archival footage, and Philippe's own creations, this film tells the story of Philippe's previous walks between towers such as the Notre Dame and the Sydney Harbour Bridge. Viewers learn about his passions, his friendships, and how he accomplished his Twin Towers walk, from getting the wire into the towers and hiding from guards to mounting the wire and taking the first step. The result is a story of daring, beauty, dedication to the point of insanity, loyalty and heartbreak, and the firm belief that nothing is impossible.

## FILM THEMES

On the surface, *MAN ON WIRE* may appear to be about one man's determination to achieve his dream, but the story reveals a lot about human nature, from friendship and loyalty to dreaming beyond the norm and achieving the impossible. Use the following themes as a basis for your discussion.

### IMPOSSIBLE ACTS

What is impossible? By drawing a line between two buildings, Philippe Petit began working toward a goal that many people would not have even dreamed possible. Through meticulous planning, focused training, and sheer determination, Petit and his friends were able to pull off an act that completely defied expectation and reminded us that nothing is impossible.

### ACHIEVING A DREAM

*MAN ON WIRE* revolves around dreams and ideas, and the fulfillment of them. Viewers get an in-depth look at exactly what went into making Petit's dream a reality. Many different people pushed and fought to see Petit's vision fulfilled, but at the same time, we also gain a deeper understanding into the price paid by friends and family when supporting a visionary thinker.

### STANDING IN THE SHADOW OF GREATNESS

Philippe's dreams could not have been realized without a band of friends who were with him every step of the way. This film dispels the myth of the solitary artist and reminds us that achieving something of this magnitude is something that requires partnership and loyalty. Petits' accomplices put their ego aside to make way for Petit. However, after the project was realized, many of these friendships fizzled out, no longer useful to him. This was painful for some, while others felt their relationship followed the natural ebb and flow that is the reality of many friendships.

### DISREGARD FOR THE NORM

Impossible acts, achieving a dream, dedicated accomplice - none of this could have been achieved without a general disregard of a normal way of thinking about the world and its constructs. It can be argued that if we didn't challenge conventions, we would live in a state of paralysis, never moving forward or discovering what lies outside of the box. Yet while breaking through society's constructs might seem like a romantic idea, there is often a price to pay, and the question is who pays it- Petit not only disregarded the law but left some of the people closest to him crushed in his wake.

**“I must be a castaway on the desert island of my dreams.”**

Philippe Petit

**“My destiny no longer has me conquering the highest towers in the world, but rather the void they protect. This cannot be measured.”**

Philippe Petit

**“If I die, what a beautiful death-to die in the exercise of your passion.”**

Philippe Petit



## FILM FACTS:

- MAN ON WIRE has been awarded 26 awards worldwide including the 2009 Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature.
- Phillippe Petit has been doing high-wire acts for 37 years. He has performed over 70 walks and has been arrested more than 500 times.
- In 1982, Petit became the artist-in-residence at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. Since then, he has performed there more than a dozen times, including a 1980 wire-walk across its nave, and an outdoor walk in 1982 across Amsterdam Avenue to the cathedral's south tower. Petite has referred to the cathedral as his "spiritual home."
- The cable that crossed between the Twin Towers was 60 meters (196 feet) long and weighed 204 kg (450 pounds).
- In 2003, Petit expressed plans to execute a Canyon Walk: "Canyon Walk is a masterpiece for me. It is an immense, worldwide event like walking on the moon for the first time. It will make me so well known all over the world that my life would completely change." Yet in 2013 Petit was beat by Nik Wallenda, who became the first person to walk across the Grand Canyon on a tightrope.
- Richard Nixon resigned from office the day after Petit's walk between the towers. His last comment to the press was, "I wish I had the publicity that Frenchman had."
- Wire-walkers usually perform in very thin leather-soled slippers to protect the feet while still allowing the foot to curve around the wire.
- High-wire artists often carry a balancing pole that can be as long as 12 meters (39 feet) and weigh up to 14 kilograms (31 pounds). This pole increases the rotational inertia of the artist, which allows the artist more time to move his or her center of gravity back to the desired position - directly over the wire. This effect can be magnified by making the pole as long as possible and by weighting its ends.
- The highest tightrope crossed on a motorcycle is 130 m (426 ft 6 in) in height and 666.1 m (2185 ft 4 in) in length and was achieved by a Moroccan named Mustafa Danger in Benidorm, Spain on October 16, 2010.
- The greatest distance ever walked on a tightrope within a 24-hour period is 15,68 km. The record is held by Joey Kelly from Germany.

## WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Share this film. Give others the opportunity to be moved and provoked by a personality as unique as Phillippe Petit's.
2. Dare to go out of your comfort zone. Identify a fear or phobia and commit to overcoming it.
3. Learn how to tightrope walk. You could start the Philippe Petit way and just string up a wire in your backyard, or you could take a class. You might also get some help and hints from Phillippe's YouTube videos.
4. Commit to realizing a dream of your own – you may not dream of walking the tightrope, but Petit's message is that no one should be afraid to simply go out there and do what they dream of doing.

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They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

**Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.**