



Man on Wire Discussion Guide

Director: James Marsh

Year: 2008

Time: 94 min

You might know this director from:

Shadow Dancer (2012)

Project Nim (2011)

The King (2005)

FILM SUMMARY

MAN ON WIRE is the story of French tightrope walker Philippe Petit who, on August 7, 1974, walked across a wire strung up between the Twin Towers of New York’s World Trade Center. The night before, he’d broken into one of the buildings, and with friends and accomplices, rigged a wire from tower to tower. Only 24-years old, Petit crossed eight times back and forth, 1,350 feet above the ground. He danced, kneeled, and even laid down on the wire, performing for nearly an hour as people watched and the cops waited. This daring act enchanted all witnesses, who called it the “artistic crime of the century.”

Using contemporary interviews, archival footage, and clever re-enactments, filmmaker James Marsh tells the story of Petit’s risky dream, first concocted at the age of 17 when he saw a picture of the proposed Twin Towers, not yet constructed. For the next 6 years, his obsession did not waver, as he practiced tightrope walks between the towers of the cathedral Notre Dame de Paris and between the pylons of the Sydney Harbour Bridge. Archival footage of these walks are thrilling in themselves, but the film’s suspense heightens as Petit and his accomplices recount and relive the months of planning and painstaking preparations for their heist.

Throughout the film, Petit’s compelling interviews reveal his passion, daring, and voluble eloquence. A fascinating portrait emerges of the artist as a dreamer, as well as the artist as egoist, madman, visionary, and demigod, for whom nothing is impossible.

FILM THEMES

MAN ON WIRE highlights one man's audacious feat of art and glory, but also reveals how so many people were instrumental in Petit's success. Through them, the film becomes a meditation on friendship, loyalty, the egoism of art as well as its achievement.

IMPOSSIBLE ACTS

By drawing a line between two buildings, Petit began working toward a goal that many people would not have even dreamed possible. The Twin Towers themselves were also in a dream stage, proposed but not yet built. But this image inspired Petit and set the course of his life. Just because no one else had done such a thing, this did not mean it was impossible. Through meticulous planning, focused training, and sheer determination, Petit and his friends were able to pull off an act that completely defied expectation and redefined what is possible.

OBSESSION

For six years, Petit prepared for his great feat, scheming and practicing while the Twin Towers were being constructed. In order to pull off his tightrope walk, Petit had to convince many people that it was possible. Surely his talent helped persuade them, but Petit's passion was so enchanting, it motivated others to believe in his vision. His obsessive drive helped him achieve his goal, but perhaps also explains why he cast off his friends after his goal was achieved.

STANDING IN THE SHADOW OF GREATNESS

Petit'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 requires partnership and loyalty. Petit's accomplices put their egos aside to make way for Petit. After the project was realized, many of these friendships faded away, perhaps because Philippe no longer found them useful. The film examines the collateral damage of great art and amazing feats. It asks the viewer to consider where an artist's true loyalties lie—are artists beholden only to their art, or also to the people who help them achieve their vision?

DISREGARD FOR THE NORM

Walking on a wire between the Twin Towers could not have been achieved if Petit accepted conventional norms and boundaries. Without challenging conventions, we live in a state of paralysis, never moving forward or discovering what lies beyond. While breaking through society's constructs may seem romantic, there is often a price to pay, and the question is, who pays it? Petit left some of the people closest to him crushed in his wake of his success. The act was extremely dangerous to Petit, those he involved, as well the public. It's interesting that Petit was charged with "disturbing the peace," but it's terrifying to consider what could have happened had Petit fallen.

“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 received 26 awards worldwide including the 2009 Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature.
- The cable that crossed between the Twin Towers was 60 meters (196 feet) long and weighed 204 kg (450 pounds).
- Philippe 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."
- 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." But in 2013, Nik Wallenda 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 Philippe Petit's.
2. Go out of your comfort zone. Identify a fear and commit to overcoming it. By identifying and taking small, manageable steps, anyone can overcome their fears and achieve their goals.
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 Philippe'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.