



INTO GREAT SILENCE

A FILM BY PHILIP GRÖNING



Into Great Silence Discussion Guide

Director: Philip Gröning
Year: 2005
Time: 169 min

You might know this director from:

The Policeman's Wife (2013)
Into Great Silence
Love, Money, Love (2000)
Philosophie (1998)
Die Terroristen! (1992)
Sommer (1988)

FILM SUMMARY

In 1984, director Philip Gröning wrote to the Carthusian monks with a proposal to film a documentary on their unique life of secluded spirituality at the magnificently austere Grande Chartreuse monastery, located deep in the remoteness of the French Alps. Sixteen years later, he received an unlikely reply in which he was invited to film if he was still interested. Ordinarily visitors are not permitted at the monastery, so Gröning accepted under the stringent terms that he would live and work as the monks do, in silence, filming only in his free time.

Over a six month period, the director filmed the daily routine of the monks as they live by the Carthusian statutes, which calls for the solitary contemplation of the holy in order to unite one's life to charity and purity of heart. Devout in this endeavor, each of these men spend their days studying scripture and praying in the seclusion of their own living quarters, only venturing out to complete their portion of the daily chores or to convene for communal worship. Though they appear grateful for their ascetically spiritual lifestyle, to the outside onlooker it may appear more an exercise in mental endurance than a modus of divine deliverance.

Bathed in natural light and the reverberating hymns that provide a haunting aural counterbalance to the overbearing silence that pervades the film, Gröning's documentation of the Carthusians is an entrancing meditation on time, devotion, faith and contemplation itself. Most astutely, the director himself has said it reflects on "the care with which one deals with everything here [the Grande Chartreuse]: with things, with time, with oneself, with the soul." Though deliberate in its ponderous pacing, allow INTO GREAT SILENCE to wash over you like a cinematic baptism and find that one's solitary faith is of greater consequence than one might at first assume.

FILM THEMES

The Carthusian way has been observed by faithful monks for nearly a thousand years, seeing that the silent contemplation of one's faith yields a charitable existence on this Earth. Their lives are lived in wilful poverty as a means to strip all impurities away, praying in silent solitude when not working hard amongst their spiritual brothers for their basic sustenance. Gröning's lens bears witness to this austere existence, cinematically emulating it to contemplate human devotion and the notion of time itself.

RELIGIOUS BELIEFS REQUIRES PERSONAL SACRIFICE

Within the Carthusian statutes which the monks wholly devote themselves to, one can find this passage: "Whoever perseveres without defiance in the cell and lets himself be taught by it tends to make his entire existence a single and continual prayer. But he may not enter into this rest without going through the test of a difficult battle. It is the austerities to which he applies himself as someone close to the Cross, or the visits of God, coming to test him like gold in the fire." These men fully accept this way of life, embracing a life of hard labor, solitude and profound silence.

HUMANS AS SOCIAL BEINGS

Despite constant reminders from scripture and rituals that one's relationship with God is a solitary, singular affair that forbids speaking apart from chants, the monks are allotted select social times where they are observed eating together, casually debating with one another, and even sledding in the snow as a big group. These men, who spend most of their time studying and praying in silence, need communal interaction to satisfy that basic human compulsion to share one's thoughts and feelings with one another.

LIVING LIFE SIMBOLICALLY

Be devoting themselves to the Carthusian way, the monks live their entire lives as a cycle of symbolic acts, whether it be washing one's hands before prayer, wearing the unadorned robes of white, or remaining in silence within one's solitudinal cell, day after day. There is deeply seeded meaning behind every ritualistic respect of their daily lives.

TIME AS BOTH PRESENT AND ETERNAL

The Roman Catholic Carthusian Order was founded in 1084 by Saint Bruno of Cologne, and though various iterations of the massive monastery itself has been destroyed and rebuilt for various reasons over the hundreds of years of its existence, the way of life which the monks have devoted themselves to is in most ways still of the salt of the earth cultural tradition - working the land for food, sewing their own robes and the like. However, they do have electric lights, though they're rarely seen, they do import fruit and other goods, and even manage bills with a laptop. While their existence merges the ancient with minimal iterations of modernity, their austere devotion to higher powers forces them to live in a profoundly solitary present that foresees forever.

"O Lord, you have seduced me, and I was seduced."

Jeremiah 20:7, Jubilee Bible 2000

"Any one who does not give up all he has cannot be my disciple."

Luke 14:33, Jubilee Bible 2000

"What's missing, and what one must find out on one's own, is the meaning of things."

FILM FACTS:

- After expressing his interest by letter to film at the Grande Chartreuse in 1984, it wasn't until 16 years later that he was invited to stay and shoot at the famed monastery.
- INTO GREAT SILENCE won 5 awards after debuting on the film festival circuit, including the Sundance World Documentary Special Jury Prize and the Best Documentary Award at the European Film Awards.
- In 1084, Saint Hugh gave the original château, that was located where the Grande Chartreuse is now, to Saint Bruno and his followers who founded the Carthusian Order.
- While living under the Carthusians' rule, the monks are expected to speak as little as possible. There are certain places where it is forbidden to speak - in the chapel, in the anteroom, in the hallways.
- Since 1737, the Carthusians have financially supported themselves via the sales of Chartreuse liqueur, which is a distilled alcoholic drink aged with 130 herbs, plants and flowers and produced in their distillery in the nearby town of Voiron.
- According to the Carthusian rite, life should be characterized by its simplicity and sobriety in terms of external forms, meaning that liturgy should consist of long periods of silence and gregorian chant, which is thought to help internal dialogue.
- The Association Law of 1901, which was put into place by the Prime Minister of France at the time, Pierre Waldeck-Rousseau, banned religious associations en masse, causing the Grande Chartreuse to close until 1940 when Marshal Pétain took over as Prime Minister.
- INTO GREAT SILENCE was shot over the course of six months, though it took an additional two and a half years to edit the film.
- There are 25 Carthusian monasteries around the world, including the United States, South Korea, Argentina, Brazil, Germany, Italy and more. All told, there are around Carthusian 370 monks and 75 nuns in the entire world.
- The Carthusian monks live on a strict schedule of daily rituals and prayer services, including an assembly in the chapel just after midnight that requires them to wake for several hours, disallowing them to ever get a full night's sleep.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. **Share** this film. Give others the chance to embrace the silence and learn from the story.
2. **Visit** the [Musée de la Grande Chartreuse](#), which is located just over a mile away from the the Grande Chartreuse monastery itself.
3. **Read** the statutes, [the writings of Saint Bruno and other Carthusian liturgy](#), all of which is freely available online in English.
4. **Visit** your local liquor store and pick up a bottle or two of Chartreuse liqueur, which the Carthusian monks distill and sell in order to financially support themselves.
5. **Learn** from the film. The Carthusian way of life is based on silence and contemplation. Consider incorporating some form of silent meditation into your everyday life as a means to self-improvement.

We believe a good documentary is just the beginning...

In a world of sound-bites, documentaries provide an opportunity to think, understand, share, and connect with the world.

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.