



INTO GREAT SILENCE

A FILM BY PHILIP GRÖNING

A ZEITGEIST FILMS RELEASE

INTO GREAT SILENCE

Directed, produced, written,
photographed and edited by
Philip Gröning

Co Producers
Michael Weber, Andres Pfaeffli, Elda Guidinetti

Production
Philip Gröning Filmproduktion

in cooperation with
Bavaria Film, ventura film sa, TSI, cine plus
ARTE/ZDF, BR, Filmstiftung NRW, FFA

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With minimal English subtitled French dialogue

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Nestled deep in the postcard-perfect French Alps, the Grande Chartreuse is considered one of the world's most ascetic monasteries. In 1984, German filmmaker Philip Gröning wrote to the Carthusian order for permission to make a documentary about them. They said they would get back to him. Sixteen years later, they were ready. Gröning, sans crew or artificial lighting, lived in the monks' quarters for six months—filming their daily prayers, tasks, rituals and rare outdoor excursions. This transcendent, closely observed film seeks to embody a monastery, rather than simply depict one—it has no score, no voiceover and no archival footage. What remains is stunningly elemental: time, space and light. One of the most mesmerizing and poetic chronicles of spirituality ever created, INTO GREAT SILENCE dissolves the border between screen and audience with a total immersion into the hush of monastic life. More meditation than documentary, it's a rare, transformative theatrical experience for all.

THE HISTORY OF THE CARTHUSIAN ORDER AND THE 'GRANDE CHARTREUSE'

The Order of the Carthusians was founded by Saint Bruno of Cologne (1030 - 1101) in 1084 and is considered as the Catholic Church's strictest order. Since its founding, this order of hermits has been located in the mountains near Grenoble, France. There the monks dedicate themselves entirely to the service of God and to spiritual life, in permanent silence. The monastery was buried under an avalanche in 1132 and came close to being destroyed by fire eight times in its history. The present-day structure was built in 1688.

Every Charterhouse is economically independent and essentially self-sufficient. The monks are thus also active as farmers and craftsmen. There is a system of compensation within the Order, through which poorer houses are given aid, chiefly through the production of the famous liqueur. The hermits' way of life – consisting of prayers, studies and physical work – has hardly changed to this day.

Today there are 19 Charterhouses in Europe, the United States, Latin America and South Korea, which are home to an estimated 370 monks. Moreover, there are five women's convents in France, Italy and Spain, in which about 75 nuns live.

There is only one Charterhouse in the U.S.: The Charterhouse of the Transfiguration in Arlington, Vermont. The Charterhouse of the Transfiguration resides in a secluded mountain valley in southwest Vermont, an ideal setting for monastic life. The monastery nestles in a deep ravine surrounded by a huge natural buffer zone accessed by a single long private gravel road. The community only admits those called to consider a vocation in a careful discernment process. As in all Charterhouses, visitors are not allowed.

Life in the Charterhouses

The Carthusian monk seeks God in solitude on three levels: separation from the world, life in his cell, and inner solitude, or 'solitude of the heart', as it is called by the monks.

The monks leave the monastery once a week for a walk, during which they are allowed to speak. They basically receive no visitors and have neither radio nor television. The prior informs them about what is going on in the world. This provides the necessary conditions for fostering silence. Twice a year, during what is called the 'contemplation' period, the monks may receive a visit from family members.

The monk lives in a cell that consists of a one-story house surrounded by a garden. There he spends the larger part of his day alone. Communal life takes place in the chapel, where the liturgy is sung every day, and at the noon meal on Sundays. During their weekly walks, which last more than four hours, the monks may speak to one another in order to become better acquainted and 'to strengthen mutual affection and stimulate the union of the hearts, while also ensuring proper physical relaxation', as it is described on the Order's Internet pages.

Compared to Roman liturgy, the Carthusians' daily liturgy is characterized by simplicity and sobriety. Among its components are many periods of silence, Gregorian chant as carrier of contemplative inwardness, and the prohibition of all musical instruments. The Offices celebrated at midnight consist of a psalm hymn, Bible readings, prayers of intercession and periods of silence.

Chartreuse

'Chartreuse' is a mountainous massif in the French Alps between Grenoble and Chambéry. It gave its name to the order of hermits founded there in 1084, as well as to the herbal liqueur produced by the monks.

Charterhouse

A Charterhouse is a Carthusian monastery. The concept stems from the Latin *cartusia* for the French La Chartreuse, the site of the first Charterhouse. A characteristic architectural element of all Charterhouses is the large cloister around which the hermitages of the *patres* are grouped. In the High Middle Ages there were some sumptuously appointed monasteries. However, monasteries established in more recent times testify to the order's ideal of poverty and simplicity. With over 30 cells, La Grande Chartreuse – as its name implies – is one of the 'major Charterhouses' and was built in its present form in the 17th century. In contrast, the Charterhouse of Portes in the Département of Ain has only twelve cells and thus belongs to the 'lesser Charterhouses'. Here the cells are grouped around the cemetery and thus retain the appearance of the original Charterhouses.

Cloister

The building in which a community of Christians lives in celibacy is called a cloister (from the Latin *claustra* or *claustrum*: bolt, lock). The earliest cloister dates from the fourth century. Even back then the grounds were surrounded by a wall and contained a chapel, a refectory, a kitchen, a laundry room, a library, a dispensary, a guest house and workshops. The hermits observed certain rules and called themselves monks; their prior was the *Abbas*, the father.

Saint Bruno of Cologne

Born in Cologne around 1030, Bruno left his home as a young man to study at the cathedral school of Reims, where he obtained his doctoral degree and was appointed rector of the University in 1056. Regarded as one of the leading scholars of his time, he wanted to dedicate his life exclusively to God and began to search for an appropriate venue. Saint Hugo, the bishop of Grenoble, offered Bruno and his six companions a site in the mountains of his diocese. The men built their hermitage of wooden huts in the wild valley of La Chartreuse. Although Bruno served as a living example to his brothers, he did not write down any rules

for his monks; the statutes of the Carthusian Order were not drawn up until much later. After six years of life as a hermit, Bruno was called to the Vatican to become an adviser to Pope Urban II. Bruno did not feel at home in the Vatican, however, and remained there for only a few months. With the Pope's consent, he set up a new hermitage in the woods of Calabria, where he died in 1101.

The Chartreuse liqueur

The monks of La Grande Chartreuse were given a recipe for an 'elixir of long life' back in 1605. But since the brewing instructions were extremely complicated and called for over 130 ingredients, it took over 100 years before a Charterhouse apothecary decoded the recipe and produced the first liqueur. To this day, it still consists of spice plants, medicinal herbs, flower and root extracts soaked in wine alcohol. Soon, the green elixir with 71% vol. alcohol was being drunk more for enjoyment than for medication. When a cholera epidemic broke out in France in 1832, chartreuse was once again used as medicine. A few years later, the monks developed a milder variant of the herbal liqueur, with 55% vol. alcohol, which is called yellow chartreuse because of its color. The liqueur matures for five years in oak casks before it is ready to be bottled. To this day, only the monks initiated into the secret recipe mix the herbs, though nowadays with the help of modern computer technology.

Cell

The cell is designed in such a way that it can afford the monk the greatest possible solitude while guaranteeing him the necessities of life. Each cell consists of a small one-story house surrounded by a garden. The monk spends the larger part of his day alone there for the duration of his life.

**These facts were drawn from the website of the Carthusian Order at www.chartreux.org.
Much more information can be found on this extensive site.**

INTERVIEW WITH PHILIP GRÖNING

What made you decide to do a film on the Carthusian Monastery? What was your original motivation?

At the beginning, it wasn't so much the idea of shooting a film on life in a monastery; instead, I had wanted to make a film concerning the moment of time. Only later did the idea take hold of me to make a movie on life in a monastery. Among the orders where silence is observed, I found the Carthusians the most interesting, since everyone keeps to oneself there. They live in small cells with straw beds, and as a stove, all they have is a little tin box; you freeze immediately if you let the fire go out. On the other hand, there is a very stable and intense communal life. Each day is so highly structured that one hardly has a couple of hours of time for oneself. There are prayers even at night. It is the life of a hermit – but in a large community.

How did the idea for a film about time turn into a film about silence?

Basically, a "normal" film always works with language – and language overlays time. I think that the most profound experience a viewer can make when watching a film is to get a feel for time. Usually this experience is masked by the story. In a film about silence – a "silent" film – this experience of time is swept up to the surface. Nothing detracts from it. And this, in turn, is directly connected to the way the monks live: in an absolutely rigid temporal structure that lays down when something has to be done and the rules according to which it has to be done.

Your film deals with time on two levels: we viewers get a true sense of the real time, but we also experience the change of seasons.

Someone who lives in only one place and whose days are always the same will obviously experience the seasons much more intensely. Imagine spending your entire life looking out of one and the same window onto a certain segment of garden or a certain mountain – the change of nature, and of time as well, would obviously take on a completely different meaning to you.

Not only time, but also the value of work and of objects seems to be different for the Carthusians.

The Carthusians live in great poverty, but they are consciously poor. For example, the tailor keeps every button and every scrap of fabric. When a monk dies, his buttons are re-used. In the film, there is a scene where we see the button collection in the tailor's shop. There are also boxes of threads, and even the smallest usable bits and pieces of a monk's habit are recycled. If you look at the habits closely, you can see that they are often pieced together from countless patches. Basically, nothing is ever thrown away. And all the income that has not been spent by the end of the year is donated. They thus never have a surplus of money.

Is that a philosophy?

Yes. I remember that I once threw something away; I don't recall what. The tailor immediately came looking for me to ask me why I had done that. Did I have no respect for the fact that this had once been made through the work of someone's hands? Why did I think this was worthless? This has nothing to do with thriftiness, but with care. The care with which one deals with everything here: with things, with time, with oneself, with the soul.

Is there any individual freedom in the monastery?

Absolutely! I met only forceful individuals there. In contrast to the Cistercians or the Trappists, who also observe silence, the Carthusians live each on their own. Their individuality finds its expression quite strongly in their cells: you can see how Benjamin, the African, has gathered together quite a bit of things after only six months. Yet José Luis lives in a practically empty cell even after seven years.

During the shooting you lived like one of the monks yourself. Is it because you wouldn't have been able to shoot the film otherwise? Or was it a personal decision to experience such a lifestyle for once?

I wanted to do it since otherwise you have no idea whatsoever of what those people are doing there. If you go there for a week and live in the hotel next door, you cannot capture the rhythm of this life – and thus neither the rhythm that a film on this subject should have. Only because I lived there for several months was I able to penetrate into the monks' work rhythms. I did everything on my own: operated the camera, recorded the sound, carried 20 kilograms of equipment. I often felt that I wouldn't make it – until I discovered another image that fascinated me. It was particularly exhausting at night. I have to admit that I omitted the night prayers a couple of times ...

But on the whole you were there every night?

Yes, Carthusian monks do not sleep through one full night in their lives. Three hours of sleep are followed by two to three hours of prayer, and then by three hours of sleep again. The interrupted sleep creates a special state of mind, of awareness. There is certain constant exhaustion, and yet at the same time this exhaustion leads to a higher concentration. Carthusian monks have no free time. The longest interval in which they carry out an activity at one time is that of the night prayer. Then comes the 45-minute morning mass and the 30-minute evening mass, along with the prayers that are recited in one's cell seven times a day. In addition, everyone has to wash his clothes, do the dishwashing, work in the garden, cut wood, read books and do his chores for the monastery. There is no such thing as time for oneself: whenever I felt that I was finally about to have some peace, another bell started ringing, and something else had to be done.

How much material did you have at the end?

About 120 hours. I shot one cassette per day, that's 49 minutes every day. Since I was following the monks' lifestyle there, and did the washing and cleaning and worked in the garden, I

only had two to three hours a day for my work as filmmaker. Moreover, I tried very hard not to repeat any shots. If a scene was good, I practically forced myself to not shoot the same scene again. My main effort actually consisted in avoiding clichés and not shooting the type of scenes that we expect from our view of monastic life.

How did you communicate in the monastery if everyone is silent?

In the film you can see the slip box in the anteroom, where the monks leave messages for one another. For example, there was one monk who was explicitly against my shooting there. In this case, I insisted on contacting him beforehand – for if he opposed my project so strongly that he would leave the monastery during that time, then I would not shoot the film. I thus left him notes with the locations and shooting times for the following day and asked whether this was acceptable to him. Likewise, the scenes with the gardener or the tailor were also arranged in this manner; I would write notes to the administrator of the lay brothers, which were then answered. Among the Carthusians there is also the rule that you can speak if it is necessary for your work. And since film-making was my work, I was able to say something like: "Now I need the three-pole pin plug."

Thus no absolute vow of silence?

The Carthusians' rule is that one should speak as little as possible. There are certain places where one must never speak: in the chapel, in the anteroom, in the hallways. By contrast, there are other places where it is expressly desired that one speak, for example on the Monday walks. Basically, however, one should maintain one's sphere of solitude. That is why the workshops and rooms are so large there. If someone is chopping vegetables in the kitchen, another person also chopping vegetables should be so far away as to practically forget the presence of the other. This is also clearly a mechanism for making it easier to observe silence. In this atmosphere, I also tried to move as quietly and slowly as possible. At the start of the shooting, the most difficult thing was the noise that I myself was making. In the silence that reigns there, any rattling or scraping of material seemed outrageous. I already found it unbearably loud when the fabric of my jacket rubbed together.

It was a wonderful dramaturgical idea to accompany a novice who, in effect, is also initially a foreign body in the community.

But this was by pure chance. I had just arrived and made one or two shots of the architecture when I was informed that someone new would be coming the next morning at 9 and that it was essential that I film this. I felt it was much too soon for me, and didn't feel confident in documenting something as intimate as this. But I didn't know if I would get another chance...

Was he the only one who was admitted during this time?

No. Four were admitted in the five months during which I was there. They did not all stay. There are many who think that they want to become a monk, but then they realize that it really

isn't the right thing for them. I'd say that about 80 percent of the novices leave. And of the other 20 percent, some of them are sent away by the monks.

Isn't it terrible to be sent away from the monastery?

In the admission ceremony, it is made clear that everyone has the right to leave – and that the community also has the right to send one away. This is also a protection for the postulants: if the monks clearly see that the postulant cannot live in such a rigid order, he is sent away. At the beginning, I tried to convince the monks who were against my film that this would be a kind of publicity for the monastery. But this idea is totally absurd to the Carthusians. Nothing could be worse than having a monk enter the order and then, after perhaps 25 years, realize that this really isn't his type of life after all. What would he do then? Moreover, no one in the Carthusian order is worried about the survival of the order. It has been in existence for nearly a thousand years now. But if God wishes that that it is over tomorrow, then so be it.

Why did you decide against any voice-over commentaries?

You cannot use language to describe a world that revolves so far beyond the realm of language. The monks endeavor to deepen their understanding of things. I can only hope that the viewer also experiences something like this. But this obviously cannot function if I immediately offer explanations to everything that he sees. It was also clear to me that this was also going to be a film about seeing things and listening to things precisely. Whereby, of course, commentaries result from the montage ...

Naturally, but they have a different quality. Through the editing, the viewer is left to make out for himself what he sees and hears, when it is light, when it is dark ...

It is a quiet film, but not a silent film. The soundtrack is really exciting.

You start to hear things differently in the monastery. And to see things differently. Through the silence, objects become your counterpart, such as the buttons for the tailor, for example.

As a viewer, one often does not understand right away what the monks are doing.

That's fine with me! My film does not have to answer all the questions. If it arouses the viewer's interest, he can go into the Internet afterwards and do some research on his own. Today, we're literally flooded with information. What's missing – and what one must find out on one's own – is the meaning of things. My film also wants to be a film about the viewer himself, about his perceptions, his thoughts. He should focus on himself. It is also a film about contemplation. Just think: on average, the monks spend 65 years of their life there – 65 years in which they carry out the same rituals day after day. I cannot explain the meaning of this to any viewer, and one can only get an impression of this at the most through the repetitions in the film. I think this is the only way that I was able to make this film: by not giving the viewer any directions, but leaving him his freedom.

A freedom that the monks also have?

The monks are offered a certain freedom through the strictness of the rules, since they've given up all control over their lives. We think that we are able to fashion our lives ourselves, or even that we should be fashioning our lives ourselves and that this is the only way to attain happiness. This is why so many people today are afraid of life. The monastery is a place that is free of fear. One has the age-old trust that God will provide.

In some scenes there is something almost childlike about the monks.

Absolutely. For example, there is the scene where they slide down the mountain on their shoes and throw snow at each other. I think there are parallels here. But you should not forget how athletic the monks are. They helped me drag my equipment onto the mountain when I wasn't able to anymore – even those who were against the film pitched in. One question that was important to me was physical contact: where does physical contact take place in the monastery? After all, it is an important component of human life. This is why the scenes at the barber's were so important, when one's hair is cut, or when the old monk is rubbed with a salve.

What is the current position of the Carthusians? How great is their influence?

Again: these answers can be obtained elsewhere. I did not want to shoot a film about the monastery, but a film about being a monk. Especially since I also see parallels here to the life of an artist. And to my everyday life as a filmmaker. I am concerned about the many sacrifices one makes because of the things one wants to do, and how one consistently pushes away certain other things. In both worlds, we are dealing with concepts such as concentration, perception, the meaning of doing.

Can or may Carthusians also be artists?

Of course. One of the monks there paints, another writes poetry. But above them is the concept of humility. If one of the monks becomes too successful and the attention he gets disturbs the life of the community, the prior will quickly tell him to stop. And the monk will do so. Thus one of the stringent conditions under which I was able to shoot my film at all was that it could be premiered at a festival, but not in competition.

Are you a Catholic yourself?

Yes, I was raised as a Catholic. I do not agree with many things prescribed by the official church, but I think that it would be too great a chain of accidents if the world we live in arose completely without meaning.

PHILIP GRÖNING

Philip Gröning was born in Düsseldorf in 1959, raised in Düsseldorf and the US. He traveled extensively through South America and studied Medicine and Psychology before turning to filmmaking in 1982, when he signed up for studies at the Munich Film School (HFF).

Gröning developed a passion for screenwriting and began to work as an actor for Peter Keglevic and Nicolas Humbert. He also worked as sound assistant, propmaster and assistant director before making his own films.

FILMOGRAPHY

Full length feature films

SUMMER (1986)
THE TERRORISTS! (1992)
L'AMOUR, L'ARGENT, L'AMOUR (2000)

Documentaries

THE LAST PICTURE TAKEN (1983)
VICTIMS. WITNESSES (1993)
INTO GREAT SILENCE (2006)

Shorts

THE SWIMMER (1983)
STACHOVIAK! (1988)

AWARDS

BAFTA "upcoming young directors" 1984
Munich Film award 1987
Kodak Award Amsterdam 1987
1st Prize Bergamo Filmmeeting 1988
Silver Hugo Chicago 1989
Film award of North Rhine Westfalia 1991
Bronze Leopard Locarno 1992
Bronze Leopard 2000 Best actress Sabine Timoteo
Swiss national Film award best actress Sabine Timoteo 2001
Max Ophüls Award Best Newcomer Florian Stetter 2001
Hessian Film award Best Director 2001
Silver Camera Bitola 2001
Nomination Golden Frog Camerimage Llodz 2001
Nomination Golden Horse Stockholm 2001
Best director award Media Wave Hungary 2001
Bavarian Film Awards Best Documentary 2005
Sundance World Cinema Special Jury Prize: Documentary 2006
Festival Internacional de Cine Contemporáneo de la Ciudad de Mexico
Special Mention of the Jury 2006
"It's all true" Documentary Film Festival International Jury Prize 2006