

Extravagant Stillness



Philip Gröning's 'Into Great Silence'

"If you don't have time to read this ad, it was written for you," announces an advertisement for a philosophy course that appears in newspapers from time to time. The implication clearly being: slow down your life; get in touch with something more essential. Always a tall order, of course. Yet, in a similar vein, it can be said of Philip Gröning's *Into Great Silence*, an exercise in pure contemplation, a glacial and austere documentary about life in a Carthusian monastery high in the French Alps: If you don't have time to see this film, it was made for you. It may not lead you to slow down your life but, for two hours and 40 minutes, it will almost certainly lower your heart rate and divest your mind of a little clutter.

No visitors are allowed to the 20 or so Carthusian monasteries scattered across the world, where monks take a vow of silence. In 1960, two journalists were given access to shoot inside the Grande Chartreuse monastery - the mother house of the order and the subject of *Into Great Silence* - on the condition that no actual monks were filmed. In 1984, Gröning, a young German film-maker, asked to shoot a documentary about life inside the walls. The head prior refused permission, but implied that perhaps at some future date the order would be ready for him. Fifteen years later, Gröning received an invitation

to come and film.

The shooting conditions laid down were very specific. There was to be no artificial lighting: only what the camera could capture. No voice-over commentary. No other crew: just Gröning and his equipment. And no additional music on the soundtrack: only live sound recorded on location. (Interestingly, this last requirement is more than made up for by the monks' exquisite deep-voiced chanting of the liturgy, which spreads through the film like a rich treacle.)

Gröning spent about five months living at the monastery between 2002 and 2004. Apart from the two or three hours a day during which he filmed, he lived like the other monks, in his own bare wooden cell, participating in the domestic routines of cooking, cleaning and gardening, as well as those of prayer, chanting and contemplation. Of the 120 hours of footage he shot, he has crafted a film about meditation that becomes, somewhat surprisingly, a meditation in itself.

In his great work *Arctic Dreams: Imagination and Desire in a Northern Landscape*, Barry Lopez describes walking in the Brooks Range, in Alaska, among the tundra birds who build their nests on the ground and whose "vulnerability is extreme". "I took to bowing on these evening walks," he writes. "I would bow slightly with my hands in my pockets, towards the birds and the evidence of life in their nests - because of their fecundity, unexpected in this remote region, and because of the serene arctic light that came down over the land like breath, like breathing." In a profound sense, *Into Great Silence* seems to be a film about breath, about breathing. Certainly it is a film that breathes. Certainly it captures something of the sense of reverence of which Lopez so eloquently writes. I don't just mean the gentle reverence of these monks for their God. It is in the film-maker's reverence for the objects and events on which his camera continually lingers: the fecundity of the forgotten corner or the hidden moment, suspended in stillness. Dust motes float in the air in a shaft of sunlight. Snow gathers on the eaves. A hunchbacked monk pushes the ancient food trolley down a long corridor, the rattling wheels bumping over the flagstones. The monastery, a vast Gormenghast-like complex, sits nestled in the snow as the stars wheel silently overhead in a stop-motion sequence. A tin plate rocks gently in a stone sink, moved by some unseen wisp of breeze.

The first hint that this might be a kind of anti-film comes early, as Gröning extends the opening scene - a monk kneeling in the half-light, head bowed, features indistinct, knuckles clenched in prayer - far beyond mere set-up. (The scene lasts more than four minutes.) The monk prays ... and prays. Stands and kneels, stands and kneels; keeps right on praying. The floorboards creak. Logs crackle in the wood stove. We are plunged into the "great silence" at the film's heart. The effect, until we settle into the film's rhythms, is a sort of cinematic weightlessness. We wait for the story to begin, for the pace to pick up. And we will wait in vain.

For those who like their entertainment snappy, expect some discomfort. What is unusual in this film about silence and contemplation is that the passage of time is undivided by filters or markers. We sit inside it, as in physical space, more than we are swept along by it. What Gröning wants to explore is something that has been marginalised by the market pressures of the industry: the capacity for cinema, at some primal level, to entrance, to open us to an ecstatic engagement with the film-as-lyric. His film reactivates some of the old magic of this newest of art forms: that moment when utter peace and letting go descend upon us, collectively, in the dark of the multiplex.

And yet, for all the stasis and immersion and non-linearity, there is a narrative of sorts in *Into Great Silence*, and a haunting forward movement. What plays out is the induction and integration into this severe life of the two novitiates we meet at the beginning of the film: in particular, the young black man, named in his new life Dom Marie-Pierre. Prostrate on the floor, the men are provisionally accepted into the order. They rise and move around the room, and embrace the other monks, one by one. Here, the tiniest hints of personality emerge from within the silence and reserve. One of the older monks steals a furtive peek at the newcomers as he waits, head bowed, for his awkward embrace. It is such a recognisable glance, so deeply human. It could be the curiosity of the small child for the new student who arrives mid-term, that yearning for an interruption to the flow of relentless sameness.

Elsewhere, other moments of personality emerge; flashes of interaction, at least, in which we see these ascetic, pared-back men as tender, even playful. An old monk fits out Dom Marie-Pierre in his new surplice and cowl. It's just one man fitting out and dressing another - in silence, of course, and almost neutrally, like a tailor - but the moment is spring-loaded because there is so little direct human contact in the film. Later still, a wizened old monk, frail and paper-thin, with sagging emaciated flesh, sits patiently while a younger monk delicately applies ointment to his bare arms and shoulders. A tableau of silent reticence, it is perhaps the film's most tender moment.

The whole of *Into Great Silence* works in this way. The smallest elements become energised, and the narrative of everyday things begins to take on a kind of supercharged intensity. Thus, when some of the monks, on their customary Sunday walk outside the monastery grounds, slide down a steep snowdrift using their shoes as rudimentary skis and tumble in a heap of delighted giggling at the bottom of the run, it seems a hilariously transgressive moment. As for the other 159 minutes: what becomes intriguing about these men is their deep level of acceptance, if for nothing else than the unchanging rhythms of the days. They eat, they pray, they chant, as if to do otherwise, or to do anything more, would be to crowd their lives with inessentials.

Into Great Silence brings to mind a recent documentary with a similar title, *Touching the Void*, Kevin

Macdonald's extraordinary film - a spiritual thriller in the truest sense - about the dreadful ordeal of two mountaineers who suffer a climbing accident high in the Peruvian Andes. While *Touching the Void* is the more gripping of the two films, both share the same heightened sense of a fiercely devout determination. They make wonderful companion pieces. I'm reminded too of *Rivers and Tides*, Thomas Riedelsheimer's documentary about Andy Goldsworthy, one of the world's great living artists, who works almost exclusively outdoors, often in the snow and ice, and whose work, devotional as much as it is obsessive, is almost entirely consumed with notions of presence, reverence, attention. Goldsworthy has made the entire natural world his monastery.

There is also in *Into Great Silence* a sense of intensity and expansiveness co-existing, of an intimate immensity and a deeply felt obsession contained within a great vastness. Kurosawa's late-career film *Dersu Uzala* captured this sense of vastness out in the Siberian wastes: the expanse in that film was spatial, and raised the hairs on the neck. For the monks of the Grande Chartreuse, the expanse that they live with and within is temporal, but no less intimidating for that. They are, like *Dersu*, in some sense travellers in the Outlands.

It is easy to admire the Andy Goldsworthy model of the artist as monk/devotee, the world-acolyte assisting Nature in the performing of its rites. What is harder to conceive of is the stark sacrifice that the monks of the Grande Chartreuse make, and the ritualistic formality of their devotion. In *Into Great Silence*, Philip Gröning affords us the vicarious pleasure of a temporary submersion in an extreme existence.

If nothing else, this is a film that encourages us to ponder deeply how we might practise greater awareness in life: how to be mindful, how to pay attention. Here and there in our world are pockets of calm, and *Into Great Silence* is one such pocket. If you don't have time to see it, it was made for you.

Luke Davies

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