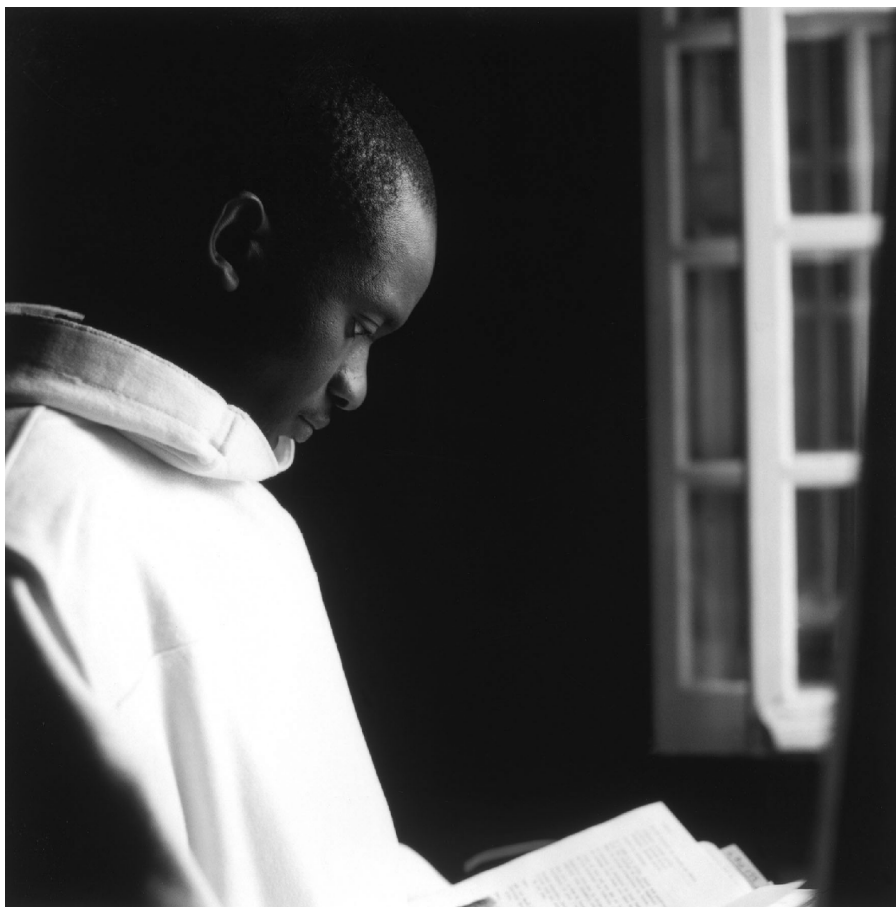


Into Great Silence dir. Philip Gröning

Soda Pictures, 2006

Time, they say, is expensive, an increasingly rare commodity as contemporary life becomes ever more frenetic. In a work driven culture there is always more to do than there is time to do, and when you're living in the fast track everything can easily become a blur. In this film, conceived, directed, filmed and edited by Philip Gröning, time slows down as we see and hear the sounds of the daily round in a Charterhouse monastery, La Grande Chartreuse, near Grenoble, surrounded by the French Alps. In this idyllic setting, where visitors are normally not allowed, each frame lingers – on a doorway, a passage, the tolling of the bell, melting snow, a flickering sanctuary lamp – during three hours of near silence, so that the viewer begins to sense and feel the quiet rhythms of the changing day, the shift of the seasons, and the work and prayer of the monks who live there. But this is not a cinematic voyeurism to satisfy the curious, or a documentary of the monastic life as it is lived in this, one of the most austere and ascetically rigorous of religious communities. It is a work of art, a long time in the making, which draws the viewer into the near silence. It is a film without plot or narrative and with only mere snippets of dialogue, but what is shown is an arresting visual meditation on the theme of time.

The deliberate slowing of the pace of time in the film and the visual lingering of each edited shot invites our attention, rather like a Dutch still-life, or Velázquez's poignant *Waterseller of Seville* in which the scene is almost frozen in time, giving the action an almost sacramental character as the divine is communicated in the all too ordinary, and usually unnoticed, playing out of daily life. Each shot is an invitation to look and see, to see this person, this particular object, and to revel in its very existence. A key term for the 14th-century Franciscan theologian, Duns Scotus, 'of reality the rarest-veined unraveller', (Gerard Manley Hopkins), was *haecceitas*, (literally meaning 'thisness'); a term which designates the specificity of a particular element of creation, and denotes this, here, and now. A sacramental sensibi-



lity, like the journey into great silence is the focusing and intensification of time. Music is described as sound in time, but sound needs the interstices of silence in order to resound, to rise and to fall, and as the music's tempo marks the time, so the routines of the pattern of the monastic day, particularly the hours of prayer which punctuate the hours of darkness and daylight, are a way of marking time.

The monastic silence of night and day enfolds the repeated pattern of work, prayer and rest, and seems to hold each moment. Here, individual everyday objects take on a weighty significance, and mundane actions also appear to be in slow motion and have as much of a ritual quality as the slow gathering of the monks in choir for their chanted prayer together. The scene of the slow trundling of a trolley delivering food to the apparently self-contained hermitage of each monk along a quadrangular cloister speaks of a life that draws nourishment from a variety of deep sources. Is this what is meant by contemplation, a conscious slowing down so that every moment is an intersection of time and eternity, a constant and careful attention to the detail of everyday life? It is often remarked how difficult it is to age a monk or a nun; the attention to the

present moment seems to eradicate the visible ravages of time on the face.

The film is not easy viewing, and those looking for and accustomed to action, will become impatient and might find the silence deadly oppressive and the time it takes tedious. Perhaps one needs to slow down before entering the cinema, or settling down before the DVD screen. The whole project is shot through with ironies, but perhaps the most significant one is the film-maker's intention to create for the viewer the experience of the monastery at a time when monasteries in western Europe are aging and rapidly declining. But can the 'experience' correspond to the actual life itself? To do so might be to confuse sensation with life in all its depth, muddle and mystery, and in TS Eliot's terms, to have the experience but to miss the meaning. A cinematic monastery is illusory. Finally, perhaps the real art behind what is projected on our screen is a silent and hidden art of the shaping of those souls who give themselves and give their whole lives to the cultivation of the life of the Spirit.

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