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www.exilefamilymovie.com

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Selling [s i l e n c e]

An almost 3-hour-long documentary about a monastery with no narration, where even the monks are silent: at first glance, these key features of Philip Gröning's film *Into Great Silence* don't sound quite like every distributor's dream. Yet the film has become a huge success with German audiences. The documentary has been in cinemas for over a year now. How did they do it? DOX investigates.

By Ben Kempas



<<
To stills from
Into Great Silence by
Philip Gröning.

>
Philip Gröning,
director of
Into Great Silence.



Philip Gröning first proposed to make a documentary about the Grande Chartreuse in the French Alps in 1984. Fifteen years later, he became the first filmmaker ever to be granted permission to film inside the remote monastery.

"Ages ago, Philip came to us with a project description," recalls Anatol Nitschke, head of X Verleih, currently Germany's hottest distribution company for feature films, closely related to the highly successful production company, X Filme (*Goodbye Lenin*). "Philip only had four pages, but we said we wanted to do it. We didn't really talk about success or failure of a release. We saw it as an experiment that we wanted to be part of." Then Nitschke didn't hear anything about the project for a long time. Phillip Gröning found partners in Germany (Bavaria Film, ZDF/ARTE, BR) and Switzerland (Ventura Film, TSI). Regional and federal film funds contributed to the EUR 730,000 project. "They knew my previous films, so I found it easy to convince them," says Gröning, who has been the producer of every film he has ever directed. Yet he had never done a documentary before.

Into Great Silence was awarded the European Film Academy Documentary 2006 - Prix Arte.

www.diegrosse stille.de

162 Minutes of Silence

In 2002, Philip Gröning picked up his HDCAM equipment and disappeared into the French Alps, spending more than six months in the secluded monastery, all by himself among the Carthusian monks, who strictly obey their vow of silence. Years passed before he finally reappeared on Anatol Nitschke's radar. "Philip showed us 20 minutes and told us how much footage he had," says the Berlin-based distributor. "At this point, we became slightly nervous. We didn't have a clue as to how we were going to make this work."

Philip Gröning spent more than two years in the editing room before finally showing his partners a version that was three hours and ten minutes long. The broadcasters were scared and told him: "This is totally boring." Gröning admitted, "I think it is, too." So the filmmaker started to gradually reduce the length of the film, but when he reached 162 minutes, he felt that it was finished. "When you reach this point, duration doesn't really matter any more. The length of the film turns from a burden into a space for a great experience."

Gate-opening Festivals

After some "major conflicts", Philip Gröning started to consider making a shorter version for broadcast. Then, an invitation to premiere at the Venice Film Festival arrived. The commissioning editors suddenly decided that they didn't want this film to be altered. Gröning remembers: "It became clear that this film couldn't be total nonsense if it was the only German film to be accepted in Venice."

X Verleih immediately scheduled the theatrical release in Germany, and two weeks before the premiere in Venice, Bavaria Film Interna-

tional (different from Bavaria Film) finally came on board to handle international sales. It was jointly decided not to market *Into Great Silence* as a documentary. “We categorised it as fiction, so it would fit into our catalogue,” says Thorsten Schaumann of Bavaria Film International. “When we first saw it, we said: ‘Wow! This is so different from everything we usually get to see, it will be something very special in the cinema.’ We’ve been selling it as a meditation. This film doesn’t want to teach you. It gives you 162 minutes of total peace.” According to director Philip Gröning, most documentaries focus too much on their issue and too little on the viewer: “Documentaries are usually not perceived as a great experience, great joy. They lack the incentive that makes you go to the cinema.”

Consequently, they targeted festivals focused on feature films. “It is very complicated to show a film both in Venice and Sundance,” explains Gröning. “And it’s impossible to show it in Venice and Sundance and Toronto... Unless you talk to them before you submit, that is.” The filmmaker emphasises the need for a perfect festival strategy: “If you end up in the wrong category at Berlin or Cannes, your film will be dead.” Thorsten Schaumann really liked their experience at Toronto International Film Festival: “North America is used to fast-paced movies. I was wondering how many people would still be in there at the end of our three-hour screening. Well, when I came back, the cinema was still packed, and it was totally silent. They had understood the film.”

Marketed as a Cinematic Experience

In the meantime, Anatol Nitschke realised that the film had turned into “an even bigger experiment” than originally anticipated. “We had to find an audience that is not totally conditioned to seeing 90-minute movies,” the distributor says. “We didn’t go for a broad marketing campaign. Instead, we tried to identify a specific target group who would be suitable viewers for this film. That’s basically all we did.” X Verleih published a minimalist poster and a movie trailer that was nearly five minutes long. “The audience expects a 1.3-minute trailer, a firework of the best scenes. We made the trailer just like the film: much longer than usual and without any narration. We said: ‘You’re not going to see a movie here, this is a cinematic experience.’”

The theatrical release had been scheduled for early November 2005, “an ideal time when the weather turns grey, ahead of Christmas but not too close to it,” (Schaumann), with four 35mm prints and three digital copies. As the film had been produced on HD anyway, digital projection offered an affordable alternative to expensive film prints. After the first ten days, they went up to fifteen prints, still not enough to satisfy the demand.

When publicising the film, X Verleih didn’t rely on specialist documentary critics. They targeted the major movie reviewers as well as writers specialising in society, lifestyles, or belief. Many years ago, Anatol Nitschke used to run a little art-house cinema in Munich – but that’s not the right kind of theatre for *Into Great Silence*, he says. “We didn’t rely on those small cinemas that would typically show documentaries. From the very beginning, we wanted the big screens. This is not about depicting or reflecting reality, it’s a spiritual adventure.”

Alternative Collaborations

During the distribution of *Sophie Scholl – the Final Days*, a feature film on the resistance movement in Nazi Germany, X Verleih had established some close contacts with churches of all confessions. This turned out to be really useful when it came to spreading the word about Philip Gröning’s film. From putting up posters to turning naves into cinemas, this churchly support was crucial for the success of *Into Great Silence*.

Another creative collaboration was established with Manufactum, a retailing and mail-order company known for its slogan “The Good things in Life Still Exist”. According to Anatol Nitschke, both the retailer and the film are “all about the truthful and essential things”. Manufactum even has a special department for products made by monasteries, such as food or wine. They recommended the film in their catalogues, sent out mailings, and were part of preview screenings. “This was one of the most wonderful co-operations we have ever done,” says Nitschke. “It wasn’t about money. Everyone just played their part in order to share a product.”

The distributor’s strategy proved right: in Germany alone, up to 45 prints were circulating at the same time, and almost 200,000 people saw the documentary within the first year. Anatol Nitschke sees the potential for another 50,000: “This film doesn’t age.” X Verleih never saw the film as a major financial risk. “It was a decision, a challenge, not a risk,” claims Nitschke. “None of us were in it to become rich. We just wanted to do something special. Funnily enough, this gigantic success has actually made us earn real money. It’s a wonderful side effect.”

Going International

However, international sales were slow at first. “My buyers didn’t know how to place it,” admits Thorsten Schaumann. “It’s too long for them. Even once you’ve convinced them, they’ll still need to convince the cinema operators in their countries, who’ll need to convince the public to go to the cinema.” It was only the news of the phenomenal success of the theatrical distribution in Germany that brought down these barriers. The film has already been very successful in Italy, again marketed in close collaboration with the church, and it is about to come out in Spain. “We’re trying to build a network among our international buyers, so they can exchange ideas for the promotion,” explains Schaumann.

Still, Philip Gröning is surprised to see how little money comes in through world sales: “I actually had to re-negotiate some deals, in one case even doubling the licence fee.” Everyone agrees that the active participation of the filmmaker in all marketing efforts is essential. In Germany, the DVD was just released, again with record sales by documentary standards. But there’s no story that made Anatol Nitschke happier than the call he got from a cinema owner who said: “You won’t believe what just happened here. I’ve got a hundred nuns sitting in on this screening.”

Ben Kempas

is a filmmaker and cameraman based in Munich (www.expressive.tv), and a co-host of The D-Word (www.d-word.com).

Belfast Girls

Sweden 2006, 52 min. & 58 min.

Director: Malin Andersson
 Production: WG Film
 World Sales: Films Transit International
 Tel.: +1 514 844 3358
 office@filmstransit.com
 www.filmstransit.com

Watching *Belfast Girls*, I felt like a Kalahari tribesman watching National Geographic – ‘Hey, these guys have come to my country and they’re putting it on screen like it was something odd or exotic!’.

Growing up in the UK, it’s always seemed perfectly normal to me that Belfast is split by high barbed-wire “peacewalls”. Malin Andersson’s Swedish eye has allowed me to look at my own country with new eyes: Belfast, I have to admit, can be a pretty bizarre city.

Andersson attacks all the themes you’d expect – sectarianism, violence, the prospects for peace – but sneaks up on them all in a refreshingly oblique and intelligent way. As Northern Ireland’s peace process approaches its adolescence, the film follows two Belfast adolescents for an entire year. They’re working-class teenage girls obsessed with the usual teenage things – make-up, boyfriends, arguments with their mums. Mairéad is Catholic, Christine is Protestant. It’s tellingly clear that Christine and Mairéad have so much more in common than they have differences, but the point is never laboured.



Cutting between their stories on either side of the barbed wire, *Belfast Girls* teases out its themes with delicacy. You can hear the effort in the girls’ voices as they struggle to explain to a foreigner the rules of Belfast life, the meaning to them of traditions handed down by their grandparents. It’s particularly poignant in the case of Mairéad, when we learn that her granddad was locked up by the Brits for decades, in a notorious miscarriage of justice. Mairéad’s eyes shine when she talks about how much fun she had in a riot against British troops, as if she was talking about a wild night out at a club.

Andersson achieves a startling intimacy with the characters, who seem to treat the camera like a sort of family pet. We’re invited not only into the girls’ homes but even into their beds. I can’t tell you the twist in the story without ruining it for you, if you get a chance to watch the film yourself. (Fortunately there is no cheesy storyline of the two girls meeting; this is genuine observational documentary.) But I can tell you that by the end of the year, both Belfast girls end up in a place they’d never expected; and you’ll feel more optimistic about sectarianism than you did when the film started.

Lucinda Broadbent

Sugartown: The Bridegrooms

Greece 2006, 82 min.

Director: Kimon Tsakiris
 Production: Bioptic, Anemon and ma.ja.de. filmproduktion
 Deckert Distribution
 World Sales: Deckert Distribution
 Tel.: +49 341 215 66 38
 info@deckert-distribution.com
 www.deckert-distribution.com



Sugartown is both a terribly beautiful and frightfully empty town located on the Western Peloponnese coast. The romantic sunsets at sea are lost on the population of Zaharo (the town’s Greek name) at this film’s start, because it is a town without women.

“There are no women for the boys,” everyone agrees, and an early title reveals that the town’s 12,000 inhabitants are so short on brides that mayor Pandazis Chronopoulos is elected for promising to bring in women from abroad. While it’s framed at the beginning and end by comic newsbytes, the documentary focuses on the bittersweet stories of three potential bridegrooms and Greco-Russian marriage diplomacy.

The story features Nondas, a 48-year-old rural café owner (he’s also a Peter Falk look-alike and nicknamed “Kadafi”), Efthimis, a shy 38-year-old electrician, and Kostas, a 28-year-old rosy-cheeked, bright-eyed shepherd. As the rural town organizes its trip, eventu-

ally settling on an exchange with the Russian city of Kiln, eight kilometres from Moscow, each of the men confesses he is looking for no more than a woman who is “a good person”. “I have everything I need in life,” Kostas wistfully explains, “a house, a car, a tractor, fields, animals. I have my fortune. But I need a partner.” Efthimis confesses he’s been burned in the past (with old home video footage of the dancing perpetrator for evidence) and makes a joke about kidnapping the right woman.

The straightforward, fixed camerawork captures rural Greece’s both stark and often kitschy texture. A shot of the bare light bulb burning outside Nondas’ café at night speaks volumes about loneliness. When the Greek men travel to Russia and start meeting women, the camera does a good job of capturing the unfolding romantic developments and cultural awkwardness. There is always a strain of hope as well as sadness. It records the negotiations between the two countries’ officials, and unveils one Russian priest’s financial greed.

The chronological journey back and forth between Greece and Russia, with abundant titles to guide the audience, is set to optimistic rhythm-and-blues shuffles (by Sergios Voudris) as well as sadder, Greek instrumentals and one grandpa’s impromptu folk songs.

Despite the mayor’s promises, organized luncheons, dark nightclub outings and TV hype, love is harder than anyone assumes. Marital bliss turns out to be more elusive than the Greek bridegrooms thought it would.

Angelike Contis