

THE WALK – Film at CONCA VERDE on 16.11.15 – Talk by Daniel Ford

It seems fitting that following the weekend's tragic events, tonight we remember and enjoy an incredible achievement by one of France's most infamous modern artists, Phillippe Petit. An achievement that required great determination, unwavering belief and astounding courage. The gift given to New York City by Petit on the morning of August 7th 1974, is so improbable, so unbelievable, so incredibly dangerous and borderline insane that it only serves to underline the wisdom of the phrase: fact is often stranger than fiction. The unauthorized feat, known as 'le coupe' saw the 24 year old Frenchman perform on a tight-rope, 1,350 feet above the ground with nothing more than a custom made balancing pole, for a staggering 45 minutes. '*The Walk*', directed by Robert Zemeckis and written by Christopher Browne, chronicles Philippe Petit's 1974 high-wire walk between the Twin Towers of New York's World Trade Center. It is based on Petit's book, *To Reach the Clouds*, released in paperback with the title *Man on Wire*. The title of the film is taken from the police report that led to the arrest (and later release) of Petit, whose performance had lasted for almost one hour.

Petit was born in Nemours, Seine-et-Marne, France; his father Edmond Petit was an author and a former army pilot. At an early age, the boy discovered magic and juggling. He loved to climb, and at 16, he took his first steps on a tightrope wire. "Within one year," he told a reporter, "I taught myself to do all the things you could do on a wire. I learned the backward somersault, the front somersault, the unicycle, the bicycle, the chair on the wire, jumping through hoops. But I thought, 'What is the big deal here? It looks almost ugly.' So I started to discard those tricks and to reinvent my art."

Petit conceived his "coup" when he was 18, when he first read about the proposed construction of the Twin Towers and saw drawings of the project in a magazine, which he read while sitting at a dentist's office in 1968. Petit was seized by the idea of performing there, and began collecting articles on the Towers whenever he could.

What was called the "artistic crime of the century" took Petit six years of planning, during which he learned everything he could about the buildings and their construction. In the same period, he began to perform high wire walking at other famous places. Rigging his wire secretly, he performed as a combination of circus act and public display. In 1971 he performed his first such walk between the towers of the cathedral of Notre Dame de Paris, while priests were simultaneously being ordained inside the building. In 1973 he walked a wire rigged between the two north pylons of the Sydney Harbour Bridge in Sydney, Australia.

In planning for the Twin Towers walk, Petit had to learn how to accommodate such issues as the swaying of the high towers due to wind, which was part of their design; effects of wind and weather on the wire at that height, how to rig a steel cable across the 200 ft (61 m) gap between the towers, and how to gain entry with his collaborators, first to scope out the conditions and lastly, to stage the project. They had to get heavy equipment to the rooftops. He traveled to New York on numerous occasions to make first-hand observations.

Since the towers were still under construction, Petit and one of his collaborators, New York-based photographer Jim Moore, rented a helicopter to take aerial photographs of the buildings. Friends Jean-François and Jean-Louis helped him practice in a field in France, and accompanied him to take part in the final rigging of the project, as well as to photograph it. His friend Francis Brunn, a German juggler, provided financial support for the proposed project and its planning.

Petit and his crew gained entry into the towers several times and hid in upper floors and on the roofs of the unfinished buildings in order to study security measures, in addition to analyzing the construction and identifying places to anchor the wire and gantries. Using his own observations, drawings, and Moore's

photographs, Petit constructed a scale model of the towers in order to design the needed rigging to prepare for the wire walk.

Working from an ID of an American who worked in the building, Petit made fake identification cards for himself and his collaborators (claiming that they were contractors who were installing an electrified fence on the roof) to gain access to the buildings. Prior to this, Petit had carefully observed the clothes worn by construction workers and the kinds of tools they carried. He also took note of the clothing of office workers so that some of his collaborators could pose as white collar workers. He observed what time the workers arrived and left, so he could determine when he would have roof access.

As the target date of his "coup" approached, he claimed to be a journalist with *Metropolis*, a French architecture magazine, so that he could gain permission to interview the workers on the roof. The Port Authority allowed Petit to conduct the interviews, which he used as a pretext to make more observations. He was once caught by a police officer on the roof, and his hopes to do the high-wire walk were dampened.

On the night of Tuesday, 6 August 1974, Petit and his crew had a lucky break and got a ride in a freight elevator to the 104th floor with their equipment. They stored it just 19 steps below the roof. In order to pass the cable across the void, Petit and his crew had settled on using a bow and arrow attached to a rope. They had to practice this many times to perfect their technique.

On August 7th 1974, shortly after 7 am local time, Petit took the most important step of his life – out onto a wire, a quarter mile above the ground. He proceeded to perform for 45 minutes, making eight crosses along the wire, during which he not only walked but also danced, laid down and knelt to salute the crowds that had gathered on the streets below. When NYPD and PAPD Officers learned of his stunt, they came up to the roofs of both buildings to try to persuade him to get off the wire. They threatened to pluck him off by helicopter - but Petit only got off when it started to rain.

There was extensive news coverage and public appreciation of Petit's high-wire walk; the district attorney dropped all formal charges of trespassing and other items relating to his walk. In exchange, he was required to give a free aerial show for children in Central Park. The Port Authority of New York and New Jersey gave Petit a lifetime pass to the Twin Towers' Observation Deck. He autographed a steel beam close to the point where he began his walk.

Petit's high-wire walk is credited with bringing the Twin Towers much needed attention and even affection, as they initially had been unpopular. Critics such as historian Lewis Mumford had regarded them as ugly and utilitarian in design, and too large a development for the area. The Port Authority was having trouble renting out all of the office space.

Following 'le coup', Petit has lived in New York, where he has been artist-in-residence at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, also a location of other aerial performances. He has done wire walking as part of official celebrations in New York, across the United States, and in France and other countries, as well as teaching workshops on the art. In 2008, *Man on Wire*, a documentary directed by James Marsh about Petit's walk between the towers, won numerous awards. He was also the subject of a children's book and an animated adaptation of it, released in 2005.

Petit has made dozens of public high-wire performances in his career; in 1986 he re-enacted the crossing of the Niagara River by Blondin for an Imax film. In 1989, to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the French Revolution, mayor Jacques Chirac invited him to walk an inclined wire strung from the ground at the Place du Trocadéro to the second level of the Eiffel Tower.

Petit regularly gives lectures and workshops internationally on a variety of topics and subjects. He has created an ebook for TED, entitled *Cheating the Impossible: Ideas and Recipes from a Rebellious High-Wire Artist*.

In the book *To Reach the Clouds* Petit not only wrote about his spectacular feat, and the events of his life which led up to it, but also expressed his feelings following the September 11 attacks during which the Twin Towers were destroyed. He wrote that on that morning, "My towers became our towers. I saw them collapse - hurling, crushing thousands of lives. Disbelief preceded sorrow for the obliteration of the buildings, perplexity descended before rage at the unbearable loss of life." Besides paying tribute to those who were killed, Petit also called for a rebuilding of the towers, promising that "When the towers again twin-tickle the clouds, I offer to walk again, to be the expression of the builders' collective voice. Together, we will rejoice in an aerial song of victory." Notwithstanding Petit's wishes, the Twin Towers were eventually replaced by a different complex of buildings, thus precluding the possibility of Petit (or anyone else) repeating a similar feat at the World Trade Center site making this story a genuine one off.

This 5th Film Show is sponsored by Anderson House – the Cambridge Centre for Bergamo, CRTDrills Lingue Bergamo – the language teachers' association, the MIUR Ufficio Scolastico – the Italian Ministry of Education and AEGEE Bergamo – the Association of Erasmus students. And this is the last film in English for the year! From next week there will be four films in Spanish for the Festival del Cine Espanol. On Monday 23rd November the first film will be Alacran Enamorado which in Italian is Scorpione Innamorato.