

MONTE GRANDE what is life? documentary with Francisco Varela

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## monte grande-what is life?

2004

Produced by T&C Film, Zürich

Directed by Franz Reichle

Distributed by [First Run/Icarus Films](#), 32 Court St., 21st Floor, Brooklyn, NY 11201; 800-876-1710

VHS, color, 80 min.

Reviewed by Charles J. Greenberg, Cushing/Whitney Medical Library, Yale University

**Rating:** Recommended

**Audience Level:** College - Adult

**Subject(s):** Philosophy, Science, Psychology, Religious Studies, Health Sciences, Death and Dying

**Date Entered:** 8/9/2005



Chilean neuroscientist Francisco Varela (1946-2001), possessing an extraordinary gift of emotional intelligence, academic prowess, and international peer recognition by the age of 25, experienced abrupt personal and professional disorientation in the chaos and violence that shook his Chilean homeland during the 1973 military coup. Searching for a personal philosophy of life that would complement his emerging thoughts and theories of perception and cognition, Varela was drawn to Tibetan Buddhist philosophy and practice. Adopting the unity of mind and body and subjective-objective undivided consciousness as a central tenet of perception, Varela experienced not only blossoming popularity among the 1980's new age cognitive research audience, but also a core set of spiritual values and meditative practices that inspired others during his extended fight with cancer.

Franz Reichle, director of *monte grande - what is life?*, faced a considerable editorial challenge in attempting to present an objective account of Varela's life for the uninitiated, even as Varela himself posits his conviction that there is no objective reality, only integrated subjective encounter with the world, what Varela terms "our own dance together." The documentary contains touchstones of Varela's life, such as childhood film clips and images, excerpts of interviews with each of Varela's three spouses and children, and a sampling of impressions that range from luminaries such as the Dalai Lama and computer scientist Heinz von Foerster to academic acquaintances such as Harvard Professor Anne Harrington. Director Reichle presents a non-linear film sequence that intersperses the rural environment and culture of Monte Grande at the base of the Chilean Andes mountains with Varela's admirers and families. Varela himself lecturing in different venues or musing in contemplative solitude near the end of his life form the majority of the presentation.

The friends and family that appear during the film provide narration. A placid and contemplative original soundtrack features soft Tibetan chanting. Some previously recordings of Varela are presented with minimal re-editing. In contrast to the unpredictable sequence for portraying Varela the person, one

aspect Monte Grande culture is given a linear and unifying role to represent an unchanging reality. A home baker constructs empanadas, first the dough and then the filling, in several unhurried and methodical steps interspersed throughout the film. In the shadow of the Andes, a daily ritual transforms natural bounty into a kind of subjective unchanging truth. Made without automation, no two empanadas will ever be identical, nor taste identically in any subjective experience. The baking sequences also provide visual refreshment for viewers that grow weary of philosophic declarations. Most of the speakers use English language in their presentations, and English subtitles accompany some segments, even the decent English of the Dalai Lama. The visual sequence offered at the beginning, prior to the Valera's first appearance, could be interpreted in a variety of ways, but might be a bit disconcerting for contemporary younger audiences with impatient tendencies.

College and adult audiences could benefit from this compact interdisciplinary introduction to one internationally respected theoretician of perception that rejected the mainstream theoretical information-processing model of cognition. One viewing may not provide enough opportunity for students to personally engage the complexity of Valera's integration of cognition with Buddhist philosophy and practice, so I would recommend that if the video is used in a classroom setting, it should subsequently be put on reserve for individual review. I personally benefited from watching the video more than once. No, I was not writing down the *empanada* recipe.

**Recommended.**

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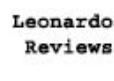
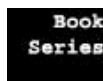
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## Monte Grande—What Is Life?

by Franz Reichle, Director; featuring Francisco Varela and H.H. Tenzin Gyatso, XIV Dalai Lama  
 First Run Films / Icarus, New York, 2004  
 VHS, 80 mins., col.  
 Sales: \$398; rental: \$125  
 Distributor's website: <http://www.frif.com/new2005/mon.html>.

*Reviewed by Rob Harle*  
*Australia*

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This is a gentle and moving film. It is so refreshing to see a movie that whilst presenting challenging and provocative ideas does so without a hint of aggression. Without the hard-sell, in-your-face hype that many Hollywood style movies and, particularly, one hour television specials of similar genre, project.

Francisco Varela, who died in 2001 at age 54 was a truly great scientist, not only because of the contributions he made to neurobiology and cognitive science but because of his passion and dedication to the quest of science. When students came to work with him, he would simply observe them working on a project for a short time; from this observation he could tell if science was their calling. As the film shows, this passion brushed off on everyone with whom Varela was associated, including His Holiness the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama.

The film successfully integrates the three major aspects of Varela's work and life: (1) the notion of embodiment (2) the meaning of self-responsibility and (3) spirituality, in a way that is easy to understand. It is a film suitable for virtually all ages and is not especially abstruse in scientific jargon or complexity. Franz Reichle is to be congratulated on creating a film that has taken a complex scientific and philosophical issue—the nature of embodiment or, perhaps, better put, "How is it possible for body and mind to exist as an integrated whole?"—and presenting it in an uncomplicated manner. This success is partly due to Varela's own gift for communication; it is, perhaps, also his personal appearance in the film that makes it so special. The film is grounded most sensitively in the reality of Varela's personal life—his partners, children, and his ordeal with cancer, much of the footage is in and around his home in Chile.

*Monte Grande—What is Life?* does not dwell on Varela's academic institutional life as such, giving no real mention of the papers and books he has published. It contains extensive footage of many of his closest associates, including Humberto Maturana, Heinz von Foerster, Jean-Pierre Dupuy, and Professor Anne Harrington. These leading scientists and philosophers all help explain Varela's ideas, especially the notion of autopoiesis (life based on autonomy) and the nature of consciousness. Their presence in the film together with members of his family, including Amy Cohen Varela and former partners, helps us understand a little better Francisco Varela the person.

As Varela himself explains, his association with Buddhism began after a more or less revelatory dream that, simply stated, convinced him that all his current scientific explanations of the meaning of life were nonsense. This revelation started him on a new intellectual investigative adventure that now included spirituality. That is, it allowed his heart and head to work together harmoniously and brought about the realisation of the true value of subjective observation *as well as* objective, empirical evidence as valid scientific ways of knowing. It was the spiritual-scientific symbiosis aspect of his life and work that brought about a close association with the Dalai Lama.

Varela was a great conference attendee and organiser and had quite a following at these. As the film shows not all these conferences were hard-edge scientific affairs, with footage of the 1981 Lindisfarne and the Mind and Life Conference. My only criticism of the film is that it could have benefited from a sensitive background music theme.

Whilst I'm not sure that the film completely succeeds in deconstructing the division between science and art as Bernhard Pörksen suggests on the front cover—it is going to take more than a short film, brilliant as this one is, to bring about such a miracle. His words do, however, sum up the film nicely, "Delightful! Varela was a master of synthesis . . . . Admired, controversial, and endowed with the intoxicating passion of an exceptionally gifted researcher. Told affectionately and gently, touchingly and astutely . . . (MONTE GRANDE) succeeds . . . in deconstructing the prevailing division between science and art".

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