

Into Great Silence: Presence, Absence, and the Edge of Documentary

Steven Schoen

Monastic life and filmmaking both search the edges of the physical world looking for something more. A monk hopes to find God at the boundaries of embodied experience. A filmmaker, too, trusts that the surfaces of physical things might evoke something beyond themselves. There is a shared notion that carefully attending to observable reality might offer a path to its transcendence.

Until recently, documentary theorists have tended to understand that *something more* as representation, rooted in the semiotic function of symbols.¹ Bill Nichols's 1992 seminal work on documentary theory is titled *Representing Reality*.² If the heart of documentary has to do with representing the world, then when light reflected from the surfaces of that world is encoded onto film, it transforms from a physical encounter with a camera into the ephemerality of human meaning-making. The realm of flesh becomes the word of symbols. So for many theorists, the work of documentary texts is the work of discourse—the work of language and symbolic expression.

More recently there has been an affective turn in documentary scholarship, shifting analytical attention to the embodied, audiovisual experience of encountering a film.³ Scholars are directing attention beyond the semantic work of documentaries to instead “attune our critical sensibilities to the unmediated encounter between sign and body, and to the resonating vibrations of reception and response that emerge from this meeting.”⁴ A

film's depictions are "not a code, message or meaning to decipher . . . they are instead apprehended as performative in themselves—as *doing*."⁵

From the perspective of this affective turn, *something more* instead flows from the "multivalent operations of documentary textuality."⁶ Documentary is a space of encounter with perceptual experiences that arouse emotional and visceral responses and exceed semiotic containment, yet to do real filmic work.

One form this affective excess can take is when the specificities and intensities of documentary depictions work to disrupt narrative. Finn Daniels-Yoemans describes the images of trauma presented in director Gideon Koppel's 2008 UK film *Sleep Furiously*: "The filmmaker deploys aesthetic strategies that serve to disrupt spectatorial engagement with 'story' It is through these affective—non-symbolic, non-cognitive—interpositions that the film *registers*, rather than narrates, [and] allows for an experiential engagement with the community's condition of traumatisedness."⁷

For Daniels-Yoemans, Koppel's film shows the capacity of documentary to render affect as intensities of presence. Story gives way to depictions that invite viewers into a visceral encounter with trauma.

Likewise, for Dan Fleming, it is presence that generates affect. Documentary affect can be "linked to a sensing of particularisms with hard edges."⁸ That is, a depiction can be so particularized that it destabilizes narrative and "opens out to other possible connections."⁹ Space is opened for cultural resonances and their affective intensities through the extrasemantic work of a depicted presence.

While documentary theorists have recognized the capacity of documentary depictions to exceed a film's semiotic content and invite an affective engagement, Philip Gröning's 2005 German film *Die Große Stille* (*Into Great Silence*) invites us to consider a more subtle capacity of documentary to convey affect at the edge of presence, within an oscillation with absence.¹⁰

Into Great Silence documents the experience of Carthusian monks as they seek transcendence through tending to the details of daily life according to statutes laid out by Saint Bruno of Cologne in the ninth century. The film has neither a traditional plot nor a real organizing set of ideas. Instead, the film uses a study of surface and detail to stretch the genre conventions of

documentary to find their limit, trace their edge, and suggest more. As A. O. Scott observed in the *New York Times*, “At first, as your mind adjusts to the film’s contemplative pace, you may experience impatience. Where is the story? Who are these people? But you surrender to *Into Great Silence* . . . By the end, what you have learned is impossible to sum up, but your sense of the world is nonetheless perceptibly altered.”¹¹

The affective capacities of documentary expressed in Gröning’s film articulate in particularly evocative ways with the embodied daily practices of monastic life as a path to transcendence. That is, *Into Great Silence* shows the capacities of documentary to evoke a sense of the immaterial by attending to the edge of the material in a way that corresponds to monastic spirituality. Mundane presence, at its edge, can propose a resonant absence as something deeply real.

Carthusians are noted, even among other monks, for the austerity of their life, and Gröning’s film offers a rare glimpse into their highly cloistered world. It is a world marked by severe simplicity, silence, and isolation. The monks eschew the distractions of ornamentation and material abundance. The Grand Chartreuse, the “mother house” of the order nestled in a remote area of the French Alps near Grenoble, is shown in Gröning’s film as a place of plain, gray stone walls and spare monastic cells with simple wood furnishings. There are no soaring gothic arches, no swirling frescoed depictions of heaven, and no images from the great and vast tradition of Christian art. Two minutes into the film, in white sans serif font on a black background, Gröning quotes the story in the Hebrew scriptures of the prophet Elijah seeking God:

The Lord passed by. Then a great wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord, but He was not in the wind. After that, there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After that came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. After the fire came a gentle whisper.¹²

The imposing presence of a mountain reduced to a whisper, time unadorned with distraction, place without the elaboration of imagination—for the monks these uncover the hard edge of material objects and temporality. There at the border, an absence is exposed that is meant to evoke an ineffable presence. For the monk, one can only press up against the surface and look to what lies beyond in faith.

In 1984, then a twenty-five-year-old filmmaker interested in radical explorations of truth, Gröning sent a letter to the monastery asking for access to film.¹³ He heard back from the monks sixteen years later. The austerity of that time frame inflects the film. Gröning's audiovisual documentation of the monks matches their asceticism. He strips filmmaking to its barest forms. The film does not use voice-over or music other than the plainchant of the monks at liturgy. Gröning shot the film using available light and mostly from fixed camera positions, except for some 8mm film used sparingly as a counterpoint to the rest of the work, which is shot with the starkly present-day feel of high-definition video. We are invited to linger over the images we see, exploring their contours, contemplating and getting lost in their forms (see fig. 1).



Figure 1. *Into Great Silence* (2005).

Gröning's film uses these conventions of documentary filmmaking but stretches them to establish a sense of presence so accentuated as to suggest absence, and then, by further extension, pure presence. For example, the film begins with a thirty-second, nearly motionless shot of the dimly lit face of a monk at prayer. There is no noteworthy movement, just a subtle shift of facial muscles—the barest hint that we are not watching a photograph. There is no music or speech. There are no far off sounds in the background, only room tone—the ambient noise of the room, raising every creak or rustle to awareness. There is no cutaway shot to salve impatience. The film depicts utter stillness, nothingness, as the material face of a monk, shot as pure

surface. We don't know this man, only the muted contours of his face and his stillness. There is no music to cue our emotion, nor are there any context clues to explain what we see (or don't see). There are only thirty seconds of quiet, slowly ticking by, one second after another—relentlessly ambiguous, both absence and presence.

Periodically throughout *Into Great Silence*, Gröning also presents short interludes of the almost clinically lit, close-up faces of monks looking frankly at the camera (see fig. 2). Since we only hear directly from one monk near the end of the film and all other words spoken by the monks are the words of the liturgy, these moments are our only hint at intersubjective access to these people whom we observe for nearly three hours. The monks' expressions are blank, reminiscent of Lev Kuleshov's famous film experiment in the early twentieth century showing the capacity of context editing to bestow deep meaning on blank expressions—except without the context. We see the faces for twenty seconds each, in groups of threes, with each shot separated from others by a dip to black. The effect is both disconcerting and profound. The still, blank faces are not really blank at all. With nothing else to attribute meaning for us, the subtlest facial movement or look of the eye seems intense. The raw physical presence of the individual faces of the monks is stark; it is both powerfully particularizing and thoroughly anonymous. Men are reduced to faces, their material surfaces, and because of the frankness and duration of the shots, the reduction draws attention to itself as such. The images affect viewers in their very failure to signify. The film “both resists and requires the making of meaning.”¹⁴ As viewers encounter the film, presence evokes an absence that, with the monks, longs for more.

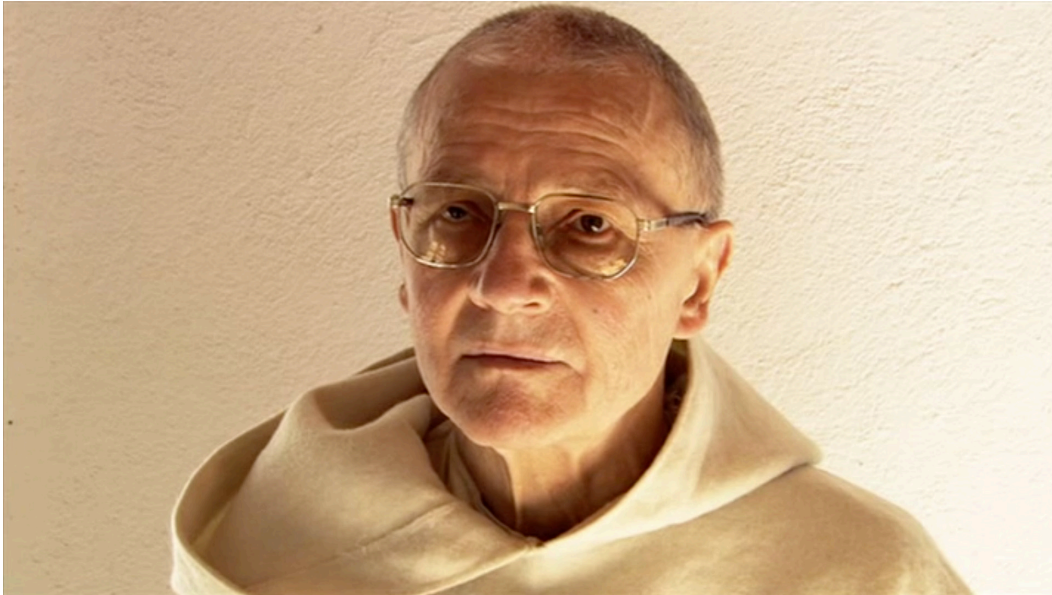


Figure 2. *Into Great Silence* (2005).

Meanwhile, there is also work at the level of meaning-making. In this digital age, a sense that the edge between presence and absence (ones and zeros) can be evocative is not surprising. In a geometric progression of signification, interacting sequences of this abstract digital binary can create embodied experiences and produce sound, color, shape, and movement with intricate complexity. The subtlest nuances of vocal timbre, the faintest twitch of an eye, the richest tapestry of multisensory storytelling can all be rendered with 1 and 0, presence and absence, each digit always fully and crudely representing only itself in radical simplicity—on or off, all or nothing. This most basic abstraction, really a relationship, generates embodied, sensory experience in a seemingly impossible conspiracy between something and nothing. Signification happens in the difference between the two digits, the difference between presence and absence. Yet that gap is a void bounded on one side by a term that is void. Paradoxically, absence is figured through presence via the signification of emptiness: a rupture, in Derrida's terms.¹⁵ That signification hides and obliterates the nothingness of the void and replaces it with something—a something that means nothing, an edge that structures the capacity of something to have meaning. To the degree that meaning relies on the invisibility of its absences, edges become the very place to look for extrasemantic ruptures. In *Into Great Silence* we are invited into an echo of this symbolic oscillation between presence and absence and coaxed to the possibility of something more by the work of the film. Gröning's film works as documentary to performatively evoke a measure of

the spiritual experience it depicts, beyond doctrine and discourse, for a taste of monastic contemplation without ever taking the paths of religion or belief.

We are located by the film at the edge of presence-existence as it aligns with the sublime chasm of absence or nonexistence (death?), which remains hidden within the intensities of presence except at its very edge. Gröning's film shows us that this intensity of the edge can work affectively, pushing past the traditional symbolic work of documentaries to represent reality, and instead invoking the limits of representation as an encounter with the absent Real. The edge can work as an affective invocation of that which lies beyond the intensities of presence, an elusive, productive absence that for the monks suggests the presence of God and for the viewer invites an affective encounter with the existential rupture that makes sense of the monks' faith.¹⁶

At times Gröning constructs traditional realist sequences: a long shot followed by a succession of closer shots to direct viewers' attention and to compress the temporality of the scene. Yet more often, the film reworks these conventions and distends the temporal standards for shots; the camera stays put for a minute or longer. Rather than sharing the freedom of an omniscient camera roaming across the scene, we are fixed in place as unmoving observers, quietly watching, as still as the monks themselves. Gröning tends to frame these shots through doorways or looking past walls, positioning us outside the room. We are at the edge of the space, studying its edges to be drawn into a monk-like experience. Yet we also remain outside the space we see, secured within the conventions of documentary as a genre and its tropes of objectivity and facticity, even as the temporal distention disrupts other dimensions of those same realist conventions and their pull toward signification.¹⁷ That is, the film as documentary is structured to enhance a sense of observation and to draw viewers to the edge of the scene as such, in a kind of oscillation between the specificities of the physical locations depicted and the evocation of implied, parallel, spatial-temporal "elsewhens"—in this case left as a mystical potentiality.¹⁸ We experience the filmic reflections from the depicted surfaces as something real, but also with an emptied signification pointing to more. In this sense, Gröning's documentary leads us inexorably to the boundary of symbol and the tangible world.

Thus, the filmic depiction of monastic austerity found in *Into Great Silence* might be said to offer a kind of hint at the insights of monastic practice, at the stark limits of the physical world experienced bodily in a life of ascetic

deprivation, prayer, silence, and isolation. The monks' path to the edge of that world and the boundary of transcendence is instead constituted for viewers as profoundly real through an experience of austerity via the film. As the temporal conventions and narrative forms of documentary are ruptured, viewers are left to study the edge of its surfaces for its hints of absence. We are invited into an experience of the edge, as edge, as an oscillation between presence and absence that hints at more. Gröning's film offers an experience of what it depicts; film becomes a performative experience of monastic spirituality. A documentary space is opened for an affective, monk-like encounter with the film and its edges that offers a sense of something more.

Notes

- 1 See for example Jane M. Gaines, "Introduction: The Real Returns," in *Collecting Visible Evidence*, eds. Jane M. Gaines and Michael Renov (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 1–18; Trinh T. Minh-ha, *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001); and Michael Renov, "Introduction: The Truth About Non-Fiction," in *Theorizing Documentary*, ed. Michael Renov (New York: Routledge, 1993), 1–11.
- 2 Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).
- 3 For some diverse examples see Thomas W. Benson, "Michael Moore and the Rhetoric of Documentary: Art, Argument, Affect," in *Michael Moore and the Rhetoric of Documentary*, ed. Thomas W. Benson and Brian J. Snee (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2015), 1–24; Finn Daniels-Yeomans, "Trauma, Affect and the Documentary Image: Towards a Nonrepresentational Approach," *Studies in Documentary Film* 11 (2017): 2; Alexandra Juhasz and Alisa Lebow, eds., *A Companion to Contemporary Documentary Film* (Malden, MA: John Wiley & Sons, 2015); Ros Murray, "Activism, Affect, Identification: Trans Documentary in France and Spain and Its Reception," *Studies in European Cinema* 11 (2014): 2; Travis Vogan, "Irrational Power: Jack Johnson, Prizefighting Films, and Documentary Affect," *Journal of Sport History* 37 (2010): 3.
- 4 Daniels-Yeomans, "Trauma, Affect and the Documentary Image," 90–91.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 89.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 89.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 94–95.
- 8 Dan Fleming, "The Staging of Affect and the 'Elsewhens' of Documentary Space," *Media Fields Journal* 3 (2011): 8, mediafieldsjournal.org/the-staging-of-affect/2011/7/21/the-staging-of-affect-and-the-elsewhens-of-documentary-space.html.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 11.
- 10 *Into Great Silence*, dir. Philip Gröning, Zeitgeist Films, US, 2006.
- 11 A. O. Scott, "Lives Lived at a Monk's Pace, Allowing Time for the Spirit to Flourish," *New York Times*, 28 February 2007, movies2.nytimes.com/2007/02/28/movies/28sile.html.
- 12 The film's translation of the biblical passage from 1Kings 19:11–12.
- 13 C. K. Sample, III, "Video Interview: Philip Groening, Director of Into Great Silence,"

- Sample the Web*, 24 January 2006, sampletheweb.com/2006/01/24/video-interview-philip-groening-director-of-into-great-silence/.
- 14 Daniels-Yeomans, "Trauma, Affect and the Documentary Image," 87.
 - 15 Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context," In *Limited Inc.*, ed. Gerald Graff, trans. Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 1-21.
 - 16 While I am arguing that the oscillation of presence and absence in the film works affectively, it is interesting to note resonances with Lacan's notion of the Real as the sublime, inaccessible-yet-productive externality beyond the symbolic order exerting force as the ultimate object of unobtainable human desire. For a discussion of the Lacanian notion of the Real and a documentary analysis that seems compatible with the affective approach of this essay, see Garnet C. Butchart, "On the Void: The Fascinating Object of Evil in *Human Remains*," in *The Changing Face of Evil in Film and Television*, ed. Martin F. Norden (New York: Rodopi, 2007).
 - 17 Examples of realist conventions include compressing time and navigating space according to the logic of narrative subjectivity within a world created by the film.
 - 18 Fleming, "The Staging of Affect," 11.

Steven W. Schoen is Assistant Professor of Critical Media and Cultural Studies at Rollins College, Winter Park, Florida. His work and teaching brings together documentary production, theory and criticism. His published work about documentary has focused on the rhetoric and functions of space and scene.