

Bruno di Marino

BODY CONTACT

Eroticism in Gioli's anatomical imaginary

In almost all of Gioli's films, there is a triumph of the body. The metonymic body, seen as a fragment to be exalted in itself and through itself. The athletic body that portrays motion in the pre-cinematographic iconography of a Muybridge or a Marey (*L'assassino nudo*, *Piccolo film decomposto*), or that no less athletic body of an authentic olympic champion (the diver Cagnotto) transfigured by means of multiple exposures or [by the texture of] the emulsion (*Del tuffarsi e dell'annegarsi*). But the body in Gioli's cinema, as in his photography is by preference an erotic element, with an ambivalent eroticism that attracts and repels, that tempts one to or alludes to the sexual act or which, on the contrary, prefigures an encounter with death (*Filmarilyn*).

The inscription of desire in Gioli is something deliberately unstable, just as the apparatus that registers it, extrapolating it from the reality in which it is found in order to inscribe it on the surface of the filmstrip. An inscription never concluded, thanks to which, the body becomes an ambivalent sign. Mutilated or frozen. An ambiguous luminous trace, without identity, as in the few seconds of *Film stenopeico* (*L'uomo senza macchina da presa*), where the motion picture camera explores the body of a woman starting with her hooded head, showing us her mound of Venus with a bit of a red blouse on her lower abdomen, and then her enormous breasts. The fleeting eroticism captured through the pinhole: what could be more objectively voyeuristic than this device for spying on and revealing nudity? Fundamentally, it's as if Gioli took literally what Baudrillard wrote about hard core cinema: "Porno actors are faceless, and cannot be beautiful, or ugly, or expressive; it's a matter of something incompatible—functional nudity erases everything in the utter spectacularity of sex.¹" But for Gioli, the spectacularity of the body and of sex is not naturally something obscene, but rather something closely tied to the organic, to the natural, to the most profoundly ancestral dimension.

The history of experimental cinema is full of examples in which the point of departure for any number of possible elaborations of an image is a pornographic film, "violated" and twisted in its dual corporeal value: to be at once a *body-image* and a *body-object*: that means an audiovisual transcription of sexually active bodies and the film material, or rather, a body of celluloid which lends itself to being physically manipulated. If Bargellini in his *Trasferimento di modulazione* [*Modulation Transfer*] (1968) subjects the filmstrip to a particular chemical process, arresting the development phase and printing and decomposing the sequences of a hard core film in black and white, Gioli in his two explicitly pornographic films—*Quando la pellicola è calda* and *Interlinea*—employs other procedures, which are less "structural" in filmic terms, but conceptually no less invasive. The problem is not so much of aesthetically cancelling out the obscenity of the images, of rendering artistically what is in fact lewd, but rather of visually

¹ Jean Baudrillard, *Della seduzione* [*On Seduction*], Milan, SE, 1997, p. 43.

transfiguring the material, creating a series of metaphors gathered from hard core cinema, and more generally, from the sexual act (for example, narcissism), and even from the filmic apparatus *tout court* (the individual frame, the frame-by-frame advance of the filmstrip).

The very title of *Quando la pellicola è calda* (1974) is a metaphor: “caldo” is “hot,” a term² designating a genre, that derives from the heat of the body. But it’s that same material filmic body that becomes hot under the light of the lamp in projection, as if the erotic act was consummated first of all inside the machine that produces the visions. In this sense, the body to body contact that we see on the screen, obtained by means of a “mirror effect” or by multiple exposure, is the performative manifestation of a self-reflexive cinema, prisoner of its own closed circuit. What exactly are we speaking about? Just as much about pornographic cinema, as about experimental cinema, two opposed and perfectly complimentary genres, that have a great number of points of contact. For, there is certainly, the desire and the effort of Gioli to sublimate with plastic-graphic qualities such material, re-reading it by means of rhythms, displacements and erasure by scratching, as well as the need to create, starting from a repetitively obscene image, an obscenely repetitive image, where sexual mechanics become something playful and at the same time something disturbing, as in case of the body with two penises, etc.

In the first part of the film—divided as often happens in Gioli’s cinema into chapters designated by surrealist and poetic inter-titles—the material providing the point of departure is pornographic sequences “found” by Gioli, that the artist makes use of in order to construct a personal erotic vision and where the male body is absent; the performers in fact are women who penetrate themselves or penetrate each other with rubber phalluses. The kaleidoscopic symphony that the artist excavates from them is that of a mechanical ballet, which at some points reaches total abstraction, with symmetrical multiplications of fragments of bodies and underwear. This mixture of lesbianism, fetishism and auto-eroticism where the female body simulates the male body and gradually introduces the spectator to the appearance of the true and proper phallus, which appears in the following chapter entitled “*sought-after geometric element*” a definition which alludes not so much to masculine/feminine competition for possession of the phallus, as to the fact that the performer generates his or her own double: the result is two faces with two mouths filled up in the process of sucking a male sexual organ with a bifurcated glans.

The alternation of bodies is articulated in a pulsing magma of blacks, whites, and greys, intersecting, transparent, superimposing light zones (skin) with dark ones (hair), but above all in pictorial-cinematic compositions that hypnotize the spectator through rhythmic variations, sucking the spectator into a sort of profane visual mantra. *Eroticism as music* was the title of an article by Callisto Cosulich which appeared in 1974 in *Paese Sera* in which the critic commented on this film on the occasion of a presentation of it at the Filmstudio of Rome. And, paradoxically, the relevant characteristic of *Quando la*

² Translator’s note: In Italian, the English word “hot” is used to designate pornographic films as a genre.

pellicola è calda is its very lack of sound, a trait which marks the great part of Gioli's cinema, but in this case becomes all the more meaningful, since the artist denies to the characters—and thus to the spectators—the sound of pleasure.

In the final section of the film, the “terrestrial mechanics³” is interrupted, since the artist chooses to close the film with still images (photography, even when removed from the filmic flux, is always ready to go into motion): but these photographs, once again doubled, reproduce first a pregnant woman, then a body seen from behind covered with pustules, and finally a white flare out. Eros is transformed into thanatos, the cry of pleasure of the woman reaching orgasm is replaced by a cry of horror. In sum, the vitalistic body, celebrated in pornographic writing, becomes corrupted, becomes diseased. The degradation is not moral, but physical. First, we hear about it, then we are certain about it. The boiling hot inscription of desire has literally burned the bodies. The cheerful geometric composition was hiding a gloomy figurative de-composition, which Gioli, pitilessly allows to emerge, exactly as when, at the end of *Filmarilyn*, the rite of the image of death interrupts and rips apart the sensual pose of the actress.

Interlinea is quite different (2008), having been made at a distance of nearly 25 years. This time Gioli starts with pornographic material in color and, once again, twists it, detourns it, to adapt the situationist notion coined by Debord, working not in the area outside the field of view—as in *Blow Job* by Andy Warhol, where we see only the ecstatic face of the beneficiary of an act of fellatio, but not the person administering it—but rather outside the frameline. Showing us the lower part of the frame that precedes and the upper part of the frame that follows, the artist splits in two the representation, obtaining a strange etymological allusion (the area *outside the scene* that derives from the Latin term *ob-scenum*): the sexual act is everything, is seen, is there, but is decomposed, fragmented, deconstructed, thus sabotaged, decentered, emptied of its explosive charge. Censorship is the fruit of a structural disorder and not dictated by a moral order. Besides that, naturally, Gioli works with multiple exposures, by means of which, he superimposes on this sequence, frames of other scenes, multiplying and rendering simultaneous these sexual acts: Gioli does nothing more than transform into an experimental technique what in the 70s was a typical procedure employed by film projectionists, that is, “interpolation,” which consisted of superimposing, during the projection of an erotic film, explicit pornographic details, using a super8 projector, in order to elude censorship, transforming a *soft core* film into a *hard core* film. A kind of artisanal expanded cinema, that for the nth time renders pornographic audiovisual inscription extremely close to experimental cinema practice.

Even in this case, as in *Quando la pellicola è calda*, the lack of sound leaves to the visual, the task of creating its own rhythm in the succession—now accelerated, now in slow motion, now frozen in a “stop-frame”—of images. Thus, of the sound there remains only the simulacrum, the sign, the trace: the optical track that runs parallel to the images. But the expressive characteristic of *Interlinea* is the continuous pulsation of the frame,

³ I can't quite tell what he is playing on: “terrestrial,” as opposed to “celestial mechanics”?

the intermittent quality and flashing of single frames, interspersed with black frames, or with light, superimposed according to a twofold logic: at once *pulsational* (the sexual drive and the material pulsing of the film strip), and above all, *frame-by-frame*.

In any case, after a couple of minutes, Gioli upends the apparatus and proposes to us no longer a horizontal advance of successive frames but a vertical one. The frame is composed of three parts: three strips which are intermittently illuminated, three images turned horizontally, that create a composition of faces in ecstasy and genitals in action. If in *Quando la pellicola è calda* an hypnotic effect was created by the granular impasto of mirrored textures, here it is created by the flickering of the filmstrip, by the normal effect of the persistence of vision in the eye of the spectator.

Between these two extremes — which delimit the corporeal *ecumene* and visualize the farthest boundary that the artist from Rovigo has reached— there are naturally a series of other works by Gioli (filmic as well as photographic) in which the body, or portions of it, are represented. It is almost never a matter of a peripheral, marginal presence, but always of a meaningful and decisive one within a logic of image-narrative, which is a part of, or at least internal to, a series.

How can the crude maker of pornography and the most subtle erotic element be reconciled and brought into agreement in Gioli's aesthetics? There is no separation. And from the rest, only a hypocritical culture of moving images has been able to separate eroticism and pornography, on the basis of a bureaucratic distinction between organs which are barely revealed and organs in action/erection. In Gioli, the crossing-over of the two territories is presented in the exaltation of corporeal naturalness, thanks to which, for example, the female vulva is associated not only with a butterfly, but with the very flicker of the framewise movement of images: a kind of pun translated into images. We are speaking of the unreleased film *Farfallio*.

Paraphrasing the adage of McLuhan that *the medium is the message*, we might say that in Gioli *the medium is the body* and vice versa, or even *the body is the medium*: his pinhole film camera, not entirely by accident, *measures* the human body imprinting it upon the film strip. The body to body contact between the subject and the apparatus is, in some cases, mediated by a pure and simple photosensitive contact of the body with photosensitive material: his unpublished photographic prints which reproduce the male and female sexual organs (*Vulva* 2004), bring us back to the *genital* degree zero of Gioli's imaginary, an anatomical imaginary from whence the body, come what may, emerges triumphant. A “glorious” body not in the Christian sense of a merit that it will acquire after the resurrection of the flesh, but in the sense of a glorified body, regenerated and purified by and in light reduced to a pure icon beyond good and evil, sin and redemption.