

Paolo Gioli, Man Without a Movie Camera

by Jean-Michel Bouhours

Quite a number of questions are being posed in this year of the commemoration of the centenary of the cinema—in the land of the Lumière Brothers we prefer to speak of the first century—concerning its future. The electronic screen has beaten out movie theaters, in Italy even more than in France, the latter leading a David vs. Goliath battle against Hollywood, the great new colonizer of the planet, that has become the *global village* McLuhan had promised us. In the name of cold principles of economy, of profitability, and above all of the profound mutations in our communication behavior, the death of the 7th art has been announced, or rather its being surpassed. The cinema has created a monster, a world of iconic debasement, where vulgarity and mendacity triumph. Staunchly loyal critics call for a burst of action, for an historical rupture,¹ for a *new new wave*, refusing to see that at the center of what is commonly called the film avant-garde, numerous artists have for a long time already surpassed the economic contingencies of the cinema in order to explore independent creative activity.

Autarky, anti-industrial economy

This critical situation in the cinema has little impact on artists like Paolo Gioli, Jürgen Reble, Tom Drahos, or Métamkine, who all possess the distinguishing characteristic of having distanced themselves from equipment manufacturers, labs, even the manufacturers of light sensitive materials—inventing their own personal tools of creation.

Paolo Gioli was certainly a precursor of this phenomenon developing today, notably in Europe, which leads me to think that the margin of today is in the process of inventing a post-industrial cinema, detached from consumerist contingencies.

A painter and silkscreen print-maker, Paolo Gioli converted to photo-chemical support materials, photography and the cinema towards the end of the 1960s, after a trip to the US during the course of which he would discover the New American Cinema and the turmoil of American Counter-Culture in the university context. Linking up with the Italian Independent Cinema movement centered around the Filmstudio di Roma, where people like Gianfranco Baruchello, Massimo Bacigalupo, and Alfredo Leonardi were working, his extreme experimentalism would place Gioli at the margins of any collective phenomena and contribute greatly, on the other hand, to the durable character of his artistic activity.²

Gioli is a photographer and filmmaker in the way Picasso and Braque were painters and sculptors when they made their marvelous cubist collages by assembling the herteroclitic objects in their immediate surroundings.

¹ See Pascal Bonitzer's article "L'image invisible" in *Passages de l'image*, Paris, 1990, Centre Pompidou.

² Besides Gioli, I know of only Ugo Nespolo and the filmmaking couple of Yervant Gianichian and Angela Ricci-Lucchi who continue to produce films in Italy.

Any means are appropriate for him to capture (natural) light and shape it to his purposes on a light sensitive surface, whether a photographic plate, or a strip of film. The humble nature of the means employed and the unceasing support of his friend and patron Paolo Vampa, have made of Gioli one of the rare independent filmmakers to have survived the 1980s.

From *The Man with a Movie Camera* to *The Man without a Movie Camera*

From the acquisition of his first Bolex, Gioli conferred on the apparatus extensive functions: shooting, special effects, even printing as had the first Lumière cameramen. The apparatus becomes for the artist a portable studio, a small traveling lab permitting shooting, compositing images and their chemical developing in an integrated and independent process, whatever the circumstance. This return to cinematic primitivism did not originate in an ideological bias, but was rather the revenge of an artist on technology, in which the latter would be made the echo of his inventiveness, taking up the project articulated by Theo Van Doesburg but rarely realized, of the necessary adaptation of cinematic technology to visual dynamism.³

And there is no known photographic technology that Gioli has not applied to the cinema. For example, the process of “photo-finish”⁴ derived from the photodynamism of Antonio Bragaglia, with which he creates anamorphoses of bodies giving results close to those of Ducos du Hauron, would produce in the cinema *Film finish* (1986-89), a film with a double existence: as beautiful to examine as a film strip as in conventional projection. In the same way, the artist would adopt for his films the technique of pinhole photography mastered by him in 1969, surpassing all previous experiments which had previously attempted to surpass the constraints of technology. A number of *experimental* filmmakers have subverted the range of what the tool might have been able to impose in the way of artist academicism. Marie Menken forced the recognition of the expressive qualities of shaky images taken with a hand-held camera; Jonas Mekas imposed the aesthetic of the over- or underexposure of images, refusing to use a light meter and in the process sharpening his eye; Stan Brakhage, finally, in one of the primary works of the underground cinema, *Metaphors on Vision*, gave several suggestions for finishing off in the cinema the first stages of pictorial Impressionism, denouncing this “post card effect

³ In a text he wrote for *Lo schermo negato Cronache del cinema italiano non ufficiale* [*The negated screen: Chronicle of the non-official Italian Cinema*], by Sirio Luginbühl and Rafael Perrota, 1976, Milano, ed. Shakespeare and Co., Gioli points out that his working methods had been involuntarily inspired by the experience of Medvedkin and his friends in agit-prop cinema.

⁴ Here “photo-finish” refers not to the end of a close horse race, but rather the technique of causing distortion in a photographic image by moving the object photographed relative to the direction of movement of the slit in a focal plane shutter. Most movie cameras—the Bolex included—employ a shutter, which is closer to the slit-scan shutter used for high-speed photography, than the familiar leaf shutter used by traditional still cameras. In a still camera with a slit-scan shutter, the shutter moves horizontally, so that distortion can be introduced by lateral motion; in a movie camera, the motion of the shutter is vertical so that most of the time such distortion is not noticeable (translator’s note).

(salon painting).”⁵ These are among the most famous landmarks of the liberation of the modern artist from the cinematographic tool and from the conventions attached to its use. These different modalities nonetheless pass through recourse to the camera and its possibilities for intervention in the process of shooting: frame rates, filters, exposure, etc. The motion picture camera becomes a sort of hat for the filmmaker, who is transformed into a magician.

But none went so far as Gioli in proposing alternative constructions of motion picture camera! Gioli utilizes pinhole photography, a mechanism of the *camera obscura* permitting the formation of an image, without the aid of a lens, inside the camera body, which has been pierced by a small hole through which light passes. With *L'uomo senza macchina da presa* [*Man without a Movie Camera*], a pinhole film dedicated to Dutch scientist Rainer Gemma Frisius, Gioli transports us to an elsewhere, an imaginary world in the heart of the mechanisms of perspective, where the miracle of nature of the formation of images occurs; as if suddenly we were immersed in an immense *camera obscura*. Isn't this the return to the primordial world of Cézanne, that Merleau Ponty called the first philosophical act, the return to the world of experience prior to the objective world?⁶ Distant indeed from the post-card effect of which Brakhage speaks, we experience a childlike marvel at frail, fragile images. The replacement of the motion picture camera by a long tube with 150 pinhole perforations, each of which registers one of 150 frames of film, imposes on the filmmaker short repetitive sequences the filmmaker will turn to his advantage. The displacement of the point of view imposed by the tube, produced on the nude body of a female model, produces a strong erotic charge; this movement of a reiterative vision deceives us. As a kind of subliminal image, the neck of the young woman appears between her thighs at the moment the film loops, suddenly taking on phallic aspects. A mirage? An optical effect? Gioli brings us back to lucidity when confronted by artifice. By way of allusion to Dziga Vertov's antithetical *Man with a Movie Camera*, Gioli, the experimentalist, demonstrates with his *Man without a Movie Camera*, that the artist possesses the means for a total mastery of his mechanisms. With the pinhole technique—where any kind of object can serve as the *camera obscura*, from a

⁵ Stan Brakhage, in *Metaphors on Vision*, New York, *Film Culture*, 1963 with an introduction by P. Adams Sitney

⁶ “Le premier acte philosophique serait... de revenir au monde vécu en deça du monde objectif,... de retrouver les phénomènes, ... de reveiller la perception et de déjouer la ruse par laquelle elle se laisse oublier comme fait et comme perception au profit de l'objet qu'elle nous livre et de la tradition rationnelle qu'elle fonde.” [“The first philosophical act would appear to be...to return to the world of actual experience which is prior to the objective world... to rediscover phenomena... to reawaken perception and to foil its trick of allowing us to forget it as a fact and as perception in the interest of the object which it presents to us and of the rational tradition to which it gives rise”] Maurice Merleau-Ponty in *Phénoménologie de la perception* [*Phenomenology of Perception* trans. by Colin Smith, (New York: Humanities Press, 1962) and (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962) translation revised by Forrest Williams, 1981; reprinted, 2002). Page 90 in translated edition.

kitchen utensil to the buttons on a jacket, from salted crackers to the artist's own hand—Gioli takes up one of the essential artistic problematics of the second half of the century: the body as a vector of psychic automatism or interface between the psyche and the work. We are clearly at the center of contemporary artistic problematics. Is it necessary for us to repeat it? The work of Paolo Gioli clearly has nothing to do with some vague nostalgia for the past. Gioli, like Brakhage, and many others, pursues an unprecedented vision in which the image is no longer the *analogon* of the thing represented, but rather the metonymy (a visual trope) of a mental process.

Cinema and mental constructs

Gioli, similarly to Stan Brakhage in this regard, articulates his visual works from two points of reference: the philosophical thought of Ludwig Wittgenstein, on the one hand, and the literary work of Gertrude Stein, on the other. Like the texts of the celebrated collector and friend of Picasso, the iconic constructions of Gioli have meaning only as mental mechanisms. *Traumatografo* [*Traumatograph*] is characteristic of this attempt to represent a psychological state, a drive. The images are presented in symbolic fashion, outside all discursive logic. Only death, fatal outcome and perfectly representable reality, will be staged, dramatized by an arrested image from a sequence of a driver thrown through a window accompanied by the ringing of a telephone. The calling into question of figurative representation—*Darstellung*—for Wittgenstein, explored in detail in the *Philosophical Investigations*⁷ serves as a kind of Ariadne's thread in the work of Gioli: the manipulation of his images, the alternation of positive and negative, the effects of matting images, the charged quality (*Prägnanz*) of the subject matter, the erratic movements of the images all confirm this permanent quest for the relationship between the *cogito* and the *imago*, the presentation of which he stages, for example, in a sequence of *Il volto inciso* [*The Graven Face*], where the cinematographic image is projected onto the face of the person being filmed. Gioli here juxtaposes the image and its mental perception—transmitted to us as spectators—by means of the grimaces or mimetic actions of the actor. The images of Paolo Gioli refuse a contingent orthonormal and isomorphic representation of physiological vision; they are, in the iconic domain, what the eruptions of Antonin Artaud were in language, the surpassing, dear to Wittgenstein, of the surpassing of oneself.

Gioli and representation

In spite of the fact that the experience of seeing predominates over what is signified, a certain number of themes cut through the film work of Gioli in one place or the other: desire, the body, death, the act of seeing.

Characteristically, the filmmaker looks for the images of his film in his surroundings: his family and friends, his cat, his house, his garden; or, if it's a case of "external" recuperated images (what is called in a certain jargon "found footage"), the latter are frequently rephotographed from television.

In *Immagini disturbate da un intenso parassita* [*Images Disturbed by an Intense Parasite*] (1970), he proceeds this way: playing with systems of mattes and counter

⁷ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 1953, G.E.M. Anscombe and R. Rhees (eds.), G.E.M. Anscombe (trans.), Oxford: Blackwell.

mattes, he makes a collage film (including the sound track by Pier Farri) blending medical imagery, cartoons, and feature films. This is not the cinematographic image, which makes up a part of a greater videographic whole, but its inverse: the electronic image as a fragment of the filmic image. The television image is inscribed throughout the film through the luminous pulsing it produces because Gioli films TV directly with his camera without concerning himself with the phase shifts that occur between the cinematographic image and the video image, creating the black horizontal bands that impart to the image a kind of periodic luminous surge. But it is these multiple “technical imperfections”—the shifts in the frame line of the mattes, the sparkling of the image, their very instability—which in Gioli’s work creates the sum of its visual richness and the affirmation of a dynamic vision.

Quando la pellicola è calda [*When the Film Gets Hot*] (1974) is an interesting example of the recycling of “found footage.” As its title ironically implies, Gioli used images from pornographic films, especially close-ups of sexual organs at work that the filmmaker truncated by his characteristic use of a mirror effect—that is, an image cut vertically in the middle. Through the play of mattes and counter-mattes, the image is recreated via two half-images, one being the inverse of the other. The explanation of this process has great importance because Gioli makes frequent recourse to it in his films. In *Quando la pellicola è calda*, the process produces fantastic results, causing the image to oscillate between a representation, which one knows to be false but accepts mentally—and here we are very much within Wittgenstein’s philosophical problematics—and an aberrant anamorphic representation. This play with the representation of the body recalls the pantheon of surrealist erotic imagery. This mirror effect reflects certain famous photographs by Man Ray, such as “Demain” (1924). The morphological aberrations strongly recall the contortions of Hans Bellmer’s doll and the celebrated optical distortions of Kertesz. In one part of the film, entitled *pantomima di impudicizie o rito locale* [*pantomime of indecencies, or local rite*], Gioli explores with brio this border zone between surreality and reality containing the sublime ambiguity of a nearly perfect onanistic gesture where only the hand, with its ten fingers, causes us to remember that we are confronting a completely illusionistic mechanism. But beyond a strong allusion to surrealist eroticism and most scandalous manifestations, Gioli’s films play, with a great deal of humor, on pornographic iconography and its detournement. The scenes become incurably orgiastic; the beings and their organs split in two for face to face encounters of great comic effect. If Gioli chooses to mock *perspectiva artificialis* for this representation of desire, for *Traumatografo* (1973), he will choose a metaphoric bias in favor of death. As the semantic construction of *trauma* (injury) and *grafein* (to write), and as an allusion to the small popular device dating from the beginning of the 19th century, the thaumatrope for demonstrating the persistence of vision, the film, in the form of a collage, confronts the spectator with a representation of the death drive. To achieve this, he will cook up a brew of multiple disparate images originating not only in the cinema but in 18th century prints, extracts of home movies with children at play, and war films or even medical imagery. From what might seem an unlikely hodgepodge to hear it described this way, there emerges a strong feeling of unease; proof that it all begins to take on meaning. Gioli succeeds in communicating in this film the unrepresentable suicidal impulse of someone who is psychologically defeated. To achieve this representation of the irrational, Gioli will press into service multiple film processes;

while transgressing the codes of editing in favor of collage, curiously, in this film, the rhetorical figure of the sequencing of shots (the Kuleshov effect) is fully respected. Gioli introduces a personal dimension, regularly marking dates in the film in the manner of a diary film.

With *Del tuffarsi e dell'annegarsi* [*On Diving in and Drowning*] (1972), Gioli creates a kind of anti-Kuleshov effect and constructs a choreography based on a high diving sequence. The take-off of the athlete from the board, then the backwards turned over motion of the body, and finally the penetration of the water become—through the manipulations of the image and their dis-assembling through editing—an allegory of the body in motion, the mastery by the human body of gravity. But after having transported us with happiness through a spatial waltz with the diver, Gioli calls us back to our senses. The ballet of images suddenly freezes to a single still image, demonstrating in this way that this sublimation of reality is due only to the mystification of an illusionistic mechanism, consisting of photographic images.

Problems in perspective

Walter Benjamin brought our attention—and before him Luigi Pirandello—to this similitude of the filmed image and the image reflected back to us by a mirror. This latter, on the other hand, establishes a personal relation, an intimate one, just where the cinema will displace this image towards the audience.⁸ For Gioli, this is a recurrent question in his work with the mirror as a paradigmatic figure. His recourse to primitive mechanisms, to the images of his precursors is most probably a means of making a judgement on the state of the image today. For if Gioli turns to the renaissance mechanism of *perspectiva artificialis* and to the *camera obscura*—the instrumental prototype of modern vision—is it by way of fascination with the past, or in order to affirm a critical position on the aporia of analogical representation, of which Baudelaire made himself the eulogist in a review of the salon of 1859, the exhibition where for the first time photography was presented.⁹ The response allows no ambiguity. The filmmaker revisits the mechanism of perspective as logocentric rationalism, which has little interest in the teleology of light dear to Gioli.¹⁰ He makes reference to the perspective device of the *tavoletta* of Brunelleschi in *Immagini disurbate...*, in a photo-montage where the gaze of the spectator is materialized by a

⁸ Walter Benjamin “L’Oeuvre d’art à l’époque de sa reproductibilité technique” in *Poésie et révolution*, Denöel/Lettres nouvelles, Paris, 1971. [First published in English as “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” in *Illuminations*, trans. by H. Zohn, ed. with intro. by Hannah Arendt, NY: Schocken, 1969. Recently republished in 3 separate versions and revised translations in *Selected Writings, Vol. I-IV*, Cambridge, Mass. & London: Bellknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996-2002].

⁹ cf Peter Galassi “La peinture et l’invention d’un art” in *L’Invention d’un art*, collective editorship under the direction of Alain Sayag and Jean-Claude Lemagny, Paris, Centre Pompidou, 1989. Originally published in English as the catalogue for an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, entitled “Before Photography *Painting and the Invention of Phoography*” as “Before Photography.”

¹⁰ See Hubert Damisch *L’Origine de la perspective*, Paris, 1987, Flammarion. [*The origin of perspective* translated by John Goodman. Cambridge, Mass. : MIT Press, 1994.]

particular angle of vision. This visual cone is seized by a copulatory movement of the eye, which would not have displeased Georges Bataille, the author of the 1928 *Histoire de l'oeil* [*Story of the Eye*], nor the sculptor of the celebrated *pointe à l'oeil* [*spike for the Eye*], Alberto Giacometti.

This entire problem of perspectival representation could only lead Gioli to an interest in the impossible worlds of Maurits Cornelis Escher, to whom he would dedicate a film in 1991, *Metamorfoso* [*Metamorphosis*]. There is no need to recall that Escher, like Gioli, dedicated himself to demonstrating through impossible constructions, the imposture of renaissance perspective. We can find here again then some analogies between screens in the work of Gioli and Escher's simultaneous spaces. Finally Escher represents an exciting alternative to pre-cinema, for a representation of movement in sequences of still images. Gioli worked from plates where two spaces or two worlds were intermingled; the dissolution of one in the other, in spite of the static figures, is related to the lap dissolve in film¹¹ and the filmmaker attempts to demonstrate in this film the links between movement and static representation in a metamorphosis.

Metaphoric constructs

The films of Gioli, in refusing photographic naturalism, demand an aptitude for compositing as the manifestation of the imagination of the artist. Every image that comes out of his camera or from one of his diverse and multiple optical machines creates an analogical rupture in favor of a claim for compositing.

In *Quando la pellicula è calda* the mechanism of dividing the image in the middle regularly produces, in the course of the film, a number of representations of the feminine sex organ. Rendering homage to Luis Buñuel in *Quando l'occhio trema* [*When the Eye Quakes*] (1988), takes up the celebrated metaphor of the eye sliced by a razor and the moon crossed by tapering clouds from the introductory sequence of *Un Chien andalou*. Gioli brings his contribution to the interpretation of this famous sequence, replacing the razor with an ear of corn with the hairlike silk inevitably evoking a phallus. The film is thus constructed by means of a mirror infinity of referential images borrowed from Buñuel's work. A fly running across a photograph of the eye, an eye sewn shut¹² make explicit reference to the themes which haunt the work of the Spanish filmmaker, in the form of iconic interpretations. Gioli turns to his own account various surrealist visual tropes: the pairing of eye/sex organ, seeing/loving, but elegantly invents another by means of them: eye/nipple. The close-up of an eye surrounded by its ciliary hairs is associated with the sensual pleasure of the scene of the embracing lovers from *L'Age d'or*. Finally, he frequently alludes to the Bataille's pineal eye.

Especially the early films of Gioli are based on a self-referential mirror infinity of a tautological nature, between the cinematographic image and its relation to the screen. Gioli has written a certain number of texts on the screen; they evoke a doubly contradictory feeling, of fascination and annoyance. In inverse fashion, notably from the anglo-saxon experience—which lead certain filmmakers to replace the entire mechanism

¹¹ See the Gioli's filmic metamorphoses of human faces in *Il volto inciso*.

¹² All Gioli's films are preceding by an image representing a blindfolded face.

of film projection with the concept of environmental pieces based on the cinematographic image—Gioli proposes to liberate the screen as receiver of images and object of contemplation by introducing it as a constituent element of the image. His early films reveal numerous levels of images within the image and of the screen within the screen. In *immagini disturbate da un intenso parrasita*, as in a living organism, where the constant exchange of gases makes life possible, the fragments of images—all with strong connotations—come into play, as in a perfectly measured biological ballet.

The field of references in the films of Paolo Gioli

Each of Gioli's films makes frequently explicit recourse to a reference found in the artistic domain of the 19th and 20th century. First of all, the anamorphoses applied to images conferring on objects anthropomorphic forms—*Profilo liquido* [*Liquid Profile*], (1977) or *Traumatografo*, (1973)—which are references to the pictorial work of Dalí. In *Quando l'occhio trema*, a film entirely constructed by means of images and themes of the surrealist Buñuel, Gioli engages in a pastiche of *Man with a Movie Camera*, turning to advantage the sexual symbolic order of Buñuel's image (the onanistic allusion with Lya Lys, the bandaged finger in *L'Age d'or*) in order to project this image with wide connotations onto an ear. In this way, he constructs a supplementary semantic level, while at the same time making a visual realization of a metaphoric mechanism associating the projected image with the body, a recurrent association in his work. With *Secondo il mio occhio di vetro* [*According to My Glass Eye*] (1971), the iconic reference will be to Picasso. In *Piccolo film decomposto* [*Little Decomposed Film*] (1986), Gioli engages in a song to movement on the basis of images of his personal preference among the precursors of cinema. All the images—whether still, isolated, or sequential—are the excuse for a kinetic rendering, which is immediately accompanied by a semantic level. The images from Muybridge reveal an ambivalence that does not appear on the plates; the body, a theme dear to Gioli, becomes mechanical and/or erotic. The movement imparted to images by Gioli, gives an added dramatic dimension to the anatomical deformities photographed by Mr. Stanford's house guest.

Regarding the using of pinhole photography, Gioli wrote in December 1982: “This choice is a challenge shared by Niépce, the sun, and me,” defining in this way a kind of holy trinity. His problematics of revisiting origins, of tainted hommages to his precursors, is more a matter, from my point of view, of a mystical dimension, of a transcendence via natural light, than of a post-modern ambivalence. Returning to the source of the photon image for his photographs, Paolo Gioli constructed his films like sequential syntagmata of photo-luminescent traces.

These latter surpass the debate on post-modernism, this false dialectique between tradition and modernity.

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