The paradoxical cinema of Paolo Gioli
by Giacomo Daniele Fragapane

Known throughout the world as one of Italy's best contemporary photographers, Paolo Gioli is also a highly original and prolific filmmaker with over 30 films to his name, a third of which have virtually never before been publicly screened. These works are hard to define by the usual standards of film and, if anything, call for a deeper reflection on the very notions of "genre," "style," "language," "narration" and "experimentation" (despite the fact that the opening credits of some of the films bear the words "Italian Experimental Cinema," the filmmaker has many times stubbornly rejected this interpretation of his work, claiming them as independent from the logic of film experimentation). Breaking all disciplinary boundaries his work takes the form of an extraordinary visual laboratory that interweaves meditations covering numerous fields: from the history and theory of cinema to that of art, photography and optical devices; from studies in visual perception to the historical sciences, epistemology, philosophy and ideological criticism.

Perhaps the best definition of Gioli's films is one unwittingly coined by Ludwig Wittgenstein, in circumscribing the necessary, required and "fundamental" dimension of language as convention. To Wittgenstein, every problem of a linguistic nature can be described by means of a "mental exercise". Such an exercise is a "device" through which the cognitive response to a given problem in a given situation can be verified within a given cultural configuration. The logic of the game is decisive — the Austrian philosopher just as often used the notion of a "language game"— in that it delineates the field of action, sets the boundaries of the exercise and defines its rules – and thus, for example, the mechanics of the beginning, middle, and end of a cognitive process.

Gioli's films essentially mirror this cognitive pattern. Each one is rigorously configured as a "system" of norms based on conceptual premises that establish its logical possibilities and outcomes. A mechanism that perhaps finds its most lucidly meta-reflexive manifestation in the adoption of the pinhole apparatus, re-invented in cinematic form in Film Stenopeico (L'uomo Senza Macchina Da Presa). In this work, each element of the signifying structure – from the form of the individual frames to the logic of attractions which animates them, linking them to one another and to the overall film – is governed by a purely "mental measurement" (Gioli's term). And given the objective impossibility of seeing what enters the field of view, it is governed by a principle according to which the visible can only be imagined or provoked so that it emerges "by itself" to the consciousness of the screen.

Here Gioli engages in a reflection, which runs through his entire body of work, on the technical and artisanal nature of art making, where the pragmatic and gestural dimension manifests itself as a required condition, constantly directed towards the realization and resolution in practice of the developments implicit in its conceptual premises. His attitude seems to be one of constantly testing the capability of the cinematic medium and its very identity. In many of his films, as in the beginnings of cinema, the structure is broken down into interludes: a series of scenes or episodes introduced by a sentence, title or caption, without, or so it seems, any causal connections between them. At other times we see a single episode, but it develops in analogous fashion.

Gioli seems to systematically refer to "elliptical," marginal narrative mechanisms that

audiovisual history has gradually suppressed or allowed to die off. This is an operation of "dialectical recovery" that must be placed within his radically anti-historicist vision of art and progress. Thus, one somewhat archetypical model of the "Gioli system" could be William Fox Talbot's The Pencil of Nature, the first photography book in history. It is a series of images that Rosalind Krauss called "demonstrations or object lessons" and that taken as a whole short-circuit any pre-established unit of narrative, stylistic or representational order.

Symptomatic of this way of working is the gesture of exhibiting at the beginning of the film the nature of the method or device used to make it. For example, in Filmfinish, before immersing the viewer in the stream of frayed images, obtained using the photo-finish technique, derived from science and sports photography, Gioli feels compelled to show the lens he used and the stationary shutter with its thin slit that filtered the images as they were being exposed. This gesture is reminiscent of a magician's rituals before performing his tricks and transformations, and in some way, it becomes the foundational mark of enunciation of Gioli's production.

Likewise, in his film-homage to Escher (Metamorfoso) Gioli pushes to the extreme limits the visual possibilities of the theme of metamorphosis. More generally, this would seem to be another of the core conceptual nuclei of his entire body of work, as it simultaneously allows him to develop his analysis of visual media (of the transformations of light through an opening or a given space-time segment, of the processes of anamorphosis, mirror inversion and so forth). Of the borders between visual technologies (between cinema and photography, photography and painting, etc.). Of the gaze and the grammar of vision, as the capacity to reflect upon the mutable appearance of things and the protean nature of sensory perceptions. And of the subject of desire, eros, and the dialectic between birth and death, both profoundly tied to the very idea of metamorphosis, if what Lacan writes is true, that desire is the constitutive loss that can never be satisfied and which compels us to change incessantly, to constantly shift the object of our interest.

However, Gioli's films do not exist in a purely abstract technical or mental dimension. They are also a kind of strange narrative laboratory in which both public and private stories and memories seem to emerge from the unceasing flow of images. Anonimatografo, for example, is an extraordinary film constructed using found footage material from the previous century, which narrates the connection between personal memory (the life, loves and cinematic experiment of an anonymous amateur of the early 1900s) and collective history. The work recalls the best films of Ernie Gehr and predates Péter Forgács' Private Hungary by over a decade.

Gioli crosses the archival and mnestic aspects of found footage with the deconstructive and self-reflexive dimension of an investigation of the limits and capability of the cinematic apparatus. He does not give in to the nostalgic fascination for those cheaply acquired second-hand clips, patiently reorganized to create a Proustian-flavored epic, but shows/demonstrates that thinking in images is always, necessarily, also doing, so that the "found footage" put back into action in the film defines itself as a cognitive circuit the development over time and the narrative tension of which derive from internal, unexpressed potential, that the "game" with the apparatus has in some way forced to be made manifest. It is not, therefore, an investigation, but an exploration, since there is nothing to discover in those images except what is already implicit in them, even if it has

not yet emerged into the light of history/narration[1].

This "internal logic" – which arises almost spontaneously, despite some difficulty, from the natural development of the premises of the mental film-exercise – thus determines the structure, form and duration of the process. Which leads us to conclude that nothing is more distant from Gioli's cinema than the (ideational, productive, formal) dimension of "genre". We might say that Gioli's films are never general, but always decidedly peculiar, and quite extraordinary, analytically concentrated on their subjects and impervious, like kinetic[2] paradoxes, to any external gravitational field.

They do not fit into that indeed most elusive category of "experimental cinema" because their very structure defies categorization or pigeonholing as a collection of historically codified texts and uses. Moreover, it is precisely his stubborn refusal to give in to the crypto-positivist idea of progressive, evolutionary history that places Gioli beyond the codes of any genre. This in some way also explains the difficulty — including this writer's own — in organizing Gioli's filmography into themes or semantic fields.

For this reason, we chose not to follow chronological criteria for this retrospective but to order the films on the basis of their natural – though, obviously, debatable – "elective affinities," to the internal connections — more or less explicit, more or less direct — which the circuits of their differences/repetitions ultimately generate in those who submit themselves to the test of seeing them.

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[1] Translator's note: in the original, the author plays on the dual meaning of "storia" as both story and history.

[2] Translator's note: "cinetico" in the original; the author here plays on the dual meaning of the word: "kinetic" and "cinematic."