"If I want to have fun I don't go to the movies." A conversation with Paolo Gioli
Giacomo Daniele Fragapane

In this interview I'd like to bring to light, as much as possible, the logic behind your creative process. I'll begin with a rather obvious question, but which I believe contains multiple, complex possibilities. Jean-Michel Bouhours wrote that in your work, "The image is no longer the analogon of the thing represented but the metonymy…of a mental process." (Jean-Michel Bouhours, Paolo Gioli, l'uomo senza macchina da presa, in Paolo Gioli. Fotografie Dipinti Grafica Film, Art&, Udine 1996, p. 197). Your films, like most of your photography, are difficiult to categorize as "representation" or "narration." Instead, they seem to unfold as an "exploration" (a term you use frequently) of an idea. As if an idea – which is often very technical, or even quotidian – once set in motion cannot help but produce a film, almost automatically. What is the standard (if one exists) genealogy of one of your ideas? How does it first manifest itself and how does it evolve over time?
It's hard to say, because each of my works begins from a very different context. For example, literature is very important – what I read, titles especially, as well as any fragment that I find in a literary text. It often begins with a sentence – you give me a sentence and I'll make a film out of it. Or a word, for example "leaf" or "life"… The title could be "The Life and Death of a Leaf." I can even wait an entire season: I wouldn't tear off a leaf to make it fall, but I wait for it to decompose, to be consumed. Described this way, it seems like the first thing that comes to mind, yet it coincides with my vision of nature and the seasons.
Thus, literature is important, and the fact that it sparks an association of ideas. For example, yesterday I was in a film lab giving instructions on several works I'm making, including a film entitled Interlinea. I pulled out a piece of 35mm color film from this garbage can they have, where they throw away discarded clips and material, and looking at it with a magnifying glass it occurred to me that I could re-frame some parts, observing what there is between the frames. I also imagined a hypothetical title, an "out-of-frame," which is precisely how Interlinea unfolds.
Thus, we are inside the film material, the film stock, the medium, before an image is laid upon it. Often, the thought of having to create the images myself distracts me – sometimes I consider it lucky, a luxury, to be able to work on a medium that already contains anonymous images made by someone else. In this case I imagined moving myself from the space between the lines to outside the frame – not unlike in the movie theatre when the film isn't aligned in the projector and someone in the audience yells: "Frame!" To explore the material, the grain, find out what's inside it and only in the end return to order, to the frame, and reveal why I was out-of-frame. I don't know if I answered your question. I think perhaps I've gone "out-of-frame."

No, I think you actually gave me more than one answer. That is, you said that a film of yours can come from something you've read, from an image that's not yours, from a play on words, and so forth. But above all from how you make the work itself.
It's essentially unconscious, and I generally discover it later.

I'd like to better understand how these different aspects are interwoven and how, since there is essentially an inexhaustible creative dimension to your approach, you know when one of your works is finished, when a film is done?
For a trivial reason that actually comes from much contemplation. Working in film rather than video – this in and of itself requires a very long and very controversial discussion – I know from the onset that I have a certain running time available, let's say five minutes, and that

within that running time I can't make any mistakes and must include everything I've imagined. I've said over and over again that, to me, digital is like an eraser, it always allows you to go back and redo everything, whereas film is like a fountain pen – in the end, what's done is done, if you made a mistake, you made a mistake.
Therefore, I don't think that digital has enriched the creative process much, precisely because it introduced the possibility of deleting. Digital allows you to create an infinite number of variations and only in the end choose the one you like best – and this, I believe, leads you to work in a much more approximate way. With film, you have to use a much more precise process, you're forced to hypothesize a series of possible mental solutions (10, 20, 50…) then decide to make the one that most convinces you.
If you work in video, I think you have to train yourself to have that same attitude: work as if you had only one possibility, as if you had only one battery that was dying, for example, to have an exact vision of what you want and stay very concentrated on what you're doing.

Does this also mean having a set approach to the subject? (I use the term rather broadly since many of your films don't have a true "subject"). Roberta Valtorta spoke of a constant "theatricalization" of the subject in your work, of a dramatization achieved through the created pose or other means. For example, the use of frames, screens that frame other screens; or how you simultaneously upset and highlight, through mirrored doubling or by sliding the photogram, the most "theatrical" part of the image that in Western tradition has always been at the centre of the frame. To what extent does this theatricalization influence your way of filmmaking? Does it differ from your approach to photography?
Yes, definitely. What I show is never something captured "on the fly," as photo-reporters do. I always mull it over, I come back to it several times, with very long pauses. Thus, I must admit that I don't like experimenting. The very definition of "experimental cinema" seems absurd and old to me (another definition I hate is "art film," which makes me think of a painter making films).
My films are completed works, they're not experiments! That sounds as if after all these years I'm still trying to see what will happen, as if I'm doing experiments without knowing whether or not they will succeed. When actually it's obvious that what I'm doing must succeed, because 70% of it is technique and the rest is talent or pure creativity – whether or not you have that is another matter.
I can't accept the possibility of having to stop because I can't do something I've imagined. Are you kidding? Within two seconds I have to throw myself into it and find a way of doing it, even if just with a piece of cardboard and scissors. Technically, I have no problems, I can do anything. The point is never to find the technique; the point is what comes to mind, what you have to do, what direction to take. I know someone who's never shot women's sexual organs, yet he's very good and would be capable of extracting something interesting from that. But he doesn't want to. I, on the other hand, never exclude anything out of principle. I'll film every corner, especially those in which dust gathers.
Anyway, to get back to your question, it's obvious that a lot of preparation goes into everything I do. Even if I'm simply shooting someone for a portrait, just for that fact that I tell him "stand there," speak to him, or to choose and prepare a spot, I am in some way theatricalizing the situation, but this has to do more with life than with film or photography. I don't try to relax him, make him seem natural – on the contrary. For me, the tenser he is, the more insecure and/or uncomfortable, the better it is. But then it's all over, it's not like I'm serious, it's just an image that I have to extract.

I wrote down a comment of yours on the film Immagini Travolte Dalla Ruota di Duchamp, where you say: "I could do a film on every single work of Duchamp's because intellect, irony

and alchemy belong precisely to cinema." Besides the homage you pay to one of the most important artists of the 20th century, this also seems like a good way to describe your approach to cinema. Can you speak a little of this Duchampian aspect to your work?
I like complicated things, challenges. I made films removing the shutter from my camera and using external shutters. For example, my hand or, in the film on Duchamp, a bicycle wheel. I would have liked to show Duchamp the results, to see his reaction, because if you think about it, the wheel is a shutter. You need only to black out its spokes, leave some openings and spin it in front of the camera. If the camera doesn't have a shutter you can decide the shutter speed by spinning the wheel quicker or slower, like they used to at the shooting galleries at state fairs.
I find it fascinating that a completed work becomes part of another work: Duchamp could never have imagined that "his" wheel would have become a shutter used to shoot another film. I could say the same about Duane Michals and many others I've used to make my work, trying to show that within their works lay hidden, infinite possibilities to make completely different things, whereas, and herein lies the irony, perhaps they thought of their work as something finished, closed. For example, imagine that a photograph's final destination is to end up, in the form of ink, on the pages of a book. Yet I animate the ink and that image begins to move, it becomes a film. The same holds true for the wheel: it is no longer an inert object, it produces images because I transformed it into a shutter similar to one of Étienne-Jules Marey's discs.

There's another aspect to Duchamp's approach that makes me think of your work. Duchamp knew very well that the idea of ready-made was dangerous, that it could become gratuitous, an infinitely repeatable formula. So he gave himself rules: he forced himself to make very few and examined each aspect of them meticulously. It seems that what you two have in common above all is this slowness, this working through a complex sedimentation and stratification of ideas and reflections.
Which in my case develops from literature, cinema, photography books and painting. Naturally, if I'm working on an idea that has to do with blood, I can't ignore certain paintings of Caravaggio's, or all the Christian and Jewish iconography on the sacrificial lamb – I must necessarily develop a series of historical correlations. In Children I began with Richard Avedon's Kennedy photos, in which you see this beautiful house with the Kennedy children playing – united by their tragic destiny – which I associated with images of the My Lai massacre and the dead children of Vietnam. As well as with several renowned, 19th century daguerreotypes of the poor holding their children in their arms; Jacob Riis' images of child laborers; and the elderly woman of The Battleship Potemkin, whom I isolated in order to depict her as if she were screaming.
In other words, I developed correlations. There is familial intimacy, a rich family captured by a famous photographer, and then there is the massacre, which took place in the past and would happen again in upcoming years. According to some film historians, in experimental films there must be the maximum of semantic concentration, nothing of what is shown must be lost. Not unlike a poem by Montale or Elliot – you can't get distracted, you must weigh each word carefully. My films aspire to be that: small poems into which I try to concentrate the greatest amount of things.

On various occasions you have distanced yourself from those who interpreted your continuous examinations of the past (on origins, art history, etc.) as a kind of nostalgia…
Me, nostalgic? Nostalgia is reactionary! Whoever said that about my work understood nothing about it…

In fact, you always take great pains to point out that there is absolutely no nostalgia in your work. And I agree with that because, if anything, I see a much more "post-modern" stance, a constant re-mixing of elements that negates the very idea of history as an evolutionary process, a teleologically linear progression. What is your relationship with the past and with history, and how is this related to your creative process?
I always look at history, at protohistory above all, because I want to understand how much of it is valid and could still be in the present. I find that re-reading history, perhaps two or more centuries later, there are often unthinkable recurrences. I see that things happen over and over again.

That's similar to what [Walter] Benjamin wrote in his On the Concept of History, which corresponds to the idea that I've gotten from this aspect of your work. That is, you tend to work on historical material – today the term is found footage, which I don't really like because I find it reductive – to bring back to light fragments of what could have been. This is the exact opposite of nostalgia.
Yes, this idea is very beautiful. Even though I usually use short inserts in many of my works. But not always: Traumatografo, for example, is full of archive material, which at the time I took from b&w television. I remember that I created a collection of fragments taken from television, which I then inserted into the film. So I'd begin with that, before even making the film, thinking in those terms. For example, if I knew that they'd be showing a Dreyer film that evening on TV, I'd decide to take fragments thinking that sooner or later I'd use them. Also, I work on three or four things at a time and therefore always think it's useful to gather archive material even if at that moment I don't know exactly what I'll use it for, and that's how my films grow.
The process is similar to keeping notes in a diary, good notes, let's say, a constant contemplation of things, of nature, that is not limited to just chronicling what happened during the day, or, even worse, that is not purely note-taking. On the contrary, I usually begin with a fragment and interpret it in a completely different way, but starting from the principle that I couldn't understand what happens around me if not as a reflection of the past. Observing what happens, I always think, "This reminds of something that already happened", or "[Italo] Svevo already said this," and so forth. I'm never at peace with what I see: looking, or reading, I always grasp the correlations and many recurrences, as if observing a loop that ultimately always ends up closing upon itself.
This is one of the reasons I'm very sorry I didn't study the classics, and I don't understand why people don't want to study the classics, Latin and Greek. The same is true for technique. Having digital technology at your disposal shouldn't lead you to forget past techniques. Photoshop exists, and that's fine, it's good to use it, but dexterity also exists, and is fundamental because you're in the dark in a darkroom, you meditate, your gestures spark certain ideas in you… Thus, on the mental level the dark is an aid, it envelops you, it makes you reflect while you wait for the image to emerge. For me, the two things go together, I'm very interested in that which is technologically advanced – so much so that often I think of things that could be done with new technologies, or discover that they're already doing them or that they don't exist but are being developed – but I think we shouldn't lose our ties with older techniques.

If I'm not mistaken, you've made only one film in digital so far, Volto Telato.
Yes, even though it's not actually a true digital film. I got it from rolls of 35mm film negatives, made with photofinish techniques. It is analogue photographic material that I animated image by image. But I shot it with a digital camera that was lent to me. So the process isn't entirely digital. This is a very important thing to understand: if you want to be

really pure with the medium, you can't consider digital something that actually comes from film. There's still a lot of confusion about this. For example, I wonder if the term "digital film" is correct. If there's no film stock, technically speaking there's no "film."

Does your choice to work with the pinhole camera tie in with your search for a "pure" relationship with the medium? If, as you maintain, it is sometimes impossible to distinguish an optically produced image with one produced with a pinhole camera, how do you explain your penchant for a more primitive technique in which, as you've said repeatedly, you don't actually see that which you're shooting but are forced each time to come up against a hypothesis, a "mental measurement"?
But that's exactly what's interesting! With the pinhole camera you construct an image out of nothing. You take a shoe box, poke a little hole in it and you can make images. If the image doesn't come out, you can always put the shoes back in the box, you haven't lost anything, you haven't spent anything. That's why each time I tell myself I should buy a camera, I continue to put if off. To me, the essential thing is being able to work, being able to produce images. I remember that in the 1980s, when they began producing technically more and more complex cameras, with automatic exposure, various priorities of shutter speed and f-stop, then auto-focus and so forth, at exhibits I'd often see numerous, sad-faced amateur photographers who'd have two or three cameras hanging round their necks yet wouldn't know what to do with them. But isn't it much more interesting to make images with the same immediacy as picking up a pencil and drawing on paper? But let it be clear: it is not an exhibition of "poverty," of a "poor" technique (if that's the right way to put it), as much as personal satisfaction. I'm always asked, and sooner or later I'll kill someone over this, "Do you create your work for yourself or for others?"

To avoid any misunderstandings, I'd never dream of asking you that.
Good, because it's obvious I do it for myself, out of personal curiosity. If I'd had to wait for other people to become interested, I'd never have done anything, I'd never have painted a painting. You do it for yourself, even if only to see what comes out, what happens if you do a certain thing. And if nothing comes out you throw it away, where's the problem? Not everyone thinks that way, however. There are artists who work only when commissioned, for the market, and if there's no market they don't do anything, they literally don't know what to do. That's not how it is for me, I can only work nurturing my curiosity. I've never cared about money – I don't even have a car, I don't know how to drive, I either walk or bike everywhere…
All I need is a bit of film, or whatever I need to work. I only think about what interests me, and I'm satisfied when the work gets made and someone likes it (although I must admit that my work is much more requested abroad than in Italy). Of course, if you think like this you're considered depraved, someone who "wanders around the house", like a writer whose name I unfortunately don't remember used to say. He said that on certain bad days all he could do was roam around the house, and would tell his wife, who insisted that he do something: I am doing something. He wasn't doing anything practical, but he was doing something. So now I'd like to ask you something: can a person be arrested for vagrancy at home? I think we'll be arriving at that soon.

I'd rather not answer… Instead, I'll take the risk of re-raising the question that will drive you to murder. Although you only work for yourself, it is nevertheless just as obvious that someone sees your films. With regard to that, have you ever asked yourself, as they say in critic-speak, who is your "hypothetical spectator"? What public do you imagine for your films (or would like for them)?

The kind that sits in a movie theatre knowing that they're subjecting themselves not to a form of entertainment but to a kind of test. There's nothing that says that a film must be liked at all cost. Where is it written that anyone has to like it? A film can also be irritating and tiresome. The point is that you have to watch a film and ask yourself the "why?" of what you've seen. Watch it as if you were putting yourself to a test, as if it were a form of self-analysis or a game with your psychological mechanisms. If you don't want that, there's no point in coming to see my films: go see Moretti! These days, "Morettism" is a true scourge, people no longer watch Russian films, they might even laugh at The Battleship Potemkin without ever having seen it but never miss a film of Moretti's and those who emulate him. If they have to make an effort to understand, if they have to exert themselves, even just for one minute – and obviously I'm not talking about only my films – people run away, because everything has to be spoon-fed to you, it must arrive without any strain. This is precisely the goal of entertainment cinema: pure fun.
But if I want to have fun I don't go to the movies, I take a walk or talk to someone. However, I don't mean that a viewer must be terrified of my films. He must simply understand that it's not a form of entertainment. For example, if the work is kinetic, he has to know that it can disturb him or even cause an epileptic attack (some filmmakers say so before their films, to avoid problems).
In other words, my films are tests: of your physical and psychological reactions, of what you know about cinema, literature, music, etc. I want my viewers to have a reaction: even a rejection. At the very least, I'd like to see him yawn or run away from the cinema, just so long as he reacts in some way. Because there is no middle ground: either you accept or you don't accept. In my case, my public is certainly not the kind you see coming out from a movie theatre content and peaceful.

This idea of a spectator who acts as if he were being tested makes me think of those perception and cognition experiments that Wittgenstein called mental exercises, or linguistic games. It seems that some of your films, like Interlinea, function in a similar manner, like "kinetic paradoxes," in which the images unfold like mental exercises.
That's true, though that doesn't mean there's always a solution. Sometimes the paradox remains a paradox. Moreover, Wittgenstein himself often was stumped by problems he posed, and would ask his students to help him because he'd reached a point from which he couldn't get out. Reading Wittgenstein you find paragraphs – which he chose to publish! – in which he simply wrote things like "It's cloudy today." Because apparently that day he thought of nothing, he didn't advance in his research.
What you say of Interlinea is very true because in that sense the film is a way to pose a problem, to remember that without the space between the "lines" we wouldn't have the picture, the frame. So I ask myself why these things are left out of films. Why do we tend not to consider them, when they're part of the medium, when they're what carries the image? Without the perforation we wouldn't see the image: that's why the perforations exist. Some could object that we should then show every element of the process, even the reels through which the film passes: sure! Paul Strand, for example, photographed the entire insides of his movie camera. I can't leave anything out: the mechanism, the various elements, the medium and so forth. Everything is part of the story and I'm interested in all of it.
If later, when exploring the image, I discover an element that strikes me, a detail, a hand, a window or anything else, then I decide to stop and see what happens. I always find it interesting to observe what happens in a cross fade, and don't understand why people don't tend to use them anymore today. Only in film, however, because the electronic one is completely different. It becomes smoky, cloudy, and is flat. I'd like to show you the difference between a film fade and an electronic fade. In the former you see that the image

lasts until the very last moment, even when there's only a glimmer of light left you continue to perceive the skeleton of the image. Whereas in the latter the entire screen gets misty, there is a world of difference.
For me, a filmmaker is a "worker of film." In this sense at least, even if my work were worthless in terms of the results, it's still worth something for my approach, which has unknowingly always been as pure as possible towards the medium and what I do. My methods have remained the same ever since I began making films: I go a store, I buy a roll of film with my own money, 30 very precious meters of film that I use to create the idea I have in my head. Then I develop it myself, because you can't go to a lab and ask them to develop 30 meters, you have to bring them at least 300!
In the beginning, I used to go to a lab in Rome, in Via Tomacelli, which worked for film amateurs and where they used to develop even small quantities of film for me. I remember at the time I'd get offended because I didn't want to be mistaken for an amateur filmmaker. Those people wanted to become Rossellini, they shot thinking of the big screen and I used to think: "Idiot! Film your wife, do whatever you want but leave the real filmmakers alone!" I always get angry when they call me a "cineaste". Cineastes make industrial, commercial films, backed by a production company. The term "filmmaker" is more exact, even though those who use it generally don't know what it really means. A filmmaker is someone who works entirely alone; his works come entirely from him, and then he goes around with his reels showing them.

So what do you call yourself? What term do you prefer to use?
What's on my ID card: photographer.

I'd like to speak of the temporal dimension in your films, which is their most specific aspect, that which (necessarily) most radically separates them from your photography, paintings, engravings. I'm interested in delving into this aspect of your work, in particular from the point of view of what we could call the "generative logic" of film time. What determines that a certain film have precisely that running time. In narrative cinema, the average running time is imposed by the genres themselves (fictional features, shorts, documentaries, etc.), and is also the result of precise market needs. However, in your case – I don't know if we could extend this idea to experimental cinema, period – it's obvious that each film constructs its own running time, so to speak it finds it internally. What exactly determines that a given initial idea develop to a certain point and then is exhausted? Are there any recurring patterns or logical processes?
I generally start with the film I have, from the five or ten minutes I have in a roll. Obviously, sometimes a certain work remains suspended for a while until I can procure more film. I often begin working on several meters of film that I then leave suspended as notes, with a working title that reminds me that I have to finish that work, like Joyce, who surrounded himself with notes, little pieces of paper that he'd add day by day. The important thing is thus to begin setting down a title.
Then "movements" happen. This word always makes me think: a movement goes up and down, is precarious, it happens little by little; it is typical to the first screenings at the birth of cinema. Many inventors at the time could shoot film but couldn't make a projector. It's like having a book but no ink. The Lumières, on the other hand, who were geniuses and above all thought like industrialists, took a little bit from one and the other and unite the best of both, taking the idea of the perforation from Edison. The process is still the same today: without the perforations, cinema would never have existed. But they were true filmmakers, they did everything themselves. So to get back to the discussion on time, I don't care if a film lasts only two minutes – it's still a film! Who said it has to last an hour and 45 minutes? The

industry. Through screen tests with audiences they realized that at a certain point attention drops, but this is a purely commercial principle.

In defining your films do you think it's correct to use the word "anti-narrative"? Or you instead think it's more precise to speak of an alternative form of narration?
I definitely experiment with alternative modes of narration. It doesn't seem like it, but there's always a story in my films. Not in the sense of a traditional story, obviously, because I also like to include some irony… Take Filmarilyn, for example, in which you see Marilyn has a scar because she had her gall bladder removed, and we know that she didn't want Bert Stern, the photographer who the took the photos from which I then made the film, to shoot her. If she hadn't died beforehand, she'd never have let him publish those photos.
What I did to squeeze pus out of that wound, and then let her die, even if in those images she's alive, she's playing and rolling around the bed. I framed her probably like the coroner found her, with her face turned downwards and her hand reaching for the phone. My images search for the exact position in which her body was found, but in those photos she assumes a position as if she were dead, nude, her eyes closed and her mouth wide open. Ultimately, all I did was tie those frames together, as if they were part of a found film that was never shot.

Thus, the story is about an investigation of yours…
Yes, I interpreted those photographs that were taken for a fashion shoot in my own way, looking at them as if they were images of when Marilyn was found dead. I closed the f-stop so that the flesh from her hands would be stripped off a bit more, I used a long fade, which slowly dies out. If she were alive obviously I'd never have done anything like that. In other words, the story is somewhat of a parable, like Operatore Perforato, in which in an old Pathé-Baby film with central perforation, which I found totally ruined, you see a worker at work. He moves around and often almost disappears near the perforation, which is right at the center of the film. So I thought: sooner or later the perforation will kill him! That's what I mean by irony. I try to keep him alive as long as possible in the film, on the margins, before the perforation kills him.
The irony and sarcasm in my works are always connected to death, with a backdrop of melancholy that probably derives from my thinking about it all the time. Moreover, Traumatografo I dedicated to the subject of the massacre, both in terms of war as well as car accidents, with an interlude of children intended to create a contrast. I also inserted fragments that I took from television, like the wonderful scene from Lewis Milestone's All Quiet on the Western Front, in which a soldier moves to capture a butterfly and is killed by a shot to the forehead. It is an extraordinarily intelligent scene, done without any rhetoric, in which you understand that the soldier dies solely from the sudden movement of his hand. The soldier falls in the mud and I make him roll around several times until his hand is consumed. I stop on his hand, I create a loop that rotates continuously in the camera, and which I explore.
I essentially created a loop of the image of the hand, rotating it in front of the virgin film that is progressively more and more imprinted upon, so you see the hand of a man who has died, who also fades, it is consumed and breaks up until just the skeleton of the image remains. The frame fills up more and more, until the screen is suffocated by the images and you see only flashing. I stopped there because I wanted to take the film in another direction, but the experiment is very interesting: you can continue until the image completely saturates the screen from being superimposed on this rotating loop and there is no room let for anything else. Everything closes and fades because the image has consumed itself.

The reference to the butterfly in Milestone's film makes me think of your film, Farfallio, whose main subject is the beating of butterflies' wings.

Yes, but the main intent there was to be ironic about the so-called "fluttering" of proto-cinema, that effect that remained in the stroboscopy and from there moved to experimental cinema. In the earliest screenings, this flickering effect was due to the fact that there were no good shutters and film jerked when it moved.

Yet there is much more in the film. The theme of the butterfly is tied to sex (you associate with it images of a vulva, nipples, and even a rather explicit fellatio scene at a certain point) and above all you re-connect it to the theme of gaze, beginning with the image of the eye that appears on the wings of butterflies, which then becomes a figure dear to Bataille and surrealism, later taken up by Caillois and Lacan with regard to the phenomena of animal mimicry and the fight for survival. It seems to me that a series of philosophical reflections develop from this minimal element of flickering, reflections that deeply traverse all of your work. Would you agree?
The butterfly's very form, which is so specular, is reminiscent of a vulva. I certainly didn't insert those images gratuitously. The central part of a butterfly's body is very hairy, the wings open up like a book and when the butterfly closes them it does so to camouflage itself. This way, seen from above, it practically disappears. And it always seeks out places with its same colors. In my work, I observe all of these things a lot, I'm particularly interested in everything that has to do with mimicry: how animals recognize color and camouflage themselves.
Once, looking at one of my trees, I saw a leaf vibrate slightly – but there was no wind. So I became curious and when I looked closer saw that there was a butterfly there that had taken on the same exact color of that leaf. I ran inside to get my camera, hoping it wouldn't move, and I first took a close-up picture, National Geographic-style. The butterfly didn't move even though I was very close. It must have felt my presence, my breath, my heat, but it didn't move because it was convinced I couldn't see it, it knew it was a leaf. I then took other pictures, of the tree and from farther and farther away. I like showing them and telling people there's a butterfly hidden in that tree, and gradually revealing it.
I don't know what drives me to observe leaves. As you know, I really love the Brackhage film Mothlite (1963). It's made entirely with the wings of moths that he and his wife captured, placing a candle in a cylinder to attract them, before killing them to tear off their wings and film them. The film is beautiful but I could never do that, I can't even tear leaves off of a tree. At most, I can gather them to film or photograph them, I do it often and sometimes I think of the how idiotic it is when some people say that autumn is beautiful because of the color of the leaves, not realizing that they're dying… Yet if you think about, this is extraordinary, because when we decompose we're disgusting whereas the leaf is beautiful. It's dying, it's crumbling to become fertilizer, to be devoured by other creatures, yet to us it's beautiful!

At this point it seems almost mandatory to speak of another of your films, Metamorfoso, which pays homage to Escher and in which all the visual possibilities of metamorphosis develop to the extreme. The idea I came away with was that metamorphosis itself deeply traverses all of his work. Is that true?
It is. Animating Escher was very difficult, a real challenge. In the original sequence there's a figure – an animal, a salamander, a crocodile, etc. – that in just a few passages, no more than four or five, dissolves and becomes a leaf or something else. But to make it truly move you need many more intermediate frames, otherwise the movement is flat. So you need to create some interpolations to create a sense of flow.

This is what you also do with Duane Michals' photographic sequences, as well as obviously the images of Muybridge, Eakins and so forth.

Yes, in Piccolo Film Decomposto, which is a film on movement. The idea is to take Michals' few photos and make them move as if the woman in the pictures were actually stripping in front of the photographer. The inspiration comes from an old trick: if I photograph you in an intermediate position, let's say between standing and sitting, from the image you can't tell whether I'm standing or sitting, or, likewise, if I'm extending my hand to you or pulling it away: these are suspended movements. Thus, if I have only one alluded gesture, I necessarily have to repeat it.
For example, take the four images of the advancing wave photographed by Albert Londe. Alone, they don't render the effect of movement, so I shot them in both directions, to have the illusion of the wave retreating, which obviously doesn't exist in the original. I did the same with the image of diver [Giorgio] Cagnotto in Del Tuffarsi e Dell'Annegarsi, in which I shot a very brief fragment and then dilated it every way possible. For me, this aspect of the relationship between transformation and repetition is fundamental, even though the term is ugly, it gives the idea of boredom. I prefer speaking of iteration, such as in, for example, the music of Satie, a musician I adore, or even Stockhausen and Glass, where there is always a build-up, an evolution, which come from mechanisms of repetition.

I'll take advantage of your answer to look at an apparently marginal aspect of your films: sound. In fact, just a few of your films are shot with sound, many are made silent and remain silent, and others still have been post-recorded (by someone other than you) for the DVD edition. I'd like to how interested you are in the sound/image relationship, and how you work on the acoustic dimension of your films?
I'm definitely interested, and in some instances worked on it quite a lot. But I'm more and more convinced that a film "in silence" offers greater possibilities because working without the medium and help of music makes you more aware of the visual dimension. There are so-called experimental films that no longer work if deprived of sound. For example, I was at a Zbigniew Rybczynski retrospective yesterday and at a certain point there were technical problems with the sound: [without it] the images no longer made any sense.
There is nothing more interesting than silence, because total silence actually doesn't exist, that's even been proven scientifically. But I had more proof when, during a retrospective of my work at the Filmstudio in Rome, I screened Quando la Pellicola è Calda, which is a silent film made from fragments of porn films. There was silence, but actually it was a silence made up of sounds of the people working on it: there were sighs, someone moved, others mumbled, perhaps because they were uncomfortable. I remember that Cosulich wrote a beautiful review in Paese Sera, in which he said it was a sound film. Then I began to think about how often silence can be more effective than sound. Because the image can show you something happening, for example a gun being fired, and make you perceive the sound even if it doesn't exist.

On another occasion you said something similar about the relationship between light and dark, that darkness is fundamental in giving a full perception of light.
Yes, your intuition is right. I spoke of that in an interview with Bruno Di Marino, so I don't want to repeat myself, but essentially I was saying then that when I print my photos, naturally I close the windows and it always takes me a while to get used to the dark. I tell myself that the room is dark even though it's not truly dark, because in that period of time there is always some light left, the light impressed upon my retina.
Suddenly, I'm the bearer of light. Reading Wittgenstein led me to reflect on these paradoxes taken to the extreme, because paradoxes conceal an infinite number of things that can then also be narrated. To return to the previous discussion, in Metamorfoso I tried to animate the animation, rendering justice to those artists who dreamt of creating images in which there was

even just a glimmer of movement. In this sense, the protohistory of cinema can always be rewritten, because those artists did not fail – they simply couldn't project that which they captured perfectly.

I'd like to return to something we touched upon just incidentally. It seems that there is always a latent sexual tension in your films, even when you don't present it directly, with explicit images. Sometimes one gets the impression that you tend to eroticize the camera itself, cinema, photography, even certain particularly "sensitive" objects like the lenses and the shutters. You tend to treat them like living organisms, not unlike [Hans] Bellmer and his dolls. Can you speak about this aspect of your work?
I can't deny that this is somewhat of an obsession, but it's also something that releases an enormous amount of ideas and energy in me. It may sound trivial, but above all you must consider that lovemaking produces endorphins, which is the body's natural drug. After making love I get tons of ideas for titles. I randomly open various books, of literature or something else, I make a pile to create a single book in which I dog-ear. Afterwards, I may look at five books simultaneously, randomly opening the points that I've dog-eared, and I begin mentally editing the images leafing through the books and making connections between them. This is normal for me: at night I can't fall asleep because I'm always thinking about what I saw during the day, what I could do, how to do it, how to connect it all…

What role does chance play in your way of working?
None. Even though I sometimes talk about randomly found images, I'm always gathering and putting them together. What's more, we are also borne of chance, from a mix of things that we cannot control… Sure, chance exists, but then chance is always replaced by choice, by will and the capacity to grasp your situation.
Once and friend and I conducted an experiment. We were in Venice and had two similar film cameras, two non-reflex Bolexes. We loaded them with the same film, splitting a 30-meter roll, and in two different moments we covered the same route – which we both knew really well because it was one we walked daily – to see if we had shot the same things. In the end, we saw completely different things. This could be a really good test for photography schools.

Do you think that your work has been truly understood?
There are very few people interested in these things [that] I've never even thought about that. I was speaking to you about the loop I created of the soldier's hand in All Quiet on the Western Front. Well, obviously no one forced me to use that image, I could've used my hand or some other scene taken from television. But I wanted it to be a reference, to a simulated death, to something that doesn't happen in reality but in cinema history, so that the viewer seeing that film would recognize it. More generally, to answer your question, I'm always sorry that whoever sees my films can't fully grasp what they mean, or what I include, because they don't know how I made them technically.
In my films, the technical dimension is fundamental. I'm convinced that if I told you how I made a certain film that you've already seen – for example, Filmfinish – you'd see it again right away and you'd discover a ton of things that you hadn't grasped. Yet, as I said, I can't stand those who speak of my work as films of "pure experimentation." Certain films by Rybczynski, for example, are pure experimentation. When you see them you get the impression that the only logic to them is to further prove the premises of his experiment… To show Lucas that he's good! Yet he hasn't done anything since the 1990s. Despite everything, the technology and the economic resources he has, he's at a dead end. He produces software and makes music videos and ads!

I've also been asked to make commercials, they offered me a ton of money but I'm not the slightest bit interested. Perhaps if they'd offered me a lot of film I'd have accepted.

Rome, November 20, 2008