

Duplicity

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1.

The Oxford English Dictionary gives not two, but three meanings for “duplicity”:

1. The quality of being ‘double’ in action or conduct (see DOUBLE a. 5); the character or practice of acting in two ways at different times, or openly and secretly; deceitfulness, double-dealing. (The earliest and still the most usual sense.)
2. lit. The state or quality of being numerically or physically double or twofold: doubleness.
3. Law. The pleading of two (or more) matters in one plea; double pleading.

The first two, I believe, contain the most apt description of the primary engine of Paolo Gioli’s artistic practice; the third might describe, through legal metaphor, the primary engine of this machine of writing.

Freud, in his essay on *The Uncanny*, appeals to Grimm’s Dictionary, as a point at which to begin his text on the *unheimlich*. The word *unheimlich* [uncanny] exists in relation to *heimlich* [belonging to the house, familiar, not strange] and *heimisch* [native]. Freud notes, along with Grimm, that in various dialects of German, *heimlich* can also carry its opposite meaning: *unheimlich* [uncanny, what is hidden, secret, deceptive]. The root of the word is *heim-*, which in English most nearly approximates “home,” may also imply what is “hidden,” “secret,” or “private,” as in “*heimlich* [private] parts” or “*heimlich* [Privy] Councilor,” in somewhat archaic usage.

Freud pointedly quotes Schelling to the effect, that “everything is *unheimlich* that ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light.” The uncanny is linked, in short, to process of repression.

In his essay, Freud links the double as a literary mechanism to a threat against the primary narcissism of the subject. That is, the double threatens to wreak havoc with the boundaries between self and other. The “magical omnipotence of thoughts” of the subject becomes threatened by a malefic external world of magical forces, which takes the shape of his double. Freud further points out, that the common male impression of the female genitalia as “*unheimlich*” or strange, is a kind of repressed recognition that the female genitalia is indeed the vestibule to the uterus from which we all come into the world. He uses the German proverb that “Love is just homesickness” to illustrate the point. But, the site of undifferentiated inter-uterine unity is as well the threat of castration; the anxiety surrounding this threat “often enough,” as Freud says appears in the form of an anxiety of losing one’s sight, the punishment of Oedipus.

Against the background of this disturbing condensation of Freud's nuanced essay, let us now turn to Gioli's work and attempt to reveal what perhaps ought to have remained hidden: its uncanny aspects.

Like Freud, in his exploration of the uncanny, I did *not* begin my understanding of Gioli with a dictionary, but the notion of duplicity may serve to allow me to speak about Gioli's work in a way that reveals its continuities and uncovers some of its mysteries. Freud did not fear linking pathology with artistic practice; neither shall I. But creating links is not the same as equating. Perhaps, it is a form of super-imposition, or cross-dissolve. In any case, I will focus on only a handful of films, which I hope will serve as metonymies for the larger body of work.

2.

Writing on his film *Metamorfòso*, Gioli notes in passing, that in spite of Escher's work being utterly static, "All of Escher is an homage to one of the major animating forces of the cinema: the cross-dissolve." And, in fact, were we to search for a single cinematic trope by which to characterize Gioli's work, it might well be the cross-dissolve, for it is a trope found frequently in nearly every one of his films. But that singularity would not be enough, to render a formal, a psychological or a philosophical account of the manic duplicity—the labyrinthine doubling of image and meaning—which characterizes Gioli's contribution to the cinema.

Perhaps, my use of the faintly though clearly visible secondary meaning of duplicity as "The state or quality of being numerically or physically double or twofold: doubleness," as against the more common meaning of "deceit," brings with it a lingering discomfort. This is, of course, deliberate on my part—and not only to evoke the uncanny, disconcerting qualities of Gioli's work, but as a sign of the incompleteness and displacement, the double pleading, the deception of any written text on visual art, or any still image taken as a metonymy for streams of images in motion. In the official translation of Freud into Italian, *unheimlich* is rendered, not with a single word but doubly as: inquietante estraneità: disconcerting strangeness. Strangeness and discomfort, then. And twofold.

3.

Though the analytical engine I would borrow from Freud is applicable even to a film such as *Tracce di tracce* [*Traces of Traces*], with its bi-lateral Rorschach symmetries near the end, *Farfallio* [*Flicker*], and *Quando la pellicola è calda* [*When the film is hot*] bring Gioli's uncanny duplicity more directly into view. Through the repurposing of explicitly pornographic imagery, both invoke the uncanny by means of duplicity. *Quando l'occhio trema* provides important insights and linkages among the works.



Tracce di tracce



Farfallio

In the case of *Farfallio* (1993), Gioli begins with an exploration of the perceptual construction of the filmic image via the mechanism of flicker (*farfallio*), rapidly bringing into optical collision images of butterflies and moths (*farfalle* and *farfalle nocturne*) through various kinds of displacement: spatial offsets between short bursts of images (some as short as 2 frames), negative/positive contrasts of the same images, and contrasting shapes and patterns in the wings of various insects. On top of these rapid flutterings of images, he, then, begins both to superimpose and to inter-cut, in short bursts, sexually explicit images, evoking a punning association of female genitalia with the bi-lateral symmetry of the wings of the butterfly.

The visual aspect of this analogy is evident not only to interpreters of the Rorschach test. The linguistic aspect derives from a somewhat uncommon slang term for the female genitalia “farfalla” [“butterfly”], based either on visual analogy or perhaps on the metaphor of a woman who has numerous sexual partners being said to resemble a butterfly who moves from flower to flower, “*svolazza di fiore in fiore.*”

Not entirely by coincidence in terms of the Freudian analysis of the uncanny, these explorations of flicker combined with superimposition—a form of cross-dissolve—are framed at the beginning and the end of the film by imagery of the eyes, both single and double, sometimes superimposed and sometimes not. Immediately after the title sequence, we see a series of images of single eyes. Gradually the concentric patterns of the wing of a butterfly or moth are super-imposed. At the end of the film, just before the credits, the process is repeated and reversed: we see a close-up on the patterns of concentric rings on the wings of a butterfly or moth and human eyes are gradually super-imposed in careful alignment with the patterns.



Farfallio [opening sequence]



Farfallio [closing sequence]

While we should not ignore the fact that, philosophically the filmmaker is clearly attempting to associate vision or filmic spectatorship (the eye) with the fluttering wings of the butterfly (flicker), the “uncanny” resemblance to the male genitalia at the end of the film is inescapable, as the moth’s body superimposed upon the nose becomes assimilated to the phallus (fallo). The is clearly *not* the nose of Mr. Tristram Shandy, gentleman. The testicles, (etymologically, “witnesses”) are evoked in the superimposition of the spots on the wings of the moth on the eyes, in this case, of a male subject. At the beginning of the film, where a single eye is involved, we may be confronting more feminine imagery, paralleling the associations created by Bataille in *Histoire de l’oeil*.

Concerning, the importance of the symbolic loss of sight, Gioli has made telling homage to Buñuel’s *Un Chien andalou*, both on film and in writing, commenting on the seminal influence of the famous opening sequence where a razor, wielded by Buñuel himself, seems to slice the eye of the female protagonist. Writing on his own *Quando l’occhio trema* [*When the Eye Quakes*] (1988), which he dedicates to Buñuel, Gioli acknowledges:

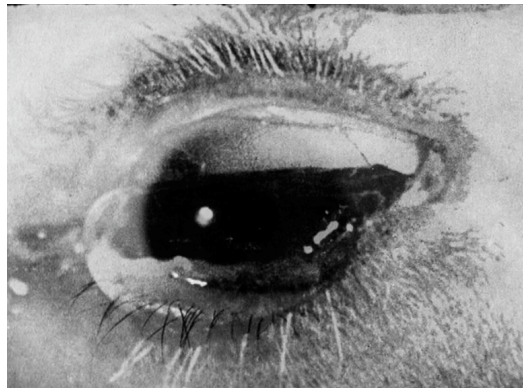
It all started with the notorious buñuelian sliced eyeball that surprises us every time. The eye of an ox, but still it’s the eye of a woman! The anxiety of the incision is transformed into saccadic uncontrolled anxiety of the eye, more exactly, of its pupil. Superimposed on the stroboscopic rhythms of single frame animation as in some archaic pre-animation, one’s gaze at it is thrown off, going in search of a little dramatic action here and there in the face through the quick cinematic nonsense of saucers and sclera. The eye of an ox, which degenerates at Buñuel’s incision, is my own quaking ox eye.

In *Quando l’occhio trema*, Gioli makes a micro-study of both male and female eyes and their destruction, frequently both re-enacting and quoting *Un Chien Andalou* and *L’Age d’Or*.



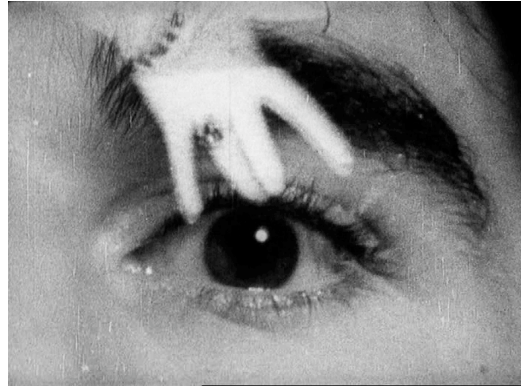
Un Chien Andalou

Among various strategies he uses in *Quando l'occhio trema*, Gioli cites Buñuel using a close-up of a still of Buñuel's female protagonist where a fly has alighted and superimposes the famous eyeball spewing its viscid contents upon his own.



Quando l'occhio trema

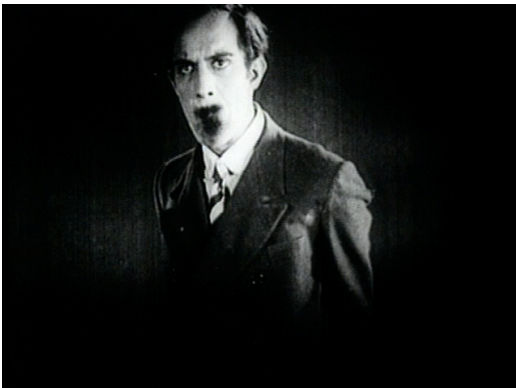
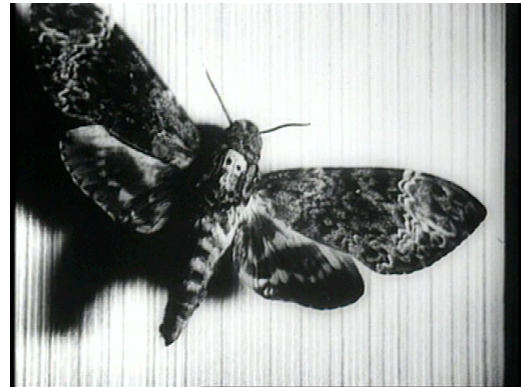
In an apposite if self-conscious form of repetition compulsion, Gioli also reenacts this cinematic primal scene, superimposing the moon upon both his own eye and that of a woman. He also re-photographs several sequences from an Italian television broadcast of *L'Age d'Or* and integrates them into *Quando l'occhio trema*, sometimes by inserting them into the montage and more often by suggestive superimpositions:



Quando l'occhio trema [Two successive frames]

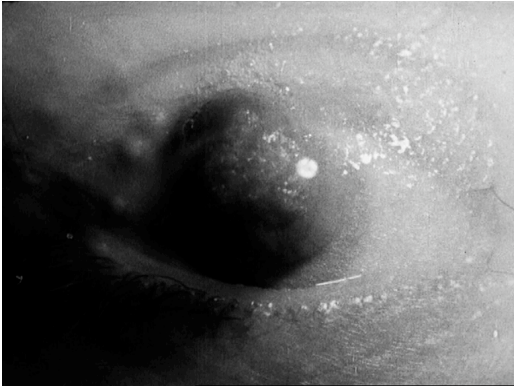
In the images above, both Gioli's mouth and eye are assimilated to the female genitalia through the superimposition with Lya Lys's autoerotic gesture from *L'Age d'Or*.

Gioli may also be echoing another series of sequences in *Un Chien andalou*, where Buñuel associates Lepidoptera with the female genitalia by focussing on a death head's moth just before the translation of the underarm hair of the female protagonist to the mouth of the male protagonist. Underarm hair being commonly associated with pubic hair:



Un Chien Andalou [Shots from two successive sequences]

In *Quando L'occhio trema*, Gioli also superimposes the image of a nipple on top of an eye ball to evoke Magritte's painting, *Le Viol* (The Rape) (1934) celebrated by Breton in *Qu'est-ce que le surréalisme?* [What is Surrealism?], to create a kind of logical completion of the image above in *Un Chien Andalou*:

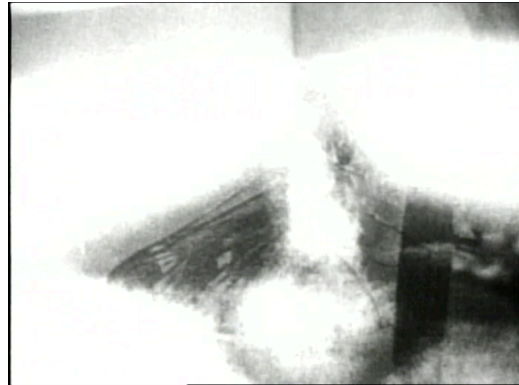


Quando L'occhio trema



Le Viol (cropped)

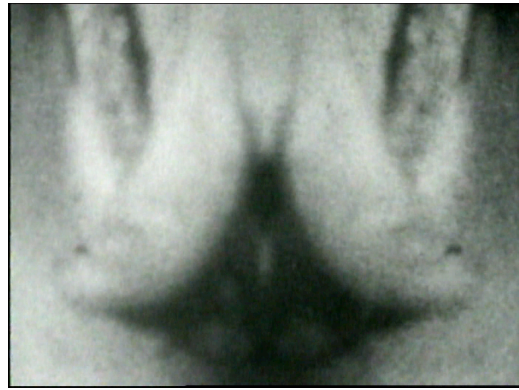
If, from the comfortable vantage of gazing upon a catalogue, these relationships may seem far-fetched, in the context of the explicit imagery of the films, it is overwhelming:



Farfallio

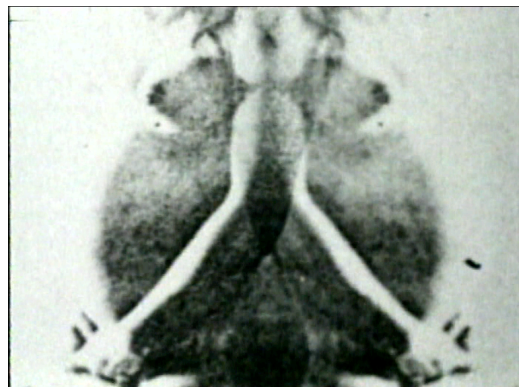
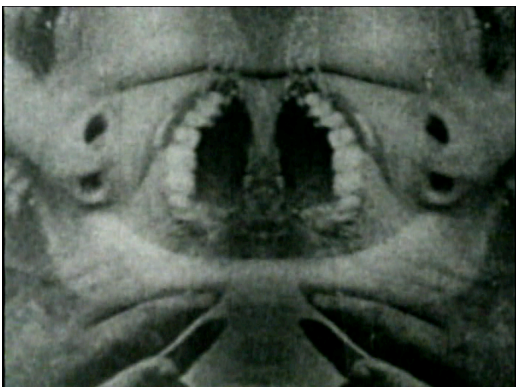
The shock of these utterly static images on the page is of a different order from our brief and complex encounter with them as spectators of the film. Here, they possess a disquieting undeniability. In order not to see them, we must actively look away. There, they are experienced as a series of brief and transient shocks, enlivening mechanisms of perception and symbolization, creating physiological insight, exciting reflection, through play. In short, they are as light and sensual and ironic in the film as these are heavy and repulsive on the page. The experience of the film is one of bodily motion: the rhythms of life and love. Duplicity, thy name is stasis.

In *Quando la pellicola è calda*, Gioli explores another kind of doubling, creating bi-laterally reversed split-mirror images of sexually explicit footage to produce an hilarious *reductio ad absurdum* of the original. As the image is folded over on itself, a duchampian abstraction is imparted to these sexual mechanics. To create this effect, Gioli employs a tricky and delicate technique of multiple-pass bi-packing and matting, using only his own movie camera, to create effects usually accomplished only on a contact-, or optical printer.



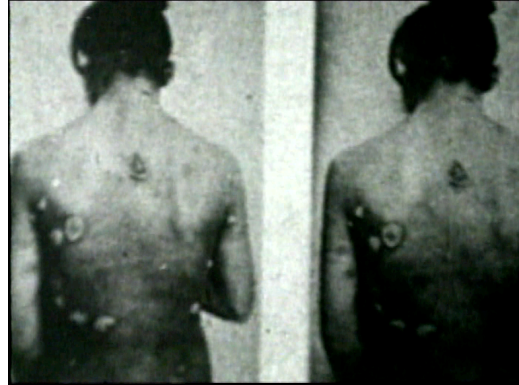
Quando la pellicola é calda

After a prolonged exploration of this visual trope across myriad activities, he presents a series of *superimposed* split-mirror images, doubling yet again what he has doubled already. He concludes with a kind of visual pun on *les dents des femmes*, where mouth and vagina are super-imposed to create a yawnig and joyful *vagina dentata*.



Quando la pellicola é calda

But Gioli chooses to end the film on a rather more sombre note: into the final toothy montage are inserted a series of images including a pregnant woman, a strangely grainy panning close-up of re-photographed hands, one indecipherable image, a dark medical close of a vagina and finally a slowly fading zoom into what appears to be two side-by-side images of the same burn victim.



Quando la pellicola é calda

The formal wit of doubling and re-doubling precisely half of the frenzied motion mechanics of love is re-placed by a looming, darkening split-screen still. The filmmaker, who thrusts his hands into mordant chemistry, and the lover, who throws her entire being into the act, both bear the traces of their actions. *Pellicola*, of course, refers to the film strip, but its etymological sense is “little skin,” paying unconscious homage to the animal gelatin at its origin. And it is to this sense to which we return with Gioli at the film’s end.

By his profound immersion in the medium, Gioli exactingly bodies forth disturbing truths; they are as much about the medium and about us, as about himself.

The uncanny is linked to death through the compulsion to repeat: his, hers, theirs, yours, mine, ours.