

*Non-indifferent memory. Notes on the Photography of Paolo Gioli*

by Giacomo Daniele Fragapane

“Following a rule is the same as obeying a command. One is trained to obey a command and one reacts to this in a particular manner. But what can one say, if one person reacts to the command and to the training *in one way*, and another *in another way*? Who is correct?”<sup>1</sup> I believe, that it is possible to understand the photographic work of Paolo Gioli as a demonstration of this paradox. From his very first efforts, Gioli has placed himself with respect to photography—the photographic apparatus, its numerous technical aspects, its history, its theoretical paradigms—in the position of one, who has clearly understood that, in order to make it to function as a form of thinking and not as a mere “vehicle” of visual representation, it is necessary to make it react *in another way* to the commands, which are imposed upon it, and to the mental processes to which it is asked to respond: reinventing it each time, forcing into every possible direction its “modes of production,” its expressive possibilities, its limits, pushing it beyond its institutional confines, using its materials, [form of] knowledge, “cultural logic” towards the aim, above all, of making it *speak about itself*. Gioli’s photographic adventure appears today, in this light, as an extraordinary, extremely profound exercise of the archeology of the cognitive processes and of the visual memory of “the century of analog images.” A path which develops along a chronological arc extending from the late 1960s to now: a period in which Gioli incessantly explores the entire universe of proto-historical, historical and modern photographic processes: from cameraless techniques to pinhole photography, from classical negative/positive processes on silver bromide gelatine to the direct positive in various Polaroid formats, from Cibachrome to “photo-finish,” not to speak of the innumerable admixtures with which he experiments combining photographic techniques and film, graphic arts, pictorial, and engraving techniques.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Ricerche filosofiche* (1953, *Philosophische Untersuchungen*), Einaudi, Torino 1995, § 206. Translator’s note: The Italian translation differs significantly from G. E. M. Anscombe’s standard translation, *The Philosophical Investigations*, in the revised bilingual edition published by Macmillan, New York, 1955. I have followed the Italian translation here as its rendering is important to the logic of this text.

<sup>2</sup> It is impossible, in the space of this contribution, to render an account, even in summary fashion, of such a dense and multiform photographic production, so rich with “variations on a theme” and with numerous returns to the same subjects. So I will limit myself to indicating a chronology of the principal works and of the typology of photographic techniques employed. At the center of Gioli’s production the two themes of the face and the human body stand out in particular; they are approached using various modalities of photography and the use of many kinds of photosensitive materials, above all, black and white Polaroid emulsions, with which Gioli experimented for the first time for transfer onto other supports, such as paper or silk. The so-called “historical” series comprise part of this research, notably *A Hippolyte Bayard Gran Positivo* [*To Hyppolite Bayard: Great Positive*] (1981), *Cameron Obscura* (1981), *Eakins/Marey*, *L’uomo scomposto* [*The*

At the root of such “bulimia” is perhaps a kind of “symbolic blockage” (in the sense, derived from Lacan, used for the term by Raymond Bellour): a movement “where contingency presents itself as the necessary condition, more or less rigorous, for a determinant relation between repetition and resolution”; a “process of properly infinite expansion,” that “demonstrates, in a complex fashion, on all levels, micro-, macro-elementary, of content and of expression, the insistence of an order, determined by a set of formal operations, particular and general at once (alternation, ruptures of alternation, condensations, displacements, oppositions, similarities, differences, repetitions, resolutions, etc.), borne along by figurative, narrative, and representational options.”<sup>3</sup> This insistence on process, this structure of “difference and repetition” is put into action by Gioli on a plane which is obviously much more *mental* than thematic or stylistic, and goes, each time, by metonymy, to the heart of the creative process at its moment of *origination*. It is there, at the base of everything, something like a foundational act, the construction of a mythology of origins with a complete corollary of reflections that invest the technological origins of the medium (engraving, the pinhole apparatus, the *camera obscura*) and the origins of its present “symbolic form” (renaissance perspective, anamorphosis, the projection screen), triggering the obsessive repetition of gestures suspended between artisanal procedures and mechanical processes: gestures, which, on the one hand, with genealogical intentions, recall the conceptual origins of the very notion of “technical reproducibility” (mirror inversion, the iterative and serial matrix of the evolutionary processes of the works and of the cycles of works); on the other hand, they insist upon the moment of origin as a sexual metaphor, biological and existential, dramatizing and putting into play on multiple and parallel levels the polarities of the masculine and the feminine, of the organic and the inorganic, of light and dark, and of the life cycles that govern their evolution (birth-seduction-coupling-reproduction-death-

---

*Decomposed Man*] (1982), *Omaggio a Nièpce* [*Homage to Nièpce*] (1983) and *Volto inciso* [*The Graven Face*] (1984), and then the one man show at the Centre Pompidou of 1983: a series of pinhole images on 50x60 Polaroid transferred onto drawing paper, a kind of inventory of naked bodies collected around a “cadaver” of Bayard (a pioneering figure in photography at its origins). Next followed the *Autoanatomie* [*Autoanatomy*] series (1987), exhibited at the Musée Reattu in Arles, the *Maschere* [*Masks*] series (1988-90) and the *Lastre* [*Plates*] series (1992), the one entitled *Torso di Sebastiano* [*The Torso of Sebastian*] (1992-93), that of *Confinati* [*Confines*], exhibited in Arles in 1998, and that of *Fiori* [*Flowers*] (1999), where Gioli succeeded in what even the technicians at Polaroid considered impossible: transferring onto paper Polaroid black and white emulsion. The *Immagini luminescenti* [*Luminescent Images*] (1994-97), exhibited at the *Museo di Roma* in 2006, were Polaroid contact prints realized using phosphorescent plates. As concerns black and white production, from the end of the 70s until today, in particular in the series entitled *Figure dissolute* [*Dissolute Figures*] and *Volti attraverso* [*Faces Through*], Gioli investigated above all the expressive possibilities of the [slit-scan] “photo finish” technique.

<sup>3</sup> Raymond Bellour, *L'analisi del film* (1995, *L'analyse du film*), Kaplan, Torino 2005, pp. 30-31. [English version: *The Analysis of film*, Constance Penley, ed., Indiana University Press, Bloomington 2000.]

decay-rebirth). A mythology of origins, finally, which always expresses itself in spite of everything in its “Thirdness,” in its pure theoretical form, as a primary development, still larval and ambiguous, of a visual idea (the idea frozen in the utterly virtual instant of its primordial manifestation: the idea as a process *in action* as *metamorphosis*, passage from potential to action).

In rigorously logical terms, then, Gioli does not operate on the terrain of “representation” nor of the imagination. Paradoxically, he never proceeds with the *forma mentis* of a “maker of images.”<sup>4</sup> What he produces is something that belongs at one and the same time to the realm of objects and to that of phantasms: his work, thus, consists precisely of the thinking of concepts—the better if dual in nature—whose images, he then brings to realization; they appear as the trace, the “residue of production.” Thus, he acts in a cognitive dimension, which is at once rigorously *technological* (because in it, the apparatus becomes the necessary and essential device)<sup>5</sup>, *performative* (because, self-reflexively, each time it must stage the act of its coming to fulfillment) and *alchemical* (because the gaze here always takes shape according to its desire for possession or for a cognitive drive). Thus, as a consequence of this, it is *sexual*, if it is true, as Lacan writes, that “it is through the mediation of masks that the masculine and the feminine meet in the most acute, the most intense way. Only the subject—the human subject, the subject of the desire that is the essence of man—is not, unlike the animal, caught up in this imaginary capture. He maps himself in it. How? In so far as he isolates the function of the screen and plays with it. Man, in effect, knows how to play with the mask as that beyond which there is the gaze. The screen here is the locus of mediation.”<sup>6</sup>

Rather than being a corpus “closed within itself” of objects endowed with certain properties (an aesthetic value, a style, the fact of treating certain themes and subjects), the photographic work of Paolo Gioli, may then be described as a great articulated and ramified *eidetic process* (even on the front of media hybridization),<sup>7</sup> a visual-mental

---

<sup>4</sup> And contrary to what he claims, for example, when speaking of his work in film, he defines himself as a *filmmaker* in the most rigorous sense of the term: “a film worker” responsible for the entire technical process of its realization.

<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, Gioli constantly makes the claim of the “purity” of his gestures, and aspires to an unmediated creativity, stripped of all theatricality; his ideal success, is the ability to “make images out of nothing.”

<sup>6</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Il seminario. Libro XI. I quattro concetti fondamentali della psicoanalisi* (1964-1973, *Le séminaire de Jacques Lacan. Livre XI. Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse*) [*The Seminar, Book XI, The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*], Einaudi, Torino 2003, p. 106. Translator’s note: the version given here is the Sheridan translation. Norton. 1981, p. 107. Translator’s note: I have followed the Italian rather than the standard English translation.

<sup>7</sup> The photographs published in this volume, exhibited on the occasion of the retrospective: *Omaggio a Paolo Gioli* [*Homage to Paolo Gioli*], curated by me, in connection with the 45<sup>a</sup> Mostra internazionale del nuovo cinema of the Festival di Pesaro, precisely observe a logic of this type. They are, in fact, “photographic matrices,” on which Gioli had initially drawn in order to make a number of films (the two bodies of

flux—the two poles are inseparable—of an inchoate nature, incessant, sometimes capricious and elliptical, where the ideas, consubstantially with the images, are developed, becoming wrapped up in a network of internal cross-references. A process, above all, of the emergence of that conceptual nucleus that has been “removed”—that is, suppressed by the widespread and massified practices of photography—which is actually the very unconscious of the “photographic:” a mental locus which Gioli scans in depth, exploring, above all, its limits and confines, in the same manner in which Wittgenstein investigates the foundations of language, its epistemological ceremonies, its unforeseeable discoveries, its aporias.

“I photograph things to see what they look like when they are photographed,”<sup>8</sup> runs the celebrated dictum of Garry Winogrand. A tautology, which perhaps, if enunciated by Gioli would sound slightly different; something like: “I photograph things to think of them the way photography thinks of them.” That is to say, that Gioli is probably a more analytical photographer than all those who have preceded him: the only one whose investigations were developed, with a full consciousness of his own methods and of his own ends, well beyond the historical moment where belonging to an “analytic lineage,” was practically an imperative for anyone operating in the art world. In his investigations, the gesture of breaking down the experience of taking photographs—and of knowing the world by means of the screen/mask of photography—always appears as a process of reduction to its primary constituent elements. In that sense, in his constant search for a degree zero of hand processing<sup>9</sup> and for the optical intentionality of the medium, Gioli is more “photographic” than Mulas. In his inexorably deconstructive approach to the very same processes with which he usually works, Gioli is more lucid, often even more bizarre than Meatyard. Gioli is sometimes almost crude, with a crudeness that makes one think of Weegee or Diane Arbus, though more logical, more basic, less “human.” And Gioli is more abstract than Eggleston or Ghirri, in his idiosyncratic approach to any kind of content-based or narrative shortcut: unless “contents” and “story” are the pretext for launching a stringent and inexorable critique of representation in order to prepare a *mise en abîme* with the very gesture he uses to appropriate them and uses to make them

---

found footage material, that were used as the basis of the book entitled *Sconosciuti* [*Persons Unknown*], the film *Volto sorpreso al buio* [*Face Caught In The Dark*] and one, still in progress at the time of writing, entitled *I volti dell'anonimo* [*Faces by a Person Unknown*], as well as a series of original photographs made with the [slit-scan] “photofinish” technique, that Gioli “animated” in order to create the film *Sommovimenti* [*Extremotions*]) and that now have come to life once again, newly re-elaborated, discovering their original photographic form.

<sup>8</sup> Garry Winogrand, “Understanding Still Photographs” (1974), in Brooks Johnson (ed.) *Photography Speaks*, The Chrysler Museum/Aperture, New York 1989, cited in Italian from Roberta Valtorta, *Il pensiero dei fotografi*, [*Thoughts by Photographers*] Bruno Mondadori, Milano 2008, p. 150.

<sup>9</sup> Translator’s note: “gestualità chimica” in the original.

evolve. To find a similar curiosity about the medium and “its” mental processes, one would have to look back perhaps to Talbot, to that initial, almost “messianic” moment—to use a term beloved by Benjamin in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*—of the photographic adventure, in which photography was still regarded with bedazzlement and marvel, as something mysterious, magic, alchemical.

This now drives us to pose the question of the nature of the relationship Gioli’s work establishes with history. Not only—as has been said so many times—with the history of the earliest years of the existence of cinema and photography, but with history *tout court*, with history, as we might say along with Jameson, as *emotional tonality*: the perception, in the most meaningful fragments of our daily experience, of what has been, of what has been lost, of what could have been different, of what presses on, as a latent force, under the surface of the present. As Benjamin writes: “The concept of the progress of the human race in history is inseparable from that of the process of history itself as running through an homogeneous and empty stretch of time. The critique of the idea of this process should constitute the basis of the critique of the idea of progress as such.”<sup>10</sup> In an analogous way, Gioli’s photography appears to us today—after the digital revolution has traced, with a clear and definitive line, the limit between two successive scopic regimes, accelerating the ever more strict interpenetration of the imagination and technology beyond verisimilitude—like a critical consciousness, a vigilant and attentive “creative memory,” a bridge between two eras of the gaze.

In 1996, Roberta Valtorta wrote that in Gioli’s work there is a continual play between “struggle and fusion: between classicality and provocation, between a love of the perspective construction of space and the radical fragmentation of the pieces composing the image; between citation and invention, between destruction and preservation; between objective and subjective... The struggle between the various elements that coexist in Gioli’s work yields neither vanquished nor victors, since he pursues them all, separately or simultaneously, in a kind of syncretism. In this way, according to a “total” design which tends to embrace the entire history of the arts [...] photography in his work seems to constitute a guarantee of “reality,” a kind of rootedness in history...[;] [photographic] material the unconscious—continuously surfaces on this history of realistic figures as does the utter symbolic freedom of signs and of surfaces, of inscription itself, that [photographic] material carries along with it.”<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Tesi di filosofia della storia* [*Texts on the Philosophy of History*], § 13, in Id., *Angelus novus. Scritti e frammenti* [*Angelus novus: Writings and Fragments*] (1955, *Schriften*), Einaudi, Torino 1962, p. 83. Translator’s note: I have used the Italian translation as a basis of this English translation.

<sup>11</sup> Roberta Valtorta, “La congiunzione degli opposti,” [“The coincidence of opposites”] in *Paolo Gioli. Fotografie dipinti grafica film*, [*Paolo Gioli: Photography, Painting, Graphics, Film*] Art&, Udine 1996, p. 32.

I would like return to the concluding words of that text, which introduced the monograph, (which even now remains the most complete on Gioli), following them up, ideally, not so much to say something more, or to say it better—I wouldn't be able to do that—but rather in order to bring out something, that has changed since then: not certainly in the way Gioli works, the absolute, singular consistency of which has never shown, in more than forty years of work, any sign of concession or retreat; nor is it a matter here of understanding how much Gioli's gaze might have evolved over time, but how his photography might ever be located with respect to a context—technological, aesthetic, epistemological—that sets before us profoundly diverse questions: starting from the fact that no one henceforth could any longer accept, without making at least some kind of distinction, the idea that the photographic medium is capable of acting as a “guarantee of ‘reality.’” Perhaps, then, this is precisely the point: Gioli's photography carries to its extreme consequences the evolutionary parabola of analog technical reproducibility, taking cognitive processes to extremes, shedding light on its internal mechanisms and aporias, acceding to and anticipating in some fashion the exhaustion of the self. And this takes place—infinately paradoxically—without ever denying *a priori* (as does however occur within the logic of film experimentalism)<sup>12</sup> its foundations and common sense: in particular, even the idea of a radicality of the photographic gaze in reality and in history. In this sense, Gioli was a “classic” artist —suspicious to the point of “critical paranoia” towards all processes of the massification and commercialization of 20<sup>th</sup> century photography—when it was a matter of being modern (and in this, it seems to me, resides the profoundly modernist nature of his work: in that he seeks an approach to the medium that is rooted in its essential structures more than in its commercial logic) and has continued to be one when many—often with an hysterical attitude that betrays the fear of finding oneself superseded in history—were beginning to define themselves as postmodern. And so, only today can we finally understand how he, in his profound philosophical classicality, but even more in his unceasingly un-self-satisfied modernism—and thus in his closeness to the lively energy of the avant-gardes of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century—has always been—and now more than ever—an absolutely contemporary artist.

---

<sup>12</sup> Cfr. Paolo Bertetto, “Il cinema d'avanguardia. Teorie, poetiche, immaginazione,” [“Avant-garde Cinema: Theory, Poetics, Imagination”] in Bertetto, ed., *Il cinema d'avanguardia 1910-1930*, [*Avant-garde Cinema: 1910-1930*] Marsilio, Venice 1983, pp. 8-17.