

SOUVENIR DE PARIS OR ON DISCOVERING THE FILMS OF PAOLO GIOLI

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Culture Theorist

I discovered the Italian artist Paolo Gioli (born 1942) quite accidentally in Paris, on the fourth floor of the Centre Pompidou, in a display of a contemporary art collection covering the period from 1960 till today. My jaded eye stopped at a work called *Traumatografo* (1973) pulsating on a TV screen. Naturally, I felt compelled to pay attention.

In my opinion, it doesn't matter whether a work of art addresses the everyday lives of people on the streets of the artist's native town, or if it is the author's dialogue with her subconscious and past, thereby accentuating traumas and complexes (at least some of these traumas will have been inflicted on those same streets). I think that one should neither feel restricted in the choice of subject, nor allow the subject to impose limitations. Art should be created with the passionate urgency of necessity from the broadest palette of impressions, knowledge and skills, and Gioli's films reminded me once more of this.

As befits the title *Traumatografo*, the notes for the film declare that it is intended to be a solace to people afraid of dying on the gallows. It is a commentary on the traumatic fear of violent death, on the one hand serious and poetic, and on the other hand ironic and falsified. In the introduction, to the sound of Mussorgsky's piano cycle *Картинки с выставки* ('Pictures at an Exhibition', 1874) we see a parade of images from death scenes. These include engravings from books with recognisable mythological images and horrifying ancient scenes (such as executions), illustrations from wars down the centuries, 20th century photographs of fallen soldiers and civilians, and similar. This is conducive to thoughts on the cyclical nature of history (so as to say – we haven't advanced very far), reminiscent of the ideas proposed in Walter Benjamin's *Über den Begriff der Geschichte* ('On the Concept of History', 1940). A moment later our attention is seized by a man falling out of a car. With variations, this episode winds its way throughout the whole work. The more one looks at it, the repetition and overlap of the images makes the fall seem ever slower, more transparent and softer, dividing the body into the physical and the transcendental. The former is overcome by gravity, but gravity has no dominion over the latter... The (co)existence of these two worlds is starkly highlighted by the strange children's games in the film as it moves on. The interplay of negative and positive, mirroring shots and movements resembling arcane rituals create a ghostly feeling. This mood brought to mind Jean Cocteau's films such as 'Orpheus' (1950), and these associations became a powerful additive to my reflections. This course of events is characteristic of Gioli's works.

The film is a visual carousel in three parts; the masterfully crafted image games let the shots disintegrate into one another like a kaleidoscope, creating new signs and anticipating if not the recognition of their meaning, then at least that the chain of associations will be followed.

This is one of Gioli's rare works where he utilises sound. As with the visual language of the film, the composition of the sound is diverse, fragmented and full of references. For example, Gioli uses an excerpt from Prokofiev's score for Sergei Eisenstein's *Александр Невский* ('Alexander Nevsky', 1938). The film is particularly famous for its impressive battle scene, and also brings to mind Eisenstein's theories of montage, particularly vertical montage, which applies directly to the use of sound in cinema. In addition, the first chords of Prokofiev's *Opus 78* resound together with other shots from classic cinema recorded from the TV, namely Lewis Milestone's 'All Quiet on the Western Front' (1930). And so the "network" expands...

Gioli has said that his films are like tests¹ which demand a reaction from viewers. I would say that there is a path forged by one's own imagination and experience, and another paved by the author's visual codes and their associated references, and this path is very interesting to read. In fact, it is so interesting and thought-provoking that one wants to return to the films again and again.

Information on Gioli's website and elsewhere reveals that the period 1967–1968, when he was a student in America, was crucial in his development. The then young artist discovered Structural film (New American Cinema), which left a deep impression and inspired him to abandon the paintbrush for the camera. In the 1970s Gioli took up

photography in a serious way.

In just over four decades of creative activity, the artist has made over 30 experimental films – fascinating masterpieces – as well as a series of no less significant collections of photographs, which initially brought him wider recognition in Italy and further afield.² American film theorist Bart Testa writes in his article ‘The Unstable Eye: Paolo Gioli’s Film Practice Seen through Paul Virilio’³ that Gioli’s films were not fully appreciated in their day because they lacked a context in Italian experimental cinema. In other words, in Italy significant activity in this field took place while Gioli was in the USA. When he returned, it had begun to die down and had acquired an excessively political character.

Gioli’s films include the flickering frame effect typical of structural cinema, overlapping images, collages, material filmed straight from the TV and readymade or found footage. Like his US colleagues, the artist often ignores the standard horizontal format and frame-like restrictions. Gioli’s works also do not offer narrative stories, but neither are they a random arrangement of shots. His cinematic language is aesthetic, multilayered, disturbing, and both emotionally and intellectually challenging.

Gioli’s films include many theoretical and practical technical references to the 20th century avant-garde masters and the early days of cinema and photography: there are dedications to Bunuel and Dali, Duchamp, Vertov, Eisenstein and others; there is a return to the experimental photo image animation of Eadweard Muybridge and Étienne-Jules Marey. Reaching even further back, he also refers to the pioneers who first immortalised impressions of light – Joseph Nicéphore Niépce and Henry Fox Talbot. This is not a nostalgic yearning for past achievements, a time when art was “real” and which has been lost forever. Gioli is creating his own version of cinema history, highlighting what he thinks is important and supplementing this with his own attitude and experience to express the spirit of his own time. The result is a quirky version of “then and now”. For example, the dominant flow of associations in the film *Quando l’occhio trema* (‘When the Eye Quakes’, 1989) is concentrated on Bunuel’s and Dali’s *Un Chien Andalou* (‘An Andalusian Dog’, 1929), but on this occasion the focus is not on the symbolic opening of the eye for seeing things differently, rather it is all about the aggressive overabundance of visual options, which, without discriminating what the mirror of the soul should be turned towards, makes the eye tremble nervously and wince before suffering that is almost physically palpable.

My reaction on seeing this film is that the “different viewpoint” is an old cliché that makes me want to close my eyes rather than open them in order to cleanse the mind (indeed, Gioli’s film ends with a closing eye). I don’t claim that this was exactly the author’s intended message. The main thing I wanted to draw attention to is that by quoting pioneers of photography and cinema, and 20th century avant-garde and contemporary masters, Gioli wishes to pay them respect, and also to reinvent their culturally iconic achievements through his own interpretation. These are highly personal works in which the author remakes history into his own experience, thereby handing over a vital impulse to the audience.

As someone who objects to the ever-growing dominance of technical innovations in creative activity, Gioli controls his film from start to finish, including the film processing. It can unequivocally be stated that he has achieved perfection through his – by contemporary standards – extremism, as he tends to create works from practically nothing, more precisely – with nothing. The main thing is to have light sensitive material; knowledge, dexterity and mastery will take care of the rest. This trio can easily replace the camera and lens. A good example of this is Gioli’s pinhole film (*filmstenopeico*) ‘Man without a Movie Camera’ (*L’uomo senza macchina da presa*, 1973–’81–’89), a technical rejoinder to Dziga Vertov and the cinema industry as a whole. In its place there is a pipe with a row of small holes,⁴ and the reel offcut is illuminated simultaneously along its entire length. The result is a film consisting of various stitched-together short strips. Each of them, as the light vibrates and breaks up, depicts a carefully chosen subject: naked female body parts, the artist’s moving head or face or himself leaning out the window, plants, urban and nature scenery. As close ups of the various objects come and go, there is a feeling of viewing it all through a keyhole, which logically gives the aura and tension of darkness. Meanwhile, the dancing flashes of urban and natural scenes appearing in low resolution release a simple delight in viewing. It is as if cinema were happening for the very first time.

Translator into English: Filips Birzulis

1 From an interview published in 2009 in *Imprint cinema Paolo Gioli: un cinema dell'impronta*, which can be read

on the blog <http://cherrykino.blogspot.com/2011/03/paolo-gioli-artisan-filmmaker-free.html>.

2 Gioli's photography is very interesting and utilises techniques that are just as experimental as his films. For example, one of his trademarks is Polaroid prints on drawing paper. He has been using this technique since the early 1980s.

3 Testa, B. *The Unstable Eye: Paolo Gioli's Film Practice Seen through Paul Virilio*. INCITE Journal of Experimental Media, Issue No. 2, 2010.

www.incite-online.net/testa2.html

4 Gioli's favourite instruments are various types of pinhole cameras.

Even seashells, a fist or a sieve of holes in a cracker can all substitute for the photo/cinema eye. caurumu siets.