

## The Symbology of an Imprint: the films of Paolo Gioli

Two distinct images recur at the beginnings and the ends of many films that Paolo Gioli made in the space of the seventies. One is the image of a sculpted head, whose vision is obstructed by heavy black bandages and the other is the painted figure of a man opening up his clothing at the chest, offering it to our view with the aggressive force of a gash. In these two images are contained in allegorical form some of the fundamental aspects of his entire set of investigations. The very indifference with which these are used, at the head or the tail of his films, allows a fundamental rule of his work to become visible, a law of rhythmic continuity of vision that does not necessarily develop from a beginning to an end, but which is affirmed in the repetition and superposition of themes as in the compositional structures of the American Minimalist music of La Monte Young and Steve Reich, developed during the same years when Gioli made his films.

The sealing off of vision by the bandages and the opening up of the clothing to bare the chest recall the continuous movement of opening and closing, necessary for the use of a pinhole apparatus. Opening and closing is the marking of the upbeat and downbeat with a single gesture through which his filmic and photographic work comes into being, the creative gesture par excellence. They are the very respiration of his vision perfectly coinciding with the flutter of an eyelid, with the reawakening of the mythic, primordial eye that haunts and rules the entire universe of its images. The eye opens onto the world and suddenly closes once again upon the latent images captured within itself, an image that is a phantasm and an overturning of the real. And it is the ineradicable residue of this marking of the upbeat and downbeat of vision: it is impossible to see it without creating images at the same time, without bearing within oneself the trace of the vision that has taken place.

Much has been written about the technique of pinhole photography used by the artist, on the nakedness of his eye—original and primitive—since it is stripped of flashiness, filters, or technological grids.<sup>1</sup> Gioli's eye refuses the presence of optics and will not accept the presence of the shutter, but rather imposes the blinking of the eyelid as the single legitimate rhythm for the acquisition of images. Gioli—in contradistinction to the majority of artists, who during the same years posed questions for themselves about the specificity of each particular artistic or technological language—is capable of moving with complete freedom from film to photography, or from photography to painting, moving against the current generated by techniques or technologies, born in historical succession, of one another, because for him the problem of the discipline simply doesn't exist; the confines and the hierarchies among fields just aren't there. Because his point of departure is not a discipline nor even a technology. How could he pose the question for himself of the authentic grammar of film, as did many among those, who were at that time engaged in a cinema of investigation? He could not, because once the filmstrip is

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<sup>1</sup> Roberta Valtorta, *La congiunzione degli opposti* [*The coincidence of opposites*] in R. Valtorta ed., *Paolo Gioli: fotografie, dipinti, grafica, film* [*Paolo Gioli: Photography, Painting, Graphics, Film*], Art&, 1996, pgg. 15-32.

freed of lenses, of the objective,<sup>2</sup> of the negative, of the shutter and even of the very structure of the individual frame, no grammar remains for his language. The form of analysis, originating in semiotics, which at that time brought film to see itself through compositional units and shots, that emphasized the individual frame to the detriment of the flow of images of the filmstrip was unable to truly articulate a great deal about pinhole cinema, in which even the frameline between successive images is lacking, where the concept of the frame and the composition of the frame slips into indefiniteness, where dissolving between the before and after of filmic time is not accomplished *a posteriori* during editing, but occurs on the filmstrip in the very act of vision<sup>3</sup>, where before and after coexist in the very moment of appearance of the images.

The sculptural head enclosed within itself behind the black bandages and the clothing opening onto white flesh in the painted figure are two symbolic images of the physicality of the eye. The head is a closed ocular globe and the clothing is the eyelids opening onto the flesh, that—just as the pupil does—allows itself to be wounded by, traversed by light. The blindfolded head and the body stripped naked are images of an eye, echoing the surrealist text of Bataille: the sexual organ open to penetration by the world. They are images that evoke the floating eye of Redon, a globe, a hot air balloon, and finally the moon, drifting away from the earth, and gradually moving away from the ground to reveal itself as a mirror: sculptural and conceptual, of that other sphere, which now appears legible to it: this spherical earth, this planet that the small and stubborn labor of an infinity of ants could, in a dream, transform into a cosmic pinhole apparatus in which to immerse the gaze and thought might blend, in search of the primeval latent image.

Gioli's pinhole film, *Uomo senza macchina da presa* [*Man without a Movie Camera*], begun in 1973, inserts into filmic appearances that circular contour of images that speaks almost naturally, by right of format, the language of 19<sup>th</sup> Century Symbolism, and that, in his photographic work, even in the use of color, revives, without the least artifice, the divisionist use of light (*Tondi di pupille riaperte* [*Tondi of Reopened Pupils*], 1986). The *tondo*, open to images of a velvety soft focus, is an ode to the surrealist eye, the sliced eye of Buñuel, to whom Gioli dedicates a film in 1988, *Quando l'occhio trema* [*When the Eye Quakes*]. In this work, the surrealist assimilation of the image of the moon traversed by a slender cloud with the sliced eye becomes an absolute coincidence of two images, eye and moon, that quiver together in the same frame. For a moment, the image of a seashell, revolving around its center, is interposed between these two. The well known sexual symbology of the seashell is joined here to a reference to Duchamp's *Anémic cinéma*, the hypnotic circular movements of which Gioli reconstructs through the spiral form of the nautilus, the generative form *par excellence*, which derives in Gioli not from a numerical sequence, such as the Fibonacci series evoked by Merz, but in allegorical fashion, since at the center of this seashell opens up the ultimate pinhole, that is the

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<sup>2</sup> Translator's note: i.e. the lens.

<sup>3</sup> Cfr. Documentary film by Bruno Di Marino in *Film di Paolo Gioli* [*The Films of Paolo Gioli*], published by Rarovideo.

entrance to that womb, which generates all images, by which nature is formed, as in mythology the universe finds its origins in the cosmic egg.

It is precisely in examining Buñuel's *Un Chien Andalou* that Gioli's symbolic universe would seem to find self-completion. The sliced eye in Buñuel's famous sequence, we know to be that of a cow and that is enough to extend the chain of associations to a further recurring image in the artist's imagination, Rembrandt's *Slaughtered Ox*. We know that the artist for long time kept a reproduction of it in his studio and that its appearance out of the shadow, caressed by light does not seem so very distant, from a formal point of view, from the images of Gioli's film. There is an obvious assonance between the *Slaughtered Ox* and the painted image of the man who rips open his clothing to bare his chest at the beginning and the end of his films. It will likewise seem evident that *Probabile foro stenopeico (realizzato da formiche)* [*Probable pinhole apparatus (made by ants)*] of 1995 and the wounded terracotta globes of Lucio Fontana's *Nature* belong to a common imaginative universe. But the wound appears, furiously evocative, in other parts of the artist's work in which images of severed heads are suspended by the hair in the hands of the decapitated person himself, contemplated by the headless body of its owner, as if the head could be a subject other than the body from which it has been detached: the tiny cosmos of a duplicated and henceforth independent identity. At other times, the head is the place where Gioli grafts on its own collage of images, the place where he opens up various clips and allows the *mise en abîme* to proliferate, allowing the filmstrip to disappear in infinite regression as in *Secondo il mio occhio di vetro* [*According to my glass eye*] of 1971.

There is a classical dictum in the theoretical literature on photography, that insinuates itself into the conviction, embraced or rejected from one era to the next, that the photographic image is the imprint of the object photographed. It is not accidental that photography at its origins is thought of in this way, as is Gioli's photography, which is frequently closer to the origins of photography in its use of the barest technical means than the photography of the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. His images are imprints, they grasp the world like a hand grasping as it picks up some earth and on the earth they leave the pattern of their outlines, just as Gioli's pinhole perforations leave on the outlines of the images the trace of the materials in which they are made; and as we watch his *Pugno stenopeico* [*Pinhole fist*], 1989, we imagine worlds rendered through the pattern of the lines of the closed palm of a hand. In all this, there is increasing tactile evidence that indissolubly links the obsession with the eye to the obsession with the body. Gioli's films might be defined as a kind of *film frottage*, that is, deliberately created for the tactile encounter between the visual support and the object reproduced. Even that magic gesture of a hand in a black glove that we see Gioli perform in Bruno di Marino's *Documentario*, that flickering of the fingers that rapidly open and close the eye of the movie camera which has no internal shutter, recall in a striking way, that gesture of a hand guiding a pencil or a piece of charcoal back and forth across a piece of paper causing the surface reproduced to emerge by means of *frottage*. And just as in this technique, in his films a continuous, indefinite, shifting of two-dimensional visual language towards the sculptural, towards the imposition of the body and of matter takes place. His films are imprints, because—as has been written—they have as much to do with what is done with matter as with what is done with light. They are born of a perception of the world in

which light is matter itself. Gioli is the only filmmaker who, while inventing pinhole cinema for himself (using a metal tube with numerous pinholes in it) had decided to work to create a strip of film images that proceeds not in time but in space. The tube was designed to allow the simultaneous photographing of a body at its full height. During the projection of a filmstrip exposed in this way,; it is in every aspect the unrealized conceptual opposite of the chrono-photography that Gioli has spent so much time in examining. It is cinematic duration captured in a singular flutter of the eyelids.

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