

## ***Paolo Gioli: The Face of Another Cinema***

by Mark McElhatten

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Optical magician Paolo Gioli is the great poet – explorer of cinematic mutilation, mutation and metamorphosis. Cinema is an hourglass that measures lost time and registers the decomposition of the instant, a looking glass in which we find ourselves, seeing the face of another. Breaking the glass that divides the eye from the world Gioli plays with these reflecting shards recomposing reality into new mosaics. Breaking the skin, Gioli is as a sculptor of light a surgeon as he acts upon the translucent skin the mortal flesh of film whose photochemical images are made with human traces and solar scars. He multiplies grafts, superimposes, severs and un.masks to find a face simultaneously made of night and day, the hidden face of cinema, this limitless face that looks back at us with our own eyes. Breaking the frames, splitting the screen, erasing the frameline that divides one image from another, nesting images inside of perforations like a compress on an open wound, Gioli has made films that encompass a encyclopedic range of imagery at times achieving a baroque complexity and elegant coherence through home made instruments and simple modifications. Phantasmal perturbances, retinal trauma, kaleidoscopic mirror mutations and stigmatic reception, superimpositions as a coital register between overlapping planes of existence are conjured up optically and metaphorically in essential films like *Hilarisdoppio* (1972), *Traumatografo* (1973) and the amazingly tour de force *Immagini disturbate da un intenso parrasita / Images Disturbed by an Intense Parasite* (1970).

Gioli has used the bobbin mechanism of the sewing machine and the vernal trembling of leaves set in motion by the wind as exterior camera shutters. Pin-hole wizard Paolo Gioli has often made image gathering devices from button eyes, snaps, and seashells. Gioli's "Stenopeico" devices can composite images from apertures that run the length of the human body from head to toe creating images with the lambent textures of a fugitive light bringing us back to the miracle and quiet astonishment of the earliest photochemical images caught by Fox Talbot and Niepce. While clearly inspired by an ideal of a visionary use of the mechanization of sight and Vertov's concept of Kino Glaz a cinema that transcends the limitations of the human eye Gioli in his pinhole works becomes the Man Without A Movie Camera removing the coated glass eye of the camera lens, attempting to disable the crystalline vision of the human eye with it's vitreous humor and it's thin protective sheath to approximate a naked eye that directly touches appearance.

Gioli dreams of a reincarnated eye and eye reconfigured from trauma. In his homage to Luis Bunuel *Quando l'occhio trema/When the Eye Quakes* (1989) Gioli lacerates the organ of vision celebrating the razor that slashes the eye (with a movement like a cloud slicing the moon) in Bunuel's *Un Chien Andalou*. Gioli's reference acknowledges the shocking

provocation and morbidity of that original image while suggesting a different range of meanings which could include the initiation of divine wound, not a blinding, but a gifting, conveying “second sight”. Making for the eye a new slit or aperture that breaks the shell of the eye like the cracking of an egg, a fertilized eye that hatches violently, newborn.

Practicing an archeology of affection Gioli has often worked with found or preexistent images capturing a sense of spiritual force and animism in the life of his selected materials. Gioli gives this force an articulate form subjecting his images to a transformative field of crisis where the space and the surface complexion of the films suggest palimpsests and mosaics, where the tropes of multiplication, laceration, suture and sacramental mutilation are linked to the vision machine and to rituals and parodies of the sacred.

Many of Gioli’s films such as *Filmarilyn* (a séance/tryst/match with the spirit of Marilyn Monroe conducted through photographic contact sheets) – *Piccolo Film Decomposto* (employing the images of Muybridge, Jules Etienne Marey and Duane Michaels to create a sense of the uncanny and accelerated mating cycles of regeneration and decay between images), *L’operatore perforato* (a silent studio production reduced to 9.5mm becomes mentally magnified into a metafilm) *Volto sorpreso al buio/The Face in the Dark* (reworking a found family photo album into a theater of operations for molding and creative deformations) and the anonymous family movie footage of the astounding *Anonimatografo*, all explore to some degree the suggestive tensions between component parts of the moving image in arrest or conversely the nascent movement in a photo or still frame. Gioli initiates startling moments of erotic reverie, kinetic ignition and reanimation exploring the osmosis and evolutionary leaps between different species of images. In approaching the material body of film Gioli is both forensic and amatory seemingly entering into the genomic structure of images in order to engender spectral hybrids and filmic chimera. These films of memorial images quickened back to life evokes the idea of image as eidolon and the notion of a Cinema and its Double -the film within the film and the face beneath the face, unveiled.

Paolo Gioli has been a constant force in cinema and the arts since the 1960’s an undeniable force in some circles pioneering innovations in the silk screen, lithography, photography, mobile screens and sculptures. “I didn’t want the images of my films to remain inexorably on film” Gioli declared and he often took orphaned film frames trimmed in editing and clustered them into mosaics of film frames inventing new processes for their transference to paper, wood and other materials. Hence the film *Images Disturbed by an Intense Parasite* (1970) and the lithographs of the same name released in 1974 and the film *Traumatografo* (1973) in relation to the silk screen series *Traumatografia* (1975). In this respect Gioli is in a company of past and present artists such as Andy Warhol, Man Ray, Michael Snow, Marcel Duchamp, Bruce Conner, Jack Chambers and Joseph Cornell, Len Lye, Carolee Schneeman, Harry Smith, Julie Murray, Michele Smith and Luther Price whose combinatory art moved across permeable boundaries between mediums leaving a trail and relay of works that relate back to their film work or conduct a central orbit around shared filmic references and cinematic ways of seeing.

Films live in the dark and their after effects often incubate indefinitely or persevere in tenebrous half –light. That which should be clear, resounding and influential is spoken partially in indistinct whispers a sound that does not travel far. “That which is most common becomes most rare” is a phrase that could describe the history of film where the number of lost films eclipses the number that can be seen just as the living outnumbered the dead. Films disappear, the victims of selective memory, affected by the vagaries of distribution or their own inherent physical fragility. Balancing this is that work which may have received limited recognition, been neglected or unknown resurrects unexpectedly to find it’s second breath. Gioli’s artworks and films are in countless museum collections and a representative portion of his films are available for rental, yet this astonishing work was hidden in plain view or remained close to unknown in many times and places where they might have set a rare example as a bellwether and inspiration for contemporary experimental film practice. Gioli had first hand exposure to the Experimental Cinema of the 60’s and 70’s and he absorbed the first avant- garde of the 1920’s.

He occupies an important place in the lineage that leads to and participates in contemporary experimental film practice and this will be recognized. Although the originality of Gioli’s work insists (as it does with all artists who have created a remarkable body of work in a authentic idiolect) that he be considered as a case apart, he is one of the missing links that connects and illuminates European, North American and Japanese avant- garde film of the past four decades. Gioli’s work continues unabated from his studio in the comparative solitude of Lendinara, Italy. If the impact of his work has been muted or delayed it is relative to its limited sporadic exposure, a situation that is destined to change.

Thus the amazing and unique films of Paolo Gioli are ripe for rediscovery. This rediscovery was set in motion by the Raro Video dvd release of 14 films( less than half of Gioli’s official output) and by important screenings in Rome, New York and Paris. A modest re-entry may yet turn triumphant abetted by this exciting retrospective of 4 programs devoted to Paolo Gioli here at the Hong Kong International Film Festival.

My sincerest thanks to Paolo Vampa who has been the steadfast supporter of Paolo Gioli across his lifetime as a filmmaker.

**Mark McElhatten**