

Paolo Gioli in the Landscape of Italian Experimental Cinema

For its coherence, its wide range of concerns and its longevity, Paolo Gioli's work in film could be considered unique in the landscape of Italian experimental cinema. His first film *Commutazioni con mutazione* dates from 1969 and the time has come to take a retrospective glance at points of intersection and contact (by way of distant background contrast) with the rest of [Italian experimental] production, that at least in the first part of the seventies was intense though it is currently, somewhat underappreciated.

We can date from the time spent by Gioli in New York between 1967 and 1968 the beginning of his progressive abandonment of painting—which would become definitive in 1975—and his decision to concentrate his activity on film and photography. Gioli was drawn to the terrain of photosensitive materials by a number of factors: seeing the films of the “New American Cinema” in small non-traditional screening rooms in New York, discovering the possibilities for producing and analysing images offered by the cinema and recognizing the autonomy and freedom of action afforded him by lightweight equipment, that put the work of an experimental filmmaker on the same plane as that of a painter in his studio.

In Italy, the encounter with the New American Cinema had an equivalent disruptive force, and offered an example for practice as well as for the organization of an alternative distribution system, a system, that became a meeting point for filmmakers, who had several years earlier begun to work outside the canons of mainstream¹ cinema. Acquaintance with the films and the filmmakers of the New American Cinema took place in the first half of the 1970s thanks to screenings at the Festival di Spoleto in 1961, the Festival di Porrette Terme in 1965 and 1966, and the Festival di Pesaro in 1967, the true and proper consecration of the primacy of American experimental cinema thanks to the presence at the festival of Jonas Mekas and P. Adams Sitney. In addition, in these same years, a few American filmmakers such as Gregory Markopoulos, Taylor Mead and Storm de Hirsch, during the time they spent in Rome made contact with the artistic milieu of the capital, screening their films in art galleries and producing some work while in the city². It should be emphasized, however, that if on the one hand, the influence of the New American Cinema was fundamental as a spur to the organization of a cooperative of experimental filmmakers for increasing visibility, on the other hand, this cooperative took root in an artistic context already characterized by a strong experimental and multimedia bent, as in the neo-avant-garde of the period, which gave Italian experimental cinema highly distinctive autochthonous elements. The CCI (Cooperative Cinema Indipendente) [Independent Cinema Cooperative], founded in the autumn of 1967 on the model of the American cooperative, brought together extremely diverse filmmakers, varying by education as much as by practice (painters, amateur filmmakers, poets, “outsider”

¹ *Translator's note: in the original “industriale.”*

² Storm de Hirsch made *Goodbye in the mirror*, (1964); Taylor Mead, *European Diary*, (1967); Gregory Markopoulos *Gammelion*, (1968), *The Olympian*, (1969), *Cimabue! Cimabue!*, (1971) to cite only a few titles.

filmmakers). Having an utterly open and inclusive structure, it never succeeded in forming a stable organization and dissolved itself barely two years later. When, in 1970, Gioli arrived in Rome, where he lived for the next several years, the Cooperative no longer existed, but artists continued to work separately and to interact in the little “temple” of Italian experimental cinema, Filmstudio 70, a Roman film club, in those years directed by Adriano Aprà and Enzo Ungari, where Gioli’s films were first screened as well (his first one-person show at Filmstudio 70 was in 1973).

The attention to the material elements of cinema, the investigations carried out by means of accumulation and variation, which characterize Gioli’s work, and which frequently call to mind the work of some American experimental filmmakers (Brakhage, primarily), is a path little explored by other Italian experimental artists. For as much as the latter have many times underscored their desire to re-write the history of cinema upon its latent possibilities, to take up once again as a point of departure its material alternation of light and darkness (evident, for example, in the writings of Guido Lombardi in *Filmcritica* of 1971), in reality, their attention has for the most part been focussed on the capacity of the cinema to construct representational and discursive modalities distinct from the institutional, with the aim of liberating its language from the theatrical and literary incrustations, which have characterized [film] history, to explore the (im)possible relationship between the real and its codification in images using modalities that do not disdain to confront the new forms of narrativity of 20th century literature and the artistic neo-avant-gardes of their time. One thinks, for example, of the series of alphabetical films of Anna Lajolo and Guido Lombardi, in which the aporias of the relationship between representation and the real witness the reactivation of the mythic and symbolic dimension. Or again in the primacy of subjective vision in the films of Alfredo Leonardi, Massimo Bacigalupo, and Tonino De Barnardi, that through the insistent use of superimposition and a form of analogical and rhythmic editing, attempt to liberate themselves from all linguistic and narrative-communicative mediations and conventions, in order to bring into being a universe of images whose point of departure and of arrival is always the “I” of the artist. The foundation of these investigations is always the liberating ease of use of lightweight amateur equipment: 16mm and above all Super-8, that allow total intimacy between filmmaker and movie camera, as a true extension of the body and the eye. This is a personal and daily relationship, exempt from the technological fetishism of the “cinematic apparatus”—which is thus overturned and called into question—apposite to a time when the miniaturization of means of production to a scale accessible to everyone, seems to impose a *modus operandi* that is now a *modus vivendi* (as Brakhage had already underscored in his text *Metaphors on Vision*). It is the creation of this individual space of action, which does not seek the legitimation of the spectator, so much as, at the extreme, a participatory/shared experience, that has clear points of affinity with Gioli’s filmic practice. I am referring to his predilection for the artisanal dimension, where he does everything himself: shooting, editing, printing, developing in a home laboratory in which the apparatuses for the production of the image are studied and modified, in order to test limits and possibilities in the service of an absolute control of technical means and materials, or better, in the service of finding his own path, even by means of subtraction (as in the case of *L’uomo senza macchina da presa*, his film made

without a movie camera, using a pinhole tube camera.) and displacements (the use of film in various formats in *Commutazioni con mutazione*).

It is interesting to note how this modern alchemical practice, which starts with the filmstrip and the fundamental tools of the cinema, may be found as well, though with a different orientation, in the work of the two other great “artisans” of the Italian experimental cinema: Alberto Grifi and Piero Bargellini. Alberto Grifi, by education a painter and photographer, stretched the optical apparatus of the camera using distorting lenses of his own construction, in order to break down perspective realism in the image and to sound out the possibility of “finding a new foundation for the gaze,” to enlarge and alter the visible (the films in question are *Transfert per camera verso Virulentia* [*Transfer by camera to Virulentia*], (1966-67), and *Orgonauti Evviva!* [*Long live the Orgonauts!*] (1968-70). In his work, Grifi joins his passion for scientific studies of the functioning of the human eye and an extensive technical knowledge of the movie camera to the revolution in visual, imaginative and perceptual terms realized by painting at the end of the 19th century. Going even further, Piero Bargellini in his film *Trasferimento di modulazione* [*Modulation Transfer*] (1969), in which the very reproducible nature of film is called into question. Bargellini did in fact alter the development process of the negative, arresting it at several points and for various movie lengths of time, and even projected a small point of light on some parts of it. He then made a unique positive print. A positive that with each projection inevitably deteriorates, bringing about the using up and death of the film itself, and whose other prints, will never be the same as the original. A radical procedure—the point of no return—that works on the primary substance of the cinema: the photosensitive material from which images are made, freeing themselves, even in this case, from the rules of a procedure—that of developing and printing—that is extremely standardized.

Into this barely delineated landscape, Gioli’s work may be inserted—Gioli, who has investigated with more devotional constancy, compared to Bargellini’s anarchic instinctiveness, the components of film and the filmic image: the alternation of light and darkness, the relationship between movement and stillness, the screen as a rectangle with a set form (calling into question the *aspect ratio* through the use of pinhole or “photo-finish” technique). In these elements Gioli’s cinema fully realizes the notion—heterodox with respect to the original—of expanded cinema proposed by Adriano Aprà and taken up again by Enzo Ungari, and which comprehends “those films that move the cinema away from the screen and those that in insisting on their own material character prepare for that movement.”³ This movement away from the screen as form in Gioli’s films is often realized through a paradoxical tendency, via repetition and layered multiplication, which expands the very possibility for the spectator to watch several points of view simultaneously, nearly reaching the intensity of a perceptual test (as in *Immagini disturbate da un intenso parassita* (1970)).

³ Enzo Ungari, *Schermo delle mie brame* [*Screen of my Desires*], Vallecchi editore, Firenze, 1978, p. 226

The singularity of the experience of Gioli's work is made clearer if compared to the film production realized in the same years by others, who, like him, came from the world of painting. Gioli has justly refuted the definition of "artist's cinema" used by Vittorio Fagone, one of the first art critics to study and validate the interests in this medium on the part of numerous Italian artists towards the end of the 1970s. Fagone proposes a cinema made by painters in a position of separateness if not in opposition to the remainder of experimental film production, as if to underscore the purity of the specificity utterly internal to the art world, but revealing simultaneously his partial and monolithic (a-historical) vision of the cinema. An artist conscious of his own actions such as Gioli could only oppose such a closure of his own horizons for action. This closure, paradoxically, is the basis of the choice of the film medium on the part of many artists, attracted, on the one hand, by the possibilities **afforded by new media** of broadening the scope of their artistic tools, and on the other by the necessity of moving beyond the confines of their own activities in life and action, of exiting the art gallery, on the impetus as well of the events of '68 and of an ever more pressing political dimension. If some artists, such as Luca Patella or Umberto Bignardi—who had already, in the preceding years, abandoned painting in the strict sense for photography, graphics and the construction of environments—deepened the specificity of the film image, then others sounded out the possibilities of reexamining behavior and actions, in a conceptual and performative key, or constructed narratives with an eye to the historical avant-garde. During the 70s, the interest taken by artists in the film medium faded and resulted in, on the one hand, a return to painting as a form, a retreat that was perhaps a product of the time, and, on the other hand, in a continually growing curiosity towards video as a field of experimentation, that began in Italy in the first part of the decade. Gioli stands out in his uniqueness as an artist, filmmaker, and photographer (activities that he developed in parallel with his activity as a filmmaker, intertwining with them and superimposing themselves on them at many points as a dialogue taking place between and beyond the confines of any particular medium). His voluntary isolation, his unyielding choice of a terrain for exploration without deviation or departure—except for reasons arising from those very explorations—his amorous passion, physical and tactile, towards the filmstrip and the movie camera, have brought about an uninterrupted filmic production that continues, imperturbable and clear, as the water of the Adige, that runs alongside his house near Rovigo.