

Paolo Gioli: a cinema “a fresco”

Aim at the eye, disperse the human

In Paris, in the 1980s, I discovered the photographs of Paolo Gioli. And it was necessary to see his films to comprehend the profound vindication of this work, uniting technical complexity and elegance, formal rigor and seduction, constancy and innovation. These films possess a movement of lines and a liveliness of surfaces, overtaken only by an irresistible agility in editing.

The film work of Gioli is based on a dangerous idea of vision, an idea, whose buñuelian origin (*Un Chien Andalou*) appears in the film called *Quando l'occhio trema*. It is a veritable *exposition* of the eye, in both senses of the word: on the one hand, this film pays particular attention to the eye and takes aim at it as its target. In an unusual process of inversion—comparable to certain optical undertakings by Michael Snow—the screen never turns its gaze away from our eye, if I may hazard such an expression. On the other hand, while there are no razors to be found in Gioli's film, it is the film material itself that *slices* the eye of the spectator: the flicker effects function like a blade. The pulsation of light and darkness had already been experimented with elsewhere (Paul Sharits), but Gioli clearly designates his target, as did Buñuel during other surrealist times: the film as razor blade. From this, most probably, derives the force of the collage, a force to which I will return.

What remains striking in terms of the vision of Gioli's complete body of work in film is the contradictory place the human—body and face—occupies in his general iconography. It would seem that Gioli's experimental project is in disaccord with the injunctions of a rossellinian type: things are there, why manipulate them?

Manipulation, here, on the contrary, is in command. The implicit—and frequently *the explicit*—“claim to status as art” of the experimental cinema produces the utopia of rediscovering the tangibility of manual interventions on the film material so that this latter translates the *touch*, which the camera as recording machine and the projecting light gun, do not allow. However, there is an indisputable “Gioli manual touch”: the accumulation of generations of images, the piling up of appearances, the illusion of a sculpted thickness of images. But beyond the fiction, breached if not destroyed, beyond the thwarted narrative teleology, beyond the doubts distilled about the “faithfulness of images,” to use the lovely formulation of Magritte in his capacity as a filmmaker, beyond, finally, the critique of the mimetic virtues lodged in the heart of the cinematographic apparatus, is the representation of the human body—character and actor—that is made uncomfortable, deconstructed, dispersed, atomised like a rebus buried in the space-time of a film by Gioli.

“The image ritornello”¹

Film as *machine*—its speeds, its rhythms, its serial nature—often has the upper hand and the body is *absent* because it is caught in the frame grinder and no longer participates in a figurative system deriving from *l’istoria*; such as in the poor and vulgar of the cinema, the narrative in the most banal sense. As in the case of Fernand Léger and his *Ballet mécanique*—oh that poor fat lady who endlessly climbs the stairs—the human body is present in the films of Gioli, but torn to bits, repeated and ground down by a comparable mechanical ballet.

And this suggests to me that this cinema derives from a kind of *exhaustion*, a deleuzian kind of exhaustion.

I am referring to a text of Deleuze, that accompanies the texts for television of Samuel Beckett, *L’Épuisé*,² [*The Exhausted*], this book—small in size and great in spirit—where one encounters an important concept in Deleuze’s thought, a thought connected to that of Guattari (who also loved the cinema). A concept or notion, Deleuze evokes this “image ritornello,” that would seem to run through the films of Beckett and is composed of three simultaneous aspects mixed together: fixing a center, organizing an appearance, catching a glimpse, in other words, *opening up* the image, unfolding it.

Evidently, I saw in the “image ritornello,” an ideal designation, an ideal description, perhaps, a definition, of what I call the experimental image and that of Gioli in particular. For the image ritornello is not defined by Deleuze by the “*sublime quality of its content, but by its form, that is to say, by its ‘internal tension’(…). The image is not an object, but a ‘process.’*” Later, Deleuze insists further on the content of the image as insufficient to define the image and evokes “*a mad captured energy ready to explode, that causes images never to last very long.*” This “image ritornello” commingles for Deleuze, with detonation, combustion, dissipation, the dissipation of energy concentrated in the image ritornello...

An inventory in the form of cinema

I have also evoked the notion of exhaustion for the cinema of Gioli, because this latter demonstrates at the level of each film as much as at the level of the entire body of work,

¹ Translator’s note: “L’image ritournelle” in the original. An expression coined by Deleuze; roughly “the image refrain” or “the image as refrain.” “Image ritornello” is used in the Smith/Greco translation. Except for this term, all translations of citations from Deleuze are my own.

² published by Editions de Minuit.

an overwhelming drive to inventory the formal powers of the cinema: layering, pulsation, alternation, incrustation, alteration, displacement of framing...³

These powers are accumulated, or selected and assembled according to the principle of a kind of cinematographic encyclopedia, in which the domination of black and white confers on the films the status of animated engravings illustrating at once technical and figurative procedures: positive/negative mirroring in *Secondo il mio occhio di vetro* (1972), symmetrical split imagery in *Del tuffarsi e dell'annegarsi* (1972), the cinegenic⁴ mechanism in *L'Operatore perforato* (1979), discontinuity between frames in *Quanto l'occhio trema* (1989), the laws of the *camera oscura* in *Film stenopeico* (1973-1989), the literal carrying out of a title in *L'uomo senza macchina da presa*, superimposition and matting in *Hilarisdoppio* (1972), disordering and degrading of images in *Thaumatrografo* (1973), homage to Marcel Duchamp in *Immagini travolte dalla ruota di Duchamp* (1994)—Duchamp who made “handmade” cinema, according to his commentary on *Anémic cinéma*—chronophotography at the origins of cinema in the stunning reanimation of still images of Marilyn Monroe (*Filmarilyn*, 1992), illusions of depth in *Immagini disturbate da un intenso parassita*, the movement of the film strip in *Filmfinish* (1986) and *Commutazioni con mutazione* (1969), the grid, the field, and the raster in *Voltotelato* (2002)...

In praise of the hand

The cinema of Gioli is an art of the manipulation of images, a “handmade” cinema, to use the duchampian formulation. In this way, *Filmfinish* is a true eulogy for the hand (innumerable hands cover the background of the image) and doubtless, Gioli could say, as could Jean-Luc Godard, that his hands are more indispensables to him than his eyes for making films.

The editing table must doubtless call Gioli completely into action. Everything likely happens there. And it's even more a matter of collage than montage. A collage, the transparencies of whose images, which overlap each other in the foreground, assure an illusion of layered depth. Despite the fact that the images condense sometimes, cross over each other and appear to fold like a *fan* in the center of the frame (an example of mallarméean cinema?), it's not of Dziga Vertov, nor of the architectural experiments of the avant-gardes of the years between the two world wars of which one is put in mind. It's rather of paintings made by means of superimpositions and transparencies, of the serigraphy of screens and cross-hatching, batik printing towards which our attention is shifted. It's the memory of the “Pop Art” of a Schifano or of a Ruaschenberg that comes

³ Translator's note: A specialist term, referring to a movement of the camera away from a particular framing, or even the placement of the camera in a deliberately awkward framing. One might even say “unframing” or “deframing.” It may also refer to the deliberately “bad” framing of a subject in a painting, or photograph.

⁴ Translator's note: “Cinégenique,” a specialist neologism, meaning related to fact of being enhanced by filming, not precisely on the model of “photogenic.”

back to us. Besides, Schifano was obsessed by the cinema, by its alternations and by its rhythms, its capacity of inverting color. And I remember the homage that the Italian painter made to Jean Luc Godard in explicitly citing the variations in positive and negative images in the film *Deux ou trois choses que je sais d'elle* [*Two or three things I know about her*]. Every work of Paol Gioli perpetuates this critical heritage and this resistance to verisimilitude, which one thinks too easily guaranteed by realist ontology and the photo-cinematographic image. If there remains one person who resists, it's Gioli!

One must truly devote some time to screening the films of Gioli to admire his precious, theoretical iconographic choreographies. Digital copies (dvd's) are today a great help in coming to know his work better. But restored film prints and projection on the big screen are absolutely crucial in order to immerse oneself in this cinema "alla fresca," a cinema whose porous fragility of images competes with the sudden appearance of figures. Space struggles against time in Gioli's work. An infinite struggle, that transposes the narrative anecdotes of the novelistic cinema into a novel constructed of images.