

A cinema of the imprint
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For a cinema archive to engage with the cinema of Paolo Gioli is a way to investigate the artistic possibilities brought into play by an artist, that is, the components making up the material basis of cinema: to make but a bare beginning: the base of the film strip, the emulsion, and the format of the film.

Gioli draws attention to the lines, scratches, breaks, and tearing of the film strip, first, in order to exploit the visual arabesques marking the surface, which interfere with the image printed on the emulsion, and at the same time, in order to draw attention to the indexical characteristics of the material history of the film strip, traces left by the passage of time and by the passing of the film through various mechanisms of reproduction: the signs of “death at work,” as Jean Cocteau used to say, in operation throughout the cinema. In this sense, the screening of one of Gioli’s works activates a mechanism which mirrors the restoration process and demonstrates the latter’s hermeneutic arbitrariness. In our daily activities as cinema “archivists,” we are obliged to swim against the current of time, choosing, on the basis of personal taste, economic possibilities, technological mastery, technical evolution, which traces to erase, being set into motion along with the restorer on the trail of the original text, identifying with the viewer at the first public screening of a film, the “Urtext” so heavily charged with symbolic meanings as to become transformed into a “primal scene.” Given the implications of personal involvement for the restorer— if he is really aware of the ethical consequences of the restoration — the restorer suffers, first, the frustration necessarily related to any attempt to attain to the myth of origins. In contrast, the vicissitudes, which Gioli forces his images to undergo, bringing to the fore the signs of the passage of time, have the effect of integrating the reconstruction of history into the realm of the visual. The decay of the original and thus, the evident materiality of the filmstrip, which cinema carefully tends to hide through the visual and narrative power of the images imprinted [on the film strip]¹, does not intend to emphasize in a banal fashion the loss of an aura, but to engage with its memory and the possibility of its survival in spite of everything, just as, to tell the truth, Walter Benjamin invites us to do in his too often quoted *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technical Reproducibility*.

The cinema stands in the center of all this.

The loss of definition in the image connected with the re-use of found footage or the practice of the artistic re-working of individual frames, the violation of framing implied in the sub-dividing of the frame, and above all the foregrounding of the components of the material structure which make viewing possible, precisely because – in one of the magical paradoxes of cinema – they are never seen — namely — the frame line that separates one frame from another, the sprocket holes which allow the film to run at a constant speed without breaking (Gioli here consciously retraces two of the fundamental stages of the invention and refinement of film technology), are simply that many ways of affirming its survival. On the condition, however, of leaving behind the mechanisms of daily use and of transforming it into a work of art, for, as Benjamin again reminds us, “When an object is seen as a work of art, it immediately stops functioning as such.” And so, for Gioli cinema is redeemed by becoming something more and something less than cinema.

In this game with structural components of cinema Gioli attempts to retrace all the histories of cinema which never took place, the roads parallel to the main highway, the routes not taken, the discarded linguistic possibilities, creating a cinema of super-imposition, matte shots, graininess, blurriness, repetitions, subdivision of the frame, positive-negative inversions, which he himself explains in the interview to Fragapane “I pulled out a piece of 35mm color film from this garbage can they have, where they throw away outtakes and discarded material, and when I started looking at it with a magnifying lupe it occurred to me that I could re-frame some parts, examining what there is between the frames. I also imagined a hypothetical title, *Outside the Frame* which would be

¹ Translator’s note: in the original “immagini impressionate”.

the exact sequel to *Interlinea*. So, we are inside the film material, the film strip, the base of the film, prior even to an image being registered on it. Often, the thought of having to create the images myself distracts me – sometimes I consider it lucky, a luxury, to be able to work in a medium that already contains anonymous images made by someone else.”

By bringing into the foreground what is fundamentally intended to remain invisible, Gioli assumes the risk of making invisible what is fundamentally intended to be seen: the image. Gioli’s images always seem to be “disturbed by an intense parasite,” as in the film *L’operatore perforato* [*The Perforated Operator*], which, in putting forth the suspended possibility of a 9.5mm aesthetic, highlights the center sprocket hole used for advancing the film in the format in question, as a “white hole” into which the images of the film are at risk of falling, to become invisible.

This body contact with cinema takes it back in time, to recover pinhole technology, and then to incorporate the archaeology of the production of images into the Lumière’s apparatus for “shooting and projection.” Gioli — and along with him the so-called “pre-cinema” tradition (though the distinction now becomes meaningless and the history of images becomes a little more continuous, no longer divided into B. L. and A. L., obviously Before Lumière and After Lumière) -- transforms his body through the images he creates, as he captures them using a pinhole tube apparatus: he becomes a simple hole through which images pass to be imprinted upon the emulsion of the film, a “black hole” which captures reality letting it pass through itself, only to spit it out again in the form of images. In this connection, it is impossible not to think of the definition physicists give to “black holes” drawing on the concept of the “event horizon.”

In precarious balance on this horizon line, Gioli engages in his “struggle with the angel,” proposing himself on the one hand as a model for a new evolutionary leap of the human species, which has transformed the cartesian *cogito* into a “*video ergo sum*.” Gioli’s cinema is made with the body, the eye, the hands, which are not only used to edit the filmstrip, but become a shutter in alternating motion in front of a pinhole, just as Gioli says can be accomplished using Duchamp’s bicycle wheel. This performative posture, which places the cinematographic act in the historical tradition of the experiments of the avant-garde – and Gioli’s cinema could be seen as a kind of “cinematic *arte povera*” — puts us on guard when in engaging with the mechanical and aseptic quality of video and digital media. Cinema, in fact, as Gioli shows (in the deepest sense, he actually demonstrates it) is fundamentally connected to erotic art, because the flow of images that recreates the illusion of motion, is made possible exclusively by the fact that a sprocket tooth repeatedly enters a perforation: in and out, in and out, incessantly repeating, until the images flow, a highly sexualized act.

In any case, Gioli takes no refuge in a kind of structuralism of materials, but courageously engages with the ethical problem of cinema, its relationship with the world, and wants to show the “rustling of the leaves.” In this body contact with reality, once again the Bazinian ontological act is realized, through the recovery of the performative force of the hand² (by means of which Gioli defines himself a true “filmmaker”) which is expressed already at the moment of the “live shoot,” and which can occur, as we have seen, without the mediation of the camera, being “collected” by the body of the artist himself, which enables its impression on the filmstrip, modulating the exposure with his own hand, which covers and uncovers a pinhole, while the rhythms of the creative act are determined by the length of the roll of film: cinema thus becomes an art of the direct tracing of reality, reproducible but only as a function of the conditions of the time and the material which determine its birth.

In other words, the cinema of Paolo Gioli becomes “a cinema of imprint” in the sense used by Georges Didi-Huberman in *La rassemblement par contact*. The imprint which — as in the work “Feuille de vigne femelle” in which Marcel Duchamp recreates the female sex organ “en creuse,” (which Gioli, not by accident, explicitly quotes) – opens up a productive doubt concerning the origin of art and, therefore, of cinema, causing us to question ourselves as to whether “It makes

² Translator’s note: in the original “manualità.”

manifest the authenticity of the presence (as a process of contact) or, on the contrary, the loss of uniqueness implied by the possibility of its reproduction. Does this produce something unique or something disseminated? The auratic or the serial? Something similar or dissimilar? The identical or rather the unidentifiable? Intention or chance? Desire or mourning? Form or formlessness? The same or the other? The familiar or the strange? Contact or rejection? [...] I would say that the imprint is the “dialectical image,” the fiery destruction of all that: something which speaks to us of *contact* (like a foot sinking into the sand) and of *loss* (the absence of the foot in its footprint).³ Thus, in the center, stands the cinema of Paolo Gioli.

³ Georges Didi-Huberman, *La ressemblance par contact. Archéologie, anachronisme et modernité de l'empreinte*, Les Editions de Minuit, Paris, 2008, p. 18. The quotation marks in the original make it unclear as where the quote ends.