

YERVANT GIANIKIAN
AND ANGELA RICCI LUCCHI
NON NON NON

Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi
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HangarBicocca Critical Notebook n. 1

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Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi – NON NON NON is the first Critical Notebook by HangarBicocca, an instrument that offers an in-depth about the artists involved in the exhibitions and of bridging eventual gaps in the critical and theoretical texts about their research.

Based on contributions by experts, the Notebook sets a context for the artists' career within a wider artistic, historical and cultural scenario. It also contributes to motivate the choices of the artists and the specificities of the works proposed within the curatorial vision of HangarBicocca.

In the case of Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi, the publication was motivated by the need to make up for the difficulty of finding written texts on their impressive research (which are, moreover, scattered in different contexts, little inaccessible and rarely translated into Italian). But the objective is also - and above all - that of throwing light for the first time on the wide segment of their work connected to video installations and drawings (thus related with contemporary art), which in fact constitutes the core of the exhibition at HangarBicocca.

In regards to this, it was considered important - and in line with the renewed identity of HangarBicocca - to make the Notebooks as accessible as possible, publishing them under the Creative Commons Licence*, and allowing them to be downloaded from the website www.hangarbicocca.org in pdf and ebook formats.

We would like to thank all the authors who generously accepted our proposal to take part in this project with a new or revised piece of writing.

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The eye as the instrument of thought

— Chiara Bertola

At the Milan home of Angela and Yervant. In their kitchen I rediscover objects and methods which I thought had been lost in time. The atmosphere is of something that has been lost – a culture of work, a focus on inherited tradition and the respect for manmade things. With Andrea Lissoni, who right at the start of our work together at the Hangar proposed an exhibition of their work, we return to the theme of many conversations, all of them interwoven and difficult to unravel and untangle as if we were caught in the middle of brambles. I had seen *Dal Polo all'Equatore*, one of their best known films, in Boston, and *La marcia dell'uomo*, installed at the 49th Biennale of Harald Szeemann in 2001. I knew little or nothing of their vast filmography. I now have the possibility of seeing their films one by one at a privileged screening, in the time necessary, as well as the opportunity for an interview and discussion with the creators. Now the images of the films, together with their narrative, one after the other, stretch out, large, powerful and emotional, and expand and grow until they become, through the ethical force of the themes, the power of the images, the urgency and the topical nature of the revelation, something awkward and at the same time majestic and immense like a cathedral.

Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi are considered the forerunners of Italian experimental cinema. They are known all over the world and live and work together in Milan. HangarBicocca is hosting the very first retrospective of installations of their work.

The two artists started to work together in the early 1970s, gathering, cataloguing and building up collections of hundreds of objects, most of them old toys and images, which they first filmed, reawakening the memory which is inevitably attached to them. Thus, for example, in the light animation of *Carrousel de Jeux* and *Ghiro Ghiro Tondo*, the re-evoked and revived past throws up new and very old stories which are both painful and joyful. As if those remains were not enough to raise a hidden memory, the creators then replace the soundtrack with a backing fragrance, diffusing in the projection room perfumes which, like Proust's *madeleines*, link up historical facts with personal emotions.

These are the early years of the creative career of the two artists, centred on film and photographic archives which they accumulated over the years up to 1977, the year in which they discovered nitrate films made by documentarist Luca Comerio at the turn of the century. They saved the films, which technically can no longer be viewed or whose material is slowly deteriorating, and re-shot every still with a special machine invented and made by Yervant: the analytical camera. Like the yarns of a loom on which the pattern of the cloth is to be woven, Yervant and Angela weaved the stills of the old films and re-edited them, revealing the hidden fabric of history. They explored the themes of the past to show how they underpin the present, how the time passed in the first half of the century continues to mould our present. «We think that only the present exists and that for us the memory is present, not past. This is why we reject the category of archaeologists; we work in the present and for the present and do not accept the idea of the past – what we see in the stills is what we see today».¹

The artists work on the stills, trimming them, colouring them, cutting them, cleaning them, to extract the essence of a time substance which is about to dissolve, grafting on something obscure a seed of truth... as if history were earth... as if the images were clods turned towards the sun by a plough. The analytical camera – which Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi built by craft methods in order to re-film the old films rediscovered – acts like that farming utensil, bringing back to the light a world whose truth risks remaining buried. This is the meaning of the vast and exhausting work by Yervant who for five years non-stop re-filmed in the dark of the studio the 360,000 stills of the film *Dal Polo all'Equatore*, rediscovered in the Comerio archive, and with Angela re-tinted them, added music and rearranged them. A way of working which brings to mind the words of Osip Mandel'shtam, about «the eye being the instrument of thought».²

In this case the eye is the analytical camera of the two filmmakers, able to see in things the details that bind us to the remote and to the different and show them in new and unusual visual relationships. An eye which «like that of a bird of prey has the power of adjustment, transforming itself into long-range military binoculars or a jeweller's magnifying lens».³ An eye which recovers and interrogates the images of History and puts them back into motion. To achieve this the artists seek an intentionally “low” perspective, focused on almost invisible details and above all aimed at constructing that large and imperceptible conceptual “loom”, able to weave together gestures, memories, perfumes, images and objects which were believed to have been lost forever. «We're interested in the archive because the entire present is already contained in the archive... but it's slow and we have to reread it and put it back into motion. Memory interests us not as the past but as the discovery and reading of the present».⁴

We can therefore imagine Gianikian's immense opus as the chronicle of a nightmare or a dream about the history of the 20th century. It is a reality governed by dreamlike laws, able to overturn the literal content of the vision into its opposite. In the films dedicated to the nameless, to people and things that have disappeared, to the meaninglessness of war, the only possibility of rebirth is apparently glimpsed in that cyclical time, without start or finish, of the poetic language of

the images symbolising human feeling. The cyclical nature of a time in which the wounds of war are absorbed into the tragic beauty of an injured face and are cauterised in the smile of a mutilated person. Because the language of art, like that of poetry, succeeds in making «the rotten petals of the faded rose» return to earth «to generate new forms of life».⁵

The history of man is also the journey of the viewer

The work of Angela and Yervant has always been shown, critiqued and loved within the avant-garde film circuit while very little of it has been presented to the world of contemporary art, overlooking its importance in this area. The reason is also to be found in a specific choice by the artists which forced them, in the Seventies, to follow the road opened up by cinema. «In those years [...] we no longer had contacts with the world of art. We had left the galleries and the cinema seemed to us to be our world. A more democratic and open medium, away from markets».⁶ So we had to wait until 2001, when the invitation from Harald Szeemann to the 49th Venice Biennale forced them to appear again before the world of international contemporary art. In fact the previous year the Fondation Cartier had already commissioned from them a work, *Visions du désert*, which they developed through the creation of an installation. Immediately afterwards, in 2004, they were invited to take part in a large international collective exhibition, *Experiments with Truth*, at the Museum of Philadelphia, in which they showed a multiple installation where the projection time can no longer be controlled and the synchrony between the four screens is gradually lost. They then started to use space and the possibility of dividing or multiplying the projection on multiple screens, doubling the emotional potential and at the same time allowing the viewer to adapt to a sort of walking gait, with the audience offered the possibility of walking together with the artists along the path of their exploration. Returning to this form of expression, in the exhibition *NON NON NON* at the Hangar, their films are presented in installation form via various large-scale multiple projections along one of the aisles. *La marcia dell'uomo* reveals, one after the other, using three large screens, three key moments in the history of the images of the twentieth century. Five significant installations from their artistic career are instead presented in the “Cubo” space: this is the series of the *Frammenti elettrici* (projected simultaneously on four walls), *Visions du désert*, *Trittico del Novecento*, *Terrae Nullius*, *Topografie*.

La marcia dell'uomo in this case is also an instruction for the spectator in order to see the development of the installation. By walking along the sequence of the three screens the history of man is spanned in three “internal” times which are activated in sequence: the end of the 19th century with the first screen, the 1920s with the second and finally the 1960s with the third. «Walking is essential, we would like to go on longer walks... Walking also means walking outside of the cinema, farther away, away from the image or closer to another, where the cinema becomes something almost sculptural».⁷

In the work proposed the relationship of the two artists with contemporary art is therefore consolidated, a relationship which for them, as we have said, is and has always been interwoven with experimental cinema, a real school of perceptual experience. We only have to think of the attention to detail, accompanied by the “treatments” of the film such as the colouring (at times acid, almost pop, similar to Warhol’s screen prints), the use of negative stills, the non-cancellation – often a highlighting – of the traces of the deterioration of the nitrocellulose and the use of music and of long silences, which together constitute the procedures for implementing a process which moves «from art towards the world».⁸

The cinema allows Angela and Yervant to slow down the rate at which the world, with its objects, its rights and its wrongs, disappears. It allows them to show detail, reverse order, break up reality and turn it upside down thanks to the enlargements and to the moderated passage of the images.

Formless material

Inevitably, where there’s talk of wrong-footing and reversal, Duchamp’s *ready-mades* comes to mind and, as a result, Dadaism and Surrealism, movements for which both Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi confirmed their initial interest. Incidentally, when I asked Yervant and Angela about their relationship with contemporary art, the first names mentioned were Dali and Buñuel. The surrealist horizon was in their sights when working on their first scented films and cataloguing objects, films and above all old broken toys mutilated by time and man’s violence. The theme is formlessness, a word that takes them back to the experience of the first surrealist manifestations yet in the meaning given by Bataille (*L’histoire de l’œil*, 1926), which classifies under the term “formless” that without the possibility of definition: the ambiguous.⁹ Surrealism seeks to create a short circuit in the logic of form, producing an unthinkable mutation within it. Undermining this concept of form becomes a fundamental and founding passage for this artistic movement, which retreats before the categorisation of reality imposed by the social conformism of those years. As suggested by Rosalind Krauss, the erosion being discussed is not an attack on material/form but instead an «erosion at the level of categories».¹⁰

I therefore attempted to rediscover the vision of Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi, in those early years during which they collected broken and discarded pieces of reality to put it back together again in order to give it another chance to

“speak”, in another language. The form they describe, like for the surrealists, does not only refer to physical appearance but also, in fact, to the rigid characterisations and oppositions in which reality is confined: in/out, alive/dead, high/low. «It is the ‘transgression’ of these distinctions [...] which produces lack of form».¹¹ According to Bataille not only do the logical categories of forms define the appearance of reality but it is through them that a meaning is attributed to it.¹² In this respect the focus by Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi on documentaries and science films, the recovery of amateur films and archive ones, can be traced back above all to the need to procure material to be deconstructed to then reconstruct it and transform it into something else. This means above all remoulding these elements within other categories, taking for example the “low” to be perceived as “high”. «Enlarge, show details, extend [...] actions which, after manipulation, transform the original archives into undisputable and topical ideological discourse».¹³

To do this, i.e. so that this material starts to perform the critical function of the language, the two creators need to segment it, cut it into many separate parts which will then serve as agents supporting a different and renewed discourse. What they deliver to the world of art is a declaration of the expressive power of the simple material (the film stills), a power which was about to disappear, which was on the point of descending to the level of the inarticulate. They approach the stills, which they consider “formless” material, like two sculptors faced with actual malleable “dough” to be moulded. They do it by showing the image material from a marginal point of history, and from that margin, from that upside-down point, they succeed in bringing out an experience from that same material which becomes disorientating and, in certain moments, also sublime.

The watercolours

I had the opportunity of entering the painful fresco proposed by Angela and Yervant not only from the main door of the work on film stills but also through a window which allows a little light and air to filter through, soothing and easing the incandescence of the images of their films. A space in which we succeed in bringing the same themes together yet with a slightly more detached vision and an easier mind... I’m talking about the hundreds of watercolours which Angela Ricci Lucchi has continued to produce, weaving the narrative and thematic paradigm within which their films are built. The exhibition at the Hangar is in fact outstanding in that these watercolours are shown for the first time.

After her life-changing meeting with Yervant Gianikian, in the mid Seventies, Angela Ricci Lucchi, in order to go beyond the limits of painting and conceptual art, moved towards film and performance experimentation. However she has never stopped painting, creating a very personal pictorial world made up of all the watercolour drawings. A *corpus* structured on several planes and registers, the most important and continuative being that of the diary, with small format watercolours (often in an album), following the life, travel and daily lives of the two artists. Then there is the one strictly linked to the film works, of which the single stills are copied or reinterpreted on hundreds of single pages or in notebooks. Finally the third is linked to and based on the Armenian cultural tradition of fairy tales. The watercolours have always accompanied the creative work and the life of the two artists. First Yervant takes notes in the form of micro-stories drawn as a rebus in which tiny drawings alternate with writing that is «tall and straight like an avenue of poplars».¹⁴ Kinds of drawn notes which Angela is later to continue, each time shaping visions which are increasingly complex. «I didn’t go to art school. I don’t believe you can learn to be an artist. I was very interested in the watercolour technique, which still fascinates me even now. It doesn’t have a great tradition in Italy, whereas it does in the North. I had the opportunity of meeting Oskar Kokoschka, who taught me a certain open-mindedness, as well as watercolours. In the mid Sixties the Nordic culture, from painting to philosophy and literature, was not particularly well known in Italy and the meeting with Kokoschka was an opportunity for me to discover it».¹⁵ This is a mid-European culture which includes names beloved by the artist, such as Kraus, Adorno, Werfel, Schönberg and above all Musil (whose war diary we find in *Su tutte le vette è pace*) and Mahler, to whom Angela and Yervant even dedicated a film.

Angela’s watercolours are the weaving of the film work, not exactly what we would call a storyboard, as they do not correspond to the drawn screenplay which accompanies the presentation of a film, but instead a thematic and visual paradigm derived from the narration of their films. The storyboards of a film are born as rapid notes made by those who, having very limited time available to present and publicise a product, study and foresee and visualise the sequence of the images in the most calculated and calibrated way possible. On the contrary the watercolours by Angela Ricci Lucchi follow the long gestation of the films which may last years and are above all in tune with the pace and tempo of reading of the books, discussions and tales told in the evening. Even if it is difficult to isolate the contributions of the two artists, it is Angela’s hand which draws and which has always adopted the more literary and cultural “front” in the close partnership of the couple... Yervant explores and works on the films; Angela explores and works on the books. Yervant notes down everything he sees in the stills in his black notebook; Angela translates every thought discussed or read in the watercolour. One day they told me «the films are the work on the stills, the watercolours are the work on the books». The travel books, ethnographic, colonial, the films or documentaries with an exotic theme provide boundless material for comparison and food for their research, helping them to unveil the hidden, violent and derisive face of phenomena

such as colonialism or the more recent mass tourism. «Films with an exotic theme interested us on account of this dimension of theft, of cultural theft, which we were then to handle in *Dal Polo all'Equatore*».¹⁶ Angela reads mostly travel literature, that which in two decades took on a decidedly propagandistic value. It is a very specific genre, linked to light writing which reveals forms of racism, exaltation and propaganda of Italy abroad, as part of the policy of “de-provincialisation” of Italy during the fascist regime.

Another day at the home/studio of Angela and Yervant in Milan: we have to look at and choose the watercolours for the exhibition. Piles of albums are heaped on the table in the studio, divided by themes (Mahler, Marinetti, War, *Oh! Uomo*, From the Pole...) and also relating to the many, intensive trips which marked the Seventies and Eighties: Vienna, Turkey, the USA, Armenia, Jerusalem, Paris, Moscow, Leningrad...

Each album contains, arranged singly on each side, the stills translated into watercolour. The drawings are organised in a sequence on the pages of the notebooks, from page to page, as if from scene to scene. In actual fact, although following the narration and theme of the film on which the couple are working, the watercoloured narration by Angela is “another film”, born of the more significant and intense images seen in the films. They are small buds which emerge from the shadow of the still... it reminds me of the series of watercolours taken from *Su tutte le vette è pace*, each of which is a very strong and moving representation which conveys in a single visual detail the entire effort of the leading players of the scenes filmed: the mule that sinks in the snow, collapsing under the weight of the weapons, the young soldiers who clamber up the mountain, dragging a useless cannon... A small watercolour traced with a few lines succeeds in putting over the cold, the fatigue, the meaningless of that useless march on the Adamello during the First World War.

Moving from oils to watercolours meant a major effort for Angela Ricci; it was, as she herself tells us, like moving from earth to water, a passage which could not take place without the lesson of the master Kokoschka and his recommendation about lightness. In watercolours everything is played out immediately: «The freshness is either saved or not». Angela's watercolours succeed in grasping the essence in the detail, that which is said to be «the sentiment of the whole, so that in the end everything disappears and the right tone remains, such as the final one left on the strings, for many hours, of a melody after hearing it».¹⁷ In fact every figure appearing in the water of the brushstroke is vital, it appears to flitter and move while imprinted for a long time within the vision of the onlooker.

In the watercolours relating to the surgical operation on a woman's head, for example, shown in the film *Oh! Uomo*, the artist's hand succeeds in following the expressionist lesson of lightness and vitality, even making the watercolour bleed on the paper like flesh. In these images Angela traces a sort of diary, in which however she transforms the work note or the painstaking annotation into the symbolic transcription of artistic creation. In this way the artist succeeds in bringing something of the endless flowing of time and of memory within the finite of form, within the limits of something visible. The stark component parts of the figures succeed in putting over with immediacy the movement of a scene. Art can be produced with little or almost nothing. The drawing, as we know, is mostly this nothing, from which however something vital and authentic can be taken without having to resort to sophisticated technologies. Angela is well aware of the fact that, by using this medium, she has to arrive at a decisive simplification, allowing only a weak trace of a much longer and deeper confrontation with things to emerge in the drawing. The extraordinary result is that once again an art form helps us to gain awareness of reality.

Another film

A surprising work has been put on show alongside the selection of watercolours at the exhibition at the Hangar: a single roll of paper, 15 metres long and 80 centimetres wide, entirely marked out and spaced from top to bottom by small figures which make up the units of the Armenian stories. Angela Ricci Lucchi has illustrated with her watercolour idiom the episodes of sixteen ancient Armenian stories which Raphael Gianikian, Yervant's father, told her. The truly unusual format of the work – midway between the tradition of oriental writing and illuminated painting – represents lyrically and evocatively a spoken world which has now almost completely disappeared. Angela began work on the “long drawing” in 1989 and ended it at Easter in 1991. Those stories are animated by the sound of the live voice of Raphael Gianikian telling the stories, translating them from Armenian into Italian. The images of the figures drawn by Angela are animated within the spoken narration by Yervant's father and come back to life within that oral tradition which is an integral part of the Armenian culture.

These are not therefore just chaotic or random notes or jottings but instead a complex and precise figuration drawn with swift and sharp strokes as if they were words. Angela conveys into an image that which she reads or hears. This unusual “transcription” transforms sound materials into visual materials with the inevitable effects of synthesis, of manipulation and in any case of transformation.

It may be interesting to underline how the forming of the images on the long drawing, their ribbon sequence from top

to bottom as if they were also letters in an alphabet, their organising into episodic notes following, step by step, the source of the narration, leads the drawing to maintain the rhythm and the improvisation rooted in the swagger of the oral narrative. The drawing thus becomes the visual imprint of the voice, similar to the stave of an ancient score on which the figurations of the rhythms and of the extensions of the voice were noted with the neums. The running over the long sheet of the tiny watercolours takes account, for example, of certain typical formulae of the opening and closing of Armenian fairy tales. One example is the «there was and there was not» with which Armenian fairy tales often start – a vagueness which is also found in the frequent «they walked a lot or a little» – or the typical final note in which it is proclaimed: «three apples fell from the sky: one for the person who told this story, one for the person who listened and one for the person who understood it». Elements that return in the long drawing, where at the end of each fairy tale, like punctuation, we find three small yellow apples.

Basically it is a question of applying the artisanal procedure of the analytical camera also to this long watercolour. There is not much difference between the “vertical mode” and that of the units with which Angela takes notes and that by which she studies the sequence of the film stills on which they work. «Looking at the films without projector or slow motion, I lost the movement which is a feature of cinema [...]. I analysed the stills like long uninterrupted series of photos glued in an album, reading the captions as if they were the pages of an illustrated book, the writing and the image [...]».¹⁸

Words take time before producing their effect and so do images. Seeing, one after the other, the films by Yervant and Angela and linking their viewing to the extraordinary work of the watercolours, it appeared clear how those stills have the strength of so many pictures, as in fact they are “painting”. I feel in fact that, like pictorial works, they also pursue the aim of making images last. In this respect they appear to match the idea of Odisseas Elitis that «painting is painting; it corrects rather than renders reality and not in the sense of the temporary but of the durable, not of the perishable but of the incomprehensible».¹⁹ The very special style of narration of Angela and Yervant – repetitive, at times exasperating – could possibly make up for the shortcomings of a fast-moving image, distant and not very realistic, of existence, in order to return to signifying our time. One thing that is certain is that, faced with the tormented images of their entire oeuvre, I realise how difficult it is to express pain with words and how great instead is the communicative power of images. With their works I have found myself as if in front of great painting, which only involves contemplation and “living” in silence, in order to make words and meaning germinate – don’t seeds germinate in the dark and silence of the earth?

1. Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi in an unpublished interview by Hans Ulrich Obrist.
2. O. Mandel'stam, *Viaggio in Armenia*, Adelphi, Milan, 2010, p. 164.
3. O. Mandel'stam, *op. cit.*, p. 189.
4. Yervant Gianikian during the presentation at Tate Modern in London in November 2011.
5. S. Vitale, *La seconda nascita*, in O. Mandel'stam, *op. cit.*, p. 189.
6. Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi in an unpublished interview by Hans Ulrich Obrist.
7. Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi in an unpublished interview by Hans Ulrich Obrist.
8. The whole thought can be traced back to L. Vichi, *La memoria fluttuante della materia*. This article is part of the seminary/film show held during the Course of History of Philosophy by Professor Manlio Iofrida at Università degli Studi di Bologna in 2010.
9. G. Bataille, *Informe*, in "Documents", no. 7, 1929, p. 382; I'm citing from the review's anastatic print, Éditions Jean-Michel Place, Paris, 1991, 2 voll. The notion of formless has its first theoretical formulation around the 1930s, when Georges Bataille dedicates to it one of the voices of the Dictionary included in the art review directed by Bataille, "Documents". Bataille starts from the impossibility to define a male female genre. In this impossibility he sees some surrealist expressions and some camouflages, from Duchamp, to Dalí to Chaun.
10. R. Krauss, *Celibati*, Edizioni Codice, Turin, 2004, p. 8.
11. R. Krauss, *op. cit.*, p. 76.
12. This topic is introduced and analyzed by Rosalind Krauss (p. 78 and following pages) in her book *Celibati*.
13. D. Hibon, D. Païni, *Del documentario fatto a mano*, in P. Mereghetti, E. Nosei (eds.), *Cinema Anni Vita Yervant Gianikian e Angela Ricci Lucchi*, Il Castoro, Milan, 2000, p. 100.
14. O. Mandel'stam, *op. cit.*, p. 63.
15. Angela Ricci Lucchi in an unpublished interview by Hans Ulrich Obrist.
16. Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi in an unpublished interview by Hans Ulrich Obrist.
17. O. Elitis, *La materia leggera*, Donzelli, Rome, 2005, p. 140.
18. S. Toffetti (ed.), *Yervant Gianikian Angela Ricci Lucchi*, Hopefulmonster, Florence, 1992, p. 85.
19. O. Elitis, *op. cit.*, p. 13.



Gianikian - Ricci Lucchi '89

Scrutinize, Interrogate, Scrape. Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi Explore Without Surrendering to History

— Andrea Lissoni

Preciosity, rigor, classification, an analytical gaze, tireless erudite research, history, memory, politics. Intellectual independence and pursuit of personal obsessions are factors that distinguish the work of Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi. They have been active as visual artists since the early 1970s, first with separate careers, then as a duo. Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi have powerfully scratched the history of filmmaking and art over the last forty years. Though they work on stereotypes, they are also constantly plagued by them: “There are no materials on their career”. It is not true; the materials are of enormous quality, but scattered between the disciplines of cinema and history (the important monograph *Entering the Frame* by the historian Robert Lumley was released late 2011, and presented at the Tate Modern, together with a retrospective of films). “They are invisible”. It is not true, they have had retrospective shows at MoMA, Jeu de Paume, Cinémathèque Française, they have presented films at the Festivals of Cannes, Rotterdam, Venice, Turin, shown at the Venice Biennial, the Fondation Cartier, the Witte de With, the Mart, the MoCA in Chicago, among other places. “They work on archives”. It is not true, they began with performances of projections and odors, and they shoot in small formats like 8mm, Super8, Hi8, as in the case of *Carrousel de Jeux* (2005). Above all, they are not experimental filmmakers, though they have been very close to masters like Jonas Mekas or Kurt Kren. Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi work on images from up close, often starting with lost and salvaged archives: they observe, dissect and organize them, re-filming and manipulating, multiplying the images in the form of sequences. They look at those excluded and the gestures that concern them, anonymous persons, repressed peoples (Armenians, Roma, colonized native populations) or children. But this still does not explain the devastating emotions one feels looking at their films or installations. They awaken our memory with films constructed in mnemonic terms, playing music with time and immersing time in color. They peer into details, gestures, knowing that is the place where horror lurks, the stereotype, the seed but also the crystallization of the imaginary. The explosive work of Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi incessantly imposes questions in its sequences, even though it already knows many of the answers. It is resplendent, personal, unique and, above all, damned political.

Andrea Lissoni: Is there a definition that represents you or in which you find an affinity?

Angela Ricci Lucchi and Yervant Gianikian: We are not archeologists, anthropologists or entomologist. For us the past does not exist, nor does nostalgia, only the present does. We create dialogue between the past and present. We don't use the archive for itself, we use that which has already been made, with a Duchampian gesture, in order to speak of today, of the horror that surrounds us. The artist and his or her work speaks of the violence with we are involved, from East to West. Since the beginning, our work has been against the violence – on the environment, animals, of man against man. In *Dal Polo all'Equatore*, man's first apparition in the white desert with his rifle, his first gesture is that of killing a bear. In short, we don't use the archive as collection of antiquities, but as an object of the present. This is done in each work, installations included, from first *Visions du désert* – made for the group exhibition of the same title in 2000 at the Fondation Cartier – that shows a voyage of a young woman in Algeria in 1931. That year was also the centennial anniversary of the French colonization of the country. We are able to precisely date that year – there is not a work for which we don't research historic information and all the possible sources in order to contextualize and read the materials we are dealing with. That was our first installation, a continual loop.

AL: What are the origins of your professional formation and its relation with contemporary art?

ARL-YG: We both began as visual artists. I had my first exhibition in Ferrara's Palazzo Diamanti, I then exhibited in Bologna. I was coming from a drawing background. I, so to say, “mastered” watercolor in Austria, while Yervant worked on creating boxes. He exhibited in Venice at Galleria del Cavallino in 1972. When we met we were both looking for something different, likely in images in motion. Yervant was already making films.

AL: What kind of films?

ARL-YG: In 8mm. For example one was on Ezra Pound as he walked along the Zattere in Venice. It was the period in

which he wasn't speaking.

AL: So they were unauthorized shootings?

ARL-YG: Exactly, but I lost them.

AL: Coming back to our genealogy, the first significant moment was perhaps the performance festival, *La Settimana Internazionale della Performance*, at the GAM in Bologna in 1977. How do you define the work you did in the 70s, when the two of you met?

ARL-YG: We started with a film that I shot in Romagna, in which the title was an anagram of Ezra Pound. Once we came to Milan, the film not yet developed, Yervant made some double exposures. We then began making films with the diffusion of odors and perfumes, moving around with a lot of cumbersome equipment, the film reels, a projector, a big suitcase. At the time, that kind of research was defined according to contexts, environment, surroundings, performance. We were dealing with works in which the artist acted, and where his or her presence was requested. After the *Settimana Internazionale della Performance*, London's National Film Theatre followed, which then opened the doors to travels to the United States. It was the last avant-garde festival in London. There was the structuralism of Peter Gidal in the UK, there was the Austrian Kurt Kren who had followed Actionism, the Americans worked on *flickering*, there was Stan Brakhage. In that context – we don't like to call it experimental cinema – we were constantly invited and did several tours in the US and in the UK.

AL: Can you describe your Bologna project in more detail?

ARL-YG: The project had three specially built areas. We tried to make the passageways between them fairly narrow so that the scents would not mingle or disperse. Each area was laid out in a different way. In one there were burners laid out in a square on the floor, with a certain scent, in the next there was an 8mm projector showing a reduced projection of *Le fiabe di Propp*, while in the last room we put burners with rubber tubes and other objects inside cages, creating a sort of "chemistry lab" effect. We didn't expect any particular reaction from the public - what actually happened was that most people ended up crouching on the ground, in a sort of *trance*.

AL: So it was an installation, with the public moving from one room to another. Were there set times, for example for the screenings, or were people free to do as they liked?

ARL-YG: The visitors were free to do as they pleased. Given that the films were not on a loop, they had to be reloaded at the end of each screening. We activated the work ourselves and then it was supervised by the guards, who had been shown what to do.

AL: It could be described as a performed installation, then, even if you don't place it in the context of *expanded cinema*...

ARL-YG: The novelty and added value came from the olfactory dimension, which as far as we know was a new thing at the time. Then in London in 1979 we returned to film, and when we staged that kind of project again, with a screening of "*Lombroso*" and the film about toys, we were at the National Film Theatre, an avant-garde setting.

AL: Then in your tours in America in the late seventies and early eighties, was it a mixed model or something that you adapted to the setting?

ARL-YG: We did adapt it, but the model remained the same, regardless of the venue: flames, burners and the projected image shrouded in smoke. We took film into a different dimension and worked with an "odour track" rather than a soundtrack, whether we were in the Anthology Film Archive in New York or Filmforum in Pasadena. We made the postcards ourselves. We expanded the reach of cinema when we were shut up inside it.

AL: Was each screening accompanied by a postcard you created specially?

ARL-YG: More or less, some of postcards covered part of each tour.

AL: The interesting thing is that the images have labels showing titles and dates, which are very similar to those you use as text cards or intertitles in your films.

ARL-YG: They are the same ones, we have a collection of them, all home-made. We wrote on the labels and printed the photos ourselves. We still use them in our films.

AL: What kind of audience followed your work?

ARL-YG: It was an audience that spread the word from one screening to the next, one city to the next.

AL: But did they follow you because you were European artists or for your approach, particularly the political angle?

ARL-YG: Undoubtedly for the political angle – we toured the universities, Madison and Berkeley for example were very political. And apart from the post-Vietnam thing, it was the period when Robert Kramer left the States.

AL: Could we call this audience a community?

ARL-YG: Definitely, like we were ourselves, I wouldn't call us film-makers or artists, but an avant-garde group.

AL: And which artists had this kind of following, what kind of programmes were you part of?

ARL-YG: Tony Conrad, for example, a lot, but also Kurt Kren, Jonas Mekas, Ernie Gehr...

AL: Did you know Robert Kramer?

ARL-YG: We were great friends. He loved our films. We used to see each other at festivals - Rotterdam, Locarno.

AL: Did you share the same kind of audience?

ARL-YG: Definitely. We were often on the same programmes together. One year in Locarno we were on the programme with Kramer and Panahi, which is a very clear indication of our political orientation and intentions.

AL: You move a bit like a band, but in what kind of spaces? *White cube* or movie theaters?

ARL-YG: In Italy, there wasn't much interest for our kind of research, so we took advantage of various invitations and left on tours for up to three months. We had constant customs problems because of our suitcase filled with chemicals, alcohol, that were easily mistaken. We went to the Jonas Mekas' Anthology Film Archive in New York and also a small Mormon theatre in El Paso and Philadelphia. There were art galleries, as it was the case in Los Angeles, but also cinemas or theaters.

AL: What did your repertoire consist of? And how did it evolve from a synaesthetic experience toward cinema?

ARL-YG: We were projecting films on objects, the "cataloghi" or "catalogues" (*Catalogo della scomposizione, Catalogo comparativo*, 1975, *Cataloghi – Non è altro che gli odori che sente*, 1976...), naming odors that one could smell, and the film on Lombroso (*Cesare Lombroso – Sull'odore del garofano*, 1976), closed a sequence that had opened in a very sweet way and then become progressively more dreadful and distressing. It was Lombroso that made us change direction. The first part of *Karagoz* (*Karagoz et les brûleurs d'herbes profumés*, 1979, followed in 1981 by *Karagoz – Catalogo 9.5*) was perfumed. The last of our perfumed films was *Essence d'absinthe* in 1981, we did our last tour and, upon returning to Italy, we shot the film on Mahler (*Das Lied von der Erde – Gustav Mahler*, 1982), even if we had already found Luca Comerio's archive that became the basis of our long work, *Dal Polo all'Equatore* (1986).

AL: Your path towards cinema was therefore a voyage within an image, of language and of the experience of perception, a voyage toward obsessions and essential themes, more than between disciplines like from art to cinema.

ARL-YG: Absolutely. The material of violence, of war, of the Orientalist dream, colonialism. In respect to other disciplines we were more like "outsiders" – we know of but we don't recognize ourselves in experimental cinema. The confrontation with the American public occurred on the basis of European culture – of its different image – and that of America, not on the styles of experimental cinema. Years of intense work passed: *Dal Polo all'Equatore*, the first two "war trilogies" – *Prigionieri della guerra* (1995), *Su tutte le vette è pace* (1998) – and among several others *Archivi*

italiani (1991), *Animali criminali* (1994), *Trasparenze* (1998) e *Inventario balcanico* (2000), before we came back to installation. But the films or videos that we shot are nonetheless in the tradition of avant-garde cinema, in continuation with our artistic research.

AL: I would say that – beyond your obsessions – it is the work on the structure of a pre-existing film that forms a system language continuity – through an action of reframing and color, and then the determination of new and other temporalities with editing and its musical nature. We must, in any case, speak of your “analytical camera”, the instrument that you sharpened for analysis, the reading of images and the flushing out of stereotypes that, at the same time, represent and produce the imaginary. What is it and how does it work?

ARL-YG: We can say that we travel while cataloguing. We catalogue through the cinema that we re-film. The original sources are recovered from documentary archives, among which the private collection of cinema and documentation pioneer of Luca Comerio (1878-1940), whose last laboratory we found the traces of in Milan in 1982. The “analytical camera” allows us to move closer, to descend in the depths of the photogram. To intervene on the scroll speed, on detail, on colour. To fix and reproduce archive material in uncommon forms. We do our “cataloguing” through the analytical camera. We archive between a mass of images, found images, once possessed, that provoke deep tensions in us. From our repertoire hidden meanings emerge that overturn obvious ones. In this way memory, behaviors and ideologies are determined. It is constructed by two elements: in the first the 35mm scrolls vertically and can capture the Lumière perforation and the films with various grades of constriction and decay of the support. The scrolling is manual, given the precariousness of the perforations and the continual risk of combustion of flammable materials. This first part of the camera is the result of the transformation of a contact printer. The second element is an air chamber aligned with the first element from which it absorbs, by transparency, the image. It is a camera with microscopic characteristics, more photographic than cinematic. The camera is equipped with lateral, longitudinal and angular scrolling mechanisms, it can entirely respect the photogram, its original structure and the speed of apparition – in a philological sense. It can also deeply penetrate the photogram, allowing for the observation of details in the marginal areas of the image, in the uncontrolled parts of the frame. The camera respects the color of the photogram’s original hand-toning, but autonomously it can also paint large areas of the film. For instance, in *Dal Polo all’Equatore* (101 minutes long) at least 347,000 photograms were shot.

AL: In other words it is an essential instrument that incarnates the specifics of your working process of pre-existing images, the precision, the research inside the image, the cataloguing, the reassembling and rereading of archives into new and disturbing works.

ARL-YG: It is a desire to thoroughly look at the archive, which at the beginning was born from the necessity to look at materials that were literally unseeable, films that, at that point, could only be wound manually. Within this logic of the experience of time, film and installation are very close. The image is created by looking at it through a loop, a rhythm, from which the structure and the musical nature of the montage emerges.

AL: That also gives a very specific, I would say unique, sense to your work on the archive. It’s not exactly in the tradition of found footage of experimental film, nor that of devotion or even of telling of counter-stories. What kind of relation do you have with the material on which you work?

ARL-YG: It’s an incessant research, we have to physically possess the materials. Only when you possess them can you see them – being a collector is necessary.

AL: *La marcia dell’uomo*, presented Harald Szeemann’s exhibition *The Plateau of humankind* at the 2001 Venice Biennale, is however on three screens. How do you decide to redesign the space through images?

ARL-YG: In a certain sense we reanimated Marey who opened the twentieth century, from which we also took the title. The work was born from long research on his work on archives at the doors of Paris. The screens’ subdivision also came about from the three sources of each screen, materials from 1895, 1910 and 1960, a voyage into the twentieth century, its watershed moments. It was in 2001, but before September 11th. With regards to the three screens, it is important to say that the subject asks for an inevitable physical proximity to time, to the public that marches toward the installation and walks from one screen to another – watching other men march. Then came *Trittico del Novecento* (2008), commissioned by Mart in Rovereto, presented on five screens and in three grand subjects: war, famine and religion.

AL: *Carrousel de Jeux* (2005), on the other hand, was envisioned as an installation. It is on found materials, in this case not film, but objects that belong to you, a collection of toys that are taken from the boxes and shown

one after another in front of the camera.

ARL-YG: It is a catalogue of 10,000 toys that survived a traumatic childhood between the two Great Wars. Miniatures made with poor materials, threatening shadows of Nazism and Fascism, that we found in the Dolomites, the porcelain covered summits of an artificial red. It's a real carousel that has a succession but not a narrative path, a grouping that could continue infinitely, if it wasn't for the final part. It is certainly not a film on filmic archive, but it is in the images that we usually find obsessions and figures. There are always children, as in our films, for example, as well as ghosts of atrocity and suffering, indicators of pain and perversions from the imaginary, even in toys. Montage is constructed on a series of associations.

AL: However distant, among your first performances there seems to be an evident continuity between the “perfumed films” and the catalogues of objects in *Carrousel de Jeux*.

ARL-YG: Sure, it's a kind of living catalogue. The process of throwing out various *Carrousel* boxes reveals the violence of games and, at the same time, the violence on games, broken, shattered, marked by the most shameful of signs, like for example racial distinctions. We don't abandon our obsessions.

AL: Do you feel you have a social responsibility in your work?

ARL-YG: Unfortunately, making films about the war does not mean stopping war. But we know that our films have an audience. When we stopped making scented films we did so because we realised that we had to move onto something else, another dimension. We also went into the field to film, like when we went to the Soviet Union before and immediately after the fall of Communism. It wasn't easy, but it was something we had to do*.

*The conversation is a revised version of the original one published in no. 31 of “Mousse Magazine” which has kindly allowed its re-release.

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Remembrance of Things Past

— Mark Nash

I was introduced to the work of Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi through one of their most important film essays *Dal Polo all'Equatore* (1986) when it was screened and distributed in the UK a couple of years later. Critics and filmmakers in the UK were fascinated by this major project on the legacies of war, colonialism and exploration. Chris Marker's poetic documentary *Sans Soleil* (*Sunless*, 1983) had recently been released in the UK. Gianikian, Ricci Lucchi and Marker were both looking at images for traces of those historical forces that have shaped the 20th century, the century which also created world of the moving image. Both sought an understanding of this contemporary world through film. Marker, for example, interrogated the archival record of the liberation struggle for Guinea Bissau showing footage of Amilcar Cabral with comrade soldiers from PAIGC¹ one of whom, Inocêncio Kani, was to assassinate him on 20 January 1973 in Conakry, Guinea at the point when Independence from Portugal was about to be declared. Marker comments on the footage he is showing us as if it is possible to look back at these images from 1973 and see the future of this revolution – the death of Cabral, Independence from Portugal and so on. Marker develops a cinematic poetics which binds these images, and by extension their worlds together to create a utopian filmic world, images “which quicken the heart”. «The first image he told me about was of three children on a road in Iceland, in 1965. He said that for him it was the image of happiness and also that he had tried several times to link it to other images, but it never worked... He spoke to me of Sei Shonagon, a lady in waiting to Princess Sadako at the beginning of the 11th century, in the Heian period... Shonagon had a passion for lists: the list of “elegant things”, “distressing things”, or even of “things not worth doing”. One day she got the idea of drawing up a list of “things that quicken the heart”».

The work of Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi has many similarities with that of Marker. They share a materialist politics and in using cinema to argue for a better world they are in a sense also socialists, though this is not the specific topic of any of their films as it is for Marker. They work exclusively on archive film, film that they have assiduously tracked down in film libraries around the world, and then in the studio and editing suite in their apartment in Milan they rework this material using the devices of slow motion, repetition and tinting.

They play with what Roland Barthes has called «the reality effect»² of the photographic image. The photographic image according to Barthes has a peculiar tense, the present anterior. It speaks both of now (the time of viewing) and of then (of the filmed event). Photography is uncanny in the way it combines these two times – bringing the dead to life so to speak. We respond to archive film as if we are seeing an event for the first time, or with fresh eyes. We cannot see the chronological distance that separates that event from us. WWI Italian troops are crossing the Julian Alps *now*, a polar bear is being shot *at this moment*, missionaries are *still* at work in Africa. *Dal Polo all'Equatore* plays with this reality effect of cinema – slow motion in particular reminds us that we are looking at film, analysing an action as if in a narrative film, calculating the precise moment at which the bullet will kill the polar bear. But then the images resume their normal flow and we are immersed again in a filmic reality that is so much more real for having been filmed. Aficionados of experimental film will recall Ken Jacobs' feature length experimental film *Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son* (1969) where he uses similar devices in an eponymously titled 1905 short film. Jacobs is concerned with the film image, the movement of the film stock, the grain of the image, and as he works on the material it becomes more and more abstract and detached from any referent.

Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi share these concerns, but their ambition is that much greater, their films are more like time machines in which we travel back to the past, experiencing it as if it were the present. Chris Marker of course had made a similar machine with his science fiction film *La Jetée* (1962) in which emissaries from the future are sent back to the present to try and divert the course of history from a catastrophic war. Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi try to give their images such an emotional charge that we experience as if for the first time something of the pity and terror that those events must surely have evoked in those originally witnessing those scenes such as the original filmmaker (in this case Milan-based pioneering documentary filmmaker Luca Comerio (1878-1940). Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi edit sequences of Comerio's material together to create a narrative sequence which tells the story of the 20th century in ways which could not be done at the time. We literally move around the globe from the pole to the equator the images make connections between exploration, colonialism, and war. Theirs is an affective history – a sequence of emotions produced by our reading the sequence of this film as a narrative. The opening of the film – a long tracking shot of a train journey through mountainous scenery – has an emblematic function. The 19c train journey transformed the experience of geography, duration and indeed narrative (since novels were serialised so they could be read on the train). In *The Remembrance of Things Past* Marcel Proust tellingly refers to the landscape of Baalbec being psycho-geographically transformed by the arrival of the train. The train with which they begin their film is also the film camera that simultaneously creates and transforms our experience of the 20th century, collapsing space, time and

narration even more extensively and comprehensively.

The most dramatic example of this affect of their work is their feature film *Oh! Uomo* (2004). The sheer weight of these images of deformity and suffering caused by WW1 creates an impact as if one were witnessing the effects of the war on human bodies for the very first time. We are currently of course familiarised with daily news reporting from theatres of war – Libya, Afghanistan, and so on but contemporary media both shield us from its reality, and by constant repetition desensitise us. In *Oh! Uomo* on the other hand the bodies of the injured living pile up before our eyes, the screen is filled with amputees and prosthetics as though it is trying to quantify the effect of the war on the living. It bears direct comparison Abel Gance's *J'Accuse* (1919) in which those killed in the war return to challenge the living for their culpability.

I have been working with artists concerned with the documentary image for some time. I was not able to include Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi in *Documenta11*, which introduced a wide range of documentary practice to the contemporary art world, but following on from my work for *Documenta*, I was invited to curate an exhibition at the Fabric Workshop and Museum in Philadelphia in 2004. I immediately thought of Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi. Their work was beginning to be shown in fine art contexts. I had seen their *La marcia dell'uomo* project in Harald Szeemann's Venice Biennale of 2001 and also Catherine David had included their film about Australian aborigines *Terra Nullius* in her 2003 programme at the Witte de With gallery in Rotterdam. The Szeemann presentation proposed a *parcours* through a series of screens on which was projected archive material some of which would later appear in *Oh! Uomo*. I wasn't convinced that this was the most appropriate way to present their work in an art context, because the viewer could choose not to be confronted by the material, just by walking on and through.

I visited Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi in their apartment and studio in Milan and discussed my exhibition project *Experiments with Truth* which took Gandhi's subtitle for his autobiography *My Experiments with Truth* as a way to stress various artists' differing and experimental approach to documentary.³ Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi's experiments with archive films put "truth" to the test, their experiments are designed to establish what can (and cannot) be said in the present about the past. Given my concerns about their longer works needing to be viewed in their entirety, Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi showed me a series of films three of which were already completed, and the fourth was in the laboratory. I agreed to provide the funding for the fourth *Nuova Caledonia* so that we could present them as a series of four short films as *Frammenti elettrici* (2002-2004) in my exhibition.

Frammenti elettrici uses extracts of private films (home movies) shot after WWII and the fall of Fascism in Europe. In the filmmakers words it deals with «social inequalities and the different 'species' of human beings». In *Roma (Uomini)* (2002), bourgeois Milanese encounter almost coincidentally some Roma people released from the concentration camps, camping on the outskirts of the city. This film prefigures the post-war history of their continued persecution. In *Viet-Nam* (2002), touristic reveries of a French serviceman include footage of innocent fraternisation with Vietnamese men and boys which belie what we know the reality of the then-French and impending U.S. imperialism. The third fragment, *Corpi* (2002), comprises clandestinely filmed footage of women's bodies as they relax on at the beach; neither prudish nor prurient, this film underlies voyeurism, an issue that is at the heart of the series, as well as the issue of control: who possesses the camera?

Hal Foster's well-known essay *The Artist as Ethnographer*⁴ explores the work of artists who adopt the position of ethnographers, sometimes with extreme *naïveté*, others as in the case of Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi, with extreme sensitivity as to how to work with the visual culture of anthropology. In Foster's words they are attempting to «frame the framer as he or she frames the other».⁵ This comes across most clearly in the fourth fragment, *Nuova Caledonia* (2004) which explores footage of celebrations witnessed by representatives of France, the then colonial power. By reframing and repetition the filmmakers seek out images of the colonists in their white uniforms to juxtapose to the black bodies of New Caledonians dancing for their colonial masters, dramatizing the power relationships between the native and the colonising settler.

As I worked on the design of the exhibition, I realised that these films were best presented as an installation. The four films were to be projected on screens forming a rectangle, hung far enough away from the wall that the audience could walk behind or in front of them. I was as it were editing the four pieces into a single experience which the viewer could modulate by their movement around the space. They were all short enough that the viewer could stay for the duration of the work. This worked extremely well: the four pieces are so different in content and this difference was emphasised by different tinting as well as the content itself, so it was clearly an installation of four separate films. Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi often create experimental, hypnotic sound tracks for their films. We had not discussed

how to choreograph the three tracks (*Nuova Caledonia* did not have one at that time), so I proposed taking one track – a particularly hypnotic percussive track from *Viet-Nam* and playing it over the installation as a whole. It worked well – the sounds echoing throughout the exhibition drew people into to this festival of affects that Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi had produced. This is also of course an example of interventionist curating. The filmmakers had a busy production schedule, they were not able to visit Philadelphia and I suspect were so tied into the image repertoire they were creating that thinking of them spatially was not a priority. At HangarBicocca however their works will finally achieve the spatial presentation they deserve and demand.

Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi talk eloquently about their work. They are so passionate about their practice, about the discoveries they have made and about the revelations their films can make about our reality that I am reminded of André Bazin's metaphor of film being the death mask of reality, providing an existential link with a world that is no longer with us. For Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi are able to take us both back in time and make dead images live again

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1. PAIGC or Partido Africano da Independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde.
2. R. Barthes, *L'effet de réel*, in "Communications", no. 11, 1968, pp. 84-89.
3. M. Nash, *Experiments with Truth*, The Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia, 2004.
4. H. Foster, *The Artist as Ethnographer*, in *The Return of the Real: The Avant-garde at the End of the Century*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1996, p. 203.
5. Trinh Min Ha's collection of essays *The Framer Framed* (Routledge, London, 1992) presents another artists perspective on these issues.



Bloody News from Friends: **The Thickened Cinema of Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi**

— Ara H. Merjian

Worldly writing begins with fact, but relies on imagination to arrive at the heart of the matter... Events constellate and dissolve... The prose of witness responds to the world, finds its work in the occasions that call it forth. Its method is exact attention to the actual. It depends on respectful reading of detail; on imagination making connections and seeing what's there. It also depends on art...

- Terrence Des Pres, *Writing into the World*, 1991

*I don't want this letter to scare you,
Your heart, like our bloody soil
and the olive branch of our hope for Brotherhood,
will burn again in the flame of all this.*

- Siamanto, «Il pugnale», *Bloody News from my Friend*, 1909

For more than four decades, Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi have recovered, re-filmed, and subtly altered original footage of eclectic origins. Working in tandem, the pair alters their frames with tinted hues, slow-motion sequences, and inverted negatives, drawing out unlikely, and often unsettling, rapports between seemingly disparate events. Their (re-)compositions treat a core of consistent themes from the 20th century: war, Fascism, colonialism, sport, spectacle, and the connections threaded among them.

More often than not, those connections take corporeal form. History in Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi's work is not a question simply of grainy striations or the patina of faded nitrate, but the revenance of real bodies. Bodies maimed and mangled by bombs (*Oh! Uomo*, 2004); corralled and choreographed for political ceremony (*Il fiore della razza*, 1991; *Su tutte le vette è pace*, 1998); probed and fetishized by the camera's roving eye (*Images d'Orient - Tourisme vandale*, 2001). *Oh! Uomo*'s close-up montage of anonymous, mutilated WWI veterans reveals faces so disfigured they struggle (fruitlessly) to contort into obliging smiles. Here is the history of the 20th century distilled, for an instant, to an image – human form, deformed. Humility and savagery, science and its Frankenstein monster. A smile without a chin.

It is not only to the bodies of filmed subjects that Ricci Lucchi and Gianikian's work draws attention. The artists' first cinematic experiments from the mid-1970s came in the form of "scented films", wherein imagery unfurled in concert with particular odors, selected and diffused by the artists. *Alice profumata di rosa* (1975) featured, aptly enough, the scent of rose. For *Catalogo della scomposizione* (1975) they circulated the smell of naphthalene (the active ingredient in mothballs). Synaesthetic in the truest sense of the word, these works aimed at a kind of corporeal empathy between viewer and image. Abidingly silent, though stripped of olfactory embellishments, Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi's archival-based work continued to pursue what we might call a phenomenology of spectatorship. Several of the tropes highlighted in their films recall art historical devices. Whether in *Das Lied von der Erde – Gustav Mahler* (1982) or *Su tutte le vette è pace*, we find prominent *Rückenfiguren*, for example.

Perhaps best known from the work of German landscape painter Caspar David Friedrich, the *Rückenfigur* literally means "back figure". Seen from behind, his presence alerts us to the scene being seen, and recapitulates our act of viewing within the composition itself.¹

The kinetic dimension of the filmic image resonates even more emphatically with the viewer's body. An imagined or perceived projection into the frame is underscored, in Ricci Lucchi and Gianikian's films, by the dilation of sequences.

In first decades of the 20th century (the bread and butter of the filmmakers' work), the Italian futurists famously vowed to «put the spectator in the center of the canvas». Rehearsing and reframing cinematic imagery from those same years, Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi venture a similar feat, while utterly opposing the futurist insistence upon speed. The spectator, Ricci Lucchi has argued, is prodded out of passivity by the pair's films, compelled by the image's curdled

temporality to reflect upon his own viewing process: «You *must* come inside each frame. We force you to think about the operations we have performed on the original material». To be sure, that self-consciousness often lurks in the original footage itself. The performance of vision – especially prosthetic vision – repeatedly surfaces in the early, silent works that the filmmakers have unearthed. If Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi help make plain the frequent violence of surveillance and technologies of vision, their source material expedites such attention. In various films we see hunters raise guns outfitted with scopes, or grip binoculars from behind a bush. The gaze of the Romantic *Rückenfigur* gives way to a less whimsical, more teleological act.

Even when the body is absent from the frame, Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi seize upon a world wrought, and ruined, by human design. *Ghiro Ghiro Tondo* (2007) singles out stray toys and dolls, collected from various European communities caught up in the two World Wars. Whether toy soldiers or a figurine of Mussolini, the objects evoke fascism and its aftermath both implicitly and explicitly. Spared the ravages of time and war that claimed their makers and owners, the relics attest – with tightlipped poetry – to a parallel materiality. Objects here are as silent and anonymous as the subjects featured in the filmmakers' other productions of found footage. Departing from their habitual working method, however, Ricci Lucchi and Gianikian have filmed objects directly. The only soundtrack provided is the intermittent crinkle of paper as things are unwrapped, isolated, displayed for the camera. The work conjures up something of Siegfried Kracauer's conception of the filmmaker as "rag-picker".

Yet the film is shorn of the proverbial dirt entailed in such an unearthing.² It proceeds in a relentlessly, even oppressively, empirical mode. We find no tinting or slow motion. Paced over the course of an expressly monotonous hour, each object's presentation undermines – in its seriality – the notion of individual history we might try to impute upon them, dampens the pathos implicit in certain passages (the racialized aspect of certain figurines, for example; or the piling of bedraggled dolls in a heap, conjuring up the terror of the camps). *Ghiro Ghiro Tondo* often frustrates viewers with its detached affect, its departure from more cogently narrative progression. Even still, we might think of the film as a metaphor – unwitting or not – of the artists' larger practice: a sorting of historical remains, somewhere between a dogged attempt to make sense of modernity, and an acknowledgement of its inexorable, often ruthless, succession.

The re-sorting and re-sequencing of frames in most of Ricci Lucchi and Gianikian's work constitutes an unspoken protest against the previous century's inexorability, against a positivism gone wrong. *La marcia dell'uomo* takes, as one of its implicit points of departure, the Paris Exposition Ethnographique de l'Afrique Occidentale, of 1895. It was here that Félix Regnault's photographic panel, *Hommes nègres, marche*, was installed – a sample of what Dr. Regnault hoped would eventually form a comprehensive inventory of racial types.

In the manner of Étienne-Jules Marey's chronophotographic studies, various West African individuals walk before a sprawling white sheet, photographed from the side. The French term for the photographic print – *cliché* – has perhaps never been more apposite to a practice of (literal) racial profiling than here, at the pinnacle of colonialist dominion, and its microcosmic playground, the European World's Fair.

Commenting on the poignancy of his «moving artifacts» as racial documents, Regnault averred that «with primitive man, gesture precedes speech». Like so much early ethnographic footage, the imagery excavated by Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi for *La marcia dell'uomo* takes that axiom to heart. The ostensibly interchangeable tribes catalogued by the camera do not, it is understood, *need* sound – or even intertitles – to elaborate upon their presence, at once savage and transparent, exotic and basic. The universality presumed of "primitives" (even at their most alien) in these films stems not from some "family of man" pathos; it derives instead from the belief that their gestures were, in Regnault's words, «the same everywhere [...] natural reflexes rather than conventions like language». Anonymous individuals are paraded and goaded to mug for the camera like any Hollywood silent-era star.

The sight, in *La marcia dell'uomo*, of a colonist felling big game for sport, sending one of his colonized servants to fetch it, is almost banal in its callous arrogance. So too, is the abiding connection between the camera's gaze and the hunter's telescope. The footage at the heart of *Dal Polo all'Equatore* or *Lo specchio di Diana* (1996) epitomizes the century's hubris even – or especially – when it presumes to enlighten. But Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi also set into relief the biases of even the most principled documentary projects (think, for example, of *Nanook of the North*). Distortion is often in-built to the project of documentary. We thus cannot approach Ricci Lucchi and Gianikian's films as mere subversions of realism. As the artists themselves have remarked in their notes for *La marcia dell'uomo*, much of the original footage with which they work already «deforms and denaturalizes» its subjects. The "Western camera" most often sought out exotic subject matter and viewpoints in order to confirm its preconceptions, offering up an ethnography specious in its selectivity.

Those selections frequently included the edificatory enterprise of settlement. *Dal Polo all'Equatore* shows us African schoolchildren learning to make the sign of the cross and clap in unison, under the solicitous watch of a missionary in her safari hat. The rote gestures seem echoed in the film's commissioned score by Keith Ullrich and Charles Anderson, its tinny piano notes at once insistent and dissonant. The ensuing frame reveals a different rapport between colonist and subject, as a white settler fells a large animal, and a group of Africans are sent to tie up the dying beast (a ritual repeated in *La marcia dell'uomo*). The claims laid by colonization find, in hunting, an entirely apposite recreation, one Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi home in upon repeatedly. A subsequent sequence finds a white man taunting a lone antelope, eventually gripping it by the horns and showing it off – trophy-like – for the camera. The game seems to grow bigger with each scene, as zebras give way to rhinoceri.

But the exotic curiosities of imperialism can find more local quarry, as captured in the pair's *La Sentinella della Patria*, based upon Chino Ermarcora's 1927 recordings of Friulian folkloric dance. Aside from the film's ostensible celebration of battlegrounds from the northern front of World War One (and by extension the efflorescence of 20th century Italian nationalism), the subject matter would seem to violate the Fascist regime's anxious policing of regional culture. Colonialism, however, begins at home. At the end of *Dal Polo all'Equatore* Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi inserted a clip of Mussolini entering Tripoli on his horse this same year – 1927 – using footage not by Comerio, but from the Istituto Luce.³ History is rendered proleptic rather than strictly chronological. Mussolini in Africa recalled not simply the millennial *romanità* of a Scipio, but the more recent example of Gabriele D'Annunzio at Fiume. Rather than reiterate diachronic logic, Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi's work underscores the vagaries of historical time: anachronistic, atavistic, eternally recurrent.

In both approach and aim, in fact, their oeuvre is unswervingly historical. But why did it emerge when it did? Why has it taken the format that it has? Some of the answers stem from biography. For Gianikian, the son of a survivor of the Armenian Genocide, witnessing formed the stuff of everyday life; coming of age in 1960s Italy, Ricci Lucchi remains no less committed to a politics of testimony, one unfettered by any restrictive sense of *italianità*. Aside from intentions or personal dimensions, however, we might better understand their work's historical pith by submitting it to historical contextualization. Their work has been largely considered a sui generis phenomenon, detached from trends in both art and cinema. A few exceptions have gone against the grain of that presumption. Stills from Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi's early film on Cesare Lombroso's collection of "criminal" corpses were included in the 2009 exhibition in Venice, *Italics: Italian Art between Tradition and Revolution, 1968-2008*. Installed in the central stairwell of the Palazzo Grassi, the images resonated with a number of works, both earlier and later: a photograph by Roberto Cuoghi of a cadaver half-buried in the earth (2006); Paolo Mussat Sartor's image of a sculpture by Luciano Fabro resembling a cloth-covered corpse (1968); Maurizio Cattelan's *All* (2008), featuring nine cadavers of freshly carved Carrara marble, set side by side. Mounted this same year at Mart (Rovereto's Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art), Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi's three channel projection, *Trittico del Novecento*, echoes a range of similar video installations, as does their 2006 piece in MoMA's PS1 galleries, *Frammenti elettrici*.

Yet aside from the occasional visual rhyme, or ideological sympathies with the experiments of contemporaries, their practice finds few analogous cases in artistic and cinematic circles.

Academia perhaps provides more apposite examples. The late 1970s, when Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi undertook their first archival works, witnessed the rise of what is commonly called "microhistory". Though prevalent throughout Europe, the method emerged most visibly first in Italy, particularly through the scholarship of Giovanni Levi and Carlo Ginzburg (who co-founded the series *Microstoria* for the Einaudi publishing house in 1981).⁴ Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi did not import this research into their work in any explicit sense. But it has been brought to bear in various ways. Methods developed in micro-historical scholarship – drawn in several instances, from the evolving discipline of cultural anthropology – resonate throughout their entire filmography. Their montages siphon history away from the peremptory swath of official narrative, re-channeling it through tributaries and estuaries, letting it pool in coves and inlets where it might be better grasped. To that end, the artists have drawn upon – and contributed in turn to – aspects of post-colonialist theory, subaltern studies, and Marxist historiography, all of which gained in clout and consequence during the 1970s and 80s.

What Clifford Geertz deemed «thick description» finds, I think, a certain echo in the filmmakers' slow motion and looped frames, their excision and isolation of sequences in order to scrutinize them.⁵ In a more obvious sense, Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi's use of close-ups (where they were not intended) evokes a microscopic attention to marginalized detail. Yet it is the general temporal ethos of their work – an ethics of time – that betrays most poignantly its particular historical sensibility. Time, in their films, is thickened, «pried open»⁶, in the words of Stephen Kern (in his incisive history, *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880-1918*). The making over of an unspecified event into a kind of "case history": that tendency – typical as much of the early avant-garde cinema's montage experiments, as of the micro-

historical scholarship from the 1970s and 80s – emerges with striking confluence in Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi's practice.

Though spurred by the same archival impetus as scholarly research, their work is no way didactic. If it produces its own rhetoric, it falls short of an explicit – and far shorter of expository – discourse. To the extent that the artists catalogue and classify images, they undermine the images' pretension to any clear-cut logos. For it is, their films remind us, in the ostensible service of progress and reason to which these (original) regimes of scrutiny and surveillance were put to begin with. As vital as cartography to colonial administration, photography and film served as prosthetic, technological extensions of Enlightenment reason. The newly mapped terrain of colonies appeared coextensive with the camera's reach – a complicity that the work of Ricci Lucchi and Gianikian does not let us forget. Shot from a camera mounted on the front of a train, the initial sequence of *Dal Polo all'Equatore* unfurls from within the vault of a dark tunnel, before opening onto an Alpine landscape threaded by tracks. Metaphorical affinities – between representation and topography, photographic lens and tunnel wall, celluloid sprocket and railroad tie – could not be more charismatically rendered than in these first ten minutes of Comerio's film. A similar equivalence emerges in the very next sequence, as the prow of a boat cuts through arctic ice – the eponymous “pole” of the film's title.

Like Comerio's footage, Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi's larger filmography traverses the far corners of the earth, from the Balkans and the last vestiges of the Ottoman Empire, to the savannahs and jungles of warmer climes. Unifying its range of locations is a kind of spectrality – one of the most consistent, and peculiar, aspects of their imagery. As Robert Lumley has noted, that apparitional quality recalls the epithets which greeted the cinema at its first screenings: «ghost-like», «unearthly», «haunting».⁷ Yet Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi's work recuperates, too, the obverse of the cinematic apparatus, its seemingly effortless purchase on the real. The uncanny dimension of their imagery derives first and foremost from its apparent veracity; its ghostliness is more unsettling because of the evident solidity and corpulence of real bodies, objects, landscapes. An unresolved dialectic – between fact and fiction, the practical and the mystical, the workaday empiricism of the Lumière brothers and the fantasy of a Georges Méliès – has lurked at the heart of the cinema from its origins. The quaint, typed title cards that open Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi's films acknowledge the prehistory upon which their own efforts depend.

Their own films are still frequently labeled “documentary”. Their work, however, transcends – undermines – the righteous propriety of that genre. The pair's studied, lyrical montage of extant footage constitute, instead, a kind of meta-documentary practice: at once a cinematic archive, and a deconstruction of its means and methods; visual testimony, and an attendant meditation on the pleasures, terrors, and failures of witnessing. Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi's cinematic additions – which are, just as often subtractions (omissions, cuts, ellipses) – inflect material with new significance. Inflections that, aside from the hues that soak various scenes, or the slow motion that distends their forms, is almost intangible in any plastic sense. Even still, the artists' interventions are deliberative, tropological, even tendentious, enlarging certain frames and excluding others. They tease out seemingly transparent mechanisms: strategies of staging, framing, editing that lurk indiscernibly in the original. The inextricability of Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi's films from their sources: this forms, I would argue, the subtle crux of their practice, its quiddity and its curiosity.

It is also what most likens their work to strains of the 20th century avant-garde and neo-avant-garde. The montage and slow-motion techniques deployed in their work recall notable examples from avant-garde cinema (Ejzenstein, *Entr'Acte*, etc.). But more profound still is the appropriative animus of their work. Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi's films hew to the bone of the originals, speak in and through its idiom, even as they alter it. The artists write: «The camera heralded by Marey finds its way into their faces, forms, heads, bodies, (almost) into their organs».⁸ Not coincidentally, Gianikian has described their own work as a “vivisection” of film.⁹ Their critical camera merges (largely) imperceptibly with its forebear. Their work begins with *ready-made* footage – no less a found object than the raw material of Dadaist irony. Their films thus relate as much to the work of René Clair as that of Péter Forgács, they share as much with Sherry Levine's photography as with Shimon Attie's.

Consider, in this vein, Salvador Dalí's 1933 photo-collage, *The Phenomenon of Ecstasy*, which evokes, in its gridded panel, Dr. Charcot's diagnostic panels of “hysteria”. Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi's own cleaning, cataloguing, and sorting of imagery recalls the very processes of Lombroso's pseudo-scientific criminology, the subject of one of their earliest films.

Part of what makes their work so compelling is the instability between registers: of imperial administration and anthropological curiosity; the exaltation of violence and a dirge to its effects; scientific description and artistic deconstruction; illustration and empathy. Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi replicate the earnestness of their source footage, but simultaneously drain it of its apodictic presumptions, and the deleterious consequences of these in late modernity. Scott Mac Donald has fittingly called their work «schizoid» in its effects.¹⁰

What the artists have *not* managed to find informs their practice as much as anything else. Gianikian has remarked that he will keep searching, until his death, for footage of the Armenian Genocide. In a more metaphorical sense, it is a lack, a void, that gnaws at the heart of the artists' project. A wound still weeping at its center. As the late Terrence Des Pres reminded us in his writing with searing eloquence, the poetry of witnessing must make present what is absent – a burden often at odds with modernism, with its penchants for ellipsis and omission, withholding and silence¹¹. The films of Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi forge an unlikely accord between these imperatives, re-sutured over the Frankensteinian corpse of the 20th century. At once doctor and monster, their project embodies all the hope and horror of its montaged body.

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1. On the *Rückenfigur* in Friedrich's work, and some of its antecedents, see J.L. Koerner, *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1990, pp. 159-166.
2. S. Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1997.
3. S. Mac Donald, *A Critical Cinema: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1998, p. 282. [«The shot is not by Comerio but by Istituto Luce. We wanted to show what would be the future of the Italians».]
4. See G. Levi, *On Microhistory*, in P. Burke, *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, Polity Press, London, 1991, pp. 93-113, in Italian as *A proposito di Microstoria*, in Peter Burke (ed.), *La storiografia contemporanea*, Laterza, Roma/Bari, 1993, pp. 111-134.
5. C. Geertz, *Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture*, in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books, New York, 1973.
6. Stephen Kern uses the term "thickened present" with regard to the evocations of simultaneity in European culture in the second decade of the twentieth century, particularly that of the cinema – an apparatus that allowed for «any moment [to be] pried open and expanded at will». See Kern's incisive history, *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880-1918*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1983, pp. 65-88.
7. R. Lumley, *Entering the Frame. Cinema and History in the Films of Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi*, Peter Lang, Oxford, 2011, p. 3.
8. Y. Gianikian, A. Ricci Lucchi, *La marcia dell'uomo (Marcia della conquista)*, in D. Païni and D. Hibon, *La marcia dell'uomo*, trans., Gina Abbati and Laure Pelayo, Mazzotta, Milan, 2001.
9. Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi, as cited in S. Mac Donald, *A Critical Cinema*, p. 277.
10. S. Mac Donald, *Avant-Garde Film. Motion Studies*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993, p. 119.
11. T. Des Pres, *Writing into the World*, Viking, New York, 1991; see in particular the chapter about Nazim Hikmet's poetry.



Found Objects

— Rinaldo Censi

In 1981, Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi completed *Karagoz – Catalogo 9.5* (1979-1981); the film has taken them about three years. It is the first production that the two filmmakers have realized by re-filming existing material using their “analytical camera”, thus transitioning from shooting objects to re-shooting them, re-photographing them frame by frame with this new technique. Re-filming faces, gestures and expressions that unknown cameramen, professional filmmakers, weekend hobbyists and scientists had already committed to celluloid back in the early days of cinema.

They come into contact with the owner of a film lab in Milan. He is the nephew of Paolo Granata, Luca Comerio’s first cameraman during the First World War and later a key figure at the fascist-sponsored Istituto Luce. The nephew had also been a cameraman; the first images he ever filmed were of Mussolini hanging upside-down in Piazzale Loreto. He still remembers Luca Comerio’s visits to the lab in the 1940s. Yervant Gianikian writes:

In Milan, in the spring of 1982, we found what was left of Luca Comerio’s first lab, a basement space in a small building on the outskirts of the city, out toward the expressways. The film lab had a 19th-century feel to it. The Prevost camera with which Comerio had filmed the First World War, initially the only man doing so, is standing vertically on a wooden titler. The contact printer, also made of wood, resembles a small cabinet, with two black cloth curtains below to hide the two bins that collect the film. The machine works by drawing the film on a single 8-point gear. The prints are stored on a wooden table with Bakelite plates. The lab is in the process of demolition. The owner, and sole demolisher, has already disassembled the Lumière printer and pulverized it with a hammer, denying it any future. The various components, rusted and dismembered, fill up barrels placed outside in the courtyard, exposed to the elements, where the wooden development racks are also stacked. Inside are other objects, cinematographic equipment covered in heavy black cloth and bound with thick rope. The flammable documentary films are conserved in a cellar, waiting to be burned. We see a few frames of a fragment of film. We see them “stopped”, by hand, against the backlit frosted glass of the light table. A sailboat changes course, the sky painted blue, the sea pink.¹

Looking upon these two reels of *Dal Polo all’Equatore*, the Gianikian realize that they’ve stumbled upon some hot material. They start becoming interested in Comerio. They collect information, printed material, they study the data intensively, comparing it with the existing filmography: *Dal Polo all’Equatore* does not appear in the official list. The film they now hold is a colorized positive copy. It’s possible that a complete negative never existed.

The description of the lab – which to some might sound like a bizarre contemporary installation piece – is in fact an accurate portrayal of a melancholy space in disrepair, where desperation and mourning are palpable. The lab contains a veritable stratification of film material, all flammable. Films by Comerio, films collected by Comerio (scientific, documentary), Fascist films shot by Paolo Granata (wherein the influence of Comerio is evident). A sort of forgotten warehouse of unclaimed goods.

In the 1930s, Luca Comerio became gravely ill and fell into a deep state of amnesia. And the laboratory itself appears to have been stricken by the same affliction: it is an archive, utterly forgotten. Most film libraries have only held onto Comerio’s fictional films. Archival amnesia: this practice ignores the pioneering theories of Boleslaw Matuszewski, who in 1898, in Paris, maintained the necessity of constituting a “Depository for Historical Film”.²

This might seem obvious. Moreover, as Arlette Farge has observed, nothing is less clear than the term “archive”, whose very nature is principally “lacunar”, defined by what is missing.³ As a locus of power, the archive tends paradoxically to instability, to the provisory. Archive madness.⁴ The sources are often unstable, mobile, anonymous. Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi study the frames scrupulously, analytically; they re-photograph the images, slowing them down, isolating details, opening up gestures, causing hidden elements to emerge in a sort of optical unconscious. The monumental work they did on *Dal Polo all’Equatore* (1981-1986) is well known.⁵ But this isn’t the place to address such questions.

Yet – alteration is what emerges from every film.

Amnesia does not therefore indicate only the lethargy of the archive, but its slow chemical decay.

Let us consider a “nitrate film”:

*Nitrate film starts decomposing from the moment its production process is completed. The disintegration is slow, but there has still not been found a way to arrest it. During the course of this decay, the film releases gases [...]. Nitrate gases have the same destructive effect on all the films conserved in the same physical space, independently of their age, or whether they are nitrate or acetate-based.*⁶

Here are the phases of decomposition as articulated by Volkmann: 1) the silver layer takes on a brown hue and loses clarity, 2) the emulsion becomes sticky, 3) the reel softens (formation of “honey”); bubbles appear accompanied by a pungent odor, 4) the film becomes a solid mass, 5) it disintegrates into a brown powder that emits an acrid smell, at which point the whole thing could catch fire even at very low temperatures.

Pestilence, epidemic, *effluvia* (air, breath, plague), as Daniel Defoe might gloss the process.⁷

But what do these suppurations, these boils, this sticky, malodorous honey designate? Some sort of fossil? Certainly it represents a void in the genealogy of cinema for anyone trying to reconstruct it. Or, simply, it’s just degraded, obsolete junk, buried in an archive.

Take for example a little film by Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi, *Trasparenze* (1998), a six-minute video. Shots on film exposed in its chemical decay: *disjecta membra* (“scattered fragments”, in the Latin), strips of perforations (Kodak), film lacerated by the emulsion, spliced, assaulted by acids. The frame has been devoured: all one can see are fragments of human figures, arms, heads, legs and other unrecognizable forms that may be rifles, mountaintops or red stains on the celluloid itself. Yervant Gianikian displays these remains as if in an anatomical theater, striving to describe what he sees.⁸ These are the remains of a reel shot by Comerio on Monte Adamello during WWI. Some parts, spared from damage, appear in *Dal Polo all’Equatore* and *Su tutte le vette è pace* (1998). The final shot of the video shows us a reel of film struggling to unroll. We can see the honey, the tightness of the spools, the bubbles, the blue washes on the film, like some sort of merry-go-round spinning before our eyes.

A fossil? A desiccated branch of a genealogical tree? Or better, a cluster of coral (flower of blood, to say it with J. Michelet), atrophied and separated from the rest of the organism – a form degraded over time, extinct, fossilized.⁹

But that’s not it. Not only, anyway. *Trasparenze* reveals a double layer which may go unnoticed at first glance. We need to consider that reel, and the materials rediscovered by the Gianikian in general, not only as filmic remains in a state of decay, but also in their quality as objects, as “found objects”. They are also “ready-mades”. This is an aspect that the two filmmakers have emphasized repeatedly, which is to say their debt to the historical avant-garde. The gesture of showing and re-filming a frame denotes precisely this aspect, this double identity. In short: someone observes fragments of “found” film, describes them and most importantly re-films them. There is thus curiously created – here – a double ground; something that comes up in the majority of the works of Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi. The frame of one film is affixed, translated onto another film (or video). The two sources are often indistinguishable, coextensive, to the extent that this process risks eluding many observers. I don’t believe we are dealing merely with a question of transmission by way of copy. What is in play here is not just the restored functionality of damaged film material. The act of re-photographing hides something else – or rather, causes it to emerge.

It is well known that one of the significant features of hyperrealism is its “semiotic aspect”, as deduced by Jean-Claude Lebensztejn, who, revisiting an important interpretation of Pop Art by Lawrence Alloway, points out how «both produce images of images, signs whose objects are signs».¹⁰ The iconic referents in this case would be photographs. A double statute of the image is thus formed, a double background: the painted image – writes Lebensztejn – represents a photographic image which in turn represents an ocean liner (Malcolm Morley), an airplane, an atomic explosion or a galaxy (Vija Celmins), a horse race (Morley again). This *mise en abyme* implies a crucial aspect: in the representation of the image there is a clearly visible “margin”, a white frame, like a postcard, sometimes with handwriting, or a burned spot, or numbers printed on the end of a roll of film (e.g. the *Ruined Slide series* by David Kessler), or the violent imposition of an ‘X’ (*Race Track* by Malcolm Morley). These kinds of impurities or defects make the dual statute of the image clear, certifying a semiotic shift: something acts on the surface while working deeply within the image.

The exhibition *Hyperréalisme USA. 1965-1975*, staged in 2003 in Strasbourg by Jean-Claude Lebensztejn and Patrick Javault, rendered evident the impossibility of defining hyperrealism once and for all, thinking of it as «a construction that obliges the art or cultural historian to rethink constantly the objects of his or her inquiry».¹¹ Cinema is not exempt from this.

The fact that every film carries traces within itself of its own photographic matrix – Akira Mizuta Lippit observes – makes certain hyperrealist features rather apparent. In other words, «is cinematic hyperrealism possible outside the hyperrealism of the support»?¹² Does there exist a further hyperrealism, a “second degree”? I have the impression that the Gianikian’s films made with the “analytical camera” emphasize this aspect. The camera frames, re-frames, re-films, re-produces a still, while the missing bits, the scratches and streaks, the perforations either broken or impressed on the emulsion, the nitrate blooms and inept splices cause a “margin” to emerge, its double ground (rendering perceptible the physical reality of the support); something that enables us to grasp the eminently *photographic* nature of cinema and of

their work in plastic terms. These images are obviously mobile rather than fixed (only in *Trasparenze* is the frame fixed, or scrolled by hand). The proximity of the Gianikian to the work of Étienne-Jules Marey can be seen precisely here: what they produce are particular photographic, or chronophotographic sequences. Slowing them down, which is done by multiplying the frames, enables us to better appreciate certain details of the gestures, accentuating them radically to the point of exaggeration, an excess of realism, underscoring a genuine a-synchronicity between the filmed image (or rather re-photographed) and the projected one. A temporal non-coincidence is generated: an ecstasy of time.

These two aspects – 1) the impurity that causes a “margin” to emerge, *revealing* the “transparency” of the support and the double ground of the image, and 2) the temporal a-synchronicity – are the elements which constitute, according to Akira Mizuta Lippit, a “hyperrealist cinema”. Both compete to define – in an ambivalent way – a «photographic time».¹³ While Lippit’s examples only go up to 1971, one is tempted to prolong his analysis because these considerations appear to apply to the work of Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi – with the difference that in their work, it is time itself that acts on the film stock, leaving traces and sedimentations, obviating the need to intervene manually. Or in some cases, the alterations might be the result of poor handling of the material, e.g. the indirect errors of a conservator or projectionist. In short, what they work with are genuine ready-mades. For their part, all that’s left to do is study and re-film the material, discovering hidden elements and causing something to emerge that had seemed dormant. However, in addition to all this, in their films and installations we find ourselves faced with a paradox: a re-filmed image represents a *photographic* image which in turn represents a man with a rifle, an explosion, someone walking, Western tourists in Africa (*La marcia dell’uomo*), an aerial landscape (*Topografie*), the walls of Jerusalem, a woman with a 1950s refrigerator, a malnourished child, a sutured skull (*Trittico del Novecento*). The sign (its trace) oscillates, is disturbed. Levels of meaning and space are interposed, one inside the other. In the Gianikian’s films, a tactile proximity – evidenced by the damage and decay of the material, amplified by slowing it down – generates an optical distance that I believe is critical; time is perceived as excess, alteration, something that appears more real than reality, thus «hyperreal».¹⁴ It’s a sort of intensity, a comatose state that opens up an *arrière-monde*.¹⁵ Or perhaps an *extimity*, something like an externalized intimacy, where the depth is revealed on the surface. A chronophotographic time for “found objects”.¹⁶ Found images. Images of the past, often forgotten. Images of images. (In a famous interview with Chuck Close, Vija Celmins told him: «For me, it was a bit like putting the [photographic] images I’d found in books and magazines back into the real world and real time [like *Suspended Plane*, 1966]. Because observing the work, we confront the here and now».¹⁷ – Or the today with the materials of yesterday, as the Gianikian often repeat). This hyperrealist deviation is not intended to overturn or cast doubt on the traditional reception of their work. In fact, in the films and installations of Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi there is an historical, memorial, bio-political dimension; an urgency (driven by the violence of the century we’ve just left behind) that is preeminent, clashing harshly with the hyperrealist vulgate (although the vacuity of the objects portrayed, their stupidity, generates a brutal social satire that is often denied by the artists). If anything, this hypothesis seeks to capture a heretofore unnoticed aspect of their work, wondering if the “subject” of their films isn’t more complex, more articulated. As if it were precisely this hyperreal excess, this time reproduced in another form, reaching us from some elsewhere that is responsible for creating memories and setting the memory in motion in a present that is here and now. Their work is elusive, incandescent, magnificently outside our grasp.*

* Here I have expanded and modified a text that appeared under a different title in no. 2 of “Fata Morgana”, a quarterly dedicated to cinema and vision (monographic issue on the Archive), Luigi Pellegrini Editore, May-August 2007.

1. Y. Gianikian, A. Ricci Lucchi, *La nostra camera analitica*, in P. Mereghetti, E. Nosei (eds.), *Cinema Anni Vita Yervant Gianikian e Angela Ricci Lucchi*, Il Castoro, Milan, 2000, p. 38.
2. B. Matuszewski, *Una nuova fonte della Storia (Creazione di un deposito di cinematografia storica)*, in G. Grazzini (ed.), *Boleslaw Matuszewski: un pioniere del cinema*, Carocci, Rome, 1999, p. 67.
3. A. Farge, *Le Goût de l'archive*, Le Seuil, Paris, 1989.
4. «'Archive' is merely a *notion*, an impression associated with a word for which, together with Freud, we do not have a concept. We have only an impression, an unstable feeling of a shifting figure, of a scheme, or of an in-finite or indefinite process». J. Derrida, *Mal d'archivio. Un'impressione freudiana*, Filema, Naples, 1996, pp. 37-40.
5. See S. Mac Donald, *From the Pole to the Equator*, in "Film Quarterly", 1989, and in S. Toffetti (ed.), *Yervant Gianikian Angela Ricci Lucchi*, Hopefulmonster, Florence, 1992.
6. H. Volkman, *La pellicola cinematografica: proprietà, conservazione, ripristino*, in P. Cherchi Usai (ed.), *Film da salvare: guida al restauro e alla conservazione*, Comunicazione di Massa, vol. III, year VI, Sep/Dec 1985, p. 112.
7. D. Defoe, *Journal of the Plague Year*, Bompiani, Milan, 1995, p. 80. For more on the Artaudian metaphor of epidemic pestilence, see M. Canosa, *Per una teoria del restauro cinematografico*, in G.P. Brunetta (ed.), *Storia del cinema mondiale. Vol. 5 – Teorie, strumenti, memorie*, Einaudi, Turin, p. 1070.
8. These materials refer to a "chronic" state. Walter Benjamin recalls a visit to the Goethe-Schiller Archive in Weimar: «In the Goethe-Schiller Archive the stairs, rooms, display cases and bookshelves are all white. There isn't a single square inch where the eye might rest. The manuscripts like propped up like patients in hospital beds. [...] But didn't these manuscript sheets likewise find themselves in a crisis? Didn't a shudder run through them, and no one knew whether it was from the proximity of annihilation or that of posthumous fame? And don't they embody the loneliness of poetry? And the place where it took stock of itself? And don't its pages include many whose unnamable text only rises as a glance or a breath of air from their silent, ravaged features?». W. Benjamin, *Immagini di città*, Einaudi, Turin, 1971, pp. 55-56.
9. See H. Bredekamp, *I coralli di Darwin. I primi modelli evolutivi e la tradizione della storia naturale*, Boringhieri, Turin, 2006, p. 34.
10. See the exhaustive essay by Jean-Claude Lebensztejn, *Préliminaire*, in J.C. Lebensztejn (ed.), *Hyperréalisme USA. 1965-1975*, Hazan/Les Musées de Strasbourg, Paris, 2003, p. 28.
11. «Hyperrealism is a construction that obliges the art or cultural historian to rethink constantly the objects of his or her inquiry». See J.P. Criqui, *Locus focus: Jean-Pierre Criqui talks with Jean-Claude Lebensztejn – Interview*, in "Artforum", June 2003.
12. A.M. Lippit, *Extimité. Chronographie et cinéma hyperréaliste (1963-1971)*, in J.C. Lebensztejn (ed.), *Hyperréalisme USA. 1965-1975*, cit., pp. 89-97.
13. A.M. Lippit, *Extimité. Chronographie et cinéma hyperréaliste (1963-1971)*, cit., p. 92. Lippit offers several examples, including *Fuses* by Carolee Schneemann (as an example of impurity: the scratched film stock would cause a semiotic dislocation to emerge), the hand-colored films of Stan Brakhage or the films of Andy Warhol shot at 24 fps and projected at 16 fps.
14. A.M. Lippit, *Extimité. Chronographie et cinéma hyperréaliste (1963-1971)*, cit., p. 94. A separate discussion should be devoted to the colorization of the film, the monochromatic layer that is added to the frame.
15. R. Bellour, *L'arrière-monde*, in "Cinémathèque", no. 8, autumn 1995, pp. 6-11.
16. Salvador Dalí, in 1973, wrote the preface for a book on American Hyperrealism, and associates its artists with crypto-Dadaism: «In a subterranean way, the ready-made influenced the minds of photorealists, leading them to paint ready-mades made by hand». Cfr. *Réalisme sybaritique aigu*, preface to L. Chase, *Les Hyperréalistes américains*, Filippachi, Paris, 1973, p. 4. We take the citation from J.C. Lebensztejn (ed.), *Hyperréalisme USA. 1965-1975*, cit., p. 43.
17. See *Vija Celmins interviewed by Chuck Close*, 26-27 September 1991, in W. S. Bartman, *Vija Celmins*, New York, Museum Of Modern Art, 1992, p. 17.



Cartography of gestures

— Christa Blümlinger

The very title of this installation, *La marcia dell'uomo*¹, seems to favour one of its three series of images from archival footage above the others: an ensemble of chronophotographic film strips that is presented here under the heading *Hommes nègres, marche*. The three-part projection therefore takes as its starting point a problem of photographic representation that can be considered not only in terms of perceptual theory and epistemology but also of the history of technology. Employing the cinematographic technique of varying film speeds, to the point of bringing the film to an apparent standstill, Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi explore the phenomenon of the photographic snapshot as encountered at the end of the 19th century. According to Michel Frizot, this involves on the one hand the iconography of the pose (which has its origins in visual art) being replaced by a non-conventional, but for that a “truer” recording of movement, one that is paradoxically capable of capturing the gesture in a clearly defined manner, «as if immobilized»²; and on the other hand a scientific tool with which to analyze a physiological question, making it possible to find new answers by breaking down a movement into a succession of distinct elements. In Étienne-Jules Marey's *Station physiologique*, ethnographers and natural scientists³ took sequential photographs of Africans who were brought in from the Universal Expositions and other similar venues; the shots were taken in analogue fashion to those of Europeans marching, according to a principle of equality derived from the scientific principle of comparison: namely in front of a light rather than a dark background, but otherwise in the same staged setting. Men, women and children stride past the camera at a suitable distance, crossing its field of view. They all cover the same distance, measured by a chronometer that is occasionally visible in the picture. Each person's individual walking speed results in a different number of instant photographs, and if these images are animated, the filmic ‘shot’ has a correspondingly varied duration. Although in Gianikian Ricci Lucchi's analytical treatment of the archival material these single frames are animated to produce moving images, the use of freeze frames means that they nevertheless remain perceptible as an original sequence of stilled, distinct elements. Increased modulation of the number of single frames duplicated for a freeze frame leads to a variability of the viewing experience, in particular through repetition. In this way, Gianikian Ricci Lucchi present the black African children stepping out of line in longer stilled film images, and similarly emphasize through the enlargement of the image area a certain Barthesian *punctum* – incisive moments and touching details. By means of differentiated repetition, *La marcia dell'uomo* accentuates gestures, procedures and looks. This not only highlights the realm outside the current field of vision, it also creates an imaginary dimension that points beyond the referentiality of the depicted gesture.

The recycled chronophotographic film footage is presented as a loop on the first of three relatively large screens that have been installed close behind one another. The other two series of images, also consisting of archival footage, are to be read in comparison with Marey's shots. The first involves images of Africa filmed by European travellers in search of a ‘foreign’ experience. Like Marey's series, however, neither the expedition footage from 1910 nor the Standard8 private footage shot in 1960 is shown at normal running speed. In the installation they are subjected to the same analytical interruption in the form of distinct yet continuous “stoppages” of varying duration. The differentiated single frame work of Gianikian Ricci Lucchi makes particular aspects stand out that would not be as visible if shown at a realistic film speed. For the viewer, the film temporality is split; it oscillates between past recording and present viewing, the result not only of being slowed down or brought to a standstill but also of enlargement, colour tinting and repetition. Traces of decay in the original material become apparent: its resolution, light and contrasts display extreme heterogeneity.

In the re-edited version of the early film material, the visit by two white safari hunters to a West African hut village shows itself to be an asymmetrical circulation of attributes and attitudes: if, as would-be guests, the white visitors sit on the ground with the black people, the gesture exposes their attempt to disguise a feeling of being out of place. And if the colonized black people sit at the table wearing top hats and petticoats, their “inappropriate” dress reveals a game of subversion. At the end of this second image sequence, a filmic configuration of the point of view is elaborated as a hierarchical relationship between safari hunt and trophy collecting, white and black, the gesture of conquest and of subjugation. Looped as an installation and in a reworked format, however, this configuration is not to be regarded as a fixed convention but instead as a possibility of what is past. Finally, in the third image, which has been extremely alienated by means of deep violet colour tinting, sexual difference as a component of a postcolonial dispositif of power is emphasized by transforming a holiday film from the era of mass tourism. A Western voyeur, wearing dark glasses to avoid being seen watching, looks on while half-naked black women dance around him for money. Here, too, the gaze

and gestures are dissected by freezing, enlarging and repeating the shot.

With their precise selection of film footage, Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi at the same time propose an archaeological view of “ethnographic” film collections in the broadest sense: a new cartography of these human geographies. As far as the archaeological view is concerned, Gianikian’s rereading of the chronophotographic gait not only traces an iconographic or ethnographic path in all its ambivalent referentiality, but also the archaeology of a *dispositif* in which the images are inscribed: it is a well-known fact that in carrying out his physiological motion studies Étienne-Jules Marey was less interested in the illusion of reproduction than in the analysis of a process. As his assistant Lucien Bull reports, Marey believed that «the projection did not allow him to discover more than the attentive analysis of a print».⁴ In the context of this installation, Marey’s paradoxical material is treated entirely in the sense of his own invention, in other words not with the illusionistic logic of the Lumière Cinématographe, but rather in a very specific mode of visibility (between immobility and variable mobility) that is closer to pre-cinematographic viewing possibilities such as the Zootrope. It becomes apparent that this experimental arrangement is based upon a scientific view that regards the physiological nature of the human gait as paradigmatic for the progression of the mechanism of the apparatus, following a pattern of «displacement/standstill/displacement/standstill».⁵ Gianikian’s approach is also archaeological in the sense that it is interested in the body and circulation of the films within and beyond the archives, not simply in terms of their representative content. In line with Foucault, one could say (particularly with regard to the two other films that make up the installation – the expedition film from 1910 and the private film material from 1960) that in the reuse of the material a *stagnating* language serves as a basis of a *circulating* language, one which also takes into account the possible field of the films’ original use. The progressive arrangement of the three screens plays a not insignificant part in this. It should be understood not only as a chronological arrangement (1895–1910–1960), but also and above all as an epistemological comparison of different functions of photographic and filmic recordings of the “Other”. Between Marey’s analysis of a physiological difference, the gesture of colonial exoticism from the Comerio Collection and the attitude of the private film-maker (as that of the postcolonial, consumption-oriented mass tourist) lie the various “life-worlds” and experiential horizons of Western thinking that determine the figuration of “black African” gestures and locomotion respectively.

The installation’s chosen *dispositif* does not, therefore, produce a genealogy of ethnography, nor is it a history of nomads from the point of view of the sedentary population. The visitor wandering between the screens does not encounter a linear arrangement but rather something that could be termed a new cartography of filmic gestures and movements as described above. This could also be defined with the concept of the rhizome in Deleuze/Guattari’s sense of the term, as a non-hierarchical form that is defined solely by a circulation of states: «What is at question in the rhizome is a relation to sexuality – but also to the animal, the vegetal», they write in *Mille Plateaux*, «[...] all manner of ‘becomings’».⁶ Continuing with the Deleuzian paired concepts of the map and the tracing, one could say that here the reuse of the archive material leads back from the supposed competence of the photographic or cinematographic “tracing” of a world to a performance of the cartography which permits the study of the unconscious, the generation of new propositions and desires. *La marcia dell’uomo (Marcia della conquista)* deals with a deterritorialization of specific forms of perceiving the world, organizing expeditions of discovery and setting up archives. This is in line with the current tendency to criticize the standardizing representation of the history of mankind in the Hegelian tradition and to seriously question the definition of identity from a Western perspective. Of course the history of ethnography (even in the broadest sense, as the participatory and reflexive observation of a culture) can by no means be regarded as homogeneous. Its ambiguity is underlined by cultural theorist James Clifford: «Ethnography, a hybrid activity, thus appears as writing, as collecting, as modernist collage, as imperial power, as subversive critique».⁷ Gianikian Ricci Lucchi take precisely this ambiguity into account when creating new links between all kinds of ethnographic traces. The work of Gianikian’s “analytical camera”, whose specific modulation of standstill and movement, of framing and interconnection proceeds in the manner of a rhizome, as described by Deleuze/Guattari: «by variation, expansion, conquest, capture, offshoots».⁸ This cartography of photographic and filmic gestures considers its own variability in terms of the form of modulation, and consequently avoids a Manichaistic presentation of ethnographic-photographic-cinematographic positions.*

* Essay appeared with the title *A cartography of gestures. Notes about an installatio (Yervant Gianikian & Angela Ricci Lucchi, La marcia dell’uomo)*, in *Cinema & Cie*, no. 8, fall 2007, pp. 70-75

1. The installation has been curated by Dominique Païni for the Venice Biennale in 2001, on behalf of Harald Szeemann. Cf. D. Hibon, D. Païni, *Marcher, monter*, in "Trafic", no. 38/summer 2001, pp. 66-67.
2. On the snapshot shutter Étienne-Jules Marey writes: «[...] un temps de pose assez bref pour que les objets en mouvement soient représentés dans l'épreuve avec des contours aussi nets que s'ils eussent été immobiles». E.J. Marey, *Le Mouvement*, Masson, Paris, 1894, p. 14, quoted from M. Frizot, *Comment on marche. De l'exactitude dans l'instantané*, in "La revue du Musée d'Orsay", no. 4/spring 1997, pp. 74-85, here p. 78.
3. In 1898 the ethnographer Félix Regnault published a study on the human gait, for which Étienne-Jules Marey wrote a foreword, based among other things upon chronophotographic studies of the gait of African people; cf. F. Regnault and De Raoul, *Comment on marche. Des divers modes de progression, de la supériorité du mode en flexion*, Charles-Lavauzelle, Paris, 1898; on this subject see also M. Frizot, *Comment ça marche. L'algorithme cinématographique*, in "Cinémathèque", no. 15/spring 1999, pp. 15-27. Marta Braun brings together an ensemble on human locomotion from the *Station physiologique* (compiled at a later date) under the following heading: "African village of the universal exposition 1900". Cf. M. Braun, *Picturing Time. The work of Étienne-Jules Marey 1830-1904*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1992, pp. 380-81.
4. Cf. L. Bull, *Quelques souvenirs personnels de mon maître E.J. Marey*, in "Bulletin de l'AFITEC", no. hors série, 1954, pp. 3-7. Quoted from M. Frizot, *Les reliques en rouleaux*, in D. Païni (ed.), *La persistance des images. Tirages, sauvegardes et restaurations dans la collection films de la Cinémathèque Française*, Cinémathèque Française, Paris, 1996, pp. 21-23, here p. 21. Long believed lost, Marey's chronophotographic films – whose 90mm format allows higher photographic resolution than the cinematographic films available at the time – were rediscovered in the 1980s and later restored onto 35mm film by the Cinémathèque Française.
5. On this principle in the work of Regnault and Marey see M. Frizot 1999, op. cit., p. 21.
6. G. Deleuze, F. Guattari: *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1987, p. 21. [G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, *Mille Plateaux. Capitalisme et schizophrénie 2*, Éditions de Minuit, Paris, 1980, p. 32].
7. J. Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1988, p. 13.
8. G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, op. cit., p. 21.



Chosen moments of the human race

— Raymond Bellour

How can we explain the effect that these films communicate? Not their individual perception, the result of their artful reconstruction, but, thanks to this art that lends distinctive hallucinatory properties to its sentiments and thoughts, the effect of humanity that they create, to the point of disorientation?

Since painting gave up on the idea, film has included in its many functions that of reconnecting bodies to the physical and social mass that we all originate from. In an era dominated by the long shot, all it takes is for one body to detach and move closer to the camera to give us the impression of suddenly entering into another life, propelling an unfamiliar intimacy towards the immobile crowd that every viewer believes him- or herself to be a unique part of. The magic of the Lumière brothers, and of D.W. Griffith. And between them the transition from a selection that is no longer haphazard, but bound up with control and screenplay. Shot effects that are effects of insight and recognition. These vary in each of us, to what extent we will never know, depending on whether the bodies that move towards our faces appear to be part of a work of fiction or present themselves as documentaries, and would have us believe that they actually existed, in the there and now.

Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi's films create a sort of *mise en abyme* that gives infinite scope to any kind of evaluation of the actual reality of the bodies they reveal, because these are both contemporary with their images recorded who knows when and later unearthed in some archive, and re-contemporary with the images that reincarnate them today, more or less remodelled, reframed, reconstructed and represented once more. So thanks to a *modus operandi* that it never fully reveals, this cinema of duration, of slowed motion, of jerks and gaps and constant shakes turns out all the more to be a cinema of framing, of endeavour, of nuances and gambles, and extraordinary shot effects.

Rocked by the rhythmic transmutation that reverberates in the images of worlds shown by these films, reconfiguring any image of the world in an *arrière-monde* which is more real than any other, the films incessantly produce shots that are events – between shots and inside shots – many of which reflect the distinctive aura of humanity that emanates singularly from the bodies, movements, acts, gestures and expressions that invade and populate them.

For example the face of this child who pops up at the bottom right of the shot in *Dal Polo all'Equatore*. Following a train line we enter the everyday life of an unspecified village in an unspecified part of the Middle East. The medium shot used soon reveals a group of bearded dignitaries, smiling like archetypes. Then others, en masse, that are hard to make out separately, advance solemnly along the train tracks. And yet more, in a narrower shot, that we only half see. A new shot, outside, on the road, shows two women, one close up on the right, the other in the background on the left, walking away from us, while two more women, forming a haphazard group with two soldiers, walk straight towards us. This is a human ballet that obeys a sort of orderly disorder, with a tangle of criss-crossing lines and bodies that the detail on the garments accentuates (the bold black and white stripes on the skirt *zig zag* away from us), like a Lumière view with twice the attention (the original filming by Luca Comerio/the work of the Gianikian). As the different pairs of women draw level, the child appears. As if projected from somewhere outside the shot, he comes into view close-up, with a cheeky air about him, his hat pulled down over his face and a rapt expression. He appears to slide into the centre of the shot, eyes fixed on the camera. Then he moves back out again, to the margins of the shot, before vanishing. The time he has taken to observe us, permitted by the director, is long enough for the two women to draw closer, and the camera briefly returns to them, closer up, before they are surrounded by many other bodies, that are fixed, like them, in a sort of vague generality.

To this cursory description we can add that the nuances of the shots vary according to the subject matter or social/figurative theme, going from brown to crimson to bistre, like a chart of colour samples, through a range of intermediate browns that are as recognisable as they are difficult to name.

The truth offered therefore relates to the proportional determination of the various guises of the human race, reflecting the measure granted to each body in the shot, and the ways in which that body appears and moves. The face of the child clearly stands out for its abrupt arrival on the scene, with a wiliness that the viewer perceives, as happens in a different way in D.W. Griffith's *The Musketeers of Pig Alley*, when the gangster famously makes his way into the foreground. But these bodily effects possess a sort of obscure obscenity which bewilders us. There is something basically obscene about the film actor whose work is that of offering his real body up to fiction, denying the internal distance of this paradox, and who gives himself over to the camera, which determines his literal and fictitious appearance. Then there is the obscenity of the documentary body that lends itself and its illusion of truth to the camera, as if confirming its real identity, that the viewer is called to witness. The obscenity of the bodies filmed in Gianikian-Ricci Lucchi's works is of another kind, not so much *between* documentary and fiction as *behind* them, in an area where, vacillating between meaningful individuality and mass destiny, and in proportion to this variation, each figure appears to be in the position to become the sole actor of his or her own virtual identity.

This evidently regards both the filming techniques and the strategies of representation on various levels, but also, and significantly so, the relatively indefinite nature of each figure in these commentary-less films, introduced or punctuated only by the odd caption. In *Dal Polo all'Equatore* there is a clear and simple division between victims and assassins, the colonizers and the colonized, soldiers and civilians, men and women, etc. But beyond that, nothing indicates their nation, identity, place, function or time. So much so that – beyond the deep primordial inequalities that lend these films a bracing brutality, the nature of their ethnic cruelty – the identity of what we see is shrouded in varying degrees of uncertainty, as are the viewer's knowledge and intuition, in contrast to the implicit norms of documentary making. This is the way in which the irrefutable impersonal identity of the human race is addressed. It offers itself up through voiceless signs that reach the animal (as shown in *Animali criminali*) with infinite, indefinite variety, through and beyond a constant process of categorisation: between silhouette and gesture, body and face, row or troupe or pack or crowd. The old question posed by Michaux, «What is a human being?», therefore surfaces repeatedly, with its indecisive answer: «the human being is basically its group».

Perhaps the identification of the reality represented changes according to the film, as if prey to the movements of the work. The almost total absence of captions in *Dal Polo all'Equatore* is contrasted nine years later by *Prigionieri della guerra*, which contains a series of specifications that cut the film into sections or sequences corresponding to local situations that appear to indicate national identities («1914. Galizia. Fronte orientale. Vittoria zarista. Partenza per la Siberia dei prigionieri austroungarici» – «1914. Galicia. Western Front. Tsarist victory. Austro-Hungarian prisoners departing for Siberia»). This thirty five minute film is broken up by seven captions. The film *Su tutte le vette è pace*, that in many ways takes up this theme and expands on it, is subtitled following the same principle. But these references are too elementary to weaken the primordial tension between the reality of bodies *en masse* and that of the enigmatic identification that any single body can be given at any time. The filmmakers have therefore come up with this approach, using short captions that have become a vital part of their work, along with the written comments that have always accompanied their films: «A search for the individual», «Man as soldier», in the archives that represent the anonymous masses. In details, distinctive traits: the expression, micro physiognomy and behaviour of the individual. Imprinted on the «wounded body of the nitrate medium».

Beyond any knowledge or references, the films develop a sure sign of a frightening century that only cinema has succeeded in capturing and recording, moving between the power of the masses and the emotions of the individual, through all the conceivable states in between. There are two striking things about *Prigionieri della guerra*, and its images torn from Russian and Austro-Hungarian propaganda. We become indifferent to the national identities that are quietly recalled as if to reassure us of the truth of this tangled conflict we were all born out of. Faced with images that are too polished to be true, all we can see are stark, uncertain entities, prisoners grappling for their very survival. The final caption paves the way for this indecision/confusion («L'attacco, la ritirata, la disfatta» – «The attack, the retreat, the defeat»). We don't know who is doing the attacking and retreating: these are just soldier beings doing battle under fire, dark masses, marching prisoners, fields of corpses, bodies piled up in mass graves, signs among signs. Behind this anonymous pressure we also break and enter into an *entremonde* of blown up, snapshot make-believe. Thus we witness one, then two, then another two little girls coming to post letters: in this subdued image, they enter, perform this action, and then exit. As the caption moments previously explained, they are war orphans who were picked up in Oberhollabrunn, in Austria. A wide shot immediately after that shows a crowd at the entrance to the camp, concluding the sequence and offering up the same information again. But in the time it takes for the children to come into the shot, a movement repeated three times, of graceful, skipping bodies miming a ballet of pure distances, we have already forgotten almost everything, and this indeed adds to the charm of the episode.

We have all observed the final shot in *Visions du désert*, a fixed close-up on the wide-open eyes of a veiled girl. But why is this shot so powerful? It ends a film on the unconscious side of colonialism that we call exoticism, based on the reworking of a private archive, a diary of travels in Africa at the turn of the century. Lasting a long minute, this shot is therefore imbued with double or triple value. First of all, it defines this very type, trained on the tourist/ethnographer, whose legacy was then gathered by filmmakers. But in this operation, that has the intensity of a frame within a frame, and a sort of moral duration, there explodes both the distance of a judgement and an abandonment to something starkly exceptional: a gaze from another time and another place, like the gaze itself, an event which is even purer and more fleeting for having been reinvented in the field, by the analytical film camera going about its work of remembering.

In *Inventario balcanico* these different strengths join forces with an irrevocable multitude, perhaps because this time we are dealing with a specific period in time: the Balkans in the twenties, thirties and forties. This historic period is therefore reworked from the perspective of contemporary events, yielding something that for us, now, is almost unimaginable. A time of peace, of peoples, communities existing parallel to nations (another positive outcome of the remains of the Empire), in a large area – the Danube, from the Black Forest to the Black Sea: a period which was all too soon hollowed out by the backbone of the worst of wars (this is explained in three introductory captions – the only ones in the film – along with a quote from Michaux).

In *Inventario balcanico*, this film, this work, there is one scene, an indoor shot that lasts six minutes, a scene like a normal scene in a film, be it fiction or documentary, albeit with the indescribable artlessness of an amateur film (the

captions also tell us this). We must never forget to imagine, here, like elsewhere, but above all here, that the problems in the original film impinge on the work we see, lending it changing successions of micro events and atmospheric conditions that become an integral part of the distinctive pace which pervades the worlds that unfold before our eyes. It is like being confronted with an early version of one of the indoor sequences of Jonas Mekas' last film, *As I Was Moving Ahead, Occasionally I Saw Brief Glimpses of Beauty*. Nineteen different shots, or almost shots, given that the jerks and adjustments blur the dividing lines, but real shots nevertheless, with their efforts, effects, and shocks.

In a room that is impossible to reconstruct mentally, we see six people, seemingly linked by elliptical relationships: on a bed, a baby wrapped in a sheepskin, and to its left a non-Western woman lying down – all we see is her head – who is surely the mother; a man and a woman, Westerners, perhaps a couple; a boy, probably their son, and what could be a maid. Two windows, a mirror, a religious image. Everything revolves around the baby, the mystery of that event. But the real mystery is that of the space and time that contains this event and these figures linked by gestures that have unexpected breadth and implications, created by the different stages of shooting and editing. Faced with these shots of rare eloquence and transience, certain images spring to mind: Dreyer's *Vampyr – The Vampire*, Yevgeni Bauer's *After Death*, or the family film Hervé Guibert talks about in *L'Image fantôme*, his words forging the enigma. This is all to do with strengthening the visible sphere, the micro-perceptions that support its progression towards the tactile, and a harrowing sensation of real, present time lost. We thus immediately overcome the distinction between fiction and documentary, entering into the intimacy of bodies whose private story shows that all we can have of history is an elusive vision, if it is vision we seek, rather than knowledge.

This vision opens the film. A wide shot, it turns and oscillates, impossible to describe, and with repeated close ups, homes in on the triumphal body of a high ranking officer (German) marching on parade among others. Later, we also see a Nazi officer with a predatory smile, as Lang reinvented them. Rapture, nausea, rage: all are powerless against the image. What shocks is this insolent delight in being filmed, which applies to both war and peace, violence and abandonment. It is the beauty of recorded things, for which we need to thank today's directors, with their skilful manipulations. What we are looking at is really an unfamiliar sort of "super Bazin-ism" and "super Rossellini-ism", a super-pedagogy connected to the ontology of the photographic image and its reproduction.

We end up thinking a lot about these things for the duration of the film, transported by the breadth of the different phases, highlighted by the dominant colours of the filters, that appear to reflect perceptive moods. When the war, which dominates the beginning and end of the film, ceases, we witness moments of life along the Danube, enviable in their ordinariness. Some of these are captured from afar - cities, castles, countryside, roads, different crowds – and some closer up, ever conditioned by this oscillation between a sensation of landscape – be it natural or man-made – and the pull of a distinctive trait, with the additional involvement bound up in a gesture, a face, the human gaze. Thus we have scenes like that of a traditional celebration, where a mask with fixed eyes observes us before slowly turning to reveal, little by little, on the other side of the image, the face of a laughing young woman, looking at the camera. Or the gloomier episode that takes place in an inn. The gesture is hard to define, because it is filmed from further away, and though we draw closer and the scene draws out, it appears to hover around the point which would enable us to identify it.

A seated man raises a glass, dreamily wagging it about in front of his eyes, rocking his head from side to side with a knowing and amused smile, as if savouring what he has drunk or is about to drink. On the left the waitress observes him. Another waitress, captured close up among the leaves, appears to be doing the same. It is like a suspension of the living, with the sensation of pure time passing.

But we need to see more in order to pinpoint what these films really touch on, with less of an air of make-believe than the scene in the room. Three children suddenly look at us, close up: a little girl with curly hair on the left, another on the right, both smiling, and between them a much smaller boy, little more than a baby, whose gaze is vague, internal. Shadows pass over the three faces, changing their expressions, a projection of a dark night of the soul, and then vanish. Now even the smallest of the three looks straight at us. And lastly we get a close up of the curly-haired girl. Indescribable. Front and side views show that she teases and returns the gaze of the camera that is filming her - to us an unknown quantity, and something we would forget about, even if the little girl, with an extreme gesture, shrugging while she laughs, twisting her hands, did not blow two endearing kisses to the camera man. But in the time it takes for her face to move out of the shot, towards the right, we can read the fear in her eyes, as if breaking down.

Something corresponding to this can be found in the famous winter garden photograph discussed in Barthes' essay *Camera Lucida*. In this vision of his mother as a child, Barthes finds her most genuine face, the "expression" that no-one else can capture. Equipped with this ammunition, he enters into time lost and found, and relates the writing of a piece of knowledge or a sentiment to the essence of photography. He gives us the right words to describe these singular truths: *Madness* (as he writes about many photos that strike him: «anyone who looks you straight in the eye is crazy») and *Pity*, to describe the certain nature of human sensitivity, by means of which, beyond any notion of reason, we arrive at the foundations of humanity itself.

This is an effect similar or close to that created by these unparalleled films. There is no doubt that their art unavoidably lends itself to the taming of both madness and pity. Barthes believed that film necessarily mitigated the madness of the photograph, of which culture and society continue to contain the violence. Yet faced with these films that insist

on talking about chosen moments of the human race, these are the very words that spring to mind. The madness of all these gazes ceaselessly probing us. Pity for the history that each figure is part of, which has now become the history of a century. What we see are photos of identities – existential, preoccupied, active identities, animated by a cruel and loving freedom. The magic that these films works – between their devotion to archive material and inventions that induce metamorphoses – is the creation of a unique approach to the photographic: as the films unfold, they produce – as Barthes sought in the photo – «an illogical conjunction between the *here-now* and the *there-then*». The curly-haired girl will look at us for all eternity. For eternity, she and her pretence of reality have vanished. For eternity, in film, she will be lost and found.

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Biographies

Raymond Bellour, researcher, writer. Director of research emeritus at C.N.R.S., Paris. Is interested on one side by literature, romantic (the Brontës, Alexandre Dumas), and contemporary (Henri Michaux, edition of his complete works in La Pléiade). Is interested on the other side by cinema (*L'Analyse du film*, 1979, *Le Corps du cinéma. Hypnoses, émotions, animalités*, 2009). Is interested also by the mixtures, the passages, the mixed states of images – painting, photography, cinema, video, virtual images – as well as by the relations between words and images. Has been involved in 1991 with Serge Daney in the creation of “Trafic”, “revue de cinéma”.

Chiara Bertola was born in Turin in 1961. She lives and works between Venice and Milan. Artistic Director of HangarBicocca, she is the curator at Fondazione Querini Stampalia in Venice and of Fondazione Furla in Bologna. She's the founder and curator of Premio FURLA for young Italian artists today at its ninth edition. She's been president of Fondazione Bevilacqua La Masa in Venice from 1996 to 1998. She co-curated Venice Pavilion for the 52nd Venice Art Biennale and she's been among the curators of the 15th edition of Rome Quadriennale in 2008. She curated many exhibitions in Italy and abroad, as well as written many essays and introductions to artists. She recently published for Mondadori/Electa the book on the figure of the curator entitled *Curare l'arte* (2008), and with Corraini the book on the exhibition project at HangarBicocca *Terre vulnerabili – a growing exhibition* (2011).

Christa Blümlinger, Professor in film studies at the University Vincennes-Saint-Denis (Paris 8). Among her former teaching activities, assistant professor at the University Sorbonne Nouvelle and guest professorship at the Free University Berlin. Numerous curatorial and critical activities in Vienna, Berlin and Paris. Her publications include the edition of writings of Harun Farocki (in French) and of Serge Daney (in German) and books about essay film, media art, film aesthetics and Austrian cinema. Her most recent publication in German is *Kino aus Zweiter Hand. Zur Ästhetik materieller Aneignung im Film und in der Medienkunst*, Vorwerk 8, Berlin, 2009 (about appropriation in film and media art), and in French, *Théâtres de la mémoire. Mouvement des images*, co-ed. with Sylvie Lindeperg, Michèle Lagny et alii (Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, Paris, “Théorème 14”, 2011).

Rinaldo Censi deals with moving images. He collaborates with “Alfabeta2”, with “Il Manifesto”, with some film reviews such as “Cineforum”, “Filmcritica” and “Fata Morgana”. He participated to many collective volumes and wrote a book: *Formule di pathos. Genealogia della diva nel cinema muto italiano*, Cattedrale, Ancona, 2008. For Cineteca di Bologna he curated the Dvd edition of the *Histoire(s) du cinéma* by Jean-Luc Godard. He suggests book translations to publishing houses – often unsuccessfully. He schedules film shows (with Warburgian spirit), when he is allowed to. He taught History and Philology of Cinema for some years at Pavia University.

Andrea Lissoni, PhD, is art historian and curator and currently works as curator at HangarBicocca, Milan. In 2000 he founded the international festival Netmage and the art network Xing, which he has co-directed since then. His most recent projects include: *Tudo è*, just another idea of the Brazilian art scene (Pitti Discovery, Firenze, 2011). Since 2007 he is Chief Editor of “Cujo” Magazine and is regular contributor to “Mousse Magazine”. At HangarBicocca he curated exhibitions of Cameron Jamie, Carlos Casas, Phill Niblock, Céleste Boursier-Mougenot. He also co-curated with the director Chiara Bertola the one year-long collective exhibition *Terre vulnerabili – a growing exhibition* (2010-2011).

Ara H. Merjian is Assistant Professor of Italian Studies and Art History at NYU. He has taught at Stanford and Harvard Universities, and is the author of *Giorgio de Chirico and the Metaphysical City* (Yale University Press, 2013). His essays have appeared in “The Getty Research Journal”, “Modern Painters”, “Res”, and “Modernism/Modernity”, and he is a regular critic for “Artforum”, “Frieze”, and “Art in America”. He is currently working on a new project on Pier Paolo Pasolini and the politics of art history.

Mark Nash is a curator, film historian and filmmaker, with a specialism in contemporary fine art moving image practices, avant-garde and world cinema. In the 1970s and 1980s he was actively involved in British film culture as editor of “Screen” (1976–1981) and as an independent filmmaker. His PhD from Middlesex University was based on his writings from this time. Mark Nash was Director of Fine Art Research at Central Saint Martins College of Art & Design, and he is currently Professor and Head of Programme “Curating Contemporary Art” at Royal College of Art, London. He has also taught in a number of US institutions including Harvard, NYU and UC Santa Cruz.

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