

PART FOUR

Critiques of Modernity: Stillness, Motion, and the Ethics of Seeing

9 The Body in and of the Image in the Films of Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi

ROBERT LUMLEY

The work of Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi has acquired a significance in the second decade of the twenty-first century that could not have been anticipated when they began their partnership in art in the mid-1970s. Pioneering figures in Europe in making films using found or archival footage that record actions and events marked by war, genocide, and human catastrophe, they anticipated a growing preoccupation with historical memory and commemoration, which became central concerns within Western cultures.¹ Films such as *Dal polo all'equatore* (From the Pole to the Equator, 1986) and the trilogy based on World War One – *Prigionieri della guerra* (Prisoners of the War, 1995), *Su tutte le vette è pace* (On the Heights All Is Peace, 1998), and *Oh! Uomo* (Oh! Mankind, 2004) – all bore witness to the horrors of colonialism and war. They journey back in time but with a keen awareness of the recurrence of cycles of violence in the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia after 1992 and in the wider world following the Iraq war of 1991. Using footage originally shot in the first half of the twentieth century, the films of Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi speak of contemporary realities, making them implacable voices of conscience and dissent within Italy. At the same time, this contemporary quality of their archive-based work is inseparable from its relationship to the history of cinema.²

A return to the photographic origins of cinema through a manipulation of temporality and a reworking of the single frames is at the core of their memorializing project, an ethical reflection on the visual technologies and their relation to history, modernity, and power. Ricci Lucchi and Gianikian slow down the film flow in order to set it in (critical) motion again as a reflection on the ideology of progress and the violence of modernity. Playing with the precarious temporality and historicity of photography, they redeem the film footage by dwelling on the sensual materiality of the image (be it colour or profilmic invisible details in the frame) and foregrounding for the viewer the physicality of the act of seeing. By exploring the viewer's visual sensations and apprehension of the film image, the filmmakers release a countervailing potential in film that reveals cinema's imbrication with contemporary ideology, be it colonialism or the violence of war and Fascism.

Paradoxically, the impermanence of the materials with which they have worked, combined with the demise of analogue and the advent of digitalization, have helped to make Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi into witnesses and actors of a material transformation without precedent in visual culture.³ The passage of time is visible not only in

what is documented – in the historical figures and landscapes reproduced – but in the documents themselves as they age and decay. Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi celebrate and mourn the passing of photography-based cinema.⁴

Early Works and Influences

To understand how Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi make films that are simultaneously about something (war and colonialism) and about film (reproductive technique, the materiality of photography), it is necessary to take a step back and look at their early days as filmmakers. Neither of them went to film school nor did they have any involvement with commercial cinema. Ricci Lucchi studied fine art (painting) and Gianikian studied architecture, writing a dissertation on silent cinema. When they began to work with film together, they continued to see themselves as artists. Gianikian made work with 8mm stock produced by Kodak for the amateur market. He edited the film within the camera and experimented with superimposition. It was relatively inexpensive. There was no need for special lighting or actors or the whole paraphernalia of the film industry. The results could be shown in art schools, galleries, and film clubs. In America there was a burgeoning of artists' films from the late 1950s onwards, a movement that was given the name "Underground cinema" in the following decade. Andy Warhol was the best-known artist experimenting with film, but there were many other artist filmmakers whose work was shown internationally (Curtis; Renan). An Italian catalogue-anthology entitled *Cinema Underground Oggi* describes the situation from an Italian viewpoint:

This catalogue has come into being as a practical and easy-to-use guide to the "mysteries" and "rituals" of underground cinema – witness, confession, and even artistic legacy of a now huge movement of filmic ideas, which originated in post-war America with authors such as Maya Deren, Marie Menken, Kenneth Anger ... and that then found first in Britain and then in France, Japan and Italy a fertile terrain in which to grow and proliferate ... The new generation of filmmakers finds in Stan Brakhage and his 'Songs' ... and in Ken Jacobs and Jack Smith the gurus of a new religion of consumption that would explode a few years later with pop art and rock music. (Luginbühl 1–2)

Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi were part of an alternative film scene in Italy that would have been familiar with the American films from screening in clubs and festivals. It is no surprise, therefore, that when in the early 1980s they toured their own work in the United States, they were hosted in New York by Jonas Mekas, filmmaker and founder of what became Anthology Film Archives.

The impact of American art in all its forms was strongly felt in Italy from the time of the Venice Biennale of 1964 onwards. However, the responses were complex and mediated by European cultural affiliations. The new avant-gardes sought out their predecessors, rediscovering the work of Dada, the Futurists, Surrealists, and others. In film, particular attention was paid to Man Ray and Buñuel and the Russian filmmakers of the 1920s. When discussing Russian filmmakers whose work they

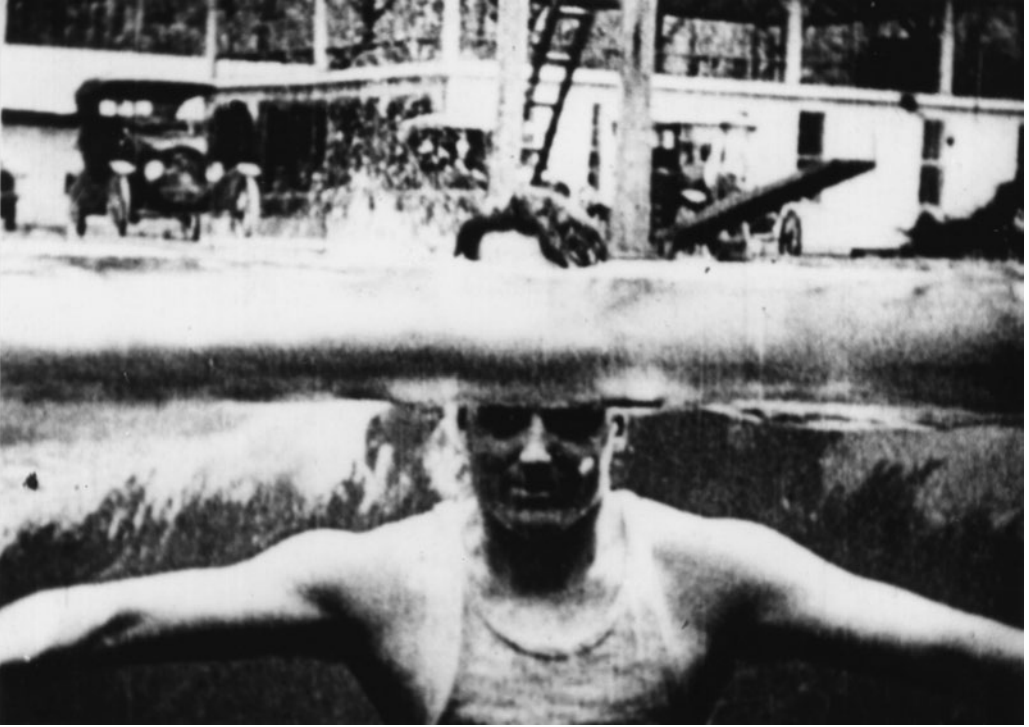


Figure 9.1 Film frame from *Karagoez – Catalogo 9.5* (*Karagoez – Catalogue 9.5 mm*, 1979–81). © Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi. Courtesy of the artists.

have admired, Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi refer to Dziga Vertov, Esther Schub, Grigori Kozintsev, Ilya Trauberg, and Lev Kuleshov (*Voyages*). In their films of the 1970s, they openly acknowledged the influence of Surrealism in titles such as *Non cercare il profumo di Buñuel* (*Do Not Search for the Scent of Buñuel*, 1975) and *Klinger e il guanto* (*Klinger and the Glove*, 1975). At this time they were making what they called *cinema profumato* (scented films) at the screenings: the filmmakers released scents with the help of essences, test tubes, and a Bunsen burner. The scents formed the olfactory equivalent of a soundtrack that was designed to trigger memories and sensations in the audience. It embodied an idea of cinema conceived by André Breton as “a lyrical substance” in which chance and disorientation rather than narrative prevailed (Breton 81). The experiment with scent was highly original and had nothing to do with Hollywood’s notion of a “total cinema” that aspired to ever-greater realism (Farassino 25–7). It had affinities, instead, with the “expanded cinema” of the 1960s with its emphasis on performance and bodily sensation (Renan 227–57).

Unfortunately it is no longer possible to experience cinema profumato. Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi gave their last performance of the work at the Jeu de Paume in the late 1990s. In some respects it constitutes a closed chapter. A second phase opened with the discovery of historic found footage (a cache of films in Pathé 9.5 mm, the first stock made for an amateur market) and with the abandonment of scent. Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi started to make films based on rephotographing and re-editing old movies of every kind.

The transformation led to the making of *Karagoez – Catalogo 9.5* (*Karagoez – Catalogue 9.5 mm, 1979–81*), which took three years to complete – a veritable homage to silent cinema. It was not a restoration but new work with antecedents in films such as Ken Jacobs's *Tom Tom the Piper's Son* (1968–9), a reworking of a ten-minute film of circa 1905 made by Billy Bitzer, later cameraman to D.W. Griffiths, and influenced by Vertov's documentary films, such as *Man with a Movie Camera* (1928). Gianikian described the making of *Karagoez*:

I have frozen the movements of a dance ... The bodies of the ballerinas look like self-propelled statues ... In an excess of voyeurism I prolong the five frames of a woman uncovering her breast in an alcove that could not be perceived otherwise. I leave those bodies, faces, scenery and the Venetian fires to shoot a didactic film ... I photograph the slow movements of an underwater swimmer ... I observe the evolution of different types of jelly-fish that resemble underwater fireworks ... I return to Casanova and inside the rectangle of 9.5mm film I isolate a detail of two millimetres – the heart painted on the cheek of the ballerina. (83–4)

The eye is not that of the cameraman who makes his own films but of the film remaker who sees with the prosthetic eye of the optical printer.

The caesura that divides the early cinema profumato from the archival or historic found footage films with which Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi are identified has probably seemed all the greater due to the absence of the former from exhibition. However, an adequate account of the oeuvre needs to integrate this original but neglected experiment. Above all, it helps us to think about a fundamental aspect of Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi's films as a whole – namely, the role of embodiment and of sensual apprehension on the part of audiences. In the words of the critic Philippe Azoury: “The cinema of Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi depends essentially on the principle of sensation, and sensation is always acknowledged as the point of departure for every revelation” (5). The early films explicitly set out to explore the sense of smell. Accounts of performances underline the intensely physical sensations evoked in audiences. Film, filmmaking, and watching the film are conceived in a strongly experiential way, which, as Azoury suggests, persists through their work. In the 1970s, there were connections between their projects and developments within independent filmmaking, notably with performance-based expanded cinema and with structuralist currents which foregrounded, albeit in very different ways, the sensations and perceptions of the viewer and the materiality of the medium. Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi's practice, however, acquired a historical and political dimension that

they see as distinguishing it from the more formal, individual, and perception-based concerns of North American contemporaries.⁵ Yervant Gianikian's preoccupation with the Armenian genocide, which his father had witnessed as a young boy, may have contributed to a vision of history as the ever-present threat of repetition and return. Meanwhile in 1970s Italy the experience of Fascism engendered fears of coup d'état and orchestrated political violence. The appeal to memory through bodily sensation of the earlier work is replaced by appeal to historical memory – historical memory embodied in the materiality and images of the film. At the same time, this shift towards the historical marked by new approaches to found footage was part of a wider cultural tendency noted by Jeffrey Skoller. Research in the archive opened up a whole new/old world to filmmakers. “For the first time in the history of the art form,” writes Skoller, “filmmakers have an archive to sift through, analyse, and appropriate, allowing them to create their own metahistories. The history of world film culture has been a short but dense one that has permeated the consciousness of much of the planet, allowing cinema to become – like literature – a way of apprehending the world itself” (xxix).

The centrality of appeals to the bodily in the work of Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi acquired a different valence in the late 1980s in relation to developments in filmmaking and film criticism and history. First, there was the “ethnographic turn” and the questioning of Eurocentric thinking and practice. Laura Marks coined the term *inter-cultural cinema* to refer to a cinema for which experimentation and appeal to “haptic visuality and embodied responses to images” were integral to its reflection on the “experience of diaspora, (post- or neo-) colonialism, and cultural apartheid” (Marks 1–23). Second, film theory itself was undergoing a major revision as a result of the critique of dominant models constructed in the 1960s and 1970s around semiological and psychoanalytical approaches. In their place was proposed a phenomenological approach associated with the work of Merleau-Ponty (Sobchack xi–xix). Both these developments have involved revisiting the early history of cinema and the first film theorists, and rediscovering the central place of the body in early films (Moore 12–25).⁶ It is easy to see, therefore, how Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi's engagement with the materiality of film and with the bodily response of the spectator put their work at a crossroads where different developments in early twenty-first century film theory and practice met. At the same time, the filmmakers were charting a course that separated them from the narcissism and consumerism of the *Milano da bene* of the 1980s. Their political and ethical choices implied a thoroughgoing refusal of the new media market and party patronage. Their films expressed a radical otherness with respect to the society in which they lived.

Handling the Image

Filmmaking for Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi is a way of life. Work is not a separate place or activity undertaken only at prescribed times. They are artisans and masters of a craft. They share their small apartment in Milan with the tools of their trade – the editing-table that once belonged to Luca Comerio is in one room with Gianikian's

homemade optical printer; a study space has shelves stacked high with box files; the living room doubles up as a viewing room when critics visit. The collections of objects and archival footage are housed elsewhere. However, their relationship to the materials is intimate and physical. Gianikian comments on the special smells of the film stock. When he works at the editing-table, he does not run the film through a *moviola* – it is too fragile. Instead, it is examined frame by frame (see [Colour Plate 6](#)).

The film is either held in the hand and scrutinized by the naked eye or turned manually through the optical printer and inspected with the help of the prosthetic eye.⁷ For this purpose, Gianikian built an optical printer of his own. He enumerates its features:

It is a camera with microscope features, more photographic than cinematographic, and reminds me more of Muybridge and Marey's experiences than Lumière's. 347,600 frames were taken by hand for the film *Dal Polo all'Equatore*. The camera is equipped with devices for lateral, longitudinal and angular running. It can respect the frame entirely in the philological sense. Or it can penetrate the depth of the frame for detailed observation of the marginal zones of the image and the uncontrolled parts of the shot. The camera can respect the color of the original toning or hand coloring of the frame, but it can autonomously paint vast areas of film. The running speed depends on what you want to emphasize. ("La nostra camera analitica" 39)

The work is slow and labour-intensive. There are no shortcuts. Even short films take months to make, whereas the feature-length ones have taken several years apiece. The smallest details are memorized; "It is a kind of vivisection. We note what is happening in each frame, how many frames there are for every shot and sequence. We are very precise," says Gianikian (Macdonald 15).

The film usually needs to be repaired and the rate of deterioration contained, all of which requires extensive knowledge of the different formats, film stock, and techniques such as tinting. Knowing about the exercise of the craft at the time the original footage was shot feeds into the reworking of the film. Technical expertise includes knowing how to make and adapt the optical printer. But the secret of the filmmaking lies not in the technology as such but in the know-how that informs the mimetic approach that brings the filmmakers into contact with the methods and thinking of their predecessors. Remarks made by Walter Benjamin about learning by copying are pertinent. "One never really understands a book," he wrote, "unless one copies it" (qtd. in Sontag, *Under the Sign of Saturn* 125). Rephotographing plays an analogous role in the filmmakers' practice since an intimate knowledge of the original film is the precondition for its subsequent transformation into new work.

The hands, too, play their part in the process of interpretation and understanding. Direct contact with objects is not cursory. The sense of touch is part of the making. Immediate contact functions as a metaphor for the intimacy of "entering into the image." It is also associated with moments of revelation. For example, there was the occasion of the first visit to the laboratory of Luca Comerio, the pioneer of Italian documentary film, whose personal archive was to provide the footage for *Dal polo*

all'equatore. Gianikian held up the strip of film, saw the tinted images of a sailing ship at sea, and knew that they had to buy the archives. A sense of mortality accompanies the film-makers's relationship to the materials of their work. The dedication to Luca Comerio at the beginning of *Dal polo all'equatore* signals an awareness of the ephemerality of filmmakers as well as film. It states: "To Luca Comerio, pioneer of documentary cinema, who died in 1940 in a condition of amnesia. Chemical amnesia, mould, physical decay, decay of the image is the condition surrounding film materials."⁸ In the years that have elapsed since the film was made, the images of the original have disappeared completely, leaving transparent film.

The Body in Motion

Within the history of photography, the body's vulnerability and film are explicitly connected in the work of Eadweard Muybridge and Jean-Etienne Marey to whom Gianikian refers when discussing his "analytical camera" with its "microscope features" ("La nostra camera analittica" 53). Marey was a physiologist who, according to Marta Braun,

wanted to arrive at a visual description of all common types of human motion – the walk, the run, the jump, and so on – and the forces at work in their execution ... If motion is the most apparent characteristic of life, there is no doubt that it is also the most difficult to measure. Most of the movements in and of the body are invisible and have an intricacy – in form, duration, regularity, and amplitude – that defies any attempt to either capture or interpret them. Marey had chosen to explore a domain inhabited by invisible ephemera. (xviii)

For Marey, the body was an animate machine (see [Figure 3.13](#)). By contrast, Muybridge was an entertainer and illusionist, not a scientist. Although he pioneered stop-action photography, he produced spectacles, not analytical works, with his sequences of images (Rohdie, *Montage* 3–5). These included not only the canonical naked man walking or running but the woman undressing or, naked, turning and bending. As Linda Williams has argued, "Chrono-photography did more than document previously unobserved facts of movement ... this very machinery of observation and measurement turns out to be, even at this early stage, less an impartial instrument than a crucial mechanism in the power established over that body, constituting it as an object and subject of desire, offering up an image of the body as *mechanism* that is in many ways a reflection of the mechanical nature of the medium itself" (508).

Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi share the interest of Marey and Muybridge in using photography to show the movements that the naked human eye cannot see. They, too, magnify and multiply the image. They look at films frame by frame, treating them as the equivalent of the photographs of the chrono-photographers. Ordinary actions, such as walking, turning, bending, and carrying objects, feature in their films. However, Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi have an anthropological and historical outlook. For them, the movements and gestures are coded and inscribed within cultures, whereas

the chrono-photographers with their grid backdrops and laboratory-like conditions, at least in Marey's case, sought to picture ideal, universally valid examples of human movement with society and culture removed. The filmmakers, furthermore, make moving pictures – a time-based form – not the sequence of photographs of the chrono-photographers. Movements and gestures are recorded in their duration, even if the manipulation of speed entails the abandonment of the search for a film speed that seeks to replicate “natural” motion and the exploration of a frontier zone between the still and moving image.⁹

Indeed, the work of Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi can be interpreted as an ongoing and relentless interrogation of the visual culture of modernity with its urge to survey, classify, and control. They return, for example, to the moment when the still image is put into motion in order to look again at a history too often seen as a march of progress. The assumption of progress, whether of technology or civilization, is examined in all tragic self-delusion. With the installation *La marcia dell'uomo*, constructed by Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi for the Venice Biennale in 2001, footage from Marey's Station Physiologique entitled *Hommes nègres, marche* is juxtaposed against amateur films from later in the century shot from the point of view of the colonizer. The slowing down of the film and the free movement of the spectator in front of the screens of the installation is designed to open up a (critical) space between image and viewer (Lumley 112–16; Païni and Hibon).

Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi give us a catalogue of human movement and gesture to invite a reflection on culture, representation, and power. If one simply takes the act of walking and looks at different films, the man or woman or child walking in slowed motion occurs again and again. Precise classification might include the stride of the Russian cavalryman, the even step of the Buddhist monk, and so on. The differences that strike the spectator have usually to do with the contrasts produced through editing – the contrast between, say, the easy gait of the tourist in India and the limp of the beggar, or between the aggressive assertiveness of the European hunter in Africa and the immobility of African bystanders.

Problematizing Spectatorship

Anthropologists in the early twentieth century studied the bodies and behaviour of native peoples in order to find clues about the nature of their societies. Fatimah Tobing Rony refers to Marcel Mauss's claim that it was possible to “divide humanity into those who squat and those who sit” (21). In certain films, notably *Dal polo all'equatore*, *Images d'Orient*, *tourisme vandale* (Images of the East, Vandal Tourism, 2001), and the short films grouped under the title *Frammenti elettrici* (Electric Fragments, 2002–5), Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi help us to “catalogue” the movements and gestures in parts of the world conquered and ruled by European powers.

In the war trilogy, the filmmakers show the massed bodies of the European peasantry. Not only were millions of men to die in the First World War but the peasantry of Europe, after centuries of settlement, was doomed to extinction, along with its distinctive cultures and modes of life. Marcello Flores comments on *Prigionieri della*



Figure 9.2 Film frame from *Images d'Orient, tourisme vandale* (Images of the East, Vandal Tourism, 2001). © Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi. Courtesy of the artists.

guerra: “The differences are noticeable, not only because the dance of the Russian prisoners is different from that of the Italian prisoners – in its rhythm, actions, and coral nature – but noticeable in that the way they wear moustaches or the way clothes corresponds to distinctive regional canons. However, what is even more noticeable is the uniformity – the masses of men who in peacetime would be working the fields ... a landscape monotonous in the harshness to which the men’s labor is subjected.” Flores finds the film remarkable for its close observation of “faces that are the same and yet different” and the contrast between the signs of individuality and the standardized uniforms of the mass (Flores). Once again, the cinematic approach of Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi harkens back to another photographic project: August Sander’s *Face of Our Time* (1929). Sander believed that “the photographer with his camera can grasp the physiognomic image of his time”; “a typology of the body as a social index,” writes Graham Clarke, “is basic to Sander’s complex code of social identity. Posture and stance, for example, reflect part of a larger mapping of the body in relation to public status and self-confidence” (“Public Faces” 71). The photographer and the filmmakers share the ambition to catalogue and inventory society at a given moment

in time, as well as an awareness of the tensions between social roles and individual identities. Humanity appears in all its physical imperfection, social inequality, and cultural diversity. In *Images d'Orient, tourisme vandale*, ranks of Indian children do agricultural work in a field, their frail bodies scarcely able to manage the implements they use. In *Oh! Uomo*, a line of children who walk slowly and laboriously past the camera with their crutches and ill-fitting boots replicate movements first captured by the chrono-photographers, but theirs are bodies ravaged by malnutrition and disease, not perfect machines in motion. The body is made into a machine when it is broken. The hand that lights and holds the cigarette, the fingers that type, the arm that scythes, and the legs that walk – all are prosthetic devices shown by the documentary film. War not only destroys men's bodies, it inaugurates a new world in which bodies too are reconstructed and remade, a savage caricature of Marinetti's Futurist vision of "metallized flesh" (Poggi 150–80).

Historically, fascination with the body has been driven by a range of forces, from developments in science to the growth of pornography, not to mention the new technologies of visualization themselves. Analyses from a post-colonial perspective have argued convincingly that the history of modernity and its notions of the body cannot be separated from Western conceptions of colonized subjects and non-Western peoples as Other. Assenka Oksiloff writes that the non-Western body was conceived in its essence as "primitive" and that the shift in anthropology to an observational mode gave primacy to "direct, unmediated visual access to the native body" (Oksiloff 3–4).

In films from *Dal polo all'equatore to Terra Nullius* (2002), Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi show how the cameramen of the time juxtaposed Europeans with their modern technology against the "natives" with their primitive tools. An evolutionary schema implicitly frames images of Europeans carrying rifles and natives carrying spears. When Australian Aborigines wear European clothing, it is tattered. In Ruth Ben-Ghiat's words, "Seeing is an integral part of the act of killing – violence as inevitable and a masculine rite; the ability of modern technologies to tame and vanquish nature, performance as a lens on the essence of the 'primitive'" (Ben-Ghiat xvii). The camera itself functioned as a weapon of war and imperialism.

Spectatorship and the Affective Image

Audience responses to the films of Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi suggest that a more phenomenological approach is particularly appropriate in their case. This might be deduced from their working method with its stress on manual intervention and mimesis, and from the depiction of extreme conditions of starvation, poverty, illness, and subjection to violence that recurs in them. The filmmakers set out to elicit strong responses. It is as if they are saying, the images you are seeing have themselves seen in reality what is now a projection on the screen. At the same time, the films of Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi draw attention to themselves as historical footage that has been remade. The viewer is addressed as someone who is watching a film.

Vivian Sobchack gives a good summary of a phenomenological approach that examines how viewers watch films. She argues that there is a mimetic and physical



Figure 9.3 Film frame from *La marcia dell'uomo* (The Walk of Man, 2001). © Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi. Courtesy of the artists.

relationship to images that is not reducible to the cognitive and engagement with narrative. She writes:

Watching a film we can see the seeing as well as the seen, hear the hearing as well as the heard, and feel the movement as well as see the moved. As viewers, not only do we spontaneously and invisibly perform these existential acts directly for and as ourselves, in relation *to* the film before us, but these same acts are coterminously given to us as the film, as mediating acts of perception-cum-expression we take up and *invisibly perform* by appropriating and incorporating them into our own existential performance; we watch them as a *visible performance* distinguishable from, yet included in, our own. (10–11)

Such an embodied viewing experience was initially at the heart of Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi's cinema profumato, but the films they made subsequently have equally worked in terms of affects not adequately comprehended through notions of “reading” and “decoding.”

David MacDougall has commented on the limitations of a process of viewing in which people search for meaning. He writes:

When they see a film they worry about what they are supposed to think. Their thinking keeps interfering with the process of looking ... They cannot give themselves to the images of a film, and afterwards all that is left in their minds is a series of judgments, or a set of questions, or a list of items they believe have been left out. (MacDougall 7–8)

In relation to *Dal polo all'equatore*, for example, critics have compared the experience of watching to being in a trance or under hypnosis, suggesting surrender of control and a haptic response to the images and sounds. Giovanna Marini, singer, collaborator, and composer of the soundtrack to *Prigionieri della guerra*, spoke of the experience of watching this film as one of being pulled between a state of dreaming and an awareness of a horrific reality: “Everything appeared transformed and seen by another eye, rarefied and even dream-like images, yet there was always the harsh reality, utter truth” (115).

Often members of audiences react to images of violence in Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi's films by covering their eyes and looking down, or by letting out involuntary gasps and sighs. The filmmakers have not hesitated to confront spectators, whether with images of pornographic scenes or surgery in medical documentaries. The body is shown in its vulnerability.

All descriptions of *Oh! Uomo* return to the scenes of eye surgery. Spectators are confronted with the close-up of an eyelid that is opened with tweezers by a disembodied hand before the remaining tissue is extracted from the empty socket. A trickle of blood is wiped away. As if it were the same patient (a trick of montage), a glass eye is inserted and “looks” to left and right as directed. The original training film has been transformed using the optical printer. The eye has now been placed at the centre of the screen in close-up. A film about surgery has become a defining scene in a film about looking (and not looking), a film that pivots around the relationship of the eye and the body. The sequence clearly alludes to the opening shots of *Un Chien Andalou* (1928) in which a razor blade cuts through an eyeball and a cloud cuts across the moon (Rees 48–9; Shaviro 54). There is an element of homage here to Surrealist films' assault on the rationalist all-seeing eye. However, the filmmakers are making nothing up; “We are not interested in fiction,” they say, “but in the complexity of reality, even when it comes in the form of propaganda that we seek to take apart.” The difficulty of looking at an eye operation is matched throughout *Oh! Uomo* by other scenes observed by the mechanical eye of the camera that are similarly unwatchable, such as those of children starving or in pain. There is the look to camera that is directly aligned to the look of the audience, a haunting example of which is reproduced on the cover of the booklet and DVD of *Oh! Uomo* – a child looks down and looks up, looks down and looks up; a child near death's door. The audience's discomfort is intensified by removal of the reassuring frames of the medical documentary that held the images at arm's length and conferred meaning on them. Instead, the act of showing disfigured faces and broken bodies is direct and unmediated, shocking.

When the films had an abundance of intertitles indicating appropriate responses on the part of audiences as well as informing them about exactly what they were



Figure 9.4 Film frame from *Oh! Uomo* (Oh! Mankind, 2004). © Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi. Courtesy of the artists.

seeing, they could be allocated a label and classified. Luca Comerio's documentaries, it seems, were full of intertitles with a distinctive rhetoric associated with Fascism. Once taken away, without being replaced by another set of verbal signposts, the images lost a precise identification and acquired new potential for meanings. Audiences were no longer told how they should interpret and react to what they saw. The filmmakers allowed themselves only images and (sometimes) sound to work on, and sought to make films that "made sense" by working with and on the senses. It is the combination of troubling images in which the body (human and animal) is so present with the lack of words that direct us in how to respond that has provoked the greatest criticism of Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi's work. The major anxiety is that privileging the image opens the way to aestheticization, making, for example, the bodies of colonized people into a spectacle for Western eyes (Russell 21–2).

Concerning this critique, Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi recall their perplexity when they read Susan Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others*, which was published just as they were finishing work on *Oh! Uomo*. For Sontag, images

documenting atrocity and suffering had become another consumer product, a form of pornography. She wrote:

Perhaps the only people with the right to look at images of suffering of this extreme order are those who could do something to alleviate it – say, surgeons at the military hospital, or those who could learn from it. The rest of us are voyeurs, whether or not we mean to be ... In each instance, the gruesome invites us to be either spectators or cowards unable to look. (Sontag, *Regarding* 38)

Sontag's text is sometimes contradictory. She makes a case for the photography of war as well as arguing that photographs often serve to substitute rather than enhance memory. However, Sontag consistently maintains that it is through written language, notably literature, that explanation and critical understanding are really made possible. Overall, the argument seemed to call in question the filmic strategies pursued by Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi over many years, notably their minimal use of inter-titles, complete refusal of commentary, and construction of narrative through editing; in brief, addressing the bodily "eye" of the spectator.

Sontag, however, was writing about the still photograph image, not about moving images. In important ways, therefore, the objections do not apply. The structure of the time-based medium enables the filmmaker to put images in sequence to create patterns, contrasts, juxtapositions. Although their early "scented films" were silent, Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi subsequently collaborated closely with composers and musicians to produce soundtracks that run parallel to the images. Taken one by one as isolated frames the images may be seen as enigmatic, mysterious, and exotic, but within the individual film, and within the oeuvre overall, they can be seen in relation to an identifiable critical practice on the part of Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi. Voiceover didacticism is rendered redundant. At the same time, the viewer is not addressed as in a debate or essay. Affect and sensation are elicited by the films in ways not usually open to cultural forms that work within notions of rationality and mental, as opposed to bodily, responses. Nor does this relegate the work to a lower order of discourse analogous to the role of the illustration of the written text. On the contrary, the images recall those of early cinema when moving pictures amazed and sometimes quite literally moved audiences (Gunning). Only audiences are now aware that they are watching films once watched by other audiences almost a century previously. The physical responses might be similar in many respects, but spectators are also watching themselves watching with a heightened awareness of historical and cinematic time. Ricci Lucchi and Gianikian's return to photography rediscovers cinema as a lost object and reinvents the act of seeing.

NOTES

- 1 See Foot; Huyssen; and Winter.
- 2 Translations into English in the chapter are all by the author unless otherwise indicated.
- 3 There is now an extensive and fast-growing literature in this area. See Cherchi Usai; Mulvey; and Rodowick.

- 4 Writing about the work of Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi has tended to appear in journals and reviews. Collected volumes have brought together many of these in Italian and English texts, as in Mereghetti and Nosei; and Toffetti. For an English-language monograph, see Lumley.
- 5 Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi have sought to distance themselves in particular from the growing number of “found footage” films, which in their eyes completely lack historical awareness and respect (Mereghetti and Rossin 121).
- 6 Béla Balázs represents an interesting case with reference to the work of Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi; “A point in time existed for Balázs,” writes Rachel Moore, “in which language was unmediated and pure gestures were identical with the thought or, better, the feeling conveyed” (67).
- 7 Work on a strip of nitrate film is the subject of a short, *Trasparenze* (1998), which is beautifully described by Luisella Farinotti (49–51).
- 8 “A Luca Comerio, pioniere del cinema di documentazione morto nel 1940, in stato di amnesia. L’amnesia chimica, la muffa, il decadimento fisico dell’immagine, è lo stato che circonda i materiali filmici.”
- 9 Raymond Bellour notes: “Without doubt there will come the day when, faced with the need to see the history of film in a broader historical context, people will seek to understand it from the range of ways in which individuals consistently – but in a crescendo lasting almost forty years – opposed its progress and tried to stop it, in particular by trying to create speeds other than those dictated by the natural true-false rhythm of editing (or based on the analogy of movement). When that day comes, the exploration done for over twenty years by Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi will be seen as a fundamental phase in a history whose (conceptual) boundaries it nevertheless explodes, since the force that holds it at the margins of both fiction and documentary categories can no longer be satisfied with avant-garde classifications” (79–80).