

The Surface of Modernity: Mario Schifano and Fabio Mauri between *Screens* and *Monochrome* Painting (1957–1969)

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Abstract

Between the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s, monochrome painting became a relevant tendency in Italy, crossing post-Spatialist and post-Informal practices. In the same years, the modernity of mass culture had overwhelmed a society which was mainly agricultural in a short time. As great symbols of this irreversible mutation, cinema and media image soon became a new lexicon for the research of many artists. By drawing on sources of that time intertwined with more recent theories on media and their relationship with modernity, this article analyses Fabio Mauri's 'screens' and Mario Schifano's 'monochromes' as an attempt of narrating the new 'society of spectacle' through the paradox of the absence of images. For both Rome-based artists, modernity seems at the same time something to reveal and to resist. If the former chooses a language that anticipates Pop grammar, the latter seems to look for a synthesis between new mass society and humanism. Both testify to the Italian way of the Post-War modernity.

'In 1960 the 1950s were 10 years old.'¹ Using this brief title for an article that sounds like a memoir, Fabio Mauri was able to look back and capture in just a few words the most defining characteristic of a decade that was so narrated that it became almost mythological. It's a question of genealogy: the 1960s were not merely, as historical debates often remind us, the precursor of the turbulent 1970s; the 1960s were also the successor of the 1950s, a decade of less loud yet irreversible rupture. The 1960s are the years of youth, the first years of rebellion and thirst for autonomy, the years of young ideas and actions, young bodies, customs, and visions. 'Everything went young in 1964', as Andy Warhol wrote.²

¹ This is the title that Fabio Mauri chose for an article published in 1983 in which he recalled the 1960s Rome-based Avant-garde. F. Mauri, 'Nel 1960 gli anni '50 avevano 10 anni', *Flash Art*, 112 (1983), 38–42. The quotation is taken from the online version available on the magazine website: <<http://www.flashartonline.it/article/nel-1960-gli-anni-50-avevano-10-anni/>> [accessed 27 March 2018]. (This one and all the quotations from Italian in this text, unless otherwise stated, are translated by the author).

² Andy Warhol and Pat Hackett, *Popism: The Warhol Sixties* (London: Penguin Books, 2007), p. 87.

Yet in Italy something had already happened. The economic growth of the 1950s was so sudden that it is commonly described as explosive (the economic ‘boom’) and mystical (the economic ‘miracle’). A new mass culture imposed itself on the country – which was still primarily agricultural – moving with the force of an ‘anthropological mutation’, as Pier Paolo Pasolini would later define it. While the 1950s introduced Italians to the first real experience of modernity, the 1960s became a sort of amusement park of well-being. With a delay of decades compared to other countries, where advanced capitalism had reached soaring heights well before the Second World War, Italy moved from housing with no heating, running water or electricity to houses with inevitably present refrigerators and televisions in less than a decade.³ The excess of consumer society suddenly conquered the country, and cinema came to represent the fears and hopes of an entire generation that looked toward the American dream with the attentive eye of a spectator in front of the screen, as Steno’s well-known comedy *An American in Rome* (*Un americano a Roma*, Steno, 1954) shows in a funny parody.⁴ Cinecittà in Rome was reborn, and it became one of the most important and symbolic industries in the country. It did that together with fashion, an emerging star of the Italian economy, which sought to catch up with the well-established Parisian haute couture, between the décolleté and the slit skirt of unreachable divas. The wounds of the Second World War were being healed by the galloping horses of the cowboys and the curves of the cinemascope. Cinema was an irresistible ideological and economic space where Italy was playing with and against new mass society.⁵

In 1959, the *Almanacco Letterario Bompiani*, which had been suspended during the most dramatic phase of the Second World War, resumed its publications. ‘The war is finally over’,⁶ the introduction written by Valentino Bompiani and Cesare

³ See Guido Crainz, *Storia del miracolo italiano. Culture, identità, trasformazioni tra anni Cinquanta e Sessanta* (Rome: Donzelli, 2005).

⁴ Among the numerous bibliographical references on this theme, see Gian Piero Brunetta, ‘Stati Uniti e Italia: uno sguardo telescopico’, in *Storia del cinema italiano*, ed by Brunetta, 4 vols (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 2013), iii (*Dal Neorealismo al miracolo economico, 1945–1959*), pp. 152–177, and, more specifically on Steno’s comedy, a recent study by Chiara De Santi, ‘L’americanizzazione degli anni Cinquanta tra *Roman Holiday* e *Un americano a Roma*’, *Cinema e Storia*, 5.1 (2016), 97–110.

⁵ Although the advent of television and the shaping of a more complex media system was progressively changing the Italian media landscape, cinema still acts as a strong apparatus of dreams and imagery. For a specific analysis of cinema audience in Italy between 1950s and 1960s see Francesco Casetti and Mariagrazia Fanchi, ‘Le funzioni sociali del cinema e dei media: dati statistici, ricerche sull’audience e storie di consumo’, in *Spettatori: forme di consumo e pubblici in Italia, 1930–1960*, ed. by Mariagrazia Fanchi and Elena Mosconi (Rome: Fondazione Scuola Nazionale di Cinema, 2002), pp. 135–172.

⁶ *Almanacco Letterario Bompiani 1959*, ed. by Valentino Bompiani and Cesare Zavattini (Milan: Bompiani, 1958), p. 145. *Almanacco Letterario Bompiani* begun to be published when Valentino Bompiani still worked within Mondadori Publishing. The intent was in the first place to return, by the lens of literature and its connections with visual arts, the litmus paper of contemporaneity. Both Cesare Zavattini and Bruno Munari already contributed to the publications in the ’30s. The latter, at that time in his Dada-Futurist phase, realized mainly photographic inserts through

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Zavattini proclaimed. Such a statement might seem strange, considering the fact that the war had been over for fifteen years by then, but it clearly demonstrates the amount of time that was necessary in order to recover from the trauma that it had caused. The first volume reproduced a series of collaborations that had been started already during the Fascist years — as Bruno Munari's cover testifies — but it was quite clear already that the Almanac was in need of a new vision. Fabio Mauri, who had just started working with the Milanese editor as head of the Roman editorial office, wrote:

In 1959 Valentino Bompiani was wondering what to do with the old Literary Almanac [...] Something was circulating at that time in Rome that no longer tasted of the post-war period, an emancipation or a free zone for ideas and people [...] I gave a favourable opinion to Bompiani: the Almanac needed to be resumed. But how? By following, in my opinion, the new trend [...] ⁷

Nothing better then, for a volume that intended to celebrate the novelty of the new Post-War Italy, than a small Italian dictionary where one could find the terms which were 'among the most current' and, by constituting an 'essential instrument of collective life', ⁸ determined their meaning and value. 110 entries, therefore, for 110 editors: novelists, poets, philosophers, literary and film critics as well as photographers offer a snapshot of the new nation immersed in modernity. In its pages, Italians found the definition of 'automation', an 'ideology launched by capitalism for a better world', ⁹ 'festival', a product of the entertainment industry 'recorded by the faithful television set', ¹⁰ 'youth' — 'today's youngsters feel much more pro-European', choose 'immediately profitable careers', and yet 'they are sharper and less rhetorical; and physically healthier' ¹¹ — "lotteries", 'the weekly mirage of fortune', ¹² 'nature', which, as Calvino warns, 'is about to die', ¹³ killed by the abundance of love that men have for it. Only a short article is dedicated to the term 'cinema', which is interrogated about its nature as either an artistic or an industrial product, echoing a common debate of the bygone 1920s.

Yet it is precisely the cinema that still acts as a great apparatus of modernity. The photographer Pietro Donzelli chooses it to define, with a single shot, the term 'crowd', ¹⁴ the symbol par excellence of mass society (fig. 1). He does

photomontage technique. The publication interrupted in 1943, in the middle of the war conflict. When it resumed, the historical contributors were still present, promoting the same experimental visual approach. Munari's polarized projections on the cover are an effective testimony of that.

⁷ Fabio Mauri, 'L'Almanacco', in *Valentino Bompiani. Idee per la cultura*, ed. by Vincenzo Accame (Milan: Electa, 1989), p. 58.

⁸ *Almanacco Letterario*, p. 145.

⁹ Ivi, p. 149.

¹⁰ Ivi, p. 174.

¹¹ Ivi, p. 180.

¹² Ivi, p. 191.

¹³ Ivi, p. 197.

¹⁴ Ivi, p. 183.

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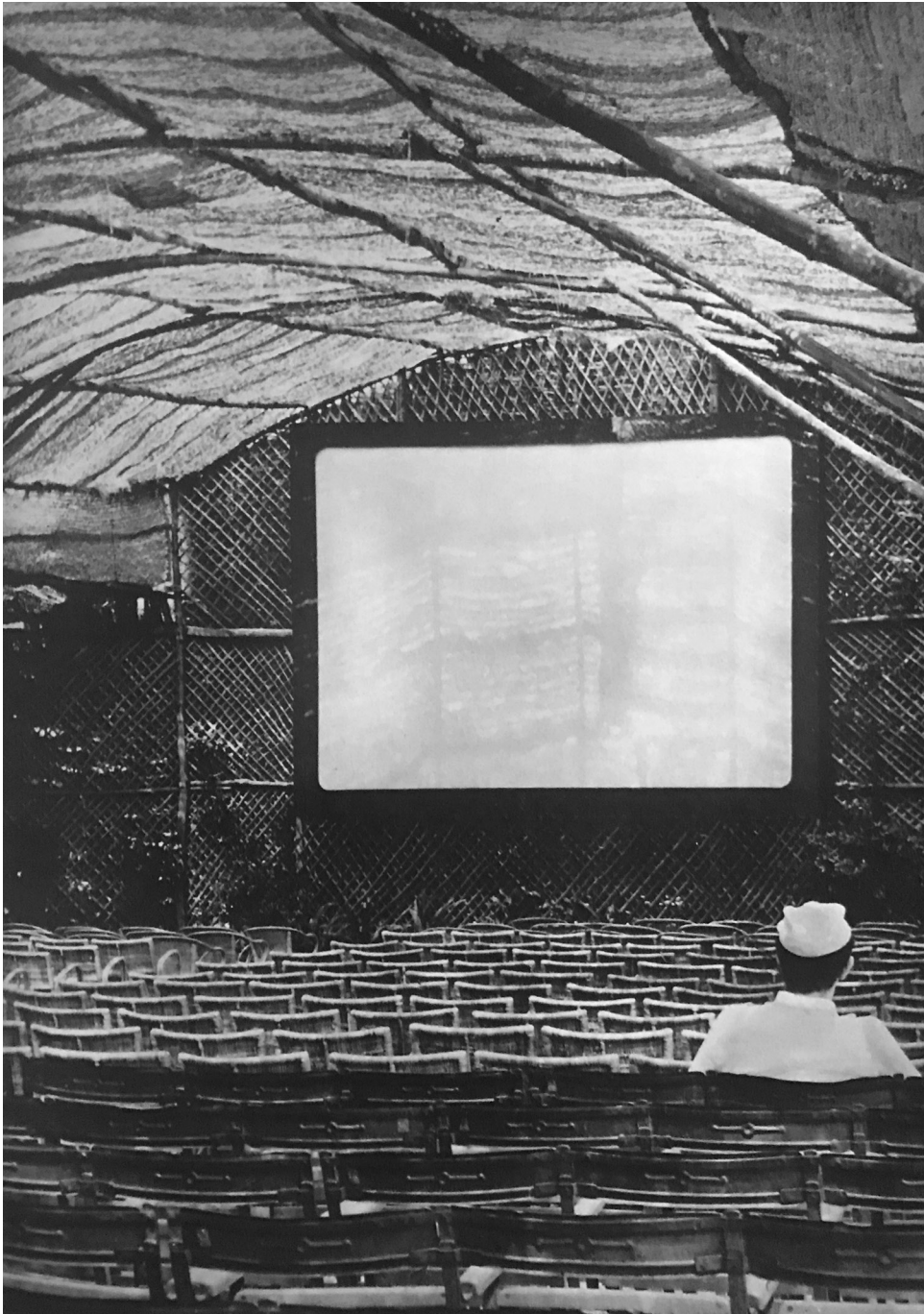


Fig. 1

Pietro Donzelli's shot illustrating the term 'crowd' on the *Almanacco Letterario Bompiani*.
Courtesy Renate Siebenhaar — Estate of Pietro Donzelli.

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that through antiphrasis, showing us only one man, from behind, sitting in the middle of the empty stall in a summer movie theatre, bordered by a fence of reeds and bamboo.¹⁵ Soft tarps guarantee coverage for the audience on a rainy night, one would suppose. At the centre of image, the empty screen returns no images except the faint shadows of the architectural skeleton, which cross the projection space and invade the frame. The phantom presences of a dissolving reality inside the rectangle of a screen without images acts, in fact, as a reality itself, as an experience of void for an overly-crowded society: 'Multitude-Solitude: these terms are equivalent, and are convertible by the active and fertile poet',¹⁶ as Charles Baudelaire wrote in a little poem entitled, not by coincidence, *Les Foules* (*Crowds*).¹⁷

In the Italy of the economic boom, where for the first time the life of citizens is structured by the time of industrial labour and office work, cinema was still, before being overtaken by the spread of television, the privileged space for one's spare time, which for the first time in the history of Italy, was a mass phenomenon. As the social critic Nicola Chiaromonte reminds us, in a 1956 article in the journal he founded together with the novelist Ignazio Silone, *Tempo presente*, it is also

an American art par excellence [...] because it corresponds to one of the most profound needs of mass civilization, which it reflects and serves: the need to automatically fill 'empty time' with a simulacrum of artificial time entirely similar to real time, yet substantially different. [...] For the inhabitant of the metropolis, whether poor or rich, worker or captain of industry, young or adult, 'empty time' is essentially the time that remains after one has finished their work, compulsory tasks and housework, and with which we do not know what to do; but we know that if we were to leave it empty, its weight would be intolerable.¹⁸

¹⁵ The cinema without images and without an audience returns to the photographic work of Pietro Donzelli, often devoted to illuminating the anachronisms of Italy's modernity. Among these *Cinema in Pila* (1954), which shows us the crumbling structure of a cinema set up with few objects of recovery in the poor and flooded lands of the mouth of the Po river. See Roberta Valtorta and Renate Siebenhaar, *Pietro Donzelli: terra senz'ombra: il Delta del Po negli anni Cinquanta* (Cinisello Balsamo: Silvana Editoriale, 2017).

¹⁶ Charles Baudelaire, 'Crowds', in *Little Poems in Prose*, ed. by Martin P. Starr (Chicago: The Teitan Press, 1995), p. 23.

¹⁷ The French poet is re-evoked in those years in Italy as a theorist of modernity by the philosopher Émile Zolla. See in particular *Eclissi dell'intellettuale* (Milan: Bompiani, 1959), pp. 29–43.

¹⁸ Nicola Chiaromonte, 'Nota sul cinema americano', *Tempo presente*, 1.5 (August 1956), 383–385 (p. 385).

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Fig. 2

Fabio Mauri, *Schermo-Disegno* [Screen-Drawing], 1957. Tempera on paper (70x100 cm).
Courtesy the Estate of Fabio Mauri and Hauser & Wirth.

The End is a Screen. Or an Icebox

What would happen if the cinema screen returned nothing but itself? A simple, canvas rectangle, a lifeless monochrome surface, as in Pietro Donzelli's photograph? When Fabio Mauri, between 1957 and 1958, creates the first *Screen* (fig. 2) using only paper and tempera, it represents a modernist operation that dialogues with the then contemporary European and American monochrome practices but will also anticipate the future Pop inquiries. From a young age he gained an understanding of the new visual forms of the cultural industry through the American comics that his father's company imported to Italy and was thus perhaps the best suited artist to capture the dual nature of cinema: its symbolic dimension, a 'window where you have to see history' from a Renaissance perspective,¹⁹ and its status as a mere object, interchangeable with an icebox. As he wrote himself, describing his works: 'the screen tense and empty, with

¹⁹ For a wide retrospective on the status of screen and its symbolic dimension see the recent study by Mauro Carbone, *Filosofia-schermi. Dal cinema alla rivoluzione digitale* (Milan: Raffaello Cortina, 2016).

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no sign or colour [...] an icebox, a television, a screen? At least all three things together.²⁰

His monochrome, which seems to recall the white square on a black background by Malevič,²¹ positions itself in a peculiar way with respect to the monochrome tendencies present in Italy in those years.²² These involve particularly post-Spatialist and post-Informal practices: Pietro Manzoni's *achromes*, Enrico Castellani's surfaces, Agostino Bonalumi's picture-objects, Francesco Lo Savio's light-spaces and metals, Franco Angeli's veils, Mimmo Rotella's *retro d'affiches*, Salvatore Scarpitta's bandages. Still, the symbolic horizon adopted by Mauri is different, and it is not by chance that he is not included in *Azimuth* magazine, founded by the Milan-based artists Enrico Castellani and Piero Manzoni seeking European connections on monochrome tendencies. Mauri's *screens* seem in fact to act as the elementary form of the 'Society of the Spectacle'.²³ Yet, in presenting it in its nudity, as an object devoid of its function, the screen not returning any image acts also as a space of rupture, or to put it in the words of the Dutch philosopher Johan Huizinga, whose *Homo Ludens* was in circulation in Italy beginning in 1946, 'a spoilsport', or 'a player who trespasses against the rules'.²⁴ As Mauri himself will later write: 'a measurer of *topos*, the screen is the continuity of the small diaphragm between inside and outside. Discreet, it awaits the images, almost omitting to propose its own right [...] So, as the monochrome covers the world, the screen can smash it.'²⁵

It's Emilio Villa, known to be 'the greatest dowser of Italian painting',²⁶ who would publish one of Mauri's first *screens* in the second issue of his magazine, *Appia antica*, in 1960. The writing 'The end', together with a painted 'X' that marks the canvas, recalls the wide and gestural brushstrokes typical of Informal Art. The reference, as is widely recognized, seems to be the Abstract Expressionism of Franz Kline, who had arrived in Rome two years earlier with the famous exhibition *The New American Painting*, organized by MoMA and exhibited in 8 European countries, and with a solo show at Plinio De Martiis'

²⁰ *Fabio Mauri. Opere e azioni 1954–1994*, ed. by Carolyn Cristov-Bakargiev (Milan: Mondadori, 1994), p. 22.

²¹ The reference to Malevič might be more than a modernist inspiration. The art historian Riccardo Venturi recalls the fact that many scholars 'now agree in recognizing the influence that the cinema screen has exerted on these aniconic paintings. These are not, or rather no longer work, as pictorial surfaces but as screens'. See Venturi, 'Il monocromo proiettato. Colore schermo esposizione', *Flash Art*, 319 (December 2014–January 2015). <<http://www.flashartonline.it/article/il-monocromo-proiettato/>> [Accessed 20 October 2018].

²² On this point see, amongst the others, Adachiara Zevi, *Peripezie del dopoguerra nell'arte italiana* (Torino: Einaudi, 2008).

²³ In this sense, it also contrasts with some of the American contemporary monochrome tendencies. See Riccardo Venturi, *Black paintings: eclissi sul modernismo* (Milan: Electa, 2008).

²⁴ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (London: Routledge, 1949), p. 11.

²⁵ Fabio Mauri, 'La misereabilità dell'arte', in *Fabio Mauri. Opere e azioni*, p. 96.

²⁶ As defined by the poet and art critic Cesare Vivaldi. See *Fabio Mauri: 1959–1969*, ed. by Cesare Vivaldi (Milan: Tipografia Vallin, 1969), p. 3.

La Tartaruga gallery. Yet Mauri immediately looks for a gap, that literally erases, with a graphic sign, the Informal instance and initiates a tightly knit dialogue, or perhaps a conflict, with the present. ‘To spy on the end, to expiate the end, to exorcise the end’, writes Villa, who interprets Mauri’s gesture as a resistance to the ‘mechanical insolence that is raging today’.²⁷ A gesture of irritation, ‘angry’, adds the critic, which nevertheless fades in Mauri’s subsequent production, where the sign, when it remains, is made into a serial form of graphic lettering where the screen-shape is replicated with different media, from screen printing to protruding canvases. Mauri will continue to create screens until the mid-1960s, before shifting the focus of his artistic research on cinema by exploring environments and happenings, from *Solid Light Cinema* of 1969 to a series of projections, including the famous 1971’s performance done together with his friend Pier Paolo Pasolini at the GAM in Bologna.²⁸ The meta-media nature of the screen leads the artist to explore more closely the new television medium, therefore connecting with European and American TV experimentations,²⁹ with the media-happening *The Crying TV*, broadcasted by the RAI in 1972: in an alienating reversal of roles, the screen reacts emphatically in front of the viewer through a white monochrome space accompanied by the artist’s crying voice that mercilessly returns to the inscription ‘The end’.

Man has thus become an object that is interchangeable with the screen. In this osmotic process, the more he identifies with it, the more the screen is humanized and the more he is dehumanized. An intuition that Mauri had already had ten years before, in his series *Numberplate-Screens*, which investigated the interstices of one of the most prominent phenomenon-symbols of Post-War modernity, where the myth of the automobile meets that of the cinema: the drive-in. An American practice, which emanated an irresistible sense of well-being upon its arrival in the Old World, in Italy the drive-in was also seen as a frivolous, expensive and rare form of entertainment, as we read in Irene Brin’s caustic remarks: the drive-in ‘has a worldly tone, it costs a lot, is infrequent’.³⁰ And yet, it remains the icon of technological triumph where human presence disappears and is dissolved in the sheet metal cabin of an automobile, annihilated in the numerical anonymity of a simple licence plate. And so, Mauri inserts the dark rectangles of the car plates under the rectangle of the screen, as if they were the *predella* of an old Medieval

²⁷ Emilio Villa, ‘Fabio Mauri’ in *Appia antica*, 2.2 (1960), 23–24 (p. 24).

²⁸ For a detailed analysis of Mauri’s work *Solid Light Cinema* and its relationship with the contemporary Italian art and design scene see Riccardo Venturi, ‘I Cinema a luce solida di Fabio Mauri’, *Doppiozero*, 7 August 2015. <<https://www.doppiozero.com/materiali/ars/i-cinema-luce-solida-di-fabio-mauri>> [Accessed 20 October 2018].

²⁹ See on this point Marco Senaldi, ‘Arte catodica. Dal dipinto allo schermo’, in *TV 70: Francesco Vezzoli guarda la RAI*, ed. by Chiara Costa, Mario Mainetti, Francesco Vezzoli (Milan: Fondazione Prada, 2017), pp. 499–506. Senaldi points out in this essay the pioneer role of Italian public television, which welcomed art experimentations as part of its broadcasting schedule, whereas in other countries artists were supported by cable television or art galleries.

³⁰ Irene Brin, *Dizionario del successo dell’insuccesso e dei luoghi comuni* (Palermo: Sellerio, 1986), p. 34.

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altarpiece. The plates almost seem like additional screens, perhaps those of a television, creating a *mise en abyme* in which, however, only the image of a frame is replicated. A void.

As a new dematerialized cult, cinema soon became for Mauri an evanescent space: starting from 1962, the artist began to show fragmented images of divas emerging on the monochrome-screen, with the consistency of shadows or ghosts. An apparition, on the surface of the monochrome, which nevertheless reveals the ambiguous nature of the image. It was well known to the Greeks, for which *eidolon* ('image', but also 'lie') and *phasma* ('supernatural vision') share the same semantic field: they are *eidola* the dead souls that Odysseus meets in Hades, evanescent images that cannot be touched, so much so that when he tries to embrace his mother the Homeric hero will not succeed — 'three times she flew from my hands, like a shadow or a dream.'³¹ For both there is, however, as the French philologist Jean-Pierre Vernant has noted,³² the meaning of an image that is the double of a body that is elsewhere. Reality that is revealed in its absence. When Mauri inserts the evanescent bodies of Marilyn or the Kessler twins' — and here television already inherits the characteristics of the cinematographic device in the creation of new divas — he confronts us with an experience that is not only that of the cult of a god, as Edgar Morin had already noted in 1957,³³ but also of a spectral vision. By participating in the evanescent substance of ghosts, stars act as intermittent images that create a slight ripple in the monochrome surface, which returns, continuously, to impose itself. Yet, in some cases, by exposing the grain of the image, which reveals the photographic printing technique (*The Scream*, 1963) as typical of Pop Art practices, Mauri forces us to look at the empty spaces inhabiting the stars' images, by so breaking their status of simulacrum.³⁴ If viewed from the perspective of seriality, his *screens* appear as a single work that stages at different degrees the 'film-specific rendering of phantom-like surface life'³⁵ indicated by Siegfried Kracauer. The spectrality of this surface thus blends with the experience of void, which is also, as the writing obsessively repeated by Mauri did not fail to underline, an experience of the end. These are the words used by Cesare Vivaldi to close his introductory text to *Crack*, a 1960 publication that gathered together the work of ten artists from the Roman avant-garde, included Mauri, reflecting on modern life: 'The white light of the earth has disappeared,

³¹ Homer, *Odissey*, ed. by Thomas W. Allen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1922), 11.213.

³² See the collection of essays by Jean-Pierre Vernant, *L'immagine e il suo doppio. Dall'era dell'idolo all'alba dell'arte* (Milan: Mimesis, 2010).

³³ Edgar Morin, *Les Stars* (Bourges: Tardy, 1957). See also Cristina Jandelli, *Breve storia del divismo cinematografico* (Venice: Marsilio, 2007).

³⁴ On the relationship between the use of photographic image by Pop Art and the theories on media from Siegfried Kracauer to Marshall McLuhan see Antonio Somaini, 'Visual Meteorology. Le diverse temperature delle immagini contemporanee', in *Fotografia e culture visuali del XXI secolo*, ed. by Enrico Menduni and Lorenzo Marmo (Rome: Roma TrE-press, 2018), pp. 31–52.

³⁵ Siegfried Kracauer, 'Hochstaplerfilme', *Frankfurter Zeitung*, 17 November 1923, now cited in Miriam B. Hansen, *Cinema & Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno* (Berkeley: University of California University Press, 2011), p. 9.

we are broken, in the blackest black, towards a black blacker than all nights. The show is over. A new show is going to begin with the word: The End'.³⁶

The Screen of Humanism

The various monochromes that appear in Mario Schifano's research, although creating a dialogue with those of Mauri, are of a different nature. The round form alludes to both cinema and TV screen. The screen is covered with wide and fast brushstrokes of industrial enamel which fill the canvas, drip over the edge and interrupt one another leaving parts that are uncovered, suspended. The gestuality, typical of Informal practice, persisted longer in Schifano's works, which were also exhibited for the first time by Emilio Villa in 1959. In the context of the dialectical relationship with Art Informel in Italy, the critic Maurizio Calvesi used the modernist metaphor of *tabula rasa* to describe Schifano's and Italian artists' monochromes as an empty space which cancels the past signs in order to make space for future ones.³⁷ Already in 1953 in the United States, Robert Rauschenberg implemented the metaphor of 'tabula rasa' through a literally *Erased De Kooning* and transformed one of De Kooning's paintings into a monochrome. Such an operation stood for a rupture, a breath, a white sheet ready for new narrations to come in Schifano's later artistic production. Schifano soon started working on a fragmented vision of the new landscape of modernity, in which highways (as in *Anemic Landscapes'* series) and advertisements (the Coca-Cola brand and Esso, the famous petroleum industry), come to make up the cinematic frames of the modern traveler. Like a true amateur, Schifano seems to record the fleeting visions of the experience of modernity, whose potential for the new is expressed as a landscape to discover.³⁸

Unlike Mauri's works, Schifano's monochromes are a starting point for that bulimia of images, whose unstoppable vortex would remain an important feature of his works up until the end. However, the monochrome would remain a key element of his research, a sort of entry point and interpretive key that helps us understand his later development as a visual teller of modern life. It is this opening that allows the artist to undertake a privileged dialogue with cinema which, according to Schifano, is the only medium capable of narrating

³⁶ *Crack*, ed. by Cesare Vivaldi (Milan: I Rachmaninoff, 1960), p. 5.

³⁷ See Maurizio Calvesi, 'Cronache e coordinate di un'avventura', in *Roma anni '60, al di là della pittura* (Rome: Carte Segrete, 1990), pp. 11–36.

³⁸ Precisely the opportunity to continue to produce monochromes instead of the subsequent paintings of 'new figuration' seems to break the relationship between Schifano and the art dealer Ileana Sonnabend, as we can read in Luca Ronchi, *Mario Schifano: una biografia* (Monza: Johan&Levi, 2010). The story is in fact controversial and is part of the turbulent adventures of the Italian art market in the Cold War. On this point see Michele Dantini, *Geopolitiche dell'arte: arte e critica d'arte italiana nel contesto internazionale, dalle neoavanguardie a oggi* (Milan: Christian Marinotti, 2012).

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and drawing the shapes of modernity. It is not by coincidence that art critics, Schifano's contemporaries, tend to exploit the lexicon of cinema when commenting on Schifano's work:³⁹ Calvesi considers the colour backgrounds with rounded corners as a 'screen set to receive, or a video just switched on',⁴⁰ while Maurizio Fagiolo Dall'Arco called Schifano's eye 'a lens-eye'⁴¹ and Alberto Boatto states that he perceives the reality 'as an image that enters randomly in an optical field'.⁴²

Certainly, by calling one of his rounded corners monochromes *Botticelli* Schifano accomplishes a double action: on the one hand he reminds us of the Italian visual tradition which at this point has been completely absorbed by the broader visual landscape, where advertisements and art works coexist in a world of media replicability, as a part of the 'city's spectacle',⁴³ on the other he makes the ability to observe that visual tradition impossible through a gesture of erasure/annihilation, of complete cancelation. *Botticelli* may allude to an idea of contemplative vision that is no longer possible with the velocity of cinematographic and TV images. While we are still able to grasp a few fragments of the Coca-Cola and Esso advertisements, replicated images born without an aura, of Botticelli's art we are left with nothing more than an empty space where the aura used to exist. Schifano's pictorial gesture, a coloured background with the mark of a palette knife that crosses the canvas, is thus the scream of a human experience which is going to fade out.

From this point of view, Schifano is very different from Andy Warhol, even though the two have often been compared. As the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard has underlined, Warhol produces simulacra in his art, images that have completely lost their connection with reality. In what is 'machinic metamorphosis',⁴⁴ the artist himself becomes a machine. Walter Benjamin reminds us that the automaton is the fundamental element of the modern experience, both in the industrial context in which human gesture is automated through the assembly line, but also in the seemingly more human urban setting, where the crowd is forced to move using fragmented, repeatable, controlled gestures. The Italian philosopher Élémiere Zolla, in his essay of 1959 *The Eclipse of the Intellectual*, introduced the phenomenology of automatism, by

³⁹ The phenomenology of the gaze connected with the film experience is nevertheless present also in existentialist and phenomenological theory in those years. On this point see Francesco Casetti, *L'occhio del Novecento* (Milan: Bompiani, 2005), pp. 248–256.

⁴⁰ Calvesi, 'Cronache e coordinate', p. 14.

⁴¹ *Mario Schifano*, ed. by Arturo Carlo Quintavalle (Parma: Istituto Nazionale dell'Università di Parma, 1974), p. 20.

⁴² Alberto Boatto, 'Lo spazio dello spettacolo', in *Fuoco, Immagine, Acqua, Terra* (Rome: Galleria L'Attico, 1967).

⁴³ It's still Maurizio Calvesi who notes that Schifano refers, in his monochromes, to 'city's spectacle', by using industrial enamel typical, for example, of the pedestrian crossing. 'Cronache e coordinate', p. 16.

⁴⁴ Jean Baudrillard, 'Machinic Snobbery', in *The Perfect Crime*, trans. by Chris Turner (London: Verso, 1996), p. 76.

contrasting the archetype of the warrior, typical of the pre-modern societies, with that of the gambler, who 'must learn to act not spontaneously, but automatically; he must not assimilate an art but master a technique. He must not invent solutions, but select automatically within a limited number of game possibilities'.⁴⁵ The transition towards the machine is fast. Warhol, who in 1963 claimed that he 'want[ed] to be a machine',⁴⁶ understood this very well. As Baudrillard notes, this is why the feminist activist Valerie Solanas shot that body that 'was never anything but a kind of hologram':⁴⁷ in order to seize what was left of the human, to test its materiality, 'to establish that blood could still flow from it'.⁴⁸

On the human nature of Schifano's body, which the novelist Goffredo Parise compared to 'a small puma whose power and jump are not suspected',⁴⁹ therefore emphasizing his wild nature more than any virtual inclination, no one had any doubts. For him, who was working in a moment in which Italy was trying to form its own identity, independent from the advanced economic-technological identity of America, humanism was an extremely important element. For Schifano and his colleagues, Botticelli, Raffaello, Leonardo, Michelangelo represented a genealogical alphabet,⁵⁰ whose presence in the eternal city was alive and significant, no matter how diluted in the media mishmash they might have been. At the end, was Neorealism, the form of cinema that made Post-War Italy famous all over the world, not also rooted in humanism?⁵¹ Even the Italian economic debate was developed in accordance with a humanist vision, by introducing the social capitalism that Italo Calvino and Elio Vittorini had been trying to sketch in the *Menabò* journal,⁵² and allowing Adriano Olivetti to create an enterprise based on a Leonardo-like vision, which combined science, technology and art.

⁴⁵ Élémière Zolla, *Eclissi dell'intellettuale*. The quotation here is taken from the English translation: *The Eclipse of the Intellectual*, trans. by Raymond Rosenthal (New York, Funk & Wagnalls, 1969), p.69.

⁴⁶ The well-known statement is part of the interview with Gene Swenson for *Art News*, New York, November 1963. The text is now available online: <<http://www.artnews.com/2007/11/01/top-ten-artnews-stories-the-first-word-on-pop/>> [accessed 27 March 2018].

⁴⁷ 'Machine Snobbery', p. 78.

⁴⁸ Ivi, p. 79.

⁴⁹ Ronchi, p. 65.

⁵⁰ This is particularly evident in the so-called School of the Piazza del Popolo. As Calvesi, who coined the term at first, states: 'The School of the Piazza del Popolo, or rather the Roman Pop: these are the most frequent definitions even if, obviously, the second is odious to all concerned, as is any label that lumps things together and which is, in essence, inappropriate [...]. Then Michelangelo, Leonardo, the panoramas of Rome, the symbols of Rome: this is, needless to say, a typically Italian repertory.' Maurizio Calvesi, *8 pittori romani* (Bologna: De Foscherari Gallery, 1967), now in *Roma anni '60*, p. 424.

⁵¹ See on this point Gianni Scalia, 'Un vero umanesimo cinematografico', *Il Mulino*, 5 (1952), 344-349.

⁵² See in particular the issue 4, 'Letteratura e industria', *Il Menabò della letteratura* (Torino: Einaudi, 1961).

The Surface of Modernity

Though it is only really in his feature-length films that Schifano explicitly expressed his love for the human⁵³ (who was under risk of extinction), one notes an intentional confrontation with a progressively de-humanized society even in his early works. Schifano's operation is not a machine metamorphosis. More than anything the artist engages in a tense struggle with the technologies and speeds of the mass society, in a way that takes on the form of an existential conflict. This was anticipated by a 1960's monochrome, *Aut Aut*, in which these two words, a clear reference to Søren Kierkegaard, stand out against a yellow background. The echo of existentialism in this work seems to evoke his friend, the painter and novelist, Alberto Moravia. In 1960, Moravia's novel, *Boredom*, was published. Dino, the main protagonist of the novel, defined boredom in the following way: 'boredom to me consists in a kind of insufficiency, or inadequacy, or lack of reality.'⁵⁴ A painter going through a crisis of creativity and suffering from apathy, Dino seems to be sick as a result of too much modernity, from a virtual dimension that thins and fades reality: 'the feeling of boredom originates for me in a sense of the absurdity of a reality which is insufficient, or anyhow unable, to convince me of its own effective existence.'⁵⁵ At the same time Moravia believed that 'alienation, the crisis of the relationship with reality, was the fundamental element of the modern world.'⁵⁶ The paradox of Schifano lays in the fact that the artist looks at cinema or video screens for both the causes and the remedy to this crisis: screen as a medium which both amplifies and erodes reality at the same time. By doing this, cinema creates an irresolvable contradiction. For Schifano cinema is thus a game, the stakes of which are the remnants of a life that has been rescued from its own transformation into spectacle. The screen becomes a space in which painting can let out its last battle cry⁵⁷ — sudden brushstrokes, violent gesture of painting, paint drippings that emphasizes its materiality — before being dissolved under the light of the projector.

A few years later the medium will suffer even greater injury, in the slashed and imageless screen that appears in a sequence of the 1969 film, *Human not Human*. In a deserted home movie-theatre a film is projected without spectators. As we soon realize that we're seeing images shot by the artist on the set of Jean-Luc

⁵³ Not only did Schifano title his first feature film *Human, not human*, but also he declared, in an interview with the writer Enzo Siciliano: 'You see, painting, despite everything, cannot complete me. It is that men look more like cinema than painting: in a film they walk, eat, make love, just as it really happens; in painting they don't. In *Il Mondo*, 16 November 1972, now in *Mario Schifano*, ed. by Arturo Carlo Quintavalle, p. 53.

⁵⁴ Alberto Moravia, *Boredom*, trans. by William Weaver (New York: New York Review Books, 1960), p. 5.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Alberto Moravia, 'I miei problemi', *L'Espresso*, 26 May 1962, now in Moravia, *L'uomo come fine e altri saggi* (Milan: Bompiani, 1964), p. 379.

⁵⁷ It is maybe not a coincidence that in the seventies the artist, who at that time used to stay at home the whole day living with numerous televisions always switched-on, would start the series of *TV Landscapes*, where still frames withdrawn from TV flux would be painted as postcards from media-reality. Painting seems still an attempt to cast a human shadow on the virtualized reality.



Fig. 3

Mario Schifano, still frame from *Umano non umano* [Human not human], 16mm and 35mm, colour, sound, 95', 1969. Courtesy of the Cineteca Nazionale di Roma.

Godard's *Week-end*, the hand of a kid begins slashing the canvas. Emptiness invades the images which continue to appear on the fragments of canvas, up until the end of the film-reel, until a white monochrome is the only thing that remains visible. There is no longer a monochrome-become-screen but a screen-become-monochrome. Torn and ripped, the image finds a synthesis between the refined modernism of Fontana's cuts and the desperate gesture of Rotella's tears, who loved to say that 'ripping posters from walls is the only revenge, the only protest against society'.

Also in Schifano's film, that gesture seems to take on strong undertones of revolt, in a year which act as a symbol of social change. In a wide-angle still shot, an empty screen and an empty stall stand out, accompanied by the sound track of a beating heart (fig. 3). Like in Donzelli's photograph, cinema without images and spectators becomes a lexicon for modernity. The screen as a surface to be rippled, a surface to be troubled.