Evident Hypotheses:
Marco Poloni's Photographic *Scripts for Short Films*

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The third person between past and future

An illegal immigrant lands near Otranto, Italy's easternmost town, which was once a trade center with the Orient, and makes his way north to Lago Maggiore, where he steals a surf board to cross the lake to Switzerland. An Arab-looking man in a German city is followed from the public library to an electronics shop, then across streets to a garage and on to an internet café, where he meets another man; we find him again in a lecture hall, at a mathematics or engineering class; we follow him taking the metro to a nondescript apartment building, and then to a cinema, until in the end we look down on him in a street, as if from the position that a CCTV camera would occupy. The point of view in Marco Poloni's *Scripts for Short Films*, of which two have been completed at the time of writing, *Shadowing the Invisible Man* (2001) >p.124 and *AKA (Also Known As)* (2002) >p.128, switches between that of the subject of the 'film' and a viewpoint that could be identified with that of a narrator and with the viewer him or herself. It is as if someone who takes the same kind of position as a 'third person' narrator in a novel were following a subject who is anonymous. In fact, the 'subject' we are following is a composite made up from photographs of different people, and what we are looking at is not in fact a film, but a series of photographs, below which are the kind of written comments that we would find in a storyboard. These sequences of photographic images are not so much 'films' as hypotheses for films. Clearly the photographs, many of which draw on the genres of documentary and street photography, have been taken; they are of actual situations and persons in the past, but the film to which this 'storyboard' refers has not been made, so rather than being self-sufficiently present, the images are suspended between being traces of a past and anticipations of a future. This has an effect on the act of viewing them: rather than receiving and appreciating them in a passive way, the viewer is engaged in an act of memory and anticipation. Two sets of question arise: Who are these pictures of? Where were they taken? Of what are they evidence? And: What kind of film can we imagine?

In catching ourselves trying to fill in the gaps, what we realize is that the past is a construction made in anticipation of a future. Our present experience is an act of projective synthesis. We combine photographs of different people into synthetic versions of a stereotype – in the case of these two *Scripts* an illegal immigrant and an 'al-Qaida' terrorist – by means of projection. And we unconsciously create the continuity of a film between the still images. Projection has both a spatial dimension, in the sense that all representations are projections from a point-of-view, and a temporal one, in that projections are anticipations of perception: they throw the result of the synthesis into the future in such a way that we will meet, supposedly outside ourselves, what we have created in the act of synthesis. The projection thus closes the future up in advance. It is no coincidence that the subjects of Poloni's two hypothetical 'films' are figures liable to be vilified in Europe and the USA, the illegal immigrant and the Arab-looking male. For what the projection of stereotypes excludes is any ethical encounter with the other. By anticipating but not making the films, by not allowing us to settle into the narrative flow of the moving images, Poloni exposes the ethical limitations of our habitual structures of perception. And he does so where this occlusion of the encounter with the other intersects with the most vital political concerns of the present: the shifting status of borders in relation to the control of the disadvantaged, and the construction of identity in relation to an 'internal' enemy in a totalized, global world.

I am not where I think

Mirror, 1997, Diameter 51 cm.

Poloni's early installations were aimed at the deconstruction of perceptual presence as the locus of truth. The convex mirror of *Mirror* (1997) rotates in its frame, intimating that the reflection, rather than securing the validity of perception, is only a reflection. This creates a hole in the viewer's perception of the context in which the mirror is situated (rather as if the convex mirror in Jan van Eyck's *Arnolfini Wedding* had been replaced by the stain-like anamorphic skull from Hans Holbein the Younger's *The Ambassadors*). This hole in the perceptual field – which as a convex mirror metaphorically reflects the whole like the eye of God – becomes a frame for the context that frames it. It thus functions something like the phenomenological *epoche* or 'bracketing' that puts into suspense the thesis of reality: the world is taken to be the work of consciousness. At the same time, this re-framing is shown to be the result of a technological mediation by the mirror, which reminds us that perception is not merely an image, which may or may not have any connection with reality, but

an image that is produced. As with phenomenology, the issue is not the illusoriness of perception by consciousness, as it would have been for the baroque, but its construction by means of a projection (which in phenomenology is the intentional act of the subject). For Poloni this construction includes technological forms of mediation – by the mirror, and in other works by video and sound equipment, and the still camera – but is not reducible to them.
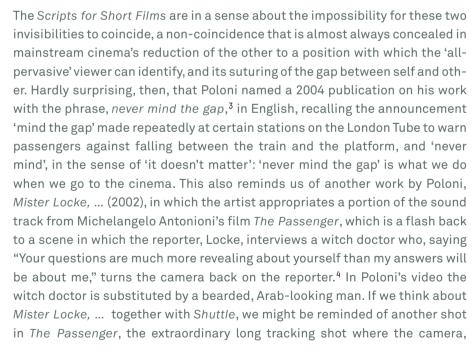
While Poloni's earlier works tended towards being somewhat abstract perceptual demonstrations, increasingly, especially in the *Scripts for Short Films*, historical and cultural mediations are shown to be at work. We can see this concern in a series of video installations from 1998-2001. In *Down There* (1998) a real-time, but mirror-reversed image looking down on an outside square, is watched and controlled by viewers inside the gallery, which is set up like an apartment. A hyper-directional microphone picks up sound. The relation between sound and vision is scrambled, however, since extras with recorded sound have been positioned to create disjunctions, such as the sound of cuts not coinciding with the movements of someone pruning a hedge.[1] In *... with Some Ordinary Extras* (2000) the camera films a slow tracking shot from outside the windows of the exhibition space, but the soundtrack comprises prerecorded fragments of dialogues from films. In *Vis-à-Vis* (2000) >p.134 the use of pre-recorded fragments of dialogues is the same, but now the camera is positioned not in the room, but in a scale model of the room placed below the window: not only is the coherency of the observed scene thrown into doubt, but equally the viewer is detached from his or her own position. If the preceding work is strictly Cartesian – like Descartes, we can doubt everything we perceive, but not that there is a subject doing the doubting – now the Cartesian subject is displaced from its center. The subject around whom the world is centered is replaced by the apparatus that produces the representation. That the installation is either in an apartment, or is set up like one, suggests contrariwise that this displaced subject is rendered homeless. Moreover, these works confront the paradox of how to 'present' the subject as a lack or gap in the visible. In *Shuttle* (2001) >p.132, by situating the camera that the exhibition visitor controls within the construction of an elaborate model doubling the two rooms of the exhibition venue, the viewer is rendered invisible to him or herself.

The structure of surveillance, which is so pervasive in our culture, is turned back on the one supposedly in control. In Jeremy Bentham's 19th century conception of the 'panopticon', which Michel Foucault took to be the model for a

1 The use of extras in a filmed representation that is apparently of reality might be compared with Pierre Bismuth, *Quelques comediens au milieu de quelques acteurs*, the first version of which was made in 1998. Poloni's emphasis is on a perceptual *dispositif* in which the viewer in fact is not seeing what he or she thinks, nor from where he or she thinks they see – the 'gap' is more a question of position than of interpretation.

2 Michael Foucault,
*Discipline and
Punish*, Penguin,
Harmonds-worth 1991.

3 Marco Poloni:
never mind the gap,
Verlag für moderne
Kunst, Nürnberg
2004.

4 This is very well
discussed by Pierre-
André Lienhard in
his essay *Mirrors
of Perception: Marco
Poloni and the Gaze
in Play*, in: Marco
Poloni, *never mind
the gap*, pp.6-27.

disciplinary society,[2] a central jailer could observe the prisoners in surrounding cells without being observed by them. The prisoners thereby incorporate the sense of being subject to the gaze of the Other twenty-four hours a day, and come to police their own actions and indeed thoughts. Poloni's *Shuttle* implies that that surveillance has become detached from any particular position: its center is everywhere and its circumference is nowhere. It works by a double movement: first, identification of the viewer with the position of power; second, evacuation of that position, since the viewer cannot see him or herself in the position that they think they occupy. By filming in the model, the asymmetries of self-other relations explored by Dan Graham in his two-way mirror installations are taken to an extreme, such that not only does the self not coincide with itself as in the traditional model of self-identity already taken apart by Graham, but the self in Poloni's installation is no longer even other to itself, it has simply vanished into the viewing apparatus. This disappearance of the body of the viewer into the apparatus prepares for emergence of the 'third-person' point of view in the *Scripts for Short Films*, where, as a condition for objectification, it is set in tension with the point of view of the other. The sense of invisibility is thereby doubled: against the invisibility of the pursuer as a surrogate for an all-pervasive surveillance is the non-visibility of the other when the images represent the other's point of view.

The *Scripts for Short Films* are in a sense about the impossibility for these two invisibilities to coincide, a non-coincidence that is almost always concealed in mainstream cinema's reduction of the other to a position with which the 'all-pervasive' viewer can identify, and its suturing of the gap between self and other. Hardly surprising, then, that Poloni named a 2004 publication on his work with the phrase, *never mind the gap*,[3] in English, recalling the announcement 'mind the gap' made repeatedly at certain stations on the London Tube to warn passengers against falling between the train and the platform, and 'never mind', in the sense of 'it doesn't matter': 'never mind the gap' is what we do when we go to the cinema. This also reminds us of another work by Poloni, *Mister Locke, …* (2002), in which the artist appropriates a portion of the sound track from Michelangelo Antonioni's film *The Passenger*, which is a flash back to a scene in which the reporter, Locke, interviews a witch doctor who, saying "Your questions are much more revealing about yourself than my answers will be about me," turns the camera back on the reporter.[4] In Poloni's video the witch doctor is substituted by a bearded, Arab-looking man. If we think about *Mister Locke, …* together with *Shuttle*, we might be reminded of another shot in *The Passenger*, the extraordinary long tracking shot where the camera,

Mister Locke, ...,
2002, DVD (Color,
Sound), 1'30.

starting from the point of view of Locke lying on a bed, slowly moves out through the barred window of the hotel into a dusty square, where it does a three hundred and sixty degree pan, in the course of which Locke is killed out of frame. The viewpoint of the camera thus detaches itself from the viewpoint of the character in the film and arguably, given its posthumous status, from any human viewpoint. Antonioni thus performs a double reflection in *The Passenger*: first on the asymmetries of recognition; and secondly on the status and limits of the visual field in which recognition and non-recognition take place. Both levels are explored in Poloni's *Scripts for Short Films*.

Watching the detective

Can we be more specific about the third person viewpoint in the *Scripts for Short Films*? When and under what historical conditions does it emerge? This viewpoint seems to be someone who tracks or trails the illegal immigrant or supposed terrorist, who follows and watches him without being seen by him. In this the 'third person' resembles an abstract, unspecified version of the narrator of Edgar Allen Poe's tale *The Man of the Crowd* (1839). This is a man who, recently recovered from an illness, sees everything with a vivid, 'electrified' intellect. While sitting in the bow window of a London coffeehouse, observing the passers by whom he categorizes into types, he suddenly spots a decrepit old man whose countenance displays an expression of 'absolute idiosyncrasy'. The narrator follows this man from nightfall to daybreak, and discovers that he regains his energy when he is among the city throng: "This old man, I said at length, is the type and genius of deep crime. He refuses to be alone. He is the man of the crowd. It will be in vain to follow; for I shall learn no more of him, nor of his deeds." Drawn to this man because he does not fit with the catalogue of types, the narrator discovers that there is in fact no depth to him, since he is nothing other than the representation of the crowd itself, the representative at once of the multiplicity of types and the agglomeration that unites them, or, to put it another way, he is the paradox of a set that is a member of itself. The first and last sentences of *The Man of the Crowd* contain the phrase "*es lässt sich nicht lesen,*" it (the book – but could it also refer to the man of the crowd?) did not let itself (or himself?) be read, the phrase being left in German in a story in English, so that it itself needs translation or is unreadable. Poe was a pioneer of the detective story, which originates in the circumstances when it becomes difficult to 'read' strangers, when an epistemological and hermeneutic effort is required to decipher them, which implies that others, when detached from

A Guy, Passing, 2000
C-Print, Diasec,
100 x 150 cm.

their roots and traditional contexts, have become ciphers. These are the conditions of migration into the rapidly growing cities, and displacement when districts were razed for the sake of road and railway communications, as happened first in London at the time Poe wrote the story, and then later in Paris and elsewhere. The enigmatic other, when combined into a crowd, becomes a threat not from without but from within the body politic, a threat to be mastered through observation and control. Soon the camera will become the means to observe, categorize and police threatening and deviant members of the underclass.

With the proliferation of CCTV in the latter part of the last century, the control of the visual field is massively extended. By breaking up the spatio-temporal continuum as policed by CCTV into still images taken with a camera, Poloni draws attention to the incompleteness of the totalization. While both the *Scripts for Short Films* are about following and watching in public spaces, the differences in the qualities of the images suggest different social, historical and aesthetic connections. *Shadowing the Invisible Man* is set mostly in the countryside and the scrubby fringes of towns and cities. Poloni is intrigued by the fact that the Italian phrase used to describe someone who hides in the countryside – typically a mobster in the Sicilian hills – is *alla macchia*, which literally means 'in the stain'.[5] This suggests camouflage, or a hiding place in the bushes, contradicting the idea of the countryside as idyllic or picturesque. And, indeed, marginal wastelands, often on the fringes of built-up areas, are the subject of many of the photographs, which generally stress depth of field, as if trying to penetrate to a hiding place. 'In the stain' also evokes the French phrase '*la tache aveugle*' which literally translates to 'the blind stain' and means 'blind spot'. This implies that the 'invisible man' is invisible because he hides in the blind spot, not just, perhaps, because he is camouflaged or concealed in the image, but also because he is other to the *dispositif* or 'set-up' of visibility on which the photographs depend. The use of color photography, combined with great depth of field, implies a mode of representation that seeks to show everything as it is. But what the focus is concentrated on in many cases is not a figure or object, as we might normally expect, but rather nothing, an emptiness or absence. It is as if the photographs seek to show something that is absent from the field of vision, its blind spot, or 'stain'.[6]

By contrast with the countryside setting and color photography of *Shadowing the Invisible Man*, *AKA (Also Known As)* is shot in the city and uses black-and-white photography. Whereas the former tends towards a stress on the contin-

5 Email communication to the author, March 2, 2005.

6 In this we could very precisely compare Poloni's *Shadowing the Invisible Man* with James Coleman's slide-projection work *La Tache aveugle* (1979-90), which divides a short sequence of photograms from less than a minute of the film *The Invisible Man* (directed by James Whale, 1933) between two projectors, each image occupying the screen for about twenty minutes, so that the complete cycle lasts several hours. The viewer is induced to search for an invisibility, which might be seen if only the image were corrected, ultimately realizing that they are trying to view something impossible to see.

gency of documentary film, with a narrative flow that has to do with the journey the protagonist is making, with a clear goal in mind, in the latter the images are often more static and composed, easier to isolate and contemplate as individual photographs. This has the effect of repeatedly halting the viewer, which matches the wandering and uncertain character of the 'action': we are put in the position of not really knowing what the composite 'protagonist' is up to, if anything. We are offered pieces of 'his' life, like a jigsaw puzzle, and invited to put them together. The issue is less what there is, or is not, to be seen in the images, as in the case of *Shadowing the Invisible Man*, than how the images fit together. If the sequence of the latter is in a sense given, it is this that is precisely the question in *AKA (Also Known As)*.

Certain images in *AKA (Also Known As)* recall constructivist photography, for example, the stunning shots of a library, taken in Hans Scharoun's Berlin Staatsbibliothek, and others, 1960s street photography, for example, when two men, one African-looking and wearing a cap, the other Arab-looking and on a mobile phone, virtually overlap but are gazing in different directions. By means of the quasi-narratives in which they participate, these genres of photography and film are implicated in a history of displacement and unequal power relations, to which the answer, however, is not simply a denigration of vision as such, but rather a *détournement* and refunctioning of techniques of representation. One way in which Poloni achieves this is by means of a double move. On the one hand he creates continuities where there are none, for example, by implying that different people are the same 'character' in the narrative, which draws attention to our spurious mechanisms of stereotyping and identification. On the other hand, by appealing to cinema and anticipating a 'filmic' version – what we actually have in front of us in the gallery is a series of separate stills – he creates discontinuities in an as yet unrealized continuum.

One effect of this is the simultaneous activation of very different senses of the *hors-champ* or 'out-of-field'. In a moving image, the out-of-field may at some future time enter the frame; in a still image it never will. Insofar as Poloni is breaking a hypothetical movie down into still images, he is rendering the relative out-of-field absolute.[7] This also means that if the gaps between the images are to be filled, this will be entirely a construction on the part of the viewer, since the connections between still images are in principle entirely open. It is the text below the images that refers to the filmic devices, such as 'reverse shot' and 'POV' (point-of-view), that conventionally fill these gaps, creating an illusion of continuity across the cuts of the montage. Closer inspection of the

7 For the difference between the relative and absolute out-of-field, see Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1. The Movement Image*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1986, pp.16-18.

images reveals that the 'continuities' reinforced by the captions are false: the subjects of the photographs who supposedly make up the same character of the narrative are not the same person; equally locations shift from one city to another, while appearing to be continuous. These false continuities rupture the narrative closure that the viewer may be inclined to impose. False continuities take on a positive value. As the philosopher Gilles Deleuze suggests, it is not a matter of following a chain, but of getting out of it.[8]

8 On false continuity see Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2. The Time-Image,* University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1989, p. 126-137.

Incompleteness is thus linked to openness: the 'third person' viewer has lost the possibility of anticipating that that which is not visible will become visible. The future is rescued from control. It may yet become the future of the other. Just as Poe's *The Man of the Crowd* figures a failure of reading, so Poloni's *Scripts for Short Films* enact the failure of projection (which also means that his work to date performs a critique of the by now ubiquitous projected image installation). In the first two *Scripts for Short Films*, this failure is connected to the attempted projection (in a metaphorical sense) of types who undermine the totalization of control: the migrant who crosses borders illegally, and the terrorist who is an 'internal' threat rather than an external enemy. Topographic security, based on the clear demarcation of inside and outside by means of boundaries and limits, is destroyed. Poloni's scripts incite stereotyping in order to perform the collapse of the mechanisms of identification upon which it takes place.

In Poe's tale, the man of the crowd has no name. Poloni proposes a similar anonymity in his *Scripts for Short Films*. The illegal immigrant crossing Italy in *Shadowing the Invisible Man* is unnamed, and even though the apartment building in Hamburg-Harburg which features in a couple of shots was that of Mohammed Atta, the title of the Script is *AKA (Also Known As)*, drawing attention to the provisional character of the name, its slipperiness, even if one had been given. It is not simply that these figures go unnamed because they are generic composites – although it is partly that – but also that the proper name features by its absence. What does it mean not to give or acknowledge a name? What, normally, does the name name? The proper name binds an absolute singularity, the other as absolutely other and irreplaceable, to the Law. It names the unnamable. It is a way of acknowledging that the other person is not an object, and has a right that derives not from commonality, as a member of a group, or even of a common humanity, but from her or his irreplaceable singularity. The violation or loss of another human being is an absolute violation or loss, each time incommensurable. The denial of the name suggests both objectification – the person subject to the common noun – and the exchange-

ability of subject positions (as in shot and counter shot) that is the weak point of any dialectical concept of recognition. I will recognize his identity so that he recognizes mine: identity as self-reflection in which the other is reduced to the same. The absence of the name throws into question the quasi-cinematic condition of reciprocity upon which the *Scripts for Short Films* are built: as with the revolving convex mirror, we are forced to question the very basis of the way in which we structure our relation with the world, now extended from its ontological basis as image to its ethical structure.

From the other as outsider to the uncanniness of the same

As I write this essay, Poloni is working on a third *Script for a Short Film*. This time the composite protagonist will be an American corporate executive. Another one of the essential figures of global power, from the standpoint of the centers of corporate capital, this marks a move from the outsider or marginal to the insider. If the 'illegal immigrant' and 'terrorist' are different kinds of 'other' to the societies that they traverse, the corporate executive is rather a cipher of the identical. Rather than breaking the projective identification of the other as a stereotype as in the previous *Scripts*, the challenge for the artist will be to convey the alterity of the ordinary, of the one who conforms, who wears the uniform of the executive, and is identified with Western financial capital and power. It will no longer be the case of the other as outsider, or of the other within, as of the otherness of the same .

A resource will be the uncanny, the effect of strangeness of that which is close to home. Poloni mentioned to me that in connection with his current project he has been thinking about Magritte's 'bowler-hatted man'.[9] Often originating in a self-portrait, or portrait of a friend, the bowler-hatted man in Magritte's paintings usually has his face obscured. Multiplied, as in *Golconde* (1953), the image of bourgeois anonymity takes on an aspect at once comical, fascinating, and slightly threatening. There is something very Belgian about the concealment of extreme eccentricity behind a closed façade of normality.

Or take the images of men, women, and couples that Richard Prince re-photographed from magazine advertisements, removing all text, during 1977-78. Arranged in series, these images become strange because of their likeness to each other, a common 'look' that is hard to define.[10] These works may suggest stills from one of those American science fiction movies made during the Cold

[9] For a discussion of the bowler-hatted man in Magritte, see Suzi Gablik, *Magritte,* Thames and Hudson, London 1970, pp.154-170.

[10] See Lisa Phillips, *People Keep Asking. An Introduction*, in: *Richard Prince*, Whitney Museum of American Art/Abrams, New York 1992, pp.21-51. Phillips discusses the relation of these works to movie stills.

War, in which the viewer is put in the position of a protagonist who needs to know which of his neighbors have had their minds taken over by aliens from outer space. Everything looks the same, but there is some unidentifiable difference. The very familiarity of the image becomes strange.

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Poloni's approach, whether to perception in the installations or the image in the *Scripts for Short Films*, is experimental. While this is very evident in the early installations – where the viewer is a willing and often active participant in a perceptual set-up which looks something like an experiment in perceptual psychology – in the *Scripts for Short Films* the works, while fully achieved in terms of their images, remain deliberately suspended in a hypothetical status. They are simultaneously 'evidence', indices of that which once was, and propositions for films not yet made. As I have suggested, this strange, double modality opens up the present to memory and anticipation, inciting an active engagement by the viewer who simultaneously 'completes' the work and, through the gaps, becomes self-conscious of the ways in which his or her own assumptions and projections are at play in this process, and produce elisions and ellipses that suppress the otherness of the other and, for that matter, of the same. Marco Poloni's works invite us to rethink what a political imagination – the creation and deployment of collective images – might be for the world we now inhabit.