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Distinguished filmmaker who brought charm, insight and human sympathy to his work

Jonathan Gili

Jonathan Gili, who has died of leukaemia aged 61, was not only an award-winning filmmaker, but a designer, publisher, photographer and collector of eclectic tastes and insatiable curiosity. His documentary films, most of them for the BBC in the 1980s and 90s, were evidence of his subtle wit, deep knowledge of history and, above all, sympathy for the human spirit and its quirks.

Jonathan was born in Oxford, where his parents, the publisher and translator Joan Gili and his wife Elizabeth (McPherson), had moved to escape the Blitz. Before the second world war, with his business partner Henry Warren, Joan had established the most celebrated Spanish-language bookshop in Britain, Dolphin Books, in London's Cecil Court.

Before he was 10, Jonathan began to design and construct toy theatre sets. He would demonstrate the plots of operas with the aid of his parents' record player. One childhood friend, Laura Cecil, recalls being given a present of a scene from *The Love Of Three Oranges*, "which, of course, I had never heard of. He made the figures from scraps of material from his mother's evening dresses."

Jonathan was educated at the Dragon school, Oxford, and at Bryanston school, Dorset, where his passion for film really began. He won an exhibition to read greats at New College, Oxford, but later confessed that he had done very little work, instead going to the cinema, often several times a day. At one of the regular Sunday morning drinks parties given by the historian Lord David Cecil and his wife Rachel, he was introduced to Phillida Stone, daughter of the wood engraver and carver Reynolds Stone. Years later, Jonathan said that he had taken one look at her and thought, "That's the woman I would like to marry."

As one of the editors and film critic of the student magazine *Isis*, Jonathan devoted a whole issue to Joseph Losey's *The Servant*. When Losey came to Oxford to film *Accident*, Jonathan, Phillida, Laura Cecil and the young John Birt were all roped in as extras. Later, while Phillida studied at St Martin's School of Art and Jonathan searched for work as an assistant film editor, they lived opposite each other in flats in Frith Street, Soho.

With a legacy of £50 from Henry Warren, in 1967 Jonathan launched his own publishing enterprise, Warren Editions; its first publication, *The Other Side Of The Alde* by Kenneth Clark, with engravings by Reynolds Stone,



Gili... insatiable curiosity

was printed on Stone's own press. While they were working on the proofs, Jonathan asked Reynolds whether he would mind if he married his daughter. "Just one question," Reynolds replied, "Is there any insanity in your family?"

Warren Editions, all designed by Jonathan, continued for many years, publishing original work by John Betjeman, Jane Grigson, Iris Murdoch, Robin Jacques, Harold Jones, Ian Beck, Glynn Boyd Harte and Phillida Gili, who became a successful children's book illustrator.

In 1969, Jonathan edited Ben Platts-Mills's film *Bronco Bullfrog*. His own directorial debut came in 1971 with *Incident*, an experimental film for the British Film Institute, starring the young Stephen Frears; that same year, he was assistant editor on Frears's *Gumshoe* (1971).

Although both *Bronco Bullfrog* and *Gumshoe* became cult movies of the early 1970s, it proved a lean time until Jonathan won an award for his editing of Stuart Cooper's *D-Day* drama-documentary *Overlord* (1975). This led to his first directorial commissions, from *London Weekend Television* and other studios.

Even on his first engagement as assistant editor for the BBC, Edward Mirzoeff, with whom Jonathan later worked regularly, recalled, "He would arrive lugging carrier-bags full of second-hand books, strange objects and all sorts of printed ephemera. I had never met anyone like him."

Jonathan's collections filled every room, the staircase and any other space in the Gilis' Fulham house. Decorative pencil sharpeners, snow-scene paperweights, odd-looking pens, cards, labels, sardine tins (later the subject of a book), jostled for position with signed first editions, pop-up books, artists' proofs and thousands of 45rpm singles.

When picture discs and, later, hologram CDs became a fad, he acquired every one he could. In an article about

his collection in 1986, he wrote, "Who could resist records shaped like Elton John's hat or Barry Manilow's nose? They have poor sound and often can't be made to play at all... but as art objects they are sublime."

This obsessional questing was reflected in the way Jonathan wrote, directed, edited and chose the music for his films. Mirzoeff says that everyone who worked with Jonathan wanted to repeat the experience, and long after producers and sound engineers had been promoted, they would volunteer to go back to their assistant status to work with him again. His first, full-length film for the BBC, in 1979, about Westminster school (a project at first opposed by the school's hierarchy), attracted 12.5m viewers.

Shortly afterwards, Will Wyatt, then head of documentary features for BBC television, tried to enlist Jonathan as a permanent member of the film unit. "What he was so good at was finding subjects that were bizarre yet attractive," says Wyatt. "Things might be strange and curious, but he would then uncover the emotional situations behind them."

Early features for the BBC included a portrait of Angus Wilson and his partner Tony Garrett for *The Other Half* series, and there followed such diverse subjects as the No 31 bus (*To The World's End*, 1985), *Mixed Blessings* (about two babies accidentally swapped at birth), *Coming Home* (about servicemen and evacuees returning at the end of the war) and *Chocolate!* (1990), a study in obsession and addiction.

Later, for the series *Time-watch*, Jonathan made a number of films about aspects of the American west: *Typhoid Mary*, *Pocahontas: Her True Story*, *Gold Rush Memories*, and *Tales From The Oklahoma Land Runs*, which won an award that particularly delighted Jonathan — from the Cowboy Hall of Fame.

Lucinda Lambton, with whom Jonathan made three of his most delightful films (*Animal Crackers*, *A Cabinet Of Curiosities* and *The Great North Road*, between 1985 and 1988), recalls, "The whole process, from the first meeting to the last day of shooting, would be filled with laughter, not ordinary laughter, but tears running down the cheeks. He gave one the sense of total freedom so that one felt boosted, and the finished film was always more than you'd hoped for."

In 1984, Jonathan was diagnosed with leukaemia, and the doctors predicted that he would live at most three years. At Hammersmith hospital, west London, he was treated with a new, auto-transfusion technique (in which his bone marrow was replaced by his own frozen blood). Although dangerous, the process was repeated twice, and proved effective. For the rest of his life, he was able to continue working, and his resilience, courage and optimism proved inspirational.

With Phillida and their children, Oliver (now a painter), Daisy (who runs a film school) and Orlando (studying politics and history at university), Jonathan was a wonderful host, often cooking the most elaborate meals, with recipes from his grandmother's Spanish cookbook. One of his last films was the two-part feature on the life of Queen Elizabeth, the *Queen Mother*, which was shown over two days just after her death in 2002. Strangely, at first Jonathan resisted the idea of this commission, but it was a gently irreverent, charming and wistful tribute.

The filmmakers Jonathan most admired were Jean Renoir, Max Ophuls and Jacques Demy. Their special qualities might be summed up as compassion and wonder at the world and its love stories (Renoir), a delight in the tricks and deceptions of time as interpreted by the camera (Ophuls), and an ability to see the world for ever through a child's eyes (Demy). These were all things that Jonathan understood and aimed for.

His final films, earlier this year, were for the BBC 4 series *Historians Of Genius*. Last year, he was made an OBE. He is survived by his mother, his wife and their children.

Patrick O'Connor

Jonathan Francesc Gili, filmmaker, born April 19 1943; died October 1 2004