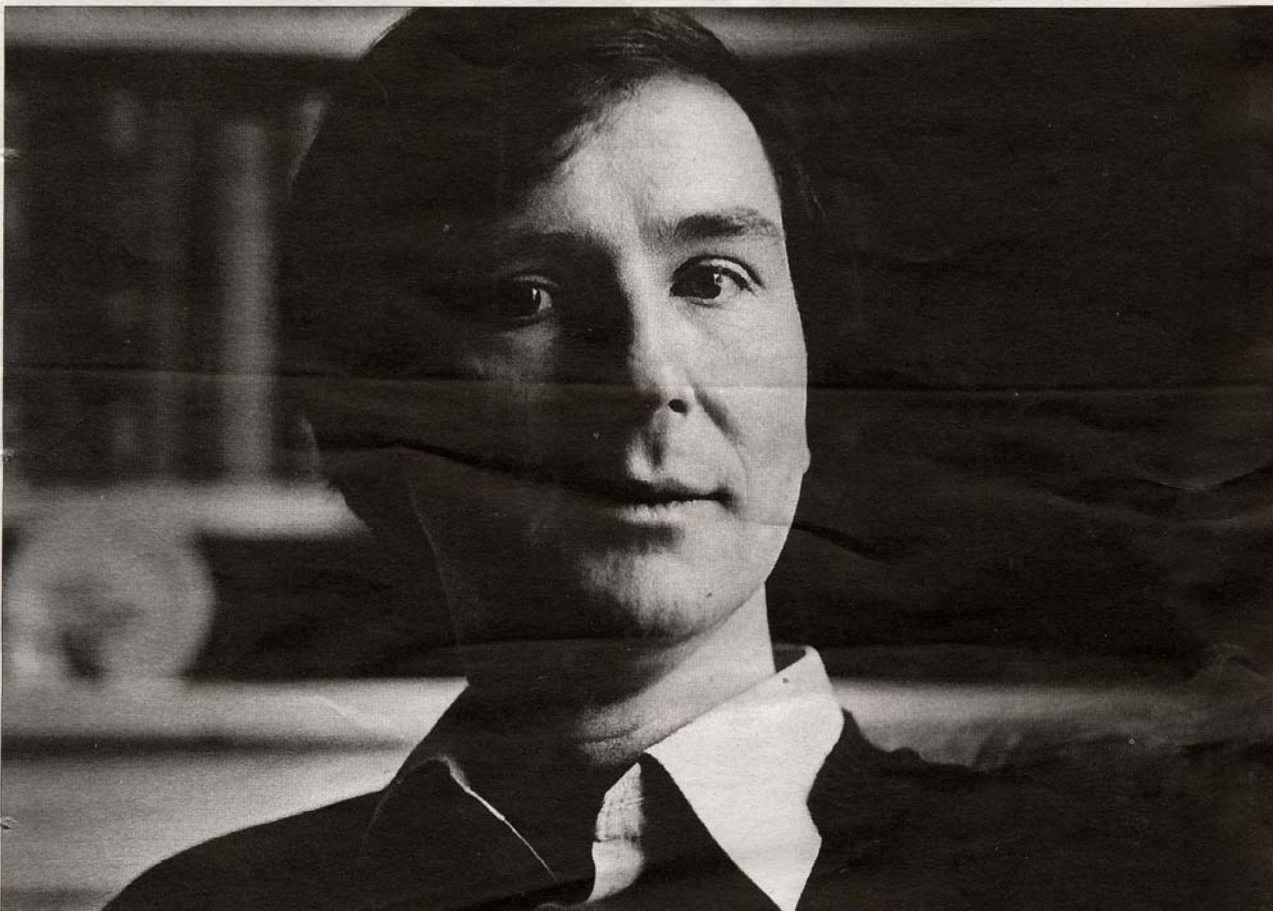


JONATHAN GILI

Film-maker who enlivened his many television documentaries with scholarship and good humour



Gili: one of his eccentricities was his refusal to own a television, so when one of his films was being shown his family had to decamp elsewhere to watch it

COMBINING a scholarly mind with a good-humoured lightness of touch, Jonathan Gili brought to the television documentary a rare integrity, originality and dedication.

He could tease human stories from the most humdrum of subjects. In 1985 his film *To the World's End*, for instance, took the No 31 London bus, and to the music of Carl Davis's *Variations on a Bus Route*, reflected the ethnic diversity of London: there was not a Cockney to be seen en route. They came from Vienna, Tipperary, Ukraine, the Caribbean. Even the bus conductor was a Midlander married to an exotic Brazilian wife. And since Gili took time to get to know his subjects, each emerged with a distinctive individual voice. Mr Tony Tobias, the newsagent with the enormous nose, whose mother had told him, "It's not your nose that's big, it's the rest of your face that's small." And Mary Devlin of Kilburn recalling her late husband: "One of the nicest husbands that stood in shoe leather".

Jonathan Francesc Gili was born in Oxford in 1943. His father, Joan Gili, a Catalan-born bookseller and Anglophile, had arrived from Barcelona in the 1930s and set up shop in Cecil Court with Henry Warren, one of a fading breed of men of letters.

From the Dragon School, Oxford, Jonathan won a scholarship to Bryanston, where he shone at Greek verse speaking. He gained an exhibition to New College, Oxford, to read Greats, but spent most of his time reviewing films — he commended a whole issue of *Isis* to extol Joe Losey's film *The Servant*. At a party thrown by Lord David Cecil, he espied Phillida, daughter of the engraver Reynolds Stone, who was studying at the Ruskin

School of Art, and decided she would be his wife — thus forming an important connection with the worlds of art and fine typography. When Henry Warren left him £50 he founded Warren Editions, publishing lithographs and books.

After working in his father's bookshop and freelance film-editing, he made his directing debut in 1971, with a one-and-a-half-minute film called *Incident*, in which a youthful Stephen Frears is seen sitting quietly in his flat, reading his newspaper, until he hears the sound of a car crash outside.

Gili, a man of quiet charm and irreverent humour, was constitutionally unsuited to corporate life — he was incapable of self-promotion or competitive office networking — but after he had made several documentaries for London Weekend, Edward Mirzoeff asked him to take on a major BBC documentary about Westminster School, which won an audience of 12 million and a Bafta award.

So began the most fulfilling period of his career, cycling to the BBC daily, directing and writing documentaries such as his four-part *Year of the French*, and *The Other Half*, about the novelist Angus Wilson and his lover, Tony Garrett, a film that managed to be both sensitive and funny.

Among his memorable films for Mirzoeff's Forty Minutes series were those made with Lucinda Lambton. Lambton's exuberant enthusiasms for bizarre architecture, animal tombs and curious collections chimed exactly with Gili's, and made their collaborative explorations hilarious. In *Cabinet of Curiosities*, while they were filming at Edriddg, seat of the Yorke family, Philip Yorke rode a penny-farthing bicycle down the drive and showed

them a collapsing ceiling: "We call this the state bedroom," he said, "because it's in such a state."

Lambton remembers Gili leaping from her moving car to buy a Michael Jackson doll to add to his astonishing collection of ephemera. Fridge magnets, matchbooks, erasers, chewing-gum wrappers, Snoopy dogs and Barbie dolls — nothing was too kitsch — were stacked in shoe-boxes that cluttered Gili's tall, narrow Fulham house.

Apart from this eccentric habit, which caused friends to heap all manner of rubbish on him under the guise of birthday presents, he also refused to possess a television set, so that when his own films were shown, his family had to decamp elsewhere to watch. But there was room at home for an eclectic collection of antiquarian books and fine pictures, many from his own Warren Editions imprint.

In the mid-1970s he was among the first (along with Tom Stoppard) to recognise the brilliance of Glynn Boyd Harte's drawings. He encouraged Boyd Harte to start making lithographs and published several exquisite little books, including *Weekend in Dieppe*, *Sardines à l'Huile* and *Metroland*, illustrating John Betjeman's verses for a television film about the Metropolitan line. At the book's launch, Betjeman himself read his verses through a megaphone.

As in the world of publishing, where more and more books are produced with less and less authorship, television offers a proliferation of programmes but scant evidence of original writing and editing skills. Gili ploughed his own furrow, never compromising his own high standards.

His 2001 film *Debutantes*, about the last deb season before the Second

World War, involved subtle interviews with octogenarian aristocrats without resorting to cheap shots about pampered princesses curtsying to a cake. Instead, women such as Ruth Sebag-Montefiore recalled, "We thought we looked ridiculous. And we were right." The war had whisked these privileged women into ambulances and on to the factory floor. Like his elegant two-part *Portrait of the Queen Mother* (2002) this was perceptive and truthful without being obsequious: the result of patient interviewing and an acute ear.

His *Tales of the Eiffel Tower*, commended by the Grierson Award judges, was followed by *The Empire State Story*. Though he had suffered from leukaemia for 20 years, Gili flung his seemingly limitless energy in recent years into a Timewatch series of films about America and its myths: *Typhoid Mary*, *Pocahontas: Her True Story*, *Gold Rush Memories*, *Remember the Alamo*, *The Oklahoma Outlaw*. *Tales from the Oklahoma Land Runs* won an award at the Cowboy Hall of Fame.

This year, *Historians of Genius — In Their Own Words*, for BBC Four, had the distinctive Gili stamp, featuring Samuel West portraying Macaulay in the guise of a contemporary historian describing the Monmouth Rebellion and Monmouth's beheading.

Jonathan Gili is to be awarded the Grierson Award's highest accolade, for outstanding contribution to documentary, on November 8.

He is survived by his widow, the illustrator and author Phillida Gili, and by two sons and a daughter.

Jonathan Gili, television film-maker, was born on April 19, 1943. He died on October 1, 2004, aged 61.