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BEYOND “ETHNOGRAPHIC SPECTACLE”

Italian South in Demartinian Ethnographic Documentaries

ABSTRACT: Ernesto De Martino wrote extensively about ancient religious and pagan rituals in the South such as funeral lament, sorcery, Apulian tarantism. His research inspired a group of young filmmakers who shot documentaries in the South between the 1950s and the 1970s: Cecilia Mangini, Michele Gandin, Giuseppe Ferrara, Gianfranco Mingozzi, Lino Del Fra, Luigi Di Gianni. The aim of this article is to explore how De Martino’s assumptions were represented in these postwar documentaries. De Martino helped the filmmakers by suggesting topics and filming locations for documentaries that served primarily as an auxiliary medium for ethnographic research. Yet, rather than staging an “ethnographic spectacle” of the South, Demartinian documentaries promoted a new way of representing and understanding Southern Italian culture.

KEYWORDS: Ernesto De Martino; Demartinian Documentary School; Ethnographic Documentary; Southern Italian Culture; Critical Ethnocentrism.

Italian South in Ernesto De Martino’s works

Ernesto De Martino (1908-1965), prominent Italian anthropologist, dedicated his entire career to the study of the magical practices in the South such as funeral rituals, agricultural rituals, sorcery and Apulian tarantism. He wrote extensively on magic and religious syncretism in Southern Italy in three major ethnographic works, *Morte e pianto rituale nel mondo antico* (*Death and Ritual Lament in the Ancient World*, 1958), *Sud e magia* (*Magic: a Theory from the South*, 1959), and *La terra del rimorso* (*The Land of Remorse*, 1961). *Il mondo magico* (*The World of Magic*, 1948) was De Martino’s first attempt to deal with the irrational in a wider context of world ethnography. He pointed out that traditional ethnography was linked to the elitist European bourgeois culture that denied any ability for social agency to the Other. Therefore, it was necessary to question the Western theoretical framework used in the construction of knowledge about the Other. Positivist anthropology saw the “imaginary Other” as a non-autonomous member of society; an object being acted upon rather than a historical subject able to act and decide. In his books, De Martino (1952, 2002, 2003, 2006, 2008) criticized the dominant ethnographic approaches of that time (especially those by Levy-Bruhl and Durkheim)

and stressed the importance of re-historification of those who have generally been regarded as “without history”. He fostered a new approach in the studies of popular culture and distanced himself from the positivist cultural anthropology and Italian folkloristics whose main representative was Giuseppe Pitrè. De Martino insisted on historicizing Southern Italians and turning them from objects into historical subjects.¹

De Martino’s notion of “critical ethnocentrism” questions mechanisms of interpretation in anthropology that were historically, culturally, politically, and ideologically conditioned. Rather than simply rejecting Western values deeply embedded in anthropology, De Martino stood for a more critical approach in the study of symbolic structures in the society, aimed at questioning different cultural categories of the Western thought. Throughout his career De Martino was fascinated by the irrational. The main focus of his research was the role that magic had in the formation and maintenance of social order in pre-industrial societies. In his first book *Il mondo magico* De Martino ([1948] 2003) tackled fundamental issues related to magic in order to raise a series of interrelated questions that will appear in his later works: is magic real or invented?, what is its role in the society?, has modern civilization replaced magic with other techniques? The modern theoretical system was founded on the assumption that magic and rationality were two mutually exclusive concepts. Far from it, magic and religion do not represent irrational elements in society; they are systems that guarantee security and stability to the society. Rational systems, just like magic and religion, have complex structures and their stability does not depend on deeply-grounded rules, but on the general acceptance of values within a society in a determined historical moment ([1958] 2008, 40). In the first five chapters of the second part of *Sud e magia*², De Martino elaborates on his assumption that magic is not inferior to Western rationalism - although it might, at first, appear as a less developed system with a simple structure and a limited set of symbolic tools when compared to religion as a more complex and uniform system. The structure of pagan rituals, De Martino ([1959] 2006, 117-129) claims, is not substantially different from the more complex symbolic structures known as religions. In De Martino’s concept of culture, magic is endowed with a very important social and existential function; it is manifestation of historicized cultural patterns by which individuals or whole communities are able to deal with existential crises that threaten well-defined cosmological order. Magic is a culturally codified set of techniques aimed at ensuring the basic human need for security and protection.

¹ Ernesto De Martino developed the idea of empowerment of Southern Italian peasants from Antonio Gramsci’s works. De Martino shared Gramsci’s idea that all “primitive” forms of resistance to the dominant culture should be transformed into class struggle. Gramsci believed that the economic backwardness of the Italian South was the consequence of the Church’s hegemony and reluctance to support changes in the social and political system (see Gramsci 1992; De Felice and Parlato 2005, 155-190).

² *Sud e magia* was originally conceived as a study of the history of magic in Southern Italy. Its working title was *Magia lucana* (*Magic in Lucania*).

De Martino did research in Southern Italy between 1950 and 1959, mainly in Lucania (current Basilicata), and in Apulia. In 1952 he went on an ethnographic expedition to remote villages in Lucania with the aim to explore local magical practices, later published in the book *Sud e magia*. Between 1954 and 1956 De Martino and his team undertook several expeditions in Lucania, where they recorded funeral laments explained in De Martino's book *Morte e pianto rituale nel mondo antico*, a historical overview of the birth and spreading of the mourning practices and the modifications brought in by Catholicism. His analysis has demonstrated the cultural continuity of ritual laments across the Mediterranean spanning from ancient to present times. In 1957 he did research in Albano di Lucania with financial support from the New York Parapsychology Foundation. Collected materials on magic and local shamanism in Southern Italy were later published in the chapter of *Sud and magia* entitled "Vita magica di Albano". In 1959 De Martino ventured into another ethnographic expedition in Salento to study tarantism, an Apulian possession cult, that will become the topic of his internationally acclaimed book *La terra del rimorso*. De Martino undertook his ethnographic expeditions joined by other team members such as photographer Franco Pinna, ethnomusicologist Diego Carpitella (who did sound recordings of local songs, chants, laments), De Martino's fiancée Vittoria de Palma, and Clara Gallini, De Martino's former student and research assistant.

"Demartinian documentary school"

While photography was the primary medium for ethnographic research in Italy owing to Paolo Mantegazza and other scholars gathered around the *Società Italiana di Antropologia e di Etnologia* founded in Florence at the end of the 19th century, interest in cinema appeared later compared to other European countries. Critical observations of aesthetic conventions and norms of the cinematic language and its use in anthropology did not exist in Italy at the time of De Martino's research in the South. Only a few films with ethnographic elements had been made before the appearance of the so-called "Demartinian documentary school" in the 1950s. The most acclaimed among them is the short film *Il pianto delle zitelle* (*The Crying of the Spinsters*, Giacomo Pozzi Bellini, 1939) shot by a photographer with no ethnographic background. Ethnographic films were initially considered a subcategory of documentary films. From the very beginning ethnographic documentary has been trying to negotiate its legitimate place within Anthropology as well as Film Studies. The nature of ethnographic film is contradictory because it merges two apparently opposed disciplines: Social Sciences and Film Aesthetics. Therefore, in terms of visual anthropology, the dialogue between those two disciplines has never been smooth. As Carta (2015) argues, "For visual anthropologists film can be a serious epistemological mode producing knowledge in its own right rather than a tool with which to illustrate anthropological precepts" (12). However, the reasons

for the marginalization of ethnographic film within anthropology was partly due to the so-called "iconophobia"; the academic anxiety towards moving images that "will somehow destroy or discredit their anthropological makers and viewers" (Taylor 1996, 67).

Unlike Germany and France,³ where interest in technical and epistemological aspects of ethnographic film came from anthropologists, Italian pioneers were young and recently graduated filmmakers intrigued by De Martino's research on the South: Lino Del Fra, Giuseppe Ferrara, Cecilia Mangini, Gianfranco Mingozzi, Michele Gandin, and Luigi Di Gianni produced important works in the history of Italian documentary between the 1950s and the 1970s. Their documentaries were inspired by the topics of Ernesto De Martino's research: tarantism (*La taranta* [Tarantula], Gianfranco Mingozzi, 1961), sorcery (*I maciari* [Sorcerers], Giuseppe Ferrara, 1962), funeral laments (*Stendali* [Still They Toll], Cecilia Mangini, 1960); *Lamento funebre* [Funeral Lament], Michele Gandin, 1954), harvest rituals (*Il gioco della falce* [Playing with the Scythe], Lino Del Fra, 1960), magical practices (*Magia lucana* [Magic in Lucania], Luigi Di Gianni, 1958). According to De Martino's research assistant, Clara Gallini (1981, 23), the "Demartinian documentary school" developed in two stages: the first one goes from the 1950s until De Martino's death in 1965, and the second one from 1965 onward, when the filmmakers consulted other experts.

Thanks to Ernesto De Martino, for the first time in Italy cinema is acknowledged as a useful tool in ethnographic research. By understanding the potential of the cinematic medium, Ernesto De Martino worked as scientific consultant giving the filmmakers explanations or showing them shooting locations. However, De Martino never discussed the peculiarities of the cinematic language that posed a challenge to the conventional text-based anthropological research. His knowledge of cinema was quite limited, as he admitted in his article "Realismo e folklore nel cinema italiano": "I am not a film critic and I have only occasional encounters with the world of cinema as a spectator who loves watching good films and talking about them with friends" (De Martino 1952, 183).⁴ Apparently, De Martino, similarly to the majority of European anthropologists of the time, perceived cinema as peripheral to either anthropology or ethnography, considered

³ In 1959 the *Institut für den Wissenschaftlichen Film* in Göttingen published a set of rules for scientific films based on the assumption that visual representation is purely objective, whereas voice-over commentary is a subjective interpretation and, as such, should be avoided (see Perniola 2004, 173). As Chiozzi (1993, 70) argues, the instructions of the Göttingen school were related to "what" and "how" to film, ignoring the active relationship between the observer (the anthropologist/filmmaker) and the observed (the subject). The introduction of lightweight sixteen-millimeter cameras and the ideas of the French filmmaker Jean Rouch in the 1950s were a turning point in ethnographic filmmaking. He introduced collaborative and self-reflexive filmmaking practices, breaching the gap between the observer and the observed. He also brought participatory filmmaking in visual anthropology and promoted a new approach according to which the presence of the camera has impact on both the observed subjects and the filmmaker (see Rouch in Feld 2003, 39).

⁴ All the quotations from Italian are translated by the author E.B.

as logocentric activities whereas the audiovisual representation's only contribution was to create empirically reliable evidence. For De Martino, photography and cinema were not entirely capable of generating ethnographic knowledge autonomously. According to him, cinema was not an appropriate medium for scientific analysis but it was useful for illustrating and popularizing anthropological knowledge. Several factors might have influenced De Martino's approach to cinema: his pioneering attempt to use camera as a research tool, the lack of a strong ethnographic film school in Italy, and the status of documentary cinema in ethnography.

Demartinian documentaries, shot after ethnographic research, served as auxiliary medium for the analysis of case studies. De Martino used to select the most relevant events that supported his thesis, and gave the filmmakers instructions on what and where to shoot (Chiozzi 1993, 194). Although De Martino did help them, Chiozzi (1993) argues that there has never been a real scientific collaboration between the ethnographer and the filmmakers. Their assignments were clearly divided: the ethnographer's involvement regarded the thematic and scientific aspects of the works while the filmmakers handled the stylistic and technical aspects such as shooting, editing, and narrative structure. Therefore, Demartinian documentaries were illustrative rather than constitutive of anthropological knowledge, thus the primacy of textual representation remained undiminished. Postwar ethnographic filmmaking in Italy never developed into a serious form of academic activity. In the first phase of the "Demartinian documentary school" the films were more descriptive, resulting in a distinct separation between ethnographer's and filmmaker's roles. In his life De Martino never joined the shooting process, and he only cooperated with the directors during the editing of two documentaries for which he also wrote the commentary, *La taranta* and *Il gioco della falce* (Gallini 1981, 25).

Beginning of "Demartinian documentary school"

Ernesto De Martino's first experience with the filmmaking dates back to 1954 when he served as a consultant for Michele Gandin's documentary *Lamento funebre*. This four-minute film was supposed to be the first section of a never-completed cinematic encyclopedia (*Enciclopedia Cinematografica Conoscere*) about popular religious culture in the Italian South. In 1954 Gandin had accompanied De Martino to Pisticci (in the province of Matera) where he filmed a funerary lament that, with the participation of Grazia Prudente and Carmina di Giulio, was relocated and staged outside (Schäuble 2021, 66). This mourning lament was performed on the occasion of a peasant's sudden death, which was mourned by a group of black-dressed women gathered around the coffin, screaming and waving white handkerchiefs. Although such lamentations traditionally took place inside the house of the deceased, Gandin filmed the scene outdoors, in an arid landscape that not only added melodramatic tone to the lament, but

also created a certain representational paradigm that will be replicated in other Demartinian documentaries (see *Stendali*). The biggest contribution of Michele Gandin's documentaries is a critical detachment from the stereotypical and ahistorical representation of the South. "In line with Demartinian ideas and his concept of progressive folklore, peasant society is no longer characterized as subaltern; Gandin's research enters into the heart of the process of economic and social transformation" (Antichi 2023, 63).

Legacy of Ernesto De Martino in Luigi Di Gianni's documentaries

Luigi Di Gianni shot two documentaries inspired by Ernesto De Martino's work, *Magia lucana* (*Magic in Lucania*, 1958), for which the latter suggested locations and topics, and *Nascita e morte nel meridione* (*Birth and Death in the South*, 1959).⁵ The influence of De Martino is evident in *Magia lucana* since several magical practices are taken from *Sud e magia*: the opening scene of a pheasant holding a curved black scythe against the sky, for instance, is reminiscent of the chapter "La tempesta" which describes similar ritual practices in Marsico Nuovo; the healer coming to cure a man tied to his bed is a clear reference to the account described in the chapter "Vita magica di Albano"; the family waiting for seven fairies to come and baptize the baby at night resembles the account recorded in Ferrandina which is mentioned in the chapter "Infanzia e fascinazione" (Guerra 2010, 188-192). In the majority of Di Gianni's movies the events and rituals were staged or re-enacted for the filmmaker. Instead of traditional local chants the director chose contemporary and avantgarde music for the soundtrack. The score for Di Gianni's documentaries was indeed composed by contemporary musicians such as Daniele Paris, Domenico Guaccero or Egisto Macchi. In his first documentary only, *Magia lucana*, the director kept the original mourning lament recorded by the ethnomusicologist Diego Carpitella. This lament was sung in local dialect by professional female mourners who staged a funerary ceremony for the movie outside the village. According to Di Gianni, De Martino was satisfied with the movie although he knew it would not be a scientific ethnographic film. "In this, as well as in other cases, I followed De Martino's suggestions while respecting the specific requirements of cinematic representation. It is no coincidence that the commentary is plain, essential, almost basic: everything had to be subordinated to the images" (Di Gianni in Ferraro 2001, 14).

Di Gianni's second documentary, *Nascita e morte nel meridione*, was inspired by De Martino's research, yet it was made independently from the anthropologist. The film was shot in a house where animals and people lived together and local people were asked to

⁵ *Magia lucana* was shot in Albano di Lucania (close to Capomaggiore and Castelmezzano where De Martino did researches that would later appear in his book *Sud e magia*). *Nascita e morte nel meridione* was shot near Avigliano (Di Gianni in Ferraro 2001, 13-15).

perform their daily duties based on a previously written storyline. The narrative structure, as the title itself suggests, follows the two main events of birth and death. The documentary describes local people's daily lives in bleak terms, highlighting their poverty in a very aestheticized way. Di Gianni's early documentaries depicted Southern rural areas as dangerous places threatened by evil forces that the villagers tried to ward off by performing rituals. The uncanny atmosphere is exacerbated by an almost surreal depiction of trance, possession or other "magical" phenomena, that blurs the boundaries between the subjective perception and the real, creating a dreamlike representation that spreads to "the entire Southern landscape" portrayed as "a hallucination, a nightmare" (Gaudiosi 2023, 42, 45). From the beginning of his career Di Gianni was focused more on developing a proper visual style than making ethnographic documentaries. Although both movies were inspired by De Martino's research and were shot in locations that were either mentioned in his books or suggested by the ethnographer, Luigi Di Gianni is considered the least Demartinian director among those mentioned above. After his first two documentaries Di Gianni kept doing research on Southern religion independently and shooting documentaries such as *Il male di San Donato* (*The Evil of Saint Donato*, 1965), *Viaggio in Lucania* (*Journey to Lucania*, 1965), *Il culto delle pietre* (*The Cult of the Stones*, 1967), *La potenza degli spiriti* (*The Power of the Spirits*, 1968). Although the topics of his later documentaries did converge, to some extent, with De Martino's research, he refused to be considered a Demartinian director. He pursued his interest in exploring Southern superstitions and paganism in his later works although his intention was not to make ethnographic documentaries but to give a personal, subjective account of Southern culture.

Other Demartinian directors

Between 1959 and 1962 De Martino worked with Lino Del Fra, Cecilia Mangini, Giuseppe Ferrara, and Gianfranco Mingozzi as a consultant.

Lino Del Fra made two documentaries in collaboration with De Martino, *Il gioco della falce* (known also as *La passione del grano*, 1960) and *L'inceppata* (*Imprisoned*, 1960). The first movie is a reconstruction of the harvest ritual in San Giorgio Lucano, similar to the one described in De Martino's chapter "Le messe del dolore" in *Morte e pianto rituale nel mondo antico*. De Martino wrote the commentary and served as a consultant. The idea for the documentary came from the photographs Franco Pinna had taken during a research trip with De Martino in 1959. *L'inceppata*, which recalls an ancient tradition in Lucania, shows a young man who cuts a log and places it at a woman's doorstep as a symbol of declaration of love. Del Fra, who discovered this tradition by himself, was helped by De Martino with the commentary during the editing process (Gallini 1981, 26).

Stendali (1960) by Cecilia Mangini is a documentary film about professional female lamenters who mourned and wept at funerals. The terms *prefiche* or *rèpute* usually refer to professional female mourners in Southern Italy who were asked to, and paid for, lamenting (*moroloja*) in the house of the deceased. Cecilia Mangini, strongly influenced by Franco Pinna's photographs and De Martino's book *Morte e pianto rituale nel mondo antico*, staged and filmed the scenes of the funeral lament in Martano (in the province of Lecce). The dominant voice-over commentary in the movie is by actress Lilla Brignone, who reads an imaginary dialogue between a mother and her deceased son written by Pier Paolo Pasolini. The repertory of gestures and speeches by the weeping and wailing women shows that the mortuary lament, which expresses the grief, is not only limited to the lyrics but entails equally important non-verbal aspects. Either the fast cutting, stressed by the avantgarde score by Egisto Macchi or the dramatic voice-over combined with the moans of the mourners create an uncanny atmosphere of a distant, exotic, and unfamiliar event. Sensory and physical aspects of the performance - such as the movements of the lamenters' heads and bodies, their rhythmic clapping, their loosening their hair, their jumping up and down, their sobbing and screaming, their verses repeating - reveal that the ritual is a skillfully choreographed performance with a proper repertory of gestures. The constant change of perspective "adds an additional experimental, alienated component" making Mangini's film "entirely fictionalized and aestheticized account of religious experience" (Schäuble 2021, 69). Despite being one of the most prominent representatives of the "Demartinian documentary school", Cecilia Mangini was not interested in making documentaries that would serve as a pure audiovisual record of an ethnographic phenomenon. As Cervini and Tagliani claim, her goal was to re-define the nature of documentary by introducing shots that do not appear neutral or natural, like the point-of-view shot of the deceased from inside the coffin - an unnatural dead person's subjective gaze (2023, 49). Moreover, in this documentary Mangini re-defined the use of the voice-over commentary that is not a substitute for the all-knowing and all-seeing narrator who explains the images. Pasolini's text adds a strong dramatic and poetic tone to the movie and does not contain scientific explanations commonly used in ethnographic documentaries of the time. Although De Martino is not mentioned in the credits, Mangini admitted that she had been fascinated by De Martino's *Morte e pianto rituale* that had inspired her to make the movie. Either Del Fra or Mangini wanted to tell stories about the *other* Italy, its "backwardness, people on the margins", and De Martino gave them indispensable "theoretical framework" although they "did not want to make ethnographic films" at first (Mangini in Grasso 2006, 51).

Also, Giuseppe Ferrara's two movies *I maciari* (1962) and *Il ballo delle vedove* (*The Widows Ballet*, 1962) address topics similar to the Demartinian researches. The first film follows local sorcerers in the villages of Lucania and Calabria who, as it is being said in the movie, are "priests of the unofficial religion, ancient and resistant, full of Catholic and pagan elements, professed among the most backward social classes in the South as the only defense mechanism against history". We first see Zio Giuseppe, then a woman who

performs an exorcism with the snake, and a 12-year-old boy possessed by the spirit of his deceased mother sorcerer. *Il ballo delle vedove*, on the contrary, is a documentary about a Sardinian exorcism ritual similar to tarantism. Indeed, like tarantism, it was performed in the summer, when the peasants were exposed to the danger of being bitten by the spider (*argia*) while working in the fields. The only remedy was the dance of seven widows or brides or spinsters. Dancers' marital status had to correspond to the spider's status. The movie recreated the healing ritual with the help of women who danced around the possessed man, jumped over him while lifting their skirts, laughing and singing. Just as the therapy was effective as soon as the sick person burst out laughing, so too the old man in the movie eventually laughed. The involvement of De Martino in both documentaries was limited to giving advice on where and what to film (see Gallini 1981, 26).

Tarantism on screen

Gianfranco Mingozzi's documentary *La taranta* (1961) is considered the best and the most authentic among the Demartinian documentaries. Although the anthropologist was not present during the shooting, the influence of the back-then still unpublished De Martino's *La terra del rimorso* on Apulian tarantism is evident. De Martino acted as consultant, accompanied Mingozzi to the locations and added some changes in the commentary written by the poet Salvatore Quasimodo (Palmieri 2023, 67). Tarantism is a rural Apulian possession cult according to which the (imaginary) bite of the tarantula spider causes a nervous disorder. Apulian *tarantati*, who are mainly women, cure their disorder through music, dancing and ecstatic veneration. De Martino and several other anthropologists (Rossi 1991, De Giorgi 2008) claim that tarantism has no identifiable biological causes and the (imaginary) disturbances are just psychological and not physical. Marius Schneider (1999) considers tarantism as the beginning of a mystical cycle which will eventually terminate with the rebirth of the possessed. By providing a historical overview of tarantism and other forms of religious ecstasy in *La terra del rimorso*, De Martino argues that tarantism should not be interpreted as a manifestation of collective psychosis but as a cultural phenomenon with its own historical causes ([1961] 2002, 44-46). In De Martino's analysis, tarantism has its cultural and symbolic autonomy. The trance state experienced during the healing process would be the answer to a personal or social crisis that De Martino calls "the crisis of presence". "The crisis of presence" manifests as being possessed by an uncontrollable force while having no ability to act. In those moments the possessed feel as someone else is acting upon them. Rituals

and other cultural techniques operate through a process of de-historification⁶ that re-establish the pre-existing metaphysical order:

Generally speaking, no matter how developed and human a civilization is, there is always a domain of existential possibilities where things occur without or against us; that is a domain that cannot be confronted with techniques of control and humanization: when it is manifested, in critical moments, encounter or collision with this sphere increases the risk of an eccentric tension, a collapse, to the extent that it does not become a matter of choosing the values but of the impossibility to choose any value. (De Martino [1958] 2008, 20)

When the fragility of presence is threatened, people require specific techniques to access a meta-historical level. De Martino argues that trance and rituals are culturally elaborated mechanisms while magic as a whole consists of long-established techniques and symbols by which individuals or communities master the crises that threaten their well-defined cosmological order. If not properly cured, “the crisis of presence” causes alienation and anxiety which, according to De Martino, can be defined as “historical anxiety or anxiety caused by the impossibility to participate in human history” (De Martino [1958] 2008, 31).

The feeling of “historical anxiety” is depicted in *La taranta* through deserted, dry and arid landscape. From the first shots the spectators are immersed into an isolated place, far away from the present time. The sensation of being in an area untouched by modernity is highlighted not only by images but also by the voice-over commentary that stresses poverty and misery of those living “outside history”. Unlike other Demartinian documentaries, the ritual was not staged in Mingozi’s *La taranta*. The featured altered states and the presence of the audience confirm that tarantism was a widely choreographed performance. The performative aspects of tarantism and musical-choreutic exorcism are highlighted by the verb “recitare”⁷ (perform), which is used in the commentary to describe the ritual that takes place inside St. Paul’s chapel. The prevalence of close-ups increases the sensory aspects of body movements such as the dance facing the statue inside the church and the trance and cries of the possessed. These corporeal aspects of the performance such as the postures and the gestures of the possessed, their screams and shouting, their rhythmic body movements, demonstrate a stylized choreography consisting of codified and repeated gestures. The movie *La taranta* can be divided in two parts: the first part is filmed in the house of Maria of Nardò and shows the home therapy, whereas the second part is shot in Galatina on the festive

⁶ De-historification, according to De Martino, is not intrinsically related to religion or more generally to culture. It becomes religious when it appears as culturally codified form defined by historical periods: “De-historicizing the crisis does not presume coping with the concrete manifestations of the crisis but through the mediation of metahistorical models to which ritual practices must adhere” (Massenzio and Dei 2024, VIII).

⁷ “Per una volta all’anno scrollano il peso dei tormenti del loro numero anonimo nella società e delle privazioni di diritti elementari e possono *recitare* la loro disperazione davanti a una folla di spettatori” (*La taranta*).

day of Saints Peter and Paul and depicts the trance performed around St. Paul's chapel where the *tarantati* plea for grace and healing. In the first part of the movie, we can see a woman's convulsive movements which simulate the possession by a spider while being surrounded by drum, accordion and violin players. A part of the healing process is also an imaginary dialogue between St. Paul and the afflicted woman who begs him to cure her. In the second part of the movie, shot inside the chapel, the sensorial and corporeal aspects of the performance are depicted through close-ups of the possessed men and women. Their body movements resemble in many ways, intentionally, those of the spider. The symbolic healing process goes indeed from the unification with the spider to the liberation through the exorcism that expels the evil and to the killing of the spider (De Giorgi 1999, 57). De Martino compares the transcendental healing experience to the ancient Greek magical practices, shamanism, totemism and even to Catholicism – that share with tarantism elements such as remorse, mysticism, and symbolic rebirth ([1961] 2002:105-122).

Conclusion

Demartinian documentaries used the so-called "expository cinematic mode" (Nichols 2017)⁸ to convey clarity and simplicity in the representation and avoid ambiguity in the interpretation. Aesthetic and stylistic aspects of the representation were the filmmakers' responsibility. In order to stress the rhetorical persuasiveness, Demartinian documentarians adopted for their commentaries either De Martino's scientific instructions or a lyrical voice-of-God commentary (i.e. a mainly male omniscient voice-over narrator); therefore, the subjects never spoke for themselves. It is no surprise that some of those commentaries were written by prominent Italian authors such as Pier Paolo Pasolini (*Stendali*) or Salvatore Quasimodo (*La taranta*). As Nichols (2017) claims, "documentaries seek to persuade or convince us by the strength of their point of view and the power of their voice. The voice of documentary is each film's specific way of expressing its way of seeing the world" (50). The voice-over commentary expects no reaction from the subjects and leads the viewer to a better understanding of the images. The impression of objectivity is further emphasized by filmmakers' endeavors to make themselves invisible while witnessing and filming the events.⁹

⁸ Bill Nichols distinguishes six cinematic modes of representation in documentary films based on audiovisual techniques and practices: poetic, expository, reflexive, observational, participatory, performative. The expository mode, in particular, do not rely on any connection between the filmmaker and the subjects.

⁹ Today it is widely accepted in visual anthropology that it is impossible to observe the Other and stay unobserved. Any type of presence modifies the observed subject's behavior and it affects the event that is being shot. As David MacDougall (1998) argues in his famous essay "Beyond Observational Cinema",

The majority of the Demartinian directors tried to develop a proper artistic approach by overemphasizing dramatic elements in the staged or re-enacted performances, often blurring the boundaries between the real and the fictional - a common practice in documentary filmmaking back then, still very much influenced by the legacy of Flaherty and Grierson. Staging and re-enactment can indeed be traced back to the beginnings of cinema and photography. Even De Martino acknowledged reconstructions and re-enactment as scientifically valuable methods that did not diminish the authenticity of ethnological research. Although the anthropologist claimed that a ritual was more authentic when recorded live in the actual context, he also believed it would serve the most when staged, so that the ethnographer could obtain "a lament that is almost similar to the real one" (De Martino [1958] 2008, 83). For this reason, he made extensive use of reproductions and re-enactments to better understand the observed phenomena. He also promoted the concurrent use of different audiovisual tools on locations, such as sound recordings, photography or filmmaking (Gallini 1986, 124).

Despite their alleged realism, Demartinian documentaries - just like many other ethnographic documentaries - can sometimes distort the perception about different cultures by stressing those cultural aspects that attract Western audience and by reducing or neglecting those less appealing. That is evident especially in the documentaries that used contemporary music to create an almost surreal depiction of a distant world. As Gianluca Sciannameo (2006, 52) noted, the filmmakers overemphasized the dramatic potential of the rituals. The role of the Other in the process of the construction of anthropological knowledge was never addressed in early Demartinian documentaries: they did not emphasize the individualities of the subjects and there was no record of any connection between them and the directors. The filmmakers often took the viewer's gaze by imposing a specific interpretation of the Other. Jay Ruby (1991) claims that "the documentarian has the additional obligation never to appear neutral, that is, to disabuse people of the fantasy that films are somehow privileged messages with an inside track to truth and reality" (53). Unlike De Martino, who practiced participant observation and interviews, Demartinian directors did not use participatory mode of filmmaking in their early documentaries. As Gallini (1981, 24) claims, only in the second phase of the "Demartinian school", following 1965, filmmakers such as Luigi Di Gianni introduced interviews in their documentaries, taking a significant step forward towards a more participatory approach. In the movies shot while De Martino was alive there was no consideration of the real-life people's feedback, since their dialects were rarely heard on screen and their traditional chants recorded by ethnomusicologists were sometimes replaced by contemporary music.

Demartinian directors played a pivotal role in developing a deeper ethnographic understanding of Southern Italian culture. By eschewing romantic preservationism, the

the authenticity of a movie is achieved by revealing the filmmaker's presence in the world of the observed subjects and the impact that his intrusion has upon the filmmaking process.

filmmakers fostered a new approach towards Southern Italian culture that went beyond the folkloristic representation. Michaela Schäuble (2021) argues that Demartinian directors “promoted a certain form of ‘proletarian exoticism’ that rather uncritically romanticizes the misery of Southern lifeworlds - a romanticism that is largely absent from De Martino’s written work” (66). In the post-war period, the Italian documentarians gathered around Ernesto De Martino were among those few ones interested in representing the South on screen. However, some scholars (Chiozzi 1993, 194) believe that despite their great ethnographic value, Demartinian documentaries did not succeed in avoiding *meridionalismo*, i.e. the archaic and mythical representation of the South. Demartinian directors were, nonetheless, much more aware and critical than other contemporary Italian directors of the stereotypes and prejudices related to Southern Italian culture. Italian fictional movies often staged an “ethnographic spectacle”¹⁰ of the South by using stereotypes to emphasize its exotic nature or mythical setting (Urban 2013, 303-308). For this purpose, traditional rituals and religious practices were filmed in order to convey the image of a South still belonging to a pre-modern world. The tendency towards an exaggerated representation of Southern Italian culture has been present in Italian cinema since its beginning. Italian postwar fictional movies shot in the South (for instance *In nome della legge*, [In the Name of the Law], Pietro Germi, 1949; *Banditi a Orgosolo*, [Bandits in Orgosolo], Vittorio de Seta, 1961; *Padre padrone*, [Father and Master], Paolo and Vittorio Taviani, 1977; *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*, [Christ Stopped at Eboli], Francesco Rosi, 1979) intensify the image of the Southerners as backward people who are somehow isolated and culturally pristine, and perpetuate the image of an exotic and archaic culture unblemished by modernity.

At first attracted to Southern magical practices, Demartinian directors tried to explain religious and pagan ancient rituals within a larger cultural and theoretical framework in order to gain a deeper understanding of Southern culture. Both De Martino and the filmmakers knew religious practices in the South were disappearing. Therefore, their attempt to document them can also be seen as an example of salvage anthropology. Although they were not ethnographers or visual anthropologists, Demartinian directors draw from the anthropological writings by Ernesto De Martino. Cinema was the medium through which they critically approached Southern culture.

¹⁰ The “ethnographic spectacle” may refer to certain characters (*mafiosi*, bandits, shepherds), locations, images, events (representation of rural festivities), and traditional costumes which create an exotic image of Southern culture and people.

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