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ERNESTO DE MARTINO AND THE CULTURE OF THE IMAGE

Photography and more

ABSTRACT This article discusses Ernesto De Martino's complex relationship with photography, images and visual culture over time. I will present my arguments in three distinct paragraphs. In the first, I will focus on the use of images within the ethnographic framework promoted by the scholar. This approach highlights a set of cultural coordinates that are of great significance for the overall development of his research and theoretical reflections. In the second paragraph, I will give attention to the *Atlante figurato del pianto*, a chapter included in the book *Morte e pianto rituale. Dal lamento funebre antico al pianto di Maria* (De Martino, 1975, 373-416). This chapter reveals the ethnologist's deep and complex theoretical and methodological fluctuations regarding the topic. Finally, in the third paragraph, I will discuss in an introductory way De Martino's perspectives on visual culture, figurative art, and the image, in relation to his evolving (and prematurely interrupted) engagement with existentialism and phenomenological thought, as mainly documented in the notes of *La fine del mondo. Contributo all'analisi delle apocalissi culturali* (De Martino, 1977).

KEYWORDS: Ernesto De Martino; Ethnographic photography; Southern Italy; Visual culture; Visual studies.

Ernesto De Martino and his visual ethnography in the Mezzogiorno

De Martino is often regarded, whether rightly or wrongly, as the founder of Italian visual ethnography. He was undoubtedly a key promoter and innovator, while others before him had practiced and contributed to this field. Photography, though utilized in various forms (anthropometric, anthropological, ethnographic), has played an important role in Italian anthropology from its early days, as in other foreign scientific traditions. In this context, the histories and historiographies of both anthropology and photography have intertwined, shaped by the colonial and imperialist perspectives that have marked both disciplines, as many scholars have pointed out.

Christopher Pinney, one of the more recent researchers to address this issue, explicitly refers to a "doubled history of photography and anthropology." He highlights the formative years between 1837 and 1843 – the birth of photography and the establishment of key anthropological institutions – as pivotal moments. Pinney also

notes that both photography and anthropology had significant precursors, reinforcing their deep historical connection (Pinney, 2011).

This connection is important because it underscores a crucial aspect of De Martino's work: his understanding of photography as an important part of the anthropological and ethnographic toolkit.

As the Demartinian case shows, photography was not just a medium for documentation, but a medium capable of detecting central aspects of the personalities of the scholars who had relationships with it. Without De Martino's engagement with photography and film, and without his unique "way of seeing" (as John Berger would describe it), the overall significance of his research and intellectual contributions would be incomplete.

De Martino's visual ethnography, primarily – but not exclusively, as we will later see – based on photography, is grounded within a broader ethnographic practice. This approach marked a significant development in the Italian academic landscape, emerging in the post-World War II era, following a long period dominated by folkloric research with a nineteenth-century character, and the subsequent fascist regression. An exhaustive reflection on De Martino's visual ethnography, therefore, must begin with an analysis of his more comprehensive fieldwork methodology and the critical issues it raises.

As is well known, De Martino was the first Italian scholar to practice field ethnography on Italy, in a direct, multidisciplinary way, following an original model that still adhered to the fundamental principles of the discipline. He conducted his research primarily focusing on the Mezzogiorno from around 1949 to 1959. Initially, he concentrated on Tricarico (Matera), then expanded his work to cover larger areas of Lucania. Later, his attention shifted to towns in Salento and the Chapel of San Paolo in Galatina (Lecce). During this period, he also carried out occasional fieldwork in other parts of Apulia and Calabria, where his research was more sporadic and comparative, serving to complement the material collected from his primary research locations.[1] In the final years of his life, with the support of collaborators like Clara Gallini, he also conducted surveys in Sardinia.[2]

Demartinian ethnographic research, diligently practiced by him over a long period (albeit less thoroughly theorized), exhibits traits that are distinctly out of the ordinary. While the insights of contemporary reflexive anthropology might highlight innovative

[1] Remarkable observations on the possessed women of Serra San Bruno (Vibo Valentia) were made together with photographer Franco Pinna. A book featuring Pinna's photographs of Calabria owes much to De Martino, who co-authored the work by contributing a text on the region's folklore. See De Martino, Pinna 1959; De Martino 1959b, V–IX.

[2] The focus here was on the ritual of the Argia in the town of Tonara (Nuoro), which was photographed by Pinna as a reconstruction based on the accounts of the elders. Two of these images were included as an appendix to *La terra del rimorso. Contributo all'analisi delle apocalissi culturali* (De Martino 1996a). For an overview of De Martino's ethnographic research, see De Martino 1995, 1996b, 2011; Gallini 1986; Carpitella 1992, 26–34; Saunders 1995, 59–74; Gallini, Faeta 1999; Signorelli 2015, particularly 91–120.

and anticipatory aspects in his approach – elements not fully aligned with the prevailing scientific and academic conventions of his time – a British, American, or French anthropologist of the era might have found it somewhat perplexing or unconventional.

Demartinian fieldwork is characterized by short, repeated sojourns, often interrupted by various academic, scientific, cultural, political, and personal obligations. It prominently features the extensive use of informants who were frequently biased – both personally and politically – and often not direct participants in the events or carriers of the cultural patterns under investigation. His approach relied on synthesizing the data collected from broad thematic fields within a given area, with relatively limited emphasis on the contextual conditions surrounding the cultural traits being studied.

On the other hand, Demartinian fieldwork is marked by its shared and multidisciplinary dimension, the use of audiovisual tools (such as recorders, cameras, and film equipment) for data collection, and the incorporation of elements peripheral to the specific research context (g.e. involving RAI technicians and collecting folk songs for radio broadcasts during studies on mourning and condolence). It also frequently employed artificial reconstructions of the situations under investigation. Even the formation of his research teams – an innovation pioneered by De Martino – often appeared guided more by chance or ideological predispositions than by an organic, systematic survey methodology. These choices often pre-defined the perspectives of study and the subjects deemed worthy of exploration or omission.

Consequently, his fieldwork exhibited neither the distancing, estrangement, nor immersion typically associated with ethnographic research, nor did it prioritize impartiality, objectivity, systematicity, or continuity. Even the conventions of folk science, such as philologically rigorous comparative research, attention to variants, and a focus on the *ipsissima verba* as emphasized by figures like Max Müller and Giuseppe Pitrè, were often disregarded.

Certain notes on fieldwork by De Martino – consistent with the theoretical framework of his works such as *Naturalismo e storicismo nell'etnologia* (1941) and *Il mondo magico* (1948) – reveal a research practice distinct not only from the dominant trends of coeval European and American ethnological and anthropological studies, but also from earlier and contemporary national efforts. This includes, for instance, his critiques of the so-called Bronzini inquiry, at the time highly regarded (Fantauzzi 2003, 261-303).

However, later accounts, particularly concerning his work in Salento, suggest a shift – or at least a downscaling – of the methods used in earlier investigations on magic and mourning. This evolution marks a move toward a more "classical" conception of ethnographic research, albeit one still deeply influenced by and embedded in his historicist framework.

The summarized content is not, of course, the result of extravagance or approximation but stems from a well-defined conception of the discipline and its

associated research. As previously mentioned, the anthropological criterion of distancing, for instance, was deemed by De Martino as not only implausible but also ethically and politically objectionable. He was studying a world to which he felt inherently connected – albeit as a member of a socially privileged class – and regarded the distance separating him from the laborers of Tricarico or the *tarantate* of Galatina as an unacceptable historical divide rather than a genuine opportunity for knowledge and validation.

The poetics and politics of De Martino's research – beyond the proclaimed principle of critical ethnocentrism, which appears to inform his anthropological reflection more than his ethnographic practice – thus tended toward the blending and alignment of subjects and objects. This approach aimed to bridge the gap between those who make and document history and those who endure it and become its living testimony. For De Martino, ethnography was far removed from the meticulous role of challenging preconceived knowledge, a role commonly ascribed to it within the disciplinary context. Instead, it served as a tool for affirming theses shaped by philosophy and political insight, validated through laborious empirical observation.

On a higher level, it is essential to note that De Martino's inquiry introduced a significant number of theoretical issues that extended far beyond the immediate social context, compelling engagement with philosophical frameworks and interpretative models of considerable scope. For De Martino, examining themes such as low ceremonial magic, death and mourning in Lucania, or the bite of the *taranta* and its therapeutic practices in Salento, meant addressing, on the side of the marginalized, central questions about the definition of the human condition in the West. This effort contributed to a reflection on the cultural construction of the individual and their social realization—one with profound epistemological implications. Without compromising the immediacy of ethnographic testimony, contributed to a reflection on the cultural construction of the person and his or her social fulfillment, rather than having immediate feedback from an orthodox methodology.

The phenomenological aspects of De Martino's ethnography are deeply tied to the intellectual formation shaped by Crocian and Gramscian thought that he brought to a decade of field research in the Mezzogiorno (Pizza, 2013; Gronda, 2016). This intellectual background, which has been thoroughly analyzed in enlightening works to which I must refer (notably Gallini, Massenzio, 1997; Di Donato, 1999; Sasso 2001, Angelini 2008, Charuty 2009, Geisshuesler 2021), is beyond the scope of this discussion and is mentioned here only as an indispensable introduction.

As I said, a significant portion of De Martino's ethnography relies on audiovisual media, including audio-magnetic recordings, film, and, most notably, photography. These media provided much of the information and insights that informed his reflections. In the visual domain, De Martino collaborated with the photographers Arturo Zavattini, Franco Pinna and Ando Gilardi during his fieldwork in southern Italy

(see e.g. Pinna, Carpitella 1980; Carpitella 1980; Gallini, Faeta 1999; Charuty 2009, 325-333; Marano 2017, 147-168; Zavattini, Faeta 2025). He also made use of photographs by Chiara Samugheo and, by his own explicit acknowledgment, André Martin, who not only influenced his approach but also introduced him to the study of tarantism.[3]

In the early 1950s, De Martino worked with Franco Cagnetta, who produced extensive but largely unpublished documentation, and later with Diego Carpitella, who used the camera as a kind of notebook (Agamennone, 2005, 47-155; Ricci, 2007, 85-96). Annabella Rossi, one of his later collaborators involved in the study of *tarantismo*, contributed a substantial photographic record of this research, which she later developed further through her own methodologies and resources (Esposito 2003; Faeta 2025, 9-41).

De Martino also had significant collaborations with filmmakers such as Lino Del Fra, Luigi Di Gianni, Cecilia Mangini, Giuseppe Ferrara and Gianfranco Mingozzi. Michele Gandin joined fieldwork with his camera, while both Carpitella and Pinna created short films under De Martino's direction.[4]

These contributions, particularly those of photographers, highlight the intertwined nature of ethnographic and photographic practice. De Martino's vision of fieldwork in southern Italy found its most compelling expression through photography.[5] However, his attitude toward visual media – especially cinema – was ambivalent. While his sensitivity, experience, and the realism-valuing ethos of his time, led to innovative openings in his work, he also harbored a deep-seated mistrust of the image and its implications.

A significant gap warrants attention: the distinction between the use of photography in ethnographic investigation and its application in critical representation. A textual analysis of De Martino's work reveals a limited use of photographs and a notable underestimation of their communicative potential. With one notable exception –

[3] Photographs by Martin, related to the rites of possession in Serra San Bruno (where, as I mentioned, De Martino went with Pinna) and Galatina, were included in the first edition of *Sud e magia* (De Martino 1959a) and have been featured again in the recent one.

[4] See Gandin 1954 (but influenced by the De Martino's aura, also refer to Gandin 1955a, 1955b); Carpitella 1960. A film shot by Pinna during the October 1952 expedition, titled *Dalla culla alla bara*, approximately 300 meters long, 16 mm, black and white, is mentioned by De Martino in a note (cf. De Martino 1996b: especially 84–85). However, the film, for which we have no further information, has never been found. Beyond these collaborations, "De Martino's relationship with cinema did not start under the best auspices and [...] would later prove to be characterized by both a profound attraction and an equally profound rejection" (Perniola 2004, 184). Among the few contributions by the anthropologist on cinema, see De Martino 1952, 183–185, which transparently demonstrates his personal difficulty with the medium. For further in-depth study, see at least Gallini 1981, 23–31.

[5] Its performative function, in relation to the image of that area, is widely recognized beyond disciplinary boundaries, including in fields such as photography and film studies. See, for example, Perniola 2004, Parigi 2014, and Saponari 2017, 249–260.

the *Atlante figurato del pianto* – which I briefly mentioned earlier and will return to – the role of photographs in in his books and essays was secondary and, more importantly, reductive compared to their use during fieldwork. In other words, De Martino assigned absolute supremacy to writing as the primary medium for data restitution. When, moreover, he was entangled in the fieldwork, De Martino was already making a profound break with Croce's ideology, dealing with a practice, ethnography, which for his master was deterministic and auxiliary with respect to the ultimate reasons for thought. He was thus unable to entirely detach himself from the set of Crocean ideas that gave to linguistic organization absolute predominance in the exposition of the moral reasons for reality. Therefore, he seemed to hold a strictly, or perhaps narrowly, "ethnographic" view of the image, perceiving it as inadequate for conveying meaning within a process of critical representation, whether in an ethnological or historical-religious context. For De Martino – aligned with a distinctly idealistic perspective – writing was the definitive outcome of observational practices. In contrast, he did not grant the image an autonomous status of signification.

The high degree of formalization in De Martino's writing has often been noted, but its deeper motivations have rarely been explored. These motivations extend beyond his refined humanistic training; they reflect a peculiar tension, vigilance, and sense of measure that reveal an ideological stance. His writing, at once literarily dense, imbued with complex poetic allusions, and rigorously exact, reflects his preference for the primacy of the *verbum*.

Indeed, the word frequently incorporates and almost subsumes the visual experience. This is evident, for example, in the description of the game of the scythe in San Giorgio Lucano (Matera) and, more broadly, in the ones found in *La terra del rimorso*, the mature culmination of De Martino's ethnographic work (Gallini, Faeta 1999, 71, 45ff.). The narrative often unfolds along visual lines: Pinna's photographs capture ritual behaviors, just as Gilardi's images document the nuances of oral communication. This shift is made possible by the fact that, although distrustful of photography and the reliance on the primary processing of writing, De Martino's ethnography is deeply focused on the gaze and its capacity for illumination. It is *the act of seeing* that often triggers the interpretative processes of deeper reality, which subsequently fuel his theoretical reflections. A phenomenon acquires its hermeneutic potential when it surfaces through the gaze, which thus becomes the medium through which interpretative frameworks are channeled and crystallized. The strong recurrence of visual remakes of facts of popular culture that *are no longer visible* (I mentioned the Argia ritual, but think of the reconstructions of the funeral mourning and some Lucanian magical practices) testifies to this primary need *to see* what is the object of ethnographic attention. As we will realize, this expansion of the gaze's epistemological function gradually gains greater significance in De Martino's heuristic journey, particularly starting with his work on funeral lamentation.

Returning to the use of photography in research practice, beyond the general characteristics previously noted, it is necessary to consider the variability in De Martino's approach, even within enduring methodological and critical frameworks. Photographic repertoires, testimonies, and the few notes in which De Martino addresses the topic allow for some observations. While certain aspects remained consistent – such as his pedagogical restraint, the relative autonomy granted to photographers, confidence in photography's descriptive and objectifying capacities, and distrust of its critical potential – other elements evolved during the seven or eight years he employed the medium in fieldwork.

Initially, De Martino assigned photography the task of creating a background ethnography or, more precisely, a sociologically oriented sketch of the societies under investigation. Photography was expected to contextualize specific documents – musical, oral, or behavioral – by visually tying these phenomena to their surroundings, with an emphasis on the latter. Furthermore, consistent with its individuating nature, photography served to delineate and circumscribe objects, restoring their scope and boundaries. Zavattini's images, for example, exemplify this phase (we have an illuminating passage by De Martino in this regard).[6] De Martino explicitly commented on this approach, noting that Zavattini's photographs, beyond documenting a stage of research in which the village held central importance (later supplanted by cultural themes and areal investigations), defined a concrete object and, through cultural projections, a place. I have highlighted this in earlier analyses of De Martino's photographers (Faeta 2003b), emphasizing the algorithmic tendency in description, rooted in an individuating and objectifying view of the image.

Over time, however, De Martino began to assign photography new roles in fieldwork, paralleling the evolution of his ethnographic practice. The photographer's lens moved away from generic ethnography and sociological identification, narrowing instead on ritual events. Photography's role shifted from mere description and classification to articulating the internal dynamics of ritual events and establishing connections between these events and broader symbolic frameworks. Pinna's work, although perhaps reaching us incomplete in its early stages, clearly illustrates this evolution. A development that aligns with the complex functions assigned to photography in documenting the

[6] The ethnologist wrote, "since the understanding of folk songs cannot be achieved without considering the significant events in a community's life, and since these events are closely connected to the structure of society, class relations, modes of production, housing, etc., the expedition made sure to accompany the collected material with the data needed to provide an accurate depiction of life and living conditions. To this end, Arturo Zavattini gathered extensive photographic documentation, both general (landscapes, dwellings, typical ways of life) and specific (folk songwriters, folk ensembles in action, etc.)"; see Carpitella (De Martino) 1952, 539–549, 547.

iconographic and cultural continuity of mourning rituals and initiating research on tarantism.[7]

The key to understanding this transformation lies in the relationship between ethnography as a method and the concept of mythic-ritual symbolism as a theory. De Martino's evolving idea of mythic-ritual symbolism, particularly in the late 1950s, explains the relative transformation evident in the final stages of his ethnographic work in the Mezzogiorno.

De Martino viewed the ritual event as an expression of mythical symbolism – a practice that rendered it a historical reality inscribed within a specific social context. He regarded the codification of ritual as essential (though not sufficient) for its effectiveness, ensuring its recognition and transmission. In this perspective, ritual, as a collective communicative practice intrinsic to archaic and "traditional" societies, shares certain qualities with modern mass communication. In an essay published in the early 1960s, De Martino explicitly drew parallels between the two systems of communication, highlighting their similarities and differences and offering valuable insights into the centrality of ritual representation in his later ethnography (De Martino 1961, 25–29).

Thus, the ritual act, which increasingly became the focus of De Martino's attention, appears as a communicative act. Its iconic representation serves as a privileged means of capturing its eidetic essence, formal qualities, and symbolic significance. This perspective also explains the gradual shift away from a purely "sociological" concept of fieldwork, reoriented into the anthropological domain, and the subsequent methodological adjustments. As such, De Martino's evolving approach to photography in the late 1950s reflects complex ethnographic and ethnological trajectories.

The *Atlante figurato del pianto*

As I mentioned earlier, the *Atlante figurato del pianto*, a chapter within the broader study on death and mourning in Lucania (De Martino 1975, 373-416), represents a moment of transition and evolution in De Martino's engagement with the topics of our interest. This evolution ultimately culminates in his theoretical notes, which remained unpublished during his lifetime and were later included posthumously in *La fine del mondo*. This work, which we will discuss in greater detail later, serves as a key reference point.

The *Atlante figurato del pianto* is a dense sylloge of 67 images, introduced by a text, located in a marginal position within the book, after the *Epilogo* and the *Aggiunte*. This

[7] Photography here acts as a bridge between "a specific episode to be analyzed" and a broader, more elusive, and complex cultural phenomenon (De Martino, 1996a, 30). The recognition of this new function of photography in funeral weeping and tarantism research can be found in Schäuble 2016, 1–28; Schäuble 2021, 53–74.

placement seems to confirm a certain discomfort in fully integrating the iconographic and photographic context into the main body of the work. This discomfort is further evidenced by the lack of philological references to the images in the introductory text. Totally different images from an iconographic point of view: photographs taken on the fieldwork, stills from films, photographic reproductions of works of art, synthetic drawings of a didactic nature of ancient works. All united in the printed photo-reproduction, the only structural element that holds together such linguistically and formally heterogeneous materials, classified by De Martino as "illustrations". It is a fact, however, that images are beginning to play an important role in the display of Demartinian ethnography.

Through an analysis of this sylloge, I will attempt to highlight De Martino's profound and complex theoretical and methodological fluctuations with regard to ethnographic photography and visual studies. Based on the historiographical and critical observations of Giovanni Agosti, Maurizio Sciuto and Riccardo Di Donato (Agosti, Sciuto 1990, 185–195; Di Donato 1999, 41–56), I have hypothesized a possible intellectual debt of De Martino to Aby Warburg–this hypothesis does not belong to the mere realm of philological curiosities, but connotes an emerging orientation towards the image, compared to the Crocian horizon, of De Martino. I have explored this suggestion in greater detail in a recent essay, which I mentioned at the beginning of this article, dedicated to the renowned German iconologist that accurately reconstructs the network of relationships existing around the hypothesized link between De Martino and Warburg. For the sake of brevity, I refer the reader to that essay and its bibliography, which acknowledges the contributions of the previously mentioned authors and others–such as Gallini, Georges Didi-Huberman, Carlo Ginzburg, Marcello Massenzio (Faeta 2023, 43–98; but see also Pisapia 2013; Stimilli 2015; Palmesano 2024, 405–433).

From a perspective that is neither strictly historiographical nor overly speculative, one can discern a connection between Warburg and De Martino in the latter's paradoxical approach to visual materials. This is evident in his commissioning of high-quality photographs that he either does not use or underutilizes, as well as his ambivalent attitude toward both the photographic medium and the photographers themselves.[8] Such behavior recalls similar tendencies in Warburg's conduct, particularly during his renowned study of the Hopi people in the American Southwest (Cestelli Guidi, Mann 1998). Through anecdotes that are at times disconcerting, the two scholars describe Warburg's attitude of great nonchalance and *naïveté* towards the medium.

[8] Zavattini, after his remarkable performance in Tricarico during the June 1952 expedition, was in fact abandoned by the ethnologist; his relations with Pinna were notably and notoriously difficult. Gilardi recalled De Martino as someone largely indifferent to photography and the medium in general. My assertions are based on personal conversations with all three photographers. See also Faeta 1999, particularly pp. 61ff, and Mazzacane 1996, 125–135.

The *Atlante figurato del pianto* further confirms the many parallels in how the two scholars approached photography. It has been widely recognized, by those examining the "unintended convergences" (Ginzburg 2018) between Warburg and De Martino, as a chapter that reflects a distinctly Warburgian sensibility. Its structure and methodology reveal notable affinities with Warburg's *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*, an ambitious project begun in February 1927 but left incomplete due to his untimely death in 1929 (Warburg 2002).

Of course, while De Martino's intention clearly remains that of using "illustrative" materials to offer a visual trace of contents expressed through writing (as we have seen: epilogue, additions and, finally, illustrations), Warburg uses images with full awareness of their autonomous character and their possibility of meaningful relationship.

Within the *Atlante*, one finds a trust in the image as a witness to cultural processes – beginning to overcome its merely didactic or affirmative function, common to most contemporary anthropological and art-historical studies. As I said, it features the juxtaposition of different iconographic sources, unified through photographic reproduction that acts as a form of textual reinforcement. But the introductory text turns as a critical link between the images. Above all, it demonstrates a productive reliance on the comparison of iconographic sources of varying origins and scales, grounded in the critical assumption of a substantial cultural continuity between the classical world, the Italian Renaissance, "primitive" world – in De Martino's case, "primitive" means Lucanian, Sardinian and Transylvanian ethnic realities.

The term atlas was atypical for Italian folk studies and ethnology of that era, more commonly associated instead with early 19th-century anthropology or linguistic and philological research (e.g., Paolo Mantegazza's *Atlante della espressione del dolore*–on Darwin's suggestion–; Paul Scheuermeier, Gerhard Rohlfs, and Max Leopold Wagner's *Sprach- und Sachatlas Italiens und der Südschweiz*; Ugo Pellis's *Atlante Linguistico Italiano*).

In short, while it is certain that the Italian ethnologist was unfamiliar with Warburg's fieldwork images or his ambiguity toward them, his overall approach bears striking resemblances to that of the German iconologist.[9]

Moreover, the similarities between the two scholars extend beyond the visual domain to what I would term, on a more speculative level, "phantasmal family resemblances". For instance, De Martino's concept of cultural work as a tool for transcending mere factual data resonates strongly with Warburg's ideas, as exemplified in his lecture on

[9] Massenzio (2021, XV–LXXVII) explores the broad dimension of cultural convergence between De Martino and Warburg, with a strong focus on the iconographic dimension as a unifying and continuous element. He identifies significant points of alignment with the more recent perspectives of Didi-Huberman, who suggests "a common cultural background, fostered by the interaction between image science and ethnographic practice" (LXIX). Massenzio's reference is to Didi-Huberman 2019, 197.

the *Schlangenritual* (Warburg 1998). In one notable passage from that work, Warburg writes:

> to the elusiveness of natural phenomena, the Indian opposes his will to understanding, transforming himself into the cause of those phenomena. Instinctively he replaces, in the most intelligent and obvious way, the unexplained effect with the cause. The masked dance [the reference is to Oraibi's *humis kachina* dance, which the iconologist witnessed, *Ed.*] is danced causality. (Warburg 1998, 61)

De Martino more than thirty years later, writes:

> if we wanted to define human civilization in the turn of a pregnant expression, we could say that it is the formal power of passing into value what in nature runs toward death: it is in fact by this formal power that man constitutes himself as the procurer of death in the very bosom of natural dying, harnessing in a cultural rule of passing what passes without and against man. (De Martino 1975, 236)

From this perspective – certainly shaped by reflections on different objects and concepts – we could propose that expressions of mourning and condolence function as "ritualized causality", much like masked dancing is a tool for injecting into a cultural rule what acts unregulated despite and against man. The same moralistic tension that seems to propel Warburg toward the study of Native American cultures – and which, in spite of some contradictions within the evolutionist framework, leads him, particularly in his later years, to perceive modernity as the fading or cessation of an ethical dimension of life and thought – resonates with numerous Demartinian themes. Once again, we find a striking connection in the concluding passage of Warburg's *Kreuzlingen lecture*, where he writes:

> The modern American no longer fears the rattlesnake. He kills it, at any rate he does not worship it. The fate of the snake is extermination. The lightning imprisoned in the wire - captured electricity - has produced a civilization that wipes out paganism: but what does it put in its place? The forces of nature are no longer conceived of as biomorphic or anthropomorphic entities, but as endless waves obeying docile human command. In this way, machine civilization destroys what natural science, derived from myth, had laboriously conquered: space for prayer, later transformed into space for thought. [...] The telegraph and the telephone destroy the cosmos. Mythic and symbolic thought, in their efforts to spiritualize the relationship between man and the world around him, create the space for prayer or thought, which instantaneous electrical contact kills. (Warburg 1998, 66)

Of course, the lens through which modernity or modernization is viewed changes significantly. In De Martino's case, this perspective becomes ambivalent – marked by both a desire for a modernity that liberates humanity and the lower classes from their subalternity and dependency, and a fear of a modernity that dulls and mechanizes the relationship between humans, nature, and society. Yet, what remains is the persistent and problematic awareness of modernity – whether embraced or dreaded – as a force that transforms, disrupts, and tears apart the long-standing connections between spirit and world, established over centuries (De Martino 1975; 1977).

The book-notes of *La fine del mondo*

If I have focused on the Warburgian parallels that emerge at a particular moment in De Martino's intellectual trajectory, it is because, as I have anticipated, they point to a distinct shift in the scholar's engagement with visual contexts and images.

To summarize: during the initial fieldwork in Lucania in the early 1950s, De Martino adhered to a positivistic and realist (neorealist) conception of the image[10], combined with an idealist-inspired view of its role as purely ancillary and instrumental. However, by the period from 1958 to the early 1960s, his approach to visual topics had evolved, shaped by a broader and more complex intellectual framework. This framework incorporated various philosophical and artistic influences, including existentialism and phenomenology, particularly the latter, which prompted a radical rethinking of the visual field and, by extension, representations. The same essay I previously mentioned (De Martino 1961, 25-29), which addresses mythical-ritual symbolism and the mass media, offers only a preparatory treatment of the subject. Nonetheless, it signals the new directions De Martino appears to have been exploring. Within the context of this new directions, which are strongly anchored to the reflections on the symbolic dimension, the thought of Ernest Cassirer, as Charuty has pointed out in detail (Charuty 2022, 7-41), is not only present, but plays an important role in the creation of the Demartinian device, one that surpasses the explicit references that appear in his bibliography.

Of course, it is useful not to indulge in a "Manichean" – so to speak – representation of the Demartinian path (a before in one way, an after in another). The focus on existentialist and phenomenological issues, although not invading the field of vision and representations, runs – as the most careful Demartinian scholars have argued – throughout the ethnologist's work, although it is organized in more systematic and complex forms in his later period. As Gallini aptly noted, after all, De Martino, despite invoking a "solar Crucian rationality and striving to integrate Gramsci and Marx [...], maintained a deep, conflicted relationship with the European literature of crisis. He entertained with it, especially in his later years, an inseparable relationship of attraction and repulsion" (Gallini 1977, IX-CI, XLII).

That said, an attentive reading of his posthumous work reveals a sense that, regarding the matter of visual, De Martino "remains on the threshold," compiling notes and reflections that suggest a profound reconsideration of images – a project he ultimately did not complete.

[10] Regarding the visual aspects, as well as on a more general level, Giordana Charuty has insightfully described a neorealist moment in Demartinian ethnography (Charuty 2010, 247–282). This is not the right context to delve into the issues related to the 'orientalist' character of the research in the Mezzogiorno that flourished around De Martino, a tendency particularly evident in visual ethnography. For an initial approach on this topic, see Faeta 2003c, 333–367+illustrations.

Warburg's "phantasmal" presence in De Martino's final writings is not related directly to iconology but rather reflects what I have described as a kind of familial resemblance. In *La fine del mondo*, for instance, there is a sequence tracing the evolution of cultural forms associated with the theme of apocalypse in the West – from antiquity and the medieval period to the Renaissance and modern times. In certain respects, this retraces the intellectual stages of Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas*. Additionally, the work contains reflections on the social pathology of the Western world and its catastrophic civilizational crises, which for De Martino incorporate insights from contemporary philosophy and epistemology – particularly themes related to Marxian apocalypses. The backdrop to Warburg's *Mnemosyne* is, as we know from many supplementary documents, rooted in the radical crisis triggered by the unprecedented slaughter of World War I. This crisis revealed a Dionysian-Apollonian dichotomy in the West—a conflict among "brothers" who had traversed the same path from barbarism to civilization. Similarly, the backdrop to *La fine del mondo* is shaped by the World War II, the ultimate intra-Western conflict, and the looming specter of total annihilation. This is viewed through the lens of a psychopathological breakdown, framed as the loss of cultural control and the collapse of an *ethos* of transcendence grounded in values.

Beyond such points of closeness, while De Martino displayed a limited interest in figurative art and its history as tools for staging and interpreting cultural apocalypses – primarily focusing on the relationship between visual art and psychopathological phenomena – his main emphasis remained on written texts. His key references were literature, philosophy, and history rather than the visual arts.[11]

Scrolling through the table of contents of *La fine del mondo*, we find no reference to Warburg, but nor do we find mentions of those who, in various ways, engaged with his ideas or belonged to his intellectual circle – figures such as Gertrud Bing, Fritz Saxl, Ernst Gombrich, Rudolf Arnheim, or Erwin Panofsky. These scholars were reformulating the critical reasons for figurative art, situating it within the broader context of the social history of the West. Instead, the art historian to whom De Martino devotes the most attention – remarkably, though unsurprisingly, in an uncritical manner – is Hans Sedlmayr, a student of Julius von Schlosser, and successor to the chair of art history at the University of Vienna. Sedlmayr, an early Nazi and later a fundamentalist Catholic, championed a dark and anti-rationalist theory of modern art, tracing its trajectory from the Renaissance to the contemporary period.[12]

[11] There has been limited attention to De Martino's engagement with figurative art in the context of his work on cultural apocalypses. For a recent exception, see Lesce 2019, 191–211.

[12] See especially Sedlmayr 1948. The influence of Sedlmayr, as well as Martin Heidegger—not the only thinkers more or less associated with fascism; one might also consider Wilhelm E. Mühlmann, for instance—invites reflection on De Martino's return, after the intense experience of anti-fascist and resistance political militancy, in the context of completely changed cultural horizons, to that basic

De Martino seems to incorporate Sedlmayr's ideas in an unorderly way, adopting suggestions that lead him to interpret contemporary art as the expression of an underground, irrational, and emotional realm – a reflection of profound existential distress. In modern art, he writes in a passage highlighted by Francesco Lesce (2019, 203):

> what interests us precisely is its nonsensical, absurd, extravagant qualities [...], since nonsensical, absurd, extravagant does not at all mean meaningless within the chosen diagnostic perspective. On the contrary, such nonsense raises a problem for "clinical" investigation, stimulating us to recover the "reasons" of the irrational. (De Martino 1977, no. 273, 485)

Following Sedlmayr's interpretations, De Martino turns his attention to Francisco Goya and, more briefly but significantly, Paul Cézanne. His perspective oscillates between a predominantly demonic view of modern and contemporary art – rooted in a pre-rational evaluation of vision, implicitly tied to mimetic criteria – and a more phenomenologically influenced interpretation. The latter views art as a medium that transcends *mimesis*, establishing a field of vision aligned with the concept of "pure visibility," which has animated much of contemporary research.

Other authors, not far detached from Warburgian thought, also appear in De Martino's writings, signaling his intellectual openness. These include Ludwig Binswanger, Ludwig Klages, Friedrich Nietzsche, Leo Frobenius, and Konrad Preuss. Yet above all, there is a marked engagement with existentialist and phenomenological perspectives. Perspective to which De Martino had been introduced, in terms that have been problematically documented (Barbera 1990, 103-127; Pàstina 2005, 179-186), since the time of *Il mondo magico*, through Heideggerian influence, both in its properly existentialist phase and in the later phase of phenomenological ontologism; even the posthumous notes indicate a constant presence, and influence, of the German philosopher.

However, Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty are the ones who introduce a new dimension to De Martino's challenge of conceptualizing the world when confronted with an end not illuminated by any eschatology. Sartre, while initially referenced for *L'Imaginaire: Psychologie phénoménologique de l'imagination*, is primarily discussed in connection to the Heideggerian concept of *Verfallenheit*. In one passage (De Martino 1977, no. 291, 529), De Martino emphasizes the utility of Sartre's thought for analyzing "nausea, anxiety, depersonalization, and the end of the world in psychopathology." This influence extends to a broader cultural and social perspective.

education, also influenced by German culture of which he was a great connoisseur, that had driven him in his youthful years to think of "fascism as a civil religion". Charuty's 2009 study is essential for understanding this period.

De Martino's engagement with Merleau-Ponty is reflected in insightful notes that testify to a shift from the rigid historicist opposition between individual and society toward a more nuanced understanding of the I-world relationship. His focus lies almost exclusively on the themes of the body elaborated by Merleau-Ponty, with only marginal attention to the French philosopher's foundational reflections on the eye, the gaze, and figurative art. Reading the laconic Sedlmayrian considerations related to the vision of Cézanne, given in the Demartinian notes, one regrets the absence of *L'Œil et l'esprit* in his library.

"A science without a name," as Giorgio Agamben defines Warburgian scholarship (Agamben 1984, 51–66), seems to form the backdrop of this period in De Martino's intellectual journey. It is a discipline that, while retaining traditional methodological and critical tools, does not forget its foundational principle: questioning "Western civilization [while allowing itself, *author's note*] to be guided by the fundamental criterion of critical ethnocentrism" (De Martino 1975, p. 89). Yet, it begins to open new horizons of interpretation, grappling with the irreducible complexity of the gaze. In the last years of De Martino's life, to sum up, a sense of uneasiness emerges that pushes him to deeper reflections, very different from those expressed in his interactions with photographers and filmmakers in the sunny landscapes of Southern Italy.

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