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# DECOLONIZING AND/OR RE- APPROPRIATING ERNESTO DE MARTINO'S 'SCATTERED' MULTIMODAL ARCHIVE?

**ABSTRACT:** Ernesto De Martino had initially intended to create a systematically prepared “cinematographic encyclopedia” – and the first entry was to be a three-minute film clip called *Lamento funebre* by Michele Gandin from 1954. This encyclopedia was never realized, but I argue that De Martino’s expeditions to southern Italy were part of his project later coined as *umanesimo etnografico* (2002 [1977]) in the context of which he intended to use the media film and photography to propagate his “critical ethnocentrism” and to foster the understanding of Southern Italian magic-religious rituals – such as Lucanian funerary lament and Apulian tarantism – as cultural embankments of marginalized rural population in the face of existential crises. In the reception of the multimodal proceedings of De Martino’s ‘expeditions’, this approach has been misconstrued as an extractivist practice that led to misrepresentations – as either demonizing or romanticizing images of people’s misery in the Mezzogiorno. Today, local artists (re)appropriate the traces of the ‘scattered’ archive in attempts to contest it or, to incorporate it into quasi-identitarian discourses about being southern Italian. In my contribution I take a closer look at the works of photographer Alessia Rollo in particular, who aims to decolonize the Demartinian archive by manipulating material visual objects. The *British Journal of Photography* asserts that “[t]hrough this heightened aesthetic, Rollo valorises the magical and establishes an alternative visual language to the clinical documents of the archives.” In contrast, I argue that De Martino’s ethnographic practice was far from producing “clinical documents” and rather exposed the progressive, emancipative, and forward-looking potential of magic-ritual practices on the one hand, and the use of multimodal media as research tools and modes of engagement on the other.

**KEYWORDS:** Multimodal Archive; Decolonization; Critical Ethnocentrism; Photography; Cultural Reappropriation.

An archive may be largely about ‘the past’  
but it is always ‘re-read’ in the light of the  
present and the future  
*Stuart Hall, 2001*

History decays into images and not into stories.

Walter Benjamin, 1999 [1927-1940]

## *Parallel Eyes*. Overwriting Iconic Images<sup>1</sup>

From April – September 2024, Bibliotheca Hertziana of the Max Planck Institute for Art History in Rome hosted an exhibition entitled *Alessia Rollo. Visual Narratives of the Italian South*. Curated by Viviana Costagliola as part of her postdoctoral research project *Viaggio al Sud*, the show featured “a selection of archival materials from the Archivio Franco Pinna (Roma) in dialogue with works from Alessia Rollo’s *Parallel Eyes* project.”<sup>2</sup> This exhibition and the *Parallel Eyes* series are remarkable in that visual artist Alessia Rollo critically engages with the archive and visual materials connected to Ernesto De Martino’s research expeditions by challenging photographic images as tools of representation. In 2019, she initiated the aforementioned photograph series entitled *Parallel Eyes* in which she paints directly over or perforates iconic images taken by photographers such as Chiara Samugheo, Franco Pinna, filmmaker Cecilia Mangini and ethnomusicologist Diego Carpitella, who had either personally accompanied De Martino on his journeys to the Italian South in the 1950s and 1960s, or were inspired by him. Rollo literally overwrites or intervenes in the images and thus attempts to reappropriate the themes and motifs depicted in the photographs or film stills. She conceptualizes her approach as artistic research through which she approaches her “own culture” via her critical engagement with the anthropologists’ visual archive. In her artist statement on her website, she writes:

*Parallel Eyes* is my personal research about the culture I belong [to]: my aim is to offer a more complex analysis of South Italian culture and to re-consider in visual, historical and sociological terms the construction of the identity of our culture. In between 1950 and 1960 South Italy, the place I am coming from, has been visually studied, classified and judged by a group of anthropologists, filmmakers and photographers. This process started by the famous ethnographer Ernesto De Martino had as result the conviction of our culture as backward, ignorant and completely dominated by the irrationality and religion. This multimedia project includes two main bodies of work: one consists in the manipulation of archive materials produced around the '50[s] and '60[s] of the past century by the photographers and videomakers belonging [to] the “scientific expeditions” of De Martino [sic!]. (Rollo 2023)

This statement reveals the artist’s inclination to reinterpret the writing of a history and the creation of images that she experiences as disparaging and misrepresentative. She

<sup>1</sup> A section of this text has previously been published as part of a more extensive chapter: Schäuble 2024.

<sup>2</sup> <<https://www.biblherz.it/3507920/alessia-rollo>>. Earlier versions of *Parallel Eyes* (Rollo 2023) were also exhibited in 2021 at the Bitume Photofest in Lecce and at the Futuro Arcaico Festival in Bari.

– like many people in Salento today – feels that her “culture” had been portrayed as “backward, ignorant and completely dominated by [...] irrationality and religion” in Ernesto De Martino’s work and the associated audio-visual materials. In my view, however, this assessment can only be partially attributed to De Martino’s actual ethnographic approach and is largely grounded in a misconception of his writings and his project later coined as *umanesimo etnografico* (2002 [1977]). To disentangle the context in which Alessia Rollo’s work is widely received at present and conceptualized as a “project about visual and social decolonization of Southern Italian culture,” as she herself labels it, it is necessary to

- 1.) gain a better understanding of the context in which De Martino’s ‘scattered’ multimodal archive has been created since the 1950s
- 2.) take a closer look at Rosso’s interventions in the light of current artistic approaches to critically engage with colonial and/or hegemonic archives
- 3.) critically assess the inflationary use of the term “culture” and Alessia Rollo’s potentially problematic validation of her work on the basis of identity politics, i.e. grounded in her own origin and belonging.

In no way do I wish to question the artistic quality of Rollo’s work or her political endeavor to take issue with and reclaim iconic representations of Salento. Nevertheless, I would like to try to rectify the starting point of her engagement with De Martino’s research method and approach. In this regard, I refer to four sets of images – the original and Rollo’s interventions, respectively – as examples to guide the reader through the historical archive and assess Rollo’s critical artistic engagement with them. Furthermore, I would like to point out the risk of a backlash that her supposedly feminist and decolonial engagement with and critique of De Martino’s work entails.

A lot has been written about the role of multimodal materials in and for Ernesto De Martino’s oeuvre and his formative role for Italian visual anthropology (e.g. Binazzi 2013; Carpitella 1968; Faeta 2006, 2007, 2018; Faeta, Ricci 1997; Gallini, Faeta 1999; Gallini 1981, 1986, 1996; Marano 2007; Mazzacane 1996; Minghelli 2016; Petrelli 2016; Ricci 2007; Sciannameo 2006; Schäuble 2015; and many more). In this essay I attempt to extend the previous analyses to the most current artistic engagements with these materials, including the photographic work of Alessia Rollo. I argue that artistic interventions as attempts to deconstruct and decolonize archives are of central importance but also carry the danger of contributing to an essentializing heritagization of iconic documents, images, and narratives and of enforcing identity-political discourses.

## Lamenters in action

In autumn 1952, Ernesto De Martino undertook an expedition to remote villages in Lucania (today Basilicata), accompanied by photographer Franco Pinna, ethnomusicologist Diego Carpitella who did sound recordings of songs and magic practices, De Martino's fiancé Vittoria de Palma, who enabled the team's access to women's lifeworlds, and journalist Marcello Venturoli. Their expressed aims were a) to collect folk songs on various topics, b) to study magic-religious behaviours related to Lucanian peasants' life cycles, and c) to document the findings with photographs and a film (Gallini 1986, 106). Usually, the anthropologist and his small team would meticulously prepare the setting for their recordings and ask the professional mourners they encountered to perform their songs and expressive gestures and postures for the recording devices. In addition, they handed out questionnaires, collected multiple sources and documents by various interlocutors, and gathered texts on melodic themes with the aim of contextualising and better understanding the ritual behaviours and bodily techniques of lament. During this trip, Franco Pinna took pictures of two so-called *prefiche* or *chiangimorti*, as the female ritual mourners are commonly referred to in the Salento region. Grazia Prudente and Carmina Di Giulio were photographed outside the village Pisticci in the province of Matera.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The original photographs and sound recordings are held and made publicly accessible by the Archivio Sonoro Basilicata: <http://www.archiviosonoro.org/archivio-sonoro/archivio-sonoro-basilicata/fondo-pinna/1952-a/05-lamentatrici-di-pisticci.html> (last accessed 22/10/2020).



Fig. 1. Photograph by Franco Pinna, taken on 10 October 1952 near the village of Pisticci in the province of Matera, depicting the *prefiche* Carmina di Giulio.

Fig. 2. Artwork by Alessia Rollo from the series *Parallel Eyes* (2019-2024) in which she perforated Pinna's photograph.

Although these lamentations traditionally only took place in closed rooms, usually at the home of the deceased, the anthropologist and his team moved them to the outside. De Martino did not conceal the fact that the lament was staged for him and his team, but rather straightforwardly explained that “the backdrop of olive trees that frames the lamenter here can be explained by the fact that she refused to perform what was asked of her in the town, motivating her refusal by saying that the neighbours would certainly have protested. It was therefore necessary to take her into the countryside to ‘make her weep’ with the help of a friend [Grazia Prudente, M.S.]” (De Martino 2000 [1958], 377. See also Forgacs 2014, 148; Binazzi 2013).

In her *Parallel Eyes* series, Alessia Rollo is quite literally drawing on Pinna's photo of Carmina di Giulio (Fig. 1) and uses it as a basis for her critical engagement with De Martino's visual archive. De Martino had published the photo in both of his books on funerary lament, *Morte e pianto rituale nel mondo antico* (1958) and *Sud e magia* (1959); it has become iconic, because De Martino used the posture of Carmina di Giulio in the photo as an illustrative example of an embodied ancient lamentation gesture that he had copied from Greek vases prior to his fieldwork and now believed he had found again in action in 1950s Lucania.<sup>4</sup> Rollo coloured the photo in various shades of green in such a

<sup>4</sup>The photo was published in De Martino's *Morte e pianto rituale nel mondo antico* (1958) and republished a year later in his *Sud e magia* (1959), yet with different captions. While in *Morte e pianto rituale* it is

way that the face of the prefica still remains visible, and perforated the background with serpentine configurations (Fig. 2). It is not clear from her artist statements how thoroughly she had previously studied Lucanian lament and De Martino's writings on it. All we know is that in 2022, Rollo stated in the German edition of Leica Fotografie International (LFI):

I chose to employ various photographic techniques because I want to make the viewer doubt what they see, and also to criticize the scientific approach of ethnographic photography, which studies the complexity of a society as an object and trivializes it. (Rollo 2022)<sup>5</sup>

She is, of course, right in that throughout the history of anthropology – especially in colonial contexts, in “race theory” as well as in criminal anthropology – ethnographic and particularly anthropometric photography and film have been used as cruel tools of measuring, categorization and objectification. Native or indigenous individuals were habitually treated as specimens, stripped of their humanity and frozen in the past. But to assess the multimodal work of De Martino and the photographers in his team exclusively in this historic scientific context is not only overtly simplistic, but also incorrect. On the contrary, De Martino's objective was to dignify marginalized individuals and to render them as subjects rather than objects of history. For him, magical and ecstatic ritual practices were manifestations of historicised cultural patterns that helped subalterns to deal with existential crises and to express their feeling of not belonging to the world – a state that De Martino referred to “as loss or crisis of presence” (“crisi della presenza”: 1947).<sup>6</sup> The fact that he included “audio-visual collaborators”, namely photographers, filmmakers and an ethnomusicologist in his team shows how seriously he took the folkloristic practices and their multi-sensorial aspects to which writing alone would not do justice (Signorelli 2013).

De Martino's intentions for commissioning audio-visual recordings during his field research were manifold. First and foremost, he wanted to highlight the performative

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captioned “Esplosione parossistica controllata in lament funebre artificiale” (“Controlled paroxysmal explosion in artificial funeral lament”), a year later the same picture is simply called “Lamentatrice di Pisticci” (“Weeping Woman from Pisticci”) in *Sud e magia* (Binazzi 2013, 191; see also Forgacs 2014, 147). For a very detailed account of Pinna's treatment of photography of the lamentatrice, see Binazzi 2013.

<sup>5</sup> <<https://lfi-online.de/de/stories/alessia-rollo-parallel-eyes-14712.html>>, all translations by the author.

<sup>6</sup> For De Martino, the term *presence* refers to a ‘secured’ and ‘certain’ form of being-in-the-world, which is also the starting point for the ways in which humans adapt to and shape the world. However, in situations of crisis – for example, the loss of a loved one, poverty, hunger, or natural disasters – this presence may relapse into indeterminacy. From this threat a dialectic of crisis and reappropriation of presence then emerges; the ‘securing’ of the presence is understood as something that requires specific techniques. In other words, knowing about the fragility of presence and being threatened by its inevitable crisis, humans strive to escape concrete history by performing acts (i.e. rituals) that give them access to a meta-historical level.

characteristics of ancient lamentations and ritual choreographies. By evoking the sensory aspects of the movements, the body techniques, the cries, the mourning, he meant to make the “spectacle of the crisis” comprehensible and bring it to life. The images and recordings were also useful documents that he would use to study ritualized gestures and movements in more detail and/or slow motion. Last but not least, De Martino feared that the religious practices he was studying were disappearing, and his endeavor to document them could also be seen as a form of salvage anthropology.

To better understand De Martino's political interest in the media photography and film, it is necessary to consider the visual shift during the 1950s as a space of cultural transition in Italy. “The belated photographic boom in post-war Italy gave rise to photographic practices at once intensely vernacular, yet endowed with a global reach: *paparazzismo* and ethnographic photography”, writes cinema scholar Giuliana Minghelli (Minghelli 2016, 384). For the case of ethnographic photography she refers to the work of Franco Pinna, whose photographs afforded what Clifford Geertz calls a “thick description” of De Martino's ethnographic encounters (390).<sup>7</sup> However, De Martino himself remained highly skeptical of the epistemological significance of images and (not unlike Alessia Rollo today) did not trust that photographs could transport complex ethnographic knowledge by themselves. To him, photography was hence no analytical tool but a kind of ‘auxiliary science’ that he did not consider capable of generating data. Minghelli summarizes: “Photography played a crucial, yet implicit role in ‘focusing’ De Martino's gaze” (392). Consequently, the collaboration between the anthropologist and the photographers in his various research teams, was not always an easy one. Photographers like Franco Pinna were meticulously instructed by him and had detailed contracts that specified what exactly they had to research and take pictures of, and how. Only later, when it transpired that the images were much more than just an illustration of De Martino's written work (and after a legal dispute between Pinna and De Martino) were the photographers credited as individual authors. When commissioning the recordings, De Martino most certainly pondered the didactic potential of audio-visual media. By ‘didactic’, however, I do not mean that he might have had in mind to ‘enlighten’ the southern Italian peasants as previous propagandistic documentaries had intended; rather, he aimed at confronting the rest of the country, especially northern Italian intellectuals, with the harsh realities of the rural (religious) life of the South.

It is important to note though, that in the case of the Lucanian lamenters, the power relations between the researchers and the rural women were undoubtedly unequal and hierarchical with De Martino giving stage directions in a paternalistic tone. It is nevertheless also apparent here that the women had a certain amount of agency and were

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<sup>7</sup> In the 1960s, Franco Pinna would also work as set photographer for Federico Fellini, thus serving both genres: critical photojournalism/visual anthropology when documenting the harsh living conditions in the Italian South on his expedition with Ernesto De Martino, and capturing *la dolce vita* and the glamorous world of cinema.

able to determine how and where they wanted to 'perform' their lament and how and where they wanted to be photographed. They refused to weep indoors and explained that lamenting in the village would "bring misfortune" ("porta iella"). For this reason, De Martino expected the photographer to keep a low profile and to almost make himself invisible as to neither disturb the mourners nor the anthropologist's work. Despite this expectation, Pinna's photographic style is rather confrontational. His "style drives home the fact that photography is the product of a *mediation* between two subjects" (Minghelli 2016, 392). He directly communicates with the women through his camera that "at once addresses and is boldly addressed by the women", as Minghelli states (*ibid.*). "The effect", she writes, "is one of an unfolding communication, in which the ritual constructs itself for the camera, while the camera responds to the visual order of the archaic gestures", thus making their emblematic embodiment palpable (*ibid.*).<sup>8</sup> Ernesto De Martino thus had neither absolute control over the women photographed nor over the photographer and his working methods.

I wouldn't go so far as to say that the Lucanian women were co-producers of their images or collaborators in the research in today's sense of the term, but they were known by their individual names, and they had a say in how and where they were depicted. Pinna took detailed notes, logging the names of the people he photographed and describing the context in which the photos were taken (Mazzacane 1996). Between 1953 and 1956 De Martino made five more journeys to Southern Italy, mainly researching ritual lamentations and popular songs, during which his regular team – Diego Carpitella and Franco Pinna – refined their audio-visual research methods. The funerary laments that the researchers observed and recorded were all reconstructed and performed especially for the anthropologist and his companions (Carpitella 1968). For this reason, and in addition to classic ethnographic methods such as participant observation and interviews, De Martino made extensive use of reconstructions and re-enactments. These reenactments in which he asked his informants to stage certain poses, trances, and gestures for the purpose of the recordings, necessitated a certain amount of negotiation and collaboration. In this sense, the women actually did become participants in the research – albeit presumably not entirely of their own free will – and could co-determine as to which extent they wanted to participate in the reenactments and perform for the cameras.

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<sup>8</sup> Pinna not only photographed, he also shot 300 meters of 16mm-film footage of everyday practices and religious rituals, including some funeral laments (Gallini 1996, 85; Marano 2007, 28). Unfortunately, however, the footage and a short film entitled *Dalla culla alla bara* [*From Cradle to Grave*] which originally were to be exhibited alongside the photographs and Carpitella's audio recordings seem to have been lost and are still regarded as missing (Forgacs 2014: 144).



*Suonano ancora* - "They still Sound"

Another visual artist who was strongly influenced by the writings of De Martino on ritual lament is filmmaker Cecilia Mangini (1927-2021). After reading De Martino's *Morte e pianto rituale* and having seen Pinna's photographs, Mangini travelled to Martano, a village in Grecia Salentina, the Griko-speaking area in the Salentine peninsula, where De Martino had previously conducted fieldwork. There, she staged and filmed a funeral ritual without previously consulting the anthropologist. This resulted in her 1960 experimental documentary film *Stendali – suonano ancora*, a "masterpiece of realist poetry", as a film critic of the time wrote, which resembles an antique tragedy rather than an ethnographic documentary film (Grasso 2005, 35).<sup>9</sup>

Mangini reconstructed the death of a young man, and the lament, performed in Griko, is introduced as one of the oldest forms of "folk poetry". The commentary was written by Pier Paolo Pasolini, who decided not to translate the lament directly into standard Italian, but to reinterpret the songs and write a fictional dialogue between a mother and her deceased son. The lament was intended to verbalise the mother's pain: in Pasolini's text the suffering mother directly addresses her son, as she affectionately and frantically mourns his death. The famous actress Lilla Brignone recited the text with a dramatic voice, which created a stark contrast with the exclamations and shrill moans of the mourners.



Fig. 3. Still from *Stendali – suonano ancora* (1960) by Cecilia Mangini. © Cecilia Mangini

Fig. 4. Alessia Rollo "Funeral lamentation", from the series *Parallel*  
Eves. size: 80cm x 60cm © Alessia Rollo

Alessia Rollo perforates a still from Mangini's film *Stendali*, in which a group of prefiche, all dressed in black with black headscarves, stage a ritual mourning. They sit in an almost closed circle after the coffin with the corpse of the fictionally deceased son had

<sup>9</sup> A version of the film without subtitles can be watched here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vziV5nphthI> [last accessed: 10/01/ 2025].

been carried away by the priest. In the film, they tear their hair, wail loudly, rhythmically wring and wave their white handkerchiefs, and steadily jump up and down. Rollo pierces the photo paper at the point where the young man (an actor) would lie in his coffin. In her artwork, the void that his dead body leaves can no longer be seen – she makes the absence of the absent body invisible. The light shining through the perforated holes from behind makes the centre of the image look like a starry sky or a galaxy and gives it a dramatic air. Not unlike Mangini's own artistic practice in *Stendali*, Rollo's intervention also crosses the boundary between documentary photography and fictionalized storytelling.<sup>10</sup> However, instead of acknowledging the pathbreaking experimental approach of Mangini who deployed a unique technique of visual as well as audio montage and arrived at an aesthetic that differs significantly from the styling in neorealist cinema, Rollo sweepingly criticizes the politics of presentation of the Italian South since the 1950s:

There is no self-representation of this region of the country, because for the last 70 years, only photographers from the north (mostly men) have been responsible for representing our society. *Parallel Eyes* is my personal research into the culture to which I belong: my goal is to develop a 'parallel view' to enable a more complex analysis of southern Italian culture and to take a fresh look at the construction of Mediterranean cultural identity from a visual, historical and sociological perspective. (Rollo 2022)

It goes without saying that neither Ernesto De Martino, who was born in Naples, nor Franco Pinna, who was born on Sardinia, nor Cecilia Mangini, who was born in Mola di Bari, would ever identify as "Northerners." Instead, they all, not unlike Rollo herself, tried to reconnect to their Southern roots through their respective academic, journalistic, and artistic work. The disparity was more a result of class issues and access to education than geographical origin. With her sweeping statement, Rollo also ignores many decades of

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<sup>10</sup> The performance of ritual mourning has also inspired a number of contemporary filmmakers as well as video and sound artists. In 2008, Italian vocal performer Manuela Barile composed an 8-minute video work on ritualised expressions of pain, entitled *Moroloja* (<<https://vimeo.com/22123865>>). Shot on HD, 16:9, the piece is a highly stylised compilation of iconic gestures of Apulian *chiangimorti* or *prefiche* going back to Greek antiquity, and a montage of disturbing wailing/breathing sounds, performed by the artist herself. All dressed in black, Barile provides a study of formalised gestures and postures of ritual mourning practices – including the pulling of one's hair, wringing of a white handkerchief, rocking back and forth and the clapping of hands on one's thighs – that is accompanied and reinforced by her intricate vocal performance. Three years later, in 2011, London-based fashion- and lifestyle-photographer and filmmaker Alexander Ingham Brooke made a short experimental documentary film with the same title, *Moroloja* (<<https://vimeo.com/126610841>>). But in contrast to Barile who did not search for "authentic survivals" of ritual lament in Apulia and was mainly interested in the reconstruction of formulaic ritual behaviour, Ingham Brooke directly and unmistakably pays homage to Cecilia Mangini's film *Stendali* (1960) and returned to Martano in search for the women who featured in *Stendali*. Just over nine minutes long, Ingham Brooke's *Moroloja* can be interpreted as a restudy of Mangini's cinematic take on funerary lament that reproduces the original format and, in parts, even assumes the form of a remake.

meticulous and highly valuable work by regional scholars and artists. I would just like to mention the work of musicologist Luigi Chiriatti here, who spent decades researching local folk traditions and collecting, recording as well as performing Grecia Salentino folk song (his own mother was one of the last Griko speaking *prefiche*). Chiriatti not only founded the Kurumuny publishing house and for many years acted as artistic director of the *Notte della Taranta* festival, he also published various books and articles on tarantism (Agamennone, Chiriatti 2021; Chiriatti, Nocera 2005; Chiriatti 2005; 2007; 2011), took photographs and organized photographic exhibitions, and participated in film projects (Miscuglio, Chiriatti 1981) – he is one of numerous local scholars, musicians and artists who has (re-)appropriated and decisively shaped the region's positive image. Instead of acknowledging the immensely rich artistic tradition and self-representation in the Salento region, Rollo reiterates and thus rewrites another historical lament: that of the underrepresented and misconceived South.

## The Southern Question

When asked in an interview with LFI - Leica Fotografie International what her photo series was about, Rollo replied

*Parallel Eyes* is an ongoing multimedia project about the prejudice that Southern Italian and Mediterranean culture is backward. I make an effort to take a decolonised look at our heritage, to take an internal point of view and to historically rework the realism and capitalism of the visual material produced about Southern Italy in the last decades. (Rollo 2022)

With this reference to the *questione Meridionale*, Italy's 'Southern Question', Rollo addresses a key issue in the perception and representation of the Mezzogiorno. Her statement raises the question though of whether, in the case of Southern Italy, we are actually dealing with an "internal colonialism", or rather with a form of orientalized and racialized representation of Southern Italians that can or should nonetheless be addressed with a decolonial perspective.<sup>11</sup> Visual anthropologist Francesco Faeta speaks of "orientalizzazione interna", an internal orientalization that led to the representation of the South as a kind of "peasant Orient" (*Oriente contadino*) (Faeta 1999; 2003; 2011).

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<sup>11</sup> In his 1993 text *Making Democracy Work. Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*, the American political scientist Robert D. Putnam traces the roots for the attributed Southern Italian "backwardness" to polarizing "patterns of governance" that originated already in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, and concludes that "[i]n the North, people were citizens; in the South they were subjects [...]" (Putnam 1993, 130). The subjugation of Southern Italy is even more clearly described and attributed to "colonial exploitation" by Sidney Tarrow who, in her review of Putnam's book, pointed out that the various foreign regimes that governed southern Italy since the Norman establishment of a centralized monarchy in the 12<sup>th</sup> century assigned southern Italy a semicolonial status that did not disappear with the unified government established in 1861, but was continued by other means (Tarrow 1996, 394).

De Martino himself quoted the words of a Jesuit monk who in the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century proposed to use southern Italy as a training camp for young missionaries, calling it “le indie di quaggiù”, “the indies of down here.” This expression also inspired an analysis of De Martino’s role for Italian visual anthropology by film critic Gianluca Sciannameo, entitled *Nelle Indie di quaggiù. Ernesto De Martino e il cinema etnografico* (Sciannameo 2006). The book outlines how filmmakers and photographers in the 1950ies and 1960ies inspired by De Martino have attempted to give, for the first time, voice and dignity to those marginalized and neglected by official historiography. Sciannameo asserts that in these works Southern Italian lifeworlds were not considered as “backward, ignorant and completely dominated by the irrationality and religion” (Rollo), but treated as longstanding popular cultural heritage which resisted “the dominance of the hegemonic Christian religion” (Signorelli 2013, 79).<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that the demartinian multimodal archive also has a tendency to aestheticize poverty and to further a certain “proletarian exoticism”, as I have argued elsewhere (Schäuble 2015).

In the introduction to her seminal work on *Italy's “Southern Question”* (1998) anthropologist Jane Schneider proclaims that “Italy was certainly affected by Orientalism” (Schneider 1998, 5). While clearly not referring to classic Orientalist constellations and imaginaries as famously outlined by Edward Said, the Orientalism Schneider evokes instead resembles a “neo-Orientalist discourse *within* Italy itself” (8). After the Risorgimento, the perception that an impoverished, backward South was holding the modernized North back increasingly gained momentum. This divergence, which advanced from the 1870s and continued throughout the twentieth century, was also heavily racialized, positioning Southern Italians as inferior due to their “dubious African and Oriental histories and cultures.”<sup>13</sup> The essentialisms inherent in the Southern Question live on to this day and have also influenced the discourse around tarantism –

<sup>12</sup> For a comprehensive discussion of De Martino’s analysis of the Southern Question, see Carla Pasquinelli 1977. Pasquinelli accentuates that De Martino’s ethnographic and religious-philosophical works take cultural and psychological dimensions of the South’s historical experiences into account, arguing that the South’s cultural resilience and traditional practices are part of a complex process of cultural survival under oppressive conditions.

<sup>13</sup> Joseph Pugliese, “Whiteness and the Blackening of Italy: La Guerra Cafona, Extracomunitari and Provisional Street Justice,” *Portal* 5.2 (2008): 3; see also Cesare Lombroso *Criminal Man* (New York & London: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1911 [1876]): 28. Pugliese argues that the *Questione Meridionale* (Southern Question) was marked by hierarchies of whiteness according to a geopolitical fault line that split Italy along a black/white axis which encoded a set of racialized presuppositions that have been “constitutive in the formation of hegemonic Italian identity, politics and culture” (Pugliese 2008: 32). Apart from the racial aspects highlighted by the criminologists of the time, the North/South dichotomy also had a gendered dimension; Guglielmo Ferrero, a supporter of Cesare Lombroso, for example, suggested that Southern Italian men were more prone to chasing women and sexually precocious than Northerners and consequently less socially engaged and economically productive (see Schneider, *Italy's “Southern Question,”* 10f).

another important and famous research topic of De Martino – in the past. According to dance scholar Jerri Daboo,

[t]he idea that the North was the place of learning, culture, industrialization and modernity, whereas the South was the land of poverty, the rural peasant, corruption, the Mafia, and a world filled with superstition and magic, has contributed to some of the ways in which the practice of tarantism has been discussed. (Daboo 2010, 20)

De Martino, of course, was acutely aware of these discourses and preconceptions and tried to create awareness of the rich folk-religious traditions of the South. He considered tarantism (along with Lucanian funeral lament) as a living relic from ancient Greece and rather feared that the precious religious practices he was studying were being transformed or disappearing. In his salvage endeavor to document and conserve them, he had initially intended to create a systematically prepared “cinematographic encyclopedia” but in the end it was never realized due to financial constraints. But I argue that De Martino’s expeditions to Southern Italy were part of his project later coined as “ethnographic humanism” (“l’umanesimo etnografico”; De Martino 2002 [1977], 389-394), in the context of which he intended to use film and photography to propagate his “critical ethnocentrism”. Emilio Giacomo Berrocal has even argued that De Martino, based on his principle of ‘critical ethnocentrism’, introduced a type of ethnography that makes him the “first post-colonial ethnographer committed to the production of post-coloniality” (Berrocal 2009, 136). As the term ‘critical ethnocentrism’ indicates, De Martino critically acknowledged the nature of the “ethnographic encounter” and the categories of his analysis; writing from a standpoint of solidarity with the Apulian and Lucanian peasants and farm workers whose popular culture he studied, he rejected the categorical notion of Southern backwardness (*arretratezza*) as a given condition as well as discourse, and acknowledged the residual ‘archaic’ qualities of this culture at the same time as understanding them as contemporary, modern variants of practices with a concrete function. He understood the ethnographic encounter as a chance and obligation to critically reflect on “Western” categories of analysis and to challenge the inherent ethnocentric values. This position also implied the recognition that the Western world had gained its hegemony by dominating the Other. Consequently, De Martino saw his own responsibility as ethnographer in trying to find ways to help the Southern Italian populations emancipate themselves. Referring to De Martino’s fieldwork notes, *Note Lucane* (“Notes from Lucania”, 1950), where he implicitly introduces the notion of ethnography as a way of fighting against the “colonial situation” (Berrocal 2009, 124), Berrocal also expertly highlights the ethnographer’s painful realization of “double epistemic violence”, (cf. Spivak 1988)– “that is the violence of representation made by the intellectual who wants to give voice to the subalterns without reflecting enough on the nature of the intellectual project itself, and on the meaning of the instruments used” (Berrocal 2009, 130).

In the fourth chapter “Apocalypse and Decolonization” of his unfinished and posthumously published opus magnum *La Fine del Mondo* – that has recently been brilliantly translated into English by Dorothy Zinn – De Martino outlines his critical comparative approach and stresses the need for epistemological reflexivity in anthropology as

a critical ethnocentrism in which Western (or westernized) ethnologists take the history of their own culture as a unit of measure for foreign cultural histories. At the same time, in the act of measuring, they gain awareness of the historical prison and limits of using their own system of measurement, and they open themselves to the task of reforming the very categories of observation available to them at the beginning of the research. Only by placing Western history at the center of a comparative study in a critical and deliberate way will the ethnologist usher in an anthropological awareness that is wider than the one contained in dogmatic ethnocentrism. (De Martino 2023 [2002 and 2019], 174)

This plea to Western scholars to “critically reappropriate their own epistemology through the ethnographic encounter with cultural difference” (Zinn 2023, XVI) contains a degree of self-awareness that might be taken for granted today, but at the time De Martino was writing was new and progressive.<sup>14</sup>

For De Martino the fascination with Southern Italian peasant culture and religious practices was closely linked to a political mission and informed by historical materialism and the educational notion of a “progressive folklore.” In a short homonymous article published in the Communist Party newspaper *L'Unità* in 1951 De Martino—with reference to Karl Marx and Antonio Gramsci—developed the concept of a “progressive folklore” in the sense of a progressive cultural change (De Martino 1976 [1951]). He conceptualized folklore (including magico-religious practices and tarantism) as an initially conservative force and as an instrument to suppress the working class and peasantry. But unlike Gramsci, for whom revolutionary change resembled a process, in the course of which “popular mentalities” and behavior are transformed and folkloric thinking abandoned, De Martino saw the potential of a “progressive folklore” in the gradual opening up to change of traditional forms of popular culture. He even argued that the workers’ movement was providing the momentum for a new kind of folklore with

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<sup>14</sup> Ernesto De Martino strongly rejected the “patterns of culture” approach of Mead and other American anthropologists and ethnopsychologists who believed in “cultural types” (De Martino 1977 [1949], 51; see also Forgacs 2014, 171). He did, however, draw a parallel between magic practices, “eccentric behavior” and marginalization. He applied to the *Parapsychology Foundation* in New York for a research grant, and in October 1956 was awarded the sum of \$ 4000.00 in support of his study on “peasant healers of Lucania”. In turn De Martino informed the Foundation about his plans to make “a scientific film”, offering them a free copy. De Martino was also in close contact with psychoanalyst and parapsychologist Emilio Servadio who helped him to bring his research in Lucania to the attention of and meet with international researchers of institutions such as the *Menninger Foundation* and the *International Psychoanalytical Foundation* hoping to compare notes on possible explanations (source Archive of the Associazione Internazionale Ernesto De Martino at the Bibliomediateca Accademia di Santa Cecilia, Box 14, Folders 2&3, personal archival research).

a progressive message that would eventually replace self-defeating superstitious beliefs and enable of the subaltern classes to “enter into history.” In this sense, he had a very pragmatic yet dynamic understanding of magico-religious practices, and to claim that he portrayed religious practices in the South as irrational or ignorant is based on a misunderstanding of his actual writings. In order to elaborate on this further, in the following I will focus on ethnographic studies and artistic (re-)appropriations of Apulian tarantism.

### “Little Carnival of Women”

Having previously examined funerary rituals as relics of ancient lament in Lucania, in 1959, De Martino famously assembled an interdisciplinary research team to study Apulian tarantism, a condition characterised by ecstatic dancing that traditionally follows the bite of the tarantula spider, scorpion or snake, and which is cured by music. During their wild, often obscene gestures these “tarantuled” persons (*tarantati*) would hold an imaginary dialogue with St. Paul, the patron saint against venomous bites and in June 29, they are traditionally brought to the St. Paul’s chapel of Galatina to plea for grace and healing.

In her introduction to the expedition materials of 1959 that she co-edited and published in 2011, fellow anthropologist Amalia Signorelli writes that outsiders, especially men, were not allowed to enter the chapel during the feast of Saints Peter and Paul in Galatina (Signorelli 2010, 21). She recalls that the door was guarded by two policemen and that this guard had been intensified by the scandal caused by the photo reportage that Chiara Samugheo had published in 1954. Five years before De Martino had traveled to Puglia to study tarantism with his team, Italian photojournalist Chiara Samugheo photographed *tarantate* in the chapel at Galatina. She published the images in a documentary photo reportage entitled *Le Invasate (The Possessed)*. In these photographs, the afflicted women can be seen with distorted faces, writhing on the floor, or climbing on the altar in the church. The title “the possessed” refers to their transgressive, alienating behavior. It can be assumed that the photos under this title have not cast a positive light on the *tarantate* in the rest of Italy. De Martino must have been familiar with Samugheo’s photos, but he does not mention them.<sup>15</sup> Instead, the photos

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<sup>15</sup> In the introduction to *La terra del rimorso* De Martino wrote that the initial idea of carrying out fieldwork on *tarantism* came to him when looking at photographs that French photographer André Martin had taken of ‘possessed’ women (and a few men) in Galatina in 1957. He stated that the historiographic coherence of these images constituted “a knot of extreme contradictions” (De Martino 2005 [1961], 11) and he called them a stimulus for his method to study the religious history of the south through exemplary singular episodes.

of the photographers who accompanied him as part of the research team, foremost those by Franco Pinna, are nowadays considered the first and most iconic images of tarantism.

Interestingly, in her reworking of iconic photographs of tarantism, Alessia Rollo draws on these earliest images of Samugheo. Her work can be interpreted as consciously protecting the anonymity of those afflicted by rendering them unrecognizable, thus indirectly criticizing the historic depictions as an affront to the dignity of the women.



*Fig. 5. Chiara Samugheo, photo from the series *Le Invasate* (1954). Samugheo had traveled to Galatina to document the phenomenon of tarantism five years before it caught the attention of anthropologist Ernesto De Martino and his entourage. These are the very first photos that exist of tarantism. Image courtesy of Giuliana Campanale.*

*Fig. 6. Alessia Rollo, "In Trance" from the series *Parallel Eyes* (2019). Rollo uses Samugheo's original photo in reverse. The faces of the afflicted are made unrecognizable by the artistic intervention. Image courtesy of the artist.*

Unfortunately, as far as I know, there are no historical sources in which it is recorded how Samugheo experienced photographing *tarantati* in Galatina. The only accounts by a female photographer are by Annabella Rossi, who was also part of De Martino's team in 1959 and who, in later years, returned on her own to research tarantism and photograph afflicted persons. She writes:

Curiosity was aroused when I began to take photographs, record voices, shouts, screams; in short, when I taped what I saw and heard – especially when doing so in the immediate vicinity of and inside the sanctuary. The reactions were diverse; the camera was not an element of disturbance, unless in moments of extreme tension, which happened mainly at festivals attended by people suffering from mental illness; on the contrary, being portrayed was a source of great satisfaction, so much so that, especially by young people, I was urged to photograph 'them too'. (Rossi 1986, 20)

Interestingly, in this case it was less the taking of photographs that caused resistance, but the recording of voices. Rossi recalls: "The tape recorder, on the other hand, was



hardly accepted. There was always the suspicion that I was making records and that I was therefore making special money out of them.” (Rossi 1986, 20). Probably a few years later, in the mid-1960s, the people of Salento were already sensitized and defended themselves against outsiders becoming famous or rich, or building their scientific or artistic careers by recording them. In other interviews from the time, it becomes clear that some *tarantate* were proud to be recorded and broadcast nationwide on TV. The statements on the medialization of suffering by those afflicted are thus diverse and also contradictory.



Fig. 7. Photo by Diego Carpitella (1959), depicting the violinist Luigi Stifani playing the pizzica during a so-called home therapy. Image courtesy of Fondazione Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia, Rome.

Fig. 8. Alessia Rollo, “The Rhythm of the Spider” from the series *Parallel Eyes* (2019). Here, the local musicians, above all Luigi Stifani, are still recognizable. Image courtesy of the artist.

Another photo that Rollo reworked and then entitled “The Rhythm of the Spider” was originally taken by ethnomusicologist and occasional photographer Diego Carpitella. This photo is visually dominated by violinist Luigi Stifani from Nardò. Stifani was widely known as *Maestro Gigi* (*Mesciu Gigi* in the local Salentine dialect) and has also been referred to as a musician of the poor and great master of ceremonies of a ‘subaltern liturgy’.

Habitually, tarantism is treated by a “musical-choreutic-chromatic exorcism” - a ritual therapy through dance, music and colour symbolism – for which a band comprised of violin, guitar, accordion and tambourine is called to play for the *tarantati* in their homes.

During these so-called “home therapies” (*terapie domiciliari*) the afflicted would perform seemingly uncontrolled dances, scream and move in convulsive ways simulating possession by (and defeat of) the tarantula spider under the distraught and curious gaze of family members and neighbors. A barber by profession, Stifani is considered the most important pizzica violinist who, along with his amateur orchestra, cured dozens of *tarantati* in so-called “home therapies” with the pinch of his violin. He himself was a key informant to Ernesto De Martino in the 1950s and established contact with various afflicted women and men for the anthropologist and his team.<sup>16</sup> Luigi Stifani developed his own musical notation system and also acted as a lay researcher; he wrote down all cases of tarantism he encountered as a music therapist – 29 in total between 1928 and 1972. His handwritten notes were published in 2000 in the volume *Io al Santo ci credo* (Stifani 2000).

In this artwork by Rollo, all the protagonists are still clearly recognizable. They probably were not obscured because they are posing for the camera and have thus clearly given their consent to being photographed by Carpitella. She uses only the colors red, green and yellow that also play a role in chromatic music therapy and draws in arches that are typical of Salentine houses. Those familiar with Stifani's story and his crucial role in 20<sup>th</sup> century Apulian tarantism will not be surprised that he is painted in bright red in Rollo's adaptation of the photo, thus highlighting the fact that he provocatively looks the viewer straight in the eye.

When describing her technique of altering the archival images, Alessia Rollo argues that De Martino's scientific approach not only dehumanized those he studied but also erased “the magic” in the ritual practices

by using photographic techniques like digital and analog manipulation, painting of negatives or perforating them: my aim is to introduce back in the images the magical and ritual aspect erased by the scientific approach of the photographers. On the other side I am documenting through my camera rituals that still exist in South Italy. (Rollo 2023)

By portraying herself as an alternative chronicler of ritual practices, Rollo rejects De Martino's approach, which she perceives as paternalistic and dispassionate. Her comment that these rituals “still exist,” however, maintains a continuity and implies that tarantism lives on in an unchanged way. And it is exactly this allegedly unbroken persistence of the cult that risks (self-)essentialising and romanticising religious practices and potentially contributes to the neo-Orientalism of the Italian South highlighted by Schneider. With her artworks, Alessia Rollo attempts to provide an alternative narrative

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<sup>16</sup> Diego Carpitella made numerous recordings of Stifani's pizzica music which became a crucial part of 20<sup>th</sup> century tarantism ritual. Stifani also appears in countless photographs by Franco Pinna, Diego Carpitella and Anabella Rossi and features in and/or is interviewed in documentaries on tarantism such as *Meloterapia del tarantismo* (1960), *La Taranta* (1961), *Sud a Magia* (1978) and *Morso d'amore* (1981) as well as in Edoardo Winspeare's feature film *Pizzicata* (1996).

on the basis of which a “new imaginary” for the future can emerge through the reassessment of the past. This endeavor puts her directly in line with De Martino, whose intention was to expose the progressive, emancipatory, and forward-looking potential of these rituals.

## Conclusion

Overall, Alessia Rollo's artist statement is clearly formulated as a reappropriation of scientific (anthropology) and visual (filmmaking and photography) representations of Lucanian funerary rituals and Apulian tarantism. With her technique to draw/write over the iconic images, she intends to reintroduce them into a magical sphere that has supposedly been “erased by the scientific approach.” In a review of her work, the *British Journal of Photography* asserts that through her “heightened aesthetic, Rollo valorises the magical and establishes an alternative visual language to the clinical documents of the archives.” She claims her own “culture” as the main reason and motivation for setting previous misleading representations straight. With this she actually speaks for a great many Southern Italians, who to this day feel misunderstood and misrepresented by anthropologists, journalists and photographers. Unfortunately, the problem remains that by invoking an “authentic” ritualist approach and by ignoring the multifaceted remediation that funerary rituals as well as *tarantismo* has gone through over the past decades (and arguably centuries), essentialist conceptions of “Southern Italian culture” and “identity” are reproduced—albeit celebrated and revalued.

Personally, I think that it is a shame that Rollo in neither of the cases – Lucanian funerary lamentation and Apulian tarantism – acknowledges that it was actually female photographers and filmmakers like Chiara Samugheo and Cecilia Mangini as well as female anthropologists such as Amalia Signorelli, Clara Gallini, Carla Pasquinelli and Annabella Rossi, who challenged the dominant views of the male scientists and provided creative alternatives to patriarchal or paternalist approaches in visual anthropology. Viewed from a critical feminist perspective, Rollo unfortunately contributes to the monolithic view of a “scientific visual archive” of the Italian South by rendering the work of these impressive women artists and researchers invisible.

Archives are not inert historical collections and thus not merely static repositories of historiography, let alone of history or ‘the past.’ Walter Benjamin once conceptualized the archive as a fugacious site of excavation and danger, thus radically challenging the modern view of the archive as a site of historical permanence and unambiguousness. I argue that Alessia Rollo might have sensed a “moment of danger” as described by Walter Benjamin, initiated by the images taken during the ethnographic expeditions in the 1950ies. The photographs and recorded documents can indeed be (mis-)read as representations by which the depicted people are objectified and reduced to specimens of southern Italian folk culture. In this view, they would inevitably have become a tool of

the “ruling classes” – subject to the “clinical gaze” of the academy and the educated political elites. Rollo’s artistic work draws attention to these iconic photos and questions their genesis and the context in which they were taken. This is an important contribution to the further reappraisal of the history of visual anthropology in Italy and the contribution of Ernesto De Martino’s ‘scattered’ multimodal archive to the *questione Meridionale*.” At the same time, however, I would like to note that artistic interventions do not by default “decolonize” an archive and that even critical engagements with colonial and/or hegemonic archives run danger of promoting a potentially essentializing heritagization. With her artistic intervention, Rollo tries to regain the sovereignty of interpretation over the images. The danger, or perhaps even the irony, lies in the fact that the arguments of her “decolonial critique” show a great similarity to De Martino’s “critical ethnocentrism”, first formulated almost sixty years earlier – with the significant difference that by insisting on her “own southern Italian culture”, Rollo serves an homogenizing essentialization thereof and, moreover, (maybe inadvertently) engages in identity-political discourse.

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