

FELICE CIMATTI

## THE LURE OF NOTHINGNESS. ART AND CRISIS OF “PRESENCE” IN ERNESTO DE MARTINO

*The immediate ‘other’ in a social relationship does not have to be another ‘human being’. [...] Social agency can be exercised relative to ‘things’ and social agency can be exercised by ‘things’ (and also animals).  
Gell 1998, 17-18.*

### 1. Dualism

At first there is risk. The risk of losing what De Martino – perhaps the major Italian anthropologist and one of the most important philosophers of the twentieth century – called “presence” (*presenza*).<sup>1</sup> “Presence” does not simply mean to be alive or to exist: it means that a human being (according to De Martino “presence” is a uniquely human possibility) must be present in respect to the situation she is facing in that moment. For example, we may take the case of someone looking at a tree in a meadow: to perceive such a tree in a *human* way implies not only to perceive the object ‘tree’, it also implies that the perceiver in some way (implicitly or explicitly) perceives herself as the ‘perceiver’ of such a tree. In this sense, she is present in respect to the tree that she actually perceives. However, “presence” is not synonymous of self-consciousness, because for De Martino the point in question is not simply the capacity of the subject to be aware of her own awareness.

That is, “presence” is not primarily a psychological or philosophical concept. What is at stake, in fact, is the capacity of human beings to perceive a ‘tree’ as a *human* object, that is, as firewood, building

---

<sup>1</sup> The English translation of De Martino is by the A. The original Italian text can be found in the footnotes.

material, something that provides shade in the summer heat, an aesthetic object, and so on. From this point of view, a 'tree' is an object that pertains to human culture and history. Therefore, when someone sees a 'tree' she is at the same time individually perceiving an object and participating in an intersubjective tradition of cultural uses of such an object. Thus "presence" is the human capacity to remain in contact with such a tradition, even if the actual subject is not aware of this tradition – tradition is indeed always operative in a concealed manner, hidden in the gestures and thoughts of the subject. What is important is that a single "presence" is never alone in her experience of the 'tree'. To be human, on the one hand, is precisely to be in a social mediated relation with something in every moment of one's life; on the other, it means that one is never in relation with a simple 'natural' object, exactly because each object is *always* a culturally mediated object. We may take the case of the sun: the sun enters into human life as warmth and light, or as energy (in the form of a solar panel). Even the sun, a very far star, from such a perspective is a human object. The point is that the sun enters into human life only as a humanized object: "the sun is what we can do with it" (De Martino 2019, 492).<sup>2</sup> From this point of view De Martino is a somewhat Kantian anthropologist, that is, someone who believes that human beings can only have relations with entities that have been adapted to the human (transcendental) capacity to experience them. In fact, "presence" is a "synthetic unity"<sup>3</sup> (De Martino 2019, 429) of all possible human experiences – indeed a typical Kantian expression.

Because of this double character of "presence" – both singular and social, actual and historical, factual and ethical – according to De Martino "presence" is not a 'natural' or 'obvious' human endowment. One has to maintain her own presence in the face of the world, that is, one *must* always remain in relation with such a cultural and historical tradition that defines the *human* condition: "presence, being in the world, being in history, are equivalent expressions that may be used to designate human vitality in the very act of distinguishing itself from biological life." (De Martino 2019, 429)<sup>4</sup> De Martino insists on the

---

<sup>2</sup> "Il sole è ciò che ne possiamo fare".

<sup>3</sup> "Unità sintetica".

<sup>4</sup> "Presenza, esserci nel mondo, esserci nella storia sono espressioni equivalenti per designare la vitalità umana in atto di distinguersi dal vitale biologico".

distinction between the human condition and the ‘mere’ natural and animal existence. This is a radical thesis, quite unusual in present times, and such a dualism between the natural and the cultural is a key point of De Martino’s anthropological and ontological theory. However, as we will see in the following pages, this dualism is by no means definitive, quite the contrary: for De Martino *Homo sapiens* is precisely the animal that never ceases to hesitate between animality and humanity, simple being and the duty of being, crisis and presence.

“Presence” is not a mere natural fact: it is always necessary to fight in order to maintain one’s own presence. In fact, one major obstacle presents itself to “presence”: natural life, which drives human beings toward a simple animal condition. “Nature is incapable of culture, because one cannot find in it the presence that gives rise from within itself to the works and the days of human civilization.”<sup>5</sup> Clearly De Martino is not denying the capacity of some animal species to develop some form of ‘culture’ (Laland/Galef, 2009). His is not an empirical assertion, it is a definition: *Homo sapiens* is the species whose existence is not a simple biological fact but a *choice*. While a non-human animal lives the life it happens to live, a human animal lives the life it decides to live.

Therefore “presence” has more to do with ethics than with biology. Such a definition of the human condition obliges De Martino to trace a clear distinction between animal and human life: “human vitality is not ‘raw and green, wild and free from all subsequent education.’<sup>6</sup> This is the vitality of plants and of animals; it is not the peculiar vitality of human beings. Human life is presence, that is, life that becomes present to itself.” (De Martino 2019, 426)<sup>7</sup>. Therefore, the concept of “presence” traces a radical difference between animality and nature on the one hand, and between humanity and culture on the other: what is at stake is the ethical character of human life. Otherwise, what we have is “the vitality of a human being, though as a natural being, as a

---

<sup>5</sup> “La natura è incapace di cultura, appunto perché in essa non ha luogo la presenza che fa prorompere da sé le opere e i giorni dell’umana civiltà”.

<sup>6</sup> This is a famous quotation from Benedetto Croce 1998, p. 35.

<sup>7</sup> “La vitalità umana non è ‘la vitalità cruda e verde, selvatica e intatta da ogni educazione ulteriore’. Questa è vitalità della pianta o dell’animale, non dell’uomo. La vitalità umana è presenza, cioè la vita che si fa presente a sé”.

corporeal organism, therefore not as *human being*.” (De Martino 2019, 427)<sup>8</sup> At the beginning there is the radically unnatural choice not to be animal. Such a choice is not at all an empirical fact, quite the contrary, it is the transcendental condition of humanity. For this reason, “the historiography of cultural life can never speak about how the shift towards humanity and culture takes place starting from a natural state devoid of humanity, indeed it can only speak of how human beings rise from naturality.” (De Martino 2019, 430)<sup>9</sup> The human condition is *human* precisely because it decides to be human. That is, humanity commences each time a living being moves away from its own animality. For this same reason it is not possible to find in animality the biological roots of humanity, since humanity simply means giving up animality.

What is the anthropological break that places human beings beyond nature? In fact, a human being is nothing other than such a break, which never stops breaking itself. The decision not to be an animal means that human beings are human precisely because at every moment they decide to be human: “the human condition is nature which, through the ethos of presence, rises to culture.” (De Martino 2019, 432)<sup>10</sup> “Presence” is an “ethos”, that is, a practical decision. Humanity is such a decision whereby one cannot stop deciding. De Martino stresses such a point: “being” always is a “have to be”. (De Martino 2019, 487)<sup>11</sup> In such a decision, it is possible to find the radical nature/nurture dualism developed by De Martino on the one hand, and the equally radical weakness of this same dualism on the other. In fact, precisely because one is not a human being once and forever, such a state of “presence” is always exposed to the risk of becoming lost. While a lobster, for example, is a lobster exactly because it was born as a lobster, on the contrary a human being is *human* only until the decision of being human is renewed and reaffirmed. One cannot stop the process of becoming human only because one cannot stop the parallel and contrary process of becoming animal (Agamben, 2002). Both processes are operative at the same time. From this point of view, one

---

<sup>8</sup> “La vitalità dell’uomo, ma in quanto essere naturale, in quanto organismo corporeo, e cioè non in quanto *uomo*”.

<sup>9</sup> “La storiografia della vita culturale non può mai narrare come partendo da un naturale senza l’umano, si passa all’umano e al culturale, ma soltanto come l’umano si solleva alla naturalità”.

<sup>10</sup> “La condizione umana è natura che, mediante l’ethos della presenza, si solleva alla cultura”.

<sup>11</sup> “L’essere” è sempre “dover essere”.

could say that with the notion of “presence” De Martino opened a hole in the human condition; in fact, being human means nothing other than this hole. De Martino attempted to ground the human world in what he defined as the “ethos of transcendence”<sup>12</sup> (De Martino 2019, 485) – that is, the ethical decision to overcome the ‘natural’ condition – indeed he felt strongly that the grounding of such a world is greatly unstable: “the world *must* be grounded precisely because it can lose its own grounding.” (De Martino 2019, 487)<sup>13</sup> It is this absence of a stable grounding that makes the grounding of this world necessary. The human decision, “presence”, is such a decision that one can only make on the edge of the abyss of the lack of any grounding.

From this point of view, the dualism of De Martino is all but a gesture of contempt for the natural and animal world. Quite the contrary, it is the evidence of a ceaseless attraction for a condition in which one is finally released from the effort of being human. De Martino cannot be understood if one does not realize how his own dualism is unstable and always open to the lure of being dissolved. The theoretical challenge that De Martino presents us is that of how to always remain in contact with such a risk of collapsing the natural/cultural dualism. The problem does not consist in the risk of forgetting that *Homo sapiens* is also an animal species, indeed it is rather about finding a way to be a *human* animal being (Cimatti, 2020). That is, to be such a living being which is capable of being human without ceasing to be animal as well. To be such a living being which is capable of remaining on the border where animality and humanity diverge. The problem is that such a border properly does not exist, because there is no such dividing line, which would place animals on one side and humans on the other. Nevertheless, it is exactly and only along the line of such an in-existent border that “presence” can take place. This raises the question: what place is a place that is not a place? What kind of experience can we have of such an impossible place? It is for this reason that the anthropological problem posed by the notion of “presence” is a problem revolving around the kind of space in which the decision pertaining to “presence” takes place.

---

<sup>12</sup> “*Ethos del trascendimento*”.

<sup>13</sup> “Il mondo *deve* essere fondato proprio perché può perdere il fondamento”.

## 2. Risk and presence

One cannot understand what “presence” is if one does not realize how such a *presence* is connected to what De Martin calls “*permanent anthropological risk*”, that is, “the risk of not being in any possible cultural world.”<sup>14</sup> (De Martino 2019, 198) This is not the risk of losing a particular cultural world, like the case of someone who faces the collapse of a political regime, as in the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The “*permanent anthropological risk*” is the radical risk of losing the capacity to remain in any cultural world. We may take the previous example of the ‘tree’. This risk translates into the possibility of seeing a ‘tree’ as if it were an object from another galaxy, an absolutely foreign entity, something that is utterly incomprehensible. In such a condition, no social action would be possible with this mysterious entity. The world would be transformed into an alien and hostile environment, which paralyzes any possible action. As a consequence “presence” itself would disappear, because without an object – that is, an entity that is present for presence – also the subject collapses upon itself. De Martino illustrates such a situation with an example that has become famous, that of the peasant of Marcellinara (a small village in Calabria):

I remember a sunset, driving down some a road in Calabria. We were not sure the itinerary was right, and we were relieved to run into an old shepherd. We stopped the car and asked him what we needed to know [...] we begged him to get in the car and accompany us to the right fork in the road. [...] Along the way, it was a short distance, he became distrustful, and then anguished, because he could no longer see the familiar view of Marcellinara’s bell tower from the window, the landmark of his tiny existential space. The poor old man felt utterly disorientated by the disappearance of the bell tower, and was so agitated, showing signs of despair and terror, that we decided to take him back to where we had met. On the way back he kept his head out of the window of the car [...] until he finally saw the bell tower again, his face relaxed, his old heart went back to beating normally, as if he had returned to his lost homeland. [...] This means that presence is at risk when it touches the boundaries of its existential homeland, when one no longer sees “Marcellinara’s bell tower”, when one loses the cultural horizon beyond which one cannot go and within which one consumes its operational

---

<sup>14</sup>“*Rischio antropologico permanente*, cioè [...] rischio di non poterci essere in nessun mondo culturale possibile”.

“beyonds”: that is, when one is faced with nothingness. (De Martino 2019, 364-365)<sup>15</sup>

“Anxiety” is a condition in which “presence” – as in the case of the old shepherd of Marcellinara – no longer recognizes its world as a cultural social world, that is, as a living space where habitual traditional actions are possible. The bell tower of his little village is the center of his “existential space”; when such a space loses its own center it is transformed into an alien and mysterious space. Now the shepherd finds himself in a space he no longer recognizes as familiar and known. Together with the collapse of the tower bell, “presence” also collapses, because the latter cannot exist without the former. From this point of view, we are all constantly keeping an eye on our “Marcellinara bell tower”. According to De Martino “anxiety” means to “experience the risk of not being able to be in any possible cultural world. It is therefore anxiety in the face of *nothingness*, but ‘nothingness’ here means the possibility of ‘annihilating’ the ethos of the presentification of the world.” (De Martino 2019, 525)<sup>16</sup> In fact “presence” properly means “presentification”, that is, the effort on the part of the subject to be in the world as a human world. We may consider the case of Marcellinara’s bell tower. With its familiar and ancient chimes, it signifies the rhythm of the sacred and profane temporality of the shepherd’s entire life; it signifies the most important social space of the shepherd, where all the community meets every Sunday and where the most important

---

<sup>15</sup> “Ricordo un tramonto, percorrendo in auto qualche strada calabrese. Non eravamo sicuri della giustezza del nostro itinerario, e fu per noi un sollievo imbatterci in un vecchio pastore. Fermammo l’auto e gli chiedemmo le notizie che desideravamo [...] lo pregammo di salire in auto e di accompagnarci fino al bivio giusto. [...] Lungo il breve percorso la sua diffidenza aumentò, e si andò tramutando in vera e propria angoscia, perché ora, dal finestrino cui sempre guardava, aveva perduto la vista familiare del campanile di Marcellinara, punto di riferimento del suo minuscolo spazio esistenziale. Per quel campanile scomparso, il povero vecchio si sentiva completamente spaesato: e a tal punto si andò agitando mostrando i segni della disperazione e del terrore, che decidemmo di riportarlo indietro, al punto dove ci eravamo incontrati. Sulla via del ritorno stava con la testa sempre fuori del finestrino [...] finché quando finalmente rivide il campanile il suo volto si distese, il suo vecchio cuore si andò pacificando, come per la riconquista di una patria perduta. [...] Ciò significa che la presenza entra in rischio quando tocca i confini della sua patria esistenziale, quando non vede più il “campanile di Marcellinara”, quando perde l’orizzonte culturalizzato oltre il quale non si può andare e dentro il quale consuma i suoi “oltre” operativi: quando cioè si affaccia sul nulla”.

<sup>16</sup> “L’angoscia come esperire il rischio di non poterci essere in nessun mondo culturale possibile. È quindi angoscia davanti al nulla, ma il “nulla” significa qui la possibilità che “si annienti” l’ethos della presentificazione mondanizzante”.

moment of his life – birth, marriage, funeral – take place. When such a bell tower vanishes all these social activities vanish simultaneously. This means that any instance of “presence” is in fact a *duty* of “presentification”; such a cultural world only exists if all the participants cooperate in maintaining its value and operativity. On the contrary, when the bell tower collapses “presence” faces “nothingness”, that is, the impossibility of any cultural action. In such a condition, everything that presence does is meaningless, because there is no longer a cultural order able to attribute a meaning to its action. Properly speaking, there are no more actions, because an “action” is a meaningful gesture; where the possibility of all social meaning is collapsed, there are no more human actions *qua* actions: “anguish opens up to the risk of not being able to be in any possible cultural world and therefore of not being able to be there at all, of becoming lost in an ‘isolated’ private and incommunicable intimacy, of becoming disorientated with respect to any possible ‘country’, of losing the beyond that characterizes the ‘world’ inasmuch as presentification is the valorization of the world.” (De Martino 2019, 528)<sup>17</sup>

The key feature of “presentification” lies in the effort to go “beyond” (*oltre*) the mere present world. This “presence” is present to the world only because it is able to place itself beyond what is actually present; therefore, presence means project, desire, expectation, decision. The world is a cultural “world” exactly because its own boundaries extend well beyond the actual world. For this reason “presence” does not mean to be simply present in the world. According to De Martino, “presence” properly means transcendence: “presence is presentification: it is always in a situation, and at the same time, always in a decision, that is, always in the act of going beyond – transcending – the situation, of emerging from it as a moral energy of intersubjective valorization, of universalizing communication.” (De Martino 2019, 532)<sup>18</sup> What the world is as it is, is not enough for it to be a *human world*. That

<sup>17</sup> “L’angoscia apre il rischio di non poterci essere in nessun mondo culturale possibile e quindi di non poterci esserci affatto, di perdersi nella “isolata” intimità privata e incommunicabile, di spaesarsi rispetto a ogni possibile “paese”, di smarrire l’oltre che caratterizza il “mondo” in quanto la presentificazione è mondanizzazione valorizzante”.

<sup>18</sup> “La presenza è presentificazione: essa è sempre in situazione, e al tempo stesso, sempre in decisione, cioè sempre in atto di *andar oltre* - di trascendere - la situazione, di emergere da essa come energia morale di valorizzazione intersoggettiva, di comunicazione universalizzante”.



“presence” has to *decide* how and why to be in the world, means that presence is not an established condition. In every moment, “presence” *decides* to be present. Therefore, this simply means that nothing is more vulnerable and fragile than such a decision.

De Martino places at the very center of the human subject an irreducible split; *Homo sapiens* is nothing other than such a split. “Presence” and “presentification” on one side, “loss of presence” and “end of the world” on the other. One cannot have the former without the latter. On the side of “presence” there is also language, intersubjectivity and historical tradition; on the side of the “loss of presence” there is also absolute loneliness and incommunicability. The human condition lies exactly between those two possibilities: to be human always means to be a presence on the verge of losing such a presence. Humanity is nothing other than such a movement between the ethical commitment to be such a presence in the world and the possibility of the end of the world (*la fine del mondo*):

The world in which there is presence, in a detachment that is always renewed, is the world of nature and history, society and culture, which are historically determined. But precisely because presence has its norm in this, it also contains the ‘no’ of its ‘yes’: the risk of becoming imprisoned by the situation, of *not* deciding it, of not going beyond it, of *not* transcending it, of *not* emerging from it as a moral energy of intersubjective valorization, of universalizing communication. It is the risk of not-being-in-the-world. (De Martino 2019, 532)<sup>19</sup>.

“Presence” means “detachment” from the actual natural world; “presence” means saying “yes” to the cultural values of the world that “presence” takes part in. However, each “yes” implies the omnipresent possibility of saying “no”. A “no” that is immediately transformed into the “end of the world”. Such a swing between “yes” and “no” means that both possibilities, “presence” and “loss of presence”, are included in the “ethos of transcendence”. That is, the “end of the world” is in a certain sense a way in which the very same human world manifests itself:

---

<sup>19</sup> “Il mondo in cui la presenza *ci è*, in un distacco che sempre si rinnova, è il mondo della natura e della storia, della società e della cultura storicamente determinate. Ma proprio perché la presenza ha la sua norma in ciò, essa racchiude anche il “no” del suo “sì”: il rischio di restar prigioniera della situazione, di *non* deciderla, di *non* andare oltre di essa, di *non* trascenderla, di *non* emergere da essa come energia morale di valorizzazione intersoggettiva, di comunicazione universalizzante. È il rischio di non-esserci-nel-mondo”.

“the possibility of its own ‘ending’, in fact, belongs to the ‘world’, and every cultural world is intimately troubled by such a possibility.” (De Martino 2019, 510)<sup>20</sup> From this point of view, “nothingness” is not simply the definitive annihilation of the human intersubjective world; it represents a possibility that is always available to presence. In fact, “presence” is *presence* only because it continuously decides not to cease being presence. However, what does this mean if not that “presence” is always on the verge of renouncing its own presence? “*End of the world and presentification to the world*” (De Martino 2019, 536)<sup>21</sup> are not exceptional situations that “presence” tries in all possible ways to avoid; quite the contrary, “presence” is nothing other than such a restless hesitation between total “presence” and “end of the world”.

One cannot fully understand De Martino’s anthropological theory if one does not seriously take into account such an “annihilating lure” (De Martino 2019, 199)<sup>22</sup> that constantly undermines the shaky self-confidence of “presence” from the inside. That is, the “end of the world” is not an exceptional possibility which presents itself only in the extraordinary cases of the end of a civilization or when presence faces death or other ‘extreme’ situations. In fact, each time “presence” says “yes” the possibility of a radical “no” is concealed behind the former act; one can say that every existential “yes” is in fact more precisely a “non-no” to the possibility of not deciding to be “presence”. In the end, “the risk of absence, of a disappearing and vanishing presence” (De Martino 2019, 533)<sup>23</sup> is a risk only because it is not properly a risk but a mysterious attraction toward a situation where the exhausting effort of “presentification” finally finds some rest. Therefore, “nothingness” is not simply what “presence” fears the most; rather it is a condition in which the burden of being human is finally discharged. What does “presence” desire more than to be no longer present to the world? In fact, each instance of “presence” is nothing other than the result of a continuous and dualistic effort of detachment from the natural world; the “lure of nothingness” – indeed a desire that only “presence” can have – is the reverse of the desire to cease transcending

---

<sup>20</sup> “Appartiene al “mondo” la possibilità del suo “finire”, e ogni mondo culturale ne è travagliato nell’intimo”.

<sup>21</sup> “*Finire del mondo e della presentificazione al mondo*”.

<sup>22</sup> “Tentazione annichilatrice”.

<sup>23</sup> “Il rischio dell’assenza, della presenza che dilegua e scompare”.

actual living life. In fact, if “presence” means “ethos of transcendence”, on the contrary “nothingness” is the unacknowledged desire to adhere totally to actual life. After all the “end of the world” can be understood not only as a danger, but also as a “temptation” (De Martino 2019, 129) for a life of absolute immanence: that is, a life without transcendence, a pure life that is neither human nor animal.

### 3. Art without presence

According to De Martino, “myth/rite” has the anthropological function of allowing “presence” in crisis to recover its own full historical operativity. We may take the case of the death of a relative: such an event throws “presence” into such a radical crisis of despair and resignation that risks annihilating one’s capacity to face the tasks and duties posed by society. In such a state, “presence” is no longer present with respect to society and history. Against such a risk the funeral and mourning rituals act “as a plane to arrest and construct a socialized (communitarian) configuration with respect to the risks of a possible radical alienation of individual needs (i.e. as a plane of active research and recovery of the risks inherent in the collapse of the valorizing presentification of life and as a defense against the risks of recession towards the total inoperability of the world).” (De Martino 2019, 150)<sup>24</sup> The “crisis of presence” is transformed into the annihilating experience of the “end of the world”, that is nothing but a radical “inoperability of the world”, the absolute incapacity to operate in a meaningful – that is, intersubjective – way. What De Martino defines as “mythical-ritual nexus”,<sup>25</sup> on the contrary establishes “a meta-historical plane that configures, provides a horizon and form to the irresolute return of the past, and that – at the same time – operates as a plane of reabsorption and concealment of the historical proliferation and historicity of the human condition.” (De Martino 2019, 145)<sup>26</sup>.

<sup>24</sup> “Come piano di arresto e di configurazione socializzato (comunitario) rispetto ai rischi di possibili alienazioni radicali delle esigenze individuali (cioè come piano di ricerca attiva e di ripresa dei rischi inerenti al crollo della presentificazione valorizzante della vita e come difesa dai rischi di recessione verso la totale inoperabilità del mondo)”.

<sup>25</sup> “Nesso mitico-rituale”.

<sup>26</sup> “La funzione protettiva del nesso mitico-rituale si esplica nella istituzione di un piano meta-storico che configura, dà orizzonte e forma il ritorno irrelato del passato, e che - al tempo stesso - opera come piano di riassorbimento e di occultamento della proliferazione storica e della storicità della condizione umana”.

Myth transforms a historical and traumatic event – the random “historical proliferation” of possibilities that eventually paralyze all actual action – into a “meta-historical” one; in such a way, the singular event that risks overwhelming “presence” acquires the value of a universal situation, already known and experienced (like the passion and resurrection of the Christ, which represent the possibility of overcoming also the grief brought on by death). De Martino stresses in particular the function of ‘recovery’ of the “mythical-ritual nexus” with respect to the risk of the “end of the world”. According to him, also art has such a function: “art is a way to recover events threatened by stiffening and chaos, and is therefore a way to cure and heal the ever-present possibility that objects become ill.” (De Martino 2019, 358)<sup>27</sup>. What De Martino calls the “illness of objects” (*malattia degli oggetti*)<sup>28</sup> is the condition by which objects are no longer recognized as human tools, that is, objects serving human beings. In such a situation, “presence” faces an unrecognizable world where intersubjective and meaningful actions become impossible. Art thus seems to have the anthropological function of bringing things back into the human world.

According to De Martino, art – like myth – is able to fulfill this function through a double and symmetric movement: the first one is that of the “descent into hell”<sup>29</sup> – the hell of the “end of the world” *qua* human world – the second one is the opposite movement of “recovery” (De Martino 2019, 358)<sup>30</sup> of the social value of objects and in general of historical tradition. De Martino is particularly interested in this second movement: “what is important is that the plane in which the object is in crisis is reached and that the anabasis is fulfilled (it is communicable, intersubjective, reintegrating) so that the single work may allow the readability of this event. What is important is that the moment of descent must not be mistaken for liberation.” (De Martino 2019, 358).<sup>31</sup> Of the two moments of art according to De Martino, catabasis

<sup>27</sup> “L’arte è un modo di recuperare gli eventi minacciati dall’irrigidimento e dal caos, e quindi un modo di curare e di guarire il sempre possibile ammalarsi degli oggetti”.

<sup>28</sup> An expression taken from the novel *La noia* (1960) by the Italian novelist Alberto Moravia.

<sup>29</sup> “Discesa negli inferi”.

<sup>30</sup> “Recupero”.

<sup>31</sup> “Ciò che importa è che il piano in cui l’oggetto è in crisi sia raggiunto e che l’anabasi si compia (sia comunicabile, intersoggettiva, reintegratrice) in modo che l’opera singola consenta di leggere questa vicenda. Ciò che importa è che il momento della discesa non sia scambiato con la liberazione”.

and anabasis, the most important is the second one. Art is “recovery”, it is not “disorder” or “indeterminacy”<sup>32</sup> in that art falls under the “ordering ethos” (De Martino 2019, 359)<sup>33</sup>.

However, such a definition of art seems rather traditional,<sup>34</sup> and unable to account for contemporary art. In the rest of this paper I will outline an alternative aesthetics – which is nevertheless inspired by De Martino. The key concept of such an aesthetics is “crisis of presence”. What is at stake is how seriously we address such a crisis. In fact, this concept perfectly describes the condition of the modern subject, a subject who is no longer self-sufficient and self-grounded. For this reason “presence” is much more unstable and uncertain than what De Martino himself thought and believed. The idea is to consider such a crisis not only as a moment that requires to be more or less quickly overcome in order to reestablish the “ethos of presence”. What is necessary is an aesthetics in which the moment between catabasis and anabasis, between crisis of presence and the recovery of presence, is rendered somewhat livable. Art is the capacity to make livable such a space of crisis. Art means stability in remaining in an instable place.

In his famous *Interviews with Francis Bacon*, the art critic David Sylvester once asked the British painter why he liked to paint triptychs so much. The answer allows us to begin to understand what art could be in a time of “crisis of presence”: “it helps to avoid story-telling if the figures are painted on three different canvas” (Sylvester 2016, 25). What Bacon calls story-telling is exactly such a movement of anabasis which was so important for De Martino. To avoid story-telling – so also the critical stories about the ‘intention’ of the artist, or the ‘message’ she wants to communicate, or the ‘emotions’ that the art work arouses in the public – means it is impossible to retrieve a unitary meaning for the artistic work. It means that an artwork does not propose itself as a form of anabasis, which aims to reestablish the “ethos of transcendence”, because, as Bacon pointed out, “the moment the story is elaborated, the boredom sets in; the story talks louder than the paint.” (Sylvester 2016, 23) When the story talks louder than the paint then the paint is no longer able to spark crisis in the observer. It is not the story

---

<sup>32</sup> “Disordine e indeterminazione”.

<sup>33</sup> “Ethos ordinante”.

<sup>34</sup> On the relationship between De Martino and aesthetics see Lesce 2019.

itself that is important, noble or ignoble, the point is that *any* story neutralizes the traumatic impact of the paint. The function of the story is indeed that of driving the paint toward a perceptual ‘comfort zone’ where it loses its capacity to disturb the observer. In such a case, one experiences anabasis almost without the opposite movement of catabasis. On the contrary, modern art continuously addresses the observer with objects and situations in which the possibility of “recovery” of the flawed “ethos of transcendence” is much more difficult. Cases in which the core of the experience is the catabasis – which means “crisis of presence” and the loss of the cultural capacity “to emerge” (De Martino 2019, 538)<sup>35</sup> with respect to the world – as opposed to the opposite and normalizing anabasis.

De Martino and Bacon have an opposite idea of the ‘function’ of art. For the first, as we already know, art is a cultural form<sup>36</sup> of “recovery of the world aimed at bringing it back to order, because what matters is that the recovery takes place; [...] that is, it takes place in the direction of form, values, the intersubjective, communicable, human order.” (De Martino 2019, 358)<sup>37</sup> Art reestablishes form, which has been flawed by the crisis, by the omnipresent “lure of nothingness”. Consequently, “there is a danger, in the current cultural situation, of many catabases without anabasis: and this is certainly a disease.” (358)<sup>38</sup> Bacon, on the contrary, underlines the basic difference existing between two kinds of art, “illustrational” and “non illustrational”. While the first “tells you through the intelligence immediately what the form is about” (Sylvester 2016, 65), the second “works first upon sensation and then slowly leaks back into the fact” (Sylvester 2016, 65-66). Contemporary art is nothing other than this second kind of art. An art whose power lies precisely in the capacity to show what Bacon defines as “the mystery of fact” that “is conveyed by an image being made out of non-rational marks”. It is important to note that according to the British painter “you can’t will this non-rationality of a mark. That is the

---

<sup>35</sup> “Perché via sia un mondo [...] occorre emergere da esso”.

<sup>36</sup> Recalcati endorses quite a similar theory of art in *Il miracolo della forma* (2007).

<sup>37</sup> “Ripresa del mondo per ricondurlo di nuovo all’ordine, perché ciò che conta è che la ripresa avvenga; [...] avvenga, cioè, la ripresa verso la forma, verso i valori, verso l’ordine intersoggettivo, comunicabile, umano”.

<sup>38</sup> “Sussiste tuttavia il pericolo, nell’attuale congiuntura culturale, di molte catabasi senza anabasi: e questo è certamente malattia”.

reason that accident always has to enter into this activity, because the moment you know what to do, you're making just another form of illustration." (Sylvester 2016, 67) The difference between illustrational and non illustrational art is the difference existing between an art that aims to anabasis through a moment of catabasis, and an art which does not aim to achieve any goal, where the moment of catabasis is a real moment of "crisis of presence".<sup>39</sup>

What is worth noting is that Bacon's idea of a non illustrational art is much closer to the core of De Martino's theory than his own quite conservative idea of art as a form of "recovery". In fact, what is at stake is how seriously we intend the "crisis of presence" and the correlative experience of the "end of the world". It seems as if his disturbing idea of a "lure of nothingness" does not find an adequate accommodation in his own theory. What is at stake with such a lure is that it embodies a movement toward a non-human condition, that is, a condition more similar to the condition of an animal or a thing: "the head-meat" Deleuze writes about when discussing the painting of Bacon "is a becoming animal of man. In this becoming, the entire body tends to escape from itself, and the Figure tends to return to material structure. [...] becoming-animal is only one stage in a more profound becoming-imperceptible in which the Figure disappears." (Deleuze 2003, 27).

Deep inside human "presence", there is an opposite drive toward the condition of someone who does not want to give form to anything, of someone who no longer thinks of herself as "world-forming" (Heidegger 1995, 274). De Martino acutely identified such a characteristic drive of modern sensibility; however, he immediately tried to depower it as a form of cultural illness. The point is that contemporary art is nothing but such an illness. From this point of view art is very far from being a form of "recovery", quite the contrary, art presents us with what Bacon called "the brutality of fact" (Sylvester 2016, 204). What was a "world" for De Martino becomes a simple "residue" for Bacon: "you have to start somewhere, and you start from the subject which gradually, if the things works at all, withers away and leaves this residue which we call reality and which perhaps has something tenuously to do with what one started with but very often has very little to do with it." (Sylvester 2016, 204). The artist does not give form to

---

<sup>39</sup> A somewhat similar position is presented in Zabala 2017.

reality in order to reestablish the “ethos of transcendence”; much more modestly and sincerely, she works with a “residue” of reality, simply presenting it as what it is: residue, remnant, waste. Such a kind of art is the cruel art of “the end on the world”:<sup>40</sup> in fact “anything in art seems cruel, because reality is cruel.” (Sylvester 2016, 224)

#### 4. Conclusions

An aesthetic theory that intends to seriously address De Martino’s *La fine del mondo* has to place at its own center the idea of “crisis of presence”. Such a crisis should not be considered as a necessary moment but only as a temporary one in the cultural dynamics of human life. According to De Martino, the “crisis of presence” is only the moment of catabasis, which preludes to the final anabasis of the “ethos of transcendence” where the previous moment is reabsorbed and transcended. Rather, one has to consider the moment of crisis as a livable habitat on its own, whose ‘value’ is not simply that of foretelling a future reestablishment of cultural order. Art is a human activity where such a disturbing experience is possible. From this point of view, art is not primarily about those particular objects called “artworks”. What the art of an epoch which is that of “the end of the world” must aim to is to make it possible to live in an ‘artistic’ way; this means to finally deactivate the dualism of nature and culture that is the unthought premise of De Martino’s theory of the human condition.

De Martino is well aware that such a dualism is unstable; for this reason, he strongly insists on the function of culture for reestablishing it, for reestablishing the threatened human “presence”. However, nowadays such a crisis is no more exceptional, it is the usual condition of life. The daily normality of life is its own exceptionality. The familiar world is the world of the “end of the world”. For this reason, what is at stake is no longer the ‘creation’ of artworks, as if an artistic form could restore the lost unity of the “world”:

That things are precisely so emerges clearly from the way in which Guy Debord [...] summarizes his position on the problem of art in his time: “Surrealism wanted to realize art without abolishing it; Dadaism wanted to abolish it without realizing it; we want at the same time to abolish it and realize it.” Obviously what must be abolished is

---

<sup>40</sup> See Davis and Turpin 2014.



the work, but equally obvious is that the work of art must be abolished in the name of something that, in art itself, goes beyond the work and demands to be realized not in a work but in life (the Situationists accordingly intended to produce not works but situations). (Agamben 2019, 4).

What is at stake is an art of the “end of the world” where the dualism of artist and observer finally collapses. Such a possibility only opens up when the moment of catabasis preserves its own elusiveness in respect to all attempts of storytelling and interpretation. This is a real “crisis of presence”, whose effect is to make possible such a weird experience by which one lives crisis without disappearing in such a crisis. In this sense art allows to hesitate between presence and loss of presence. It is possible to apply to art the definition of thought given by Deleuze in his book on Foucault: “thinking addresses itself to an outside that has no form” (Deleuze 1988, 87). Art presents us such a radical outside, that is, such a radical catabasis. Exactly because this “outside” is to such an extent *outside*, one can experience through art the “end of the world”. Art drags the subject away from herself: “thinking does not depend on a beautiful interiority that would reunite the visible and the articulable elements, but is carried under the intrusion of an outside that eats into the interval and forces or dismembers the internal.” (Deleuze 1988, 87).

If one takes the terrifying notion of “crisis of presence” seriously a very different idea of art can be experienced, an art suited in the apocalyptic time of the “end of the world”. An art that can only begin when the fear for the non-human and materic in us is set aside. What this temporality needs is an art no longer serving the “ethos of transcendence”, because – as Clarice Lispector writes in *The passion according to G. H.* – so far life has been “humanized too much” (Lispector 2012, 6). For this reason, an art that is equal to the “crisis of presence” requires the same obtuse recklessness of the narrating voice of this extraordinary novel, a woman who allows herself to experience her own irresistible inhumanity. The beginning of this adventure is the same as G.H.’s:

Yesterday [...] I lost my human constitution for hours and hours. If I’m brave, I’ll let myself stay lost. But I’m afraid of new things and I’m afraid to experience what I don’t understand—I always want the guarantee of at least thinking that I understand, I don’t know how to just give myself

over to disorientation. How do I explain that my greatest fear is precisely in relation to ... to being? and that there is nonetheless no other way to go. How to explain that my greatest fear is precisely the fear of having to live out whatever happens? how to explain that I cannot bear to look out, only because life is not at all what I thought it was and is in fact something other—as though I had known before what it was! Why is it that just looking is so greatly disorganizing? (Lispector 2012, 4-5).

### **Bibliography**

Agamben G. 2002: *L'aperto: l'uomo e l'animale*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino.

Agamben G. 2019: *Creation and Anarchy. The Work of Art and the Religion of Capitalism*, Stanford University Press, Stanford.

Cimatti F. 2020: *Unbecoming human. Philosophy of animality after Deleuze*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh.

Croce B. 1953: *Indagini su Hegel e schiarimenti filosofici*, Bibliopolis, Napoli 1998.

Davis H.-Turpin E. (eds.) 2015: *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies*, Open Humanities Press, London.

De Martino E. 2019<sup>2</sup>: *La fine del mondo. Contributo alle analisi delle apocalissi culturali*, a cura di G. Charuty, D. Fabre, M. Massenzio, Einaudi, Torino 1977.

Deleuze G. 1988: *Foucault*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington.

Deleuze G. 2003: *Francis Bacon: the logic of sensation*, London, Continuum.

Gell A. 1998: *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*, Oxford, Clarendon Press.

Heidegger M. 1929-30: *The fundamental concepts of metaphysics: world, finitude, solitude*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1995.

Laland K.-Galef B. (eds.) 2009: *The Question of Animal Culture*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA)

Lesce F. 2019: *Il crollo dei linguaggi estetici. Arte, vitalità e trascendimento in Ernesto De Martino*, «Studi di estetica», anno XLVII, IV serie, 15, 3, pp. 191-211.

Lispector C. 2012: *The Passion According To G. H.*, The New Directions Book, New York.

Recalcati M. 2007: *Il miracolo della forma: per un'estetica psicoanalitica*, Bruno Mondadori, Milano.

Sylvester D. 2016: *Interviews with Francis Bacon*, Thames & Hudson, London.

Zabala S. 2019: *Why Only Art Can Save Us. Aesthetics and the Absence of emergency*, Columbia University Press, New York.