

# GAZING AT THE MEDITERRANEAN

## Visual Anthropology and Photographic Research in the Work of Dario Coletti

Antonio Cecere\*

The Mediterranean, today, is increasingly at the center of philosophical, sociological, and, above all, anthropological inquiry. It is not easy to find a single meaning in the concept of ‘Mediterraneity’ that can be translated into the various languages spoken by the men and women living in the lands touched by this sea. Yet, there is a Mediterranean consciousness that we can recognize when we turn to look at the interconnected nature of the history and culture of its people. While languages could seem to prevent the understanding of the Other, symbolic events are an atavistic characteristic of man’s behavior that can be traced in art, religious feeling, and all the ways in which the forms of socialization are expressed.

The *festival* is the pre-eminent form of social symbolism, a type of collective expression that involves the possibility of reading human universality in its most exclusive characterization of a local event. Every popular festival is local in the sense that it is specifically linked to the history of a place and a people, but, at the same time, it enables us to intercept the universal in the human being, as we notice that it expresses every individual’s self-recognition in the communal yearning of the dancing crowd.

Dario Coletti’s work is an anthropological inquiry confined to a local event that reflects the universality of the social actions of the Mediterranean people and allows us, through his photography, to cast our gaze on the cultural and spiritual complexity of the communities of our Basin. It was Coletti himself who, in his book *Il fotografo e lo sciamano* (2013), testified to his involvement in the festival of Gavoi with words that refer to the dimension of healing of the fracture between individual and community:

For Fat Thursday, though I’m weighed down with other commitments, I try to keep the day free for the procession of the *tumbarinos* of Gavoi. I do it for myself. I do it for the excitement. I do it to be healed. It all starts when you disembark, with the grey smog still in your mind and nostrils and with the blue sky already in your eyes. It continues, when you get into town, in the kitchens

---

\* *Università di Roma “Tor Vergata”*

where they are roasting food and people are coming together. And it's after lunch that they start to gather in the streets and squares. Everyone arrives as they wish, some alone, some in a group, some with a friend. At first, it's just a single drum, then others join in to test the rhythm. The first *tumbu* sets the theme to warm up and tune the instruments. Meanwhile, people are starting to get together and test the rhythm together. Someone watches, there's the aroma of good wine, there are moist eyes and lips, someone remembers.<sup>2</sup>

“At first it's just a single drum”, “I do it for myself”: Coletti captures the individual determined to meet up with the blur of the crowd, creating a community linked by the beat of the drum: “then others join to test the rhythm together”. He captures the individual connecting with all the others as the festival is in process. In these pictures, the body, with all its senses, is expressing itself through the *chiaroscuro* that captures the anthropological depth of the festival of Gavoi.

In the text *Mana*, which I analyze here for its social symbolism, the images isolate the movement of unidentified individuals and indistinguishable groups from the studied movement of the photo. The effect of a dual movement, that of the figure portrayed and of the photographer who has no sharply defined observation point, restores the animation and exhilaration of the moment when the drums play together. Individual figures move toward a sense of harmony and appear in an indistinct crowd, becoming a unique vital power.

In *Mana*, Coletti captures the instant when ‘mediterraneity’ becomes consciousness, the moment when every pilgrim, every merchant, every exile and every Ulysses, stripped away from his personal journey, becomes one with the crowd, creating a real community that is always different in space, but (incredibly) always the same in time. The carnival is a Cosmic Festival that tears the cultural order to shreds, blurring the identity of every participant in a movement of obscene masks and gaunt bodies that follow

---

2 “Per il Giovedì Grasso, anche se oberato da altri impegni, cerco di ritagliarmi una giornata per assistere alla sfilata dei tumbarinos di Gavoi. Lo faccio per me. Lo faccio per emozionarmi. Lo faccio per guarire. Tutto inizia quando si scende dalla nave, con il grigio dello smog ancora nella mente e nelle narici e con l'azzurro del cielo già negli occhi. Per proseguire poi, quando si arriva in paese, nelle cucine dove si arrostisce e dove comincia l'affiatamento della compagnia. Ed è dopo il pranzo che comincia l'adunata nelle strade e nelle piazzette. Ognuno arriva come può, chi da solo, chi con il gruppo, chi con un amico. È dapprima un tamburo, unico, poi se ne aggiungono altri a provare il ritmo assieme. I primi tumbu che marciano l'aria sono prove e accordature. Intanto la gente comincia a riunirsi e a provare il ritmo assieme. C'è chi guarda, c'è odore del vino buono, ci sono occhi e labbra umide, c'è chi ricorda”.

the drumming call of collective chaos. The uproar of Gavoi is a cosmic festival as it celebrates carnival, a liturgical time when the community can mask differences and abandon the normal appearance of the city so as to subvert its social roles. As Maria Àngels Roque, anthropologist who has studied the cultures of the western Mediterranean for decades, has written:

While the political and religious borders (between north and south) seem rigid, there are correspondences in practices that help us recognize, even in apparently distant contexts, similar cultural practices, not necessarily identical but with very striking similarities at least in their formal appearance. [...] The Mediterranean can also be regarded as a long-term laboratory, in which the various peoples and various civilizations have exchanged and adapted their respective beliefs and systems of participation and solidarity.<sup>3</sup>

In short, her research shows that if we carefully study the Mediterranean people, focusing on the family as our cultural reference point, lifestyles, and the festival rituals, we shall see that the community is able to rediscover and reinvent itself each time as transcendence for every Mediterranean person, whether permanent resident or recently arrived pilgrim. The Mediterranean is, thus, a cradle of civilization that has been hybridized by the constant exchanges between travelers and cultures, and that, thanks to this continual “creative exchange,”<sup>4</sup> has elevated many aesthetic elements, such as myths, legends, and rituals, to a shared memory.

Coletti’s photographic research should be seen in the context of the pioneering work begun by Pitt-Rivers (1959) who had realized that studying the Mediterranean, starting from ritual, aesthetic and social events in the local communities, could transcend the prejudices deriving from the national stereotypes that prevent us from seeing the shared foundations of peoples.

These photos stimulate our thinking to recreate the overall idea of an encounter between individuals driven by the desire to return to the unison of

---

3 “Mentre i confini politici e religiosi (tra nord e sud) appaiono rigidi, sul versante delle pratiche, al contrario, esistono delle corrispondenze che aiutano a riconoscere, anche in contesti apparentemente lontani, pratiche culturali simili, non necessariamente identici, ma dalla somiglianza comunque molto rilevante almeno per quello che il loro aspetto formale. [...] Il Mediterraneo può essere considerato anche come luogo di un laboratorio, di lunga durata, all’interno del quale i diversi popoli e le diverse civiltà hanno scambiato e adattato le rispettive credenze e i rispettivi sistemi di partecipazione e solidarietà”. Maria Àngels Roque, *Antropologia mediterranea- Pratiche condivise*, in *Mediterraneo figure ed incontri*, Affaya, Mohammed N. et al., (Milan: Jaca Book, 2005), 11.

4 On the idea of the Mediterranean as creative exchange see Mohammed Bennis, *Il Mediterraneo e la parola, viaggio, poesia, ospitalità*, (Rome: Donzelli, 2009).

being together. In a small place like Gavoi, women, and men rediscover the joy of losing and finding themselves, just as all those scattered across the sea sooner or later feel the desire to find themselves in a port, a square, as indistinct legs and arms, dancing in a shared harmony. This carnival that Coletti captures in the never-static images of the book, has the power to evoke in the observer everything that the Mediterranean has already imprinted in our imagery of women and men who know well the taste of olives.

As Claudio Bernardi notes, “The rite of foundation (and social re-foundation) repeats itself, in a controlled form, the originating trauma and path of salvation. The model of a sacrificial festival of cosmic re-foundation is Carnival in our – western Mediterranean – context.”<sup>5</sup> Here, Bernardi explains that this festival survived the victory of Christianity over the pagan cults, but these collective, spontaneous rituals keep alive the full value of the human yearning to form a community with those who are the Other – a spontaneous community formed according to the will of individuals to feel and lose themselves in a collective I. Far from a codified representation of divine or human law, the *Festival* is an atavistic way of building the *General Will*.

Looking at Mana’s photographs, we can better understand Jean Jacques Rousseau’s critical thoughts on the festival’s role in constituting a community. Rousseau was convinced by the idea that only the spontaneous gathering of human beings in a collective space in public, in the open air, still contained the intrinsic value of a community.<sup>6</sup> Unlike the value of the theater as a possible social *paideia*, the festival does not stage a concept of the community in which the citizens watching the show become passive supporters of it. In the festival everyone, through dancing, is the collective *Mana* and becomes a founder of the community and of the festival. Thanks to Coletti’s photography we can imagine the Sardinia of Gavoi as the experience of an inversion of the social universe, another kind of place where the dream of another kind of society comes to life. In an age of isolation and disorientation, of faces turned grey from the reflection of concrete buildings and expressions numbed by the glare of a computer screen, the mask of Gavoi is a beacon to reach Utopia.

---

5 Claudio Bernardi, *Carnevale, quaresima e Pasqua, dalla festa sacrificale alla libertà dell’evento*, *La Festa*, in Petrosino, Silvano (ed.), (Milan: Jaca Book, 2013), 91.

6 Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Lettera sugli spettacoli*, trans. F.W. Lupi, *Aesthetica* (Milan: Aesthetica, 2003)

# SHADOWS OF THE SACRED

## Around the Photographic Figuration of Dario Coletti

Giulio Latini\*

Multiple human/non-human figures appear as winding presences precipitated from unknown distant geological sediment and settling for an enduring instant in all their totemic bodily physicality, transmuted into the codes of perturbing black wooden masks (*visera*) and sheepskin costumes (*mastruca*). Metamorphic apparitions reverberate in the suspended gazes of those who are present, and witness a telluric movement that, between stops and cadenced repetitions, could go on indefinitely. A fluctuating movement defines the tones and textural timbres of a carnivalesque horizon, that of Barbagia, among the most visually intense in the Mediterranean cultural field.

An alienating horizon within which Dario Coletti's writing of light has been dwelling for a long time, immersing itself, between Mamoiada, Lula, Gavoi, and other sites in Sardinia, in the dynamics of a vibrant and enigmatic rituality marked – between *mamuthones* and *issohadores* – by the musical rhythmic of the rattles hanging from the neck (*sas hampaned-dhas*) and of the heavy cowbells (*sa carriga*) hanging from the cloak of the great masks but also by drums and accordions.<sup>1</sup>

The writing of light, that of Coletti's individuating camera, is capable of sensing visual-anthropological captures by virtue of a deep relational internality of the religious dramaturgy that unravels along the segments space crossed and reflected. It is an internality marked by an exquisitely pathetic testimonial coloring, since Coletti's gaze, in Ricoeur's words, "has seen, heard, felt [...] in short, it has been 'impressed,' struck, shocked, wounded, in any case reached and touched by the fact. What his saying conveys something of that being-impressed by."<sup>2</sup>

---

\* *Università di Roma, "Tor Vergata"*

- 1 See in this regard Raffaello Marchi, *Le maschere barbaricine* in *Il Ponte*, year VII no. 9-10, September/October 1951, 1354-1361, and, on the filmic testimonial axis, *Sos Mamuthones de Mamojada* (2004) by Italo Sordi, but also *Mascaras (Le maschere tragiche della Sardegna)* (1987), by Bachisio Bandinu, Piero Sanna.
- 2 Paul Ricoeur, *Ricordare, dimenticare, perdonare. L'enigma del passato*, trans. N. Salomon, (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2004), 18.

Sensitive and knowing images, therefore, are available to accommodate and figure<sup>3</sup> essential energetic cores of a precise archaic ceremonial that implies a momentary change of state, of a primordial performative communal memory, irreducible to the vocabulary of a disenchanting technical governmentality, of a pragmatic argumentative reason, which has long since dismissed the grammar of the sacred, its mystery, its disruptive violence. *To figure*, as I have just written, which in the meaning borrowed here from Didi-Huberman, going beyond mimicry and representational univocity, means to emphasize the “knot of essential truth”<sup>4</sup> transferred from the most immediate aspect of the photographic outcome. A knot, it seems to me, that, in the oscillation between the visible and the invisible, speaks within Coletti’s practice and becomes the idiom and marking of sacred cartography that has been divested, removed, even if it continues to maintain unamendable shadows. These shadows find intimate acceptance in the fibrillating and deconstructing tensions of the photographic space-time layered along the rings of his significant narrative.<sup>5</sup>

Such a narrative for sensitive and wise images, with exact compositional weighing, impressed in a black and white with powerful contrasts, extended up to the maximum range possibilities, in a rarefied expressive quadrant, of suspended fluctuation that plays productively with “blurring” and with an undulating spacing of focus of the physiognomies and pos-

---

3 I am referring here to the notion of “figuration,” in tune with what Didi-Huberman expressed, not in the limiting sense of “a pure and simple procedure of putting into appearance, of mimesis and representational transparency, in short of univocity” as much as, at a deeper and more essential level, in the sense in which “figuring” (equivalent to the two verbs *praefigure* and also *defigure*) “consists in ‘transposing or transferring the sense [of the thing one wants to signify] into another figure.’ [...] Figuring a thing, therefore, does not mean restoring to it its natural or ‘figurative’ appearance: it is exactly the opposite that it is about, that is, conducting a work of transferring its appearance in order to attempt to grasp or address, by means of a deflection, the knot of its essential truth.” Georges Didi-Huberman, *L’immagine aperta. Motivi dell’incarnazione nelle arti visive*, trans. M. Grazioli, (Turin: Bruno Mondadori, 2008), 148-149.

4 «Nœud de vérité essentielle». Georges Didi-Huberman, *L’image ouverte: Motifs de l’incarnation dans les arts visuels*, (Paris: Gallimard, 2007).

5 A narrative, one would say, outcome of a constellation of shots that literally feel the pressure of time given in them. That is – as exemplarily expressed by Tarkovsky – when “beyond what is happening, one feels a particularly significant truth; when one feels quite clearly that what one sees in the frame is not exhausted in its visual depiction, but only alludes to something that extends infinitely beyond the frame, alludes to life.” Tarkovsky, Andrei, *Scolpire il tempo. Riflessioni sul cinema*, trans. L. V. Nadai, (Milan: Ubulibri, 2002), 111.

tures of the subjects (and their shadows) that cleave circumscribed environments, streets, widenings, juxtaposing walls, eclipsing. It is a narrative by photogrammetric flashes, evidently, whose sign, syntactic and semantic identity, and its symbolic tonality; it appears distant from the protocols of visual representation and the regimes of the gaze of the most substantial part of the contemporary photographic ecosystem. Such a system appears crushed on the idolatrous presentification of the surface through images, as Mounier already foreshadowed several decades ago, destined to constitute “an immense anonymous body characterized by a substantial self-referentiality of the world, which renounces any mediation and is directly present in all, is all.”<sup>6</sup> That anonymous body appears amplified beyond measure, as Carboni recalls, “by the project of integral solarization of reality and individual existence that characterizes the mimetic and virtual demon of ultra-technologies?”<sup>7</sup>

Here, then, even within this perspective, Coletti’s images are precious, inviting one to take an imaginative journey of rare density; it is a journey with intense meaning as it forces us to go beyond circumscribed material and mental places, sterile identity monologues, delivering us to the plurality of the voices of the other from us and of the other with us.

---

6 Roger Mounier, *Contre l’image*, (Paris, Gallimard, 1963), 36.

7 Massimo Carboni, *Resistere alla traducibilità*, Il Manifesto, September 1, 2001.