

# SHADOWS OF THE SACRED

## Around the Photographic Figuration of Dario Coletti

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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>

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- 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.

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

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