

# PHILOSOPHY OF THE SYMBOLIC BODIES

## A Contemporary Mana

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When Charles Baudelaire, in the mid-nineteenth century, was first confronted with the brand-new photographic art, seen as a typical expression of “Modernity” – a neologism coined by the poet himself: “the transitory, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art, of which the other half is the eternal and the immutable...”<sup>1</sup> – the impression given to him by those images, so real, of the individuals and things of the world, was that of being confronted by *ghosts*, ghosts of a fleeting time that photography seemed to preserve and almost restore to life. Photographs –from the Greek *phōtòs*, meaning “light”– expressed a kind of dark force contained in things and not representable by the traditional figurative arts, which were deeply transformed from that moment with Impressionism and its contemporary currents. In the subjects depicted in famous portraits (such as the ones by Nadar and others), the fixity and hyperrealism offered, as a counterpart, a kind of *symbolization* of the depicted bodies that seemed to exceed the sense of simple “presence”. At the end of the 19th century, a fashion was established, although somewhat macabre in our eyes today, of photographing the dead as if in a gesture that preserved their “spirit” or soul, fixed forever in the figure, waiting, perhaps, for its return. Films have since been made about the theme, the most recent of which is *The Others* (2001), starring Nicole Kidman.

Images from Dario Coletti’s photo collection *Mana. Sacred and profane in the Barbagia’s Carnival 1995-2016* offer the cue for a reflection on this philosophy of symbolic bodies that can emerge from the depiction of the Barbaricino Carnival in Sardinia. Here, masks cover faces, grafted onto uncanny figures of bodies that present *vital essentiality* to the eye, in their often indistinct, moving figures caught during the various carnival proces-

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1 “La modernité, c’est le transitoire, le fugitif, le contingent, la moitié de l’art, dont l’autre moitié est l’éternel et l’immuable”. Charles Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, established, presented and annotated by C. Pichois (Paris, Gallimard, 1976), vol. 2, « Peintre de la vie moderne », chap. IV, p. 695: « La Modernité ».

sions. These are not real bodies, but rather *simulacra* pregnant with a dark and recondite meaning, referring back to that dark force that photography alone can evoke at the highest level.

The nume-*mana*, or however else this anthropological concept is allowed to be named is, thus, to be related to *force*, the chthonic force, the natural energy of the earthly being that simultaneously transcends the actual experience of the world. In a chapter of his posthumous work (*The End of the World*), the great anthropologist Ernesto de Martino was able to describe this concept regarding the work of Marcel Mauss. What is this “force”? It is worth delving into this key notion concerning Coletti’s photograph. Claude Lévi-Strauss, in his *Introduction* preceding the collection of writings by Marcel Mauss, *Sociologie et anthropologie*, Puf, 1960,<sup>2</sup> as de Martino observes, hints at a philosophical interpretation of *mana*<sup>3</sup> and related representations:

In his effort to understand the world, men always dispose of a surplus of signification (which he distributes among things according to the laws of symbolic thought that it is up to ethnologists and linguists to study). This distribution of an additional ratio of meaning – if it may be so expressed – is absolutely necessary so that, in the sum total, the available signifier and the found signified remain with each other in the complementary relationship that is the very condition of the exercise of symbolic thought. We hold that notions of the *mana* type, however diverse they may be, where they are considered in their most general function (which does not disappear from our mentality and our form of society) represent precisely this *undulating signifier*, which is the servitude of all finite thought (but also the guarantee of all art, of all poetry, of all mythical and aesthetic invention), however much scientific knowledge is capable, if not exactly of suppressing, at least of partially disciplining... In other words, we discern in *mana*, *wakan*, *orenda* and other notions of the same kind the conscious expression of a *semantic function*, which enables thought to exercise itself, despite its own contradiction. By this route, we explain the seemingly insoluble antinomies connected with this notion, and which have struck ethnographers and which Mauss has highlighted: force and action; quality and state; noun, adjective and verb; abstract and concrete; ubiquitous and localized. Indeed, *mana* is all these things together, but not perhaps because it is none of them: simple form, or more simply symbol in its pure state, thus ca-

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2 Claude Lévi-Strauss, introduction to Marcel Mauss, *Sociologie et anthropologie* (Paris, Puf, 1960), pp. XLIX and L.

3 Eastern Melanesian religious concept that became, between the 1880s and the 1950s, with Claude Lévi-Strauss, a central anthropological category in debates about religion, magic, and symbolic efficacy. The transformation of clinical narratives into ethnographic subject matter requires the critical reinterpretation of the notion of “fluctuating meaning” proposed by Claude Lévi-Strauss.

pable of loading itself with any symbolic meaning? In that system of symbols that constitutes all cosmology, this notion would simply be a symbolic zero value, that is, a sign that emphasizes the need for additional symbolic content beyond that which already loads the meaning; but a sign that can be any value as long as it continues to be part of the available reserve, and is not already, as phonologists say, a group term.<sup>4</sup>

The *undulating semanticity* that goes beyond individual meanings and would underlie *mana*-like notions, this *semantic halo* of perceiving beyond the perceivable and nameable realms remains in Lévi-Strauss' interpretation a mere ascertainment or at least the analysis stops at the surface. The undulating semanticity, the semantic halo of the perceived, finds expression in the *mana*. Still, the *mana*, the *wakan*, the *orenda*, etc., founds a horizon of *possible* representations which, by its socialized, interpersonal, culturally conditioned, value-open character, fulfils the function of resumption and change of sign concerning the tensed universe of crisis. This is the case of the Barbaricino carnival, shot and depicted by Coletti. The undulating semanticity of *mana* circumscribes a sign-shifting horizon to the perceptual realms that risk going beyond irrelative motion: the semantic halo of *mana* points to the cultural task of transforming the individual, irrelative and incommunicable crisis into interpersonal and public reintegration. Through *mana*, the universe that “goes beyond” is accepted in its “beyond,” but this “beyond” opens to an order of relations that applies to all and prescribes the ways in order to reestablish itself the world.<sup>5</sup>

The merit – and aesthetic value – of Dario Coletti's photography consists precisely in its ability to evoke that force, as the presence of being in the world and, at the same time, as *its transcendence of value*, collective and shared in the “carnival.” It is both a spectacle and an unprecedented teaching, the teaching to see the invisible contained in that force, the *contemporary mana*, too often obfuscated by the superfetation of images with which our everyday life is burdened, emptied of that meaning.

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4 Engaged, in the 1940s, in a “history of magic” project, De Martino paid meticulous attention to all the uses of notions such as *mana*, to arrive at the conclusion not of a floating meaning, but of an “empty concept.” Cf. Giordana Charuty, *Ernesto De Martino. Le precedenti vite di un antropologo*, (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2010 [2009]), 238-240.

5 Giordana Charuty, Daniel Fabre, Marcello Massenzio (ed.), *De Martino, Ernesto, The End of the World. Contribution to the analysis of cultural apocalypses*, (Turin: Einaudi, 2019), 178-179.