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Performing and Re-enacting Southern Italian Lament: Ritual Mourning and the Migration of Images in the Mediterranean

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Abstract: Funerary lament and ritual weeping are multi-sensorial public expressions of grief that are often referred to as examples of cultural continuity in and across the Mediterranean. In the 1950s, anthropologist Ernesto de Martino and his team assembled a unique set of photos and sound and film recordings on lament in Southern Italy in an attempt to verify that contemporary forms of mourning did not just resemble ancient funerary laments but were actual relics thereof. Departing from these audio-visual materials, this essay traces recurring patterns and sequences of images and sounds related to lament in Southern Italy, arguing that the (female) body of the performers becomes the main medium of iconographic and choreographic reproduction by way of re-enacting and imitating lament in staged settings. Rather than studying the phenomenon of lament in itself (or its decline) or commenting on the continuity thesis, I focus on the mediated transmission of corporeal expressions of lamenters by drawing on Aby Warburg's concept of the "migration of images" (*Bilderwanderung*). I include artistic approaches and modes such as re-enactment, performance, and montage in my ethnographic study of ritual mourning and show that there is a repertory of ecstatic gestures transferred through command performances that is not concerned with "authentic" documentation. Instead, these gestures are there to be performed, individually reappropriated, and revived in situations of crisis to the present day.

[funeral lamentation in the Mediterranean; ritual and grief techniques; visual ethnographic documentation; sound recordings; De Martino studies; re-enactment; visual culture; Bilderwanderung]

The actual moment of death electrifies the mourners, even though some of the women lapse into a trance and are senseless until they reawaken and take up the mourning again. They fling open the windows to let the dead man's spirit out and open the doors to invite people in; then they settle down for the harrowing hours of the watch while the women chant, one singing the virtues of the dead man, the others wailing the chorus. They embrace his head and scratch their faces until their nails grow bloody from the wounds and their faces [are turned] into blood and raw flesh. Then a wailing throng of people, amid cries of anguish and pain, dance about, twisting and turning back and forth now to one side, now to the other, swaying to the ceaseless flow of the tearful refrain until the moment when they take the body away. The grieving reaches new peaks of intensity as people throw themselves over the dead person, hugging him and crying out to him in their pain the song reserved for the dead. Their endless, horrible cries of grief are the same, a constant offering,

day by day: “Sorrow, sorrow, sorrow! Cry you mothers who have children, cry with all your pain! Alas, my brother! Death has come up to our windows, it has entered our house! The world is darkening! It has lost its light! Our house is black!” The special pitch and quavering of the voice, more exaggerated than in singing, along with weeping and sobbing that accompany it, make this heartrending. (Amelang 2005:4f)

The ritual mortuary lament so vividly described in this passage never occurred as such. The text does not refer to a specific ethnographic example and is actually a fictionalised account. It was early modern historian James S. Amelang who collated and assembled phrases from a number of different historical sources, including the lament for Hector at the close of *The Iliad*, the four plays *Andromache*, *Electra*, *Hecabe*, and *The Trojan Women* by Euripides, as well as two verses from the Old Testament – Jeremiah 9:21 and 22:18.¹ Moreover, Amelang consulted an entry on funeral dirges in a dictionary of early modern Spain, the description of death laments of Moroccan women from an 1803 travel account, a transcription of an early twentieth-century funerary lament from the Galician village of Salcedo, and traditional mourning practices in a mid-twentieth-century study of Sephardic Jews in Salonika in Greece (Badia Lebllich 1997:164; De Covarrubias 1943:516–517; Filgueira 1945:604–605; Molho 1950:174). He further cites two ethnographic accounts of ritual laments from villages in Lucania (today Basilicata), namely Ernesto de Martino’s *Morte e pianto rituale nel mondo antico. Dal lamento pagano al pianto di Maria* (2000[1958]:79) and Ann Cornelisen’s *Torregreca: A World in Southern Italy* (1980[1969]:143). Further emphasis is laid on the experimental documentary film *Stendali* (1960) by Cecilia Mangini for which Pier Paolo Pasolini wrote the screenplay (Pasolini 2001:2099–2100). And last but not least, Amelang also refers to two more recent anthropological monographs, one on a village in northern Greece and the other on a Bedouin society in Egypt (Danforth 1982; Abu-Lughod 1986).

This tour de force is essentially based on the argument of cultural continuity in and across the Mediterranean. In his analysis, Amelang discusses three different kinds of continuity: a) chronology, as illustrated by the juxtaposition of ancient texts with recent ones, b) geographical continuity, as the examples stretch from one end of the Mediterranean to the other, and finally, c) that of provenance or genre, revealed by the compatibility and interchangeability of literary and ethnographic texts and documents of actual historic experience (Amelang 2005:6). By constructing such a fictionalised hybrid passage, Amelang not only demonstrates the astonishing prevalence and resilience of ritual lament in Mediterranean cultural practice – spanning from antiquity to the ethnographic present – but also tackles the issue of *survivals*, or rather *Nachleben* in

1 Amelang quotes phrases from Homer, *The Iliad*, XXIV (pp. 838–839), as well as *Andromache* (pp.197–198), *Electra* (pp. 147–148), *Hecabe* (pp. 651–653), and *The Trojan Women* (pp. 115–118). The versions used are Know and Fagles (1998) as well Rutherford and Davie (1998).

Aby Warburg's sense.² Consequently, Amelang's experimental sampling culminates in the question of whether "the bizarre laments of southern Italian women in the present [provide] the key to understanding mourning in the Mediterranean world of the distant past" (Amelang 2005:6); this question is also crucial to the Italian philosopher of religion and ethnographer Ernesto de Martino (1908–1965), whose work on death and ritual mourning Amelang is also drawing on in the eclectic mock-up quoted above.

In my own ethnographic research, I am mainly concerned with the artistic survival, the *Nachleben* of images and motifs generated in the context of Ernesto de Martino's "spedizioni etnografiche" ("ethnographic expeditions") to the South of his native Italy between 1952 and 1959. De Martino primarily studied funeral rituals and *tarantism* – a rural Apulian possession cult in which the (imaginary) bite of the tarantula spider is believed to cause a nervous disorder – as ways of coping with socio-economic misery and personal crises.³ He himself preferred the term *relicti* (*relics*), rather than *survivals* to describe the continuities of particular ritual patterns and practices, including melodies and songs, gestures, motion sequences, magic spells, and formulas, etc. (De Martino 2000[1958]:308). Striving to prove the point that the ritual cries of modern Lucanian women were indeed relics of ancient funerary laments rather than just resembling them, he proposed to analyse and re-evaluate ancient documentation through evidence gathered in present-day fieldwork.

Although De Martino himself took no photographs, during several of his research trips, he commissioned photographers and filmmakers along with ethnomusicologist Diego Carpitella to highlight the performative characteristics of the phenomena studied. He thus inspired a whole generation of filmmakers and photographers to explore Southern Italian death rituals, magical practices, and ecstatic saint veneration audio-visually. His first goal, as I see it, was to counter the static nature of preceding representations and analyses of tarantism and ritual lamentation. By evoking the sensory aspects of the movements, body techniques, cries, and mourning, he intended to make the "spectacle of the crisis" comprehensible and bring it to life. He used images – sketches, photographs, and film – to outline a stylised choreography or codified catalogue of ecstatic gestures and expressions; and the images helped him to study the ritualised gestures and movements in more detail and/or slow motion (see Pisapia 2013a, 2013b). In this

2 By *survivals* I mean the long-term continuity of a repertory of gestures and speech (here also wailing) in the face of accelerating modernisation and social change. Whereas, in extension of Edward B. Tylor's analyses, Warburg's *Nachleben* denotes the continuity or afterlife and metamorphosis of images and motifs.

3 I have been conducting ongoing intermittent ethnographic fieldwork on the revival of tarantism and popular religion in Apulia since 2012, and have researched the media output (drawings and sketches, photographs, and films) of De Martino's excursions at the Archive of the Associazione Internazionale Ernesto de Martino at the Bibliomediateca Accademia di Santa Cecilia – Fondazione in Rome, which was made possible by a fellowship of the Karin and Uwe Hollweg Stiftung at the Casa di Goethe in Rome (2015–2016). All translations from Italian are by myself except for the passages in which I draw on the translations by David Forgacs (2014).

article, I therefore aim to add images of gestures and choreographies of movement – and, to a certain extent, also sound recordings – to Amelang’s eclectic description of ritual mourning in the Mediterranean. I argue that documentary photo- and cinematography, recordings of re-enacted scenes, as well as artistic approaches and appropriations contribute to a timeless, yet variable repertory of gestures and speech of mortuary lament.

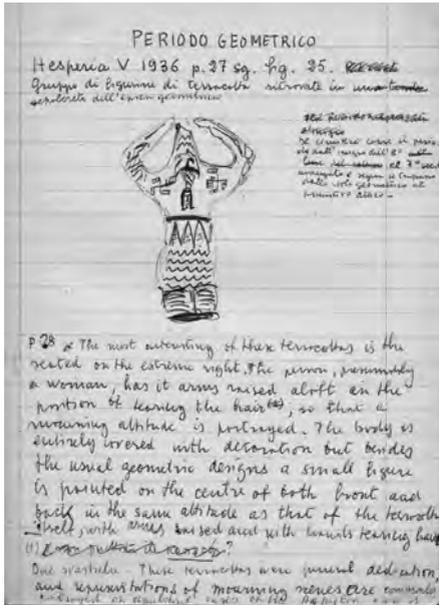
In the following, I will focus on depictions and embodied appropriations of professional mourners, so-called *prefiche* or *chiangimorti* in Southern Italy. Rather than studying the phenomenon of funerary lament (*moroloja*) in itself, or its decline, I focus on the mediatisation and circulation of images of female lamenters – in ethnographic as well as artistic contexts. In doing so, I draw on a set of unique audio-visual materials that were produced in the context of Ernesto de Martino’s expeditions to Lucania and Salento⁴ in the 1950s and which have evolved from there until the present day. I will introduce a series of photographs – “authentic” and staged – taken during these research trips by photographer Franco Pinna and present an overview of the relevant film and sound recordings; in addition I will focus on the experimental documentary film *Stendali* (1960) by Cecilia Mangini for which Pier Paolo Pasolini wrote an imaginary dialogue between a mother and her deceased son. Mangini was strongly influenced by the writings of De Martino on ritual lament and staged the scenes for her film in Martano, a village in Grecia Salentina, the Griko-speaking (a Southern Italian dialect with Greek roots) area in the Salentine peninsula, where he had previously conducted fieldwork. In the following I will trace recurring iconographic patterns and sequences of sounds and images related to lament, arguing that the (female) body of the performers acts as the main medium of iconographic and choreographic reproduction. By adding artistic approaches and modes such as re-enactment, performance, and montage to the ethnographic study of ritual mourning, I am furthering Amelang’s argument about the interchangeability of provenance and/or genre of source materials and hope to revive the discussion on *Bilderwanderung*, the “migration of images” – a term and concept used by Aby Warburg in his conceptualisation of the Age of the Renaissance as the renewal of pagan antiquity.⁵

“*Si nu’ chiangimorti!*” (“*You Are One of the Mourners!*”)

There are numerous depictions of female ritual mourners on terracotta sculptures from ancient Egypt or ceramic fragments dating back to Greek and Roman antiquity. In

4 While the historical region of Lucania extended from the Tyrrhenian Sea to the Gulf of Taranto and comprises almost all the modern region of Basilicata, Salento is a geographic and historical region at the southern end of the region of Apulia, sometimes described as the “heel” of the Italian “boot”.

5 In his text “Italienische Kunst”, Aby Warburg writes “It was with this desire to restore the ancient world that ‘the good European’ began his battle for enlightenment, in that age of internationally migrating images that we – a shade too mystically – call the Age of the Renaissance” (Warburg 1999[1912]:586).



Figures 1 & 2 Sketch from Ernesto de Martino’s notebook on mimics of lament in ancient Greece (left) and the page from the journal of *Hesperia* (1936) he copied it from and referenced in his notes (right).

Southern Italy the term *chiangimorti* – a word that derives from the standard Italian *piangimorti*, or rather *piangere i morti*, which literally translates as “crying for the dead” (It. *piangere* = to cry, to weep, to mourn) – is commonly used for women who ritually mourned and wept at funerals. Alternative names for women who, from classical antiquity and throughout the Mediterranean, were paid for lamenting or delivering a eulogy are *prefiche* (sing. *prefica* or *prefica*), from the Latin *praefica*, or *rèpute*. In Lucania and Salento, they usually worked in pairs and, at least until the late 1950s, were called to the house of the deceased to perform their ecstatic rituals.

Some of the earliest photographs and filmic documentary footage of ritual mourners were shot in the 1950s. In autumn 1952, Ernesto de Martino undertook an expedition to remote villages in Lucania, accompanied by Franco Pinna, Diego Carpitella, who did sound recordings of songs and magical practices, De Martino’s fiancée, Vittoria de Palma, who enabled the team to access women’s lifeworlds, and the journalist Marcello Venturoli. Clara Gallini, De Martino’s former student and research assistant, speaks of this and subsequent journeys as “la ‘scoperta’ della Lucania”, “the ‘discovery’ of Lucania” (Gallini 1986a). Their explicit aims were a) to collect folk songs on various topics, b) to study magico-religious behaviours related to Lucanian peasants’ life cycles, and c) to document their findings with photographs and a film (ibid.:106). In his notes for the preface of *Magia Lucana*, De Martino explicitly mentions “[t]he world of mourners. Vocational mourners. Psychic state of the la-

menter in action. Ritual and grief technique” as some of his topics of interest (Gallini 1986b:121).⁶

Being a historian of religion, before De Martino embarked on the ethnographic study of actual remnants of funerary lament in Lucania in situ, he meticulously studied historical and secondary sources of the phenomenon, mainly from ancient Egypt and ancient Greece. For this purpose he also consulted depictions of terracotta figurines, and he not only took notes but also sketched numerous gesturing stick figures (kneeling down, standing with hands raised, etc.) and copied figures from vases (Figures 1 and 2).⁷ Among other things, he sketched “mimetic typologies of female lamenters” from Egypt and notebook seven is entirely dedicated to “GRECIA – MIMICA del góos” (“GREECE – MIMETICS of lament”). He also consulted excavation reports in various Classical Studies journals and copied a geometric terracotta figurine.

In his handwritten notes, he quoted the following description of the terracotta figurine he sketched from a report of an excavation of the Athenian Agora in 1935:

“The most interesting of these terracottas is the seated figure on the extreme right. The person, presumably a woman, has its arms raised aloft in a position of tearing the hair, so that a mourning attitude is portrayed. The body is entirely covered with decoration but besides the usual geometric designs a small figure is painted on the centre of both front and back in the same attitude of that of the terracotta itself, with arms raised and with the hands tearing the hair. ... These terracottas were funeral dedications, and representations of mourning scenes are commonly portrayed on sepulchral vases of the Dipylon style” (Shear 1936:28).

By copying these depictions and descriptions, De Martino familiarised himself with standardised corporeal gestures and facial expressions of lament in the ancient Mediterranean world.

During the trip to Lucania, he probably had this imagery in mind. It can therefore be no coincidence that the pictures that Franco Pinna took of the two *prefiche* Grazia Prudente and Carmina di Giulio near Pisticci (figures 3 and 4) strongly correspond to De Martino’s notes. The photo of Carmina di Giulio (figure 4) in particular bears a striking resemblance to De Martino’s drawing of the terracotta figurine with its arms raised aloft in a position of tearing the hair. This photo was published in De Martino’s *Morte e pianto rituale* (1958) and republished a year later in his *Sud e magia* (1959), yet with different captions. While in *Morte e pianto rituale* it is captioned “Esplosione parossistica controllata in lament funebre artificiale” (“Controlled paroxysmal explosion in artificial funeral lament”), a year later the same picture is simply called

6 In her comments on the unedited works of Ernesto de Martino, Clara Gallini quotes his notes in the original as “[i]l mondo delle lamentatrici. Lamentatrici di vocazione. Stato psichico della lamentatrice in azione. Lamento rituale e tecniche del cordoglio” (Gallini 1986b:121).

7 I would like to thank the Archive in the Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia in Rome for generously granting me access to digitised versions of Ernesto de Martino’s and Vittoria di Palma’s various notebooks.



Figures 3 & 4 Photographs by Franco Pinna, taken on 10 October 1952 near the village of Pisticci in the province of Matera, depicting the *prefiche* Grazia Prudente (left) and Carmina di Giulio (right). In this region, ritual lament is known as *naccarata*.⁸ Photos: Franco Pinna

“Lamentatrice di Pisticci” (“Weeping Woman from Pisticci”) in *Sud e magia* (see also Forgacs 2014:147). Although these lamentations traditionally only took place in closed rooms, usually at the home of the deceased, the anthropologist and his team moved them outside. De Martino does not conceal the fact that the lament was staged for him and his team, but to a significant extent straightforwardly explains 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]” (De Martino 2000[1958]:377; see also Forgacs 2014:148).

To sing inside the village would “bring misfortune” (“*porta iella*”), the women explained. For this reason, De Martino expected the photographer to keep a low profile and to almost make himself invisible so as to disturb neither the mourners nor the anthropologist’s work. Despite this expectation, Pinna’s photographic style is rather confrontational. He directly communicates with the women through his camera, which “at once addresses and is boldly addressed by the women”, as Giuliana Minghelli states (Minghelli 2016:392). “The effect”, she writes, “is one of an unfolding communication,

⁸ While the photos are kept in the Archivio Franco Pinna in Rome, the original 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 visited 22.10.2020).



Figure 5 Funeral of Carolina Latronico and funeral lament in Castelsaraceno, 3 August 1956. Photo: Franco Pinna

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.). But Pinna not only photographed, he also shot 300 metres 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).

Between 1953 and 1956 the anthropologist 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 they observed and recorded were all reconstructed and performed especially for the anthropologist and his companions. Only once did they witness an ‘authentic’ lament, for the late Carolina Latronico in the village Castelsaraceno in the province of Potenza, on 3 August 1956 (Gallini 1999:24; Gallini and Fatea 1999:162–172, see figure 5). Usually, they would meticulously prepare the setting for their recordings and ask professional mourners 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. Ideal ethnography, De Martino contended, “entails immediate annotation and phonographic recording, photography, and documentary film” (Gallini 1986b:124).⁹

9 Referring to De Martino’s plea that an ideal ethnography should entail as many diverse sources of information gathered through as many media technologies as possible, Clara Gallini quotes him “una



Figure 6 “Simulazione di lamento funebre”. Carmela Palmaverde is reconstructing a ritual mourning in Montemurro, 5–11 August 1956.
Photo: Franco Pinna



Figure 7 Reconstruction of a funerary lament, performed by Rosamaria Carlucci (left) and Giuseppina Troiano (middle) in Ruoti, 15 August 1956.
Photo: Franco Pinna

On their excursion in August 1956, Franco Pinna shot 341 photographs (only twelve of which were in colour) with his Rolleiflex Biottica in this way. Among the most famous today is a series entitled “Simulazione di lamento funebre” (“Simulation of a funerary lament”), the reconstruction of ritual mourning by Carmela Palmaverde in the small town of Montemurro (figure 6). A week later the team recorded the reconstruction of a lament by the two professional mourners Rosamaria Carlucci and Giuseppina Troiano in the village of Ruoti, close to Potenza (figure 7).

The on-site observations Ernesto de Martino made during these research excursions culminated in his extensive, aforementioned ethnographic study *Morte e pianto rituale* published in 1958. According to his idea of an ideal ethnography, De Martino added an extremely heterogeneous visual appendix to his monograph. Called “atlante figurato del pianto”, a “figurative atlas of mourning”, it comprises sixty-six images and includes photographs, film stills, reproductions of pottery, and reliefs, etc. The first part is entitled “materiale folklorico”, “folkloric material”, and features eleven photographs of funerary lament that are mainly presented as “artificial”. The collection also includes some of the photographs on Lucanian funerary lament by Franco Pinna from Pisticci

documentazione che integra [...] la annotazione immediata e la registrazione fonografica, la fotografia e il documentario; che raccoglie testi letterari e temi melodici, scongiuri e comportamenti rituali che li accompagnano, costumanze e occasioni di vita culturale, feste e scenari in cui si svolgono; che non trascura la persona del portatore di cultura tradizionale” (Gallini 1986b:124).

and Montemurro described above, along with comparative materials from Sardinia and Romania, as well as two stills from Michele Gandin's four-minute shortfilm *Lamento funebre* (1954) that are described as "mimic sequence repeated indefinitely in artificial funeral lament" (De Martino 2000[1958], see Figure 8 below).¹⁰ The second part covers the "ancient world" and includes sketches and examples of archaic gestures, mainly from Egypt and Athens. The third part, on the "Christian epoch", consists of iconographic representations from the medieval era. The term "atlas" did not feature in the anthropological vocabulary of the time and is reminiscent of Aby Warburg's unfinished *Mnemosyne Atlas* published in 1929.¹¹

De Martino's use of the term "artificial" in relation to certain scenes of funerary lament was in no way pejorative; he appreciated performances and re-enactments as effective ethnological research methods and he continually emphasised that reconstructed performances were as scientifically valuable as "authentic" data. In *Morte e pianto rituale*, for example, he writes that an "artificial lament" was as "dramatic and demonstrative" (De Martino 2000[1958]:377) as a real one, and in a radio programme broadcast in 1954 he stated "the lamenter undergoes a gradual self-suggestion and, after hesitating a few times, immerses herself so deeply in her role that she really cries, perhaps remembering her own dead loved ones" (Satriani and Bindi 2002[1954]:69; see also Forgacs 2014:148).¹²

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; they served his purposes just as well as if they were 'authentic'. Unlike

10 In the first part of his appendix to *Morte e pianto rituale*, in which De Martino presents several photographs taken during his ethnographic expeditions under the rubric of "folkloric materials", illustrations 3a, b, c are film stills of Gandin's *Lamento Funebre*. These are simply described as "sequenza mimica indefinitamente iterata in lamento funebre artificiale. Pisticci (Lucania)" without further mention of the director's or the film's name (Martino 2000[1958], appendix without page numbers).

11 De Martino's use of the term *atlas* makes reference to Aby Warburg's unfinished *Mnemosyne* project, in which Warburg tried to identify and map what he believed were universal formulaic gestures and expressions of emotion, so-called *Pathosformeln*. Although De Martino never directly referred to Warburg's last project, a number of scholars have drawn attention to strong parallels between the two atlases (Agosti and Sciuto 1990; Faeta 2003; Didi-Huberman 2012; Pisapia 2013a and 2013b, among others). The connection was also discussed at an international conference entitled "Mourning, Magic, Ecstatic Healing: Ernesto de Martino" held at the Zentrum für Literatur- und Kulturforschung, Berlin, Germany (9.–10.7.2015), especially in the contribution by Davide Stimilli, "The Luxury of Tears: Warburg and De Martino on *Klage* and *Lamento*" (Stimilli 2020). Furthermore, in October 2017, Carlo Ginzburg gave a lecture entitled "Unintended Convergences: Ernesto de Martino and Aby Warburg at the Warburg Haus in Hamburg", a video of which can be seen here: <https://lecture2go.uni-hamburg.de/l2go/-/get/v/22138> (last visited 22.10.2020).

12 On 19 April 1954, RAI Radio Tre broadcast the third part of the series *Panorami etnologici e folcloristici* (*Ethnological and Folkloristic Views*), on Ernesto de Martino's research, entitled "I lamenti funebri e l'esperienza arcaica della morte" ("Funerary laments and the archaic experience of death"). The whole broadcast can be accessed here: <http://www.teche.rai.it/1954/04/panorami-etnologici-e-folcloristici-i-lamenti-funebri-e-lesperienza-arcaica-della-morte/> (last visited 22.10.2020).

other leading international anthropologists of his time he always understood that all ‘authentic rituals’ are performances – and that is the reason why he did not see it as falsification or distortion to ask his informants to stage certain poses, trances, and gestures for the purpose of the recordings.¹³

What should not be forgotten in this context is the fact that women were usually paid for their mourning services – so the ritual lament is per se a performance and not necessarily an expression of individual, emotional crisis. “One of de Martino’s points in *Death and Ritual Lament* is to show how the personal dimension of mourning is regained within the ‘protected’ and codified environment of the lamentation ritual. It is a constantly de-historicised and re-historicised gesture, in transit between truth and fiction, between being there and being possessed”, as Daniela Cascella writes (2012). 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” (De Martino 1947).¹⁴

Mortuary Lament – A Multi-Sensorial Spectacle across the Mediterranean

Laments or lamentations are passionate expressions of grief, mourning, and pain that often take the form of music, poetry, or song. They encompass many different genres, each depending on the subject, and comprise some of the oldest forms of poetry and writing in human history. Some texts date back more than 4,000 years to ancient Sumer, and elements of laments appear in the Homeric epics, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*,

13 In-between the journeys with De Martino, Diego Carpitella had also travelled to Southern Italy together with American field collector of folk music Alan Lomax. In August 1954, they recorded funerary lamentations and also photographed so-called *chiangimorti* or *prefiche*, female ritual mourners (Lomax, Wood and Plastino 2006:10). Ethnomusicologist Maurizio Agamennone describes the challenges of the work of Lomax and Carpitella as follows: “It seems that in order to convince the mourners to sing they had to bring a real coffin and inside they had put a fake corpse” (quoted in Gaeta 2004). As it turns out, Lomax and Carpitella had also made use of re-enactments and applied even more extreme measures than Ernesto de Martino and his team by staging an entire funeral with a fake corpse.

14 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.

and in the Hindu Vedas. They are also found in religious texts of the ancient Near East and ancient Rome, and are components of the Judaic and Christian tradition (Suter 2008). Not all mourning expressed in laments is necessarily for the dead, but when it is, the laments are usually part of more elaborate funerary rituals and they are almost always performed by women.

The best-known and most extensively studied form is probably the ritual lament in Greek tradition. These range from *kommos* in classical Greek tragic theatre (from Greek κομμός, *kommós*, literally “striking”, especially the rhythmic beating of the head and breast in ritualised mourning), which denotes a lyrical lamentation song chanted by the chorus and a dramatic character, to the folk laments that are still performed in modern Greece, especially in Mani and Epirus. In ancient Greece, the actual singing of lyrical lament, or *threnos*, was performed “by professional mourners who initiated and conducted the entire musical component of the mourning ritual”, as C. Nadia Seremetakis has elaborated (1991:124).¹⁵ Between 1981 and 1988 Seremetakis researched and collected performances of laments in Inner Mani. Her collection of Maniat lament, published in the monograph *The Last Word: Women, Death and Divination in Inner Mani*, encompasses improvised mourning songs, dreaming, and women’s involvement in mortuary ritual and related divinatory practices, including exhumations of the dead. Highlighting the historical centrality of death rites in the region she also states that “understanding death rituals is inseparable from understanding [...] cultural imagination” (ibid.:2) and conceptualises the performances as the “paramount public event of the culture, and the primary resource for the production of aesthetic forms (music and poetry), of kin ideology and indigenous oral history” (1990:482). Apart from the ritual mourning of the dead, lament is therefore also to be understood as a poetic social commentary.

The modern Greek term for lament, *moirólói*, arguably means “crying or telling one’s fate” and it is from this word that the expression for the funerary lament in Grecia Salentina, *moroloja*, is derived. In *The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition*, a comprehensive study of laments from Homer and the classic period to contemporary variants, Margaret Alexiou convincingly shows that the term *moirólói* is composed of the etymological elements *moira* (fate) and *logos* (speech, word).¹⁶ The collectivity of traditional female performers of lament in modern rural Greece who antiphonically vocalise and physically display suffering are called *moirologhístres*, while each individual woman from this collective who improvises a lament narrative is known as a *korifea* (Seremetakis 1990:489).

Ritual mourning, however, is not limited to *logos* but entails an entire choreography of suffering. It is “embedded in polyphonic media: poetry, acoustic effects, techniques

15 According to Seremetakis, *threnos* was distinguished from *goos* (*ghóos*), those laments that were performed by the female relatives of the dead (ibid.).

16 *Moirológhia* are not just performed at funerals but can also denote occasional songs performed during work in the fields (Alexiou 1974:110).

of the body, vocal music, and the arrangement of physical artefacts as material narratives” (Seremetakis 1991:3). The whole mortuary cycle – which is performed exclusively by women – encompasses the washing and laying out of the deceased body in an open coffin, followed by a period of ceremonial waking (*klama*) and lament singing, either held in a private home or in a church. In these sessions, which can last for several hours, the mourners negotiate and stress their relations with the deceased, often in kinship terms and with reference to notions of exchange and reciprocity.

Seremetakis distinguishes between acoustic and corporeal means of expressing grief, whereby acoustic can denote linguistic (discourse) and non-linguistic (i.e. sobs) forms. In this respect, the ritual sobbing establishes an acoustic structure beyond verbal content. Furthermore, Seremetakis describes how in a lament, the bodily integrity of the mourner is metaphorically transgressed and that her felt pain and her violent screaming occasionally even used to result in violent physical expressions, such as the stripping off of the headscarf, pulling of one’s hair, etc. After these emotional and performative excesses, the wake then makes way for the formal part of the burial, which is led by a priest and accompanied with liturgical singing.

This ethnographically rich description of Maniat death rituals as vocal and multi-sensorial spectacle strongly resonates with Amelang’s fictionalised account of funerary lament quoted above. What is crucial are the non-verbal qualities of lament: the polyphonic structure of the women’s voices, the timbre and pitch of the *moirologhistra*, the lead lamenter’s individual voice, “her sobs, moans, shrieks and sighs” (Holst-Warhaft 1992:38). The experience that ties the biographical, historical, and emotional dimensions of lament together is pain and suffering. Transferring these elements back to lament in the Griko-speaking parts of Southern Italy reveals the important role that the medium of film plays in the recording and transmission of gestures and choreographies of suffering.

Filming the Corporeal Aspects of Lament

When studying the “tecnica del piangere” (“technique of lament”), Ernesto de Martino knew that he had to include the corporeal aspects, the performances, the postures, and gestures of the wailing women and to review the musical structure of the laments in situ (De Martino 2000[1958]:57). To research and better understand the multi-sensorial expressions of pain and suffering which have survived the centuries and are again and again charged with meaning he could not rely exclusively on photographs and sound recordings. “The Lament exudes a staged quality with no claims for authenticity or for the outpouring of uncontrolled emotion: often in a funeral, groups of women ‘who know how to weep’ enact the Lament on behalf of the family of the dead”, asserts Cascella, thus emphasising that “[l]ament is not to be intended as a fixed, textual-only form whose meaning is embedded exclusively in its lyrics, but as a whole made of

words as they are spoken, of gestures, of music and in the tradition of such words and gestures, in the places and occasions when they are performed. As such, it can only be studied across many different languages and formats: audio recordings, film and photography as much as written notes” (Cascella 2012).

Initially, De Martino intended to create a systematically prepared “cinematographic encyclopedia” of popular religious culture in the Italian South. The first entry was to be a four-minute documentary film-clip called *Lamento funebre* (*Funerary Lament*), by filmmaker Michele Gandin, for which De Martino served as a consultant. In April 1954, Gandin had accompanied Ernesto de Martino to Pisticci and filmed a funerary lament that he staged with the participation of Grazia Prudente and Carmina di Giulio – the two *prefiche* that Franco Pinna had already photographed and possibly also filmed in 1952. Like Pinna, Gandin also moved them outside: on the one hand, to have better lighting conditions and, on the other, he argued, because the dramatic moment was more effective when set in the barren, moon-like landscape (Marano 2007:44). The narrative structure of *Lamento funebre* is built around the sudden death of a peasant in the field who is then mourned by a group of *prefiche*, or wailing women. The *prefiche* are dressed in black, their hair covered with black headscarves, and they surround the coffin, while wailing, screaming, and frantically waving white handkerchiefs. A highly formalised and aestheticised *mise-en-scène*, these black and white recordings focus on body techniques, facial expressions, and gestures of the presenters – their “expressive codes” (Gallini 1999:18). The film’s commentary describes the lives of the local population and the landscape in very bleak terms, highlighting people’s poverty and the desolateness of the place – yet in a very poetic and aestheticised way. De Martino strove to gather ethnographic material that would support his theory that magico-religious practices and ritual lament were folkloric cultural forms of expressing and potentially overcoming anguish which also had the capacity to shed light upon their ancient precedents throughout the Mediterranean. According to Gandin, during their fieldwork De Martino “paced back and forth continually tormented by what meaning to give to these religious facts, to these popular displays we were filming. I myself, while I was making this brief documentary about funeral laments, getting to know for the first time this aspect of southern life, said to myself: ‘It’s fascinating, beautiful, but what does it mean? It moves us, but what is its proper interpretation (*ragionamento*)?’” (Piquerdu 1983, quoted in Amelang 2005:8). These ponderings point at the conundrum that not only Gandin but all *registi demartiniani* (Demartinian directors) produced fascinating and highly stylised works of art, yet promoted a certain form of “proletarian exoticism” that rather uncritically romanticises the misery of Southern lifeworlds – a romanticism that is largely absent from De Martino’s written work. In the end, the “cinematographic encyclopedia” that De Martino had planned was never realised due to financial constraints, but *Lamento funebre* by Gandin remains the first filmic account of ecstatic mourning practices in the Salento. And although the scenes are all re-enactments of an actual mourning ritual, the work is of great ethnographic value and constitutes the first “artistic survival” (Didi-Huberman 2003) of lament in Salento.



Figures 8 & 9 On the left, film stills from *Lamento funebre* (1954) by Michele Gandin, referred to as “mimetic sequence repeated indefinitely in artificial funeral lament” in De Martino’s “figurative atlas of mourning” appended in *Morte e pianto rituale* (1958). On the right, a film still from *Magia Lucana* (1958), by Luigi di Gianni.

In 1958, in the same year that De Martino published *Morte e pianto rituale* and four years after Michele Gandin’s *Lamento funebre*, another filmmaker staged a funerary ritual. Luigi di Gianni also added a scene of a mortuary lament in his film *Magia Lucana*, for which De Martino, similar to Gandin’s film, also acted as consultant. Di Gianni relocated the staging of the funerary lament to an arid landscape outside a village (figure 9), using original sound recordings by Diego Carpitella. It was this scene, which is only two minutes long, that reportedly caused a stir when the film premiered at the festival in Venice. Apparently, members of the audience got very upset and walked out. Di Gianni himself explained these reactions by stating that Italian audiences at the time expected documentary films to deal with art and travel, but not to draw on such topics as death, poverty, illness, and desperate mental states.¹⁷ In this scene in *Magia Lucana*, the voiceover commentary first provides a translation of the lament in standard Italian, followed by Carpitella’s recordings of the women’s intonations in local dialect.

17 There is a striking parallel between the reaction to Luigi di Gianni’s film in Venice and the reactions to Jean Rouch’s film *Les Maitres fous*, which had first been screened at the Musée de l’Homme in Paris three years previously in 1955. Rouch showed his film on the *hauka* spirit possession cult in today’s Ghana to an audience mostly composed of anthropologists and African intellectuals. They then urged him to destroy the film as they feared it would encourage racist prejudice (Henley 2009:104). These rather strong reactions indicate that middle-class audiences in the 1950s found images of ecstatic and/or ailing bodies very disturbing, no matter whether they were filmed in Southern Europe or in West Africa.

The scene of the lament in *Magia Lucana* looks almost exactly like Gandin's original recordings: Di Gianni uses the same camera angles (aerial shots, pans, wide-shots and close-ups) and places the coffin for the staged funerary ritual in the same moon-like hilly landscape. The weeping and wailing women, dressed in black and waving white handkerchiefs, surround the coffin and perform an artificial mortuary rite while men and children watch nearby, positioned in "statuesque poses" (Forgacs 2014:147). Both scenes are carefully choreographed and highlight the ritualistic pattern of the lament while conveying a melodramatic sense of desperation and gloom. Re-enactments enforce a specific visual language. When filmmakers and photographers stage a certain scene or choreographic pattern, they also tend to do so with reference to previous images, hence creating a certain representational paradigm. In the case of Gandin's and Di Gianni's films, this resulted in a very dramatic imagery with an instantly recognisable look that was distinctly reminiscent of German expressionist cinema and *film noir*. Shots were often lit by using only one or two strong light sources to create the appropriate look and mood for a film. Lighting shots with high contrast made the scene appear more sinister and ominous and radically dramatised the funerary ritual.

But the filmmaker who most elaborately dealt with the sensory aspects and the embodied choreographies of funerary lament in Southern Italy was undoubtedly Cecilia Mangini. After reading De Martino's *Morte e pianto rituale* and having seen Pinna's photographs, Mangini travelled to Martano, where she staged and filmed a funeral ritual without previously consulting the anthropologist. This resulted in her 1960 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). While Michele Gandin and Luigi di Gianni did not make their use of reconstructions and re-enactments explicit, Cecilia Mangini took the principle to an extreme and used it as a creative artistic strategy (see figure 10 below).¹⁸

In *Stendali* the filmmaker reconstructs 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 is 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 is 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 recites the text with a dramatic voice, which contrasts with the exclamations and shrill moans of the mourners, who are dressed in black.

Due to its aestheticised visual language, its rhythm, and the literary narration, Mangini's film unfolds an impressive cine-poetic. She makes full use of reconstructions, manipulations, music, filmic montage, fast cutting, and literary/poetic elements. Using the constructedness and artificiality of the situation as a deliberate stylistic ele-

18 Interestingly, among his many sources, Amelang not only quotes a passage from *Morte e pianto rituale* by De Martino, but also refers to *Stendali* in its own right.

ment and the mobility of the camera in combination with the constant change of perspective – at one point even filmed from the viewpoint of the dead – she adds an additional experimental, alienated component. Her films are entirely fictionalised and aestheticised accounts of religious experience. She deploys a technique of visual as well as audio montage and arrives at an aesthetic that is clearly different from the styling in neorealist cinema. The lament is recited with a frozen facial expression and even the tearing of the hair is a standardised gesture, which creates the image of a formalised ritual with fixed locomotion patterns. The wringing and waving of white handkerchiefs, the women’s sonorous singing, the rhythmic movements of their heads and upper bodies, and their increasingly quick jumping up and down turn the lamentation into a controlled-ecstatic dance. Egisto Macchi, who composed the music for *Stendali*, is referred to as

“musical commentator” in the credits, and his sound effects indeed constitute an independent second commentary, next to Pasolini’s text. The importance of the non-verbal qualities of the lament is reflected in the soundscape and the skilful montage of various acoustic strands, such as the fictionalised dialogue, antiphonic singing, the non-verbal sighs, sobs, and screams of the *prefiche* along with their rhythmic clapping and jumping, all accompanied by Macchi’s atonal dramatic music.

In her description of rural Greek lament Seremetakis observes that “[m]ourning with full ‘pain’ involves touching the dead, caressing the face, forehead, and hair, or holding the forehead (the head being the center of the persona). They talk and sing to the dead as if addressing a sleeping child or an ill person” (1990:488). In this sense, the re-enacted lament in *Stendali*, in which a fictional mother cries out to her deceased son, expresses exactly this kind of pan-Mediterranean and timeless form of ritualised mourning that Amelang also attempts to convey. It is therefore no coincidence when Luigi Chiriatti writes of *Stendali* that “[t]he atmosphere of the film literally carries us back to the choruses of ancient Greece by Euripides, by Aeschylus, by the great Greek dramatists” (2007:52). And indeed, Mangini’s documentary is a timeless cinematographic study and memorial of Greek-Salentine ritual lament. Ultimately, *Stendali*



Figure 10 Stills from *Stendali – suonano ancora* (1960) by Cecilia Mangini. © Cecilia Mangini

even follows the narrative outlined by Serematakis that, after the *prefiche's* lament, the coffin with the (fake) corpse is carried away and handed over to the institution of the church, which is led by the priest. This act epitomises the transition from a phase of boundless, ecstatically expressed suffering into a form of mourning that follows a standardised liturgical pattern.

Concluding Remarks

It is safe to state that all filmic accounts of funerary lament in Salento since the 1950s have been staged or re-enacted for anthropologists, sound recordists, photographers, and filmmakers. They all appropriate a set of standardised gestures, postures, and sounds, amounting to a choreography of suffering via various mimetic strategies. It is striking that none of the re-enactments fully abandons the documentary and/or ethnographic agenda and none employs a radical anti-naturalistic approach; even when fictionalising, alienating, or exaggerating the performative patterns, none of the audiovisual works gathered aims at decontextualising funerary lament by depriving the wailing of its folkloristic elements.

At the outset of the article, I described how I intended to revive the discussion on Aby Warburg's concept *Bilderwanderung* with reference to the example of mortuary lament in Southern Italy, furthering Amelang's argument about the interchangeability of provenance and/or genre of source materials. I have traced the astonishing prevalence and resilience of ritual lament in Mediterranean cultural practice proposed by Amelang in terms of geographical continuity, as well as chronology, as illustrated by the connection between ancient and more recent texts. Furthermore, I suggested adding images of gestures and choreographies of movement to Amelang's description. Analysing documentary photo- and cinematography as well as recordings of re-enacted scenes in parallel, I identified a uniform and consistent, yet variable repertory of gestures and embodied movements of mortuary lament, such as the raised hands above a lamenter's head, the waving of a white handkerchief, the wringing of the hands in despair, the banging on the earth or coffin, the gentle back-and-forth swaying of the body, as well as the rhythmic pulling of the hair. I have shown how the earliest photographic images of *prefiche* by Franco Pinna have migrated across time and various media, using re-enactments as the connecting mimetic element and strategy for this *Bilderwanderung*.

In his analysis of De Martino's approach to studying ritualised lamentation by using re-enactments, Italian Studies scholar David Forgacs also highlights the performative and standardised nature of the technique of weeping:

Rather, it consists of acquired practices and learned performances – body movements and gestures, cries, the repeating of formulaic verses – and these can be re-

produced if necessary by a paid mourner unrelated to the dead person. The artificial lamentation is not a copy of the real thing. It is the performance of a performance, more “controlled” than the actual performance, not least because it lasts only a short time, but not fundamentally different in kind. It was precisely the performed or theatrical nature of such events that made ethnographers feel it was ethically acceptable to record them. (Forgacs 2014:152)

Regardless of the ethical justification of re-enactments as research method, it is important to note that De Martino and his entourage used the camera, and especially the motion camera, as a tool for kinetic analysis. While De Martino initially had it in mind to systematically document and study funerary lament through cinematic frame analysis, photographers and filmmakers such as Franco Pinna, Michele Gandin, Luigi di Gianni, and Cecilia Mangini increasingly made use of experimental cinematographic and artistic means in their *mise-en-scène* of lament.

The practice of inducing, staging, or re-enacting certain emotional states or expressions can be traced back to the beginnings of photography and was previously used primarily in medical studies on the physiology of neuropathological movement. De Martino adapted this highly controversial practice for his ethnographic approach, although he was very careful not to pathologise his research subjects. Rather, he intended to disclose the refrains and formulaic expressions of lament found across time and place in the Mediterranean.

By isolating iconic gestural units, the camera reveals the structural organisation of the lament according to a modular, repeatable sequence of gestures – the hands raised to the head; the loosening of the hair; the rhythmic motion of the body – a basic grammar of the technique of mourning handed down from time immemorial in the Mediterranean basin, as de Martino’s visual appendix to *Morte e pianto rituale*, the “*Atlante figurato del pianto*”, illustrates. (Minghelli 2016:392f)

With this analysis of De Martino’s analytic approach, Giuliana Minghelli points to an affinity between ancient ritual gestures and modern photographic technology. Photographic and cinematographic apparatuses themselves exhibit a certain ritualistic nature. The reproduced images and postures store cultural knowledge and create a visual order that tends to “dehistoricise” an event. “Dehistoricification” (*destorificazione*) in De Martino’s sense describes the process or state in which one loses one’s place in the unfolding of history at critical moments of personal, social, and/or cultural suffering. Funeral lamentation and states of trance, for instance, simultaneously exacerbate dehistoricification (by taking one further into the metahistorical dimension of myth) but also, ultimately, reinsert the afflicted into history and help to overcome the crisis through ritual praxis (Massenzio 1986).

The repertory of lament gestures, music, and poetry becomes dehistoricised when collected and stored – whether it is in memory or as an audio-visual document. I argue, however, that through (re-)enacting the “basic grammar”, laments reappropriate, re-

vive, and rehistoricise the codified catalogue of ecstatic gestures and expressions. I have shown that the performances and re-enactments contribute to the continuity of funeral lamentation and other ecstatic techniques in so far as they are part of a collective tradition which carries the media and techniques for experiencing Demartinian dehistoricisation. By being acted out, being performed publicly, and thus being experienced, the ritualised gestures and expressions resonate with the underlying cultural knowledge and regain a personal dimension. The study of ancient ritualistic forms in the present – not as permanent structures out of time, but as devices that can be mobilised as coping mechanisms in particular critical situations – is therefore not about tracing or reproducing the historically real, but about better understanding the varying narratives and meanings they continue to be imbued with.

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