



Ritual as metaphor

Anthropological Theory

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Abstract

The effectiveness of ritual is a major anthropological question. In this paper, I challenge some of the explanations anthropologists have provided to such a question and I attempt to formulate an original theorization of ritual as metaphor. The proposed hypothesis is grounded in two inspiring concepts: Ernesto De Martino's idea of "dehistoricification" as the main technique of the ritual and Bruce Kapferer's "virtuality" as its proper dynamic dimension. Drawing on these theoretical foundations and a direct ethnographic experience and conceiving of ritual as a practice rather than as a symbol, I propose to regard it as a particular practice of metaphorization that is not representative of reality but effective on it.

Keywords

Ritual, metaphor, dehistoricification, Ernesto De Martino, virtuality, Bruce Kapferer

Introduction

How does a ritual work? This is clearly an ambiguous question, and cultural anthropologists have generally preferred to answer the question descriptively rather than analytically. We have a vast number of studies describing the ethnographic phenomenology of rites, their connections to the myths, their liturgical structures, their stereotyped modes, their linguistic and/or esthetic features and their performative sequences, their cultural meaning, and their social functions. Yet, fewer studies have endeavored to answer the question in its other sense: how *can* a ritual work? How can it be effective? Or, to borrow a pharmacological expression, what is its mechanism of action?

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Among the classical authors who faced this problem and proposed their hypotheses, Claude Lévi-Strauss (1949), Clifford Geertz (1966), and Victor Turner (1967, 1969) are likely the most renowned as well as the most stimulating. Searching for the main aspects they have in common, one can point out two very specific features that turn eventually into “two limitations” they have in common, to share the words that Esther Langdon (2007) uses in her ethnographic challenge to those classical interpretations on ritual effectiveness: the pivotal role of symbolism and the psychoanalytic orientation.

This latter is quite evident in Lévi-Strauss’ article that directly compares the Cuna shaman, who sings his spell to help a woman dealing with difficult childbirth, to a psychoanalyst, and applies Freud’s concept of abreaction to the emotive response of the patient. And the psychoanalytic background is retraceable in Turner’s ritual theory too, especially in the terms of the exchange between the sensory and ideological (that is, individual and social) issues that a ritual always performs. If Freud’s heritage is not directly present in Geertz’s famous 1966 article on “religion as a cultural system,” still his approach considers religious practices and representations as systems of symbols that establish “long-lasting moods and motivations in men” (1966: 90), declaring at least a psychic-driven conception that might be discussed together with his colleagues’ psychoanalytic readings.

If we instead query the idea of symbol and the use of symbolism, we find that the symbolic aspects of ritual are crucial for a large part of the anthropological debate (Hoskins, 2015) but are generally connected to a representational, meaning-centered view of ritual. My paper intends to argue this symbolic perspective. To Lévi-Strauss, symbols are “équivalents significatifs du signifié, relevant d’un autre ordre de réalité que ce dernier” (1949: 22);¹ Geertz defines the symbol as “any object, act, event, quality, or relation which serves as a vehicle for a conception” (1966: 91); Turner distinguishes the symbol from the sign, admits symbol’s polysemy, and prompts a non-representational, transformative standpoint on ritual, but he still conceives of it as meaningful in itself. The three of them summarize the symbol’s properties as metaphorical ones, but they all eventually assume that the primary task of metaphor is representation.

In the next pages, I will develop my theoretical analysis of ritual as a non-representational metaphor. I will follow an analytical path that links two main points of references: Ernesto De Martino, the major Italian anthropologist of the twentieth century who challenged the Durkheimian (and then Lévi-Straussian) idea of religion as a sociological mechanism, and Bruce Kapferer, who redirected Turner’s processual conception of ritual toward a dynamic interpretation grounded in his theory of “virtuality.” These anthropologists, although distant in geographic, generational, and philosophical origins, share several conceptualizations and approaches; and significantly both maintain that ritual’s efficacy deals with its power of a radical transformation of both self and reality. I am going to re-read their work and, based on their assumptions, elicit a novel conception of ritual that could be used to answer the question that opened this paper.

As if it were real: Ritual and dehistoricification of reality

“Though little known outside of Italy and France, Ernesto De Martino (1908–1965) was one of the most exciting, original, and profound thinkers of 20th-century anthropology”

(Saunders, 1993: 875). This is the opening line of a relevant article published in 1993 in the *American Ethnologist* by George Saunders. It was the first time that De Martino's anthropology was discussed in a leading English-language journal, since De Martino wrote in Italian and, by that time, had only been translated into French,² except for an isolated and poorly translated English-language version of *Il mondo magico* (1948 [1988]).³

It is within *Il mondo magico* that the starting point of my reflection is to be found. Published in 1948, the work immediately establishes a revolutionary perspective on magic. De Martino, indeed, considers magic as a historical product that can be understood only by dismissing the rationalist prejudice that had affected the sociological and anthropological approach to it. Moving from Benedetto Croce's idealist-historicist philosophy, in the early stage of his activity De Martino worked to found a historicist ethnology and challenged the French School of Sociology, and signally Lévy-Bruhl's concept of "*mentalité primitive*" (1922), contesting as the major mistake of the rationalist standpoint its undisputed assumption of magic's unreality. According to De Martino, magical practices and beliefs constitute an urgent theoretical problem.

We must begin our exploration by testing the supposedly self-evident claim that magical powers are non-existent. Here, a new difficulty presents itself and complicates what seemed, at first glance, to be a simple question of fact. In investigating the reality of magic powers, there is a temptation to demand as evidence what must be comprehended through *reality* as if there was a concept that the mind apprehends as a self-evident truth; a concept which the investigator must apply or not, as if a predicate to the subject on which a judgment is to be formulated. But sooner or later there must be some consideration given to the fact that this problem involves not just the quality of magic powers, but also our concept of reality. The research embraces not just the subject under dispute (magic powers), but the very criterion of judgment (the concept of reality) (De Martino, [1948] 1988: 3).

By "magic powers," De Martino means the complex system of magic-religious rituals as well as the "paranormal" practices performed by sorcerers and shamans, which are accounted for by the classical ethnographies of the early twentieth century (he considers in particular: Czaplicka, 1914; Gusinde, 1937; Shirokogoroff, 1935; Spencer and Gillen, 1927; Trilles, 1932). And this is why the quotation and the whole of *Il mondo magico* also can be regarded as a breakthrough contribution to a more general theory of ritual: magic ritual is observed in a non-rationalist perspective as a cultural object in itself that does not represent reality, but affects it, overcoming the very fundamental opposition between reality and un-reality.

During the 1950s, De Martino converted to Gramsci's Marxist-derived historicism and dedicated himself to a militant ethnological investigation of southern Italian rural masses aiming at their political emancipation (Berrocal, 2015): an approach which later will be at the heart of Cultural and Decolonial Studies. Over a decade, he carried out several "expeditions" to Lucania and Puglia, and published an astonishing trilogy of ethnographies. The first, *Morte e pianto rituale* (De Martino, 1958), has not yet been translated into

English and accounts for an in-depth research on the survival of ritual lamentation, a culturally codified mode to mourn a dead person, which in his time was still observable among peasants in rural areas of Southern Italy. The second monography about Southern Italy is *Sud e magia* (De Martino, 1959 [2015]), an essay on magic-religious traditions, and is based on several ethnographic surveys carried out in Basilicata by De Martino and his collaborators in the early 1950s to test his theoretical assumptions through the fieldwork. It was edited and translated into English by Dorothy Zinn with the title *Magic. A Theory from the South*, in 2015.⁴ The third ethnography, *La terra del rimorso* (1961 [2005]), probably De Martino's most famous book, is his last work before his premature death in 1965. It draws on an ethnographic campaign conducted in the late 1950s in the southern region of Puglia, where he and his team studied the residual phenomenon of tarantism, a particular centuries-old ritual complex featured by an individual state of possession due to the mythical bite of a spider, and the relative choreutic-musical exorcism.⁵

De Martino's fieldwork drew upon an interdisciplinary team-working, involving an ethnomusicologist, a sociologist, a psychiatrist, a photographer, and a film-maker. It was a revolutionary ethnographic experiment within the Italian armchair ethnological tradition of the time. Favored by such an articulated inquiry, De Martino regarded those surviving magic-religious elements he observed in his surveys as the effect of the political and economic subalternity of southern Italian peasants, but also as an effective though rudimental strategy of historical and cultural redemption. Here stands the fundamental concept of De Martino's anthropology, which is crucial in all his essays and articles: the concept of "presence" (*presenza*). Magic and religion, with their mythical-ritual systems, need to be related to what De Martino calls a "historical drama" (1948 [1988]: 70) that associates the primitive world, the subaltern masses, and even the Western bourgeoisie in front of its critical stage, as he stated at the end of his life in his notes published posthumous (1977): the drama of a presence in danger of being lost.

De Martino's concept of "presence" originates most probably from Pierre Janet's idea of "*présentification*," which might be briefly defined as "the ability to differentiate between past and present, reality and fantasy" (Craparo, Ortu and Van der Hart, 2019), and opposes what the French psychologist calls "*misère psychologique*" (psychologic misery), that is, a "*faiblesse morale*" (moral weakness), a disintegration of the self as a united and stable entity (Janet, 1889).

Even though some "direct connections" (Zinn, 2015: 10) with Heidegger's existentialist formulation of "*Dasein*" (being-there) are undeniable, De Martino's presence has not to be confused with that. I maintain it is closer to what Jean-Paul Sartre (1943: 109–126) names "*présence à soi*" (presence to one's self), the main feature of the "*être pour-soi*" (being for-itself), when he critiques the unconsciousness of Heidegger's being, as Daniel Fabre (1999: 214, 217) has importantly noted. As it is in the Sartrean terms, De Martino's presence is constantly under construction, as well as the world, of which the presence makes sense. "Transcendence" is presence's main task: an incessant effort to go beyond the givenness of reality, and here once again Sartre's heritage is rather evident. In such a perspective, being is eventually a "must-be," but whereas in Sartre's

phenomenology this is an ontological must, De Martino's presence faces a historical and cultural duty. It appears always and only through a historical-cultural dynamic: on one hand the risk of sliding toward a naturalness that coincides with not-being historically and culturally, and on the other hand the redemption of the being-there and the re-foundation of the world within recognized historical-cultural coordinates.

De Martino's presence may thus be defined as a culture-shaped being-in-history. Sartre's existentialist ontology is here evidently well-tempered by De Martino's historicist anthropology: to be present means must-be-in-the-world through a specific socio-cultural pattern and within a historical context. To this Italian anthropologist, transcendence is not a solipsistic effort but relates to a specific "*ethos*," a treasure of acknowledged representations, practices, and shared values, transmitted through history. Rituals (that De Martino considers as always inextricably connected to myths) are part of such treasure; they stand for the basic device that humans use, in some specific moments and situations, to transcend the meaninglessness of reality, to establish their presence and re-found the world and its history.

But how do rituals work, according to De Martino? As he clearly and repeatedly states, there is an actual and close relationship between the crisis of the presence, its risk of being lost, and a magic-religious redemption, to the point that the "hieropoetic [sacred-making] process" itself "is to be interpreted as the choice of exemplary critical moments and as a technique – or a system of techniques – for facing the risk of alienation" (De Martino, 1956 [2012]: 443). The fundamental technique that operates such magic-religious reintegration is termed "institutional dehistoricification" by De Martino and might be considered as the very basic mechanism of ritual. Critical passages, difficult situations, anguishing life moments may increase the risk of one's presence disintegrating, and thus within a ritual, they are "dehistoricified, that is, they are solved – masked and protected – in the repetition of the identical; and, in the end, as if they were not new (historical), but as if they were repeating an archetypal situation, which has *already* taken place in metahistory." In this way "through the pious fraud of this 'already' guaranteed on the level of metahistory, the 'here' and the 'now' of history is rediscovered, and presence regains – in varying degrees of awareness and cultural potential – the plenitude of its own formal horizons" ((De Martino, [1956] 2012: 443). Elsewhere, De Martino thus summarizes the question: "the dehistoricification of becoming – or more precisely, of what is happening as current or possible negativity – takes place through the basic technique of 'just-as' [*così-come*]: the 'just' of a certain concrete negative feature and of a corresponding desire to eliminate it gets ritually absorbed within a resolving mythical exemplification" (De Martino, 1959 [2015 online]: ch. 10).

The first result that this technique achieves is the institution of a "ritual presence" characterized by a "reiterative, impersonal, and dreamy character."

Such a presence, in which everything tends to become stereotypical and traditional, is technically suited to both trigger descent (*catabasi*) toward psychic realities at risk of alienation, or to start the ascent (*anabasi*) toward values. Ritual (or mythic-ritual) presence is thus to be understood as a presence that works under a regime of "saving" (*risparmio*), that tends to restore the balance that has started to tip toward failure ((De Martino, [1956] 2012: 444).

The ritual presence is finally “a protected regime of existence,” which is activated by a symbol. Symbol is a cornerstone in De Martino’s theory as well as in the approaches of Lévi-Strauss, Geertz, and Turner, but De Martino regards it from a very particular perspective. To De Martino, the mythic-ritual symbol is of course “un modello di rappresentazione e di comportamento” (1957: 93), a model of representation and behavior, a “model of” and a “model for,” as Geertz summarized religion’s main properties. Yet, what technically provides the religious reintegration of the presence’s crisis with a collective and long-lasting efficacy is the symbol as the practice of a cultural tradition, which is as an intersubjective sharing of values. This standpoint draws directly from the philosophical archeology of De Martino’s concept of presence: in a very dense page of *Il mondo magico*, he subsumes Kant’s transcendental unity of human rational self-awareness as the fundamental foundation of the autonomy of the person, which is taken for granted within the Western world’s epistemology and ontology. “To bring about the opposition between a ‘subject’ and a ‘world’, or a distinction between the subjective unity of the ego and the objective reality of what is real [...] it is necessary an act of [the] synthetic transcendental function,” that is, “a unification according to the forms” (De Martino, [1948] 1988: 146).

Beyond the indisputable direct influence of Benedetto Croce’s idealism, I believe that De Martino implicitly refers to Ernst Cassirer’s post-Kantianism.⁶ The German philosopher, indeed, is openly quoted in a footnote of the passage I have mentioned as well as in various other pages of this book and earlier writings. What is more, De Martino (1948 [1988]: 158), defines the form as “a constituting act, a self-creation”,⁷ evidently referring to Cassirer’s symbolic forms more than to Kant’s or Croce’s categories. According to Cassirer, indeed, there is a *de facto* coincidence between reality and its representation, therefore every form is a creation of both the world and the self through the mediation of symbols. A symbol, from myth to math, is finally conceived of by the philosopher not as a mere vehicle of expression for thought or imitation of things. Rather it is the constituting historical-cultural means by which concept and object necessarily acquire their delimitation and determinacy, their reality (Cassirer, [1925] 1955: 155–156). Representation results in objectivation. De Martino basically agrees with this position, which maintains that neither the self nor the world is given, and he undoubtedly understands from Cassirer the idea that even myth and broadly magic-religion need to be considered in their full ontological autonomy and historical specificity of symbolical forms organizing the chaos of sense impressions. Yet, he goes far beyond this.

De Martino aims at overcoming such a strictly epistemological approach that eventually proves still a rationalistic attempt to understand the magic world. To De Martino, the problem is primarily existential: the two poles of Cassirer’s conceptual relation, the self and the world, are not given, but also their relation itself cannot be assumed as established once and forever. “The transcendental unity of the awareness of the self establishes not only the possibility of the autonomy of the person but also the possibility of the risk to which this autonomy is continually exposed” (De Martino, [1948] 1988: 146): the form, as self-creation, includes its opposition, the risk that both the self and the world might collapse. Thus, according to De Martino, the symbolic form is a must-be that unceasingly

transcends that risk of not-being. It constitutes the historical and cultural mediation that creates and recreates both the self and the world. This mediation essentially lies in the inter-subjective effort to tackle the task of coping with the collective historical drama of the magic world: the crisis of the presence, or “a reality [...] that is trying to give itself a form” (De Martino, [1948] 1988: 118). Both the self or the world might be given meaning through the shaping activity of the symbol, which is regarded as an act, a practice of symbolization,⁸ more than a model, and as such is indeed the core activity of any ritual.

A glance at one of De Martino’s ethnographic examples will clarify this theoretical discourse. The anthropologist observed the phenomenon of tarantism at the end of the 1950s in Salento, the most southern and then isolated area of Puglia, and described it as built upon a healing ritual. The patient, most commonly a woman, was affected by a severe melancholy, and her daily behavior was hindered by an oppressive feeling of “being-acted-upon” (*essere agito da*). To cure such a state of possession, which appeared as a condition of confusion and anomie, the patient’s relatives exposed her to a piece of specific traditional music (“*taranta*” or “*pizzica*”) performed live by a local non-professional band. If the woman reacted to the music by dancing and acting as a spider, the diagnosis was done: a mythical spider had bitten her and magically possessed her. It is patent, here, that the critical situation is configured within a mythical pattern that is coherent to its social and cultural context. Nevertheless, this pattern, that is, the symbolic form shaping the situation, is not external to the rite but is forged in fact during and through the rite itself.

The musical-choreutic ritual performs the crisis symbolizing it: the dance of the “*tarantata*” (as the woman is named within the ritual) is not a representation, nor it is a mere “model of” a social condition or psychological distress. The symbol stems and controls an individual crisis in terms of a culturally (that is, non-individually) defined practice. This is exactly what “dehistorification” means: the *tarantata*’s sorrow is broken-off from its currentness and is configured on a metahistorical, interindividual level. The ritual redemption from the crisis works in the same way: this too is mediated by the symbol. After the first phase of the dance, indeed, which was performed by the woman lying on the floor, she stood up and started jumping all around the ritual perimeter, stepping alternatively and rhythmically on her feet, as to squash a spider, yet according to a precise choreography. De Martino describes this dance as a symbolical fight against the state of possession, meaning that it is not a personal, psychological and physical reaction, but draws from and summarizes the commitment of the whole community. The *tarantata*’s individual fight is sustained by the ritual music and dance, and framed into the enacted myth: Saint Paul, whose effigy was significantly displayed next to the band, was actually fighting through her body against the spider.

The ritual possession and its choreutic expression do not furnish the *tarantata*’s disaggregated self with a prefabricated symbolic meaning: they suspend its crisis, interrupt its disaggregation, and thus reshape it within a new form, the ritual presence. To De Martino, a ritual is always an act of symbolization carried out through cultural tools, which is yet never prescribed in those tools: it is a private and particular situation transcending into a social and universal one, and its effectiveness lies in its power to shape chaos, to create a form out of chaos.

Holding at bay reality: The virtuality of ritual

The other theoretical pillar on which my argument stands is furnished by Bruce Kapferer's work. Kapferer, his ethnographic fieldwork in Zambia and even more that in Sri Lanka as well as his stimulating theoretical achievements surely need no introduction. Though the anthropologist has been lately committed to the study of nationalism and violence (Kapferer, 2011), to the dynamic relationship between ancient and modern forms of the state (Hobart and Kapferer, 2012), as well as to a very original anthropology of the event (Meinert and Kapferer, 2015), here I focus on his theory of ritual. Interestingly, a few possible convergences can be outlined between Kapferer's and De Martino's thoughts. I am convinced that such similarities are more than vague thematic and interpretive assonances; and they are even more astonishing considering that the two anthropologists belong to different generations, have quite different anthropological backgrounds, and worked on very distant fields.

A first general concurrence might be found in the tendency to a critical attitude toward relativism that the scholars share. De Martino expresses the need for a "critical ethnocentrism"—the critical, comparative examination of the fundamental ideas and values of one's cultural context (Saunders, 1993: 886)—as a historicist method of investigation that intends to avoid what he considers a deleterious parceling of cultures; the ethnographic encounter has always to be seen "as a double thematization, of one's own [culture] and the alien" (De Martino, 1977: 391).⁹ Similarly, Kapferer draws from Evans-Pritchard (the most "historicist" social anthropologist!) the purpose to overcome "what has become an issue in anthropology, that of relativism versus universalism" (Kapferer, 2002: 3), considering any ethnographic work as a reflexive practice. Precisely in this perspective, the observation and the study of magic and sorcery, to which Kapferer has lengthily committed, eventually must problematize the Western (pre)conceptions about it. And here again Kapferer's intent to "rethink" magic "beyond rationalism" pairs De Martino's challenge to the anti-magic prejudice.

Magic, sorcery and witchcraft are at the epistemological center of anthropology [...] But the questions these phenomena highlight expand beyond mere disciplinary or scholastic interest. They point to matters of deep existential concern in a general quest for an understanding of the human forces engaged in the human construction of lived realities (Kapferer, 2002: 1).

Magic is obviously not a universal concept, but a Western notion refined by anthropologists to mean acts that do not work, or, at least, practices that are not *really* effective. Both magic and sorcery have been classified by classical Kantian anthropology as "realms of unreason," but according to Kapferer their labeling as irrational "is paradoxically a way to forcing them within the bounds of reason, which may deny to magical practices and especially to much sorcery key qualities of their potencies." Indeed, "magic and sorcery may be symbolization of processes or dynamics, that, in effect, reach beyond the limits of reason" (Kapferer, 2002: 22).

Of course, here I do not aim to discuss magic and its efficacy in general, nor can I refer to the infinite variants through which this abstract concept takes concrete shape in the

different ethnographical contexts. Nor do I either intend to uncritically and simplistically superimpose the category of magic on that of ritual. Therefore, if I mention Kapferer's work on magic, it is mainly to indicate another very relevant anthropological confluence between him and De Martino. And, most importantly, I aim to highlight the theoretical core matter in both Kapferer's and De Martino's reflection on magic: the need to think of magic's efficacy through a non-prejudicial approach. Although magic has been marked as "unreal" by an ethnocentric and rationalist tradition, the anthropological study of magic practices must focus on their realness, as well as on their direct relation to reality. The challenge is to overcome the Durkheimian idea of representation, and this applies to magic practices and other kinds of ritual practices, no matter what their specific shape and content, what their different frameworks and goals are. In any form and context, and beyond its tremendously various phenomenology, magic (as well as religion) is not to be understood as the representation of social or political realities:

The very force of magic, sorcery and witchcraft (as could be said of a considerable amount of religious activity) is connected to their emergence in spaces apart from everyday life. Not only is their practice or occurrence motivated in spaces of disjunction, dislocation and discontinuity – in the breaks, blockages and resistances in the flow of everyday life – but also they elaborate their power and potentialities in such disjunctions, discontinuities and breaks. Magic and sorcery and the fear of witchcraft are imaginative irruptions formed in such processes. While oriented to overcome such breaks, they may yet elaborate further what can be called their own phantasmagoric space, an imaginal field whose force derives not so much by what it is representative of external to itself, but in the potentialities, generative forces, linkages and redirections that it opens up within itself (Kapferer, 2002: 22).

The main bias Kapferer observes in symbolic anthropology is the tendency to be "overdetermined to match symbolic forms to empirical reality, to treat symbols as representations of reality," and finally to "force a distance between the symbolic and the lived-in world" (Kapferer, 2002: 23). On the contrary, his idea of magic and ritual lies completely in a non-representational view.

Comparing with deeper attention Kapferer's and De Martino's discourses, and digging into the bibliographic references of their works, it is possible to retrace two philosophical sources that they likely might have in common. The first is to be found in Sartre's existentialist ontology and particularly in his phenomenological psychology of the Self. As I have already mentioned, De Martino's concept of "presence" is associable with Sartre's philosophy of Being, and an influence by the French philosopher is documented in many other pages of De Martino's work. But here I speak of the early Sartrean concept of "magicality," to which Kapferer explicitly refers in his interpretation (1979a: 119, 1997: 2) of the Sinhalese exorcisms he has studied for many years. Sartre develops the concept of "magicality" within his theory of emotions (1938 [1995]) that I would roughly thus summarize: far from an idea of passivity, which is traditionally associated with human emotional nature, Sartre conceives of emotion as a strategical response of our body to an external stimulus, and not as a simple feeling. In front of a given situation, most commonly a situation with which is difficult or impossible to cope, emotion

originates in a degradation of consciousness, which is still a sort of behavior because it creates a “specific state” of consciousness and intentionality; this new state is goal-oriented and helps the subject view the situation differently. In such sense, Sartre states that “l’émotion est une certaine manière d’appréhender le monde” (emotion is a certain way to understand the world); but at the same time, it is a “chute brusque de la conscience dans le magique” (a sudden fall of conscience into magic) (1938 [1995]: 115–116), because by reshaping our perspective on the situation, emotion re-signifies it and finally transforms it. And since the subject experiences that situation as real, its emotion is to be considered truly and effectively acting on reality; an emotion, concludes Sartre, “est une transformation du monde” (is a transformation of the world) (Sartre, 1938 [1995]: 79). I do not aim here to discuss at length the possible influence of Sartre’s concept of a psychological “*monde magique*” (Sartre, 1938 [1995]: 93) on De Martino’s theory of an ethnological “*mondo magico*,” as I dedicated to this intriguing topic a specific study (Della Costa, 2021). Nevertheless, I think it is undoubtable that many conceptual similarities might be spotted between the two approaches, and following Kapferer’s application of Sartre’s “magicality,” those similarities appear even more evident.

First of all, Kapferer conceives of ritual as a practice, to be regarded in itself, and this is what De Martino implicitly does too, at least in his first, most radical and ambitious study, *Il mondo magico*. Indeed, Kapferer’s theoretical hypotheses on ritual constantly relate to his ethnographic observation of *Suniyama*, a Sinhalese anti-sorcery exorcism rite. This is a healing ceremony performed by a sorcerer on a victim of demonic possession or mal-evilence, in front of a numerous and participant audience (Kapferer, 1979a, 1979b, 1997, 2002, 2004, 2013). The rite lasts one entire night and is a complex system of symbols, myths, and gestures that is difficult to summarize without running the risk of trivializing it. During the first phase, starting after the sunset, offerings and *mantra* are presented by the healer to the spirits held responsible for the eyesight or possession that are evocated by mythical accounts and represented by masked actors; the ritual’s peak is reached at the night watch when dancing and drumming performances prompt the entrancement of both the performers and the patient, and the sorcerer intercedes by demanding the spirits within the possessed man to set the victim free. During the last phase, the masked actors engage in a comic conversation with the audience, jollying the spirits they represent, while the exorcist figures in such conversation as a normal human being.

Kapferer’s interpretation of this healing rite is as original as convincing. At first, in his early reflections on the *Suniyama*, the anthropologist provides a sort of Geertzian explanation:

Healing rituals are a model of reality as understood by patients and others gathered at a ritual occasion, and are a model for reality in that they show a patient and others in an audience how individuals who wish to become well, or be maintained in a position free of demonic influence, should conceive of reality and the location of demons in it (Kapferer, 1979a: 158).

In such a perspective, the ritual “both expresses and creates what it represents,” it is “an emergent phenomenon generated by the translation of cultural form into action”

(Kapferer, 1979a: 154). This, I believe, sounds immediately similar to De Martino's concept of mythical-ritual symbol that furnishes reality with a horizon, with a form. The patient "is constructed as a symbolic type of the demonic. As a symbolic type [...] the patient becomes reified above context" (Kapferer, 1979a: 161).

And here comes the second possible philosophical convergence between Kapferer's and De Martino's understandings: the theory of symbols by the German philosopher Ernst Cassirer, which we have already seen as a fundamental theoretical point of reference for the Italian anthropologist and which Kapferer assumes through the mediation of "symbolic interactionism" and of Susanne Langer's work (1942, 1953). Strongly and openly inspired by Cassirer, Langer includes also seemingly irrational behaviors, such as the esthetic forms of expression, within the possible means by which man makes sense of the world. These are termed "presentational" (or "non-discursive") symbols and are of a different kind than the scientific "discursive" symbols. Still, to Langer, symbolization is the main activity human beings carry out in front of a reality needing a shape to be given a meaning. It results eventually in a powerful reduction of experience's overwhelming complexity, a dynamic process that establishes a virtual reality. In Kapferer's anthropological use of Langer's philosophical understandings, this symbolization activity and its results overlap with the ritual act and its effects. In his ethnographic study of the Sinhalese exorcism, the rite is "explored as manifesting a complex interrelational dynamic of different esthetic or symbolic processes that have perceptual and conceptual effects integral to the (re)construction of experience and the (re)formation of person and self" (Kapferer, 2004: 38). Ritual "is not so much a symbolic organization for patient (or ritualist) abreaction or catharsis as a process that enables and insists on patient composure and quiescence, even against the forces of destruction that are integral to the realities of the rite" (Kapferer, 1997: 107). Through the ritual possession, which is a culturally controlled crisis, the patient's *I* collapses into the patient's *me*, as in De Martino's view the presence collapses, short-circuiting with the world-to-be-present. The patient's self is negated-disrupted, is symbolically typified (Kapferer, 1979b: 11–12), and reconstructed within the ritual. Exorcism achieves its "transformational potential through a connection of what is, the illness of the patient, to what must be, a return to health, constituted in the context of changed definitions of reality" (Kapferer, 1979c: 166). To Kapferer the healing rite operates and fixes a transformation of the patient's initial negative situation/crisis transcending it (Kapferer, 1979b: 16), and once again here the accordance with De Martino's theory is evident.

Rituals, indeed, do not represent life changes, "they effect them" (Kapferer, 2004: 40). The non-representational character of the world of ritual draws exactly from the distance it keeps from its larger context (43): it is not reflective of an external reality, thence is not symbolical in the classical sense, rather it creates "a kind of phantasmagoric space, a dynamic that allows for all kind of potentialities of human experience to take shape and form" (Kapferer, 2004: 45). Following Langer, but even more Deleuze and Guattari ([1991] 1994), Kapferer names "virtuality" (2004, 2006a, 2013) this property of the ritual. The ritual has a critical quality, "able to realize human constructive agency" (Kapferer, 2004: 45): it inserts virtuality into "real reality." Everyday reality is chaotic, is "fractal-like," continuously changing and shifting in perspective, and its

flow might be perceived as unmanageable and thus threatening. “The virtual reality of ritual, in contrast, is a slowing down of the tempo of everyday life and a [...] temporary abeyance of dimensions of [its] ordinary flow” (Kapferer, 2004: 46). Thus, the ritual creates a portion of virtual reality, which is “thoroughly real” and even part of the real reality, but also somehow separated. Within such a disjointed space and frozen time, the ritual sets the possibility of “an engagement with the compositional structuring dynamics of life in the very midst of life’s process” (Kapferer, 2004: 46). Kapferer’s ritual virtuality is strictly cognate to De Martino’s ritual presence, as its capability to slow down the tempo of the ordinary life’s flow, eventually, has the same ultimate scope of “dehistoricification:” “holding at bay some of the chaotic qualities of reality,” which is intrinsically disordered, “thus allowing the dynamics of reality formation to be entered within and retuned, readjusted” (Kapferer, 2004: 47).

Experience beyond performance: Kapferer’s masterstroke

Speaking of processes and dynamics, Kapferer is clearly speaking of the ritualists’ experience. Bruce Kapferer, indeed, is one of the pioneers in elaborating an anthropology of experience, and his ritual theory is openly rooted in Victor Turner’s idea of performance, which he has kept critically discussing and reworking. Kapferer, indeed, was one of the main contributors to Turner’s posthumous work, *The Anthropology of Experience*, edited by Edward Bruner in 1986 (Turner and Bruner, 1986). That work marked a milestone in the anthropological reflection, which had been ongoing for more than one decade, on three crucial subjects, such as experience, performance, and context, especially in the field of ritual in general and about ritual healing’s efficacy in particular.¹⁰

In his opposition to the structuralist, post-Durkheimian, and broadly neo-Kantian anthropology, Victor Turner turned to Wilhelm Dilthey’s concept of *Erlebnis* (literally an experience that has been lived through) as the only subject of anthropological interpretation. I believe it is only necessary to recall here Turner’s anthropology of experience in a few lines. Briefly, he strived to translate into cultural terms Dilthey’s critical distinction between reality as what is “really” out there, experience as the way reality is assumed by consciousness, and expression, as the process through which individual experience is meaningfully organized. Expression, thus, is the existential, subjective, current experience framed within an inter-subjective “structure of experience.” What ethnographers observing a ritual have actual access to is, eventually, only the experience that is expressed, that is socially shared, for example in the form of a performance. Yet, Turner’s point is that every performance derives “from the subjunctive, liminal, reflexive, exploratory heart of social drama, where the structures of group experience (*Erlebnis*) are replicated, dismembered, re-membered, refashioned, and mutely or vocally made meaningful” (Turner, 1986: 43). In sum, expressions also shape experience.

On this path, many new approaches to ritual arose, regarding rites as performances, and focusing on the crucial aspect of their performativity. Actually, Stanley Tambiah (1968, 1973, 1979), along with a few more scholars (Finnegan, 1969; La Fontaine,

1977; Rappaport, 1974, 1979) had begun even earlier to investigate magic practices in terms of their performativity, borrowing the Austinian pragmatic method, and applying it to the linguistic aspects of ritual. I believe that Tambiah's theoretical achievements are still of a symbolist nature, as we can easily grasp from such a statement: "Ritual is a culturally constructed system of symbolic communication" (1979: 119). Roy Rappaport shares Tambiah's idea that ritual is to be taken as "a mode of communication" (Rappaport, 1999: 50), and signally as a communicative performance "in which transmitters achieve effects by informing, representing form to, transmitting form to, injecting form into, more simply transmitting messages to, receivers" (Rappaport, 1999: 51). In this view, communication does not mean only "saying," but also "doing," and ritual's effectiveness is understood in terms of "information." Rappaport, though, overcomes Tambiah's reliance on performativeness, on "the magical power of words." The illocutionary force that guarantees ritual's effectiveness emerges from the relationship between the rite's performance, its words and acts, and "the conventional states of affairs with which they are concerned" (Rappaport, 1999: 117). In other terms, the ritual performance draws its efficacy from conforming to a convention, to an order that furnishes it with its context of fulfillment, but at the same time it brings that order into being. Eventually, to Rappaport, "performativeness itself may be made possible by ritual," and "performance is not merely one way to present or express liturgical orders but is itself a crucial aspect or component of the messages those orders carry" (Rappaport, 1999: 118). Therefore, ritual enacts a meaning that it contributes to create, and publically conforms to it: this is, in Rappaport's words, "the first of ritual's fundamental offices" (Rappaport, 1999: 119).

An even more constructivist approach to ritual's effectiveness is that used by Edward Schieffelin (1985), who reflects on the curing séances he observed among the Kaluli people of Papua New Guinea. Assessing "the limitations of symbolic analyses of ritual that take the form, primarily, of a meaning-centered examination of ritual text" (Schieffelin, 1985: 707), Schieffelin focuses on its non-discursive and performative aspects. In his view, "ritual is an emergent social construction" (Schieffelin, 1985: 721) that does not enact, through symbols, any ready-made meaning, but composes its own meaningful reality: "through performance, meanings are formulated in a social rather than cognitive space, and the participants are engaged with the symbols in the interactional creation of a performance reality" (Schieffelin, 1985: 707).

Although Kapferer provocatively defines Rappaport's "attempt to arrive at some kind of scientific universal understanding of religion and ritual" as one example of "a positivist swing" (Kapferer, 2004: 34), there is no doubt that all the studies I have just mentioned took root in an anthropology of experience, and those scholars strived to challenge the Durkheimian conception of ritual. Still, I share Kapferer's doubt about the claimed non-symbolic nature of the performative approach to ritual and its efficacy. Both Rappaport and Schieffelin, in their different views, stress the idea that ritual creates performatively the reality within which it makes sense, but this sets a relation of priority of the ritual reality on what we have named the "real" reality, which reproduces anyhow a symbolic reflection of the latter in the former. The performatively creative, constructive, and interactional function of ritual does not fully escape, eventually, from the logic of representation. This is just flipped upside-down.

The pragmatist linguistic notion of performatives is now commonly referred to in discussions of the dynamic constitutive potency of rite. But this is an extension of the spirit of the symbolic interactionist dictum made famous by W. I. Thomas that “if people define something as real then it is real in its consequences” and fundamental in most symbolic understandings of the ritual process. [In contrast,] the potency of the meaningful action of rite may be in substantial part the property of particular dynamics upon which meaningful constructs may subsequently or simultaneously build (Kapferer, 2004: 38–39).

Another, and more recent, strand of studies that approaches ritual and ritual’s efficacy focusing on the experience and its expression through the performance is embedded in medical anthropology. I mention here *The Performance of Healing*, the foundational volume edited by Laderman and Roseman (1996), to which Edward Schieffelin contributed, by the way, with an interesting essay about rite’s failure (1996). Even though tracing “a slightly different theoretical lineage,” all the articles in that volume “share a concern for the notion of healing as a performance: as purposive, contextually-situated interaction; as multimedia communication and metacommunicative of ‘framed’ enactment; [...] as reflective and transformative” (Laderman and Roseman, 1996: 2).

Among all the anthropologists who contributed to *The Performance of Healing*, and still animate the debate on ritual healing’s efficacy in terms of performance, surely Thomas Csordas is one of the most acute and relevant, and his work deserves to be discussed. At the beginning of the 1990s, Csordas presented his theory of the embodiment in two famous articles, *Embodiment as a Paradigm for Anthropology* (1990), and *Somatic Modes of Attention* (1993), which were then reorganized in his probably most famous work, *The Sacred Self* (1994). Drawing from Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological theory of perception, as well as from Bourdieu’s concept of practice, Csordas provided an original interpretation of ritual, and ritual healing, within the Catholic Charismatic groups that he ethnographically studied in the USA.

Csordas’ discourse pivots on the body that is not to be considered as an object, but “as the subject of culture, or in other words as the existential ground of the culture” (1990: 5). Such a basic statement collapses immediately the subject/object troublesome duality on which much of the modern Western *Weltanschauung* was built. Here Merleau-Ponty’s influence is evident, and it is not difficult to recognize the Sartrean phenomenological-existentialist matrix that De Martino shares too, as we have seen: “For Merleau-Ponty, perception begins in the body and, through reflective thinking, ends in objects. On the level of perception, there is not yet a subject-object distinction: we are simply in the world” (Csordas, 1993: 137). There are, thus, no objects prior to perception, which is a bodily experience; and “embodiment can be understood as an indeterminate methodological field defined by perceptual experience and the mode of presence and engagement in the world” (Csordas, 1993: 135). Yet, according to Bourdieu, the body is socially informed, thus also the experience is culturally influenced: the *habitus* mediates between the objectivity of the structure and the practices, generating them as a unifying principle. In the demoniac possessions and relative exorcism that

Csordas describes, we need to distinguish the demons as cultural objects “and their experiential manifestations as concrete self-objectifications in religious participants” (Csordas, 1990: 15).

What persons experience is an obscure feeling of disorder, which is objectified by the healer through a repertoire of cultural models that mirrors an ideal culturally defined self and its negative attributes. But even before such an objective attribution of cultural meaning and form to their experience, supplicants (as Csordas names the subjects of the healing) express their distress, or better the perceptual experience of it. The possession is not the symbol of the distress that the supplicant experiences: “the preobjective perception of demons as emotion, thought, or behavior” (Csordas, 1990: 17), supplicant’s bodily expression of that perception, is precisely what he or she experiences. In the same way, “the expressive moment that constitutes this form of self-objectification as healing is the embodied image that accompanies the casting out of the spirit” (Csordas, 1990: 16). This embodied process of self-objectification, therefore, results in a primary signification mechanism where the experience and the expression, to use Dilthey’s and Turner’s terms, coincide.

Kapferer indicates Csordas’ work as an invaluable contribution to developing a method for ritual analysis that investigates what lies “beneath the symbolic:” “the dynamics of rite in the context of embodiment involve not only the playing out of structure but its creation – the point that Turner stressed in his work, thus countering a static Durkheimian representational orientation that had clogged much anthropological discussion of rite” (Kapferer, 2004: 40).

All the approaches I have recalled, indeed, demonstrated that ritual is not to be read *only* in symbolic terms. A radical focus on the experience of the participants to the rite shows how the performance is crucial in establishing its context, forging its meaning, and defining its effectiveness. The problematic point, though, is the very concept of performance, as Kapferer has kept claiming since he discussed Turner’s anthropology of experience in 1986, always looking for a study of experience beyond the performance as directly conveying the experience.

To Kapferer, experience and its expressions are not the same thing. He strives to keep a balance between what he calls “the text” and “the enactment” in the performance (Kapferer, 1986: 191–192); in other terms, neither a functionalist/structuralist approach nor a constructivist/performative one is to be pursued. Since experience is subjectively experienced but is intersubjectively shared through the mediation of socio-cultural constructs, typifications, and idealizations, “what is shared is not the experience of the other in its full existential immediacy.” The core question, hence, is about the possibility of a “mutual experience in the sense of experiencing together the one experience” (Kapferer, 1986: 190). What guarantees this possibility is not so much an abstract performative and creative power of the practices as the directionality and the media of the performance, its way to organize the time and the space, in one word: its structure. To Kapferer, the structure of the ritual performance defines the participants’ intersubjective experience. This is why we need to overcome the summary idea of ritual as performance, unless we conceive of performance as “the structuring structure” (Kapferer, 1986: 202) in a ritual.

If Kapferer clearly rejects the classical idea of ritual representing reality, he does not either accept the idea that ritual creates another reality. His “masterstroke,” to use Don Handelman’s expression, is the introduction of the “virtual-actual relationship” (Handelman, 2013: 33) in the study of ritual. Through such relationship, which is established between ritual reality and “reality,” Kapferer approaches the very mechanism of the ritual, that is, the way it works, beyond both the meaning and the performative experience, beyond rationalist prejudgments and mystical contaminations.

Once again, the similarity to De Martino is striking: the Italian anthropologist continuously and strenuously searched for a third way to investigate ritual in particular and magic-religion in general overcoming the rationalist approach of the French School of Sociology on one hand, and Rudolf Otto’s irrationalist-phenomenological one on the other (De Martino, 1948 [1988], 1957). I would not hesitate to ascribe to De Martino Kapferer’s fascinating assumption that, in studying magic and religious practices, we need to bring together the Cartesian radical doubt and the phenomenological suspension of disbelief (Kapferer, 2001: 342–344). A balance position that, according to Kapferer, is finally the very nature of anthropology itself: “anthropology is secularism’s doubt” (Kapferer, 2001: 342).

Metaphor in its own right

As we have seen, what is crucial in Kapferer’s theory on ritual, as well as in De Martino’s, is neither its meaning nor its context of production. He shares Handelman’s particular focus on the “ritual in its own right:”

To begin the analysis of ritual as phenomenon in its own right, no assumptions need be made immediately about how sociocultural order and ritual are related, neither about the meaning of signs and symbols that appear within a ritual, nor about the functional relationships between a ritual and social order (Handelman, 2004: 3).

Such an approach results in considering ritual as a form, or better as a forming dynamic, just like both De Martino’s and Kapferer’s approaches do too. Signally, Handelman regards ritual as a curve, “one that arcs away from the immediate embrace of its sociocultural surround and moves towards self-enclosure and increasing self-integrity” (2004: 12). Yet, this curve is not absolutely autonomous and self-referential, it moves also outward, back to its broader social and cultural environment. “The double movement – simultaneously curving towards closure and twisting towards openness – baldly describes the ritual in its own right, separable yet inseparable from its surround” (Handelman, 2004: 13). Thence, the form is here to be seen as a “forming form” (which is not so distant from Kapferer’s concept of “structuring structure”), existing “through its dynamics of self-forming and dissipation” (Handelman, 2004: 14). Both “ritual presence” and “virtuality,” defined by De Martino and Kapferer as reality-distancing dynamic forms, can be seen in this perspective.

Handelman also qualifies the ritual dynamics as a fold, recalling Deleuze’s study on Leibniz (1993): “as it curves, the fold or pocket opens the depths of space/time,” and

this opening “is a curving of space/time, since the movement of living is neither stopped nor blocked, but shifted into itself, enfolded, reorganized, and thereby made different, minimally, partially, utterly, from the movements of whose courses the opening is but a moment” (Handelman, 2004: 14). After that moment, the curve twists back, unfolding on life’s linear flow. Still, ritual does something, it transforms that flow through and during its folding, its opening a space/time “within which cause and effect can be joined self-referentially” (Handelman, 2004: 15). Studied in “its own right,” as a phenomenon and not as a reflection of sociocultural order, ritual is caught in its “a-representativity” (Handelman, 2004: 16). Briefly, the ritual is conceived of here as “a technical practice rather than a representational formation,” to employ the words that Kapferer uses (2006b: 672) but are coherent also with Handelman’s and even De Martino’s standpoints. This does not mean “to deny the representative function (the constitutive potency of representation) of ritual but to suggest that in certain ritual practices the representational process of rite is a secondary process organized in the technical interest of ritual to create, constitute, and to a degree, control daily life’s chaotic realities” (Kapferer, 2006b: 672).

Kapferer limits his interpretation to “certain ritual practices,” like healing rites, and tellingly “to rites that are not so much concerned with presenting the nature of apparent reality (varieties of public and formal ceremonial, rites of commemoration, parades, festivals)” (Kapferer, 2004: 49). I believe that the articulated arguments discussed so far can provide us with the theoretical tools not to formulate another general definition of the ritual, but to identify a dynamic that might be seen as common to every rite, despite the diverse socio-cultural contexts. I maintain that ritual is basically a metaphoric practice, or better a metaphorizing practice, that is, it works and is effective as a particular, non-representative kind of metaphor. And I will argue that this notion of metaphor can be useful to describe and understand even a festival, such as the “*Flores de Mayo*” Filipino Catholic celebration that I observed in a Jewish city in Israel.

But before presenting this specific acceptance of the concept of metaphor and applying it to an ethnographic instance, I would like to summarize how metaphor has widely been thought of and used by anthropologists. According to Jakobson’s fundamental semantic understanding (Jakobson and Halle, 1956), a metaphor can be generically defined as an operation that, within a system of signs, substitutes an element of a syntagmatic set with another one of a paradigmatic set. Something standing for something else, on the base of any sort of similarity. It is mainly in such a broad, let me say “symbolical,” sense that metaphor has been studied by anthropologists. Claude Lévi-Strauss in *La pensée sauvage* (1962) refers constantly to tropes, namely to metaphor and metonymy, drawing his interpretation of natives’ modes of thinking from Jakobson’s semantic theories. In his tremendously famous article “The Magical Power of Words” (1968), Stanley Tambiah rereads in a semantic-pragmatic perspective Malinowski’s ethnographic information about magic spells in the Trobriands and applies to them Jakobson’s definition of metaphor. During the 1970s, anthropologists pay ever more consistent attention to metaphor: some of them are interested in investigating ethnosemantic systems (Fox, 1971; Rosaldo, 1972), some others focus on the social and cultural use of metaphors (Sapir and Crocker, 1977), and others are already oriented to find the “root metaphors”

(Turner, 1974) or “organizing metaphors” (Fernandez, 1972) by which humans, gathered in societies, have shaped experience into culture.

Within this symbolical approach, along with a universalizing cognitive perspective that took hold in the 1980s (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Tyler, 1978), sophisticated and stimulating reflections about metaphor emerge (Fernandez, 1986, 1991). In particular, these studies 1) shed light on the absolute indissolubility of metaphor from cognate tropes, such as metonymy, synecdoche and irony, as well as on the complex interaction of all of them within a general metaphorical performance (Durham and Fernandez, 1991; Ohnuki-Tierney, 1991; Turner, 1991); 2) disconnect the analysis of metaphor from the restricted field of (ethno-)rhetoric, and start to fully consider metaphor as a practice,¹¹ paving the path for the most mature approach to “rhetoric culture” carried out by Strecker and Tyler (2009) and their school (Meyer and Girke, 2011) in the 2000s. Thomas Csordas, in one of his most recent papers (2021), arrives to think of the healing process in terms of a “rhetorical model,” and although he has never elaborated the notion of metaphor, he has constantly drawn part of his theoretical elaboration on ritual from James Fernandez’s studies (Csordas, 1987).

In these studies, Fernandez links metaphor to ritual, which he considers as “the structure of associations brought into play by metaphoric predications upon pronouns” (Fernandez, 1977: 102). Deeply influenced by Kenneth Burke’s philosophy, the anthropologist looks at metaphor as “a strategic predication upon an inchoate pronoun (...) which makes a movement and leads to performance” (Fernandez, 1972: 43); it is, hence, not only a mere rhetorical device of persuasion but also an organizing image and an action plan. Accordingly, “ritual is to be analyzed (...) as a series of organizing images or metaphors put into operation by a series of superordinate and subordinate ceremonial scenes” (Fernandez, 1974: 125). Despite the novelty of such an insight within the anthropological reflection on rhetoric, Fernandez’s acceptance of metaphor, in fact, still features a representative perspective.

In contrast, here I mean ritual as a non-representational practice, thus I aim to demonstrate that it works as a non-representational metaphor does. I do not regard metaphor, indeed, either only as a rhetorical device of persuasion, or only as a poetic image of reality; I conceive of it as a creative sense-challenging, rather than sense-making, practice, and I mostly focus on the social practice of metaphorization, just to openly paraphrase Strecker (1988). If every ritual, as a practice of symbolization, incorporates a rhetoric that furnishes it with “its form and its meaning” (Cannada Bartoli, 2009: 82), I hold that the core rhetorical-semantic mechanism of ritual is metaphor, or better the practice of metaphorization. Therefore, I refer here to the use of metaphors in meaning disruption and re-construction rather than to their own inner meaning, but I do not apply a pragmatic method, which nevertheless resulted in fascinating insights for ritual theory, as we have seen (Rappaport, 1999; Severi, 1993; Strecker, 1988; Tambiah, 1979). In fact, I adopt Donald Davidson’s non-representational concept of metaphor. In his revolutionary, and much-discussed (e.g., Reimer, 2008; Stern, 1991), article “What Metaphors Mean,” which was published in 1978 as a contribution to a *Critical Inquiry* special issue on metaphor, the philosopher employs his truth-conditional semantics to explain how metaphors have no metaphoric meaning;

they “mean what the words, in their most literal interpretation, mean, and nothing more” (Davidson, 1978: 32).

My purpose is not to recall the long-lasting debate about the literal and non-literal meaning of metaphors (see Recanati, 2001), but Davidson’s idea prompts particular understandings that might be of great use for our discourse on ritual. First of all, “what distinguishes metaphor is not meaning but use” (Davidson, 1978: 43): it is a pragmatic tool, it does something. But what does it do, and, most of all, how does it do that? Metaphor does not convey any cognitive or significant content, it “does lead us to notice what might not otherwise be noticed” (Davidson, 1978: 41); more precisely, “metaphor makes us see one thing as another by making some literal statement that inspires or prompts the insight,” and “seeing as is not seeing that” (Davidson, 1978: 47).¹²

Metaphors, indeed, work to make us see things in a different light by being “*patently false*”: the absurdity of a phrase such as ‘you are a pig!’ prompts us to disregard the literal truth and the ordinary meaning, “guarantees we won’t believe it and invites us, under proper circumstances, to take the sentence metaphorically” (Davidson, 1978: 42). Here it is not only about the suspension of truth-evaluation, but also about the re-elaboration of meaning as disjointed from reality. Thence, as both ritual dehistoricization and virtualization do, metaphorization shapes the literal meaning into an “as if” form separating it from the ordinary, taken-for-granted sense of reality. Even better: metaphorizing reality is not representing it, but negating, penetrating and reorienting it toward an inter-subjective readjustment. Kenneth Burke did affirm something similar when he stated that metaphors provide us with a “perspective” upon things, and they do so by their intrinsic and constitutive “incongruity” (Burke, 1984: 89–96). What metaphors give us a perspective upon is not a different reality: it is the same one we perceive, signify, and live through as the historical, actual, or literal reality. Yet, metaphors open a gap between us and that reality, place a membrane, so to say, that folds reality in a new framework where we can reorganize and readjust its form, apart from the disordered and chaotic actuality with which we must cope. Exactly as we have seen ritual also does.

In fact, the semantic complexity is not at all reduced within the metaphor, and this is not a simplified paradigm to impose on reality. The opposite is true: “there is no limit to what a metaphor calls to our attention, and much of what we are caused to notice is not propositional in character” (Davidson, 1978: 46). Indeed, if you attempt to explain the meaning of a metaphor, you face infinite possibilities to deal with: it contains infinite elements and none of them ultimately corresponds either to the literal sense of real reality or to an alleged metaphoric meaning. This is because metaphor discloses what Jerome Bruner names “subjunctivizing reality” (1986: 26);¹³ it invites us to see things from an unusual standpoint, and opens us to infinite hypotheses, molding the world into infinite possible worlds. I understandably refer to Gottfried Leibniz’s famous concept of “possible worlds:” infinite co-possible and non-actualized worlds that differ from the “real” one only in the attribute of the actuality (1985). Such theological assumption underwent thereafter semiotic (Eco 1979), logical (Hintikka 1989; Kripke 1980), cognitive (Bruner 1986), and even narratological (Doležel 1998) redefinitions. Both in Leibniz’s original theory and in its further acceptations, a possible world is established upon a

non-contradiction principle and relies merely on its own internal coherence; its “possibility” does not relate to the real/unreal alternative but to its own acceptability, and thus sets a relative “reality.” Therefore, also metahistory and virtuality and eventually metaphorical realities might fall under the broad definition of possible worlds existing within, yet separated from, the real-actual world: they are realities that are “real without being actual” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1991 [1994]: 156). In their own right, metaphors and rituals do not represent anything and do not express nor create anything: what they do is to disjoint reality from its own historicity/actuality or “referentiality,” as we might name it also, and reshape it as “possible.”

Reyna Elena in the park

As metaphor does, ritual provides us with a novel gaze on reality. It proves to be a powerful metaphorizing device helping people adjust their selves in critical situations or overpowering circumstances, opening a gap between those selves and their experience of the everyday life where they are free to creatively manipulate their being-there. I could ethnographically observe a sort of such manipulation during my fieldwork in Israel among a Filipino Catholic community celebrating the traditional feast of *Flores de Mayo* in Rehovot, a medium-sized Jewish city in the Central District (Della Costa, 2020). Every year on the last Saturday of May, all the officially established Catholic communities of Filipino migrant workers organize an extraordinary ceremony, with several white-dressed young women parading through the major Israeli cities. Featuring specific iconographic items, they represent the different titles by which the Virgin Mary is venerated and precede the *Reyna Elena*, a sumptuously costumed woman who impersonates Saint Helena, the mother of the Roman Emperor Constantine: she is considered the first pilgrim to the Holy Land and the finder of Jesus Christ’s Holy Cross.

Here I focus on a very picturesque scene, which I personally witnessed in 2017 and reported as introduction to my ethnography. In the frame of the present work, I believe that it renders vividly the theoretical assumptions that I have been explicating. It was the last Saturday of May, and the *Flores de Mayo* celebration was about to start. Everything was almost ready, and the colorfully dressed women who were taking part in the pageant (the *Sagalas*) had gathered in the city park, each one accompanied by two maids of honor who traditionally carry a richly flowered arch. It was a small noisy crowd waiting in the shade for the moment to get in line and trying to take shelter from the heat, which even at 6 pm can be suffocating on a May day in Israel. At a certain point, an Israeli woman in her sixties strolling in the park passed by, stopped, and stood, staring thoughtfully at Rose, a young Filipina dressed in a long white dress with a resplendent crown on her black hair. After some silent seconds, the woman asked “*Ma ze?*” (“What’s this?”), and the girl struggled to answer something about *Flores de Mayo*, in her broken Hebrew. The woman did not understand and asked again. Rose, then, pronounced this sentence, embarrassed as one who is forced to state something obvious: “I’m Reyna Elena, the mother of Constantine, the Emperor.” At that point, the woman, apparently fed up with such nonsense, went away without another word.

I believe that Rose's ritual costume in the park worked for the passing-by lady exactly as metaphors do. What is ultimately the job that metaphors do? It is precisely to strike us by means of incongruity and make us ask "*Ma ze?*" No one asks "What's this?" in front of the obvious. Most probably, that woman would have never noticed Rose and the other Filipinas gathered in the park on a hot Shabbat afternoon, if they were not dressed up for the *Flores de Mayo* celebration. Their presence there was a ritual presence, neither influenced by the context nor creating any other context. It was just absurd, that is, extracted from the context or negatively integrated into it. And what Rose answered was not symbolical, she did not say "I represent Reyna Elena;" she was asserting a patent falsity as a truth. In front of a ritual practice as in front of a metaphor, the interpretive effort must focus neither on the meaning nor on the context. Is Rose's statement true or false? This is not the right question of course, but also the phenomenological answer that "it depends on the context" is quite unhelpful. "I am Reyna Elena" does not even performatively re-create the context, nor does it contain another representative meaning besides its literal one. Indeed, the passer-by just did not understand and went away. Still, she had stopped in front of Rose-Reyna Elena: the ritual succeeded in disconnecting that scene from its surrounding and in challenging its obviousness. It made that reality a possible one, something in front of which one wonders "What's this?." As the famous paradoxical sentence "All Cretans are liars," pronounced by Epimenides the Cretan around 600 BC, that statement "I am Reyna Elena," in that context, is just true *and* false simultaneously. It is not symbolical, as it does not represent anything, it is not pragmatically used, as it does not do anything, it does just mean the subverting of the commonsensical meaning. And this negating force is also the positive power of metaphors and rituals: their *vis destruens*, in fact, coincides with their *vis construens*. A further short note about metaphor theory may definitely clarify how this happens.

Metaphor sets an incongruity with the obvious sense of reality, and at the same time opens infinite possibilities of congruence. Yet, it does not surrender to the danger of an infinite semiosis, which would plunge us again into an unbearable chaos. In fact, its possibility spreads only within the folds it creates, ranging from an actual reality to be contradicted to an actual reality to be affirmed. Metaphor resets reality as a self-organized possible reality that needs eventually to be understood somehow as an actual reality: its possibility is, thus, actualized. If it is not, it is non-sense.

How metaphors impact actual reality by making it possible is the last matter I want to discuss, trying simultaneously to shed light upon ritual's functioning. Let me resort to Paul Ricœur's hermeneutic approach to metaphor as it is fully developed in his *La métaphore vive* (1975) and poignantly summarized in a dense 1978 English article, written to be his contribution to the philosophical dialog in which also Davidson took part. Reflecting on the relation between metaphor and reference, Ricœur moves from Jakobson's postulation that poetic language "does not obliterate the reference but makes it ambiguous," and assumes the "split reference" (Jakobson, 1981: 42) that results from the poetic function of language as a leading line in the discussion about "the referential function of the metaphorical statement" (Ricœur, 1978: 153). As metaphor is, indeed, the principal instrument of the poetic function of language, Ricœur regards "split reference" as the proper metaphorical reference:

poetic language is no less about reality than any other use of language but refers to it by the means of a complex strategy which implies, as an essential component, a suspension and seemingly an abolition of the ordinary reference attached to descriptive language. This suspension, however, is only the negative condition of a second-order reference, of an indirect reference built on the ruins of the direct reference. (Ricoeur 1978: 153)

At a more strictly semantic level, this implies that “the sense of a novel metaphor is the emergence of a new semantic congruence or pertinence from the ruins of the literal sense shattered by semantic incompatibility or absurdity” (Ricoeur, 1978: 153). Such twofold suspension of the ordinary reference and of the literal meaning operated by the metaphor is the negative dimension of a new setting that incorporates and transforms the old one. “As the metaphorical sense not only abolishes but preserves the literal sense, the metaphorical reference maintains the ordinary vision in tension with the new one it suggests” (Ricoeur, 1978: 154), and this prompts relevant ontological issues. The suspension of the actual reality, indeed, coincides with “the projection of new possibilities of redescribing the world” (Ricoeur, 1978: 154). Metaphor affirms and negates, says “it is” and “it is not” at the same time, and thus establishes a tension between the two poles of being; within this tension, being is redefined as “being as,” where “as” does not relate to a symbolic-representational meaning, but is inherent to and constitutive of what Ricoeur terms “metaphorical truth.” This, finally, is not at all a new reality, but a transcending, and even transforming perspective upon the ordinary one.

Metaphor, therefore, operates a *compositio oppositorum* (unity of opposites) between incongruity and congruence. To metaphorize reality means to transcend the radical opposition between actual and possible. And here a further overlap of ritual and metaphor occurs. According to Kapferer, ritual enacts a series of contradictions, which are not tolerable in ordinary everyday life, within the cultural frame of performance, and transcends them into an acceptable form (1979b: 13–14). Moreover, “by negating the reality” (1979c: 165) in the course of the performance, ritual transcendence resolves the contradictions and achieves a radical transformation of both self’s identity and context. Similarly, to De Martino, transcending an incongruent situation is the core activity of ritual. Negating the dangerous threats of life and the intrinsic contradictions of the everyday chaotic reality, ritual establishes the possibility of being-in-the-world within a synthetic and controlled mode. Individual inconsistency is transcended and recovered through a historical and cultural practice that transforms it into a possible value. Ritual’s transcending dynamics say this about reality: “it is,” “it is not” and “it is as.”

Quotation marks

To conclude, it is here useful to recall an inspiring page that Valerio Valeri wrote in 1981, which suggests, in other terms, the meaningful meaninglessness of ritual I have attempted to describe:

the rite appears as a collection of signs, although without offering the code that allows for a full interpretation of those signs. On the one hand, it looks as if it is endowed with meaning;

on the other hand, it seems devoid of any apparent sense. This contrast powerfully attracts attention and is tantalizing: it may stimulate a search for meaning in what is ordinarily meaningless but is “put in quotation marks” as if it possessed it. (...) the rite allows people to reflect on the fundamental constituents of experience and to derive from them, if not a clear meaning, at least the sense of interconnectedness that results from manipulating them in the same context. (Valeri, [1981] 2014: 306–307)

Thus, ritual does not only put reality in brackets as in Husserl’s understanding of the *epoché*; it puts reality in quotation marks, that is, it highlights its ambivalence, its possibility. Creating a “ritual reality,” ritual sets actual reality within a distancing perspective that makes us see its absurdity as a possibility, and this is precisely how it is effective on it. A ritual reality is thence a metaphorical reality, and metaphorization is the fundamental dynamic of ritual’s effectiveness.

I am convinced that the core sense of the *Flores de Mayo* ritual I observed in Israel is to be addressed neither as a transnational nostalgic revival of a tradition that migrants strive to keep in diaspora nor as a political engagement aiming at the public visibility of which migrant workers are, anyway, not assured. Rather, *Flores de Mayo*, as it is celebrated in Israel, is an intricate system of tropes that metaphorize and transcend both the original Filipino and the migrational Israeli frameworks. The rite proves eventually to be the ironic challenge to the migrants’ subaltern position within the Israeli society, the synecdochic translation of the traditional feast into a radically readjusted form, and the metaphorical distancing of the migratory experience, which is reshaped into a religious pilgrimage, or, even more, into a spiritual path. What these Filipinos actually do by such a unique celebration is neither to escape their difficult living conditions in a mystic religious elsewhere nor to combatively face their subaltern reality entering the public space and demanding recognition. They in fact set an incongruity gap between their being Filipino labor migrants in Israel and their being Catholics who celebrate, in the Holy Land, the mythical finding of Jesus’ Cross and the pilgrimage that inaugurated the foundation of Christianity as a public faith. In such open space, where they possibly are and at the same time are not what they are, their agency is actively practiced, and their presence is effectively established. The rite folds, for a while, the harsh reality in which they live, shaping a perfectly coherent framework for it to be negated and readjusted. They are there *as if* they were not.

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Notes

1. In English: “meaningful equivalents of things meant which belong to another order of reality”, Lévi-Strauss, 1972: 196).
2. To be more accurate, after an enthusiastic reception of De Martino’s studies by Michel Leiris and Alfred Métraux, who prompted their partial translation in the early 1960s, the Italian anthropologist was also almost completely forgotten in France, as his approach did not match the structuralist hegemony. Only in the early 2000s, thanks to Daniel Fabre and some other French or French-speaking scholars such as Silvia Mancini (1991, 1997), Carlo Severi (1999), Giordana Charuty (2009), and Marcello Massenzio (1999), did De Martino’s thought re-enter French anthropological debate (Bergé 2001; Cordier 2005). Recently, new French editions of two works by De Martino were published: *La fin du monde: Essai sur les apocalypses culturelles* (2016) and *Mort et pleurs rituels. De la lamentation funèbre antique à la plainte de Marie* (2022).
3. The book was published in 1972 by an Australian publisher under the popularizing title *Primitive Magic. The Psychic Powers of Shamans and Sorcerers*. It was then republished in 1988 by the British Prism Press, and this is the English edition I am drawing from here. I agree with the negative opinion of Dorothy Zinn who advises the reader: “the translation provided in *Primitive Magic* lacks any annotations or critical apparatus; indeed, it is utterly inadequate with respect to the complexity of De Martino’s language, and in a number of places, the translator has actually omitted parts of the original text that seem to have been especially challenging. Additionally, De Martino would certainly have vehemently rejected the New Age cast given to the work in Paul Saye White’s preface” (Zinn, 2015: 14 [endnote n. 5]).
4. In 2015 Dorothy Zinn edited also a special issue of the *Journal of American Folklore* about De Martino. The introduction to this special issue (Zinn, 2015) offers an outstanding sketch of De Martino’s thought and work for English readers.
5. *La terra del rimorso* was translated into English as *The Land of Remorse. A Study of Southern Italian Tarantism* thanks again to commendable work of Dorothy Zinn. The English translation, published in 2005 with a foreword by Vincent Crapanzano, had a positive impact and boosted a renovate interest within the English-speaking anthropological milieu. In the following years, indeed, several authors as Emilio Berrocal (2009), Marja-Liisa Honkasalo (2009), Thomas Hauschild (2012) used De Martino’s insights for their original and intriguing studies. In 2012, Fabrizio Ferrari published the first intellectual biography of De Martino in English, and “Crisi della presenza e reintegrazione religiosa,” a foundational essay (1956) that outlined the core of his anthropological view, was translated by Charles Stewart and Tobia Farnetti. More recently, a remarkable series of German-language studies on De Martino were provided by Ulrich van Loyen (2015, 2021) and Antonio Roselli (2017, 2021). A special mention lastly deserves Flavio Geissshuesler’s study (2021) that rereads De Martino’s work and life within the intellectual climate and the socio-political context of his age.
6. About Cassirer’s influence on De Martino, see Andri, 2014, Pàstina, 2005, Talamonti, 2005.
7. The original “un atto di plasmazione” (De Martino, Yr: 158) could perhaps be more properly translated as “a forging act.”

8. Symbolization later became the core of cognitive ritual theory: see Bell, 1992; Boyer, 1993; Cannada Bartoli, 2004; Sperber, 1974; Strecker, 1988).
9. The English translation is by Saunders (1993: 885).
10. A remarkably complete review of the contributions to the study of ritual healing effectiveness from the 1970s to the 1990s can be found in Csordas and Lewton, 1998. These authors focus on the key themes of experience, performance, and practice.
11. Here I can only mention the linguistic anthropology of Dell Hymes (see Gumperz and Hymes, 1972) and Alessandro Duranti (1997).
12. He clearly refers here to Ludwig Wittgenstein's famous philosophical issue about aspectuality (1980). Reflecting on *Kipbilder* (ambiguous images), the German philosopher introduces the concept of "seeing-as", meaning that the form of the image is clearly relative to the observer's perspective, which is momentary and changing.
13. It may be interesting to note that, some twenty years later, Seligman and his colleagues understood ritual as creating a "subjunctive, 'as if', or 'could be' universe" (2008: 5).

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