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Research article

Techniques of Presence: A Way to Interpret Technoscience Starting from Ernesto De Martino's Theory of Magic

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Abstract

Ernesto de Martino developed in the 1940s a theory of magic on philosophical grounds, while engaging a critical dialogue with the anthropology of his time. The central category of his study is that of the “crisis of presence”. Through it, the magical is interpreted as a historical response to an existential and permanent predicament of the human condition. The role of the shaman and the ritual are interpreted in an original way as countermovements against the risk of losing one's individual consistency (presence). Magic, from this perspective, reveals itself not to be primarily a way of dominating the natural world and making it function according to our needs and desires. While it does not lose this operative character, it proves to be initially born out of an inner condition of existential crisis. The purpose of this paper is to delineate the De Martino's theory of the relationship to magic and to trace its connection to modern technosciences. Regarding the underlying need to which they respond and the way in which its procedures are conducted: In magical thinking there is no intention of developing a description of the world, instead a willingness to dominate its irregularities. Magic operates through recomposing human presence when it is threatened by forces outside its dominion. In our hypothesis, magicians appear as a kind of techno-scientists who succeed in obtaining a representation of the world only insofar as their interventions prove effective on it.

Keywords: Ernesto De Martino; Magic; Technoscience; Anthropology; Presence; Technology and Magic

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Научная статья

Техники присутствия: Способ интерпретации технонауки, начиная с теории магии Эрнесто де Мартино

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Аннотация

Эрнесто де Мартино разработал в 1940-х годах теорию магии на философских основаниях, ведя при этом критический диалог с антропологией своего времени. Центральной категорией его исследования является «кризис присутствия». Через него магическое интерпретируется как исторический ответ на экзистенциальное и постоянное затруднение человеческого существования. Роль шамана и ритуал интерпретируются оригинально как контрдвижения против риска потери индивидуальной состоятельности (присутствия). Магия, с этой точки зрения, оказывается не в первую очередь способом доминировать над миром природы и заставить его функционировать в соответствии с нашими потребностями и желаниями. Хотя он и не теряет этого оперативного характера, он оказывается первоначально рожденным из внутреннего состояния экзистенциального кризиса. Цель этой статьи состоит в том, чтобы обрисовать теорию Де Мартино об отношении к магии и проследить ее связь с современными техническими науками в отношении лежащей в их основе потребности, на которую они реагируют, и того, как проводятся ее процедуры: намерение разработать описание мира, а не готовность доминировать над его неровностями. Магия действует, восстанавливая человеческое присутствие, когда ему угрожают силы, находящиеся за пределами его владений. В нашей гипотезе маги предстают своего рода техно-учеными, которым удается получить представление о мире только в той мере, в какой их вмешательство в него оказывается эффективным.

Ключевые слова: Эрнесто Де Мартино; Магия; Технонаука; Антропология; Присутствие; Технологии и магия

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INTRODUCTION¹

“Magic” is an object of study as intriguing as it is embarrassing to the history of thought. The Western world's self-interpretation proclaims its detachment from the magical. The modern subject, that uses his reason and lives in a world written in mathematical characters, no longer sees any use in an explanation of things that does not also obey stringent logics of reason. The world is no longer inhabited by incomprehensible entities, nor by dark forces plotting for or against his life, according to inhuman laws of reward and punishment. One looks upon magic as a relic of a childlike past, from which one is now safely and completely emancipated.

When European anthropology began its travels and was confronted with “magical civilizations”, its first discoveries only confirmed what the European modernity already ascribed to herself, to be the pinnacle of rational development. And this development was matched and confirmed by the growth and refinement of her scientific and technical apparatus. The latter demonstrates, as if there were still a need, the extent to which the modern world is now freed from the obscurity of the natural world, its secrets, and its constraints. Anthropology, by tracing a primitive and primordial humanity, which has not yet obtained the means of progress and lives in a world of superstitions, spirits, and irrational beliefs, could thus become a science worthy of the highest interest, that of observing an origin that would otherwise have vanished altogether.

Certainly, this reconstruction has, over the years, seemed less and less convincing. Western rationality not only found its critics, but had to question its genesis, finding in it remnants of that neglected heritage, perhaps never fully eradicated. Why, despite everything, does human behavior continue to respond to logics that are not entirely transparent? Why does it fail to really conduct itself according to that absolute freedom which also, so it seems, is its distinctive mark which separates it from nature? Can we be entirely confident that we have completely emancipated ourselves from that childlike past of magic and other primitive beliefs?²

This brief inquiry aims to relate the theoretical results realized from the investigation of magic by Ernesto De Martino (1908-1965),³ an Italian anthropologist and thinker, to the field of technical action, which is based on the manipulation of objects. The underlying thesis of this paper is that in magical thinking there is no intention of developing a description of the world, instead we discover the willingness to dominate its irregularities following a regular code of action and intervention. The way magic operates, through those that we will see as procedures of a genuine technical matrix, is recomposing the peculiar human presence when threatened by forces outside its

¹ This paper complements several papers on “Technology and Magic” which appeared in *Technology and Language* 3:4, 2022. It also originated as part of the 2022 Padova Summer School on Philosophy and Cultural Studies of Technology, associated most closely with the papers by Natascha Adamowsky (2022), Benedetta Milani (2022), Federico Monaro (2022), and Mareike Smolka (2022).

² It is precisely in the Renaissance that one finds, alongside the great propulsion toward the scientific method, still irruptions of the magical thinking, not antithetical to said method, but integral to the history of its development (for instance, we can look at Paracelsus, Girolamo Cardano, or Giovanni Pico della Mirandola).

³ For an English-language introduction to De Martino's work see Ferrari, 2012 and Geissshuesler, 2021.



dominion. In our hypothesis, the magician appears as a kind of techno-scientist *ante litteram*, that is, as a subject who succeeds in obtaining a representation of the world only insofar as his or her intervention proves effective on it. Thus, the possibility of knowledge is subordinate to obtaining a practical result through the deployment of a correct procedure.

The relationship between magic and technology, as we aim to show, is not as much of a stretch as one would initially be led to believe. The paradoxical comparison between what is the so-called primitive mentality and what is the peak of contemporary progress, will lead us to question even the categories of “primitive” and “progress”. We will try to show the similar underlying structures between magic and the most advanced form of Western technology. That may reveal to us the proximity of the magical, at least in the consideration of it that we are about to outline.

DE MARTINO'S THEORY OF MAGIC

De Martino's arguably most famous work, *Il mondo magico* (*The Magical World*), was written during World War II and came out in 1948. To introduce the theory of magic displayed therein, it is necessary to give an account of the author's argument against the ethnological and anthropological sciences of his time.

Previous theories drew two conclusions that, for De Martino, could not be accepted: 1) that all the phenomena of magic are the residue of a civilization that is primitive and inferior in its degree of development (Tylor, 1871), or that at least is characterized by being pre-logical (Levy-Bruhl, 1910; 1949); 2) that magic as a whole has to do with the domain of the irrational and belongs to it (Frazer, 1911), therefore even the result of a magical practice has to be completely irrational, incomprehensible. If, for example, magic has some power in influencing social cohesion and ensure the stability of a community, this will be only due entirely to psychological reasons, such as mass-manipulation or self-suggestion.

De Martino's *first* move is to counter the idea that “primitive” coincides with “archaic” (in a chronological sense) and with pre-intellectual or irrational. There is no definition of “primitive” that can encompass all human societies, from the Egypt of the pharaohs to the Eskimo community. It is a category that turns out to be dependent solely on the observer's point of view. Therefore, “primitive” is a characterization entirely relative to one's culture of reference, not an absolutely valid designation. *Second*, if we take the magical (or paranormal) as an object, it is not true that its explanation in so-called “primitive societies” is always tied to an irrational belief. For example, whether the phenomenon of lightning is explained with the notions of modern meteorology, or whether one considers it the apparition of a divinity or the descent on Earth of a mythical hero, in both cases one is applying an order function to an event which manifests itself first and foremost as something unknown (De Martino, 1941, p. 94).⁴ Either way, reality is given an order. The “primitive” world is not an illogical or pre-logical world, it

⁴ All translations from De Martino's works are by the authors.



possesses a logic of its own, and we understand nothing of its culture and development unless we make the effort to penetrate that logic.

This brings us to the second point: the body of knowledge that makes up *magism* (*magismo*) is not a merely psychological content. The foundation of the effectiveness of magic is not to be found in the conviction of the subject performing the act or in the social group to whom the act is destined. This is evident when highlighting a character of magic that is usually marginalized: magic works. It *does* something, it has its own specific operation. If in fact the magical ritual did not work, which means that it did not arrive at any result, we would be right to consider its practice completely irrational. It is after all a banal question: If magic had no effect, if the ritual always failed, wouldn't magical civilizations be absolutely incomprehensible?

De Martino's question is then: where does magic come from? What triggers the creation of a system that we can call a system of practices, rituals, rules, arrangement: a magic system? Magic is something that exists in its cultural world, as an historically determined expression of a community. It is not simply something that one believes in, it is something that is part of that way of life and one's own everyday reality. "The problem of magical powers", says De Martino, "involves not only the subject of judgment but also the judging category itself, the category of *reality*" (De Martino, 1948/2022, p. 54; s. a. Cherchi, 1998).

So, the magical does not have to do with the not real, but with the aspect of reality that remains impenetrable, which cannot be investigated, but which must be acted upon. The domain of the irrational and of the unknown are not one and the same. If the purpose is to "determine the *Weltanschauung* of magism and the historical function of that *Weltanschauung*" (De Martino, 1941, p. 74), one obscures the understanding of magic by dismissing it as *a priori* non-rational. Magic should be, at first, given the dignity of a way to *deal with the unknown* by incorporating it into a rational scheme of interpretation and practices. Like every historical world, ours as well has ways of dealing with the unknown. The comparison between what is known to us and unknown to other worlds is not fruitful. Quite different is the case if we shift the focus, and we consider our manners of dealing with the unknown compared to theirs. It is then a matter of broadening the field of inquiry and, first of all, assessing *against what* magic is employed, from what inescapable necessity it emerges as a determined historical concretion.

According to De Martino, magic comes from a structural condition of the human, around which *magism* as a historical world develops. Referring to Heidegger's early philosophy, De Martino says that the culturalization of nature, its ordering into a functional system of practices, is the result of the manifestation of *Angst*. As it is well known, being-there, the human's *Dasein*, does not only have to deal with the condition of fear (*Furcht*). Fear is always fear of something, fear in face of a concrete danger or a depiction of it. *Angst*, on the other hand, does not turn to an outside, but to the inside. It is the consciousness of "nothingness as nothingness", as annihilation of one's own presence. In a way, we can say it is fear without an object, a being-there that is stricken with the anticipation of the possibility of not-being-there-anymore, the end of every further possibility. This occurrence – the moment when *Angst* confronts a human with his most radical possibility, the impossibility of being there – is called by De Martino "crisis



of presence” (*crisi della presenza*). We can follow here a description by the author himself:

The crisis of presence is felt as an occult force, as a malevolent influence. The crisis of the objectivity of the world is experienced as if everything acquires the ductility of wax, and as if things lose resistance and become sag in their contours. The world falls apart, collapses, loses relief and dignity, it becomes sordid. (De Martino, 1948/2022, p. 151)

De Martino, at this point, filters Heidegger through his Italian reception and his own neo-Hegelian background.⁵ Contrary to Heidegger, there is for De Martino a content of *Angst* that is somehow *determined*, precisely in the sense that Hegel gave to that process as *bestimmte Negation*.⁶ Even in the most radical negation we must be able to find a residuum, something that remains from that negation, and from which we can start again and, one more time, build something on top of what has been negated.

This determined content is for De Martino the same invariant structure that manifests itself in the phenomenon of *Angst*. The crisis of presence, triggered in the moment of breakdown, configures a human tension to respond, to do something in order not to succumb to a total loss of identity. Again, this is an original point, as it moves us away from the naive consideration of the “primitive” world as one that does not know the individual and the person and would live in a kind of “community with all things,” cloistered in an ontological and social monism that would prevent the arising of a qualified form of self. But it is not just that, for the individual confronting its own crisis of presence is in fact not only faced with the loss of self as singularity, but simultaneously faced with the loss of its own historical world. So we already have in *magism* the affirmation of an interrelationship between *Dasein* and *Welt*, on the one hand, our “presence at the world” (*presenza al mondo*), on the other, “the world becoming present” (*il mondo che si fa presente*).

When this interrelationship is challenged, the response is not that of an isolated individual, alone with oneself, but is a collective response, and the individual becomes part of the public, collective drama (De Martino, 1948/2022, p. 154). In this collective dimension of crisis, the properly magical drama is distinguished from delirium and mental pathology, which remain solely in the private sphere of the individual. Faced with *Angst*, with the “nothingness that advances,” cultural formation can and will respond, by creating ways for recovering the presence in the world that is going to fade.

the *supreme principle* of the transcendental unity of self-consciousness entails a *supreme risk* for the person, namely, the risk of losing the supreme principle that constitutes and grounds it. This risk arises when the person, in place of preserving its autonomy over content, abdicates its task, allowing content to assert itself outside the synthesis, as unmastered *elements*, as *data* in absolute sense. But when

⁵ For an overview of De Martino's philosophical background see Barbera, 1990, Sasso, 2002, and Berardini, 2013.

⁶ Where for Heidegger *Angst* is only in the face of what is and remains completely indeterminate (“das Wovor der Angst ist völlig unbestimmt” Heidegger, 1927/1967, p. 186).



such a threat unfolds it is the same person who is at risk of dissolving, disappearing as presence, *precisely because its presence is not assimilable to elements and data*. (De Martino, 1948/2022, p. 161)

What happens in the crisis is thus a radical disruption of the *a priori* forms of subjectivity. The world is not put into form, it escapes the ordering instance of the individual, and becomes for it a formless, incomprehensible and imposing mass. Faced with the weight of the datum, the self fails to give itself a determined shape and breaks down. In front of such a force of indetermination, the cultural response involved by the magical practice is instead always determined and determinant. It is *determined* insofar as it takes the form of a certain ritual, a certain rule, the observance of a certain prohibition or *taboo*, and that's because magic is systematic, always ordered, not anarchic or improvised. It is *determinant* insofar it has the ultimate purpose of reintegrating presence against the risk of disappearance. In this conflict, which is played out on the dual level of a procedure (ritual) and the result related to it (reintegration of presence), we have the *drama* of the magical world and its internal dynamic.

Also, from this point of view, De Martino can criticize the individualistic framework of existentialism, i.e., its attachment to the individual as singular (thus, the impossibility of understanding the crisis of the individual outside the pathological, as abnormal consciousness). Inside the procedure of the magical drama, we surely see a struggle for the singularity of the individual, but it takes the organized form of a communal endeavor for the “the elementary being there, or presence, of the *persona*” (De Martino, 1948/2022, p. 165) which is not abstracted in isolation, but is instead part of a surrounding social structure. Only in the context of a social world, which follows communal logics, then the presence of the individual can be saved thanks to an external intervention, that of the mage or shaman figure. And the rescue occurs at the level of an everyday practice, which is magical rituality.

REINTEGRATION OF PRESENCE AND DEHISTORIFICATION

As we have seen, for De Martino, the reaffirmation of presence is a reaffirmation of an existence, of a singularity, inside a community. Magical rituality acts as his refuge and as a social shield or, in Shirokogoroff's (1923) term: the mage or shaman has the role of society's “*safety valve*”. If we have outlined what the origin of the magic ritual is and have come to understand why it is necessary and how the intervention of an outsider is incorporated, it is therefore appropriate to see how the shaman is formed and what is the very essence of his practice.

In the very training of the shaman, we see the confirmation of the operative function of magic. To become a mage, one must undergo through an initiation that involves one's personal regaining of selfhood. In the ritual pattern of initiation into the role, the following elements are almost always present:

1) The first stage consists in isolation. The shaman will go to the forest, the desert, or some other place distant and disconnected from the community, where the initiation begins. We can identify this stage as one of existential solitude;



2) The second stage is conducted through the consumption of drugs, or otherwise the induction of altered states. This ritual has a specific meaning: the shaman has to deal with the risk of uncontrolled possession by spirits. This is the most important passage, the one in which the shamans themselves run the risk of losing their presence;

3) Lastly, if the shaman manages not to succumb to the altered state, then it's possible to finally return to the native community. At this point the training is over, the shaman's own presence is been reintegrated and he can return in the world that will receive his intervention. This theme is generally interpreted as "second birth", or "rebirth", and is the deciding qualification for the shaman role

In short, only because the shaman has run and exorcised the risk of loss of presence, can be the director of the magical drama. The mage has faced "chaos", "the indeterminate" or "the nothingness", and succeeded in reemerging victorious, as again an individual unit, is now entitled to become the guardian of communal order.

through the sorcerer's redemption, the whole community opens itself to redemption, can have access to "salvation." In this sense, the sorcerer is configured as a true *magical Christ*, a mediator for the whole community of being there in the world as redemption from the risk of not being there. On the other hand, this redemption is cultural in the sense that the individual experiences connected to the existential drama proper of magism do not remain isolated and unrelated to each other, but are shaped in tradition, and as tradition they provide the ideological and institutional expressions within which the new individual experiences will move, and by virtue of which the vicissitude of risks, daring, debacles and victories that characterizes the magical world will receive a unity of development. (De Martino, 1948/2022, pp. 99-100)

We can at this point take a closer look at what this movement of redemption and reintegrating of presence consist of on a conceptual level. We might say that the original disruption, the shock provoked by the risk of losing one's presence, is indeed a negative movement, and cultural constructions, including magic and religion, consist of making up an opposition to that danger. Magic is a countermovement to the negative: "an experience, a drama, a problem, an unraveling" and also, finally, when it works, "an achievement" (De Martino 1948/2022, p. 74). That which is achieved is the re-integration of presence. But then we have to consider magic as a positive, as *positum*, a specific cultural construction made to keep the negative at bay. When it fades away in time, the trouble, the original negative, does not dissipate as well. That means that the risk of self-loss is not necessarily something that belongs only to distant civilizations: it is always there. As a response to this problem, magic is, in itself, entirely rational, because the truly irrational and incomprehensible is the concrete mass of the data when it exceeds the ordering function of subjectivity. And the magical practice is also a way of ordering the economy of presence and rebalancing the relationship with the original negative.



In *The Magical World*, however, De Martino still seems to tie this risk to the specific unfolding of a certain cultural world, precisely that of *magism*.⁷ Only later, returning to these questions, will he recognize the general scope of his theory: the loss of presence is not just a “magical risk,” but a “product” of the “vital sphere” itself (De Martino, 1953-1954/1995, p. 72 note). As such, it is constantly addressed, regardless of the historical civilization of reference. If *Angst* has to do with the loss of reality in a given historical moment, the countermovement will have to be characterized by being the positive removal of that problematic piece of reality, which manifests itself in an indeterminate threat. As we have seen briefly in the three phases of the shaman’s training, we can trace each stage back to a broader meaning that can be further ascribed to other social figures, not just that of the mage, as its vector of realization. By this route we access the final characterization of the idea behind the interpretation of *magism*, a general theory of *dehistorification*.

The human, the being who in Marxian terms “makes history”, must “dehistoricize” its own production of history (De Martino, 1953-1954/1995, p. 62), that is, de-realize its reality. The reintegration of presence thus shifts from being an exclusively magical practice to being characterized more extensively as a “technique of presence toward itself” (*tecnica della presenza verso se stessa*; De Martino, 1953-1954/1995, p. 60). The sense of “technique” here, De Martino points out, is not the usual one of dominance over the external object, whether natural or artificial, but of inner (re)appropriation of a “vital good”, that is presence itself.

Certainly, however, as a technical mechanism, the mythical-ritual device that removes human historicizing activity is configured as a process of “alienation,” in the precise sense of removing an element of activity from its owner. And, nevertheless, this process is necessary to receive something back, the confirmation of presence. However, its necessity is not given as this or that historically determined form (be it magic or a specific religious practice), which is and remains contingent. The inevitability is that such a process *needs to materialize itself*, insofar as it responds to an immutable human necessity that continues to present itself in history, regardless of its particular configurations. *Angst*, strictly individual, is reconfigured into the anticipation of the end of an entire historical world, and the figure that triggers the process of reintegration and dehistoricification becomes that of the apocalypse.⁸ The end of the world, the collapse of one’s “mundane order,” the oblivion of its reality, is thus configured as a “permanent anthropological risk” (De Martino, 1977, pp. 14-15).

⁷ That led him to speak of a “return” to *magism* when forms of reintegration of presence appeared in his contemporary world (in the case of the countryside population of Italy or in the new “spiritualistic” trend): “Everything in the life of the spirit, can be called back into question, even those achievements that seemed to be sheltered from any risk, and thus also the fundamental achievement of being-there in the world. In a situation of peculiar suffering and deprivation, as during a war, a famine, etc., the being-there may not withstand the exceptional tension and open itself again to the existential drama of magic” (De Martino, 2022, p. 131 note).

⁸ These are precisely the themes that will employ De Martino’s research from the 1960s onward, research that unfortunately he will not be able to finish in a systematic work and of which we are left with only a considerable amount of semi-organized notes.



But again, these conclusions need further justifications. Might it not, even now, be a matter of a certain historical conviction that is also destined to be outdated? This, if we turn once more to De Martino's reflection, stems from a specificity of Western culture, where “specificity does not mean primacy, or superiority. De Martino's attitude has always been one of “critical ethnocentrism” (see Saunders, 1993), that is to say: the anthropologist cannot approach other cultures in a completely pure and unprejudiced way but only as one that belongs to a certain culture at a certain moment in its historical shaping. However, one cannot help but admit that it is precisely that relativization and perspectival distance that permits an analysis. Certainly, the magical world would never understand itself through the problem of the crisis of presence. But we can understand it as such precisely because we are distant and that distance is what we have gained in the course of history itself.⁹ The modern subject has not found a solution to the fundamental problem, but has found a way to face it. We have found historicity itself, understood – and here we can certainly diverge from De Martino's analysis – as the categorical content that can be applied to the analysis of a world.

The use of historical categories is clearly subject to historicity (in the sense that every given social world has its own), but precisely the intrinsic historicity of our categories is something that cannot be refuted, otherwise a history would not be conceivable in general. In this discovery of historicity therefore consists the specificity of Western culture, and its difference from all the others:

Humanity has always lived in history, but all human cultures, except for the Western one, have expended treasures of creative energy to mask the historicity of existence. It could be said that human cultural history is the history of the masquerades of the historicity of existence, the history of the ways in which humans have pretended to be in history as if they were not in it. (De Martino, 1977, p. 354)

In this would consist the only form of progress we have gained, namely the historical awareness of its drama and the necessity of its mechanisms. If the underlying structure of the problem, the crisis and the need for countermovement, remains unchanged, it will therefore have to be possible to apply this hermeneutic gaze to the contemporary as well, to see if our own techniques of presence actually respond in the same way.

HOW TECHNO-MAGIC WORKS

Now, De Martino's thesis which we have just described in its philosophical terms has an important techno-practical aspect. The magical drama of risk and redemption is always accomplished through the mastery of a technique. In all forms of magical practice, the magician's first act is to fall into a particular state of consciousness, which is an

⁹ Therefore, De Martino can confidently say: “the meaning of a historical epoch always lives within the movement of historiographical consciousness, and its problem only lies for posterity” (De Martino, 1948/2022, p. 170).



obvious reminder of the experience of losing Self. This *enchantment*¹⁰ () takes place according to a precise sequence of steps:

- (a) a process of disintegration of the person, loss of the self;
- (b) extreme concentration on a single object, which entirely occupies what remains of consciousness;
- (c) vision and dialogue with supra-entities, that takes the place of a direct relationship between one's self and magical spirits;
- (d) progressive domination of vision, which is interpreted as an invitation to become a mage from an adjuvant spirit.

These elements, masterfully described by De Martino (1948/2022), can represent the first stage of a magical practice in the moment they become “the dominant end, voluntarily pursued” (p. 87) by the mage or shaman. Namely: magical enchantment, which is the first professional skill of a mage, is nothing more *than the deliberate repetition of the loss of self*. At this stage, through this willingness to undergo a repetition of a traumatic event, the danger of becoming absent is not only dissolved, but actively mastered, and this mastery is power socially recognized. As De Martino (1948/2022) points out in several points of his work, in magical practices the risk of dissolution becomes part of a technique based on repetition:

The technique employed by the *selk'nam* sorcerer appears entirely appropriate for the purpose of weakening the unitary presence: it proposes itself to the presence by iteration again and again of the same content, thereby compromising the condition of any presence, which – as a *unification of the manifold* – is never compatible with the *repetition of the identical*. (p. 88)

Voluntary *enchantment* techniques have unified elements that are clearly recognizable in all cultures. First, they use behaviors and tools, which are employed according to a precise ritual protocol. Solitude, darkness, fasting, dancing, monotonous chanting, drum-rolling and the use of narcotics configure the professional equipment of the mage. Through these paraphernalia, he artificially re-enacts the original experience of the self-dissolution (the possibility of not being present) but removes from them their element of danger. This happens because – if the “not being here” by its essence would be definitive and unrepeatable – the fact that it *can be repeated* willingly and according to a technique makes it controllable and available. The *identical repetition of the unrepeatable* is really the beginning of magic in its technical and professional meaning. Therefore, the magical ritual is not an end in itself, but produces a result, which is precisely the repositioning of a self, which the situation of *Angst* would otherwise have dissolved.

Facing the most extreme danger – the loss of consciousness as the faculty of knowing (unification of the manifold) – the magical attitude does not seek a theoretical explanation, but *goes further (va oltre)* with the establishment of a techno-practical order. In this technical protocol there may be knowledges, but they are arranged around the

¹⁰ I prefer this expression to the more technical one of *trance*, because it better expresses the specificity of the phenomenon.



practical existential fact of being able to voluntarily repeat – *and therefore respond*– to the possibility of dissolution.

This structure of the magical world is confirmed by the more specific techniques that the mage uses in his professional activity: *spells* and *mimesis*. The shaman's art consists mainly in rendering ineffective the malign influence of dangerous entities. Diseases, for example, are traced back to external influences, i. e. to a hostile being, also a magical user, that wants to cause the death (loss of presence) of another individuality. The mage is therefore called to counter the insurgent lability in the various nuances that this assumes in the daily life of a community. But the mage must also fight against other mages, who intentionally arouse the risk of the loss of presence. If it is in fact clear that the magician plays a role of social cohesion, magic cannot be but central in the struggles against the enemies of the community. In this scenario, where the mage is configured as a professional figure opposed to other mages, the movement of “going further” the risk of not being attended by ever more technical rigor. Thanks to the practice of the spell:

now the human being controls all moments of magical drama. (...) The risk is no longer a demonic snare, which arises beyond human control, during solitary wanderings, during the gloomy night, in the presence of a dead body (...). The fact that one mage can intentionally *make* the spell and another mage can *unmake* it gives the existential magical drama the character of a competition in which the presence of the strongest will claim victory (De Martino, 1948/2022, p. 111).

The circumstance that a subject can intentionally implement a spell based on a controllable and repeatable protocol and that another subject can implement a *counter-spell*, endows the magical agon with the character of a professional practice based on competence. Precisely because magic follows a specific procedure, it can be recognized by another practitioner, and then deconstructed. Even in this case it is to be noted that, if magic had a completely arbitrary character, no “counter-spell” would be possible, which instead makes sense only because it recognizes that a certain state derives from the application of certain practices (the rules of the opposing magic).

The same dynamic that we observed in the spell procedure can also be found in the mimetic processes implemented by the mage. Imitating animals, invoking atmospheric phenomena, copying other human beings, it's not a way to represent them (as a metaphor or a symbol), neither to becoming identical with them, because that would just result in a loss of one's own presence. The shaman imitates the bison to hunt it, the mage imitates the rain to make it fall, and imitates another human for the purpose of injuring or killing. Every mimetic practice is part of a protocol that aims to produce a result on the object of imitation:

Those who imitate the rustling of the leaves for ecokinesis do not perform imitative magic: they will do so only when, becoming the center of imitation, they will imitate the rustling of the leaves in order to produce the wind. Only within this resistance and this redemption of the “I am there” threatened by ecokinesis can magical imitation be constituted (De Martino, 1948/2022, p. 113).



Indeed, a mimesis that sought to reproduce the object or natural phenomenon would be nothing more than a form of crisis, in which the self is lost in the givenness of the world. Magic is exactly the opposite of an “indiscriminate koinonia” (De Martino 1948/2022, p. 224) with the natural world, indeed that unity with the natural is precisely the supreme risk. Imitation becomes properly magical only when it is purposeful, when it assumes a precise poietic aim. In the example: the procedure imitates leaves not to join nature, but to produce wind.

Here we must consider two aspects, which can make us finally appreciate the closeness between magical practice and contemporary technoscience.¹¹ On the one hand, there is no real distinction between the technical object employed by the practice and the theory of the practice itself: ritual, or magic, is both the means and the specific object of magical knowledge. On the other hand, more broadly speaking, there is no autonomous theory of magic inside the magical world, but rather an essentially productive practice from which the conceptual element cannot be abstracted. The pure element of knowledge, separated from its application and experiment – the *scio* contained in *scientia* – becomes here inseparable from practice and the necessity of his performance.

There is, in short, no purely theoretical shaman.

Magic aims at a production, which takes on, as we saw earlier, the character of dehistoricification (when historicity presents itself in the form of a problem). What the magical wants to produce is always a concrete self, a presence in the world, of which the shaman is a kind of original imprinter. The shaman’s command over the process of production is first and foremost applied reflexively. Precisely because the shaman dominates it, a reproductive practice is made possible. But every reproduction eschews the seriality of the result, since each subject is a person in a peculiar sense. What remains reproducible and serial is practice itself. Magic is thus a rigorous procedure that oversees a general production of subjectivity. Its primordial genesis, the *Angst* of self-loss, somehow determines its outcome (that always aims to a reintegration of one’s own self), but leaves the process indeterminate. The way in which the procedure is determined, that *positum* of which we spoke previously, will then depend on the configuration of the historical world to which it refers.

Perhaps, this determination of content is bilateral, and it is through this process that the historical world too comes into existence. However, this never fully unburdens it from its basic need, as we have learned from De Martino: is the opposition to the givenness and immediateness of the world, not yet historically understood, that presents us with the task of replacing these with the result of a human, artificial praxis, thus a mediation.

CONCLUSIONS: TECHNOSCIENCE AS A REPRODUCTION OF PRESENCE

Contemporary common sense is inclined to consider its distance from a past civilizations, or even present ones that are perceived as distant, primarily in terms of scientific progress. De Martino himself would not have said otherwise. And yet, when we

¹¹ For a more detailed analysis of the term, see e.g. Nordmann, 2010; 2011.



compare our ways of confronting the unknown we find conceptual similarities that are not insignificant. Magic, as we have seen, is something rationally and socially instituted, which has a specific function and is trusted only on the basis of its ability to fulfill that function – thus, its practical efficacy. As we have seen, the magical or “primitive” world does not stand in striking antithesis to the modern world. And this is perhaps the most unsettling result of De Martino's research. Progress is neither envisioned as a triumphant march toward constant improvement, neither is it the emergence in history of new, more complex problems, that nevertheless holds the promise that the problems of the past are now fully solved. There is, instead, an invariant foundation, a fundamental problem that determines the human being to create adequate procedures of reintegration. Hence the comparison with modern technoscience becomes possible.

Technoscience does not operate in accordance with reality, but as a recomposition of it. Reality is interrupted, suspended, and then returned as modified, technicized. At the moment of crisis, the real is de-realized. This intermittence of reality, which is held and then released, is made possible by mediate and operative forms of technical intervention, even if only in the form of information or entertainment. In the face of *Angst*, technoscience offers a response, and that response works. As with magic, the main focus is not to offer a general theory of reality and its processes, but a toolset that allows its more dangerous side, in an existential sense, to be kept at bay. The result is a production of reality, a surplus of the real (see Grigenti, 2019), which can certainly be again a cause for *Angst*, but it is indeed a result. Magic is not first and foremost an active form of dominance over the real (Malinowski, 1925/1948), but arises as a reaction, culturally situated. Technoscience, as it has developed, performs the same function in contemporary society.

What changes, evidently, are the forms through which the result is achieved (no longer the ritual, but the technical operation). Also, the mode of reintegration changes, but in a more subtle way. In fact, magic reintegrates presence as it was, before the crisis, interrupting the historical flow that would lead to its disappearance, and leading the individual's singularity back to its stability. The technoscientific model, on the other hand, interrupts the flow in the same way, but reconfigures presence as novelty, as invention. Presence is reintegrated into its status of being, but it is no longer the same as before. Presence immediately runs again the risk of not finding itself and not recognizing itself as such. Therefore, technoscience constantly offers ways of reintegration which are always new and different through a constant production. These, however, never succeed at permanent reintegration. The singular magical ritual thus breaks down into the recursiveness of a procedure that must be renewed all the time. The economy of presence, removed from the resolving intervention of the mage, thus becomes a pervasive, multifaceted, and multidirectional technology.

Following this interpretive suggestion, we would have to say that indeed, technoscience is one of the historical techniques of presence, in a way, however, that is substantially unprecedented compared to the examples we could find in the past. And yet, its element of originality is also the most problematic one, for constant renewal implies constant failure to reintegrate selfhood and, ultimately, the loss of the horizon of stability that is to be assured by magic.



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