

Taranta's lines of flight in performing arts

Daniela Calvo

Abstract

The taranta, the poisonous spider of tarantism, continues to multiply in different forms, to weave its web of meanings, connecting people, inspiring artists and stimulating historical, folkloric and ethnographical research. In a process of recovering local traditions (focused on music and dance) that began in the 1970s and underwent a big shift in the 1990s, taranta (denoting the spider, a style of music and dance) and tarantism has become positive values of identity, an intangible heritage and touristic and commercial products, in a complex web of interaction between local and global processes. In this paper, I point out some molar, molecular lines and lines of flight (in the sense of Deleuze and Guattari) in the assemblage of taranta, from an analysis of the artistic effervescence and the experience of people who follow and enjoy shows, events and courses of taranta music and dance.

Keywords: taranta, spider, tarantism, neotarantism, performing arts

Introduction

*Tarantate*¹ pray and ask grace in Saint Paul's and Peter's Chapel in Galatina and escape curious onlookers and TV cameras; actors enact the suffering of the spider bite and the ritual of tarantism following the lines of Ernesto De Martino's descriptions²; dancers and tourists express joy and sensuality in «magical circles» formed by musicians, dancers and the public in sunny Salentine summer; spiders of different forms and colours decorate tambourines, shirts, cd covers, books, manifests and souvenirs.

The taranta, the spider of tarantism, continues to bite and to weave its web, to stimulate, perpetuate and expand desire, sensibility and an imaginary built over historical accounts, ethnological studies, literary and artistic works (music, dance, theatre, cinema, photography, design and plastic arts), tourism promotion and patrimonial policies.

¹ The terms *tarantati/e*, *attarantati/e*, and *tarantolati/e* indicate the people bitten by the taranta.

² Cf. De Martino (1997).

The polysemy and multivocality of the *taranta*, which allows endless possibilities of reinterpretation, transition and creativity, and, thus, its survival, are conveyed by different fonts and through different sensory means³, in new rituals that gather together ephemeral communities⁴ of participants in concerts, feasts, festivals, dance courses and summer pilgrimages to Salento (when a web of concerts take place in different villages and the big festival *La Notte della Taranta*, the Taranta Night happens).

The spider, in its multiple and multiplying forms and meanings, remains the common denominator of the current cultural scene at Salento and *taranta-tarantella* is the brand by which *pizzica*⁵ is best known at national and international level.

As Salvatore Bevilacqua (2005) pointed out, the spider, tambourine and *pizzica* appear as signals, emblematic of a mythical Salento and exhibited in various associations or separately:

«These comprise an unmistakable ethno-touristic sign, variably staged in different media vehicles (book and magazine covers, postcards, posters, t-shirts, etc.). Heritage objects detached from their original meanings, exposed to the sight of everyone, these ‘Semioforos’ (Pomian 1978) are self-significant symbols that act as intermediaries between the spectator and another world, an invisible world that speaks of people and mythical stories»⁶.

The potency of *taranta* continues to reside in its connectivity, its ability to occupy an «in-between» space, establishing relationships and blurring the borders among different dominions of reality and experience. In tarantism, the *taranta* is a powerful connective symbol, which links the different domains in which the Cosmos is organized (human, animal and supernatural realms) and different dimensions of human experience (the physiological, psychological, social and spiritual ones)⁷.

³ Characteristics that Victor Turner (1987) identifies in ritual symbols.

⁴ Giuseppe Michele Gala (2013, p. 153) observes, among the characteristics of the current success of *pizzica*, «the formation of real human communities on a thematic basis: an interest, a leisure activity, a hobby can coagulate real extraterritorial social groups; the web enormously facilitates these new ‘thematic’ gatherings».

⁵ *Pizzica* is the music and dance that gained relevance in the rediscovery of the traditions of Salento and it has become the emblem of tarantism. There are two hypotheses about the name *pizzica*: a way of playing guitar, or a reference to the bite of the spider. Today, the distinction between different forms of *pizzica* is stressed: *pizzica tarantata*, played in the therapeutical ritual and no longer practised; *pizzica pizzica*, of playful character, that accompanied festive occasions; *pizzica-scherma* (*pizzica-fencing*), practised by two men who face each other in a danced duel, and is typical of the feast of Saint Rocco in Torrepaduli (LE); and *neo-pizzica*, the current re-elaboration of *pizzica pizzica*. In all its forms, the music is based on the *pizzica tarantata* (Chiriatti 2011). On the evolution of folk tradition in Salento from the standpoint of dance see Inserra (2017).

⁶ Bevilacqua 2005, p. 78.

⁷ See Lewis (1991) and Calvo (2021).

Today, the *taranta* constitutes a complex assemblage in continuous evolution, where contradictory and competing meanings coexist and proliferate.

The temporal hole in cultural transmission before the rebirth⁸, also called the Renaissance⁹, of Salentine music and dance favoured the formation of a constellation of meanings around the symbol of the *taranta* and the fruition of music, dance and feasts of *pizzica*, so that some authors interpreted *neotarantism*¹⁰ as an «invention of tradition» in the sense of Hobsbawn and Rangers (1983), and as an «inversion of tradition», in the terms of Giovanni Pizza (2015)¹¹.

According to this interpretation, the suffering and the harsh conditions of the peasants' existence gave space to an idealized and aesthetised past, the therapeutic ritual was reinterpreted as a rite of rebirth and union with the divine (where Dionysus-Bacco replaced Saint Paul), the *tarantate* became dancing Menads, misery and cultural backwardness gave space to a positive meridianism¹², the land of remorse became the land of Renaissance, tarantism passed from a psychiatric issue to a model for alternative therapeutic approaches, the geographical centre shifted from Galatina (where the *tarantate/i*'s pilgrimages ended at Saint Paul and Peter's chapel) to Melpignano¹³ (where *La Notte della Taranta* Festival concludes), the central period passed from June to August, shame became a pride of local identity.

Tarantism was decomposed and fragmented into its symbolic units, which were resignified, reaggregated and amalgamated to the ancient Greek past, connected to ancestral times and endowed with universal meanings, such as the search for trance, catharsis, well-being, union with the divine and a flight from daily life, while

⁸ After the first publication of *La terra del rimorso* by Ernesto de Martino, when he registered the decline of tarantism, local culture began to be rediscovered in the 1970s and gained a national and international resonance in the 1990s, to which the work of De Giorgi (1999), Di Lecce (1994) and Chiriatti (2011), as intellectuals and artists, was fundamental. For a critical analysis of this process, see Pizza (2004, 2015).

⁹ Cf. Santoro (2019) and Alcaro (1996).

¹⁰ Term coined by a group of researchers gathered in the congress *Tarantismo e Neotarantismo*, held in Rome on 3 and 4 February 2001, denoting a «phenomenon that we thought to call *Neotarantism*, trying to express with this neologism the attitudes of a very large public that, from North to South, looks for, listens to, enjoy, buys, but mainly dances, the so-called 'attarantata' music, even if they do not know the history, culture, rhythmic and choreutic models connected to it» (Nacci, 2004, p. 7).

¹¹ See also Pizza (2002), Azzarito (2016) and Bevilacqua (2005).

¹² That, aiming at enhancing South Italy and the Mediterranean, ends up essentializing, reifying, exotizing and aestheticizing a complex cultural complex, in a process analogous to orientalism, as analysed by Edward Said (2003).

¹³ An interesting coincidence is that Melpignano's show, for the first years, was held in Saint George Square, devoted to the saint who defeated the dragon, mythical being related to snakes (animals involved in tarantism). The displacement between the two cities can be seen as a replacement of St. Paolo, who is, at the same time, protector of snakes, spiders and scorpions and healer of *tarantati/e*, by St. George, who tamed and slayed a dragon that demanded human sacrifices and became a symbol of evil.

becoming a cultural heritage, a pride of local identity, and a commercial and touristic product.

In any case, the opposition between tarantism and neotarantism, suffering and joy, stigma and positive identity seems more to reify some aspects and cement the differences in the interpretations of two important figures that studied tarantism and contributed to the development of what turns around *pizzica* and tarantism today, i.e., Ernesto De Martino, with his focus on suffering, misery, crisis of the presence and healing; and Georges Lapassade, who underscored the universal need for trance and ecstasy, and who interpreted tarantism as an adorcistic ritual and connected it with Dionysian mysteries and the ancient Greek past, at the same time that he proposed a line of progression with hip-hop and rave parties.

As Karen Lüdtkke (2008) pointed out, tarantism and neotarantism, shame for the condition of *tarantato/a* and research on altered states of mind through music and dance, stigma and positive identity, suffering and joy exist side-by-side in contemporary Salento. Suffering, crisis, protest, transgression, political and gender issues, communitarian relationships, therapy, feasts, performances and fun are part, even if to a different extent, of both tarantism and neotarantism.

Artistic, literary and media productions and personal and collective experiences connected to the taranta are the product of an assemblage, in the terms of Deleuze and Guattari (2004), and assemblages are always assemblages of desire, with lines of flight (*lignes de fuite*, this can mean leaking, fleeing or escaping) as both desiring-machines and social-machines, swirling in the in-between and cutting edges of creation and deterritorialization; molar lines, of rigid segmentarity and established models, and molecular lines, of flexible segmentarity which trace small modifications and make deviations. Because assemblages are assemblages of desire, whatever the organization of the assemblage, no matter how rigid its molar lines, that will always be lines that escape the assemblage and connect it with its outside and maintain the immanent possibility of transformation. The molar lines, the molecular lines, and the lines of flight in an assemblage are intertwined and mutually upholding.

The artistic, intellectual, social, political and economic effervescence around *pizzica* and tarantism looks to be the product of lines of flight that connect the assemblage with its outside and maintains the imminent possibility of transformation and deterritorialization, along a process that Deleuze and Guattari describe in their Eight Plateau: «It is also possible to begin with the line of flight: perhaps it is the primary line, with its absolute deterritorialization. It is clear that the line of flight does not come afterwards; it is there from the beginning»¹⁴, while some molar lines persist and molecular lines develop in flexible forms.

Rituals — healing rites of tarantism, visits to the chapel in Galatina, as well as contemporary events of *pizzica* — represent points of singularity, when different

¹⁴ Deleuze and Guattari 2004, p. 226.

pasts, present and future condense; relationships, identities, modes of existence and communities form and unbundle; emotions are stimulated and lived; knowledge, habits, skills and sensibilities are produced; the symbol of the taranta strengthens and creates webs of meanings and relationships. In the terms of Deleuze and Guattari (2004), we may say that intensities which actualize¹⁵ becomings and form history are continuously produced.

The aim of this paper is to point to some original lines of analysis of the symbol of the taranta, in the current effervescence of interest, artistic and intellectual production, feasts and events around tarantism and *pizzica*, in which fragments of different historical epochs, ancient myths and rites merge and reunite, then link with new ones, and change sign and meaning. Starting from the assumption that public policies, artistic and cultural production and events, heritage, fashion, search for roots and regional identity, insertion in artistic and feast circuits and promotion can't fully explain the persistence of the taranta, as an assemblage of symbols and materiality, and its skill to move and gather people, and produce an artistic effervescence if we don't explore also its potentiality to perpetuate and produce imaginaries and emotions, to adapt to different localities, temporalities and experiences and to link different domains of reality.

The research starts from a personal experience, when, following a course on *pizzica* held by *La Paranza del Geco*, in Turin, hints at the connection of a step in which the feet beats the ground in the attempt to crush the spider awoke my interest, that took form in the study of tarantism and the observation of the presence of tarantas and not only in many songs but also in tambourines, shirts, postcards and other materiality circulating around *pizzica* manifestations, as well as in themes of artistic performances, especially dance, theatre and cinema.

I propose, therefore, a complementary insight with respect to the studies focused on patrimonialization, territory promotion, politics, music revival, world music, tradition, belonging, identity, commodification, local and global articulations and processes and cultural production¹⁶. In fact, as observed by Clara Gallini at the 2002 festival *La Notte della Taranta*, the success of *pizzica* can assert itself as a shared and credited phenomenon, only if is also sustained by its myths and stories¹⁷, that should continue to be alive, to stimulate the imaginary, to touch and move, to respond to contemporary needs and experience, to connect (experiences, meanings,

¹⁵ I employ the term *actualized* as coming to a concrete existence, in the sense of Deleuze and Guattari (1980), who distinguish between the virtual and the actual, where the virtual denotes a potency of being which already exists as a reality, and history translates a coexistence of becomings into a succession.

¹⁶ See, for instance, Pizza (2004, 2015), Bevilacqua (2005), Imbriani (2015), De Giorgi (1999), Lütke (2009), Nacci (2004), Plastino (1996, 2003), Santoro (2009), Santoro and Torsello (2002), Agamennone and Di Mitri (2003), Fumarola and Imbriani (2005).

¹⁷ Cf. Santoro and Torsello (2002, p. 162).

people, real and imagined territories and times) and to reproduce and transit¹⁸ in artistic and cultural production.

The study developed with my personal experience as a participant in concerts, feasts, festivals, and courses and workshops of music, dance and popular culture of Salento, and interviews with a semi-structured script with artists, cultural promoters of Salento and with people attending courses, feasts and *pizzica* shows.

The paper is organized into three sections. In the first section, I briefly sketch the process of formation of the current taranta scene and the heritage of Ernesto De Martino's analysis on tarantism; in the second section, I explore the taranta as weaver of webs of relationships in the current artistic, cultural and social scene of Salento, focusing on *La Notte della Taranta*, the main event devoted totally to *pizzica*; in the third section, I present the permanence and reinterpretation of De Martino's work on tarantism by artists and intellectuals who propose contemporary and universal meanings of «the crisis of presence» and possible ways out.

The taranta continues to bite

Salento (an area of the Apulia region in southern Italy, which was part of ancient Magna Graecia) became known as the «land of tarantism» — although there were analogous phenomena in different areas of the Mediterranean — from the work *La terra del rimorso*¹⁹ by the Neapolitan anthropologist Ernesto de Martino, published in 1961, whose edition of 1994 — when interest on tarantism and local culture was beginning to grow — obtained great success and become the main reference of tarantism, a molar line strongly influencing its interpretation and construction as intangible heritage integrated into the local economies of tourism.

In his expedition in 1959, De Martino and his team observed the progressive disintegration of tarantism as a means of social reintegration and symbolic horizon to suffering, overwhelmed by medical and psychiatric paradigm, along the process of economic, social, political and cultural transformations of southern Italy, at the same time that the taranta began to disappear from the landscape (by the process of mechanization of agriculture and the use of chemicals) and the imaginary.

¹⁸ I employ the verb *to transit* (from the Latin verb *trans-eo, -es, -ii, -itum, -ire*) with the meaning of «to go through, to cross over» (a condition, space or time), containing the possibility of modification, and strictly connected to the words *trance* and *translation* (to transfer, to transport, to transplant) and *traduction* (to let cross, to lead beyond, to carry across, to transfer from one state to another), as analysed by Palmisano (2003).

¹⁹ The term «rimorso» acquires the double meaning of «re-bite», since the symptoms of the spider's poison reappeared every year —at the beginning of the summer, close to the feast of Saint Paul— and of «remorse», for a bad past that comes back to torment people.

However, as the lyrics of the song *Alla Festa della Taranta*, from the compilation *Sponda Sud* (2007) by the Italian singer Eugenio Bennato point out:

«E sott'all'albero d'ulive
la taranta è ancora viva
la taranta è viva ancora
e te pizzica e te morsica lu core»²⁰.

Today, the taranta has revived and multiplies in the lyrics of songs, dances, theatrical performances, films, historical representations, tourist guides, souvenirs and logos of festivals and events. It weaves a network from Salento, exceeding national boundaries, and gathers together passionate and curious people in feasts, concerts, festivals, congresses, and music and dance courses and workshops.

If, still today, it may happen that the locals ask a particularly agitated child if he has been bitten by a tarantula, for the young people who participate in the *pizzica* movement, «being *tarantato/a*» assumes a positive meaning, indicating an uncontrolled impulse to dance moved by the music, being transported, experiencing ecstasy and euphoria in concerts and feasts, and a passion for *pizzica*.

In fact, after a period of neglect and disinterest, tarantism, taranta and local popular culture²¹ (with a focus on music and dance) became the object of a complex process of rediscovery and enhancement that begun in the 1970s with the recovery of traditional culture, music and dance by artists and intellectuals such as Rina Durante, Luigi A. Santoro, Luigi Chiriatti, Daniele Durante, Luigi Lezzi and Brizio Montinaro²²; it passed through an association with counterculture, hip-hop, raves and trance²³, and was selected as a patrimonial good and the basis for the construction of local identity, cultural and artistic effervescence and the touristic promotion of Salento.

²⁰ And under the olive tree / the taranta is still alive / the taranta is still alive / and it stings and bites your heart.

²¹ I use the term «popular» to indicate the culture of subordinate classes, in particular, peasants. For a more detailed discussion about popular culture, see Peter Burke (2009, pp. 7-15).

²² The *folk revival* in Salento is described, for example, by Santoro (2009).

²³ In this instance, the theatrical experiment of Georges Lapassade and Piero Fumarola at the beginning of 1980s played an important role. Lapassade (2020) proposed an adorocistic interpretation of tarantism, in polemic with the exorcistic hypothesis of De Martino (1997), and established a continuity among shamanism, tarantism, «possession religions», raves and the search for altered states of mind through music and psychoactive substances. See also Lapassade (1994), Plastino (1996) and De Angelis (2019). In the 1980s, the national success of the band Sud Sound System, that mixed reggae, hip-hop, dialect, political and social content and Salentine music, began to awaken the interest of young people from all over Italy, especially those connected to the left, who found in music and popular culture a means of protest and opposition to globalization.

The 1990s saw an acceleration of this process, which played out in the interaction among global and local processes, memory and identity²⁴, with the success of the re-issue of *La terra del rimorso* by De Martino; the publication of the book *Il pensiero meridiano* by Franco Cassano; the release of the film *Pizzicata*, under the direction of Edoardo Winspeare; an intensive music production based on *pizzica* and popular traditions; an enhancement and revitalization of popular feasts; the foundation of *Diego Carpitella Institute*, aimed at the study of Salento's popular culture and the production of thematic archive and library, books and journal publications and research activity, and the first *La Notte della Taranta* festival — a series of shows of music and dance entirely devoted to *pizzica*, which takes place in different villages of Salento, and has had national and international resonance and great public success²⁵.

One particularity of the revitalization process of the popular culture of Salento is that its propellant motive was not the attention to the richness of local songs, music, dances and traditions, but the interest in a healing ritual (belonging to the past) that was transfigured into a valuable heritage, memory worship, an icon for tourists, and cultural and symbolic capital.

Neotarantism, born on the ashes of tarantism, developed in a process of overcoding and overlapping of different historical and cultural elements, continually creating new lines of flight. They proceed by constructing from pre-existing elements, which are separated, re-aggregated and exchanged in new forms, with new senses and new functions.

The contemporary rites of taranta —shows, feasts, dinners accompanied by music, dance and music courses and workshops, congresses and seminars, theatre plays, historical re-enactments, patron feasts, and book presentations— favour the propagation, strengthening, creation and transformation of molar, molecular and flight lines in the assemblage of taranta, charged with new intensities, life, desire, passions and emotions.

²⁴ See, for instance, Gala (2013) and Imbriani (2015).

²⁵ It is not my intention, here, to reconstruct in detail the process which led to current public policies, institutionalization, cultural, artistic, touristic and mediatic effervescence around the taranta, but just to point out some important steps which will serve for further analysis. A wider study can be found, for in Santoro and Torsello (2002), Mina and Torsello (2006), Fumarola and Imbriani (2005), Pizza (2004). For a story of the foundation and development of *La Notte della Taranta* and its relationships with the *Diego Carpitella Institute*, local institutions and intellectuals see Imbriani (2015) and Agamennone (2015).

The taranta's web

The spider, a multivocal and polysemic symbol, producing and reproducing (in an open process which includes transformations, transitions and fluidity) a constellation of meanings, myths and stories which continues to capture the attention and produce a variety of emotions, memories, stories and imaginaries, teems in many cultural and artistic events, employed as part of a mediatic strategy promoting *pizzica*, which is often named as taranta, operating, thus, an association with the spider.

The festival *La Notte della Taranta* is a great sounding board of images and meanings related to the taranta and Salentine music, culture and territory, since it became an important music event, tourist attraction and model of territorial marketing, while also having an international projection:

«Traditional music, in particular the local tarantella, the *pizzica pizzica*, is the most representative feature of an offer that combines exotic elements of a recent past (tarantism), associated with a liberating message, with a 'typical' and 'local' food and wine route, the marinas, the uninterrupted and crowded nightlife»²⁶.

Simone Campa²⁷ — a musician, performer and researcher of southern Italian traditions, and founder of the artistic company *La Paranza del Geco* in Torino, whose parents are from Apulia — observed that the name 'taranta' is more emblematic and flashier than *pizzica*, since it refers to the spider. According to him, it passes through the policies of cultural marketing and promotion of Apulia, *La Notte della Taranta Foundation* and *Diego Carpitella Institute*, which turned local traditions into a value to be shown and promoted abroad. With its strong emotional appeal and its capacity of producing new imaginaries and connections, the taranta became the brand of the actual artistic scene, touristic promotion and Salento, contributing to their success.

A taranta with a big heart is the logo of *La Notte della Taranta* Festival, which, despite having an implicit reference to tarantism by using the name and image of the spider, along the years established an independent path from tarantism and its current performances and historical enactments in Galatina.

An inversion in the relationship of *La Notte della Taranta* with tarantism and the presence of spiders and *tarantate* on the stage happened after a polemic arisen for the publication of a promotional video of *La Notte della Taranta* Festival, leading to Eugenio Imbriani's and Sergio Blasi's resignation from *La Notte della Taranta Foundation* (Imbriani 2015). The video pretended to explain the origin of tarantism as a therapeutic ritual for people suffering after a spider's sting and to clarify which spider is responsible, without taking into account the complexity of the phenomenon

²⁶ Imbriani 2015, p. 182.

²⁷ Interview given to the author.

and the great variety of researches and interpretations. From 2017, dance performances themed on tarantism disappeared from the scenes of the festival and, in my interview with Gabriella della Monaca (from Lecce, a journalist responsible for communication and special events of *La Notte Della Taranta Foundation*) in 2018, tarantism and the spider appeared just as founding elements and not an actual source of inspiration of the contemporary artistic scene, that is undergoing transformations and contaminations. We can observe here some dynamics in the process of memory elaboration pointed out by Bergson (1991): the construction of memory is a collective and lively process, in which past gains life from current purposes, desires and needs, is elaborated from the present and projects itself to the future.

In fact, according to Gabriella della Monaca, the spider was chosen as logo of *La Notte della Taranta* because tarantism represents the past, the history and the root of all that is developing today around the music and dance of Salento.

Figure 1: Logo of *La Notte della Taranta*



Source: Website of the town of Otranto²⁸

In 2005, Francesco Maggiore, from the communication agency Big Sur, created the logo, «a spider, symbol of the myth, with a red heart representing the passion and the soul of music, an eye directed to the future, the moon as strong appeal to the Mediterranean and cosmic forces, to the ancestral consciousness of pizzica»²⁹.

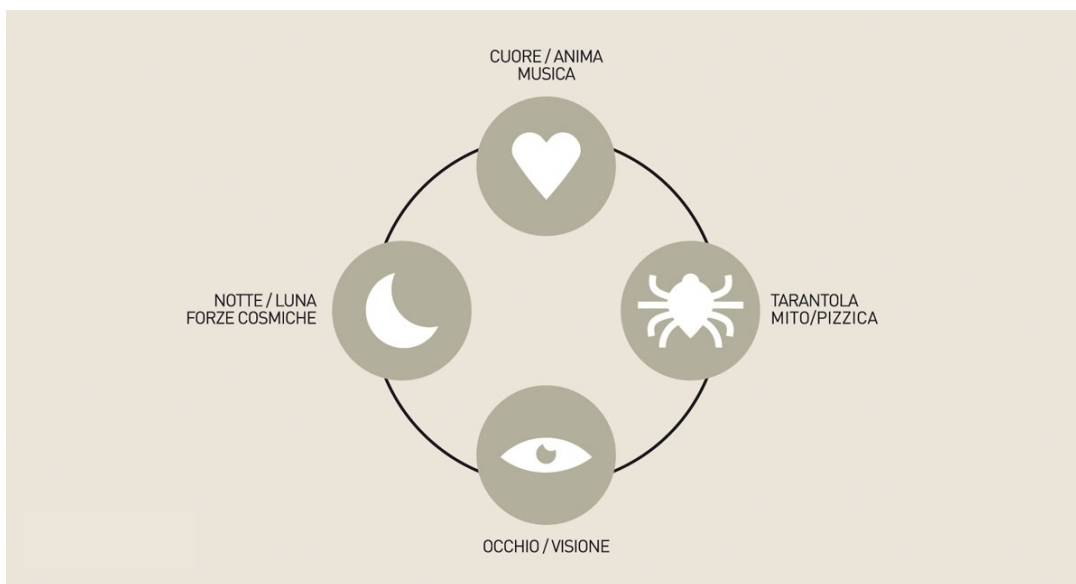
²⁸ Available at: <<http://www.otrantonelsalento.it/la-notte-della-taranta/>>. Accessed Sept. 2022.

²⁹ <http://www.tagpress.it/cultura/come-e-nato-il-logo-de-la-notte-della-taranta-storia-e-curiosita-20150821>. Accessed Sept. 2022.

An extract from the presentation of the project enriches the meanings of the logo that accompanies the festival:

«Vision and creative experience, the taranta is a mythical but real spider, which appears as a hegemonic symbol, a unifying myth of our culture; ‘revealing’ summer and Salentine dance, all inscribed in gallantry, the coming and going of feelings. The taranta, symbol of the spectacular event, becomes a stylized sign that encompasses four symbols: the tarantula, icon of the myth, unifying Salentine culture; the heart to signify the strong emotional aspect, the pulsating element of the event dedicated to music, arts and Salentine tradition; the eye, a constant and attentive gaze, ready to catch and nourish itself with dreamlike and evocative visions; the moon, heavenly body, element of the night, the backdrop where the rite is celebrated»³⁰.

Figure 2: Logo design of *La Notte della Taranta*



Source: Gabriella della Monaca, personal communication.

In Francesco Maggiore's and the project description of the logo of *La Notte della Taranta*, appear the strong emotional impact of the taranta and its capacity to establish a relationship among different temporal dimensions and planes of existence, actualizing the taranta's ritual property of making different pasts, personal and collective experiences converge into the healing ritual of tarantism, connecting different domains of reality (human, natural and spiritual, with the fusion-confusion

³⁰ <http://www.tagpress.it/cultura/come-e-nato-il-logo-de-la-notte-della-taranta-storia-e-curiosita-20150821>. Accessed Sept. 2022.

of the taranta and Saint Paul) and experience (the physiological, psychological, social and spiritual ones) (Calvo 2021). It does so by connecting the ancestral and mythical past, present experience and projects for the future, as well as opening human experience to the interaction with cosmological forces, the «moon, heavenly body»; and points towards the Mediterranean and Salento region as spaces of movement and exchange of peoples and cultures, actualizing the historical role of the region with contemporary international fluxes moved by music, art, culture, tourism and territory promotion. The night, represented by the moon in the logo design of *La Notte della Taranta*, indicates when the contemporary rite of the festival takes place, and recalls the liminal period of night, when Saint Paul or the taranta could appear in dreams, or the first bite could occur.

Gabriella della Monaca pointed to the same connecting capacity of the symbol of the taranta and of Salento, as something that may gather people and establish a dialogue among cultures and communities:

«The name *La Notte della Taranta* was chosen to highlight the end of tarantism as a phenomenon described by De Martino and the beginning of a new rebirth for the taranta that meant a rebirth for Salento, the way out of cultural isolation and the capacity of the peninsula to return to what it has always been, a land of harbour and reception, a land of dialogue among Mediterranean populations»³¹.

In fact, the *Notte della Taranta* Festival assumed an international character, attracting people from different countries, thus having international repercussions; it hosts musicians and artistic directors of different origins and backgrounds, favours contaminations and dialogues among a variety of musical styles, and promotes the circulation of *pizzica* and of musicians around the world and the insertion of *pizzica* into international music circuits. The ancient role of Apulia as a centre of commercial and cultural exchanges, thanks to its position in the Mediterranean, is now revived and taken as an example thanks to the cultural and artistic movement around the taranta and the power of music in creating relationships, a communal sense of belonging (among local populations, musicians, dancers and the public moving in synchrony) and (ephemereal, fluid, structured or long-lasting) communities.

The theme of communication is strongly present among those who experience *pizzica*, as I could observe when participating in courses, shows and festivals. For instance, attending *La Paranza del Geco* courses, in Turin, the participants (mostly women) often expressed the feeling of being free to express themselves through body dialogue and synchronized movements in dance and communicate authentically with their partners of dance, when a shared synesthetic and kinaesthetic dialogue favours communications in non-verbal forms. Every Tuesday night, at the course held by

³¹ Gabriella della Monaca, personal communication.

Valentina Padovan and Erika Valentini, another ritual favouring communication and the construction of relationships and a *communitas* accompanied the dancing circle: during the break people consumed together delicacies brought and shared by the participants, often accompanied with a glass of wine. This rite, which gathered foods from different regions (and countries, after a girl from Serbia joined the group) was preceded by another ritual, at home, when many women prepared the food to be shared later (the few men attending the course, with their wives, usually took wine and drinks). Before festivities (Christmas, Easter, someone's birthday) and the end of the course in June, these dinners became particularly rich and were accompanied by an exchange of gifts, often hand-made by the giver. The course participants often established lasting friendships and met not only at events connected with *pizzica* and other popular dances, but also organized dinners together and took part in special events in someone's life, as happened in occasion of the wedding of a girl.

The metaphor of connection for the spider that constructs wires and webs was pointed out also by Luciano Cannito, choreographer and theatre producer originally from Apulia and with cultural training in Naples, who was in charge of the artistic direction and the choreographies of the 2017 edition of *La Notte della Taranta*. He argued that the spider as a symbol of the festival is a wonderful choice, because the web, the spider's net, becomes symbolically important at the present moment, since:

«The network of culture, the network of people who believe in culture, in the jewel of art, music and dance, is a network among people who know how to bring positive words. So, the spider is important as a builder of the network, the web, that unites. It also manifests the connection of the community taking part in a show, a piece of theatre or dance, as well as in ancient rituals»³².

The taranta continues to weave its web, producing intensities and following lines of flight that open the possibility of producing intensities which connect people, construct a web joining different points of Salentine territory and parts of the world, generate movements, fusions, transitions and contaminations in music and culture and actualize virtualities already present in the mythical-ritual complex of tarantism: the ephemeral community which forms in shows, concerts and festivals mirrors the rural community which gathered around the *tarantato/a*; the musicians' tours in Salentine, Italian and international context mirror the routes of musicians travelling from village to village for tarantism healing rituals, as well as patronal feasts and the celebrations of weddings, baptisms, harvest, seeding, a calf's birth or other festivities; the public confluence to Melpignano, where *La Notte della Taranta* Festival closes mirrors the *tarantati/e*'s pilgrimages to the the Church of Saint Peter and Saint Paul in Galatina.

³² Luciano Cannito, personal communication.

The taranta as a chthonic animal and access to the depths of the self

The taranta³³, a chthonic animal, living and crawling on the earth, building its lair in the underground world, from which it emerges arousing fear and strong emotions, is a powerful metaphor for feelings, impulses and desires that are hidden and trapped in the depths of human soul, asking to come to light and be satisfied, is the guardian of the threshold leading to the underworld and human soul, a promoter of change and healing, in past rural Salento as well as in contemporary individualized societies.

According to De Martino's interpretation (1997), the spider's bite represented real or symbolic poisons, causing unresolved psychic conflicts and «crises of presence» (the fear of death, misery or a precarious and deprived sense of life) in a cultural system that offered possibilities of evocation, configuration and resolution through the rite with music, dance and colours. De Martino stressed that:

«At the time when the cycle of the agricultural year is concluded and the productive balance of the harvest is made, individuals liquidate their heavier psychic activities, causing a flow of repressions, traumas, and frustrations riskily cumulating in the obscurity of the unconscious symbolized by the poisoning spider and the rehabilitative therapy»³⁴.

And Annamaria Rivera (1988) added that:

«The symbol of taranta lends figure to the shapeless, rhythm and melody to the threatening silence, colour to the colourless, in an assiduous search for articulated and distinct passions where agitation without horizon and isolating and closing depression alternate: it offers a perspective for imagining, listening, looking at what leaves without imagination, deaf, blind, and yet asks with force to be imagined, listened to, looked at»³⁵.

These interpretations, focused on suffering, constitute a molar line of tarantism which persists and echoes in those of many artists who work with the cultural heritage linked to tarantism and *pizzica*. Nowadays, the spider as a metaphor of suffering is no longer an external agent, but became something from inside that wants to come out and free itself.

³³ I intend here the taranta as a sociocultural product, resulting from the convergence and overlapping of characteristics and behaviours of the two spiders of tarantism (the *Lycosa tarantula* and the *Latrodectus tredecim guttatus*), other poisonous animals (such as snakes, scorpions) and imaginary animals, as well as other mythical and ritual elements.

³⁴ *L'Espresso*, n. 1, May 1960. Cit. in: Mingozi (2009).

³⁵ Rivera 1988, p. 263.

Ernesto de Martino's legacy, with a focus on social and individual suffering, constitutes the strongest molar line of tarantism, continuing to influence interpretations of, imaginaries around and experience of past and contemporary relationships with the taranta. Lapassade—in the preface of Chiriatti's book (2011)—recognized that: «[De Martino's work] offers the basis for the cultural construction that followed later, i.e., that of tarantolata's romantic myth, as if it were a permanent support of pizzica, that resists along its elaboration through folk, thus, as a form of link between past and present»³⁶.

On the other side, George Lapassade's analysis and artistic experimentations on tarantism, popular culture, myth and trance and his interpretation of tarantism constituted a radical deterritorialization producing a line of flight (which, later, condensed into molecular lines) which departs from tarantism and open possibilities swirling from De Martino's descriptions and analysis, opening the path for alternative hypotheses. Lapassade deterritorialized tarantism by connecting it to shamanism, rave parties and other manifestations of a universal need for altered states of mind, conjunction with the divine, wellness and community.

These lines and intensities emerged from conversations with and personal participation to the laboratories of two artists, working with dance, theatre and performance moved by the taranta, feeling and artistically expressing a deep connection of taranta and tarantism with present needs and experience: Anna Deگو's artistic work on tarantism follows this molar line, while proposing a re-reading of tarantism as a contemporary phenomenon and a possible form of expression of and way-out from individual crises, while Valentina Padovan's artistic experience and philosophical elaboration pointed out possibilities of freedom, change and wellbeing through the taranta, explicitly inspired by Lapassade's interpretations, whose book *Dallo sciamano al raver. Saggio sulla trance*³⁷, that she recommended me to read.

Anna Deگو is a contemporary actress and dancer from Genoa, who took part in the dance company of Adriana Borriello, working on popular traditions linked to tammurriata, and, today, she artistically interprets tarantism. She stated that her interest is to find the traces of tarantism in the contemporaneity, as it contains an important universal matrix, which she verifies in workshops in different countries. Anna Deگو follows De Martino's interpretation of tarantism as expression of and an attempt to solve the menace of presence of the human being in the world. She expresses a nostalgia for a «magic world» and an idealized past, when rituals and myths offered hope, means of action and an explanatory horizon for individual and collective crises, and when an individual's issue was cared by the whole community, which gathered for celebrating together healing rituals, as opposed to contemporary lack of faith, isolation and loneliness.

³⁶ Chiriatti 2011, p. 12.

³⁷ From shaman to raver. Essay about trance.

Anna Dego places the spider in the depths of the soul: according to her, tarantism is supported by the human being, who, in tarantism, is taken in a moment of crisis, of passage (that, in ancient societies, was accompanied by rite), which she stimulates to perceive, to play with, to find an answer to, to act, and to move in the protected space of art.

According to Anna Dego, tarantism was a community response to the crisis of a symbolically bitten person, but, in contemporary society, there is a strong rational component, reflecting the lack of faith in magic and the loneliness that has replaced community life. Therefore, the human being must alone face his or her discomforts, crises, repressed desires, obstructions, contained energies, and moments of passage. The name of her workshop pathways *I pericoli dell'anima. Viaggio intorno alla tarantella* (The perils of the soul. Journey around tarantella, inspired by the title of the English translation of *La Terra del rimorso* by Ernesto de Martino) is significant for indicating the inner work that Anna Dego stimulates by using the image of taranta.

Through tarantella it is possible to find a way out for something inside that was blocked, at the level of emotions, desires, feelings, with the music and a physical intervention through the body, with the beating of the feet on the earth; since the body does not lie, it brings a truth. It is in this aspect that Anna Dego finds the universal value of tarantism:

«We all have cork experiences: you stopper your mouth, your hands, your eyes, your ears. You close, you compress, you squeeze, you don't let something go out of you, at the level of thoughts, emotions, feelings, experiences, because they are not given space. But the body suffers from these things, accumulates, remembers at an unconscious level and through music and dance it is possible to touch and unburden this container with all that is not expressed. It is an important, deep, interesting, but also dangerous work. Tarantella is a kind of telluric dance»³⁸.

She interprets the taranta as:

«The symbol of something underground, hidden, that wants to come out in the clear, maybe cannot, but tries, has a small space: the white sheet of tarantism, that, in my play *Maria di Nardò*³⁹ becomes a square that delimits the dance. She jumps, uses her strength because that square is not enough. It is a femininity that wants to find a little word, a small space where it can express itself, but it is soon withdrawn»⁴⁰.

³⁸ Anna Dego, personal communication.

³⁹ *Maria from Nardò* is the pseudonym of a *tarantata* to which De Martino (1997) devoted a large description.

⁴⁰ Anna Dego, personal communication.

Valentina Padovan, actress, dancer, teacher and artistic codirector of the artistic company *La Paranza del Geco* from Torino, approached southern Italian popular dances in the 1990s, when she was part of the theatre company *Il Teatro delle Forme*, that took inspiration from Italian popular traditions, feasts and rites. She adds a positive spin to De Martino's interpretation of the taranta: as the unleasher of repressed conflicts. The spider would reveal a profound desire and uneasiness that leads to important changes in life.

As a teacher of dance, during her courses Valentina Padovan stimulates the revelation of one's own truth, the communication and the liberation of emotions, the expression of oneself as being with his or her own wishes, free from the webs of superstructures and the rhythms imposed by others. She observes that:

«Maybe there is this little taranta that continues to pull strings inside people, thank goodness, and leads them to separate from the condition of imprisonment of everyday life and to return to being a person whose wishes are recognized by the reference community, that is no longer the family or the village, but the course, the feast, that become sacred moments»⁴¹.

Valentina Padovan also emphasized that women continue to be subordinated to men in present days, because it is hard for a woman to be perceived as a being who thinks, acts, desires, and has equal dignity. In this sense, it is significant that the vast majority of people attending the courses offered by *La Paranza del Geco* are women. Most of them express this possibility of free expression and communication through bodily engagement in dance, as well as a sensation of catharsis and relief.

While accepting the interpretation of tarantism proposed by De Martino, Valentina Padovan added a further passage, highlighting the importance of suffering as a stimulus to change:

«Evil can be a blessing, the devil is the one who divides: in the individual path, he marks the passage from a level of freedom, knowledge, consciousness to another, and invites people to cross the threshold. He may be a benevolent guardian, or propose past dramas that must be faced in order to cross that threshold. In every philosophy and religious tradition there is that figure, wrongly interpreted as the tempter, who indicates the wrong path. But I believe that he is the guardian of the threshold, the inner threshold. I like to see the spider in tarantism as a guardian that, at a certain point, is confronted, because it opens the door to a degree of consciousness and further freedom. But, in complex cases, the route is circular and returns to the starting

⁴¹ Valentina Padovan, personal communication.

point, as with the tarantate who must repeat the ritual every year. And these are the rituals that must be interrupted»⁴².

The view of the spider that emerges from the earth as an expression of an interiority that is blocked or concealed identifies the taranta as a chthonic being, living in the depths of the earth and in the depths of the soul, from where it can emerge and controlling the threshold to the underworld.

In fact, the *Lycosa Tarantula*, one of the spiders at the center of tarantism, digs its den in the ground, from where it emerges in summer when the work in the field intensified. Medieval literature about poisonous animals, such as spiders, snakes and scorpions, also emphasized their crawling on the earth, giving space to universal meanings connecting the earth and underground world with unconscious content and the depths of the soul, as expressed, for instance, by Luigi Chiriatti (2011) and Mario Cazzato (2000). This was underlined also by Maria Piscopo, from Irpinia (in the region of Campania), a dancer, singer, musician, teacher and researcher of central and southern Italian dances and dramatherapist, from a family of musicians, singers and dancers of tammuriata⁴³, who approached *pizzica* in her professional environment. Regarding the symbol of the taranta, she observes the complexity of the phenomenon and underscores the common characteristic of crawling in the earth of all the animals involved in tarantism: spiders, snakes, scorpions and other poisonous insects⁴⁴.

Luigi Chiriatti connected the archetype of the serpent to psychological contents, referring to Carl Gustav Jung's analysis of the serpent as representative of the unconscious element and incapable of consciousness, but that possesses a wisdom and knowledge of its own, often of supernatural nature. The author observes that:

«Snakes are symbolic elements of the collective unconscious and bring messages linked to the unknown part of the human psyche to the field of consciousness [...] Snakes, spiders, rodents are archetypal images that often appear in dreams and 'channel', it seems, fears and phobias of mankind»⁴⁵.

Henceforth, as a symbol of hidden and blocked emotional and psychological content, may be trapped underground and seek a way out, as expressed in Anna Dego's artistic production and reflections, or be a guide, leading along subterranean routes in direction of open air, or the threshold's guardian, which stimulates self-

⁴² Valentina Padovan, personal communication.

⁴³ Tammuriata, tammorriata, or dance on the drum, is a family of traditional dances of Campania, related to the devotion to Mary.

⁴⁴ Interview given to the author.

⁴⁵ Chiriatti 2011, p. 135.

knowing, change and evolution, as emerged from conversations with Valentina Padovan.

Final Considerations

In the mythical-ritual complex of tarantism, itself an elaboration of different elements, which includes ambiguities and contradictions, in a land that has always been a crossroads of peoples and cultures, the taranta emerges as a powerful, multivocal and polysemic symbol, capable of surviving the rite and its animal incarnation.

In the proliferation of intellectual, commercial, artistic and material productions that see it as a protagonist, the figure of the taranta nowadays contributes to the creation of new traditions and new rites, in which it assumes new meanings, yet sometimes reverting to the old ones and constructing unprecedented temporal and spatial connections.

The taranta, as a network builder—as evidenced by Gabriella Della Monica and Luciano Cannito—is a representative image of the connections established along the webs that weave together people, ideas, emotions, objects, myths, festivals and rites.

But the spider also represents the possibility of accessing psychic and emotional content for which music and dance offer an escape, a temporary breath that allows one to give form, through the body, to an intimate part of oneself and feel part of a community, even if only for the duration of the therapeutic rite, or a show or dance workshop.

Anna Deگو and Valentina Padovan stressed also the gender issues that Ernesto De Martino (1997) analysed in his study on tarantism, express them in their performances and observe and touch them in their teaching activity.

The people who attend courses, concerts, festivals and feasts of *pizzica*—even if many of them are attracted by music and dance or by the playful and aggregative component and have no interest in tarantism—are nevertheless involved in this constellation of symbols and meanings that permeates the sensescape moulded by the taranta and the lyrics of the songs they listen and dance to. They form personal bricolages, depending on their subjectivity, their interests and the situations encountered, in which different elements are selected and come together and form a personal synthesis.

The description of a step in which the foot hits the ground as a representation of an attempt to kill the spider is the most cited example in which the taranta appears, but there are considerations that mirror elements of different interpretations of tarantism and neotarantism: the cathartic, liberating, energetic aspects of dance, the therapeutic effects of music and the image of a «magical circle» in which catharsis,

epiphanies, collective extasy and contact with the divine or one's own soul may happen, people feel part of a community and come out healed in body and soul.

If de Martino's interpretation of tarantism as a strategy for overcoming personal and collective crises and as a link to suffering, misery and gender issues represents a molar line that continues to influence intellectual and artistic production (as Anna Dego manifested), other molecular lines and lines of flight depart and develop, in a complex, changing and effervescent assemblage and web of relationships, which establishes partial connections among artists, scholars, the public, local institutions, touristic promoters, the territory and its inhabitants, memories, stories, myths, rituals, media, and may lead to (provisory) personal and collective elaborations and syntheses.

The line of flight created by Lapassade's connection of tarantism to Dionysian celebrations, a universal need for trance and conjunction with the divine, wellness, shamanism, hip hop and rave parties continues to propagate, harshens into molecular lines, as manifested in the reflections and artistic work of Valentina Padovan and in the feelings of union with one's own intimate self, the divine and dance partners in the «magical circle» of dance, and the cathartic and liberatory experience of music and dance that many people experience.

The rebirth of and cultural, artistic, and touristic productions around taranta, have produced also molar lines along the wave of the success of local music and dance and of the *Notte della Taranta* festival. In any case, taranta assemblage continues to stimulate artistic effervescence and webs of connection at the local and global level, driving the continuous creation of new molar lines, molecular lines and lines of flight, which intertwine and mutually uphold.

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