

Fabrizio Manco

Bodied Experiences of Madness - a *Tarantato*'s Perception

*I have always danced in a manner where I grope within myself for the roots of suffering by tearing at the superficial harmony.*¹

Tatsumi Hijikata

In per sona

“Mmela Paccia” – Carmela the Mad Woman, as translated from the Salentine dialect – was one of the most oneiric, uncanny and earliest memories from my childhood in the 1970’s in the Salento peninsula at the south-eastern limit of Italy. Regularly, during the hot June nights, Mmela, wearing her white night gown, would come out of her house by the main road and would obsessively and rhythmically walk barefoot up and down on the edge of the narrow pavement, then at times stopping her rhythmic stamping walks and starting to dance, while mumbling to herself a sort of hypnotic incantation. The sound of her bare stamping feet hitting the ground echoed in the empty road, whilst she continued her looped performance of a balancing act on the edge. The edge where two surfaces met, a concrete step before the asphalted road, was the boundary to her house and the limiting threshold to her state, which I later realized to be that of a woman on the edge, dancing between architectural, physical, social, economic and environmental constraints: a *tarantata*.²

The account of an event still ingrained in my memory, is one of the many stories in the collective one which formed the complex stratification of Salentine tarantism. My interest in tarantism began in the late 1980s, before it was a fashionable subject, becoming a stronger influence in my art practice when I moved to London in 1991, although I continued to return to Salento each summer. These returns were marked by changes in people’s growing awareness of their Mediterranean culture, in a sort of political shift by

¹ Viala and Masson-Sekine 1988, p. 185.

² *Tarantata* is the Salentine dialectal word for the Italian *tarantolata* (fem.) and *tarantatu/tarantato* for the Italian “tarantolato” (masc.). For practical purposes, I am here using the italianized version *tarantato* of the dialectal *tarantatu*. The mythic spider of tarantism is called *taranta*, in the Salentine dialect, which is *tarantola* in Italian (English/Latin: tarantula). For the collective plural, I will use both gender terms in the dialectal words, as well as the dialectal *tarantati* (Italian: *tarantolati*).

the new generation, which was later to become increasingly critical of globalization and reflective on questions of identity, always in a constant flux. Each time I returned, I could identify subtle changes in the social, cultural and physical landscape of Salento, and found myself re-discovering a rooted and familiar voice. I became aware of a sort of self-exoticism, the distance from my own culture, enough to live it as a form of my own “otherness.”

Tarantism, although extinct, remains in the Salentine consciousness. A younger generation has been engaging with the older, that of my parents and grandparents, inheriting a culture infolded in survival, joy and sorrow. The pre-modern has often been designated as the exotic, emblematic “purer” tradition. This is obviously a romanticization, a belief in the naive illusion of a permanence, with the resulting nostalgia of an idealization of the past, which makes the harsh contemporary reality more insufferable. The mythology of the “backward south” in Italian culture has been a strong one. Salento was called “the Italian Indies” (*Indias de por allá* in Spanish)³ by the Jesuit missionaries in 1561, when they had to reimpose the Church’s authority on what they saw as a “semi-barbarian” land, mainly because of the presence of tarantism.

In this land the body rebelled in the South’s warm climate: for the “bite” of a mythical tarantula often occurred during the hot season, the time when tobacco had to be harvested. Times of very hot weather and of hard work under the sun are times of sensual arousal, magical times of summer stillness and inner agitation, but they are also times for the religious festivals of patron saints. It is then that the tarantula at the feet of the tobacco stalks bites again, freeing the controlled body through spasmodic coarse acts of madness, taking apart the culturally imposed body with the creative and simultaneously devastating energy of nature within those bodies, deformed and sometimes debilitated by their work. That same nature in tarantism is a mystical possession, where its alterity generates a “natural” trance, pushing the body to the limits of space and environment.

³ De Martino 1961 (1994), pp. 22-23.



Melissano, Puglia, Italy 1975

Left: Fabrizio as a child near the *tiraletti*, traditional frames which were used to hang the tobacco to dry.
 Right: Fabrizio's mother is seen threading a neighbor's tobacco with a friend and her daughter.

My own longing is not merely nostalgia, but a call for that culture of the body, which is ultimately hybrid and transgenerational. It is a memory from my childhood of that illiterate subaltern community, the one along a stony unasphalted street, where families of peasants and of emigrants to the north of Italy and abroad (returning for the summer) had only one black and white television serving as a “fireplace” where, in the evening, we gathered around, sitting together on the blanketed floor. In hot summer evenings, we sat in groups outside the too hot houses to catch the breeze and to catch up with many intriguing stories of the present and past. So, later in the echo of those many story-tellings, I started the quest for my re-embodiment of the culture of Salentine tarantism, from those reliquary aerial traces. As a child, I heard stories from my neighbors, whilst treading tobacco with them. My parents also told me stories they had heard when they went to Pisticci in Basilicata, to work in tobacco fields. My grandmother whom I never met (she died in 1952) was struck by lightning, whilst sheltering from the rain under an olive tree. It was “whispered” that she might have been a *tarantata*. In a strongly patriarchal society the stories about my grandmother, a matriarchal figure within the social confines of the town of Ugento, became for me stories of a meaningful resistance.

There was a sense of shame associated with tarantism, and still, for my parents, there is a sense of bewilderment as to why I would be interested in such a phenomenon of madness,

which for them – whatever its folkloric valorization – had mostly negative connotations. Yet, this has in the past twenty years or so, given way to a more positive re-evaluation in its re-contextualization in what ended up being called neotarantism. This is a space for a discovered expressive voice, opening up culture and resisting its flattening. In its many resonances, tarantism became for me also a way of “making oneself queer” (or *tarantato*), resisting the prejudiced part of the world in which I lived. With Felicia Hughes-Freeland, I would call this “a translocal experience,” in her addressing Eugenio Barba’s⁴ experience as an immigrant which “produced the reflexivity which prompted him to explore and theorize about different traditions of embodiment and action.”⁵ This experience is a means of insight into another history of the post-traumatic body, one in crisis, and one which is inscribed in a theatre of suffering, the *mise en scène* on the limens of varied experiences of a trance state in its most radical embodiment.

Consequently, my perspective in this writing is personal and experiential and with my cultural heritage infusing my artistic practice. Tarantism, offers me a suitable ground for performance and research, precisely because it is a para-theatrical phenomenon with an historical and ethnographic specificity, and a language of emancipation in ritualistic form.

As the archaeologist of all corrupted superficial layers, those of centuries of “civilized” thought, Antonin Artaud predicated tactics of clash for individual liberation. In tarantism this emancipation was that of a dance indeed intended as a somatic act of emancipation, one towards a need to be visible and to be heard, as a weapon of intent from an induced madness. The *tarantati* danced their right of possession and poison of folly until collapse, hoping for a drastic transformation and a re-integration in the community. A “theatre of suffering” and also one of “cruelty,”⁶ where the shadowy side found its way through Artaud’s form of Gnostic struggle towards a remedial ecstatic condition, albeit momentary. For Artaud “plague” was *necessary*, and here is the identification with the illness itself, where the *tarantati* were regenerating through the lancing of the abscess of a social and a mental/physical affliction.

⁴ Originally also from Salento (Gallipoli) and immigrant to Norway and then Denmark.

⁵ Hughes-Freeland (ed.) 1998, p. 4.

⁶ The *tarantati* could have become aggressive towards members of the audience who wore colors which recalled those of their *taranta*. “Cruelty,” here has to be intended not only in its literalness, but especially as it was for Artaud, a means of performing and showing what is dark and rejected and not wished to be perceived and seen by others.

In ombra

In 1959 Ernesto De Martino, the ethnologist and student of the philosopher-historian Benedetto Croce, with his team produced – after merely three weeks’ research – a study of Salentine tarantism, which might still be considered a reference. Beyond its specificity, Salentine tarantism, and its history in that land which De Martino called *The Land of Remorse*, might be seen to have a more universal significance, for its territory “is our own planet itself, or rather that part of it which entered that zone of shadow of its bad past”.⁷ In the midst (and mist) of this corner of shadow, it is difficult to find the “essence” of Salentine tarantism. As well as an inheritance from ancient rituals like that of Bacchus or Cibel (Corybantism) and Orphic spirituality, tarantism has been categorised by De Martino as a form of exorcism (inscribed in a psychoanalytic and Christian interpretation, although exorcism is not solely a Christian practice). Yet, this approach rather marginalizes it as an archaism of the religious life of the south, and it might be viewed more centrally as part of the continuing conflict between Christianity and the Pagan world. Appropriately, De Martino’s interpretation is contradicted by Gilbert Rouget seeing it instead as an identification with the spider and as a “partaking of an alliance,” in other words, as an “adorcism.”⁸

To go beyond essentialist recounting, one needs to find specific elements for a strategy of narration. My choice is to concentrate on components of somatic rebellion and the negotiation of the environments of body and the world in tarantism. Undoubtedly, the emancipation from restriction and isolation, which is also one of the body-mind, is here pivotal, and I consider it in its intertwined cultural and physical performance aspects. Over the recent years, a lively discussion has taken place, especially within the frame of folk music. The discussion often occurs within a superficial dichotomy between the polarities of the “authentic” and its “opposite.” Of course, something can be both ancient and new, but the new has got to be aware of the implication of its synonymy. The sentimental sugaring, and to a certain degree reactionary, longing for the “authentic” and the bucolic world is that of individuals who

⁷ De Martino 1961 (1994), p. 13 (my translation). *La terra del rimorso* is the original title in Italian. Here, *rimoroso* as well as translating as “remorse,” also has, in Italian, the double meaning of “re-bite,” alluding to the recurring bite (*morso*) of the *taranta*.

⁸ Rouget 1985, p. 164. Adorcism is the opposite of exorcism. The term was coined by Luc de Heusch, “Possession and Shamanism” in *Ibid.*, *Why Marry Her?*, pp. 154-58. This is a shorter version of his original essay, “Cultes de possession et religions initiatiques de salut en Afrique,” in Vol. 2 of *Annales du Centre d’Étude des Religions*, Brussels 1962.

themselves had no direct experience of rural life,⁹ and who have romanticized it. A more difficult and a challenging enterprise, however, is to tread that inconvenient line between the nostalgic and regionalist attitude towards folk forms of traditions and the acquisition of a body-memory of an intrinsic relation to nature. The stereotype of the city/country and culture/nature dichotomy has long been a dominant one. In it, still, the country is seen as a limited sphere of backwardness and ignorance. Salentine tarantism suffered from this prejudice, in its having been regarded as culturally inferior, as a reflection of *mainly* peasant culture, illiterate and superstitious.

Stepping outside of its social and cultural meaning, tarantism, originating in a manic psychophysical state, was believed to be caused by the supposedly poisonous *lycosa tarantula*. An ancient phenomenon, developed in the middle ages, it had as a character the symbolism of the bite and the venom of the *taranta*, with the subsequent healing therapy through dance, healing music (or “iatromusic,” as it was called in the Baroque period)¹⁰ and colours, which unfolded itself as a sequence of “bite,” “poison,” “crisis,” “cure” and “healing.” The *taranta* was also many other mythical spiders with their own specific colours, tunes and moods, and this was reflected in the *tarantati* who identified with their own specific *taranta* and its specifically loaded bite. It was believed that a particular *taranta* might communicate lustful behaviour, or assume behaviours of power and glory, as well as those who asked for funereal laments. In reality the *lycosa tarantula* is innocuous, unlike the *latrodectus tredecimguttatus* (or Black Widow). In terms of its symbolism, we need to ask what the tarantula and the related animal realm of scorpions, snakes and the basilisk¹¹ represented.

This realm has also ecological and cultural connotations, because of its relationship with the earth, where the *taranta* becomes an archetype in this global “theatre of the spider,” a paradigm where the spider is a kaleidoscope of “others,” multiple manifestations of “self” and nature. In this “self” as the field of body consciousness, tarantism is a somatic language in an extra-ordinary state and performance framing, where the body is central in its relation with, but also in contrast to, its environment and boundaries. The dance becomes the tarantella – the

⁹ Mabey, 1984, p. xii.

¹⁰ However, some *tarantati* did not ask for the music therapy.

¹¹ A “kind of serpent, goldcrest [...] A fabulous reptile, whose gaze or breath is fatal, hatched by a serpent from a cock’s egg.” The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary 1993, p.188. There are also stories on the *sacàra* (or *cervone* in Italian), an actual snake, yet believed to have horns and capable of hypnotizing and emitting different sounds.

dance of the little tarantula – which in Salento is referred to as *pizzica-pizzica* with its variants, according to the precise ritual performed. This form of tarantella is the most ancient of all tarantelle,¹² and it is very specific in its having different uses: the *pizzica de core* is a dance for courting, *pizzica-pizzica* variants are also used for the *danza scherma* – a vicarious fighting dance, indirectly related to tarantism – as well as for therapy in the *pizzica-tarantata*. The *pizzica-tarantata* and the music which accompanies it, what Rouget defines as possession trance is, according to him, not therapy, but a means of contact with the possessing entity and with the society where the cult functions. More likely, it is a communicative and objectifying identification which creates the therapeutic situation.¹³

As a result, the dancing of the *pizzica-pizzica* became increasingly distinct from the generalized performance of tarantism itself, where the choreic spasmodic unfolding of the *tarantati*'s dance was uncoordinated in its appearance. It was the manifestation of the intelligence of the body in finding its attuning, a sort of musical vibrating instrument through perception. In their spontaneous actions, the *tarantati* could attempt a few recognizable *pizzica-pizzica* steps but, most of all, their performance in the de-sacralized chapel of *Santu Paulu* in Galatina,¹⁴ would be that of a chaotic and less structured movement. In this sense, the body became one which expressed itself beyond any codified form that can be normally identified as dance. If dance as therapy is crucial to tarantism, it is also because of the effect of vestibular functions for hearing and balance, together with the general sensory experience.

A simultaneous creating and undoing of the existential condition, of the illness and the cure, in tarantism were ambivalently intermingled. As in Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty, the consequence is that cathartic effect of the renewing "cruelty," which offers a relief from a psychic block. In tarantism, this occurs in the unfolding of the motions and the emotional behavior-in-motion, where corporeal collapse and exhaustion are a total abandonment of every interpretive mind, ultimately and finally freed from the self, because of the obsessiveness and weariness of this unaware exodus and return. In letting go through restriction and framing, what is allowed to emerge is the peripheral, where all elements of

¹² Over-generalized discussions on tarantella often fail to perceive the specific distinction between the Salentine tarantella (especially the *pizzica-tarantata*) and the Neapolitan tarantella. This latter did not significantly have a therapeutic intent and was formalized and folkloric. With its accompanying music of *tammurriata*, it is the one which remains the most popular of all the forms of tarantella of Southern Italy.

¹³ Rouget 1985 p.168. He states: "To attribute the effect of music on trance to its incantatory power is to interpret the evidence in a totally arbitrary way. It means introducing magic where it does not belong" (p. 239).

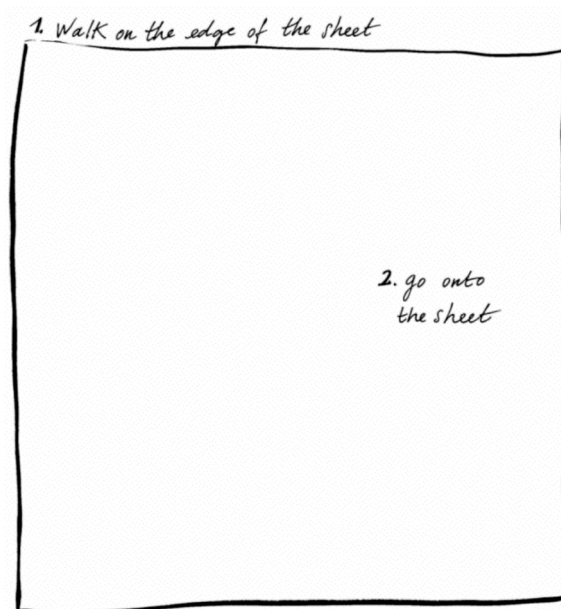
¹⁴ I will be using this dialect version instead of the Italian San Paolo (patron saint of Galatina, protecting the town's citizens from the illness of tarantism) or English St. Paul, for it is more culturally specific.

sound, utterance, lamentation, shouts, music and movement originate from an obscure source. This “obscurity” is the source which holds an enigmatic violence, where even psychological discourse and analysis find a limit and, where reason appears as utter madness. In its esoterism, this source activated an intoxicating delirium and a *sincere* dance. The well of nothingness is that obscurity, which is also located in the conditioned and the queer body, or of “making oneself strange,” a body which sometimes both reflects and rejects social control, and expresses itself spontaneously in many corporeal affects and responses to power(s). In the altered state of consciousness of the *tarantati*, untrained bodies behaved in completely unexpected ways when, for instance, older women and men were able to execute dangerous physical acts of climbing, hanging, twisting, crawling, a theatre of the un-skilled, of the un-trained, sometimes of the un-fit, socially as well as physically. It is a dance imprisoned and relieved by the guiding *taranta* in charge of “giving the thread” to one’s dance as a life, and a dance of negotiation within oneself of the *exo* and the *endo* limits of oneself in the world, and as a gendered body.

Although in tarantism there were many *tarantati*, there were far more female *tarantate*. In socio-economic and gender repression, the *tarantate* short-circuited a constituted order, within a frame of the religious, social and patriarchal power and their control. Some scholars believed that women became more exposed to tarantism than men because of the extensive cultivation of tobacco after 1791, when they were the main source of its labour. The era of tobacco marked the change from feudalism, whereby the nobility became the agrarian bourgeoisie. Women, most of all, needed to draw attention to themselves in that society, and more so because as *tarantate*, they faced the disparaging attitude of those who saw the phenomenon as a mere freak show. These women exposed and exhibited themselves to the public to assert their need for attention and sympathy, and to be accorded their dignity as individuals. A *tarantata*’s cruelty, in an Artaudian sense, was that of offering a “spectacle” of herself by, at the same time, staging a crisis, both social and individual. The behavior of the minority of men was frequently similar. Stories are told of those who rolled onto the floor, and of others who hung from trees, or dug themselves into the earth or jumped into the water. One such story tells of a man who affected parturience and was calmed down by being presented with a child, having been convinced it had been delivered by him. The *tarantati* might have appeared as hysterical, but they were in an entranced state, not only produced by individual psychology, but by a ritual which was also, and especially, culturally programmed. Hence, the spider was not the cause of the crisis. Still, the crisis was real, undergone in an extreme state of trauma, a general unsettling which worked on the disrupting of automatic

behavioural patterns of thought and movement, thereby recuperating a wholeness. After experiencing a vigil, an initial dissociation of consciousness is to be intended as constructive and where, paradoxically, consciousness becomes transparent. A clear consciousness in a trance was a channel of detachment and a way of entering an intermediated state, by becoming the voice of a diversity. The “vocal movement” is itself also an event that negotiates through action and instinct, and is linked to the gestural.

As in other cultures, this was a result of a dominant religious dogma, which collided, then syncretically mixed with native cultures, in a sort of survival of the animistic through the Pagan, and the Pagan through the Catholic. The components of tarantism survived, even if integrated in the cult of *Santu Paulu*, as a cult of possession. A contradictory cultural substrate in the co-existence of contrary parts and cults is fundamental to a sense of identity which is constituted by the very co-existence and dissonance of fragments. Within this syncretism, the therapeutic ritual, from its most archaic roots in nature rites, was itself a visually and acoustically scenographic performance, a combination of movements contained by visual, musical and spatial frames. In the domestic therapy, one evident frame was a bed sheet on the floor, delimiting a ritual perimeter.



The tarantati's sheet on the floor, drawing, Fabrizio Manco 2011

Aaaaaahi mamma!

On the sheet – which often was covered with vegetation, a sword, a mirror, red, yellow and green ribbons (*zacareddhe*) and images of *Santu Paulu* – one started crawling on the back, sometimes on all fours, the head shaking and beating the *pizzica tarantata*'s rhythm, before standing up vertical and starting to go around that ritual perimeter. The choreic turn ended with exhaustion or when *Santu Paulu* had granted his grace. The dance also moved towards an abrupt end, together with its percussive music, to a still point – a sudden rupture – although still vibrating in an inner moving stillness. Stillness and motion, finally resolving the tension with each other, calling out to each other, an intrinsic correlation, where the place of this correlation is the body; the compulsive body of the *tarantati*, longing to be reanimated. Dancing their returns for twenty to sixty years, until the “bursting” of the *taranta*, the *tarantati*'s somatic combustibility burned itself in the dance. The type of domestic dance differed according to the dancer. Some actions took place only on the floor, others by turning, others by climbing on walls, or hanging and swinging from ropes (which in ancient tarantism functioned as a trance inducer).

The choreic cycle was then repeated in the *Santu Paulu*'s chapel, at the end of June, in occasion of the patron saint's festivity in Galatina, connecting this with the rhythms of nature and harvest. It is, of course, the same cyclical rhythm which gave rise to the summer symptoms of the *tarantati*. Each June, or generally during the summer, the remembering and returning of the symptoms of the bite, implied a constant switch of the time of suffering and remembrance. Therefore the first bite was already a re-bite.¹⁵

In the chapel, the phase on the floor took place also in front of the niche where the statue of the saint was kept, behind a metal grate to protect it from the aggressive beating of the *tarantati* beseeching for the saint's grace. The standing up phase was often performed in front of the statue, where there was more collapsing on the floor as well as repeated fainting, as if this was a “performance,” and a previous fainting in the domestic ritual had been a “rehearsal.”¹⁶ This fainting, suggests a theatrical dimension, and a theatre also facilitated by the specific architectural space. At the same time, this theatrical spatial aspect was enhanced by the *tarantato/a* running around the altar, or standing or jumping perilously on the baroque corbels. Also by often wearing a white dress, the *tarantata* became a “bride of *Santu Paulu*,” in the attempt to mystically marry the saint's healing power and to touch the painting of the

¹⁵ De Martino 1961 (1994), p. 178.

¹⁶ This repetition of an act could be seen as fictional but, instead, shows a *living through* the body, a knowledge of emotions, and through that body, an ability to repeat them.

saint at the centre of the chapel. Sometimes, the performative aspect was imbued in a small surrounding circle of the assisting family, forming a ritualistic circular gathering around the *taratato/a* in the contriving small space of the chapel. This transgressive, sometimes sexual behaviour of disorder, far from the actual control of the authoritative image of St. Paul, aimed against what was a parasitical and culturally authoritarian attitude towards the body and, taken out of the theological frame, enables us to see it more broadly. Concluding the chapel's ritual, the *tarantati* drank the water from the miraculous well behind the chapel, into which snakes and scorpions were thought to be thrown, and the *tarantati* would drink from it and vomit.

Visceral polymorphic but also polyphonic moods were achieved in the state of possession, of creating an empty space within, in order to be danced by the spider's dance. The ancient echoes of nature's chthonic divinities became alive in their frenetic dances, in the multiplicity of voices within the trance state, where an antagonism was established, an imposing of one's choreic movements onto the imaginary spider's, obliging one to dance beyond one's will and capacities. Running after the *taranta*, the *tarantati*'s dance, as possessed victims and as heroes who submit to the force by dancing with it, was performed in the tension and oscillation between becoming the spider and separating from it. Thus, it transcended any dichotomy, within a historically formed consciousness. Yet, the contemporary attitude is not that different from the primordial, when faced with real suffering, or when it feels itself faced with another agent over which it has no control, risking not being oneself, and with no individual choice, in what De Martino (in his analysis of Lucanian magic rites) calls the experience of *to be-acted-upon*.¹⁷ In this sense, I would like to employ a shamanistic interpretation in which "to know is to personify, to take on the point of view of that which must be known."¹⁸ In dealing with the animistic relation between humans and nonhumans, shamanism is a way of going through ontological limits, and the body in tarantism is a result of a renovating becoming the spider, rather than by mimesis. Here, knowing means becoming. The transformation of the tarantula in an anthropomorphic form was in order for a dance-fight to be established, where the conflict and negotiation were also a turning point. The *taranta* as a metaphor became a physical metamorphosis. The whole concept of what it meant to be human was therefore challenged in the "animal" as "natural," where natural was pantheistically understood as "super-natural," a returning restless spirit, from this nature into the automotive processes of daily life.

¹⁷ De Martino 1959, p. 98 (my translation).

¹⁸ De Castro 2004, p. 468.



Fabrizio Manco, [STATES OF]TRANCEformation, performance research, Chisenhale Dance Space, London 2005. Photo: Patrick Curry

Tarantula auris

I believe that the *tarantato/a*'s was most importantly what I call an “ear body”: a body surprisingly renewed by being danced by sound, floored by the difficulty of having an erect position, establishing a friendship with gravity and cornered by the *taranta*'s de-stabilizing power. The power of sonic vibrations through the framework of the rhythmic percussive sounds, a transduction of sound through the *tarantati*, is here intended as channeled perception, as embodied hearing and listening perceived across the “body-membrane.” The ear becomes body and the body becomes ear.

A double interpretation of spatial experience of the body can be conceived, space as “object” and space as metaphor. Yet here, space is first of all a meeting of physical-sensorial experience, between a “state of mind” and a “mind” filtered by a complex network of cognitive processes, which have no legal or rational order. Before even becoming a question of making sound “visible” through the entranced body of a *tarantoto/a*, what I want to make

tangible is not sound, but tarantism's call for our somatic-auditory attuning, yet not as a privileging of one sense over the others, but as a democratizing relationship through auditory aspects of embodiment. In incorporating the dancing tarantula the *tarantati* tuned themselves to the music, becoming a musical instrument, vibrating in accordance and in parallel with the sound vibrations of the strings and the tamburello's rhythms.

The research conducted by Giorgio Baglivi and the Jesuit Athanasius Kircher in the 17th and 18th centuries has been influential in the study of the phenomenon. Most importantly, within the context of Cartesian philosophy and a mechanistic understanding of acoustic transmission through bodies, we might mention Immanuel Swedenborg, who was aware of Baglivi's ideas, iatromechanics and his research in Puglia. He described sound waves flowing with the speed of lightning and augmenting in various degrees in the body, through the nerves, bones and membranes with his concept of *tremulations*. A tremulation is the subtlest vibrations in the body so as to recover a lost balance and a factotum to nature, hearing and the living body in an effort to recover its balance is

like a ball thrown against the floor which makes smaller and smaller rebounding, until finally it returns out of the balance of motion into an equilibrium which is in a state of rest (...) a single tremulation may in a moment spread over entire systems, and thus over that whole part or body which is in a state of tension.¹⁹

Thus, physical tension is essential for the event of tremulation, and the body needs to be free from obstructions to enable its reception. A tension is a musical trembling chord, or a tight tamburello's skin resembling the ear-drum in order to enable the rhythmic quivering alleviation of the *tarantati*. This is, therefore, a somatic tension, a vital tension which is in relation to release and, therefore, is here intended positively.

The *tarantato* body of one and many tremulations and ears is the one moving from tension, and from an initial mimesis to becoming, making an identification with the *taranta*. The becoming of an animal or another insect's body, a cricket's ears just below the knees, or another insect with abdominal ears, created further adherence to surfaces, when any event of vibration, moved progressively through the body to unrest a *tarantato/a*. The same happens with spiders, responding and "dancing" to the subtlest vibration in the air, conducted through vegetation and surfaces. The *tarantati* were a tremor amongst tremulations, organically unfolding across the trembling time and space that the percussive sound created, the being-

¹⁹ Swedenborg 1719.

time and an inaugural healing event of audition. In this event, rhythm made the confines of the body fluctuate within the body, limitless within its confines. This was a manifold phenomenological relationship between the listening body and the body beyond cochlear hearing. The performance of the healing process through sounds and lamentation needed a crisis, where the *tarantati* were the receivers and creators of distance, where subsequently the subject became its problematizing. Their listening body's adhering to the horizontal stage of their life unsettled and channeled their condition, was urgently attentive in gleaning any subtle vibration, and affecting the most infinitesimal tremulations. This adherence to the horizontal guides us to a non-discriminating attitude of an insular state of being, to those crawling on the earth, where there exists no separation, where abjection can only be understood in relationship with, but not in opposition to, "purity." It is a problematical term, but here "pure" is intended as something even more encrusted and anamorphic. Classical thinking, with its dichotomous approach, has created a distance that we need to occupy.

The sacred power of dance as rhythm, vital force and *Thanatos*, is heightened by the role of aggressiveness in ancient dances within funerary ceremonies, distantly echoing the *Danse Macabre* of medieval Europe. Indeed, it has been suggested that one form of tarantism originated from the choreomania of dancing mass hysteria in graveyards.²⁰ A tight relationship between death and trance is intended as a symbolic experience of death, as the arachnophobia was also the fear of dying with the poison. The poisoned nerves of the *tarantati* in their restlessness, agitated and resuscitated the innermost part, where *Thanatos* danced with life. The *tarantati* danced the swinging, jumping and stamping of the *pizzica-tarantata* for survival, in the symbolic attempt in squashing the *taranta* with their foot. This swinging between life and death can be seen, paradoxically, as an erasure of that very dualism which is implied in Gnosticism and its Christian heritage. The struggle between good and evil was transcended in the animistic milieu ingrained in tarantism. During the antagonistic process of the *pizzica-tarantata* – a form most rooted in the "rawness" of the original musico-choreutic therapy – the struggle was that of keeping the dance's oscillation between life and death. The same swinging and dancing relationship is within tarantism's cyclical recurring of symptoms, all leading towards the desperate call for the cure and returning to balance. I wilfully complicate a dichotomy of depth and surface, conscious and subconscious, external and internal, in the *tarantati*'s struggle to move towards the most important element of rhythm

²⁰ Gloyne 1950, p. 36.

and rupture, where all polarities were radically and continuously realized and annulled at the same time.

In struggling to connect to the phenomenological reality of being-in-the-world, the victim of the *taranta*'s bite was constantly trying corporally to remember that reality. The habitual, culturally and at the same time physiologically conditioned trance of the *tarantati*, had to find specific actions in response to habits, even attuning along a *via negativa*. In what appears abject behaviour, one *tarantato* is described as slowly licking the floor itself,²¹ a possible way of digesting the substrate, through literally incorporating it in an animal way. The very moment of becoming a crawling animal obviates the dichotomising process of thought and its related objectification of the animal or the world. Here is a phenomenon which sees the human as animal body in relation to hearing the world, through the body. Amongst animals, of course, the somatic listening lesson has always been present, and tarantism, in connecting with these roots, would appear to have similarities with Tatsumi Hijikata's *butoh*.



Fabrizio Manco, *Blue Cicada*, performance, Fellingine, Puglia, Italy 1999. Photo: Fausta Muci

*Terragumo*²²

²¹ di Lecce 1994, p.132.

²² I made this hybrid word combining the Italian word *terra* (earth) and the Japanese *kumo* (*gumo*, when placed next to another word) to suggest a potential metamorphosis and relationship with the earth. It mirrors the existential milieu of *butoh* and tarantism. The Shinto legend of *tsuchigumo* (earth spider) was influential in Kagura, Noh and Kabuki. In Kabuki the actor, in order to simulate the throwing of spider threads, throws lines of sticky paper from a roller attached on his wrist. *Tsuchigumo* was also an agent of the “spider people,” at the margins of society, a resistance against dominant controlling power.

It may appear arbitrary to make a comparison between tarantism and butoh, but it is perhaps possible to insert tarantism into a field of unexpected associations. When I refer to butoh, I mainly mean the “historical” one of Tatsumi Hijikata, and his *Ankoku Butoh* (Dance of Utter Darkness). Both *Ankoku Butoh* and tarantism are far from each other in history and geography, yet have similarities in their specificity as cultures and of the body in crisis and rebellion as well as of ritual, transformation and becoming. Artaud is the connective thread between tarantism and *Ankoku Butoh* (and at its root), where the cathartic cruelty of his theatre resonated in Hijikata’s “psychedelic” and pre-modern performances.

Like tarantism, butoh presented a negative view of their own societies. Just as the mythology of the “backward south” was strong in Italian culture, so that of the backward and “inhospitable north” was strong in the Japanese. Hijikata was born in the northeast of Japan, the dark and cold Tohoku, in the prefecture of Akita. It was Japan’s poorest region, with a culture quite different and alien from the rest of Japan and a place of ghosts and barbarians, where to be civilized meant pushing away “these barbarians.” Unlike in Salento, where the weather conditions functioned as a small input of pre-liberation, in Tohoku it was the contriving effect of cold, working in the rice fields immersed in water, which conditioned and deformed the body. Yet both locations share the marginalization and exploitation of power and the effects of nature on the body.

Like tarantism, butoh was disparaged in the past and was looked upon with shame and as something to avoid talking about. Because it went outside of Japan, to be experienced by the world, it was considered to have harmed the image of the Japanese nation, although for some time, it has been accepted as a sort of re-import. Though it was an avant-garde form, butoh arose from Hijikata’s look at pre-modern traditions and it bears the imprint of medieval Japanese trance rituals and peasant ceremonies, with their re-living through that “dance of darkness” and his work of the group *Hakuto-bo*²³ and later with the *Tohoku Kabuki* project. Here, the word kabuki is an appropriate description, as the root lies in that plebeian performance of marginalized people in the form of debauchery.²⁴ In Hijikata’s work, the body found a link with nature, also in a broader sense, of a post-modern world, in a sort of heretical ceremony of restless spirits.

²³ Hijikata formed this troupe together with Yoko Ashikawa, his pupil. Here he concentrated only in directing and choreographing. It is in this occasion that he set his personal “surrealist” language of *butoh-fu*.

²⁴ Kabuki has its origin in all-woman troupes, where also male and female prostitution was part of it “but due to problems of public morals, the Tokugawa Shogunate banned women from the stage in 1629.” Toita & Yoshida 1986, p.110.

*Kamaitachi*²⁵ is the title of a photographic book of Eiko Hosoe in collaboration with Hijikata, a poetical personal chronicle, mixed with both love and hate for the countryside. *Kamaitachi* is also part of the Japanese folklore. It literally means “sickle of a weasel,” a small invisible animal which attacks people in the rice fields in late spring. A person who is attacked by a *Kamaitachi* finds any part of the body sliced as if it were cut by a very sharp knife, but without any blood. This disaggregated body is also the one in Hijikata’s *butoh*. Out of a negative experience in his childhood and early adolescence, Hosoe tells about his experience in the countryside, after being forced to move out of Tokyo with his parents in 1944. The American bombing had reduced the metropolitan population to starvation. Dance in Japan also served as a call for the spirits *tama* (present in man as well as in nature and objects) that gave vitality. The spiritual power of dance and rhythm was as strong in the substrate of Japanese culture, which fed into *butoh*, as it was similar to that which fed into tarantism. In other events of rural origin in Japan, this could be observed as a *tamafuri*, an entrancing action of shaking, in order to activate the spirits and embody them.

In the Japanese mythological substrate of *Ankoku Butoh* and the Japanese memory in general, dance is at the origin, restoring light to the world. Here the sun goddess Amaterasu withdraws into the celestial grotto and she reappears to the world thanks to a sexual dance by another goddess who performed for her a dance of stamping feet. The particle *toh* in *bu-toh* alludes to this rhythm generating movement of stamping feet. This also recalls the oldest and most basic elements of cadence, obsessive repetition in a frenetic crescendo of drumming, together with that subtle hint and accentuation in the beginning of the choreic performance of the *tarantati*. In fact, they were believed to have been bitten most of all on the heels – in general in the lower limb area – and it was from here that the dance started. This, appropriately, corresponds with the language of the intrinsic chthonic root of both tarantism and *Ankoku Butoh*: there were beating feet, beating sounds, beating bodies which then collapsed onto the floor, beating hands on the vibrating skin of the tamburello, affecting the pluri-rhythmic empty body which was carried-over. Yet, there existed an important asymmetry, an incongruity between the *tarantati*’s agitated “noise” and the outer rhythmic sounds, which triggered the syncopated cadenced movements. It is this incongruity which eventually found its organization in a sort of rhythmical sequence. For instance, in the choreutic therapy, the

²⁵ In September 1965, Eiko Hosoe and Hijikata visited Tashiro, a simple farm village in the Akita prefecture. Tashiro was also the childhood home of Hijikata; he returned there with Hosoe after 20 years.

rhythms of the body were manifested through the most infinitesimal tremors in an oscillation between response to the percussive rhythm of the tamburello and the more disordered jerky spasms. The sonic aspect in tarantism and the proprioceptive one during a butoh improvisation, can allow rhythm to be articulated to any degree of temporality and forms, in many possible subtle or extrinsic ways, externalized in infinitesimally small or more visible impulses. Movement and response to sonic inputs happen in almost tight synchronicity. No matter how immediate and accurate a movement can be in reacting to sonic cues, it requires entrancing, with the minimum cognitive mediation; it is always an effort to find a direction, an adherence, or a locus. In butoh, rhythmicity²⁶ and fluctuation exist in a more *Samadhi*-like form.²⁷

Toshiharu Kasai, in his psychosomatic explorations of butoh, says that the dancer after a performance feels a sense of calmness, without clearly understanding the reason why; it is a reconnecting with the environment after a sort of quest intended in non-schizoid terms. The body in Hijikata was objectified in an empty *sôma*, one which becomes debilitated in thinking, in a restlessness of the dead. That same restlessness also agitated the “poisoned” ones, the blood of the *tarantati* revived in their real and metaphoric illness, where death danced with struggle. In Hijikata’s dance, this became a complete denial of the controlled body in favour of *nikutai*, a focussed perceptive, anarchic and yet mindful body, one which was an attack on the disciplined urban body²⁸. Therefore, Hijikata’s was a pre-war and pre-disciplinary rural body. As with butoh, tarantism is an *un-dance*, as Kasai calls it.²⁹ This un-dance is the departure in tarantism from what nowadays has become formalized as fashionable *pizzica*, instead of the more unruly performances and spirit of ancient tarantism.

Ending

Today, tarantism’s realm of madness and its dancing culture is a rich and profound inheritance from the past, partly surviving in its documentation. In our memory and cultural inheritance, Salentine tarantism has a vitality, which pushed the marginalized to be performers of their own life and tribulation. It left in popular memory a heritage

²⁶ During my training with Akiko Motofuji (Hijikata’s widow, now herself deceased), she often used beating a drum, as also Hijikata used to do in his classes.

²⁷ I believe that the *tarantati* moved continuously from an ecstatic (ergotropic) to a relaxation (trophotropic) trance state. For details on ergotropic and trophotropic arousals, see Fischer 1971, pp. 897-904.

²⁸ I argue that this body and that of tarantism was also an incorporation of a *contingent* environmental, cultural, social and physical site. Here, I have coined the term *site-contingent*.

²⁹ Kasai 2000, p.336.

which spoke more than words could do, regarding the infinite ways in which a body and performance can operate within a specific and trans-cultural space, whether historical, economic, political or physical. The living archive of tarantism, through the many generations, is still an intense stimulation. It manifests a range of distinctive ideas and practices, dis-sonant within its specific somatic and transgressive character. Still weaving its real-imaginary textile, tarantism in new-ancient forms and transforming manifestations becomes a collective world of social and environmental interrelations, by passing on the experiencing of our animal wisdom through the physical earth.

The folly of tarantism is also a wisdom in its most somatic sense. Here, pain and suffering unfold themselves as an event in the most infinitesimal creases and folds of bodied minds, creating uncomfortable or eased movements. It is the dance of a spirit with an unhinging dynamic vigour in the existential strain against surveillance, the liminality of dancing between madness and grace, between mortification and bliss. Fluctuating in the delirious space of their dis-possessed bodies, I invite again the *tarantati*, as myself, to the audition's floor. Detailed sensations and precise perceptions prevailed through chaos: dancing is the same as remembering, the beginning of a feverish rhythm which was already a final and sudden ending.

Literature

- Batson, Glenna, "Proprioception," *The Journal of Dance Medicine & Science* 4 (2008), pp. 1-4.
- Becker, Judith, *Deep Listeners: Music, Emotion, and Trancing*, Bloomington 2004.
- Benedict, Ruth, *Il crisantemo e la spada* (The Chrysanthemum and the Sword) Milan 1991.
- Blacking, John (ed.), *The Anthropology of the Body*, London 1977.
- Chiriatti, Luigi & Nocera, Maurizio, *Immagini del tarantismo, Galatina: il luogo del culto*, (Images of Tarantism, Galatina: the Place of the Cult) Lecce 2002
- De Castro Viveiros, Eduardo, "Exchanging Perspectives: The Transformation of Objects into Subjects in Amerindian Cosmologies," *Common Knowledge* 10:3 (2004), Symposium: Talking Peace with Gods, Part 1, pp. 463-84.
- De Martino, Ernesto, *La Terra del Rimorso, Contributo a una storia religiosa del Sud* (The Land of Remorse, Contribute to a Religious History of the South), Milan (1961) 1994.
- De Martino, Ernesto, *Sud e magia* (South and Magic), Milan (1959) 2001.
- Fischer, Roland, "A Cartography of the Ecstatic and Meditative States" *Science* 174:4012 (1971), pp. 897-904.
- Freeland-Hughes, Felicia (ed.), *Ritual, Performance, Media*, London 1998.

- Gloyne, F. Howard, "Tarantism. Mass Hysterical Reaction to Spider Bite in the Middle Ages," *The American Imago, A Psychoanalytical Journal for the Arts and Sciences* 7:1 (1950), pp. 29-42.
- Goodal, Jane, *Artaud and the Gnostic Drama*, Oxford 1994.
- Heusch, Luc de, *Why Marry Her? Society and Symbolic Structures*, Cambridge 1981.
- Hosoe, Eikoh, *Kamaitachi*, New York 2006.
- Hughes-Freeland, Felicia, "Introduction," in *Ibid.*(ed.), *Ritual, Performance, Media*, London 1998, pp. 1-28.
- Kasai, Toshiharu: "A Note on Butoh Body," *Memoir of Hokkaido Institute of Technology* 28 (2000) pp. 353-360.
- Klein, Susan Blakeley, *Ankoku Butoh: The Premodern and Postmodern Influences on the Dance of Utter Darkness*, Ithaca, NY 1988.
- Kurihara, Nanako, *The Most Remote Thing In the Universe: Critical Analysis of Hijikata Tatsumi's Butoh*, New York, 1997.
- Lapassade, Georges, *Intervista sul tarantismo* (Interview on Tarantism) Maglie 1994.
- Lecce, Giorgio di, *La danza della piccola taranta, cronache a Galatina 1908-1993*, (The Dance Of The Little Taranta, Chronicles in Galatina 1908-1993), Rome 1994.
- Massumi, Brian, *Parables of the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*, Durham, NC & London 2002.
- Nacci, Anna (ed.), *Tarantismo e Neotarantismo, musica, danza, transe* (Tarantism and Neotarantism, Music, Dance, Trance), Nardò 2001.
- Mabey, Richard, "Introduction: Entitled to a View?" in *Ibid.*(ed.), *Second Nature*, London 1984, pp. ix-xix.
- Rouget, Gilbert, *Music and Trance: A Theory of the Relations between Music and Possession*, Chicago & London 1985.
- Swedenborg, Immanuel, "On mechanical Tremulation, Vibration in the Body" (1719), <http://www.soc.hawaii.edu/leonj/499s99/cachola/borg/sborg.html>. (Accessed on 15 March 2003), no pagination.
- Toita, Yasuji & Yoshida, Chiaki, *Kabuki*, Osaka 1986.
- Viala, Jean and Masson-Sekine, Nourit, *Butoh, Shades of Darkness*, Tokyo 1988.