



This monograph presents the results of a three-year research project combining ethnographic fieldwork with theoretical and methodological inquiry. It examines consciousness from an anthropological perspective through the study of contemplative practices broadly understood, including but not limited to different forms of modern Buddhist meditation and mindfulness. To address experiences of extreme intimacy, the author critically reassesses ethnographic methodology and proposes a visual-elicitation approach based on multi-layered drawings produced alongside participants' contemplative paths. The study also includes an autoethnographic dimension and advances reflections on consciousness, qualitative method, and the agency of images in intersubjective and introspective relations.

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Federico Divino

ANTHROPOLOGY OF CONSCIOUSNESS THROUGH CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICE



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**ANTHROPOLOGY OF CONSCIOUSNESS
THROUGH CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICE
Meditative Experience and Subjectivity**



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Writing style disclaimer

In this work, the pronouns “they/them” are used in a neutral sense when referring to a singular category that includes individuals of all genders (Clarke, 2019).

For stylistic reasons, the text will include sections of ethnographic transcriptions from the subjects who participated in this study. This choice to allow the subjects to speak for themselves, without narrating or paraphrasing their content, has been made to respect their narratives as much as possible, which I aimed to emphasize in this study.

For another aspect of my stylistic choice, I tend to use italics not only to emphasize words or phrases but also to highlight parts of words that I do not wish to break apart. For example, in the word ‘*something*’, if I want emphasize the component ‘*thing*’. Additionally, italics are used to indicate terms in languages other than English.

*“The Imagination is not a State:
it is the Human Existence itself”*

(Blake, 1907, p. 51, v. 32)

Table of contents

1. Introduction: the anthropological ‘field’ of Consciousness	1
1.1 From ‘Magic’ to ‘Consciousness’	10
1.2 Doing Anthropology with images	14
1.3 From Ethnography to Maṇḍala-elicitation	18
1.4 Ethnographic subjects: a brief background	22
1.5 A note on autoethnography	29
2. Elicitation and the Inquiry on Consciousness	37
2.1 The contemplative Elicitation	39
2.2 The Uncanny	41
2.3 The World and the Presence	51
2.4 Coniunctio Oppositorum	55
2.5 The Subject of Consciousness	65
2.6 The Mindful Path	76
2.7 First Ethnographic Considerations	82
3. Defining the Ethnographic Maṇḍala	89
3.1 The perspective of Analytical Psychology	92
3.2 The ‘oriental’ influence on Jung	94
3.3 Auto-analysis and auto-ethnography	97
3.4 Forms and structures in the Maṇḍalas	100
3.5 Kellog’s theory: a brief overview	102
3.6 New possible interpretations	105
4. The ‘Signs’ of Maṇḍalas	111
4.1 Experiences of Signs and Symbols	115
4.2 The faux image: meditating on illusions?	119
4.3 Landscapes in the Maṇḍala-Elicitation	122
4.4 Scenic Fiction: Elicitation of a Meditation on the Body	126

4.5 Living Matter, conscious images	138
4.6 Consciousness and its Relationship with the Image	144
4.7 An Anthropology of Consciousness	152
5. Meditation, Dreams, Consciousness	157
5.1 The Dream and the Image	159
5.2 Dreams in Anthropology	164
5.3 Dreaming Maṇḍalas	172
5.4 Phantasy, Consciousness, living images	179
5.5 Experience and sedimentation	187
5.6 Shape and transformation	201
6. Ontology of the Image	207
6.1 On the Dialogue between Anthropology and Psychoanalysis	209
6.2 The Access Way to the Image	216
6.3 For an Anthropology of Consciousness and Identity	227
6.4 A 'Buddhist' Solution for the Ontological Problem	238
6.5 Visual theory and the problem of perceived reality	253
6.6 The New Ways of the Image	263
List of figures	271
References	273

1. Introduction: the anthropological ‘field’ of Consciousness

This work is the result of a multi-year ethnographic research project focused on the theme of consciousness through the investigation of contemplative practices. While grounded in ethnographic methodology, this research interprets the concept of anthropology broadly, considering it as encompassing the human being (ἄνθρωπος) in its depth (Morris, 2014). Consequently, the primary issue concerns establishing a form of ethnographic field that is not necessarily localized in a specific geographical area but is constituted from time to time in the relationship between the ethnographer and the subjects participating in the investigation. This form of field among interacting consciousnesses is not a novelty in anthropological research. However, the contribution this research aims to make to human studies does not lie in the investigation of a specific community of meditators—such as those at the intersection of traditions and cultures, like modern Western practitioners inspired by Indian spirituality or those within traditions that have evolved over centuries yet still exist in the Indian world. Instead, contemplative practice is analyzed here as a method of inquiry through which diverse subjectivities can acquire different awareness about their own world experience and their very experience of being.

Additionally, it should be noted that this research transformed as data collection progressed, and the very purpose assumed different and unforeseen forms, such as a greater focus on my personal experience with these practices and my subjectivity, which was examined, reassessed, and even challenged by this ethnographic journey. Through this constant re-evaluation, I was able to reflect more deeply on the nature of this non-localized ethnographic field, which is situated from time to time in the relationship between interacting consciousnesses, exchanging experiences and expanding the scope of their conceptions of themselves and the world (Burawoy, 2003).

Before moving on to the theoretical premises and the background constituting the foundations of this research, I would like to spend a few words on the multidisciplinary nature of the discussions conducted in the theoretical dissertation concerning the addressed themes. This research adopts a multidisciplinary perspective regarding the sciences and contributions that have enabled the construction of my discourse. By multidisciplinary, I specifically mean the possibility of engaging in a dialogue situated at the boundary space between distinct disciplines, which have provided insights into a common theme. Therefore, this is not only an interdisciplinary work but deliberately multidisciplinary, as my aim was not to partially take what was useful from different disciplines but to adopt, where possible, multiple methodological perspectives in a comparative and parallel form to find a non-reductive but complementary synthesis of all these complex and varied viewpoints.

The theme of multidisciplinary is, in my view, fundamental in strict anthropological research and even more so in one that has as its core theme a practice that requires multiple levels of understanding to be fully comprehended (Gooberman-Hill, 2006). These include the historical-religious context related to Buddhism, the philosophical background that has considered meditation, as well as the ethnological context necessary to account for the contemporary environment in which certain practices are adopted. Finally, it must also be ethno-psychological, as the contemplative experience necessitates understanding different epistemologies from our own (Alvargonzález, 2011), specifically those related to Buddhist psychology (Johansson, 1979), which can describe contemplative practice from a Buddhist perspective (Orellana, 2019). This perspective must be compared with psychological and phenomenological issues from the so-called Western episteme for comparative reasons but also to obtain a comprehensive and as complete as possible view of a complex issue like this.

Nevertheless, none of these issues will be the specific focus of this investigation. I have refrained from an ethnographic research focused on practitioner communities. As mentioned, the core of my interest has progressively centered on that relational space established in social interactions and dialogues between subjectivities, including the documentary dialogue of a subjectivity with itself, as I will explain when discussing the ethnographic methodology specifically implemented to study one of the possible ways to practice contemplation, namely elicitation through the production of a multi-phase visual content (stratification).

Of ethnographic intersubjectivity, we are bound to ask: is it given, as an existential condition, or is it achieved, as a communicative result? The question is unanswerable, since it is wrapped up in the very move by which the ethnographizing of encounters converts end results into initial conditions. [...] To practice participant observation, then, is to join in correspondence with those with whom we learn or among whom we study, in a movement that goes forward rather than back in time. Herein lies the educational purpose, dynamic, and potential of anthropology.¹

This is thus the central theme of my investigation, which will be supplemented by a series of contents aimed at promoting its understanding in a multidisciplinary key.

The trajectory leading to my desire to delve into this aspect begins with my ethnographic work on meditation, initially focused on the study of clinical and therapeutic applications of Buddhist contemplative practice. Subsequently, it has evolved towards the examination of altered or modified states of consciousness that arise during these exercises, thereby raising fundamental questions concerning identity and the very nature of subjectivity, as well as the relationship between

¹ Cf. Ingold, 2014, pp. 389-390.

individuals. The manner in which meditation challenges these aspects tends to influence anthropological perspectives themselves impelling us to reconsider also the very anthropological theory.

During the years in which I developed the themes presented here, I sought out the narrative, the unveiling of intimacy, the unknown to oneself. I directed ethnography towards the exploration of what can most intimately be called 'experience', even though this has entailed questioning the conception of a stable identity, both for the participants and for myself as a researcher. The subjectivity I have emphasized is devoid of a centered and stable 'self', yet it does not prompt us to divert attention from what the person, as the vantage point from which the world is perceived and the ultimate experiencer of what they witness, reveals to us about a 'subjectivity' that is alive, that encompasses everything of interest in the human being. The investigation of contemplative practice, in bringing to light this subject as expression, testimony, and experience, even while disrupting it by stripping away the notion of an autonomous and self-sufficient 'I', emerges not merely as a topic of anthropological interest, but as a potential revitalizer of ethnographic methodology, offering a model for the analysis of subjective experiences that is more relevant than ever.

Consciousness and identity are two intricately connected themes, yet they are not the same. It is necessary to address them separately. In Buddhism, which is based on contemplative practice, identity is an arbitrary and impermanent construct that individuals ascribe to themselves and that is recognized by what we might now call socio-cultural factors. In this, there is a great affinity with anthropological ideas, but the two are not strictly interchangeable, especially in terms of their consequences. Consciousness must be distinguished from awareness or mental presence (*sati*), as the latter is an innate capacity in sentient beings, allowing them to exist in the world as subjects capable of experiencing reality and, to some extent, shaping it. Consciousness, which is the true heart of the issue, is a complex cognitive mechanism based on dividing the world into recognizable entities through the attribution of identities. These identities are then organized in the world. We will delve into these issues in greater detail, as they manifest vividly to the ethnographer encountering meditation on their path. However, meditation also presents another problem, which is the crisis of anguish and transcendence experienced by some individuals when they inevitably approach the dissipation of their identities. This, in some ways, is a separate problem and has received separate treatment but calls back to the fundamental idea from which we cannot exempt ourselves: consciousness 'constructs' the world through divisions and attributions of arbitrarily designated identities. Human beings, however, far from being a nameless entity, are conscious beings. Still, this consciousness is obscured by the identity that stands before it, acting as an organizing force in events and even in one's own beliefs. We recognize ourselves in our identity rather than in our awareness.

Still, if identity—which is precisely a separative force—is not something given absolutely but is rather an anthropological mechanism, it is from anthropology that we must begin to decrypt its complexities.

Of all the anthropological literature that has addressed these issues, the works of Ernesto de Martino constitutes a fundamental starting point. In addition to the well-known issue of the conventional nature of identities, which he recognized clearly long before others, de Martino's theory excels in recognizing how these identities can enter into 'crisis' when their sense of belonging to the world—that consciousness 'identities' have collectively constructed and continue to reiterate—is undermined. In fact, the sense of anguish that de Martino points out in the condition of presence crisis is paradoxically caused by the loss of distinction between subject and object (de Martino, 2021, p. 31), which is actually the very cause of nihilistic isolation. This should not surprise us: if this loss is synonymous with the breakdown of a condition of known security, then one is no longer present in history, as presence "is losing the power to be its meaning and norm; anxiety can be interpreted as anxiety about history, or rather as anxiety about not being able to exist in human history. Therefore, when it is said that anxiety is never about something, but about nothing, the proposition is acceptable" (pp. 31-2).

We can find this same *modus operandi* in how consciousness (*viññāṇa*) functions for Buddhists, i.e., through the assignment of names and forms. The name (*nāma*) is part of the norm; the name represents the designation of an identity associated with a specific form (*rūpa*). The norm is nothing more than the set of these data conveyed through names (Sasaki, 1986). As Fabietti and Matera (1999, p. 41) write, "there exists a complex and articulated field of linguistic problems that closely concern the anthropologist, and many of these linguistic problems emerge from the investigations conducted by the anthropologist, and, in the end, the linguistic phenomenon cannot help but 'tune in' to the anthropologist".

Thus, de Martino perfectly summarizes the issue we are about to address (de Martino, 2021, p. 535):

Language, intersubjective communication, expressibility, and publicization of the private, continuous listening, and internalization of the public, value-based choice that always transcends situations: all of this does not add to presence but founds, maintains, and develops it, constituting its very "norm" that makes it "normal". When, as in existential anguish, words fail, communication is impossible, the private becomes ineffable, the relationship with the historical world is fundamentally threatened, and deciding according to intersubjective values is engulfed in a kind of mortal weariness, then the loss of the "norm" of presence is experienced, the sign of presentification changes, and presence is lost itself: one experiences the horror of nothingness, where, however, nothingness has the fundamental sense of the ethically negative *par excellence*,

namely, the sense of the receding and annihilation of the primordial ethos of presentification and transcendence.

For de Martino, the set of norms implemented by society—which he calls “economic order”—does not coincide with presence, because the latter is a “synthetic power that conditions all individual forms of cultural life” (de Martino, 2019, p. 426) while the economic form-force “is a distinct power of action that involves the technical domination of nature” (p. 477). Therefore, the masses forget their autonomous ability to counter nihilism and end up relying on groups of “economic” interest (in the etymological sense of οἰκονομία, common management), which are in turn driven by the annihilating force of the technique they use to control the masses: τέχνη οἰκονομική. Thus he introduces the “ethos of transcendence” as a force that strengthens existence as the valorizing function of all other valorizations, it cannot, for de Martino, be reduced to a particular value, let alone an economic one (p. 429).

The economic model allows for production, labor distribution, and societal organization.² It is the economic reasoning that, for de Martino, underlies social models that “associate humans” with each other, but this reasoning arises in the condition where “suffering, with its polarity of pleasure and pain, and with its corresponding reactions, is inserted into a rational, deliberately chosen, and historically modifiable plan of producing goods according to rules of action”. Only in this way does “vitality resolve itself into the economy, and human civilization ‘begins’” (de Martino, 2021, p. 18). However, the economic cannot be the ultimate key to understanding life.

² On the functions and origin of the economic order, we can refer to the splendid pages of de Martino, who describes multiple aspects of it in his research on death. I consider it appropriate to refer to these pages due to their exhaustiveness and completeness. Regarding the genesis of economic power, de Martino states: “The mere vitality that lies ‘raw and green’ in the animal and the plant must, in man, be transcended into the work, and this energy of transcendence, which objectifies the vital according to forms of cultural coherence, is precisely presence” (de Martino, 2021, p. 17). In this regard, we arrive precisely at the implications of the establishment of economic power, among which I wish to emphasize the centrality of language, a theme often underestimated when discussing de Martino. In these important pages, de Martino links language to the technical potentialities established by the economic order, referring to clear themes of graspability and usability: “It is economic coherence that associates men for the purposes of production, distributes labor, and establishes specific productive regimes endowed with a more or less extensive range of effective action; it is economic coherence that orders the immediacy of living and suffering into a mutable system of ‘natural objects’ that indicate the lines of our desires and our aversions, and that enclose the image and memory of possible effective behaviors; it is economic coherence that prepares the artificial instruments—both material and mental—that extend and intensify the power of the human body and its organs; it is economic coherence that elaborates language as an instrument of interpersonal communication; it is, finally, economic coherence that regulates the power of human groups and inserts them into that sphere of relations which goes by the name of politics” (p. 18). These are, therefore, eminently phenomenological themes, for it is precisely in the establishment of ‘things’ within the horizon of usability, in their being conceived as graspable and manipulable (thus, trivially, also nameable—and in this, de Martino recognizes how the determining power of language is involved in the so-called ‘technical dominion’ over nature) that the economic order makes society, as we understand it, possible. According to de Martino, “In primitive civilizations and the ancient world, a considerable part of man’s technical coherence is not employed in the technical dominion over nature (where, moreover, it still finds rather limited applications), but in the creation of institutional forms aimed at protecting presence from the risk of not being in the world. Now, the necessity of this technical protection constitutes the ‘origin’ of religious life as a mythical-ritual order” (p. 38).

But the inaugural transcendence operated by the economic constitutes only the narrow gateway to the realm of culture: and whoever sought to confine themselves within the possession of the economic and to reduce cultural life to this mere beginning or inaugural condition of civil existence would not, in reality, even manage to maintain themselves within its domain, which holds autonomous value only within a movement that urges one to transcend its boundaries. The *ethos* of presence thus rises from the economic to poetry, to science, and to moral life, fully developed and self-aware—only to return, subsequently, to the economic, which never ceases to reassert itself, for the detachment from the vital can never be definitive. And yet, it returns with new forces, accumulated in varied activity and thus ready for a more vigorous effort of economic coherence, capable of more effectively realizing the mastery of natural vitality in its immediacy. This is the cycle, or rather the spiral, of cultural life, which has its center in presence as a power of formal objectification and liberation from ‘infirm and blind vitality’: a cycle or spiral that is progress, for it is an increase in the *ethos* in its civil realization. Without this *ethos* of presence, there is no culture: and not only do poetry and science become inconceivable, but so too does the very detachment from the vital inaugurated by the economic.³

What de Martino says in *The End of the World* was already anticipated in other of his works (Ginzburg, 2017). In fact, for him, “those who claim to confine themselves to the possession of the economic and to restrict cultural life to this simple beginning or inaugural condition of civil living would not succeed in maintaining themselves even within their realm, which has autonomous value only within a movement that pushes to surpass its boundaries” (p. 19). It should be noted that until 2023 de Martino’s work has not enjoyed particular widespread international dissemination, except for notable translations into French. However, in 2023, Dorothy Louise Zinn published an English translation of *The End of the World* (de Martino, 2023a), making this significant work accessible to an English-speaking audience. Nonetheless, in this research, I will refer to the Italian editions, both because the English version was not available at the time of data collection, and because, as it is my native language, I found I had more immediate and straightforward access to the content. Therefore, the translations of the quotations from de Martino that I provide are my own.

Other contributions to the problem of identity and consciousness in anthropology have not come as close to successfully comprehending what meditation fundamentally challenges as an issue. It must be noted that de Martino did not have meditation or Buddhism in mind when he was articulating these considerations about consciousness. Quite the opposite: he had a rather superficial knowledge of Indian practices, which, among all the ethnological data he presents in his studies, may be the ones

³ Cf. de Martino 2021, p. 19.

suffering the most from scarcity, paradoxically, even though they would be the most useful to corroborate his theses not only on the presence but also, and especially, on magic, which he closely associates with the dawn of conscious presence. Except for sporadic mentions, de Martino does not usually refer to Buddhism or other Indian practices in his works. Nevertheless, even if few (de Martino, 2023a, p. 50), his considerations are of extreme value for this research.

It is appropriate to indicate the theoretical positioning of this work. Methodologically, consciousness has been addressed in various fields, from medical anthropology (Tsouyopoulos, 1988; Mattingly, 2006; Taussig, 1980; Hinton et al., 2008) to the recent branches of neuroanthropology (Laughlin, 2023) and the anthropology of consciousness (Sperry & Henninger, 1994). These fields are equally important, yet I have chosen to draw primarily from works on a theoretical level. My primary background is in the anthropology of health, and it is within the realms of medical anthropology and ethno-psychiatry that I initially became interested in meditation and conducted the preliminary research that culminated in this study. Also, Medical Anthropology has been the first field of Anthropology to deal with problems suchlike consciousness, mindfulness and their intricate interplay with the issues of body and self-awareness (Scheper-Hughes & Lock, 1987).

It is also undeniable that the use of meditation primarily involves a therapeutic interest, directed toward ‘self care’ in a broad and holistic sense. Here lies the fundamental distinction: what I discuss is not clinical but ‘therapeutic’ in the sense that anthropology has conventionally attributed to this term. The distinctive structure of Western clinical biomedicine is undoubtedly of interest to anthropologists, regardless of whether they are medical professionals. However, the cultural forms and aspects underlying Western clinical biomedicine are not the focus of this work, nor is the framing of modern mindfulness within those systems, as I have previously addressed these topics (Divino, 2021; Divino, 2024).

Therefore, when I refer to using medical anthropology as the primary methodological framework, I aim to emulate de Martino in his foundational works, from “The World of Magic” (2022) to “The Land of Remorse” (2023b), and especially the incomplete “The End of the World” (2019). De Martino was concerned with how various cultural devices, through their magical-religious potency, present themselves as safeguards for the autonomy of the cultural subject through true forms of ‘therapy’. Shamanism, tarantism, ritual weeping (2021), prayer, and even contemplative practice in our context, were all cultural forms that de Martino conceived—or would have conceived—as mechanisms for protecting presence, thus exorcising the negative and perilous aspects that threaten to destabilize it.

Nevertheless, meditation stands somewhat apart from these patterns, as the ‘therapy’ it offers culminates in a transcendence of presence itself, rather than its reinforcement. We must dutifully

consider all these aspects, and because this ‘therapy’ that meditation offers is a form of healing from life and its anxieties, it is the domain of medical anthropology to delve into it. Even though this therapy involves transcending consciousness, it compels us to inquire into what consciousness is, or at least how it is understood by Buddhists and experienced by meditators.⁴

However, medical anthropology will not be the sole methodological framework employed, even though it will be the most frequently mentioned. This ethnography immediately led me to explore how states of consciousness and the transcendence of presence could be described by meditators. When one of them proposed using drawing to visually represent what was much more challenging to articulate in words, this ethnography branched out into the realm of visual studies. It was through the device of visual elicitation that the study of consciousness and contemplation primarily continued. This necessitated considerations on the image and its interaction with consciousness, even in therapeutic contexts, as the image can indeed be a form of therapy (Favero, 2023). It is omnipresent in contemplative experiences, thus compelling us to grapple with the image and its power in defining both consciousness and its ‘therapeutic’ transcendence.

Throughout this analysis, it has become essential to reflect on the very nature of contemplative practice and how it should be conceived from the perspective of an anthropologist engaging with these dynamics.

In the study of sociocultural dynamics concerning contemplative practices, two distinct dimensions influence the descriptive possibilities of the phenomenon in question. Certainly, as documented in my initial ethnographic research (Divino, 2021), a significant portion of modern contemplative practices pertains to the domain of health. Individuals who engage in these practices often do so primarily to derive benefits related to well-being (Idem, 2024), regardless of whether such benefits are framed within a clinical perspective—addressing what they define as “illness”—or within a broader self-care framework that, while potentially therapeutic, is not strictly clinical.

Beyond this, however, it is crucial to recognize the profound role that contemplative practices play in shaping practitioners’ identities. One of the most critical aspects of modern mindfulness, for instance, is its deployment in varying degrees of social engineering, particularly during childhood. At this stage

⁴ Presence and consciousness are the central themes of this research, but they are so in the context where the crisis of presence and the transcendence of consciousness are both experienced in a ‘therapeutic’ process (at least conceived as such by both Buddhists and modern meditators engaged in contemplative practices). Therefore, approaching these experiences with a critical eye, as de Martino did adeptly by combining historical-religious aspects with ethno-psychiatric studies, becomes crucial in seeking an ethnological perspective on issues related to the crisis of presence. For instance, this mirrors the structure of “The Land of Remorse”, where de Martino not only investigates the crisis of presence within contemporary Apulian tarantism through ethnography but also constructs a historical-religious framework by archaeologically tracing its evolution from the ancient world to its current manifestation. He further enriches this inquiry with insightful reflections on therapeutic efficacy, engaging in dialogue with psychoanalysis and transcultural psychiatry, fields he was well-versed in.

of life, the objective of fostering quiet and compliant subjectivities becomes particularly salient, and mindfulness is often conceived as an effective tool for transforming restless children into silent and attentive students. This is an important issue; however, I will not dwell on it here, as it falls outside the scope of this study and has already been addressed elsewhere (Reveley, 2016; Jackson, 2019).

Nevertheless, this reference provides an opportunity to discuss a related aspect of these reflections. If mindfulness, when employed as a tool of social engineering, is intended to shape the subjectivities of restless youths into more docile and acquiescent students, meditation, in a similar or even greater measure, serves as a tool for self-fashioning. Indeed, the most distinctive feature of modern meditation is precisely its function as a means through which the subject engages with the self, imposing upon oneself a form of self-engineering aimed at achieving specific outcomes—greater calm, serenity, health, harmony, and so forth—through a process of self-discipline.

More than merely contributing to the formation of an identity centered around being a ‘meditator’—a factor that undoubtedly influences the reasons for and modalities of meditation—meditation is primarily sought for its capacity to enhance or perfect the self. In this sense, one might refer to Foucault’s notion of “technologies of the self” (Kelly, 2013; Mitcheson, 2012), although I argue that this concept is particularly applicable to modern meditation, where the use of this technique is explicitly directed toward the (re)shaping of the self and the expectations placed upon oneself. Understood in this way, meditation as ‘self-perfectioning’ aligns with certain forms of modern mindfulness, which can be seen as a set of techniques that enable individuals—either independently or with the guidance of an instructor—to perform a range of operations on their bodies, subjectivities, thoughts (a particularly salient aspect, as will be discussed), and even their conduct or way of being, all with the aim of self-transformation in terms of enhancement.

This definition extends the concept developed by Marcel Mauss, who characterized “techniques of the body” as a set of codified practices performed automatically by individuals who have fully incorporated them as bodily disciplines: “Nous avons fait, et j’ai fait pendant plusieurs années l’erreur fondamentale de ne considérer qu’il n’y a technique que quand il y a instrument. Il fallait revenir à des notions anciennes, aux données platoniciennes sur la technique, comme Platon parlait d’une technique de la musique et en particulier de la danse, et étendre cette notion” (Mauss, 2021a, pp. 52-3). Meditation is not necessarily a culturally codified phenomenon, but it certainly qualifies as a technique of the body insofar as it employs structured forms of discipline and praxis. Additionally, Foucault’s technologies of the Self possess an ethical-political dimension that is absent in Mauss’s conception of body techniques, which are instead framed as a ‘know-how’ that can be acquired and, once mastered, reproduced effortlessly.

1.1 From ‘Magic’ to ‘Consciousness’

The theme of magic has long been associated by anthropologists with the theme of consciousness, or more precisely, with that aspect of ‘magical consciousness’ (Greenwood, 2005) that pertains to animistic or hylozoistic cults, by which we mean those involving a close connection with nature and possessing a panpsychist conception of the world. Greenwood argues that this idea of magic does not solely belong to those peoples who were once identified as ‘primitive’ and whom anthropology now regards with greater respect. Rather, it also relates to the way in which human beings themselves think in various contexts that concern daily life and the establishment of systems of knowledge and experiencing the world. ‘Magic’ and, above all, ‘magical consciousness’ are found especially in philosophical systems as well as in myths and legends. Therefore, it is a more complex phenomenon that is not simply related to the supernatural realm but to the very nature of human thought.

Marcel Mauss, did not offer a singular, all-encompassing definition of magic within his body of work. Nonetheless, he made significant contributions to the anthropological comprehension of magic through his influential essay (Mauss, 2021b, pp. 3-141). In this seminal work, Mauss delved into various facets of magic and its role across diverse cultures. While he refrained from furnishing a rigid definition of magic—“*elle est susceptible d’une définition claire*”—he provided valuable insights into the operational mechanisms of magic within societies.

According to Mauss, magic can be construed as a social phenomenon profoundly interwoven with religion and societal structures. He posited that magic constitutes a form of action aimed at influencing and controlling the supernatural or the divine to effect desired outcomes in the natural world. Magical practices frequently encompass rituals, incantations, and symbolic gestures enacted by individuals or specialized practitioners commonly referred to as magicians.

Mauss underscored the inherently social nature of magic, contending that its efficacy hinges upon communal belief and participation. Magic operates within a framework of shared beliefs and symbols within a given social group, with its effectiveness contingent upon the collective faith in its potential to produce desired results. In this context, magic transcends individual beliefs and actions, becoming deeply embedded within the broader tapestry of social and cultural contexts.

In this sociocultural context, magic assumes a pivotal role in the dynamics of human consciousness. Nevertheless, during the alleged historical epoch when magic is prominent in the formation of a culture, it is predominantly viewed as a form of technique characterized by its perceived efficacy, a feature particularly associated with primitive societies. De Martino critiques this foundational concept and its subsequent developments, notably found in Lévy-Bruhl’s work (de Martino, 1941), which fail to acknowledge the capacity of human consciousness to exert influence over reality. This new perspective posits that magic is not merely a product of nature but rather an inseparable facet thereof.

Hence, while de Martino firmly established himself within the realm of authentic anthropology of consciousness, successfully uniting both the examination of cognitive processes and the potential of 'magical' powers to wield 'effective' influence over what appears as objective reality within a unified theoretical framework, other anthropologists traversed two distinct phases: cognitive anthropology and the anthropology of consciousness (Benussi, 2019; Shanafelt, 2004; Wax & Wax, 1963). Consequently, they only reclaimed the notion of 'magic' from a non-disparaging standpoint towards the culmination of this intellectual journey (Dubuisson, 2016).

Accordingly, the crux of these deliberations revolves around the exploration of human cognition within the purview of cognitive anthropology. Entities assume the character that our consciousness attribute to them, thus we perceive them accordingly. Concurrently, they possess an existence beyond and distinct from our perceptual constructs. Cognitive anthropology found its origins in the works of Boas and became deeply intertwined with linguistics and the philosophy of mind under the influence of Lévy-Bruhl (Kronenfeld et al., 2011, pp. 9-46). Nevertheless, its fundamental focus remained tethered to the notion of the "historical" evolution of cognition, particularly in the comparative analysis of cognitive modalities across diverse cultures, rather than centering on the study of cognition itself as an anthropological quandary.

The recovery of the notion of the magical within the context of an anthropology of consciousness has also led to a redefinition of the problem of self-perception that challenges what we knew or believed about contemplative practices, and consequently, the relationship between culture and identity. For now I intend to explain why I have not found the solutions proposed by most modern anthropologists satisfactory. Instead, I continue to refer primarily to de Martino as the theoretical foundation, which must also be redefined in light of what we learn about the experience of meditation.

Contemporary anthropology appears to conceive of identity primarily as the establishment of a boundary (Cohen, 1994a; Idem, 1999), a boundary that separates self-perception from the perception of other-than-self. Therefore, we must go beyond, surpass the economic limits of cultural life. On this matter de Martino (2021, p. 20) says that:

The crisis of presence can be traced back to the double face of the economic, which, while on the one hand is a positive among positives and is exposed to undue intrusion from other positives into its sphere or can unduly intrude into the sphere of other positives, on the other hand, ideally constitutes the inaugural positive that separates culture from nature and makes possible, with this detachment, the dialectic of forms of cultural coherence. This means that to the extent that detachment is relatively narrow, the experience of a becoming that passes without and against us, a disastrous dominion of the irrational, i.e., a "blind" rush towards death, is configured.

This is consistent with the evidence on the matter, and it is not the aspect I am challenging. The metaphor of identity as a boundary resonates not only in Buddhism but also in connecting the problem of the cultural nature of identities—which at this point are subjective manifestations of what happens on a larger scale within ethnic communities—with the problem of consciousness, as it is ultimately conceived as a divisive element: that which allows us to perceive ourselves as separate and think of a “self” different from others. But there is one problem to address.

The problem became fixed as one inhering in the distance between *cultures* rather than between *minds*. Anthropology has been preoccupied with the boundaries between cultures. It has preferred to avoid the boundaries between minds, between consciousnesses, because, ironically enough, these are seen as being too difficult to cross [...].⁵

This problem has not yet been radically resolved. Despite contemporary anthropology discussing consciousness much more than it did in the past, it is reluctant to develop an anthropological theory of consciousness that goes beyond the idea of having it developed primarily within a ‘socio-cultural’ framework. In other words, it continues to engage with collectives and very little with individuals, and when the individual is brought into the picture, it is always heavily contextualized within their socio-cultural milieu. There is nothing wrong with this, nor do I intend to claim that individuals are independent or detachable from their environment, which would be nonsensical.

I do not intend to assert that consciousness is independent of this socio-cultural framework, but I would like to argue for the possibility of a theory that is entirely anthropological in its approach to consciousness, without attributing the primary cause of individual consciousness to socio-cultural dynamics. The research question is whether it is possible to study contemplative practices from the perspective of the individual practitioner and observe how these practices transform their conscious experience.

When consciousness is implicated, shifting the focus entirely to the cultural scale only complicates the problem for it does not elucidate the underlying principles that presumably operate in each individual. These principles are obscured by the more complex and incrementally densifying mechanisms that come into play when consciousness interacts with all others on historical, cultural, social, and macroscopic levels. I emphasize that I do not intend to discard the macroscopic perspective but rather to approach it from the individual level and not vice versa.

⁵ Cf. Cohen, 1994b, p. 64.

I intend to place de Martino within the field of anthropology of consciousness and apply his theory to ethnographic research on meditation. Anthropology of consciousness today is almost entirely an autonomous subfield of anthropology (Cohen, 1994b; Lutz, 1992; Greenwood, 2005), but in many aspects, it has come to affirm what de Martino had already theorized in his works, especially regarding themes related to magic and the interaction between consciousness and reality. De Martino reformulates an extremely personal anthropology, drawing extensively from philosophical questions, particularly those related to existentialism, and psychoanalysis. The dialogue with psychoanalysis is now a *vexata quaestio* in anthropology (see §6.1). De Martino, a pioneer in this respect as well, does not hesitate to draw concepts and ideas from psychoanalysis that he will then reformulate for his own purposes. Yet, de Martino is also a staunch opponent of 'naturalism', which can be termed today as 'scientism' or 'radical objectivism'. How does he reconcile his passion for philosophy and psychoanalysis with an anthropological idea that radically rejects absolute laws? Psychoanalysis errs in its claim to describe a truth about the laws of the psyche that is valid for all human beings and has failed to recognize the cultural relativity of psychopathological manifestations and how they are extremely variable depending on culture, symbolic languages, historical legacies, and social environment. However, what de Martino does not dismiss from Freud's work is the effort to recognize at least 'general tendencies' that can be universalized. De Martino was well aware of this, as he brought to public attention the existence of a 'psychopathological' phenomenon closely linked to the culture of Southern Italy.

What are now referred to as 'culture-bound syndromes' (CBS) and reveal the relativity of pathological manifestations were already recognized by de Martino in "tarantism". Nonetheless, even if this phenomenon is exclusive of Southern Italian culture, he does not hesitate to define it as 'hysteria' because he recognizes in it the same 'general tendency' that also emerged as a well-defined problem in Freud's Vienna, though in a completely different cultural and social context. The dialogue with psychoanalysis is, therefore, not aimed at rehabilitating this practice in its entirety but acknowledges the validity of some of its ideas unquestionably and refines them where possible. Moreover, de Martino's preferred interlocutor is Jung, not Freud. This is because Jung's analytical psychology, especially due to his interests in 'Eastern' cultures, proved to be much more useful for his theory. All these aspects partially rehabilitate Jung's work in de Martino's eyes, and he makes extensive use of it. De Martino was pioneering in this too, as the anthropology of consciousness began to use Jungian theory again through the recovery of the notion of archetype (Laughlin & Tiberia, 2012).

Therefore, we could also extend this to Jung's successor, Hillman, whose background as a philosopher and critic of psychoanalysis has further made these contents appealing to us. There are,

of course, many criticisms: firstly, Jung's superficiality in dealing with certain issues related to the 'Eastern' world, where he shows little mastery of historical and philological aspects, and secondly, some of Jung's prejudices that can be fully framed within the orientalist ideology, as well as some interpretive stretches that, no matter how willing Jung was, do not adequately account for the cultural relativity that certain phenomena may have. Nonetheless, I have outlined these criticisms in the end of the conclusive chapter, where I introduce the notions that can be useful to us from psychoanalysis and transferable to the field of Anthropology of consciousness, particularly thanks to the imaginal language implemented by Jung's alchemical theory.

1.2 Doing Anthropology with images

The ethnographic research on meditation I commenced in 2018 had the initial goal of investigating the clinical applications of what appeared to be an elaborate 'technique of the body'. As this practice migrated from the 'eastern' and exotic world to the 'western' world, it was not only adapting to a rigidly codified protocol of allopathic biomedicine, but also undergoing transformative processes and redefining the identity of those who were adopting it, which posed a challenge to my work.⁶

However, my research has continued and is still ongoing, forcing me to constantly re-evaluate the accumulated material and reflect on what it imposes to consider. I still keep in contact with some of the subjects and new ones have come, but as the theme shifts from health to the definition of identity and consciousness, new 'exceeding' elements continue to overflow the limits of the research theme and impose a consideration of the very nature of ethnographic inquiry. There are in particular some points that have tormented my reflection and that I hope to be able to propose in the context of a debate on the limits of the ethnographic method. I intend to bring my personal anthropological experience of encounter/clash with an alterity that is perhaps difficult to define for some, because it is not immediately visible, but hidden in a profound relationship that only an inquiry into contemplative practice can bring to light.

During my first ethnographic research on meditation (2018-2021), I initially aimed to explore the relationship between modern forms of meditative therapy, such as mindfulness, and the world of clinical practice and personal health management. However, as my research progressed, the scope of the project expanded, and I began to reflect on meditation as a whole and to question the ethnographic method. This anthropological inquiry continued in the following years and eventually became part of my doctoral research.

⁶ The clinical aspect of the material was later reworked and directed to a multi-year research in Medical Anthropology (Divino, 2021; Idem, 2024).

One of the main problems I encountered in the ethnography of meditation concerns the research model itself. How can one study an ethnographic ‘field’ that is not geographically localized? Certainly, every individual who practices meditation engages with it within a cultural context; it is localized, and I do not deny this. I do not intend to diminish the importance of the historical, cultural, social, and subjective dynamics that lead someone to become interested in meditation, to frequent certain environments—whether they be spiritual or psychological research settings—each characterized by their own internal dynamics and histories. However, my primary interest lies *also* beyond this contextualization, focusing on the problem of consciousness itself, which emerges as a common issue for meditators in Europe as well as in India (to name just two possible examples). When the area of interest is subjectivity itself, the ethnographic method fails to prove effective. Luckily, ethnography is a flexible methodology that has already undergone several transformations. Nonetheless, I would not consider an ethnography of meditation as simply ‘multi-sited’ (Marcus, 1995), even though the multi-localized nature of an ethnography that does not want to focus on a single community of meditators but on the phenomenon of meditation that is now globalized is an undeniable fact. Yet, it is not the global nature of the phenomenon in question that I will focus on, but on the subjective experience of meditators who practice contemplative exercises, and on a way of using ethnography to return in the most detailed way possible the experience that they live. In this context, the focus is not merely on the importance of subjectivity within a well-defined framework, as is common in medical anthropology. Instead, this study aims to move beyond confines, as meditation itself seeks to transcend and question subjectivity. Moreover, subjectivity engages in dialogue with the historical and socio-cultural dimensions of belonging, yet it surpasses these elements through the contemplative nature of meditation.

I found myself in need of defining *contemplative anthropology* from the ground up, with its own methodology, i.e., a contemplative ethnography, and research objectives which could understand meditation from an experiential perspective.

These complexities manifested also in the intersections between ethnography and autoethnography, the relationship between image and the dissolution of recognizable forms, and the discourse surrounding identity and belonging, particularly in relation to ‘those without identity’.

Meditative practice leads the meditating subject to deconstruct their own subjectivity, not in a nihilistic or self-mortifying sense, but by expanding the perception that otherwise confined subjectivity to a well-defined identity. For the Buddhist conception, identity is a complex aggregate of factors that clash and, only in their relationship, allow the phenomenon of “I” to manifest (Johansson, 1979). Just by removing one of these “bricks” (*khandas*, “aggregates”) the whole building falls apart, revealing how it is actually “interdependent”: identity is not a building that stands

on its own, but part of a complex web-like structure of several interconnected nodes, each one relying on all the others. Every minimal element is necessarily in relation with the whole system, otherwise it could not exist. Human selves can't be isolated. This is true for Buddhists also in an ontological perspective: nothing can exist by its own. As humans, we 'are' because we *are-in-relation*. Yet, the contradiction of identity is precisely this: we think we are independent.

Since I found that traditional ethnographic methods were not sufficient in understanding the complexities of contemplative practice, where the apparent distinction (perception of being separate and independent) between myself and another-self fades, I searched for a new ethnographic methodology to study this complex problem. I had to expand the scope of inquiry and examine interdisciplinary fields that have already established connections with anthropology.

The technique ultimately chosen for this anthropological investigation involves elicitation through the production of artistic elements called *maṇḍalas*. The ethnographic inquiry proceeded primarily through meditative ethnography and autoethnography, outlining what I will subsequently define theoretically as 'Contemplative Anthropology', drawing also on the work of other anthropologists who have anticipated these studies. I am referring in particular to the modification of the ethnographic gaze based on the adoption of a non-dualistic contemplative principle borrowed from meditative experience and constant practice applied to ethnographic inquiry (Orellana, 2019). I will describe this aspect more fully in the conclusive chapter. However, this work is intended to be a significant contribution to the study of contemplative practices, whose effects are seen not only in terms of health, but also in the so-called 'extended consciousness' (Josipovic, 2013).

The phenomenon of extended consciousness is complex and difficult to describe and document. The participants in this study themselves initially had difficulty expressing their experiences in words, and therefore an elicitation technique was chosen, which everyone benefited from. The use of *maṇḍalas* in academic investigations is not new. It has been found to have positive effects in the field of art therapy (Jakobsson & Jakobsson, 2021) as well as in the continuation of studies initiated by Jung in this regard, and published in psychology journals especially if they are studies focused on possible beneficial effects of the *maṇḍala*-drawing exercise (Liu et al., 2020). However, both of these approaches suffer from an excessive objectivist perspective, while the elicitation technique implicates greater involvement on the part of the meditator and focuses more on the hermeneutics of the subject, without seeking to reduce the production of *maṇḍalas* to pre-ordained patterns.

Certainly, this particular ethnographic choice has immediately necessitated an inquiry into what it means to 'do anthropology with images'. At first glance, this may seem like a trivial question, but it is crucial to distinguish between the anthropology of images and anthropology conducted with images, wherein the latter employs images as the ethnographic medium for qualitative data collection,

rather than treating images as pre-existing entities to be retrospectively analyzed by the anthropologist. The use of images as an ethnographic tool raises an immediate problem, notably the challenge of defining what constitutes an image, a problem that is also present in the anthropology of images. However, the difference lies in the nature of the images I worked with, which are not ‘visual products’ such as films, advertisements, paintings, or drawings created with the explicit intention of being artistic works. Here, I dealt with, for lack of a better term, ‘unwitting artists’. While this does not alter the fundamental issue of ‘what is an image’, the unique nature of this ethnography compelled me to address this question from the outset. For now, I will highlight the fundamental theme that has informed much of my reflections. If I were to trace the essence of many of my conclusions to a recent work, it would be in Nakassis’ article on the linguistic anthropology of images. Nakassis also grapples with the anthropological nature of the image: “How might we reconsider the notion of image as that which is always already immanent to discourse?” (Nakassis, 2023, p. 75). His issue, as we will also see in chapters 5 and 6, revolves around the relationship between language and image. While it is undeniable that images convey messages and are thus laden with meanings and ‘signs’, the challenge lies in defining the relationship between verbal language—what commonly comes to mind when we speak of ‘language’—and ‘image’. Nakassis addresses the opposition between image and language with the concept of the “image-text”.

Although images are primarily understood as visual data (a drawing, a photograph, or a video), it must be noted that the problem of the image in anthropology cannot be resolved if images are reduced solely to visual data. Certainly, the visual is a medium, likely the preferred medium for the dissemination of images, just as the preferred medium for verbal language is oral and auditory. However, language can also be written, encoded in gestures for the deaf, which introduces another dimension of visibility—dynamic rather than static like writing. Importantly, language cannot be confined solely to orality or writing but must be understood as a total anthropological phenomenon: we are in language and language is in us. At this juncture, the same issue arises with images.⁷

⁷ Nakassis writes on this matter: “First, images are not necessarily visual. (Hence the problem of the image is not the same as that of visual communication.) Images may exist in and across any and every modality and medium wherein indexical iconic (diagrammatic) semiosis is possible [...]. Images, thus, are not in opposition to language; nor are they the special preserve of our prototypes for images: paintings, film, and so on. Images are *in* discourse, they are its shape (that is, the contours of discourse cast an image); they are the basis of our feel for language and of its pragmatic effectivity. Second, images are not only the outcomes of evenemential processes; they are the very form of those processes and, in that sense, are processes themselves. Every image-text, as a virtual metasemiotic type, is embodied in arrays of material signs unfolding in time and space. An image is borne by its pictures. One only sees, hears, or feels an image in/through pictures, a text through/in a texture in a temporalized event. At the same time, an image is a (metasemiotic) principle that links pictures together as “the same”, guiding perceptual judgments that construe them as such. If so, the image is both immanent in and beyond its pictures, for an image is the emergent precipitate of a dynamic configuration of text-in-context (the former of which, the “text”, always iterable in some other context/configuration) for someone in some embodied activity in time (e.g., seeing). An image, therefore, is not that which is within some spatial frame but rather the virtual shape of a temporal process of framing (i.e., entextualization)”, cf. Nakassis, 2023, pp. 79, 80. This serves as a good summary, previewing what will be addressed in the final chapters regarding the image. It should be noted that in

1.3 From Ethnography to Maṇḍala-elicitation

At the outset of my research, I had intended to focus on meditation in general. However, I encountered significant resistance from the individuals I approached, as they exhibited a marked disinterest in sharing their experiences with me. Even before embarking on this research, I had been frequenting Buddhist monasteries and meditation centers. Upon moving to Belgium, I sought to recreate this environment by selecting several meditation centers to visit. With the exception of a couple of longstanding relationships that proved to be supportive, it must be said that most of the meditators who frequent these places exhibit a rather similar attitude. They arrive in the evening (when these activities are primarily organized), tired from a hard day's work, and then dedicate themselves to meditation for an hour or half an hour. In rare circumstances, they may stay to talk with others, but everyone is in a hurry to go home. Placing advertisements online did not aid my research, and so I had to rely on the network I had already established in Italy, while trying to build another one with difficulty in Belgium.

Nevertheless, focusing on meditation per se proved fruitless, even when discussing it with friends and acquaintances who had been practicing it for some time. I had already begun an autoethnography a few months prior, which was primarily based on keeping track of the experiences and sensations that arose during my meditation practice, which I mostly conducted in the late afternoon. This practice was based on the alternate techniques of *samatha-vipassanā*, integrated with my own personal reimagining of the meditations of *borān kammaṭṭhāna* that I had learned a couple of years prior from the research of Kate Crosby (2020). These meditations involved the use of visualizations of elements (*nimitta*) such as sacred syllables, luminous spheres, images of the Buddha, and exercises involving the internalization of these luminous elements in various ways. I kept track of these experiences for a couple of months in my ethnographic diary, but I was ultimately dissatisfied with this mode of research. My autoethnographic experience has ultimately taken on the characteristics of a reflection on subjectivity and intersubjective relationships through meditative practice.

It all began after several months of meditation focused on myself. As mentioned earlier, my autoethnographic practice was initially based on meditating alone or attending group meditation centers, while taking note of personal and interpersonal experiences related to contemplative practices. However, this did not satisfy my initial research interests.

Suddenly, an idea came to me. During meditation, one should not experience specific thoughts, or rather, proper meditation would require that when certain thoughts arise, the individual does not dwell on them, but rather recognizes their causes and conditions, and allows them to slowly flow away

interpreting the maṇḍala-drawing, I did not impose any theoretical framework but allowed the subjects to express the meaning of their drawings themselves. This will be elaborated upon shortly.

without allowing their focused concentration on a fixed point to be excessively distracted. However, meditative practice certainly disdains more superficial thoughts, but it is also an excellent exercise in introspection. In meditation, repressed memories, forgotten events, and elements submerged in the deepest depths of the psyche can often resurface, and thus, in view of self-improvement, what emerges in moments of more focused contemplation is desirable. In this case, as in many others, an image sprang into my head. A complex, abstract, and articulated image, like that of a kaleidoscope, but much less regular. Immediately, I took out my ethnographic diary and tried to represent it.



Fig. 1: My mandala No. 'zero', 16/12/2022

A dozen representations came out, but overall it was undoubtedly a mandala. Before choosing to focus on meditation, I was certainly aware of what mandala were; I had studied them both during my three-year degree course in Asian Studies, particularly in the Art History course, but I had also addressed them in my training in Hillmanian and Jungian-oriented lay psychoanalysis. However, I had never thought of integrating them into ethnography.

The participation of another individual, Leo C., whose ethnography I will discuss in detail later, further solidified my belief in the validity of this methodology. This individual was a first-time meditator participating in the study and requested to use drawings to represent what they found too difficult to express in words. This prompted me to revisit my own drawing, and upon recognizing common patterns, I became convinced that this visual elicitation technique could be implemented as a new methodology for ethnographically studying contemplative experience. Yet this idea also made me understand that the mandala was perhaps the most plastic representation of an anthropological path that was so difficult to describe in words, like a photograph of a psychic moment, like an archaeological layer of the personal picture.

Becoming aware of this has greatly changed the direction of my research, pushing me to incorporate visual elicitation processes such as the production of maṇḍalas to document the diverse meditative subjectivities. This has also allowed for determining the limits of an autoethnography that proceeded simultaneously with that of other subjects. In other words, the physical field has been replaced by an entirely consciousness-based ethnographic field, the dynamics of which are exposed by the elicitation of the subjects themselves.

The more specific modes that have determined my elicitation methodology will be presented in the chapter dedicated to visual elicitation. However, before that, I intend to examine more theoretically the potentials and historical reasons for a contemplative anthropology and an anthropological investigation of consciousness. I will therefore anticipate some of the ethnographic contents that will later be examined in the light of the elicitation process, to contextualize them in the research path focused on meditation itself and on the processes of consciousness, which have recently interested new branches of anthropology, such as medical anthropology, cognitive anthropology, and the very young field of neuroanthropology (Lende & Downey, 2015).

Now, I will focus on the use of images and the anthropological nature of maṇḍalas. I will take inspiration from what was told to me much later by one of the participants in this ‘ethnographic experiment’. Here, I will introduce the most active of my participants. Leo, the only one whose real name I will use instead of a pseudonym, since he himself authorized me to do so, is a dear friend of mine.

The results of this ethnography take into account my relationship with the participants and my ‘positioning’ within the field of conscious experience of the meditators. My friendship with Leo is particular and profound, based on a long-standing personal and intellectual exchange. Apparently, Leo and I have little in common: he is a physicist by training, and when I met him, he was studying physics at the University of Padua and, at the time of my ethnography, was working on his thesis, a process that cost him a lot of effort and resistance from the rigid academic environment. Despite being a physicist and an anthropologist, our friendship was surrounded by long conversations that sometimes lasted until late at night, in which we talked about philosophy, methodology, the universe, and big schemes.

Leo is fascinated by the structure of the universe and does not show the arrogance to teach others how to be in the world. He has a great capacity to listen and learn from others’ positions, without the pretense that his training is the best possible. The general annoyance towards rigid objectivism is what intellectually brought us closer together, in addition to an undeniable emotional connection given by character affinities: we are both introverted, very sensitive, and also touchy. Our friendship

was not free from conflicts, but over time, we both changed our positions a lot following reciprocal influences, and I always valued his opinion, second only to that of my partner.

That said, Leo must be framed in an approach to the spiritual that is 'anthropologically' very different from mine. His interest in the structure of the universe and the cornerstone that moves all things is an interest that I would not hesitate to define as spiritual, but it is declined by a mathematical and rigorous mind whose maximum ambition is to create a symbolic system that allows new mathematical formulas to describe everything that exists in a single science that includes humans and matter.

Leo had never meditated before meeting me, nor will he do so in the years following our first encounter. Despite his love for mathematics, Leo is not a rigid calculating mind and has always dabbled in the arts, especially poetry and painting, producing works that I have always found dazzling. For this reason, the idea of involving him in this research occurred to me. When the initial idea was simply to follow meditators and document their experiences, I would never have thought of involving someone like Leo. However, the anchoring to an artistic expression convinced me that he had something to say, and to this day, I am satisfied with my choice.

I proposed my initiative to Leo, who agreed to start meditating. Leo is a very curious person fascinated by the unknown, and therefore we can take into great account the data he produced as a newcomer approaching meditation for the first time. I did not give him any particular indication on how to meditate, only general ideas. However, it should be noted that Leo had read my book published in Italian a few years ago, a translation and commentary on the *Satipaṭṭhānasutta*, considered today the oldest text containing instructions on meditation and the basis of subsequent re-elaborations such as mindfulness. Theoretically, therefore, Leo did have a basis from which to start, even though he had never practiced the meditative technique on himself. Certainly, he has also conducted further research to refine and adapt it to his way of doing things, and what came out of it will be presented in this work together with other subjects.

Although it cannot be unequivocally denied that my personal and cultural background has led me to express, through certain symbols and signs, the elements composing my first maṇḍala (or the No. 'zero'), hastily sketched in a notebook as it emerged, it is also indisputable that other individuals, who, unlike myself, were not previously acquainted with alchemical symbols and representations, will tend to follow a similar schema and report elements interpretable as an alchemical opus. In addition to this, it must be noted that the selection of specific symbology is not deliberate, as the creation of the maṇḍala, both in this initial draft and all subsequent ones, adhered to the principle of stream of consciousness, transcribing what came spontaneously, without excessive contemplation or reflection, and I ensured that all subjects adhered to this foundational principle in the construction of

their maṇḍalas. In the case of Fig. 1, as sharply observed by Leo, my inclination toward linguistic expression and verbal communication is prominently displayed.

My maṇḍala is replete with words and inscriptions in various writing systems that “float” as if in a histological fluid, akin to information contained within a cell, and indeed, Leo repeatedly emphasizes that my mode of representing maṇḍalas evokes cellular structures in which various elements and organelles are suspended. The centrality of the word and its imaginal depiction perhaps reveals my proclivity for semantic inquiry, as well as my visceral passion for philology and linguistics. The choice of these words is significant: OPUS (“work”), ESSENTIA MAGNA (“great essence”), among others, and also includes phrases written hastily, as in automatic writing. The lines on the right read: “hence dust returns to the gentle limbs of sounds on earth”, while on the left, the inscriptions “in utmost harsh light” and “refulgence” resonate as drawings might. Moreover, these automatic writings partially unveil my deficiency in Latin knowledge, as they have engendered, in at least one instance, expressions that would provoke disagreement from a philologist. Indeed, for the sake of absolute accuracy in Latin, the phrase “*essentia magna*” could be also rendered as “*magna essentia*”, with the adjective anteceding the noun.

From a representational perspective, having written these lines offhandedly, they possess the same value as the visual ‘signs’ that appear in other maṇḍalas in the form of figures or abstract shapes. In my case, these certainly reveal a predilection for semiotics in general, but it must also be acknowledged that not all of the lines written in this maṇḍala can be deciphered by me today. The writing is obscure, and its reading has escaped my memory.

1.4 Ethnographic subjects: a brief background

I have previously examined Leo’s background. Nonetheless, other subjects participated in this ethnographic ‘experiment’. As they were all focused on producing one or only a couple of maṇḍalas, I will present them in this separate section. In many ways, Leo was the most active subject of the study, despite my initial expectations of his level of involvement. I presented his background as he was also the main source of inspiration for the newly developed methodology.

It was not required of any participant to produce more than they felt inclined to do, and thus the majority of the subjects were content with producing only one maṇḍala. In contrast, Leo experienced a series of sensations and results that deeply affected him, to the point of requesting permission to continue the experiment, eventually producing ‘officially’ five maṇḍalas, in addition to a series of secondary drawings that were difficult to classify. This does not make Leo more valid than other subjects, but his productivity is a characteristic trait that must be highlighted for research purposes. With regards to the other subjects I am about to present, for privacy reasons, I will not disclose the

true names or nationalities of the participants involved in the study, except for those who explicitly gave me their consent.

Since this ethnographic exploration is highly non-local, I preferred the possibility of addressing a heterogeneous audience. For reasons of privacy and also at the request of the majority of participants, I will not make direct references to matters that would easily lead to their sensitive data being identifiable.

The 'meeting places' of this ethnography are diverse, sometimes digital (Pink et al., 2016), sometimes physical. However, this ethnography was primarily conducted in a digital format, with subjects communicating their progress in meditation and their reflections on their online journey. This was necessary in order to bridge distances, considering that most subjects had busy lives or were geographically distant from me. Nevertheless, the value of a digitally conducted ethnography has already been addressed by scholars in the social sciences (Murthy, 2008), and it is now considered a reliable method of data collection if properly conducted (Hine, 2017).

Most participants came to me through word of mouth. At the beginning of my visits to meditation centers in Belgium, I encountered significant difficulties in establishing connections with people who were not very interested in discussing their experiences. This was especially true for those who believed, as one case I recorded during an ethnography stated, that "discussing one's experiences is an act that produces attachment, and with meditation, we want to avoid attachment... so I don't think you will find any collaboration from me or anyone else in this center for a similar research... if there are experiences, they bring emotions, and emotions are to be avoided... absolutely... what could I possibly tell you about my experience? I seek bliss... the cessation of attachments, that's it... if I told you that I have experienced pleasant sensations and that I have dwelled on them excessively, I would be misinterpreting meditation... if I told you about negative emotions... I'd be doing it wrong anyway".

This testimony, obviously anonymous as it belongs to the early ethnographic phase, before I recruited willing participants who authorized the sharing of their experiences, reveals much about the type of environment I had to deal with initially. In this case, the context was a traditional Buddhist meditation center, whose manager initially surprised me by recounting how she used to be a well-known painter before converting to Theravāda Buddhism. As she began meditating, her paintings changed, but then she decided to stop because "images create attachment". She did not authorize me to display her paintings, and truth be told, she did not show them to me either, and she generally seemed uninterested in discussing these matters. Personally, despite having studied the history of ancient Buddhism and the practice of meditation from its origins to the present day, I do not perceive these testimonies as adhering to the reality of meditative practice, but rather as a dogmatic tendency of a later

interpretation in general. It was not the idea of Buddhism that I had, but beyond personal ideas, it did not allow me to collect experiences, which was the focus of my research. Similar environments and situations were encountered in all the meditation centers I visited. Therefore, I decided on a different approach. I had recently experienced the environment of clinical mindfulness environments, which I became intimately familiar with during my master's thesis research. Coherently with its being engulfed by the capitalist culture, meditation takes part to "the age of spectacle, characterized by an immense accumulation of spectacles in which all that was once lived directly has distanced itself in a representation" (Favero, 2018a, p. 20).

Mindfulness practitioners were more willing to discuss with me what I have, perhaps too vulgarly, referred to in my diary as "their own business", but I did not want to return to the same ethnographic environment as in the past. Indeed, not only religious Buddhists or mindfulness enthusiasts meditate, but also a silent yet numerous community of individuals who hold diverse and varied beliefs regarding a not better specified 'spiritual' dimension, without religious connotations, and who adopt meditation as a 'device' to access this dimension towards which they feel a calling. Tracking down these individuals is easy for someone who has been interested in meditation for years, as they are familiar with forums and other online environments where spiritual topics are discussed, ranging from popular to generalist.

Nonetheless, it is my opinion that one cannot oversimplify from all these sources, and I do not believe that all those who live a spiritual dimension also engage in a drastic simplification of the history of religions or the ideas surrounding them. In these environments, by announcing my intention to conduct research on states of consciousness in meditation, I received a response from Layla, a cheerful woman with a husband and children who divides her daily life between work and her passion for the spiritual dimension. She has some experience in what she calls 'shamanic journeys', practices she came into contact with a long time ago and has personally developed. Layla meditates in her own unique way, which we will discuss later. At the opposite end of the spectrum, we have Leslie, who discovered mindfulness meditation not necessarily as therapy but has been practicing it daily ever since. She sees mindfulness as a "gateway to tranquility and peace" and seizes every opportunity to learn more, participate in conferences, and engage in related studies. In her life, she is involved in other pursuits but says she has found in mindfulness a key to concentration and well-being. I define her approach as opposed to Layla's because Leslie chose to practice mainly mindfulness, a form of meditation that is strictly codified, since she prefers something that has a "clearer defined path and journey" compared to other types of meditation she has tried (and found less satisfying than mindfulness). On the other hand, Layla describes herself as an explorer in her own way, and in my view, a syncretist.

Despite their differences, both women have produced maṇḍalas with a very similar structural pattern. Then, there is Daniel, someone I have known for quite some time, who is more religiously involved in meditation but not to the extent of refusing to participate in a study. I have known him for several years through a friend. Both of them are affiliated with the Kammaṭṭhāna Forest Tradition of Thailand and meditate accordingly. Daniel has never concealed his methods and has enthusiastically collaborated with me even in previous research preceding this work. In the past, he had entertained the idea of ordination and becoming a monk, but at the time of this research, he is still officially a layperson, although experienced in meditation and well-versed in all the texts of the tradition. He takes a more ‘doctrinal’ approach to the issue and is always cautious about matters of modern spirituality and what he calls “new age degenerations”. By now, it should be clear that my position in all of this is somewhat in the middle, as I do not reject the possibility that something anthropologically valid can also emerge from the spiritual world and syncretic forms of new religions. Lastly, I introduce the final participant who took part in this study, Joseph. Although he joined the study and was interviewed last, some of his insights and intuitions derived from his meditative experiences profoundly inspired the theoretical aspects concerning the nature of images and the relationship between images and consciousness that I present in this work.

As said, Joseph was the last participant to join this study, and he did so abruptly after having discussed it amicably with me for some time. I had a unique friendship with Joseph, as we initially connected online during the 2020 Covid pandemic lockdown in Italy. During that time, we spent hours on the phone primarily discussing topics related to Buddhism, meditation, and spirituality, as he was aware that I was involved in these areas, and he deeply appreciated them. After some time apart due to my academic struggles, we resumed communication after I relocated to Belgium for research. Joseph had continued to be passionately interested in these subjects, and I have always admired his genuine and unbiased approach to these areas as a non-expert. Over time, his views on spiritual matters changed, and I surely appreciated his authenticity and lack of excessive preconceptions, which can sometimes be found in meditators explicitly aligned with a Buddhist school or spiritual ideology. Hence, I must acknowledge that my existing bond of spontaneity with Joseph led me to positively embrace his willingness to participate in the study, especially as he was not affiliated with any Buddhist or Mindfulness school. Joseph has been meditating for several years, considering himself self-taught, and I can confirm that his approach to meditation is entirely autonomous.

At the time of my ethnographic research, Joseph was about 40, he had no formal academic training, had not attended university at all, and had always been employed. He is a versatile worker with the ability to reinvent himself and adapt. I have witnessed him change jobs twice over the years, and I knew he had some entrepreneurial experiences in the past. His interest in spirituality is deeply

personal and fueled by autonomous curiosity. He reads books and articles, but he adapts these experiences to suit his own needs and self. Joseph has shared with me common phenomena experienced by expert meditators, which he described with curiosity and fascination. These are the kind of phenomena that de Martino would consider “magical” and that are still challenging to explain within the strict confines of quantitative science. I have always welcomed these stories with equal fascination, particularly a brief experience of out-of-body experience (commonly known as OOB) and a couple of cases of lucid dreams that, according to Joseph, enabled him to predict events that actually occurred in his near future.

His inherent inclination towards spiritual matters has led him to interact with the work of numerous people he considers “life mentors”, including well-known figures like Osho and Krishnamurti. However, these readings have contributed to the gradual formation of his own constantly evolving ideas about spirituality and life, all driven by a natural curiosity that impelled him to independently experiment with meditation. Two fundamental aspects must be clarified: Joseph claims he has never read meditation manuals or attended courses, yet in his description of his personal contemplation technique, I have observed remarkable similarities with the tendencies currently found among meditators in the Theravāda tradition. I must rely on his word if I am to believe that he has independently developed these techniques, inspired by the need to cultivate some form of mindful attention.

The second aspect concerns the timing of Joseph’s work, as he did not keep precise dates. Therefore, I can only provide the date of our ethnographic encounter: July 29, 2023. Joseph created three maṇḍalas, but only the last one was created in distinct meditation phases and stratifications, which I will discuss in detail when delving into his experience. The other two maṇḍalas were created “on impulse, in a frenzied state of inspiration after meditation”, and we mutually decided to include them even though they did not fully comply with the established criteria, as I find them worthy of attention. Initially, Joseph hesitated as he was aware that the exercise proposed a stratified approach, but I feel that excessive rigidity in research criteria can hinder the intentions of anthropology. Therefore, I will consider these two “preliminary maṇḍalas” for what they have to offer. All his maṇḍalas were cataloged after my own, as they were drawn between June and July 2023. Given that all his friends refer to him by the nickname “Joe”, I will also address him as such in this work.

The seemingly small number of these subjects may raise some concerns about the validity of this study. However, anthropology has long abandoned quantitative claims without losing its capacity to describe ‘real’ phenomena (Herzfeld, 2018), and it is primarily towards a qualitative investigation that my interest is directed. The aim is not to establish universally valid rules for interpreting

maṇḍalas, but rather to use them as a visual elicitation tool through which subjects can express their complexity.

Our method can be done by anyone in analysis or out. It requires no special knowledge—even if knowledge of symbols can help culturally to enrichen the image, and knowledge of idioms and vocabulary can help hear further into the image. By letting the image itself speak, we are suggesting that words and their arrangements (syntax) are soul mines.⁸

It is this complexity, not the maṇḍala itself, that will be subjected to anthropological scrutiny. In this regard, it is important to note that the individual, in their incredible complexity, carries within themselves an entire world, and thus an ethnography of even a single subject would be sufficient to reveal a wealth of interpretive material of great value. Not to mention the reciprocal and equally complex relationships that situate the individual within a dense and intricate web of connections between themselves, the world as an external society, their internal aspects, each of which is involved in a peculiar relationship with worldly aspects, and then there are others, mirrors of the self but also dialoguing entities that mutually transform and interchange. Finally, we should mention the relationship with the anthropologist, who is also (or rather, in my case) involved in this study in a participatory and active manner. Therefore, if the subject, as I indeed intend to explore, is consciousness, we cannot anchor ourselves to the absurd claim of revealing it as the median epiphenomenon of an interaction between a multitude (Negri, 2011). The multitude “does not build on a coherent shared sense of collectivity” acting rather as “a collection of singularities” (Favero, 2018a, p. 30). Given that we are all human beings, consciousness is inherent in each individual, already as a singular entity. It is thus the interaction between the two consciousnesses—the participant’s and the anthropologist’s—that will reveal the necessary elements to better understand what lies beneath what we perhaps erroneously identify as the interiority of the human.

Regarding the cultural backgrounds of the participants in this study, it is imperative to note that the identification of a distinct cultural context or socio-cultural milieu within which our subjects operate proves elusive. This particular aspect serves to distinguish the present study from my prior ethnographic investigation conducted for my master’s thesis, which centered on meditation practitioners who turned to contemplative practices primarily for therapeutic purposes. This encompassed not only clinical settings but also individuals who sought resolution for personal mental or physical health issues, or more broadly, enhanced well-being. These individuals can be categorized into two distinct and readily discernible cultural environments from an anthropological standpoint.

⁸ Cf. Hillman, 1990, p. 26.

The first cultural milieu notably pertains to those engaging in meditation from a therapeutic clinical perspective. Generally speaking, though bearing in mind the tendency toward generalization, these individuals often gravitate towards mindfulness practices and various clinical protocols. Notably, they frequently exhibit a perspective on meditation that reflects elements of what one might term ‘scientism’, characterized by an unwavering faith in and unwavering commitment to scientific practices. Concurrently, they typically view mindfulness as a scientifically validated practice and a kind of ‘psychotherapy’, among other things. From my personal ethnographic experience, it is evident that these individuals tend not to emphasize the spiritual or religious facets of meditation, as perceived by others. However, it is essential to acknowledge that within mindfulness practitioners, whether independently or under the guidance of a specialist employing a therapeutic framework, traces of spirituality and religiosity can manifest, encompassing diverse manifestations, particularly rooted in so-called Eastern spiritual traditions.

It is noteworthy that the brand of spirituality demonstrated by mindfulness practitioners or those who embrace mindfulness in a broader sense does not possess a particularly robust character. Frequently, it is exemplified by nebulous and imprecise notions pertaining to the Buddhist realm or what they often characterize using the antiquated and exceedingly imprecise term ‘Eastern’ or ‘Oriental practices’. As mentioned earlier, these individuals may encounter spiritual insights, and I have previously alluded to their association with movements frequently identified as New Age, which amalgamate various forms of spirituality originating from Asia and Europe. Historically, these movements have their roots in the reinterpretations of Asian spiritualities by Western adherents, with notable reference to the Theosophical Society and the fervor, particularly in the 19th century, in Europe for the realms of India and China. This infatuation resulted in numerous generalizations and misconceptions, instigating a resurgence of interest in Eastern spirituality, marked by Orientalist influences and a stereotypical, generalized portrayal of the East, leading to the emergence of exotic and captivating practices that piqued Western curiosity (McMahan, 2009).

This European and Atlantic fascination with the so-called Orient can be construed as an endeavor to define their own identity via overt differentiation and appropriation. The Occidental world delineated itself as the “non-Orient”, thereby endowing the East with an identity that failed to authentically encapsulate the diverse cultures and myriad historical, religious, and societal traditions that have historically characterized Asia. Nevertheless, Orientalism fabricated an Eastern identity, inherently reinforcing Western identities. In this vein, I have previously characterized mindfulness as an offshoot of this Orientalism, now undergoing a revitalization and transformation as it is reacquired, restructured, and reconfigured in ways that no longer serve to define Western identity, but rather, bolster Western capitalism (Purser, 2019).

In the capitalist metamorphosis of meditation into mindfulness, a commodified product is birthed, while meditation itself is transmuted into a technology of the mind. Indeed, this technique aligns with what Emanuele Severino has aptly identified as emblematic of the will to power intrinsic to Western culture (Severino, 2007; Pitari, 2019). In part, these narratives concerning the rediscovery of Asia and Asian cultures by the West also intersect with those who practice meditation or espouse so-called Eastern religions in the Euro-American context today. They are captivated by discourses that elevate the prestige of these practices. While there is no inherent fault in this phenomenon, it is imperative to consider that these spiritual movements engage in an ongoing dialogue with so-called Eastern identities. These identities, having been externally labeled as such, are also incorporated into processes of identity definition and otherness delineation. They may either embrace or refute these designations ascribed by external parties. However, it is impossible to disregard how contemporary Buddhism in East and Southeast Asia has been significantly shaped by the identity and image that adherents in these regions desire to project onto the global stage. The question no longer revolves around what Buddhism inherently is, but rather, how it is perceived in the eyes of the world (Sernesi & Squarcini, 2006). In the specific case of my ethnography, this was merely the background of the real focus, that is the perception of Buddhism or forms of spirituality linked to contemplative practice in the eyes of the users.

1.5 A note on autoethnography

The preferred tool for collecting qualitative data for this investigation is ethnography. However, I did not position myself solely as an observer in this study; I actively participated as well, drawing upon the tradition of autoethnographic studies, which I will briefly introduce. It should also be noted that the ethnographic model has been partially transformed in this study, moving towards the establishment of a form of inquiry that I personally refer to as “contemplative anthropology”. This form integrates ethnography and autoethnography, relying on introspection and utilizing meditation as a research tool. In this study, meditation is not only practiced by the subjects under investigation but also by the researcher, as it is inconceivable to approach such a complex subject as human consciousness otherwise. The integration of ethnography and meditation was first proposed by Orellana (2019). This contemplative ethnography represents the seamless integration of the ethnographic gaze conducted by those who practice meditation and sensitizes ethnographic inquiry through meditation. To clarify, a phenomenon or fact that can be empirically observed does not always reveal itself to our perception and sensibility in the same way. Ideally, the ethnographic gaze seeks to engage intersubjective dynamics in the understanding of human phenomena. Nonetheless, by integrating contemplative experience and looking at these phenomena with the same attention and

concentration that meditation stimulates, they appear even more distinct, and in greater depth than they do through participant observation alone. All the same, the contemplative view challenges some of the ideas and beliefs we have held about ethnography so far:

- 1) Immersion in the field: contemplative practice leads to the abandonment of the notion that there exists a culturally or geographically definable 'field'. This does not mean that cultures or social groups do not exist, but the definability of these as areas within which research can be conducted is seriously called into question. Just as a chemist has the laboratory as the place of their research, an ethnographer should have the 'field' as the place where social facts occur or the cultural context in which the dynamics in question take place. This is no longer the case from the perspective of a meditator, and the reasons for this reevaluation are noteworthy.
- 2) Limits of the emic approach: the ethnographer should adopt an emic approach, seeking to understand the viewpoints and perspectives of individuals within the community, rather than imposing external categories or evaluations. The emic approach arises from the need to bridge the cultural gaps presumed to exist between individuals from different cultural worlds, social realities, and diverse educational backgrounds. While these differences undoubtedly exist, the idea that they are *insurmountable obstacles* to understanding otherness is not tenable, just as the current notion that the boundary between subjectivities can be narrowed as much as desired but can never be fully shed to don another's perspective is a dogma. Specifically, this latter idea is what contemplative experience seriously challenges, prompting us to reconsider the methodological categories by which we assess the inter-subjective relationship. This is what is referred to as the non-dualistic experience of reality.

I will discuss more in depth contemplative ethnography later, as the methodology will be developed throughout the work.

Expanding upon the preceding discourse, the non-dualistic experiential paradigm engendered by meditative practice stimulates a fundamental reevaluation of the conventional demarcation that delineates ethnography from autoethnography. Traditionally framed as an introspective inquiry undertaken by the ethnographer, autoethnography increasingly presents a challenge in its categorical differentiation from ethnographic inquiries directed towards 'otherness', or presumed otherness, particularly when the profound influence of meditative engagement is taken into account. Notably, all ethnographic pursuits, including those oriented towards exploring facets of 'otherness', inherently traverse the subjective realm of the ethnographer. Furthermore, the confluence of ethnography and autoethnography is intensified when the ethnographer becomes immersed in contemplative practice, dissolving the divisive boundary between self and others to the extent of subverting conventional

consciousness. This transformative process extends the boundaries of individual subjectivity to encompass what was formerly apprehended as the subjectivity of external entities. Consequently, it becomes increasingly intricate to posit that an ethnographic investigation is fundamentally distinct from autoethnography, as our experiential consciousness, emancipated from the constraints of identity and traditionally internalized societal delineations, evolves to perceive and comprehend ostensibly 'external' phenomena not as distinct and disparate entities but as intrinsic components and distinctive manifestations of a unified consciousness. This perspective, in turn, beckons a contemplation of these phenomena as extensions rather than partitions of the self, thereby instigating further observation regarding their interconnectedness within the purview of a singular consciousness.

Hence, especially in a study like this, it is not possible, in my opinion, to distinguish strictly between ethnography and autoethnography. Consequently, it is not sensible to refer to autoethnography when reflecting on my own meditation and elicitation, and to ethnography when discussing what other subjects have reported to me. After all, particularly with a few subjects, the exchange is personal, and the meditative practice itself strengthens the bonds between subjectivities, as I will show in the ethnographic part.

The data on the other that I derive from my (auto)ethnography is no less valid due to passing through my subjective experience. It would be invalid if I were to force the subjectivity of others into a controlled and laboratory-like space, subjecting them to exercises in an environment that inevitably produces responses vastly different from situations where the subject feels less observed, less under scrutiny. To overcome this limitation, we must accept the subjective involvement of the anthropologist and validate the intersubjective exchange as a means of reaching meanings (Campregher, 2010; Strandvad, 2013; Friberg, 2019; Begueria & Beneito-Montagut, 2024).

Autoethnography is a valuable research approach that holds immense potential for understanding and presenting lived experiences in a meaningful and authentic manner. Tessa Muncey (2005), in reflecting on her own research journey, aptly likens mainstream research to a rigid superhighway that bypasses the idiosyncrasies and narratives of the communities it overlooks. Autoethnography, in contrast, allows for a more holistic understanding by incorporating both literal and metaphorical journeys. These journeys encompass birth, conflict, resolution, and alternative perspectives, offering insights into diverse worldviews. Muncey emphasizes the significance of snapshots, metaphors, artifacts, and journeys as integral components that form a patchwork of emotions, behaviors, and experiences. Together, they construct a comprehensive portrayal of one's life, contributing a much-needed truth to a world hungry for understanding.

Autoethnography emerged in the 1970s as a method for cultural members to provide firsthand accounts of their own culture. While early scholars recognized the importance of personal perspectives in research, they did not explicitly highlight the inclusion of personal experiences. In subsequent decades, qualitative social scientists continued to emphasize storytelling and personal narrative, challenging the notion of objectivity in research. Autoethnography gained popularity in the 1990s, particularly in communication studies, with scholars like Carolyn Ellis and Art Bochner producing influential texts. Autoethnography combines autobiography and ethnography, employing memory, reflection, observation, and interviews to explore cultural experiences. It serves multiple purposes: countering dominant cultural scripts and stereotypes, offering insider knowledge of cultural life, critiquing harmful representations, capturing everyday experiences, and creating accessible texts for a broader audience. Autoethnography allows researchers to reveal nuanced aspects of culture, challenge existing research practices, and engage both academic and nonacademic readers (Adams et al., 2017).

Scholars, including anthropologists, geographers, and researchers from other disciplines, sought to challenge the conventions of academic authority and objectivity by developing non-conventional forms of representation. Autoethnography, as a representational outcome, emphasizes the subjective nature of knowledge and utilizes subjectivity as an epistemological resource. It foregrounds the emotions and experiences of the researcher, dismantling the conventional distinction between researcher and subject. This approach enables critical reflexivity and recognizes the researcher-self as the primary research subject, shifting the focus from cultures or identity groups to networks, rationalities, and emerging assemblages. Autoethnography transcends cultural boundaries and embraces the concept of transculturation as a process. It encourages researchers to engage in self-examination and understand their own subjectivity in relation to the research field. By adopting an autoethnographic sensibility, researchers acknowledge the overlapping nature of researchers, research subjects, and the objects of research, challenging traditional distinctions. Autoethnography thus offers a valuable tool for addressing the epistemological and ontological dimensions of research and enriching geographic studies (Butz & Besio, 2009). Autoethnography, particularly in the form of personal experience narrative, offers valuable uses and potentials as well as potential problems in research. By adopting a twofold identity as academic and personal selves, autoethnographers delve into their own life circumstances to gain insight into broader social and cultural phenomena. They employ personal narrative writing, incorporating affect and emotion, to enhance their analyses. This approach represents a radical shift as researchers subject their intimate surroundings to critical analysis, treating themselves as objects of signification. Personal experience narrative proves successful in integrating personal experience effectively into the study of larger phenomena.

Researchers experiment with various forms of representation, such as fiction, poetry, and personal essays, blurring the lines between representation and performance. However, a challenge lies in crafting representations that resonate with the audience beyond the author. Distinct from autobiography or memoir, personal experience narrative aims to inform readers' understanding of aspects of the social world that extend beyond the researcher's individual experiences.

Autoethnography, emerging within the context of questioning the dominant scientific paradigm and advocating for multiple ways of knowing, holds great potential and poses challenges. Traditional scientific approaches have long marginalized the researcher's self, aiming to minimize bias and subjectivity. Autoethnography challenges this perspective by recognizing the situatedness of the knower and embracing subjectivity as a valuable resource for knowledge production. It offers a methodological alternative that encourages researchers to draw on their personal experiences, narratives, and reflections to understand the social world. By foregrounding the researcher's identity and emotions, autoethnography allows for a more comprehensive and nuanced exploration of research topics. However, autoethnography also faces criticisms and concerns. Its subjective nature and reliance on personal narratives raise questions about the reliability and generalizability of findings. Furthermore, the lack of clear methodological guidelines and the fluidity of the approach can make it challenging for newcomers to navigate. Nevertheless, autoethnography's emphasis on personal knowing, its potential to challenge dominant paradigms, and its commitment to giving voice to marginalized individuals make it a promising avenue for producing meaningful and transformative research (Wall, 2006).

There have also been proposals that build on autoethnography, such as analytic autoethnography. This is worthy of mention as it is definitely a step that brings this method closer to the contemplative anthropology that I have attempted to pursue in this work. There are certainly some, if not all, elements in common between the idea of analytical autoethnography and a contemplative one, such as, for example, the importance and value given to subjective experience considered as immediate data and not mediated or 'corrupted'. Furthermore, analytical autoethnography has been recognized as valid for the psychological analysis of emotions and is still used in this sense in psychological research (Buckley, 2015).

In many ways, my autoethnographic practice can be described as a particular form of habitual introspection. Meditation has always been a part of my life, at least since my adolescence when I first approached it. Over time, I have experimented with various meditation techniques, but they all share similarities and can be divided into three main phases: the first phase involves seeking focused concentration through relaxing the body and training the perception of presence. Depending on the situation, I may use audio aids to block out external noises, or I find peaceful and quiet places. The

attentive practice progresses by focusing on different parts of the body, which I progressively relax, and then concentrating on the breath until I feel my body reaches a state of tranquility where I can sense the blood flowing through my veins and even my heartbeat. During this phase, memories, recollections, or fantasies may arise, and I try to avoid dwelling on them to prevent distraction.

In the second phase, I choose an image or sensation to concentrate on and progressively “push myself downward”. The use of images or sensory stimuli is essential to evoke the sensation of descending downward, a spatial experience that I archetypally relate to depth, roots, and foundations. In this phase, different types of images may emerge, such as memories that were completely forgotten or spontaneous manifestations of inexplicable elements like luminous spheres, colors, moving shapes, or even sounds resembling steady and even tones, such as the slow reverberation of a large cavity.

The third phase, to simplify, begins when I access a state of consciousness that cannot be defined as either sleep or wakefulness, but rather as a transcendence of mere vigilant presence and an expansion of sensory capacities. If I reach this phase, a sense of cognitive expansion persists for a few minutes even after I resume normal activities. In the height of meditation, this sense of expansion can be connected to euphoric or blissful states, but not to mere bodily pleasure. Instead, it is something more complex, where a general understanding of what seemed previously more intricate is perceived. To use a metaphor I often refer to: it is like going from being in the midst of a labyrinthine street to hovering above it, seeing all the intricate paths clearly and distinctly in a unique way. Often, in the transition from the second to the third phase, there can be complications involving the rising of deep anxiety, restlessness, and crisis.

My autoethnography has thus progressed through these meditations, of which I kept written records in my diary. However, beyond these sensations, which I have just summarized, meditation also provides me the opportunity to reflect on specific issues. In the case of this ethnographic research, I have contemplated consciousness and the experiences shared with other meditators.

Some meditation sessions were directed towards a subsequent phase where I engaged in the creation of my own personal maṇḍalas (see Fig. 13, 14, and 15). Initially, I had considered subjecting these maṇḍalas to evaluation by other participants in this study without revealing that I was the author. However, I must mention that no response was satisfactory enough to be included in the transcripts. The initial notion of having other participants in the study comment on my maṇḍalas without disclosing the author’s identity proved to be rather unsuccessful. Overall, what I have observed from this ethnographic study is the remarkable richness with which an individual is able to articulate their thoughts, even with few words, when interpreting their own drawings, particularly if these drawings were created through a complex process of layering. The pursuit of the study of subjectivity greatly benefits from elicitation, genuinely encouraging subjects to open up more and reveal aspects of their

experiences in a more natural manner, sometimes even surprising themselves, because this is done under the guise of the interpretative 'mediation' of their own drawings. However, when it comes to interpreting others' works, not just my own, the attempts become much more forced and unproductive. The subjects strive to say something, which often amounts to compliments or aesthetic judgments, and this seemed frankly unhelpful to me from the outset.⁹

⁹ Except for Leo and, on one occasion, Joe, all the others simply contemplated the drawings in silence and made comments like "it seems complicated" or "very rich in details", but no preferences or other specific comments were indicated. I couldn't hide from Leo that I was the author of the maṇḍalas, and perhaps this is what encouraged him to be more candid. As for Joe, to whom I showed only 23, I received comments on the "complexity and richness of details", but also one about how "the mind of the one who produced it must be composed of multiple organized and harmonious levels, yet simultaneously rich in hidden worlds and symbolism that seem to dance in perfect harmony... I am also fascinated by the geometries placed in the center, which, in my opinion, indicate the attainment of a profound, almost primordial, state of knowledge" (interview on July 29, 2023). When comments are consistently along the lines of 'what a beautiful drawing' or 'the creator must be very talented', it devolves into what I found to be an embarrassing request for information. I have thus concluded that this aspect of the investigation did not warrant significant interest, as the 'self-analyses', if they can be so termed, proved to be far more fruitful. Aside from these comments, my maṇḍala production has mainly been an introspective exercise, reflecting on the nature of our relation with images.

2. Elicitation and the Inquiry on Consciousness

In this chapter, I will analyze the initial ethnographies and the application of the new methodology developed for this occasion, which, upon the suggestion of Paolo Favero, I have termed “maṇḍala-elicitation”. I will present the methodology of maṇḍalic elicitation as I also introduce the visual works carried out by the subjects, thus progressing with the presentation of ethnographic data.

The utilization of elicitation techniques has been introduced in the social sciences as a means of inducing subjects under investigation to spontaneously produce elements of interest to anthropologists and sociologists, while simultaneously removing barriers that are typically present in other situations.

Indeed, socio-anthropological research encounters a fundamental problem in the form of the anthropologist’s influence on the subjects being studied. The mere presence of a scholar who poses inquiries and asks questions to the subjects, despite being well-integrated into the field and environment, can engender situations of subjugation or reticence. Postmodernism in anthropology has extensively discussed the collapse of cultural barriers and the challenge faced by scholars in accessing a cultural alterity in which they have not been raised (Latour & Miranda, 2016; Clifford & Marcus, 2023). The innovation I intend to introduce with this ethnography is the collapse of another type of positioning, specifically the distinction between what is thinkable, imaginable, and conceivable by me, and that of the ‘other’. During psychological experiments, volunteers are studied almost always placed in a controlled environment under the vigilant observation of scholars, resulting in outcomes and responses that may not be provided spontaneously as in the outside world. Despite the anthropologist’s complete integration into the studied environment, the anthropological investigation will always proceed on an observer-observed axis. The interaction between subjects has been integrated as a component of the anthropological process and is no longer dismissed as impossible, as well as unproductive. Currently, the intersubjectivity of the ethnographic gaze is regarded as an asset, yet it still poses challenges for the spontaneity of the observed subjects. The visuals I have engaged with in this ethnography propose a radical reinterpretation of how we perceive viewing and observation, be it introspective or directed towards an ostensibly external object. I thus partially adopt Morgan’s notion, which elucidates the following.

Gazes are different patterns of configuring the immediate relationship between an image, a viewer, other viewers, a setting, and a divine or spiritual reality made present in the configuration. Most importantly, gazes structure a relationship between viewers and the image, or focal object,

and are therefore modes of interface with the broader network in which any gaze is embedded. Focal objects, I argue, perform their work on the viewer to make him or her the subject of seeing, whether it is to activate the viewer's moral agency, to create a social status, or to construct the notion of a unitary mind, soul, or substance.¹

In this context, we encounter a unique circumstance wherein the subjectivity of a meditator is articulated by an image. This image, in a certain respect, serves as a reference to interior imagery, or it is the interior image itself becoming evident within a multi-structured series of images. Consequently, it can be observed on various levels, embodying a range of narratives within itself. Elicitation techniques have emerged in this context as a tool for facilitating subject expression. As Pauwels writes: “participatory techniques seem to embody special opportunities to include the ‘emic’ view in research as a necessary complement to the dominant etic view” (Pauwels, 2015b, p. 117). It should be noted that Pauwels employs the term “etic” rather than “ethic” specifically in relation to the emic/etic dichotomy (Hahn et al., 2011), to emphasize an anthropological analytical approach that takes into account the perspective of the other, rather than that of the researcher, who holds an emic point of view (Förster, 2011). While the latter seeks to explore the cultural world of the other through immersive experience, thus understanding how others think by gradually acquiring their experience, the etic approach has traditionally been predominantly oriented towards more standardized methodologies of investigation, less tied to anthropology and more aligned with sociology or psychology (Mostowlansky & Rota, 2020). However, my intent is also to address this gap and explore the possibility of an etic perspective that remains faithful to the subjective experience of the participants, giving them a voice without being constrained by excessively stringent methodologies and measurements.

Noticeably, the emic perspective in anthropological literature has already been extensively examined (Xia, 2011). It is important to bear in mind that Pauwels’ discussion on visual elicitation primarily caters to a sociological audience. However, anthropology too can significantly reap the advantages of visual elicitation, as I will hopefully demonstrate.

In my research, the utilization of elicitation techniques was imperative from the very beginning. Initially, I planned to examine meditation through ethnographic interviews and auto-ethnographic reflections, by participating in various meditation seminars and courses in Brussels and Antwerp, meditating with the participants of these centers, and immersing myself in the milieu of meditators. However, I found this model to be completely unsuccessful, as it failed to recognize the very nature of the ‘field of consciousness’. Meditation centers only absorbed a part of the configurations of

¹ Cf. Morgan, 2014, p. 94.

meditators' ways of doing and confronting each other. Additionally, I discovered that meditators are generally reluctant to share their experiences, particularly those who follow the classic Western model of meditation, which seems to be a closed and self-centered practice. Meditators typically live busy lives and carve out a small space between one commitment and another to devote themselves to well-being, which means they only meet other meditators in a common meeting point. Furthermore, even in monasteries, where meditators are more nourished and bound by the common Buddhist spirituality, the sharing of spiritual experiences is highly codified and not very spontaneous.

Speaking individually with a meditator with whom a bond has been previously established, they may still be reluctant to describe their experiences of meditation in detail. In the case of mindfulness meditators, this may be linked to a general disinterest in deepening psychological issues. In the case of religious meditators, the lack of interest in deepening experiences is given by the fact that they are viewed as useless and potential attachments. The religious meditator usually has an idea of meditation that is closely linked to the cessation of cognitive activities of any kind. Despite the initial strenuous resistance to ethnographic inquiry, my investigation has pushed me towards two main revolutions. The first involves extending my research interest to neophytes and anyone who wishes to practice meditation as a contemplative practice understood more broadly, particularly outside of rigidly codified or doctrinally connoted centers. The second concerns the research methods, which have seen the adoption of a particular form of elicitation, specifically the use of maṇḍalas.

2.1 The contemplative Elicitation

The drawing of a maṇḍala, like the visual elicitation technique in general “was originally applied in psychological research” (Pauwels, 2015b, p. 118). However, in its application within the anthropological domain, visual elicitation has discovered novel applications, yielding diverse and unforeseen outcomes. A similar phenomenon was observed in the utilization of maṇḍalas. Ethnography through maṇḍalic elicitation diverges significantly from Jung’s intuition-inspired psychological investigations. My investigation endeavors to re-envision Jung’s approach, adapting it to the realm of ethnography, proposing an authentic maṇḍalic elicitation technique that is both transdisciplinary in its scope and well-suited for ethnographic inquiry. However, I have not foreclosed the possibility of studying the methodologies adopted not only by Jung, but also by subsequent psychologists. By conducting these comparative analyses, one can develop a technique that is both tailored to ethnographic needs, and is transdisciplinary in its application.

There are many types of elicitation, but the one proposed in this research is purely visual. I found this form of visual elicitation particularly effective because “researchers often find it is difficult to convince their respondents to participate in interviews” (p. 119), which was precisely my case, thus,

by making the interviewee produce something that represents him, but above all making him not only the creator but also the interpreter of his own art, “the respondents take on the role of an expert. This encourages them to speak more freely”, Pauwels writes.

The study of the maṇḍala hides great potential, given its composition of multiple layers, usually replete with symbols and visual elements that aim to represent various moods or phases of meditation. Participants were instructed to depict their spontaneous thoughts without confining themselves to any predetermined meaning. The creation of various layers of the maṇḍala occurred in a natural and modular fashion, spanning several phases, thereby capturing diverse periods of meditation. The artist, uninformed of their role as an artist, expressed their feelings freely, unconstrained by conventional forms and able to incorporate abstractions or other forms of visual representation. Only later, upon completion of the work, did the artist interpret their creation considered as a whole.

With no specific objective in mind, other than to depict sensations and experiences inherent to meditation and to explore the depths of the psyche, artists created a structured representation of their interior selves. The resulting maṇḍala manifested at various stages of their meditative journey, serving as an x-ray of their psychic state, a precious and intricate structuring of profound psycho-anthropological states.

Consequently, this representation of consciousness through imagery can offer invaluable insights into the nature of consciousness. As stated by Pauwels (2015b), “genuine *visual* feedback can be obtained by allowing the members of the group or culture studied to produce their *own* images in response to a researcher-initiated assignment” (p. 123). Drawing upon my familiarity with the Jungian approach, the validation of the potency of visual elicitation impelled me to devise a methodology that aligns with my underlying postulations. The methodology employed in this study is grounded in three key principles:

1. Participants must be practitioners of meditation, regardless of their level of experience or the specific technique to which they subscribe, provided that it incorporates the essential elements of contemplative practice. These elements include concentration or focus, the cessation of superficial cognitive processes, and the descent into deeper psychic layers where superstructures are no longer operative. The study considers the contemplation of these stages, as well as the deeper elements, as constitutive of ‘meditation’ (i.e., ‘contemplative practice’).
2. Participants are asked to create a multi-stage maṇḍala during their meditation practice. Each layer of the maṇḍala is drawn following the completion of a full meditation exercise, symbolizing their mental state and experiences at that specific moment. They are free to choose the shape of the maṇḍala’s layers, whether circular, square, or something else, and are

encouraged to create the maṇḍala spontaneously, without artistic or figurative constraints. They can also choose if proceeding from the outermost layer to the innermost or vice-versa. This section of the exercise draws inspiration from Jung's experiences. Jung's exploration into the realm of maṇḍalas began with his personal quest to create a maṇḍala as a method of conducting psychic self-analysis. According to Jung's intuition, the maṇḍala was to be produced in stages, similar to a modular path, with each layer added incrementally, following his initial decision to do so on a daily basis (Slegelis, 1987).

3. After the formation of the maṇḍala, the meditator will then present their work to an anthropologist (in this instance, me) in order to solicit an interpretation, thus "the respondent will perform a somewhat different 'expert role' when commenting on self-made images" (Pauwels, 2015b, p. 127). The anthropologist's role is initially that of a mere listener and observer, with questions posed to the participant only to solicit further interpretations of intriguing or unexplored parts of the work. However, in instances where greater rapport had been established, the anthropologist may offer interpretative hypotheses, seeking the participant's opinion. It is important to note that the exercise has to be conducted also as an auto-ethnography, with the researcher producing maṇḍala according to the same methodology and meditating throughout the study. The researcher can also decide to share their maṇḍala with other participants and cross-read their works for additional insights.

The results promise to shed light on the relationship between contemplation, artistic expression, and the subjective dimension. Additionally, I obtained the subjects' consent to exhibit their maṇḍalas to other participants without disclosing the producer's identity or personal and social context. The resulting interpretations from these cross-readings of other individuals' maṇḍala have yielded further noteworthy elements which will be discussed in due course.

2.2 The Uncanny

During the process of ethnographic elicitation, wherein I asked subjects to explain their path and the meaning they found in their maṇḍalas, I realized that there could exist an anthropological interpretation of the alchemical process as a journey of transformation of the subjects' world, and that maṇḍalic elicitation was just one of the many ways in which this transformation was most effectively stimulated. The alchemical metaphor will be employed herein solely for its imaginative value, and we shall refrain from engaging in an exposition of the history or philology of alchemical studies. The intention is to leverage the application that Jung makes of alchemy in his research, both because he, in the first instance, connects it to Asian spiritualities and maṇḍalas, symbols he deems to be present

in all cultures, not solely those of Buddhist origin. Furthermore, alchemy predominantly utilizes an imaginal lexicon, thereby serving as a fundamental aid in comprehending the metaphors of transformation and consciousness analysis, as expounded upon by meditation practitioners.

The images that populate the meditators' maṇḍalas are dreamlike, and in this sense, they are also alchemical images, meaning that they underlie a complex process (or several phases of the same) of psycho-anthropological transformation. This often forms part of the legacy of beliefs held by meditators, far from elaborating on them here, we take them for their sociocultural value: there is a kind of sharing of ideas, regardless of their origin, which links the practice of meditation to the images and perception of reality. In a subsequent ethnographic encounter in which I discuss these beliefs with Joe (October 12, 2023), he confirms to me that he sees a connection between the mental image and the real one:

"I really want to achieve enlightenment... I know this may indicate attachment, and I shouldn't pursue it with desire... it's difficult... but I also think that this fascinates me because I believe in the creative potential of thought... I believed in it even before I read anything about Buddhism and meditated... I mean, mental images, when accompanied by willpower, take shape in reality through sheer willpower... so if the mind itself that generates thoughts and constant judgments and continuous criticisms of everything and everyone and with great imagination 'creates' the reality in which we live, then what is behind it, wanting to regulate this flow of energies and thoughts through a 'discipline', such as Buddhism... then isn't what regulates also as illusory as the mind itself? Do you understand what I mean? I believe that through a long journey of this discipline... a meditation practice that can work as an inner work throughout life... it can lead to the ability to master the mind... just the act of mastering the mind and thought itself is a significant step forward... but since the Buddha said it's all an illusion... then the mind itself is as well... and this means that even what masters the mind is illusory... it's a fleeting image... is this the issue?"

Certainly, Joe's belief in the creative potential of thought was a central theme, but he was not alone in this conviction. Layla also suggested that mental images, when coupled with strong determination, could manifest in one's reality. This perspective indicates a deep appreciation for the interplay between the mind and the 'external' world.

However, this fact also represents a harrowing contradiction: a paradox. Over time and with the advancement of the contemplative experience of the meditators who participated in this study, I have frequently encountered a state of profound unease, concomitant with reaching a moment of 'unity' with the image, with the object of meditation. This is also a well-known phenomenon among long-term meditators. The dichotomy separating the observing subject from the observed object is erased

as meditation progresses, to the extent that a simple contemplative exercise focused on an ‘object’ observed by the meditator can culminate in the disorientation and bewilderment of the meditator, who feels in profound union with the ‘consciousness of the object’ being observed. At that point, where is the meditator? Where is the object? This sense of disorientation is regarded by many scholars, including philosophers, anthropologists, historians of religions, and psychoanalysts, as a primordial fact and is considered to lie at the very origin of thought.

The aforementioned points are highly relevant to the maṇḍala we are about to examine. Excluding certain experiments that may or may not be considered part of the elicitation exercise, but which Leo has unofficially excluded as “preliminary phases”—and which he then referred to as “disassembled maṇḍalas”—Leo’s first “official” maṇḍala, composed in approximately one week, had a significant visual impact on me. When he presented me with his initial creation, I was pleasantly unsettled, struck precisely by that primordial *thaûma* described by Severino: the mixture of astonishment and anguish, wonder and terror, curiosity and caution. It is perhaps this very emotion that underlies philosophy. However, his images also evoked in my mind the paradoxical nature of alchemical symbolism as well, thus closing the circle with what I knew from Demartinian anthropological theory regarding the experience of disorientation or crisis of presence. It should be noted that I will not immediately reveal these considerations to Leo, but also that many of the things I will say are derived from having processed genuine experiences of that same disorientation that Leo, like other meditators before and after him, reported to me precisely at the peak of contemplative sessions.

Alchemy is known for its use of obscure images, which are complex representations that are difficult to describe or understand. One such image is the alchemical *filius philosophorum*, also known as the *Rebis* or the *lapis*. This figure is often depicted as a hermaphrodite, which symbolizes a state of unity that is not easily comprehended. According to Jung, this unity is a complex accord, which is the culmination point of the work beyond which it is impossible to go except by means of the *multiplicatio*. The lapis is often described as the cosmogonic First Man, the root of itself, and the Ouroboros. Jung believes that the creation of the *increatum* is an impenetrable absurdity, which can only be described in terms of opposites. The alchemical opus ends with the idea of a highly paradoxical being that defies rational analysis, which is unsurprising given that the *complexio oppositorum* cannot lead to anything but a baffling absurdity. However, the paradoxical image of the goal holds out the possibility of an intuitive and emotional experience, as the unity of the self, unknowable and incomprehensible, irradiates even the sphere of our discriminating, and hence divided, consciousness. This inner unity, or experience of unity, is expressed most forcibly by the mystics in the idea of the *unio mystica*, and in the philosophies and religions of India, Chinese Taoism, and Zen Buddhism (Marlan, 2022, p. 57).

The theme of paradox is intricately linked with that of monstrous and unsettling images in alchemy. Abraxas, an occult deity of the Gnostics, is an example of a chimeric monster with supernatural characteristics. This theme evokes the ancient Greek idea of θαῦμα [*thaûma*], which refers to the astonishing and unsettling, and for Severino, it is the genesis of philosophy: the initial trauma before the inexplicable, the incredibly “other” (Tarquini, 2022; Borbone, 2021). Jung’s study of Abraxas reveals that the radical and primeval experience of opposites as a demonic force is a monstrous and divine reality. Jung argues that if Abraxas represents effectiveness, then nothing is in opposition to it, except for the ineffective. Therefore, its effective nature freely unfolds itself, and the ineffective does not resist it, allowing it to be imagined as a primal theory of action. Jung describes Abraxas as an “improbable probability, unreal reality”, adding that if the pleroma had a being, Abraxas would be its manifestation. Abraxas is not a specific effect but effect in general, representing both force and duration. What the god-sun represents is life, while what the devil represents is death. However, Abraxas speaks that sacred and accursed word that is life and death simultaneously, which renders it “terrible” and a “monster” (Marlan, 2022, p. 68).

This topic has a long history in philosophy and psychoanalysis, and it finally reaches anthropology thanks to de Martino. The sense of bewilderment or the utterly uncanny (*Unheimlichkeit*) is to be understood here, following Freud’s definition in an essay from 1919 entitled *Das Unheimliche*, as a form of anxiety derived from a perceived detachment from what is familiar to us. When uneasiness pervades the habitual, the dwelling (*heim*, from which *heimlich*, the familiar) appears as a contradiction, a distressing reception, an inhospitable abode. The dwelling itself can be understood in a broad sense: the ‘world’ is both internal and external, but here we want to avoid clear-cut divisions between categories as well as interpretive dualisms.²

What predisposes the “end” of worlds is, first and foremost, the implicitly accepted premise that being can annihilate itself: de Martino says that “entities are troubled by a void” (de Martino, 2019, p. 214). The experience of the end of the world as a crisis of presence, that is, an anxiety-ridden experience prefiguring one’s own annihilation, going into the nothingness of one’s being, is something that arises when one fears “the disappearance of the very possibility of manifesting a world, and emerging in it as presence”. Therefore, although we cannot concretely experience the “end” of the world, what anguishes us is the very idea of nothingness, “its withdrawal towards annihilation, its disintegration reflecting the fall of the energy of presence as the primordial ethos of world-making” (p. 216).

² Ernesto de Martino intuitively grasps, without being fully aware of it, that the idea of Nothingness fuels this process. He clearly revisits it in distressing expressions, in which the prefiguration of a “end” of the world transforms into a terrifying experience (*Weltuntergangserlebnis*).

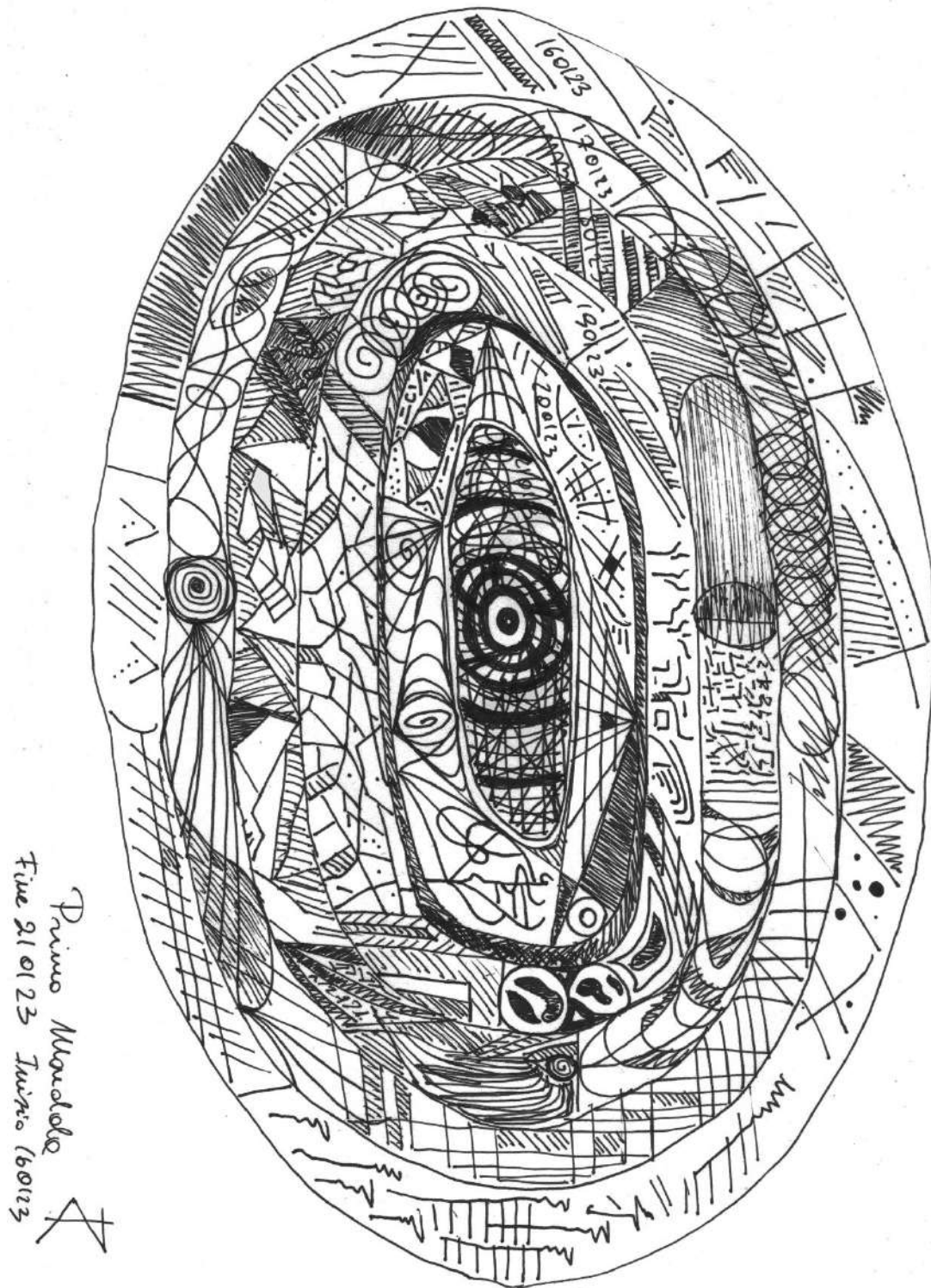
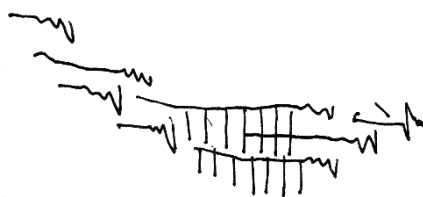


Fig. 2:
Leo's first 'official' mandala. Completed on January 21, 2023

The experiment with Leo exceeded my most optimistic expectations. I was aware that his maṇḍala contained such a vast amount of material that it would be impossible to analyze it all. In retrospect, I can confidently state that *thaûma* is the central theme of Leo's elicitation. We addressed this matter in the ethnography on March 1, 2023, during which I, of course, allowed him to be the first to explain to me what he saw in his work.

The first aspect that caught my attention concerns monochromatism. Leo conveyed the impression of internal stratification, almost a 'depth', using only the black of the pen and the white spaces. However, this striking black-and-white monochromatism is certainly a 'perturbing' element. I gave Leo the green light for his hermeneutics, and he immediately pointed out that his contemplative exercise involved a very specific and personalized approach. In other words, he wanted to integrate the meditative act into the process of tracing the layers and producing the maṇḍala itself. He did not meditate separately and then draw the maṇḍala; instead, he drew while meditating.

Indeed, Leo conceived meditation as an exercise of concentration embedded in the creative act, which would explain the complexity of the layers for him. Different layers communicate with each other, they are not entirely isolated but "contaminate" the adjacent layers. The construction of each layer gives the impression of a single moment of concentration. It is no coincidence that Leo chose to include the date in each drawn layer. The meditation primarily took place in the evening, and Leo believes that elements of the emotions experienced during the day are reflected in it, resurfacing as symbolic apparatuses during the meditative act.



Section of Fig. 2: "Human figures" in the first layer

Leo himself recognizes, only in retrospect, while reviewing the drawing, the presence of symbols that evoke clear meanings to him. For example, Leo points out a section of the first layer of the maṇḍala that he identifies as representing "human figures", strongly stylized but unequivocally individuals to him. Thus, the layers of the maṇḍala host various "groups" of symbols that conglomerate in specific areas. This is also not accidental for Leo. Another example concerns the spirals and circles: "I noticed that circles and spirals emerge during moments of meditation when I focus more on myself", he said.

Leo then specifies to me that for him, the outline of hands, stylized in various ways, is a recurring theme. He gives it a very cubist representation, but besides the hands, he also notices a representation of other “parts” of the body, which he relates to his personal reflection on corporeality that has been tormenting him in the months leading up to the creation of this maṇḍala. The “issues related to the body”, as he calls them, result in a “maximum symbolism given by a connection with reality through the body, like the hand that produces”. In fact, there is no figure in this maṇḍala that can be associated with realism.

“Speaking further about stratification... one important thing I want to say... concerning the maṇḍala and everything that comes with it... I am able to reconstruct the processes... that is, by looking at them retrospectively, I can reconstruct the... let’s say, the figures, what is there, the memory... but I find it difficult to recognize myself... to identify what is in the figure with who I am now... it’s very Pirandellian, you know... I am a magmatic fluid that constantly changes shape.”

At this point, I bring up my question about monochromatism, to find out if it is an intentional choice or what Leo thinks about it. Leo kindly points out that actually, in the layer marked as fixed on January 18th, there is a depiction of a sort of moon, the only example where the pen stroke is inconsistent. A moment that, for Leo, marks the beginning of a progressive symbolization of reality, whereas before there was a connection, albeit representative, with “the reality of things”, in which hands appear. Paradoxically, as symbolism increases while progressing towards the innermost layers, Leo also experiences an increased contact with reality. I personally asked him to confirm my interpretation, to which he replied that for him, “the symbolic is the condensation of reality onto things”.

After Leo has completely exhausted his hermeneutical interpretations, I think it is an opportune moment for meta-hermeneutics, namely the interpretation of what his maṇḍala has triggered in me. Leo only talked about “moments of feeling”, but not about how (or if) this maṇḍala can be a mapping of one’s own self. He responded to me that this was implicit for him, shifting my attention to the fact that, to his mind, the more rigid elements such as grids or angular lines manifest rational aspects of his personality, which I can confirm to be a significant component of his character, although deep down he is an extremely poetic person. The more sinuous lines, which break the rhythmic pattern, are indeed deeper (toward the center). Leo associates them, so he says, with emotion, but particularly with the “blotches”, which are also found in the outermost layer, “surrounded” by straight lines. Leo defines this as a “constriction of sensation and feeling within an ordered, orderable, and predictable structure of reason”.

Let's move on to the moment of my "disorientation", where, in his maṇḍala, I feel the *unheimlichkeit* to be preponderant. I think it is appropriate to bring this to his attention directly, given the intimacy we share. My impression is that this maṇḍala was unsettling (in a *thaûmatic* sense) not so much due to its density or its cubist nature, but rather because of the apparent presence of a double membrane. I explain directly:

"honestly, it seems as if you wanted to reproduce... let's say... the image that it evokes in me has a physical quality to it, first and foremost, it appears to be a physical orifice... you choose which of the seven [laughs], but that's what it seems like to me... there's precisely the border part that you've turned into a thin double layer, which has a membrane-like quality... and it seems that in reality, the last layer is not a layer at all but something that is beneath the entire structure of the layers above, from which you peer out... as if it were a hole or an orifice... and I would like to know... what is this thing at the center... that, however, seems like a lower level... topologically below... and gives this idea of both a carnal aspect and the fact that this lower dimension seems to extend below, even beyond what we see through the central hole, as if there were another maṇḍala beneath the first one, which is more extensive... well, it seems to me that the last layer is not a layer at all but a glimpse into another plane."

Leo is not surprised, and perhaps he expected this question from me. He points out that in the drawing there are two natures, one with swirls and one with straight lines. These are two aspects that he has already described to me as conflicting within himself. It should be noted that at the time of this ethnography, Leo was finishing his thesis in physics, which was a difficult path for him both in terms of the academic environment and the rigid nature of the subject matter. This is paradoxical if we consider that, for several years that I have known him, he has aspired to mathematics. After completing his degree in physics, he seriously contemplated whether it was time to shift academically towards mathematics. His own writing experience was a tortuous journey that ultimately culminated in a thesis in theoretical physics, where mathematics played a predominant role. It will become very clear during the course of my research that what I was investigating as "consciousness" on an anthropological level could not be fixed as a static image, but that the maṇḍalic elicitation itself depicted a transformative process, whose phases always follow common steps that Jung had already identified in his 'alchemical' theory.

In the language of the alchemists, matter suffers until the *nigredo* disappears, when the "dawn" (*aurora*) will be announced by the "peacock's tail" (*cauda pavonis*) and a new day will break, the *leukosis* or *albedo*. But in this state of "whiteness" one does not *live* in the true sense of the word,

it is a sort of abstract, ideal state. In order to make it come alive it must have “blood”, it must have what the alchemists call the *rubedo*, the “redness” of life. Only the total experience of being can transform this ideal state of the *albedo* into a fully human mode of existence. Blood alone can reanimate a glorious state of consciousness in which the last trace of blackness is dissolved, in which the devil no longer has an autonomous existence but rejoins the profound unity of the psyche. Then the *opus magnum* is finished: the human soul is completed [sic] integrated.³

Indeed, should we adhere to the conventional stages of traditional alchemy, we frequently encounter a fourth element, known as *flāvēdō* or *citrinitas*, which serves as a transitional phase positioned between *albedo* and *rubēdō*. The *flāvēdō* phase is marked by combustion, symbolically associated with the luminosity of fire and the Sun. The alchemical substance, previously subjected to putrefaction (*nigrēdō*) and subsequently purified (*albēdō*), now becomes illuminated by the potent and vigorous energy of consciousness. While *albedo* predominantly embodies a feminine essence, *flāvēdō* assumes a distinctly masculine character. The union of these two polarities ultimately culminates in the sacred union and the emergence of the progeny, known as the red stone (*rubēdō*). Consequently, *flāvēdō* represents a sublimation distinguished by the golden hue that suffuses the preceding lunar white. In accordance with Jungian theory, *nigrēdō* signifies the Shadow, while *albēdō* pertains to the Anima or Animus (the respective opposing aspects of the psyche in men and women). Conversely, *flāvēdō* embodies the archetype of the Wise Old Man, the masculine equivalent of the Great Mother, while *rubēdō* signifies the Self that has attained the entirety of its existence.

However, during these maṇḍalic meditations, Leo is seriously conflicted about continuing his academic path. For more than one reason, his first elicitation can be interpreted as a dominant *nigrēdō* phase. He had already decided to abandon physics and switch to mathematics, but now he is seriously questioning whether that will also become another arduous struggle, and whether it is truly worth attempting to change the academic environment, hoping that things will be different. He wonders if he will end up disillusioned and hating mathematics, which he holds in high regard and certainly does not want to lose, even if it means “doing mathematics”, as he often says, independently, continuing to fill the already dense notebooks where he writes formulas of his own creation.

Both of us have had very tumultuous experiences in university and have often been subjected to bitter treatment, which has deeply demoralized us. Therefore, I understand Leo on this point, as well as his conflict. His idea of mathematics is “pure” and philosophical, quite different from what is experienced in university, with few exceptions.

³ Cf. Marlan, 2022, p. 81.

As Leo spoke to me about the center of his maṇḍala, he began reciting from memory the last canto of Dante's Paradise "such is the geometer who wholly strives to measure the circle, yet, though pondering, finds not the principle he needs, no matter how he contrives", and then he comments

"that is the center of a nucleus that lies beneath everything else... that lies within everything else... as you said, that is a hole that opens onto a reality that is a different dimension... and there, in an even deeper layer, there is that white point which is the unattainable core of the Self, which goes beyond the division between rational and irrational and those contrasts... and it is precisely an unmoving engine that expands. But I would like to point out that there is a white layer that frames the central nucleus... And no line touches that white layer... there is this nucleus that is detached from all the productions and emanations of reality... this construction... this essence that has no ties to everything else... it generates... the unmoving engine."

It should be noted, I emphasize personally, that Leo has no knowledge or expertise in alchemical symbology or religious studies. He is certainly well-versed in Western philosophy, as evident from his language, but when he interprets the center as the nucleus of the Self, he doesn't even realize he's quoting an interpretation that Jung himself gave of maṇḍalas. I am certain that Leo is 'unfamiliar' with psychoanalysis, although he is not unfamiliar with continental philosophy.

I define the detachment from the center to the rest of the maṇḍala as a relationship with a kind of "resonance zone", and here the anthropological references would be possibly infinite. However, I would not exclude his personal deformation as a physical "descent" into this representation of a sort of wave source. Instead of talking to me about atoms, Leo indirectly mentions Plotinus and the "pulsating" being that generates the world (το ἐν). When I smile at his mention of Plotinus, evoking the name of the Greek philosopher, he is surprised that I know about him. Paradoxes never end. Actually, I have always talked to him about Indian philosophy, but his surprise at me having read Plotinus—as if I were completely ignorant of any philosophical tradition outside India—is a wonderful paradox of our friendship.

Anyhow, in Leo's case, we are not talking about psychopathological issues, so we need to readjust the concept of Freudian and Demartinian *unheimlich* and understand it not as a condition that manifests itself in specific moments of pathological crisis, but as an existential drama, that de Martino himself had already understood in this way, which is then an anthropological drama and concerns all individuals. Although it may not have explicitly emerged in the initial ethnography with Leo, it seems evident to me that this elicitation also brings to light many of these existential dramas, not in the form of the maṇḍala, but in its contents. The struggle between the more baroque lines and the straight strokes is an exemplary case. Leo's presence, even hidden beneath, adding a third dimension to the

maṇḍala, creating a layer beneath the layers, is threatened by these struggles, which, however, somehow branch out from it, as can be seen by studying his maṇḍala from the center to the periphery. Those who experience this crisis are unaware that disappearance, which they mistakenly live as annihilation (using de Martino's own words), always precedes a new emergence. But if the arising of a new world is not foreseen at the end of a world, then the crisis takes over, giving rise to a sense of displacement and uneasiness (*unheimlich*). The ritual device aims to ward off the anxiety of nothingness, as "ritualism harbors in germ a protective separation from the world, a restorative escape from becoming" (de Martino, 2019, p. 237). In other terms, the experience of the end of the world can be conceived as a loss of self (*Selbstverlust*), a "withdrawal of the ego into the world" (p. 164) that coincides with semantic confusion.

The form of discernment that underlies identities, the interpretive framework of the world that shapes familiar concepts, begins to crumble, and everything can become other than itself. Based on what we have said, it is natural to consider socio-cultural identity as the cornerstone, the center of irradiation, of the experience of the "world", which is always, let us remember, a cognitive world. Only the nihilistic premise, which allows us to think of being as nullifiable, opens up the possibility of such a crisis of presence. This is not an interpretation, but it is de Martino himself, beyond any reasonable doubt, who uses the concept of being and annihilation to describe this peculiar condition of the end of the world: "annihilation is experienced as destruction emanating from an overpowering, hostile world that stands in front, the no-longer-being oneself as dispossessing, powerlessness as disempowerment, being exposed to dismemberment as a malevolent displacement and disempowerment by those counterforces. Being subtracted and torn away from oneself appears here as emptying, deprivation, and theft of existence" (p. 165).

When it is not a conscious act that destroys the cognitive barriers that create perceptual dualism, the subject who finds themselves in a condition of witnessing the end of their own world, the confusion of what they could previously recognize and discern, can only experience a sense of displacement (*Unheimlich*), the sensation of being in an unfamiliar and hostile place, or being victims of something they cannot control. The world has changed, everything is indeterminate, like "a feeling of lack of support and insecurity" (p. 169).

2.3 The World and the Presence

The uncanny experience can have multiple possible explanations. We have already evaluated de Martino's proposal multiple times, but it must be said that a surprising connection to a contemplative experience of Jung could have inspired it, which helps us to better understand the aspect of the crisis of presence. It should be remembered that meditation has two aspects: on the one hand, the dissolution

of dualistic and isolating cognitions, i.e. the perceptions mediated by the belief that the entities of the world, including one's own identity, are independent, and on the other there is the risk that, if we arrive unprepared for this dissolution, it can turn against us, in the form of an anguish of the presence that dissipates.

As Petitmengin notes very well: “the dissolution of intentional veils supposes the adoption of a receptive mode of attention, which allows the recognition of usually unnoticed microgeneses concealed by the absorption of attention into the content or objective of action”, indeed “tiny tensions create a subtle cognitive veil which has the effect not only of concealing, obscuring the immediate experience, but of superimposing on it the false appearance of a subject-object duality” (Petitmengin, 2021, p. 48). This duality is at the very basis of the perception of the ‘world’ and identity. When it is lost, perception itself collapses, and presence falls into crisis. The most expert meditators do not allow themselves to be caught by this crisis, because contemplative practice has led them to a more extensive understanding of their own presence in the world, which is therefore lost in its historical-cultural contextuality, and they feel no need to determine themselves in punctiform way in the stream of consciousness. However, there are crises, meditative but also of another kind: de Martino includes all neuroses and psychoses, from schizophrenia to paranoia, in the manifestations of the end-of-the-world crisis. What is really interesting about this is that Jung is most notably known for an experience resembling paranoia, as recounted in his memoirs. In this event, he found himself succumbing to an unusual state of despondency, subsequently encountering a sequence of images associated with symbolic-mythological manifestations (Marlan, 2022, p. 41). Jung characterized this experience as verging on psychosis, yet it also served as the impetus for him to document his psychic development through the creation of mandalas. Through this episode, Jung obtained tangible evidence of the potency of images within the human psyche.

Recognizing Jung's experience as likely an instance of *Weltuntergangserlebnis*, as studied by de Martino, renders Jung's personal analytical approach more comprehensible. Initially, he perceived the distinction between external and internal realms to have dissolved, supplanted by an irreconcilable contradiction (Marlan, 2022, p. 42). Consequently, Jung resolved to closely observe his own psychic development on a daily basis. Marlan explains (*ibid.*):

It was a long time before Jung felt he began to emerge from the darkness. One of the things that had helped him come to terms with his nearly overwhelming experiences was that he began to draw small circular drawings in a notebook every morning. He recognized such drawings as mandalas, which seemed to correspond to his inner situation at the time.

I have elected to draw inspiration from this methodology, as it affords us an opportunity to observe not only the various stages of consciousness that manifest during the meditative process, which would be impossible to discern if a complete work were to be produced in one fell swoop, but also because several scholars have associated different levels of the unconscious with distinct layers and substrates of the maṇḍala. In my interpretation, cultural and biographical elements are often expressed in different parts of the visually elicited maṇḍala, while the central areas represent a more profound dimension that is intimately linked to consciousness. Nonetheless, the demarcation between layers does not appear to be an inflexible fact. In the elicited maṇḍala, the boundaries traced by the pencil or pen often fail to contain the psycho-anthropological contents of the subjects, which frequently permeate other layers, resulting in a more cohesive design and a compelling subjective representation. Jung personally writes about his encounter with this art form:

In 1938, I had the opportunity, in the monastery of Bhutia Busty, near Darjeeling, of talking with a Lamaic *rimpoche*, Lingdam Gomchen by name, about the *khilkor* or mandala. He explained it as a *dmigs-pa* (pronounced “migpa”), a mental image which can be built up only by a fully instructed lama through the power of imagination. He said that no mandala is like any other, they are all individually different. Also, he said, the mandalas to be found in monasteries and temples were of no particular significance because they were external representations only. The true mandala is always an inner image, which is gradually built up through (active) imagination, at such times when psychic equilibrium is disturbed or when a thought cannot be found and must be sought for, because it is not contained in holy doctrine.⁴

Jung states that the structure of the maṇḍala cannot be attributed to a Buddhist invention, but rather Buddhists must have drawn on a common theme of the collective unconscious, which they have been able to reinterpret and represent in their own way. In addition to the Buddhist maṇḍala we find similar representations in every artistic tradition of the world.

Jung elucidated the origins of active imagination in his writings (Chodorow, 2015), recounting his inaugural personal encounter with the phenomenon in 1913. He posited that the unconscious mind's desires and fantasies either emerge spontaneously or are more or less consciously brought to awareness. Once acknowledged or actualized by an individual, the intensity and frequency of these emersions—mainly in the form of dreams—may diminish, in contrast to their previous vivid and recurrent nature. Active imagination, a cornerstone of Jung's contributions to psychoanalysis from

⁴ Cf. Jung, 1980, p. 96.

1912 to 1960, serves as a means of visualizing unconscious issues, thereby enabling their emergence and facilitating the analysand's ability to address them.

This technique can be executed through various forms of expression, such as visualization, automatic writing, or artistic endeavors like drawing, dance, music, theater, painting, sculpture, ceramics, and crafts. Comparable to shamanic journeying—albeit typically constrained to the mental realm without the creation of physical objects or games—active imagination fosters creative independence from the analyst. As Jung contended, by engaging in this method, patients can shape themselves through their own artistic manifestations.

Jung's concept of active imagination, conceived between 1913 and 1916, entails a meditative practice that transmutes the unconscious' contents into distinct images, narratives, or personifications. This technique functions as a conduit between the conscious self and the unconscious, promoting the exploration and amalgamation of dreams and creative impulses through imagination and fantasy. Jung drew parallels between active imagination and the transformative processes of alchemy, as both endeavors seek unity and interconnectedness from a fragmented and disassociated entity.

Central to Jung's active imagination is the maintenance of wakeful consciousness while invoking the unconscious and fostering a creative, dialectical relationship with evolving internal imagery. If an individual were to verbalize a visualization of a scene or character, Jung's method would necessitate the practitioner to observe the scene, discern any alterations, and comprehend them prior to engaging in a relationship through their conscious self and cognizance, ultimately leading to the expression of a third, reconciliatory perspective. Active imagination demands rigorous effort and is distinguished from passive or purposeless phantastic imagination. This approach intends to preclude unconscious contents from manifesting without the conscious mind's involvement, emphasizing the necessity for personal reactions to be incorporated into the process.

Anthropology has in the past begun to entertain the notion of delineating an association between human creations, imagery, and objects in general, and states of consciousness (Lewis-Williams & Dowson, 1988). It appears reasonable to postulate that an object fashioned by an artist, who invariably inhabits a distinct historical-cultural milieu, embodies aspects of the inner, subjective psyche of its creator, along with substantial traces of its cultural essence.

Nonetheless, some scholars have proposed a more dynamic connection between the 'produced' object and the 'producer' as a cultural subject, prompting inquiries into the appropriateness of regarding the object (or the image) as a cultural subject in its own right. Consequently, the production of a work may not be viewed solely as a relationship between creator and creation, but rather as an interaction between two consciousnesses—one actively shaping and the other being shaped, yet simultaneously requesting to be formed in specific ways and configurations.

In this theoretical framework presented by Shapland's thought experiment, consciousness is posited as a pervasive property, manifesting in varying degrees across all entities. Given that consciousness is hypothesized to permeate all aspects of the world, the interactions between human consciousness and the consciousness inherent in matter may facilitate the emergence and enhancement of the latter (Shapland, 2021).

I was intrigued to encounter Shapland's explanation of object biographies within the context of a panpsychist theory (pp. 520-2). This theoretical framework is applicable to the analysis of anthropomorphic objects, as well as to anthropological postulations concerning the ascription of consciousness and individuality to particular artifacts. These artifacts hold significant cultural, rather than solely functional, relevance within the societies that engendered them (p. 524). Shapland's theory can be readily applied to the visual elements that constitute an image 'crafted' during a contemplative experience. In this context, the meditator engages in dialogue with the subject being drawn, thereby creating a complex imaginal dynamic.

2.4 Coniunctio Oppositorum

Not all transformative processes involving *thaûma* are equally explicit in their phases of self-deconstruction and reconstruction as in the case of Leo's maṇḍala. When examining Layla's work, for example, I found myself confronted with something that was seemingly harmonious but upon closer inspection, equally disorienting.

As mentioned in the introduction, Layla is a joyful woman with an attitude that I would dare to define as optimistic. She is a positive and also highly conscious individual. Her meditative technique is a substantially personal compound derived from various phases that she has assembled throughout her experiences in the 'spiritual realm'. Layla is more than a mere spiritual enthusiast; she is an active inhabitant of this realm and a passionate practitioner. She has engaged in various forms of meditation, including mindfulness, but has also had a master who taught her to combine meditation with so-called astral projections. Anthropologically speaking, this aspect is part of the well-known revival of shamanic cultures in the West, often transformed and reshaped by Western and Westernized perspectives to become something new (Botta, 2018). Shamanism and its related ecstatic techniques have long fascinated Westerners, as they are associated with a presumed mysticism of a purer, lost archaic era that we are supposedly reclaiming through neo-shamanism. These are highly complex phenomena that often blend a desire to recover a form of strong spirituality lost in the modern world, while simultaneously combining heterogeneous and historically distinct phenomena, such as the shamanic cultures of the Americas and Siberia, or ecstatic practices with Indian meditative traditions.

Regarding Layla, she explained to me that she views meditation as a metaphor and a means of communication through imagery. Specifically, meditation is the way in which the unconscious communicates with consciousness, imaginatively and imaginal. Such communication already occurs through imaginal modes in ordinary contexts, such as dreams or inspiration, but Layla believes that meditation allows individuals to focus on an intention that facilitates a more effective reception of messages inherent in these images. At the outset, it was stated that the processes of world organization undertaken by consciousness are fundamentally dichotomous in nature: they engender separations and divisions and structure a world based on this divisive force. However, this division also exists within consciousness itself: it could not divide the world if it were not intrinsically split, dual in its very nature, somewhat akin to how the brain is divided into two functionally distinct hemispheres in their ways of perceiving the world (McGilchrist, 2019).

This divided consciousness is also found in Layla's fundamental cosmogonic conception, which envisions two distinct worlds coexisting in parallel dimensions, occasionally intersecting but essentially unknown to each other, and only the power of meditation can bring them into alignment. These are the everyday and material dimension as opposed to the 'spiritual' dimension. According to Roy Willis, "all human cultures simultaneously recognize a duality in world-view or cosmology while also recognizing an underlying commonality or continuity" (Greenwood, 2005, p. 91). Lévy-Bruhl was the first to suggest "that human beings had two coexisting forms of consciousness: rational-logical and mystical; he went against the Enlightenment premise that the predominant mode of thinking was rationalistic" (*ibidem*). However, he still could not understand the potential of this 'spiritual' world (or perceived by many cultures as such), at least not at the level of anthropological studies on consciousness. He still referred to societies that envisaged a spiritual conception as "inferior" (*sociétés inférieures*), and we must wait for de Martino before the study of 'magical' worlds is given serious consideration and anthropological structure.

Layla defines her personal approach to meditation as a "technique of psychosynthesis and visualization inspired by shamanic trance". It is fascinating that she herself considers these techniques equivalent to Buddhist meditation and responded to my call for volunteers interested in participating in a study on meditation. Her shamanic-meditative journey begins with an "anchoring to an image", as she explains in the ethnographic interview conducted on March 2, 2023.

This anchoring translates into a "journey in which images spontaneously present themselves, automatically constructing from that initial image that I have anchored in my mind... the first image can be recalled from memory, but those that develop from it are not controlled by my conscious mind".

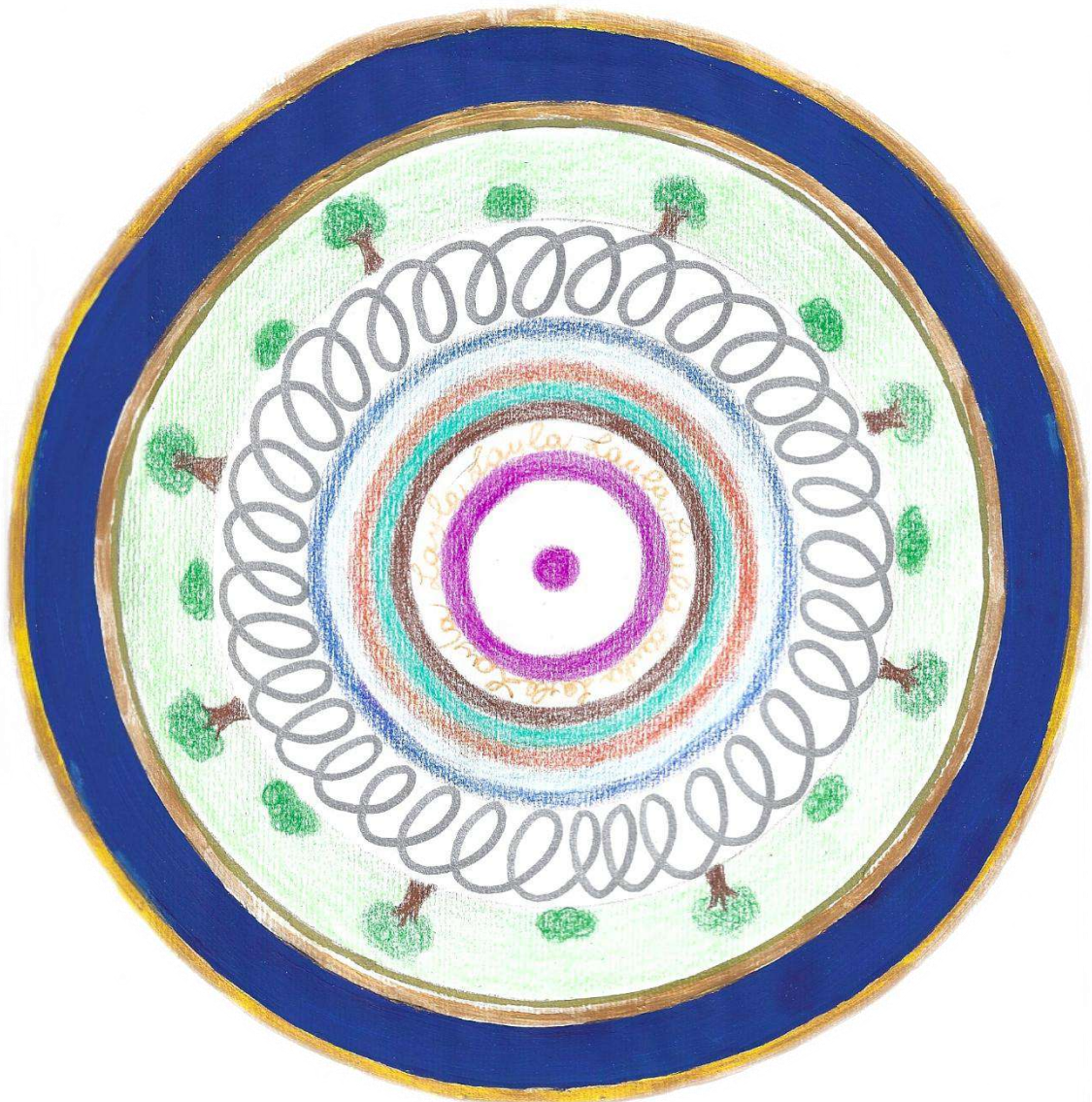


Fig. 3: Layla's Maṇḍala. Completed on March 1st, 2023

This mnemonic anchoring is a metaphorical downward calling, and Layla explains that it is crucial for it to be so: “any image is acceptable, as long as it evokes the lower, the foundations, the depths... roots... earth... subterranean caves... stairs”. To achieve this, one can also evoke anchors from other senses: “I can hear sounds, preferably drums... and by following that rhythm, I descend into the unconscious, the lower realm... where a part of me resides, which my mind is trained to perceive as an animal guide... I do not know what form that animal will take until I visualize it at the end of the downward path... and then, by following that animal, other images surface... but visualizations should never be interpreted! I must limit myself to receiving them as they are, with a non-judgmental attitude”. It is also noteworthy here how a fusion is made between shamanic traditions involving the

“ecstatic journey” and the visualization techniques of Buddhist meditation, as well as the so-called “non-judgmental attitude”, characteristic of a modern interpretation of Buddhist morality.

The imaginative journey of Layla, as well as the maṇḍala she presents to me, is imbued with symbolisms typical of this culture that I define as “neo-spiritualist modernism”. It should be noted that this does not in itself undermine the credibility of the eliciting experience. On the contrary, Layla composed the maṇḍala by repeating her contemplative exercise several times, while respecting the only request I had made: not to draw predetermined symbolisms, but to let the images flow autonomously onto the paper, to be interpreted only subsequently. Layla kept me informed of the developments in her meditation throughout our ethnographies. As early as February 22nd, she said to me as follows:

“The first journey... did not come from the traditional practice of meditation but from a shamanic journey indeed. In reality, I embarked on this journey with a different intention... seeking guidance for personal work. However, before responding, the guide who appeared to me... you know, guides being energies that support us, to which our brain assigns a face to make them “accessible” to us... and he asked, “Who am I...?” Referring to the maṇḍala, and then added, “I am”, referring to myself, not to himself. As the guide told me this, the vision of the first vision appeared: a deep blue color representing the vastness of everything, space, and the universe, surrounded by a golden strip both internally and externally, symbolizing my uniqueness. Therefore, I am the entirety enclosed within the golden frame of my uniqueness; I am both Everything and Unique. If we wish to perceive it in terms of psychosynthesis, which I have studied... or rather, directly experienced within myself, in the past, I am the container of the whole. In shamanic terms, I embody both the essence and the personality that carries this essence into the world... otherwise referred to as the ego, but since the term is used derogatorily, I prefer the term “personality”, which is the physical means to manifest the essence in the world.”

The manner in which Layla recounts her experiences, her room filled with a diverse array of objects, evokes reminiscences of what, perhaps prejudicially, we are inclined to designate as ‘shamanic’. As Layla speaks, she consistently wears a radiant smile, exudes cheerfulness and good spirits, yet retains an air of calm composure. Behind her, a drawing she crafted subsequent to a shamanic retreat is displayed, which schematically represents what she considers to be the four fundamental elements, depicted through a series of concentric triangles. She takes it in hand and shows it to me, noting my interest. Surrounding her are tambourines, small sticks, dream catchers, and an assortment of sundry objects that populate an environment which conjures imagery of a vast sunlit spring meadow, replete with a congregation of neo-shamans,

perhaps somewhat quaintly within my imagination, engaging in a gathering. But in the end, what is modern shamanism? From the standpoint of historical authenticity, it undeniably stands as a recent cultural construction. However, when considering its spiritual impulse, it cannot be anything but genuine, akin to every cultural and religious movement, even if it draws inspiration from a fictional antiquity significantly amended in its reconstruction. Within Layla's shamanic visions, I easily discern the same proclivities toward 'magism', as de Martino termed it, which we can also identify in other cultures around the world.

"The second meditation was a bit strange... I heard continuously 'I am nature'... I think this includes instinct... and originated from a dream, further explored through meditation with the Spirit of the Earth element. The third meditation delivered this message: 'I am emptiness', the Void that regenerates. It arose from a meditation involving the five elements within a teaching related to the ability to create emptiness so that life adjusts by itself, regenerates, and falls into place... both within myself and externally if I step aside a little."

We can see this reflected in what will later become the outermost layer of the maṇḍala. However, upon viewing the complete work, I couldn't help but notice an uncanny experience here as well, namely that of descending into the depths. But while Leo's meditation led to expressing, at least in the first maṇḍala, a profound state of internal rift due to his conflict with the social world, in Layla's case, we witness another aspect of the same problem that is emphasized: the tendency, or rather the fervent desire, for reunification, for reconciliation with oneself. The conjunction of the opposites is not a mere undifferentiated fusion of the two elements that unify, but rather something new (Marlan, 2022, p. 49).

This is what Elémire Zolla defined as the nostalgia for completeness that underlies the myth of the androgynous (Zolla, 2022). In Layla's spiritual conceptions we find this same idea, also developed through her visual journeys experienced during the meditations and shamanic flights, that is, that the human being is in its fundamental essence an undivided unity, neither male nor female, thus referring to the myth of the androgynous.

Layla's maṇḍala also reveals a rift, albeit not prominently. It is in fact divided into two main sections: the first, pertaining to the outermost states, concerns the social ego, the culturally constructed identity that is part of the mask, the "Persona" we wear every day, the one that says "I am... I am...", and then we see a separation, represented by a sort of barbed wire, colored even in silver-gray, which constitutes a distinct division with the innermost layers, which are instead more primitive in their structure: they are pure color. No need to say that there is more than a strong relation between consciousness and identity: "il est évident, surtout pour nous, qu'il n'y a jamais eu d'être humain qui

n'ait eu le sens, non seulement de son corps, mais aussi de son individualité spirituelle et corporelle à la fois" (Mauss, 2021b, p. 335). Layla will subsequently describe that "barbed wire" differently, but we can reconstruct the meditative phases that led her to compose it, an experience she communicated to me on February 27th:

"In the fourth meditation I have seen the five elements represented by colors, with earth at the base, followed by water, fire, air, and ether or space. In many cultures, it is believed that the five elements are the foundation of creation, and everything is composed of them... thoughts, nature, objects, humans, including myself! This experience emerges from a meditation involving the five elements. I cannot but think that these elements are important... at least as symbols... for my life."

According to Jung's perspective, the emergence of new life from states that resemble death suggests that the descent into the unconscious does not lead to the destruction or loss of the soul. Rather, it is forming a "living counterpole" to the state of death in the physical world. The Rosarium portrays this counterpole as the activation of feeling and new life. However, Jung considers this not to be the final stage. The emergence of vitality indicates another kind of experience that anticipates the *lapis*, which involves "imaginative activity" and intuition, essential for complete realization. Jung believes that the imaginative activity unlocks new psychological possibilities for insight and changes the way we perceive the world. Imagination revels in the garden of magical possibilities as if they were real.



Fig. 4:

Squaring the circle. Representation of the creation of the Philosophers' Stone, from *Atalanta Fugiens* by Michael Maier, 1617, Emblem 21

For the alchemist, nothing is more charged with such possibilities than the intuition of the *lapis philosophorum*, the Philosopher's Stone, which provides a complete experience of the individual's totality (Marlan, 2022, p. 56).

In her representation, Layla has opted to incorporate the dimension of color. I refer to color as its own distinct dimensionality because it adds something more than the mere line or shape traced on the two-dimensional plane to the visual experience. Color is a choice stemming from the necessity to imbue the maṇḍala with meaning that simple two-dimensionality (a monochromatic shape) cannot always convey. On March 2, 2023, I finally beheld the complete maṇḍala and allowed the artist, Layla, to expound upon the meditative experience in its entirety, reassembling the pieces of the various phases, which had subsequently metamorphosed into layers.

“I think that at the core of everything is the need to heal... to heal in a non-medical but deeper sense... I start meditating by creating emptiness... the only fundamental action is setting the objective... and there comes the image... there comes the place, which often is a place from the past, from childhood, when we are purer... and precisely I ‘make emptiness’, then the image arrives... and I go deep into it. Now, talking about the maṇḍala... I think that each layer represents a different day of meditation... but I haven’t really thought about it much. I mean, now I see it with you for the first time as a whole... the issue of the center is the most powerful image... it came to me during a shamanic journey... a space, a vast space with something spinning around it... and it’s a center without parts... the parts are divisive and they mess up our lives a bit... they are pieces of ourselves that we developed at different moments in our growth, but each part has different desires, different needs... and they all go against each other... and if the center is not self-aware, it remains at the mercy of these conflicts without being able to move... that’s what I seemed to understand by looking at that center... even though you don’t have to erase your parts, you know... making two parts get along is like merging them into a third part... into a new center... that’s why for me, everything actually revolves around that center... then, there is a layer where I wrote my name in golden color... well, that is not my identity, even though it is my name... you see?”

The meditative journey undertaken by Layla has woven a discourse on identity through a theater of images. Contemplatively considering identity as a problem enables Layla to apprehend what I can certainly construct as discourse on an intellectual plane. However, in the case of contemplation, it possesses the advantage of phenomenological experience: the perception of the ephemeral nature of one's own identity is vividly ‘felt’, and the emptiness of things is

manifest in the same imaginative voyage prompted by contemplation. Thus, it transcends the theoretical goal, constituting a form of experiential evidence of this phenomenon.

Yes, 'I am Layla'... my name came to me during meditation, but I understood that the name is just a sound... that carries a vibration that evokes something... yes, the name is a social identity, but in some cultures, it is also said that it is the soul whispering to the parent the name it wants to have in this incarnation, and therefore that vibration, that sound of that name... will remind us of our deepest mission... because every time we hear it, it awakens us and reminds us of who we are... deep down... the name is deeper than the social identity... that's why it is closer to the center. The phrase 'I am Layla' is the fifth layer, encapsulating the map of my being, who I am, within the sound, vibration, and imprint of my name. Layla is the quality that I bring into the world, resonating on that frequency. It arises from a simple meditation of silence and centering, holding the question 'Who am I?' I am the center. In psychosynthesis, it is said that I am the center, the point in the middle, and around us revolve our parts, which are aspects of our personality. We must be masters at holding the reins, managing, containing, or giving space to one aspect or another that may sometimes be in conflict with each other. This symbol, which is also of my favorite color, cyclamen, represents this.

It should be noted, as a complement to this anthropological framework, that Layla engages not only in personal meditation but also serves as a guide to others. She offers herself as a meditative guide, incorporating additional "shamanic techniques", as she defines them, in order to facilitate the healing of individuals who seek her supervision. If we were to contextualize her personal experience within other aspects found in various cultural worlds, we cannot avoid looking to the great shamanic traditions of Asia and Native America. However, Layla's neo-shamanic reinterpretation is highly individualistic and incorporates principles and techniques typical of contemplative Buddhist practices, which, in themselves, do not inherently involve a visual or spiritual guide aspect. Nevertheless, within Layla's conceptual framework, consciousness can also manifest through these images or spiritual guides. Naturally, the form of spiritual guidance, which is unique in the case of the subjects participating in this study as it is peculiar to Layla, is however a fact that always accompanies 'magical' practices in the anthropological sense: "Le caractère indéfini et multiforme des puissances spirituelles, avec lesquelles les magiciens sont en relations, appartient bien à la magie tout entière" (Mauss, 2021b, p. 79).

These entities perform 'magical' acts that serve the assistance she seeks. Simultaneously, these magical acts are made possible by the connection that consciousness has with any other. In other words, every conscious being is interconnected with all others and can exert a form of performative

influence on others. In the deepest stages, this is not limited solely to inanimate objects: everything is consciousness, and thus, everything is engaged in a dialogue with everything else.

Magical consciousness, as an aspect of human cognition, may be equated with what Lévy-Bruhl has termed ‘the law of participation’. Lévy-Bruhl saw participation as a psychic unity, a fundamental state of mind, that included individuals, society, and the living as well as the dead; he described it as a type of thinking that created relationships between things through unseen forces and influences [...].

Magical consciousness is based on analogical rather than logical thought, and involves the association of ideas, symbols, and meaningful coincidences. Described variously as ‘altered states of consciousness’ (ASCs), shamanic states of consciousness (SSC), or non-ordinary reality, magical consciousness is usually brought about through the application of one or more techniques, such as dancing or drumming (or a combination of these); it may occur in or out of a ritual setting. Primarily concerning a shift in consciousness to an expanded awareness, it may involve the invocation of spirit beings.⁵

Layla represents the five layers that extend furthest outward, starting from her name, as five monochromatic layers. She tells me that each color corresponds to a specific experience on which she has meditated, and that they came to her through this association: brown for earth, aqua green for water, light brown for fire, light blue for ether, and finally dark blue for ether or space; “but also emptiness”, she says, “an emptiness that is not understood as the absence of space... it is a full emptiness, actually a primordial matrix where everything can be born... an emptiness full of infinite possibilities... in the Andean shamanism culture, I have learned that the centers of the body connected to the five elements are precisely in this arrangement... which is a density arrangement”.

Layla is thus asserting that what is closest to the center, which she considers the most important thing, is the culmination of condensation. Therefore, it is not a metaphysical, ethereal, and immaterial center, but something that is the opposite of ether, which she understands as creative power: a pre-existing creation. We come to the point that interested me the most:

“this thing that looks like a piece of wire [laughs], I visualized it before meditating on ether... yes, it is indeed a piece of wire... I don’t know why it precedes ether... because ether is something that creates through decomposition and recombination, through combinations... so I think this circular movement of the wire is precisely the primordial characteristic of revolution, of revolving around... the continuous regeneration, the vital circle... I only saw this silvery spiral... I didn’t

⁵ Cf. Greenwood, 2005, p. 89.

think it was a piece of wire... I saw it and represented it like that... but it can actually have to do with a boundary... well, it has a bit of that sense, also because the outermost layers speak specifically about matter... as if separating the more abstract part from the more concrete one... trees represent what I like the most... being in the midst of nature... it is something that represents my more social self, saying 'I am nature', and thus I had the image of the forest... which I then depicted in the maṇḍala. Finally, the outermost layer, representing the very initial stages of meditation, is akin to the night sky... profound... hence the alternating blue and golden stripe... and that is a singular layer... it is the sky enclosed within the golden frame of my personality... it is the entirety manifested within me... I believe that identity is the gold that serves as the vessel for the whole... embodied by the blue sky... which I visualized during the initial meditation... and, in my view, represents the totality of the whole... the notion that I consider us to be ultimately much more expanded... much more interconnected with the entirety than we imagine... we are the universe encapsulated within us... somehow."

In conclusion, this ethnographic account of Layla's meditative experience unveils her incorporation of color as a significant dimension in her practice. The utilization of color in this context extends beyond a mere two-dimensional representation, as it adds depth and meaning to the maṇḍala. Layla's meditation process involves creating a state of emptiness and visualizing an image, often rooted in childhood memories or purer moments. The layers of the maṇḍala correspond to different days of meditation, each representing a distinct phase of Layla's introspective journey.

One pivotal element that Layla highlights is the center of the maṇḍala, which she encountered during a shamanic journey. However, I would like to point out that with Leo's permission, I also showed his maṇḍala to Layla, for a sort of cross-interpretation. Layla looked at it with astonishment, responding, "If I had drawn it myself, I would still see it as a shamanic journey... it's remarkable that someone created it using a different meditative technique from mine... there's the theme of continuous regeneration and also of the center... the central nucleus separated by a layer of almost purity... it's truly very similar to mine beyond the formal expression... but the structure is the same... he too is 'different' inside and out". The center, devoid of divisions or fragments, symbolizes the necessity for self-awareness and harmony among the various aspects of one's personality. Layla suggests that integrating conflicting parts into a unified whole enables movement and growth. Furthermore, she explores the significance of her name within the maṇḍala, perceiving it as a vibration and a reminder of her profound mission. Layla associates her name with a deeper identity that transcends societal labels and resonates closer to the center of her being.

Interestingly, Layla visualizes a spiral-like wire preceding her meditation on ether, interpreting it as a symbol of continuous regeneration and the primal characteristic of revolution. This representation

may also allude to boundaries, separating the abstract from the concrete realms. Notably, Layla expresses a deep connection with nature, symbolized by trees in her maṇḍala, which reflects her social identity intertwined with the natural world.

Finally, the outermost layer of the maṇḍala represents the initial stages of meditation, akin to the profound night sky. Layla perceives this layer as encapsulating the entirety of her manifested self within the golden frame of her personality. She postulates that identity serves as the vessel for the whole, epitomized by the blue sky visualized during her first meditation. Layla contends that humans are intrinsically interconnected with the universe and possess a more expansive nature than commonly perceived.

2.5 The Subject of Consciousness

On the 28th of June, 2023, I began the ethnographic exploration with Daniel. Interestingly, Daniel opted to complete a pair of maṇḍalas prior to providing an integrated commentary on both, thereby extending the scope of the ethnographic study to encompass two distinct pieces created a month apart. Previous ethnographies conducted with Daniel have primarily focused on his meditative practices; however, this recent investigation has surfaced new intriguing elements concerning the issue of identity and consciousness.

His account underscores the challenges he encountered in transitioning from meditation to drawing, largely due to his self-perceived inability in the artistic domain. This conflict offers a perspective on the role of personal beliefs and self-perception within the creative process and identifies potential barriers these constructs might present.

A noteworthy facet of Daniel's experience is his engagement with specific meditation practices, namely *samatha* and loving-kindness meditation (*mettā*). His depiction of meditative practices—such as sitting in tranquility, bodily detachment, and breath concentration—echoes traditional techniques associated with *samatha* meditation. The inclusion of loving-kindness meditation suggests his proclivity for fostering compassion and goodwill in his practice. The focus on these particular meditation techniques elucidates the interaction between personal preference, intention, and the symbolic depictions emerging during the drawing process. As Hillman (1990, p. 66) writes:

Mental events as images do not require and cannot acquire further validation by reference to external events. The soul's life is not upheld as correct by virtue of exteriority. But neither are mental events validated by virtue of my having a dream, *thinking* an idea or *feeling* an experience. We are beyond soul as a conglomerate of subjective functions, with imagination merely one function among others, a bureau in the department of mind.

Furthermore, Daniel's practice of initiating his maṇḍala drawings from the center it is peculiar and different from the choices of most of the other participants. We can reconnect this force to aspects of his character or relating to his meditative experience, but what is certainly noticeable is the recurrence of the vortex motif, and the idea that the center is the starting point from which things develop, not towards which they tend to. Therefore, not an end but a cause. Certainly, these can be understood as two sides of the same coin, but it is strange then that the choices are not presented at 50%, but by majority towards the idea of placing the center at the end of the process. The central focus of the maṇḍala, expressed through fiery elements encased in square, stone-like motifs, denotes the contained vitality of the flame.

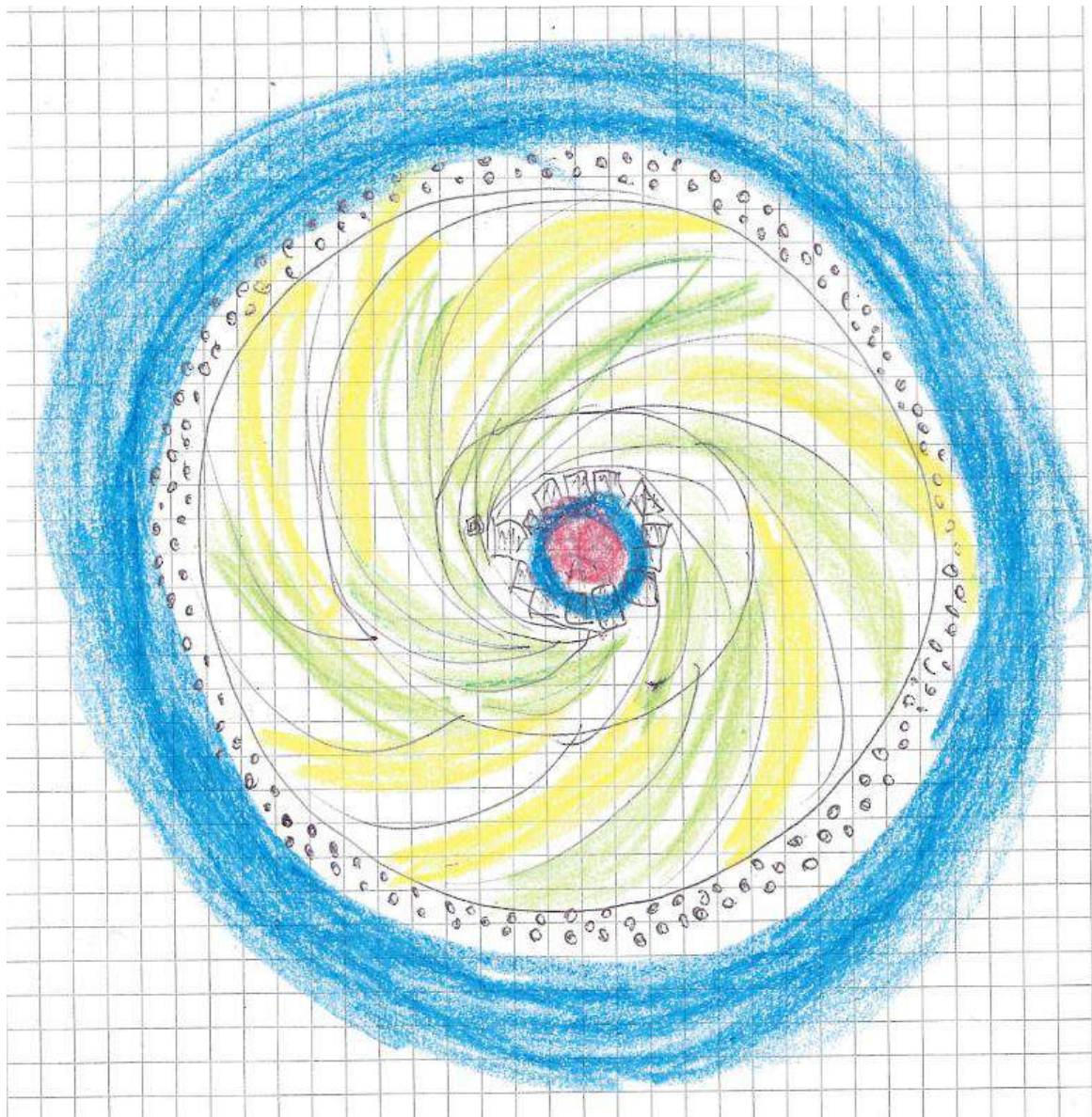


Fig. 5:
Daniel's first maṇḍala. Completed on May 25, 2023

This symbolism reflects his participation in the Sujith Ravindran movement, a fusion of ancient Vedic practices and Śaiva spiritual traditions, and resonates strongly with the archetypal figure of Śiva. Daniel's association of fire with this movement and his yearning for communal connection underscores the salience of communal practices and relational experiences in his spiritual odyssey.

The repetitive use of the color blue, symbolizing profound tranquility and the impression of an endlessly extending sky, implies the endurance of meditative states beyond the confines of the retreat setting. This interpretation aligns with Daniel's perception that the mind does not necessarily operate in a chronological fashion and that recalling central meditative experiences can elicit analogous states. The repeated incorporation of blue in the maṇḍala represents his aspiration for serenity amidst a period characterized by heightened activities and stress.

Additionally, the depiction of a vortex in Daniel's second maṇḍala aligns with the Buddhist concepts of *ṛtti* and cognitive processes. Daniel associates the vortex with the high-pressure period he is traversing, typified by an excessive workload and reduced social interaction due to quarantine measures. The use of yellow and green hues signifies his ambition to mitigate the vortex's intensity, invoking memories of nature walks during quieter moments of quarantine. This evocation of the natural environment and its calming influence underscores the value Daniel places on nature as a sanctuary and source of reprieve.

Daniel: "The timeline was quite peculiar because I had a lot of difficulty with this activity... despite having been meditating for many years, this experience with drawing was new to me, and I have to say... I struggled at the beginning to transition from the end of meditation to drawing... not because I didn't have things to put on paper... primal images and sensations that took on a clear visual form in my mind were abundant... but I have a problem with drawing... since I am somewhat of a perfectionist but have never been a great artist... in fact, I have always been quite incapable of drawing... I am convinced that I can't draw, and this triggered a series of rational processes that preceded the more immediate experience of meditation... so when it was time to put the image on the paper... there was a mental prejudice that... because, you know, I didn't want the drawing to be ugly or unrepresentative... I would sit in front of the paper and not know what to do... then at some point, I tried to overcome this prejudice and do something immediate... something simply based on the emerging images... a bit like synesthesia... something transferable... and in practice, I did a second meditation after the first one... more focused on sensations... and that's how the first maṇḍala came out... which I drew in multiple stages. I didn't make any changes to my way of meditating... to give it a name, it's *samatha*... so I sit, let go of the body, focus on the breath, and then go deeper... at the beginning, I can use the technique of loving-kindness meditation... mostly, I have almost always meditated with this technique... I would let the concentration acquired from the breath phase blend with the mental state of loving-

kindness, even though sometimes there was some resistance... which I didn't explore much... because I mainly focused on the aspect of "right effort", neglecting the psychological investigation a bit... because it's a somewhat stressful period and I didn't have the mental state to dedicate myself to the investigation part. However, after each meditation, I would move and sit in front of the paper... to make it work, I took advantage of the fact that the mind was still quiet from meditation and let the images flow in an unmediated way... I chose to draw this maṇḍala starting from the center because I felt this sort of inspiration pushing me to start from the deepest part and then build the... structures... let's call them that... on the outer parts. So, on the first day, the core of the maṇḍala emerged... it is like this because after meditation, many thoughts emerged... many sensations... even memories... related to nature."

The first thing that gives us to think about: notwithstanding his extensive experience as a meditator, Daniel encountered a distinctive challenge during the transition from a meditative state to the act of drawing. His reluctance to engage with drawing, rooted in a perceived deficiency in his ability to create aesthetically pleasing or representative images, illuminates the intricate nexus between personal self-assessment and creative undertakings. His explicit acknowledgment of perfectionism and an entrenched belief in his inability to draw underscores the preconceived notions and beliefs that govern his approach to this creative process.

Central to his narrative is the process of surmounting this cognitive bias. Daniel's reference to an assimilation of emerging images reminiscent of synesthetic experiences signifies how meditation modulates his responsiveness to these creative impulses. The subsequent shift towards a secondary meditation, oriented more towards the sensory aspects, reveals a multifaceted approach to his meditative practice. This amalgamation integrates elements of *samatha* and loving-kindness meditation, affording equal emphasis to concentration and compassionate elements.

Daniel's choice to render a maṇḍala, commencing from its center and gradually expanding outward, implies a profound connection between his meditative experiences and the imagery and memories pertaining to nature that surfaced during his meditative endeavors. This particular decision manifests an inner odyssey that permeates his artistic expression.

Daniel did not heed the suggestion to ignore his prejudices and draw serenely. When I explained the methods of ethnography to him, I made it clear that there is no need to produce a work of art, and that what comes out of the experience is fine. Daniel, however, seemed unable to put this internalized judgment aside, which is even more surprising when you consider that this idea of self-judgment, possible social introjection and fear of evaluation, should not be part of the experience of an experienced meditator who, having abandoned his own ego, certainly doesn't care about aspects such as the judgment of others or aesthetic standards. I deduce from this that identity is a dangerous, sticky

fact that tends to recur and is very difficult to abandon completely. It's not impossible to get rid of it, but it's certainly a difficult task to try.

Daniel: "This is a very particular period for me... and I try to spend as much time as possible in nature, not only meditating but also engaging in activities or going on retreats, even with friends, around a fire... so this image is very vivid in me... meanings related to fire emerged... and in fact, it is something that I started to incorporate into my meditative practice... and if you see, there is the central red core representing fire, surrounded by square elements that are the stones usually placed around the fire... and as an image, they symbolize the boundaries of the fire to me... something that serves to contain its power, vitality... and finally, it is surrounded by this blue ring... this color and its shades, I associate them with the deepest calm... completely pacified... when I did my long meditation retreat in Australia... at the deepest moment, a *nimitta*, a visual symbol, emerged, which I experienced as a blue sky... this infinitely extended sky... which always appeared in the highest states of meditation... as if I surpassed the boundary... and it still happens when the mind is extremely calm... although outside of retreats, it's never as authentic in the same way... and instead, I resort to the idea of the extended sky to evoke the experience... this is something I learned from my meditation teacher... he taught me that it is wrong to think that the mind functions chronologically, and that meditation must always proceed in stages... and in fact, after the initial experience, just recalling the central event associated with the deepest meditation can evoke the same state... whether it's neuroplasticity or not, I don't know, although I sometimes wonder about it. Anyway, you may have noticed that this blue repeats itself... it's always the same blue... that appears twice. In the first case, when it surrounds the fire, I associate it with my involvement in the movement of Sujith Ravindran... it's an exploration of the masculine aspect... in a 'mature' way... it's a bit peculiar... it's a reinterpretation of ancient Vedic practices related to sacred fire rituals... but they have been reinterpreted in the context of spiritual Śaiva cults... associating them precisely with the archetypal figure of Śiva."

The significance of color, endowed with cultural and symbolic connotations, extends its influence across diverse societies worldwide (Hutchings, 1998). It constitutes a fundamental dimension of human expression and communication, assuming a prominent role in the spheres of rituals, ceremonial practices, artistic endeavors, and quotidian existence. Within the academic purview of anthropology, the exploration of color symbolism, together with its cultural underpinnings, offers valuable insights into the nuanced processes by which societies construe and engage with their immediate environments (MacLaury et al., 2007).

In the specific context of Daniel's contemplative practice, the recurrent utilization of the color blue exemplifies how color symbolism can become deeply entrenched within an individual's spiritual and

cultural framework. The consistent alignment of blue with profound tranquility and serenity underscores the capacity of colors to elicit distinct emotional and spiritual responses. Notably, many cultural traditions ascribe to blue the attributes of peace, serenity, and spirituality; for instance, in Hinduism, the color blue frequently finds association with deities like Kṛṣṇa, symbolizing notions of divinity and transcendence.

The narrative of my ethnographic encounter with Daniel can only be rendered more meaningful by directly presenting excerpts from our dialogues, as is the case with all the ethnographies in this study. Beyond our conversations, I prefer that images, with their evocative power, speak for themselves. What I have personally learned from these ethnographic experiences is precisely how images serve as witnesses to a person's world. The individual is not merely, as we well know, a part of the world but also a 'bearer of a world'. This world within the world adds to the complexity of human affairs, a complexity often overlooked. What fascinates me most are the idiosyncrasies. I have had many ethnographic encounters with Daniel, but only on one specific occasion did he describe his drawings to me. Each time I sit down and have a meditator before me, I feel that in showing me that sheet with those drawings, he is opening a world to me. It is as if those circles, filled with colors and the most disparate forms, also signify the opening of worlds; they are circles of a world that unfolds, and at the threshold, its complexity already overwhelms me.

I have always seen Daniel as the prototype of a devout Buddhist practitioner. To give an idea, when I first met him, he was contemplating the desire to become a full-fledged monk. He was a scholar who spoke to me about texts and analyses of the Buddhist canon, participated enthusiastically in meditation sessions, and then, that day, on a small iron table barely big enough for a sheet of paper and a cup of coffee, he revealed a paradoxical contradiction: he was a computer scientist. I had never considered his profession, as he had always been 'Daniel, the almost-Buddhist monk' to me. Seeing my face betray a certain degree of astonishment, he could not help but laugh, leaning back slightly in his chair and spreading his arms as if to say, 'welcome, I invite you into this world', a world as crazy as any other, after all.

Daniel: "The central practice of this movement that I started attending a few years ago involves retreats where everyone sits around the fire... and for my experience, it has been important... you know, I have been meditating for almost twenty years... and meditation is mostly an individual practice... even though there are group retreats... it is predominantly a subjective experience... and I was missing a connection in terms of relating to more people... and it's a type of practice... perhaps similar to family constellations? I don't know... a relational field is created with other people... after some concentration and purification practices... so in this practice, I found many of the things I found in meditation... so that's why there is fire at the center... then, of course, there

are deeper meanings related to my subjectivity... but it's the first time I'm trying to explain these images since I drew this maṇḍala... then about three days passed... and after another meditation, this image of the vortex emerged clearly... as a Buddhist, you will surely connect it to *ṽtti* and all the cognitive vortex processes... it could be... this is a quite stressful period for me... but to tell you the truth, it has been going on since the time of COVID... I wouldn't say it's a complicated period... but it's denser in terms of activities compared to previous periods... paradoxically, during those times, I was able to live a more hermit-like life, with few social interactions... but I was more relaxed... now that the number of activities has increased... perhaps due to excessive isolation due to quarantine... various activities have accumulated... I continue to meditate in a group because I don't feel a desire to practice alone like in the past... and then I have this new environment of circles around the fire... in addition to the increasing workload... so sometimes... often I have the feeling of... or rather, I almost have nostalgia for a period when everything was calmer... and now I'm caught up in all these activities... which, from a certain perspective, touches on certain aspects of my identity... my constructed identity... so I tend to associate this vortex with this stress... but at the beginning, it was a colorless vortex... I saw the colors in the meditation the next day... so I added yellow and green... once again, these colors are a reminder of nature to me... not in an overly idealized sense... but being amidst the green of plants is relaxing for me... so these colors somewhat soften the vortex, recalling a period in my life... the quarantine period... when everything was quieter and calmer... and I remember going for walks in the park... at that time, it was allowed to go out for a walk near home... but because I have an extremely rational job with a very rigid structure that leaves little room for creativity... by the end of the day, I would be truly agitated... parched... so I would take these breaks in the park..."

Federico: "What do you do for a living?"

Daniel: "I'm a programmer."

Federico: "A Buddhist who's a programmer?"

Daniel: "[laughs] I'm also a neo-luddite... but let's not bring out this part of me all at once [laughs]"

Federico: "Well... it's still quite unique... I remember a few years ago you were even considering becoming a monk... it's idiosyncratic..."

Daniel: "Definitely... but a part of me also loves these hyper-rational things... the logical structures... they're not completely incompatible with Buddhist philosophy... the problem isn't

analytical logic itself, but how it's used... and especially in this job, it's draining for me... that's why when I went out to the park, it felt like putting my brain in a bowl of cool water and letting it dry in the breeze... it was rejuvenating... and I would transition from a state of semi-alienation to a greater communion with everything... and that's why the presence of trees is very important to me... the image of a tree evokes something emotional. Going further outward... on a different day, I made those little dots... even that... I can't tell you where it came from... I had the visual image, but I didn't interpret it... what are the dots? It was a sensation... that I rendered like this... a sensation of... [long pause] of a boundary, I would say. A sensation of a boundary made up of small parts... The outermost blue represents the sky again. After drawing that, I felt I couldn't go any further... because for me, it signified a sense of overall pacification. As I mentioned, the sky has a very strong connection for me to this transcendent stage of meditation... from my experiences in Australia.”

Notwithstanding, I chose not to delve further into the apparent dissonance between Daniel's work and his Buddhist vocation primarily because he himself dissuaded me from pursuing this line of inquiry. He referred to his work as “a part of me that does not fully describe me”, and despite working as a computer scientist due to his “hyper-rational mind”, he asserted that the contemplative Buddhist path “nourishes the part of me that work drains. I don't think there's much to say about work; for me, it's a prison—I don't like it”. His meditation practice and Buddhist path, as well as other Indian or neo-Indian spiritualities he is exploring, are certainly driven by a desire for enrichment in a way that his work does not satisfy. Additionally, as he himself notes, it serves “to explore consciousness deeply—something I cannot do when I am on autopilot writing code for hours on end... In those moments, it is as if my consciousness is suspended, operating automatically... it is when I meditate that I truly feel present”.

Daniel's maṇḍala reminds me in many ways of Layla's. Both have a particular connection with the ether, the celestial space, which appears in both maṇḍalas in the layer closest to the center and the outermost layer, as if framing the maṇḍala. Both Daniel and Layla, despite not knowing each other, manifested the celestial ether in practically identical places, making the ether self-contained, as it both contains the world-maṇḍala and is closest to the core. Not only that, but the presence of trees, represented in a more tangible way by Layla and in a more symbolic way by Daniel, is a significant presence. Regarding the ‘dots’, I found it interesting to associate them with boundaries, as Leo had already suggested, who later defined the ‘dot’ or ‘stain’ in the maṇḍala as the representation of identity or the construct of identity. The proliferation of dots itself is not strange, as identity is not a monolithic fact but something diverse. I show Daniel one of Leo's maṇḍalas in which these dots are present, without telling him who the author is.

Daniel: “It makes me laugh because most of the difficulties I had at the beginning stemmed from predefined boxes that I put myself into... by saying, ‘A drawing should be like this’... even though I knew that any form of drawing would be fine with you, without structures or patterns... and yet I struggled to break free from this mental framework at the beginning... so, those dots, I see them as obstacles... in a general sense... and ultimately, for Buddhism, identity is an obstacle... an obstacle to ultimate well-being, but still an obstacle.”

Daniel’s description of finding rejuvenation and communion with everything through meditation in the park highlights the significance of natural elements, particularly trees, in his practice. This emphasis on the presence of trees aligns with Layla’s experience, emphasizing the importance of nature in their respective maṇḍalas. The connection to the transcendent stage of meditation through the symbolism of the sky further reinforces the spiritual significance of natural elements in Daniel’s practice.

The discussion of the ‘dots’ in Daniel’s maṇḍala, associated with a sensation of a boundary, resonates with Leo’s interpretation of the dots as representations of identity or the construct of identity in maṇḍalas. Daniel’s reflection on the initial struggle to break free from predefined mental frameworks suggests that the dots can be perceived as obstacles, which aligns with Buddhism’s view of identity as an obstacle to ultimate well-being.

We must then examine the problem of the relationship between the meditator and the image. Ultimately, this is the anthropological inquiry into consciousness that we posed at the outset. Until now, I have avoided delving into it in detail, but as it will become predominant in the forthcoming chapters, I will introduce some fundamental issues here. What is the relationship between the meditator and their drawing? Does this type of ethnography, based on visual elicitation, merely produce something that ‘reflects’ the meditator’s subjectivity, almost like a photograph, a snapshot captured at the moment of meditation, or is it something more? What strikes me at this stage of the ethnographic process is the gestural aspect: when meditators explain their drawings, they often make a relational gesture with their hand, pointing to themselves and then the drawing repeatedly, moving their hand back and forth, as if indicating a connection. Sometimes it is as if the drawing speaks to them. To answer my questions, they ‘consult’ the drawing, looking at it with different eyes, addressing it as if it could respond, providing clues to guide them in their discourse. This might seem trivial, considering that they are the ‘creators’ of the drawings, but the point is that these drawings, produced at specific moments when their state of consciousness was altered by a series of meditation sessions, are also objects of meditation. Therefore, the meditator relates to the drawing as they might

to any object used in meditative practice. Indeed, as observed with Leo, this often happens spontaneously.

As Husserl teaches, consciousness is always “consciousness *of something*” (Marosan, 2022). Whether this object x is perceived as something external to consciousness, an internal datum (a thought), or consciousness itself (introspective function), there is no difference because the vectorial aspect $C \rightarrow x$ is maintained, even and especially in the introspective phase: simply, consciousness (C) treats itself as an object (x), but introspection is not an exercise that can transcend discernment.

Fasching posits meditation as consciousness not directed towards an object (Fasching, 2008, p. 463). This definition is intriguing but partially imprecise as it overlooks the introspective forms of consciousness that are object-directed, rather than a separate mental state. However, meditation does indeed aim at overcoming the binary. Once this relationship $C \rightarrow x$ (including $C \leftrightarrow C$) is removed, one must ponder: what remains? Is there a presumed consciousness-in-itself, or does a state emerge that is typically obscured by the process of discernment and only surfaces upon its cessation? The hypothesis advocated here is that it is awareness, the mental state accessed by the meditator by suppressing discernment.

According to Marosan (2022), two introspective states of consciousness (p. 464) can be discerned: one related to identity mechanisms and thus proceeding by association, and another related to “presence”, the experience of self and being there. Fasching attributes contemplative exercises to inhibiting the former aspect, intending to enhance the sense of “presence” more profoundly. This latter mechanism is generally unconscious, akin to Janet’s psychological automatism. However, the conflation of meditation with an exaltation of the here and now is an interpretation stemming from mindfulness, and there are serious doubts whether meditation per se is concerned with presence, except in preliminary stages of contemplative preparation that are subsequently abandoned. Presence is still a state of consciousness, albeit deeper than mere discernment concerned with recognizing and organizing identities (of things or people, including oneself), and its exaltation is not the ultimate goal of meditation. “Presence” is indeed a state of consciousness (p. 465), but not the ultimate focus of meditation.

Patañjali portrays yoga as the means that “leads to the ultimate cessation of the swirling cycle of cognitions” (*yogaścittavṛttinirodhaḥ*). In both the Patañjali’s discipline of yoga and Buddhist meditation, the ultimate goal appears to be the transcendence of the subject/object duality. However, with such transcendence, even the deepest functions of consciousness, such as presence, are surpassed. It is crucial not to conflate presence with subjectivity. Consciousness is certainly an exquisitely subjective phenomenon, and there are substantial grounds to challenge the idea that consciousness is anything other than a subjective phenomenon. From this perspective, distinctions

between the inner and outer worlds are entirely arbitrary and poorly suited to describe the phenomenon of consciousness, which encompasses both simultaneously. The concept that closely approaches that of mental presence is the term *sati* in Buddhism, a profound form of meditation that grants access to a certain degree of mindful presence and also appears connected to memory (Shulman, 2010).

Hence, we have a framework as follows: consciousness can be understood as discerning activity (*viññāṇa*), as mental presence (*sati*), or as a state that operates in automatism, i.e., at the opposite end of mental presence. This latter aspect is aptly captured by the term *bhavaṅga*, frequently found in the Pāli texts, and its meaning is currently a subject of debate. Often a part of compounds like *bhavaṅgacitta* “unconscious cognition”, this term is thought to refer to a mental state in which the subject is unaware of the psychic processes underway.

So where is consciousness given to itself? It is not to be found anywhere in particular: it is present in each and every presence of anything. All phenomenal givenness is as such (consists of) the self-presence of consciousness; I (qua consciousness) am not to be found anywhere else. There is no extra-phenomenality of consciousness.⁶

In Buddhism, there is indeed a certain emphasis on mental presence (*sati*), but it must be noted that this state is not definitive. Sati meditation, as outlined in the well-known *Satipaṭṭhānasutta*, serves as the fundamental model for mindfulness. It focuses on developing a focused mental presence and attending to the states of consciousness related to the body (*kāya*), sensation (*vedanā*), cognition (*citta*), and the perception of things or phenomena (*dhamma*). The distinctive aspect of this meditation is the emphasis on contemplating the apparent bifurcation that consciousness operates in focusing on these phenomena: there is a body within the body, a sensation within the sensation, and so forth. Each of these four foundations of mental presence appears as “dual”.⁷

⁶ Cf. Fasching, 2008, p. 475.

⁷ Let us briefly revisit the initial notion that Buddhism offers concerning discernment as an operator acting on the dichotomy of name and form. This definition harmonizes well with the theory proposed by Tononi regarding consciousness as a form of integrated information. This theory, known as Integrated Information Theory (IIT), is grounded in a mathematical model. However, the aspect that holds particular interest lies in its emphasis on the qualitative rather than exclusively quantitative value of consciousness. Consciousness does not merely process a vast amount of information but rather organizes and qualitatively recognizes it. Nevertheless, the IIT attributes this distinction to the amount of information generated when a differentiation is made (Tononi, 2008, p. 217). In this regard, information is the key to understanding consciousness and is defined as “the ability to discriminate among a large number of alternatives” (p. 218). The situation differs slightly in the theory of *viññāṇa*, as the same alternatives are based on convention (*paññatti*), which allows for a possible distinction between *x* and *y* and so forth. Therefore, consciousness resides also in the very act of differentiation: *discernō*. Moreover, consciousness is also as a way of being-in-the-world and relating to the world. Consciousness is also closely linked to cultural identity (*attā* for the Buddhists). We will therefore see how this aspect is integrated into the investigations that will follow.

2.6 The Mindful Path

I now present an ethnographic encounter that took place on March 29, 2023, involving the only practitioner of mindfulness, Leslie. Initially, Leslie showed a great interest in the study and actively participated, creating a maṇḍala over several weeks of meditation. However, after this initial enthusiasm, Leslie expressed her desire to create at least one more maṇḍala. Unfortunately, she then decided to stop at the first maṇḍala. It should be noted that Leslie's approach is the most different and atypical compared to all other participants in the study. She is the only one practicing mindfulness and not a more traditional or "profound" meditation technique, as other participants who showed skepticism towards mindfulness would define it.

However, drawing from my previous ethnographic experience (Divino, 2021), I can certainly report a personal impression in which mindfulness practitioners tend to differentiate themselves from those practicing traditional meditation, particularly in terms of depth. I focused on meditators attending Buddhist centers and psychologists specializing in mindfulness or who had completed mindfulness courses. This latter category differed from "traditional" practitioners not only in terms of their greater "spiritual" or even religious involvement with the Buddhist or Indian traditions in general but also because mindfulness practitioners tended to view meditation more as a means to achieve calmness and inner peace. They were generally reluctant, even fearful, when it came to the possibility of delving "deep" or exploring the depths of their psyche and unconscious. This exercise was always described as non-beneficial to mindfulness and a distraction from the primary goal of attaining a quieted mind and a more relaxed life.

I am hesitant to completely exclude that this reluctance to continue 'beyond' in contemplation, which would imply a genuine loss of 'presence' in the Demartinian sense, and thus a partial 'crisis', which however, for those who manage it, is surpassed and resolved by a condition of transcending presence itself, it might be a reluctance attributed to the fear of identity loss. Identity, therefore, strongly intervenes in the contemplative experience as a form of resistance to the weakening of presence.

On the other hand, spiritually engaged meditators mocked mindfulness for being superficial and for distorting the original Buddhist intent. They were instead drawn to the "darker" dimensions, to the extent that delving into the depths was not restrained by the sense of anguish that usually accompanies such exercises. In fact, it was embraced as a sign that the exercise was progressing well and that submerged material was finally coming to light.

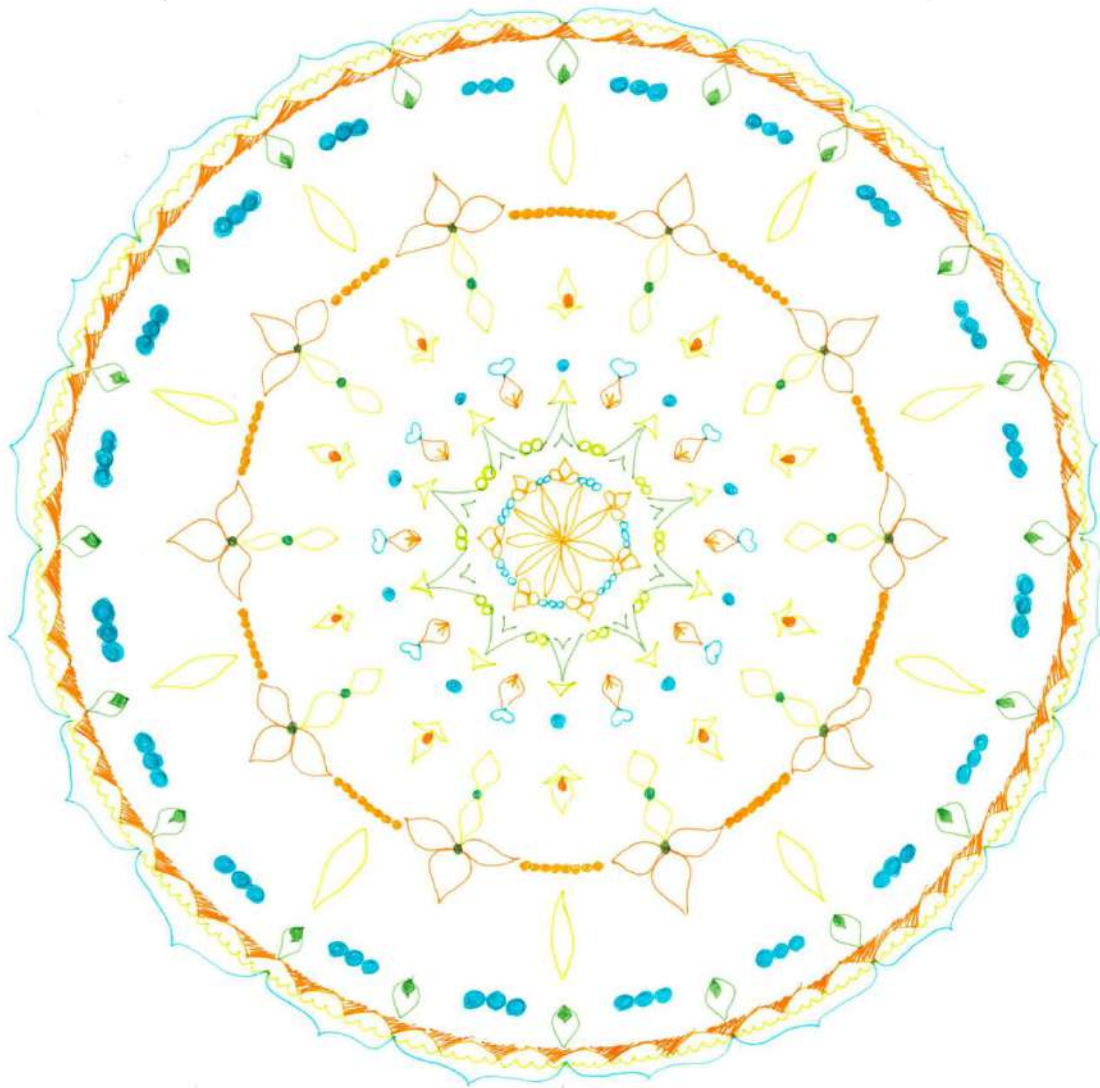


Fig. 6: Leslie's first maṇḍala. Completed on March 22, 2023

Let us return to Leslie's ethnographic framework. Much of the information about her was gathered during various ethnographic meetings, but for clarity, she reiterated the salient aspects during the March 29 encounter in which she explained the details of her maṇḍala.

Leslie: "Well... I learned about meditation through an official course... the Kabat-Zinn protocol, to be precise... Initially, a friend of mine encouraged me to do it, but she was disappointed after the first session and didn't want to continue. Fortunately, I decided to stick with it. Perhaps I had the open-mindedness of a beginner. At first, I wasn't interested, but during the early sessions, I felt that there was something... special... that touched me, even though my meditative experiences were still in their infancy. But right from the start, I remember having pleasant sensations, even after just a few sessions. So, after this experience, I decided to continue and joined other group sessions with a mindfulness teacher, as well as group meditation sessions. One day, a professor

at the psychology department of the university organized seminars, and I was very interested. I also took a mindfulness course there. It has been a decade-long journey for me. These university seminars took place once a week and lasted for two hours per session. We had sessions with Zen masters as well as expert psychologists, and they always concluded with meditation. I continued to cultivate this practice with a consistent frequency, never abandoning it. Sometimes I attended weekly meetings from other mindfulness traditions within the framework of psychology. I also attended week-long retreats and similar activities.”

Leslie’s persistence in her meditation practice, notwithstanding her friend’s initial disillusionment, underscores certainly her resolute character and determination. Leslie’s articulation of “pleasant sensations” serves to emphasize the subjective and experiential dimensions inherent to the practice. Her progression from solitary meditation to group sessions and her subsequent involvement in academic and structured environments at her university underscore the varied contexts in which meditation is encountered and embraced.

The incorporation of meditation into academic settings, exemplified by the psychology department’s seminars and mindfulness courses, signifies the burgeoning recognition and integration of mindfulness practices within educational institutions. The incorporation of sessions led by Zen masters and expert psychologists further elucidates the synergy between traditional and contemporary approaches to mindfulness.

Leslie’s unwavering commitment to her decade-long journey, encompassing regular individual practice, participation in group meetings, and attendance at retreats, serves as a paradigmatic illustration of the enduring dedication that numerous individuals invest in their meditative undertakings. Her narrative elucidates the diverse trajectories through which individuals engage with meditation and underscores its capacity to become an enduring and profound facet of one’s life. This narrative resonates with the broader anthropological landscape of mindfulness, portraying it as a dynamic and evolving practice with profound personal significance for many.

Leslie: “So, let’s say I align myself with the *vipassanā* tradition, meditating with varying frequency, but always in a fairly consistent manner. Even this winter, I took a mindfulness and compassion course. As you can see, I am quite passionate about it. It brings great benefits to me, especially because I have realized that it has a significant impact on my life, providing stability and helping me cope with unpleasant events. It has been more helpful to me than psychotherapy, to be honest. I underwent many years of psychotherapy and even tried various schools, including bioenergetics and a couple of years of cognitive-behavioral therapy. However, I found mindfulness a decade ago, and since then, it has worked very well for me. I can help myself

greatly and derive significant benefits from it. I have acquired the ability to self-center, even in a short time, during destabilizing moments. I believe this aspect is reflected in my maṇḍala as well because the predominant sensation during meditation is that of benefit and inner peace. It comes to me quite naturally.”

Federico: “So, you mainly focused on mindfulness traditions, is it your choice or did you happen to only attend mindfulness courses?”

Leslie: “No, it’s my choice. Of course, I also tried *vipassanā*, which has received more academic consensus, but for me, meditation is a form of therapy. That’s why I seek confirmation in mindfulness. I know there is a community of scholars behind it, and it is a proven therapy. It works for me, so I feel more secure. However, I believe that other meditation practices without specific rules or coming from Buddhist traditions can also work. I am open to any kind of meditation, but I predominantly chose to practice mindfulness. However, I do not reject *vipassanā* and may embrace other traditions in the future. But, as I mentioned, I don’t recite mantras or similar things. My meditation is silent and focused on the breath.”

Federico: “I understand. And what about your maṇḍala? How does it relate to your meditation practice?”

Leslie: “I practiced mindfulness. I chose a weekly timing, so once a week, I would engage in a focused meditation, allowing sensations and images to emerge, which I then reproduced on paper. That’s how I created the initial layers. This continued until a certain point, represented by the turquoise hearts in the maṇḍala. At that point, I changed the frequency because the central part was created multiple times a week. I felt that the contents were emerging more fluidly, so I thought it was necessary to fix them on paper. This continued until the final central layer. Perhaps I will continue if you’re interested, as this experience has stimulated my artistic side. Maybe I’ll start painting on canvas again. I find that drawing the maṇḍala is somehow an extension of meditation because when you draw, you have to focus on a single action.”

Leslie’s deliberate alignment with both the *vipassanā* and mindfulness traditions, coupled with her unwavering commitment to a regular meditation regimen, serves as a pertinent illustration of the prevailing trend wherein individuals seek therapeutic and stabilizing effects through the practice of meditation. Her outlook on meditation as a therapeutic modality resonates with the prevailing consensus regarding the burgeoning recognition of mindfulness practices as a validated therapeutic intervention, often outperforming conventional psychotherapeutic

methodologies. This predilection for mindfulness meditation is bolstered by a profound sense of reassurance, emanating from the consensus among scholarly circles and the supportive communal backdrop enveloping this tradition.

Leslie's receptivity to exploring various meditation practices, even those outside the ambit of distinct Buddhist lineages, conspicuously underscores her malleability and versatility as a person. Her meditation methodology, primarily centered on the cultivation of silent breath awareness devoid of ceremonial components such as mantras, underscores the customizability of meditation techniques to accommodate individual inclinations and requisites.

Leslie's artistic pursuit, wherein she manifests a maṇḍala through her meditation endeavors, forges an intriguing nexus between the domains of art and mindfulness. It should however be noted that Leslie very quickly lost interest in this practice. Although she initially appreciated it several times, reiterating that she would like to make a second attempt, she closed contact with me immediately after the first ethnography, only to then reappear to confirm that she had lost interest in the matter. Of course I didn't push her to continue, seeing that there was no motivation.

In the case of Leslie only, we find ourselves in the most standardized and classic form of mindfulness. Much has been written on the relationship between the commodification of meditation and the medicalization of contemplative practice, which inevitably transforms its outcomes. Since the focus of this research does not revolve around this aspect, I will refrain from delving into it further. But still I can offer a few observations. What is known from Leslie's ethnography is that the mindfulness practice, at least as performed by her, does not seem to have piqued her particular interest in the themes of consciousness and identity. All of my more specific inquiries were sidestepped or tersely addressed, and Leslie appears to have even experienced some difficulty articulating explanations related to the nature of her designs, as if she had detached from them. Naturally, her work is visually impactful and aesthetically pleasing, but at the same time, it appears cold and almost as if it intends to mimic repetitively uniform decorative motifs, as if they were made from a mold. This conveys a certain reluctance to reveal and unquestionably an inclination to conceal rather than show. An image can reveal even when attempting to hide, and what this beautiful design reveals, with its meticulous and excessively standardized features, is perhaps a tendency to hide. As one progresses, it conceals what is behind, like a mask. Therefore, instead of conveying something about oneself, it is more of a mystifier, concealing while revealing and revealing while concealing.

Leslie: “There are points where there was a certain flow, and what the pencil or marker pulled out came out by itself. It’s a very spontaneous exercise. But if I have to be honest, there weren’t any particular moments of revelation. The maṇḍala I’m showing you mostly represents the sense of calm I feel when I meditate. If I were to give an interpretation in retrospect of the various layers, well... the overall sense is one of calm and serenity. Looking at it as a whole, I can say that the initial part feels more distant from me. I don’t recognize myself in it, referring to the outer layers. However, there are parts where I recognize myself more, which give me more satisfaction, especially the inner layers with the orange flames. The more I move towards the center, the more I feel a sense of satisfaction when I look at it, even the flowers. They can be representations of the blossoming of calmness. I’m not sure if this corresponds to anything. The interior is denser, perhaps it has a psychological meaning.”

Federico: “What do you think about the forms you chose? The flowers, the flames... What do these formal choices represent for you?”

Leslie: “I’m not sure... it’s a spontaneous thing. Deep introspective aspects like these are a bit obscure to me. I can’t tell you why because it wasn’t a deliberate choice. I let everything flow, so what came out is what you see. I can only say that the general sense guiding these choices is harmony. Even the colors I chose are based on what communicates more harmony to me. That’s it. Flexibility, harmony... even the lanceolate shapes are very calming to me, and they represent the forms of the sensations I experience while meditating. They are a plastic representation of the meditative process. In fact, it seems like the same form repeats itself continuously. Perhaps the outer sides are more confusing, while the daisy in the center represents a concentration on the present, the here and now. It’s a bit like the center of my mind around which the whole meditative process revolves.”

The interview with Leslie offers critical insights into her personal experiences with meditation, particularly situated within the framework of mindfulness practices. Her path in mindfulness was initiated with the Kabat-Zinn protocol, an esteemed methodology in the field of mindfulness, which she found to be a transformative catalyst from the onset. Leslie’s dedication to the practice of meditation is unmistakably demonstrated through her engagement in numerous group sessions, retreats, and courses over the preceding ten years. She underscores the profound influence that meditation has exerted on her life, even eclipsing the advantages she previously gained from psychotherapy.

Regarding her predilections within the realm of meditation, Leslie primarily emphasizes mindfulness, although she maintains a receptivity to alternative traditions and practices. She esteems the

therapeutic dimensions of meditation and acknowledges the corroborative backing and academic consensus that underpins mindfulness. Despite abstaining from the recitation of mantras or participation in specific rituals, Leslie's meditation routine is predominantly centered around silent meditation with a focus on respiration.

The nexus between Leslie's meditation routine and her crafting of a maṇḍala presents a fascinating discourse. She elucidates that her meditation involves a focused mental state, facilitating the surfacing of sensations and images which she subsequently replicates on paper. The act of maṇḍala design becomes a continuum of her meditation practice, necessitating her concentration on a singular action. In this endeavor, Leslie encounters spontaneity and a state of flow, expressing the gratification derived from the manifestation of the maṇḍala.

In the context of her maṇḍala's interpretation, Leslie discerns an overarching sentiment of tranquility and serenity. She perceives a greater degree of self-representation in the inner layers, notably in the central section populated with orange flames and flowers, which symbolize the efflorescence of tranquility. Leslie concedes that the deeper introspective dimensions underlying her formal choices remain enigmatic to her, implying that the process was more spontaneous than premeditated. The elements of harmony, adaptability, and lanceolate shapes are coherent with her meditative experiences and contribute to the depiction of the meditative process encapsulated within the maṇḍala.

2.7 First Ethnographic Considerations

Thus far, we have presented the initial outcomes of ethnographic interviews focused on exploring consciousness concerning the meditative experiences of selected participants. At this juncture, it is appropriate to draw preliminary conclusions, especially considering what the ethnographic inquiry has communicated thus far regarding the issue of consciousness. Additionally, it is important to note how this kind of investigation may either align with or deviate from various approaches. Since this research aims to implement a novel methodology for the ethnographic study of meditation, I have analyzed scientific literature, including other works that attempt to offer investigative methods focused on the subjectivity of meditators. In particular, the micro-phenomenological approach.

Both micro-phenomenology and contemplative ethnography applied to maṇḍala-elicitation employ methodologies inspired by the experience of consciousness, striving to reach a pre-reflective instance, a culturally unconditioned facet. However, the extent to which a similar experience can be attained remains a question. As evidenced in the presented ethnographic interviews, I chose a method that minimally interfered with the subjects' narratives. The meditators were afforded freedom of expression and were not guided or directed toward specific paths by my inquiries, which were limited

to seeking clarifications on certain aspects of their experience. I must take a step back and not assume the role of an expert in the presence of the meditator. This fundamental aspect, facilitated by visual elicitation, encourages subjects to open up more and feel less inhibited.

Usually, subjects who know they are being studied and feel as if they are being put ‘under a microscope’, implicitly or explicitly, do not communicate the same experiences as when placed in a participatory environment, aware of being listened to without judgment (Angrosino, 2007). This may appear commonplace to practitioners of ethnography, but it is crucial to reiterate. Although anthropologists are accustomed to investigating by immersing themselves as much as possible in others’ experiences, the validity of this methodology, particularly in exploring complex matters such as consciousness, has not yet been widely embraced. Indeed, methodologies advocated for investigating conscious experience remain heavily influenced by laboratory settings, rigid protocols, and the pursuit of patterns aligned with predetermined expectations.

It appears indisputable that the practice of meditation intersects with the issue of consciousness. However, a certain conceptual deconstruction and analytical perspective will be necessary to make us fully aware of the actual themes of this investigation.

First and foremost, there is a tendency to take consciousness for granted. We use this term sufficiently and, therefore, we may not realize what it actually signifies. The meaning is implicit within the culture in which we are immersed, and thus, the way speakers use it is a matter of habit for them. This mechanism is not only applicable to word meanings but also to every aspect of daily life. Certainly, the concept of “consciousness” is culturally bound to our habits, but meditation, specifically contemplative Buddhist practice or Yoga as understood by authors such as Patañjali, conceives consciousness within a broader spectrum. It will be my concern to point out that in this study, I intend to adopt this idea and examine how, in the importation of a practice with a different conception of what consciousness is, there can be effects on those who engage in it.

Among scholars of consciousness, there are those interested in the investigation of the so-called pure or immediate consciousness. This pertains to the pre-reflective aspect of consciousness, purged from educational and cultural conditioning. Within this context, one might consider that Buddhist meditation aims to attain pre-reflective consciousness, yet specific clarifications are necessary. Anything related to the exploration of consciousness is naturally sieved through our ideas and cultural conditioning, ideas that significantly influence the experience. Names and forms, in the words of Buddhists—nominal identities, concepts, and mental constructs shaped by cultural conditioning—act as a substantive element that seemingly precedes the cognitive experience and filters it like a pair of glasses.

Regarding this, Shear and Jevning (1999, p. 190) rightly point out that the inclination to think through interiority and exteriority is a culturally learned distinction—namely, the separation between the physical and psychic worlds: “objections have been raised against the possibility of the existence of culture-independent experiences in general” (p. 191). Other cultures might perceive this differently or not have this distinction at all. This objection about the cultural nature of consciousness organization could be further extended to cast doubt upon consciousness itself. However, if consciousness per se is denied as a cultural product, it would consequently imply the impossibility of discussing any general principles of human experience, even denying experience itself, which is absurd. One must not succumb to the temptation of facile extremism. Indeed, it is by ‘culturalizing’ everything that one progressively falls into a self-referential pattern. If it were impossible to transcend culture and consequently discuss consciousness in a pre-cultural sense, then would any culture exist at all? Culture is defined by the possibility of estranging oneself from it, although this is far from an easy task. It’s worth noting that often the models used to distance ourselves from culture are themselves cultural, producing the opposite effect.

All of our experience, as well as our language, occurs in particular social contexts, unique to each culture and subculture. As a result they are all also built up out of culturally-dependent components (language, symbols, expectations, etc.). Consequently all experiences in general, and the (supposedly single) experience we have been discussing in particular, are in fact culture-specific.⁸

This deadlock suggests the necessity of contemplating an exit strategy, which could involve the gradual reduction of the influence of elements recognizable as culturally and educationally conditioned. This is why Buddhist discourse appears immensely valuable for a phenomenology of conscious experience: by recognizing the units of names and forms as the nuclear problem of consciousness organization, it suggests that even the terms and concepts used to identify and explain phenomenological experiences are primarily subject to a nature of cultural conventionality (p. 201). Hence, meditation encourages the recognition of these two-sided units of names-and-forms within arising thoughts, subsequently detaching from them through contemplative practice. It would be difficult here to disregard Lévi-Strauss and his concept of the psychic unity of humankind, as it appears in myth, in the archaic forms of language, and in its ‘superstructures’ in general (Lévi-Strauss, 2014).

⁸ Cf. Shear & Jevning, 1999, p. 199.

At this juncture, we question the most appropriate methodology for investigating states of consciousness within meditative practice. In this section, we will confine our examination to evaluating the distinctions between micro-phenomenological inquiry and ethnographic-contemplative approaches in the study of meditation. Although micro-phenomenology has provided me with essential and valuable insights for integrating ethnographic practice, it must be acknowledged that the latter method remains, in my view, more robust in its aims to investigate the conscious aspects of subjective experience.

The micro-phenomenological interview (Heimann et al., 2023) commences with an explicit and detailed explanation of the investigative methods, delineating objectives and principles, while also reiterating the type of questions to be posed. These questions often prompt the subject to reconsider their explanations, recollect lived experiences from memory, and delve into details of their subjective experience. This aspect can be commended for its emphasis on exploring pure experience. However, it also tends to somewhat constrain the subject along a predetermined path. Undoubtedly, eliciting such meticulous efforts in reconstructing subjective experiences spontaneously is challenging. Yet, while it may contribute to maintaining the subjectivity of the experience itself, does prompting the narrator to pause their stream of consciousness to dwell on specifics prove beneficial? These inquiries effectively disrupt the subject's free narration—at least as inferred from micro-phenomenological interview transcriptions.

Microphenomenology can indeed prove beneficial in inspiring the types of questions to pose when the subject naturally halts their narrative, thus serving as further elicitation. For example, “validation questions” can be very useful when the subject seems momentarily lost (Petitmengin, 2006, p. 255). However, the narrative cannot be directed by pre-established questions. In this context, I observed that visual elicitation, positioning the subject as an expert with complete expressive freedom, especially when assured that no specific schema is being sought, allows for greater and easier articulation of personal experiences. Naturally, this approach also has its limitations, as seen in cases such as Daniel's discomfort with drawing due to his strong social bias against artistic prowess evaluation, or in Leslie's belief that mindfulness should cultivate calmness, thereby minimally stimulating pre-reflective focus on consciousness.

In Daniel's case, this obstacle could be readily overcome through increased familiarity with the subject. This is where the questioning aspect can prove advantageous, and micro-phenomenology provides excellent examples of methodologies that encourage subjects to refocus on the analysis of lived experience. However, I am of the opinion that it is only in such instances that specific questions are useful, as in my experience with other subjects, they tend to obstruct their free expression of subjectivity rather than facilitate it.

The issue of interview transcription is another important aspect to consider. The practice of micro-phenomenology tends to streamline interview transcriptions by excluding various data deemed irrelevant by its standards. However, these discarded elements are actually fundamental from the anthropological perspective. Being a ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 2008), and within these data lie significant details, especially in the exploration of subjectivity. I am referring to elements such as “all contextual information, comments, or reflections that did not describe aspects of the target experience itself” (Heimann et al., 2023, p. 227). Pauses, hesitations, coughs, distractions, or interruptions are integral components of a complex system. Only by considering the entirety of this system can we understand how each aspect contributes to the expression of subjectivity.

Undoubtedly, due to space constraints, it is necessary to omit elements that the anthropologist deems less relevant. Nevertheless, beyond human error, it is not feasible to preclude interview elements merely on the grounds of their seeming irrelevance. Behind what seems trivial might be hidden invaluable data. Without the appropriate training, the initial experience of meditation is characterized by

a rapid flow of inner images and ‘films’ that are called up from the memory or constructed: recent or distant memories, which may be pleasant or traumatising, future scenes that are either feared or desired, are played out without interruption. This inner imagery is accompanied most of the time by emotions of varying degrees of intensity. The images and emotions themselves cover an even deeper layer that is hard to access, that is silent, in which the frontier between myself and other people, between the inner world and the outer world, and between the various sensorial modalities, is far more permeable [...]. In addition to these various ‘strata’, the meditator also gradually becomes aware of the dynamic dimension of his or her experience, i.e., the rapid succession of inner operations – comparisons, tests and diagnoses – which constitute the incessant flow of his subjective experience.⁹

The proliferation of mental films and images are a precious part of the subject’s experience in their progression towards contemplation. Nonetheless, they are an inseparable part of the experience of the *corps propre* (Merleau-Ponty, 2004, p. 247), and we cannot understand the meditative experience, including the transcendence of the dual experience, without understanding how the body, understood as the corporeality of which Merleau-Ponty speaks, not only experiences this experience before and during meditation, but also its eventual transcendence after.

⁹ Cf. Petitmengin, 2006, p. 236.

Therefore, I advocate for the necessity of a gentler elicitation. Only through this approach can experiential spontaneity be more readily ensured. Thus, while ethnographic practice may benefit from micro-phenomenology as an inspiration for the mode of certain questions to pose to subjects in specific contexts, solely contemplative ethnography proves more than sufficient to obtain the desired information. Protocols such as the DES (Descriptive Experience Sampling) sometimes prove too rigid as potential impositions that steer the interviewee toward a direction expected by the interviewer (Petitmengin, 2006, p. 253), whereas visual elicitation or other forms of elicitation through free expression may better encourage subjects to self-narrate. In this context, the image becomes autopoietic, and the theme of consciousness, while not explicitly stated, clearly emerges within the fabric of the forms that the meditating subject expresses on the page.

The micro-phenomenologist fears the scenario of a subject “escaping from a description of the experience into comments, assessments and judgments about the experience, or digressions relating to his concerns of the moments” (p. 239), however, in the realm of anthropology, these instances are not deviations from the expected course, but rather significant pieces of information that, when present, shed light on the subjectivity of the interviewee. Naturally, the intentions also diverge. Micro-phenomenology seeks pure, pre-reflective experiences, while contemplative ethnography aims to articulate the meditative experience in its essence without sacrificing the value of the subject who has undergone it. This is because I believe that the importance of meditation lies within this subjective value.

In recent years, micro-phenomenology has emerged as a methodology aimed at studying lived experience through interviews that apply Husserlian *ἐποχή* to psychological analysis. Within this framework, a certain compatibility between the micro-phenomenological method and contemplative practice has been recognized, with the former being proposed as a valid approach to investigating the experiences derived from the latter (Petitmengin et al., 2019). Micro-phenomenologists are careful to clarify their methodology in several fundamental aspects. In Husserl’s psychology, the focus on immediate perception, unmediated by later mental constructs—which we might now identify as cultural, linguistic, social, or subjective—was an investigation that sought to uncover common elements shared by all these constructs, which were thought to be derived from it. For example, one might mentally evoke all types of ‘red’ and analyze them until the common essence of ‘red’, a supposed pure red, remains.

In this sense, micro-phenomenology adheres closely to that psychological tradition which assumes the existence of an objective ‘red’, or a set of minimal units of psychic perceivability. This aspect is highly contestable for a range of reasons thoroughly articulated by cultural psychology, but without delving into those technicalities, it is notable that the *thingness* discussed in Buddhism, to which I

will refer later in the text, does not at all align with objective sensory data, nor with an alleged purity in perceptions stripped of obstructive elements. There is no discernible ‘pure red’ separate from the various reds we perceive in our experience. Even though micro-phenomenology seeks to distance itself from eidetic variation as an exercise to arrive at such objective data, instead valuing the iterative unfolding of lived experience with greater attention to the subject’s experiential data, it ultimately fails to achieve its intended goal. Specifically, it aims to shift the subject’s or even the researcher’s awareness toward the implicit (unconscious) processes of their mental activity. I have not found this methodology to be particularly effective; in contrast, elicitation proves to be far more efficient in prompting the subject, autonomously and with minimal intervention on my part, to express themselves in a highly detailed manner. Moreover, there is another issue: recognizing the existence of mental processes that typically operate outside of our awareness is one thing—and in this, elicitation applied to meditative practice is at least as useful as, if not more than, micro-phenomenology. However, attempting to identify a supposed purity in processes unmediated by other factors is another matter entirely. In this regard, micro-phenomenology is excessively skewed toward quantitative rather than qualitative methodologies, and thus incapable of producing significant results through self-narration.

3. Defining the Ethnographic Maṇḍala

In this chapter, I intend to outline the process that led me to adopt maṇḍala-elicitation as an ethnographic technique for the anthropological study of states of consciousness. To achieve this, it will be necessary to briefly explore the existing literature on maṇḍala studies. These studies are primarily inspired by the work of Jung and thus adapt the practice of maṇḍala drawing to psychological analysis. To date, there have been no serious attempts to implement a qualitative methodology in this regard. Nevertheless, the study and analysis of these previous works have been fundamental for me in delineating a methodology applicable to ethnographic investigation.

Representing a complex experience such as consciousness through visual means is an undertaking. We live in ourselves every day, but our mere ‘being ourselves’ is a fact on which everyday life does not allow us to reflect. In addition, in the meditative process, complex mechanisms of reconstruction and deconstruction of identity were involved, at a level of fragmentation such that the representability of such conditions became almost impossible. Identity, in its dynamism, was placed in a critical situation, a crisis that also transcended de Martino’s crisis of presence, as it was induced by a conditionality that exempted from the classic situational anguish, in which the individual is faced with a ‘problem to be solved’ that makes its identity convictions waver.

Meditation transcends this crisis, but at the same time it experiences its multiplied effects. From a constructive to a destructive dynamic, *solve et coāgulā*. And it is precisely by reflecting on the oscillation between *pars cōnstruēns* and *pars dēstruēns* that I have found a possible solution. The testimonies of the artists who used painting or other expressive forms as a meditative tool had convinced me that representation was a possibility, albeit limited, of expressing such a complex process. On the one hand, one must accept the limited nature of this method, and on the other hand, welcome the determining factor of hermeneutics. The *maṇḍala* is a form of artistic representation that has a long history in Buddhist practice, and probably originates from the practice of visualizing specific “signs” (*nimitta*) and circles (*kaṣiṇa*) as supports for meditation. Actually, the word *kaṣiṇa* reveals that those “spheres” were intended as a single “totality” of elements conceived as a unity.

In common usage in Indian languages, the word *maṇḍala* denotes a circle or a disc. It appears already to indicate the chapters of the Vedas, the text of Indo-Aryan tradition with the oldest contents of this culture, where the term *maṇḍala* is employed to indicate the books that compose the Veda corpus. In Buddhist tradition, the use of *maṇḍalas* intersects with that of physical *nimittas*, colored circular discs historically used as supports for meditative practice. The *nimittas* are used extensively in the *borān* meditation. There are three stages of the *nimitta* described in the Visuddhimagga which involve the

use of the *kaṣiṇa* as a basis for meditation. A preliminary (*parikamma*) *nimitta* which the meditator sees when relying on the external object; an acquiring (*uggaha*) *nimitta* which appears when the practitioner is able to see the object even with his eyes closed; and finally, a *nimitta* of equivalence (*paṭibhāga*) which corresponds to the mental image of the object of meditation that can be manipulated by the will of the practitioner regardless of the initial object. This is the object of the *jhāna citta* (Crosby, 2020, p. 50). This object is not perfect but rather the purified essence of the object originally physical. The *paṭibhāga* is sometimes described as a visual object even though the initial object of meditation itself is not in any sense a ‘visual’ one (*ibidem*). The Amatakaravaṇṇanā draws down into the body purified essence. Crosby reports a more traditional version of the *borān* meditation in which the *nimitta* must arise spontaneously (p. 54). The practitioner may recite an *arahaṃ* (Cambodia) or just go ahead with the breathing practice while repeating the syllables *buddho* (Thailand) or visualizing a crystal gem with a Buddha image inside (Dharmakāya tradition). The crucial phase of this kind of meditation is to catch all of the luminous *nimitta*-spheres.

If the multilayered maṇḍalas are descended from the superimposition of several *nimittas*, then it seems consistent with the common use, in later Mahāyāna traditions, of the maṇḍala as a tool for deep meditation. However, there is uncertainty about the origin of this term. The Sanskrit *māṇḍala* may derive from a semantic root of a non-Indo-European language. In this case, various hypotheses come into play, both for the exogenous and endogenous origins of the Indo-European linguistic group. All the roots, such as **mel̥nd-*, **mer̥nd-*, **mand-*, **mend-*, are vaguely connected to the archetype of the action of “turning”, “rotating”, hence the development towards the “circle” or the “disc”. There are more ancient hypotheses that connect the term *māṇḍala* to the Latin *mundus*, meaning “world”. This latter term is also problematic and of uncertain origin, sometimes connected to the Etruscan *muθ*, “pit”, and other times to the root **mh₂nd-* (“to adorn”). Therefore, it is a term shrouded in mystery. What is certain is the historical-ethnological aspect regarding the concrete use of maṇḍalas as both an artistic expression and a tool for meditative practice. In the context of Jungian studies there have been some attempts to reinterpret the term as linked to a root *manda-* concerning sacred spaces (Albanese, 1977). In the case of the *māṇḍala* this can certainly be true on an anthropological level, but it is now undisputed that the term *māṇḍala* refers etymologically to a circle.

It can be assumed that *māṇḍalas* were initially monochromatic spheres then transposed into real discs representing the various meditative phases, over time they must have overlapped in different layers, creating concentric circles that summarized in one image the path of the meditative practice. Like in a maze, it proceeds from the outside to enter the center. Over time, *māṇḍalas* have become increasingly complex and varied, assimilating various kinds of artistic and iconographic elements. We are not interested in deeply investigating the visual history of *māṇḍalas*, but it is important how

it comes to a certain point to Jung's eyes. Certainly, not being an Indologist, many of his interpretations not only of *maṇḍalas* but of numerous issues related to Indian thought are now considered inaccurate by many Indologists and it is also considered ambivalent on many points (Schlamm, 1999). However, in the economy of hermeneutics, philological correctness does not matter, at least not necessarily. Jung's intention of using *maṇḍalas* as a clinical practice has had its successes, which I will briefly explore shortly. At this point, after the possibility that Jung has revealed, the *maṇḍala* can be taken out of psychoanalysis and inserted into ethnographic practice. The therapeutic dimension remains pertinent to the self-care of the individual and we, in the context of Medical Anthropology in which this work is inscribed, will take it into consideration, as we have taken into consideration the therapeutic value of meditation. However, the *maṇḍala* as a healing act is integrated into meditation itself, at least in the exercise that I have conceived inspired by Jung. The *maṇḍala* also allowed me to make use of visual investigation in research, giving an experiential form to the meditative path of the subjects, including myself. In my autoethnography, in fact, after my first experience the 16th of December, I decided to fully integrate the practice of the *maṇḍala* starting from December 31, 2022, when I started drawing a *maṇḍala*, adding a layer a week, filling it with the contents that at that moment, in my meditative path, I felt to express. The same exercise was proposed to various other subjects, and we will examine the results below.

Hermeneutics can be used in anthropology to analyze the relationships between the self and representation. It is a method of investigation that allows the ethnographer to interpret the meanings of events, objects, and symbols in contexts of cultural production. By applying a hermeneutical method of investigation to ethnography, it is possible to uncover complex systems of representation and deconstruction of identity. This can be achieved by proposing to subjects who practice meditation to create artistic works such as *maṇḍala*, following a phased procedure in which each meditation corresponds to the creation of a section of the *maṇḍala*. The ethnographer then interviews the meditation practitioner to ask him/her for a hermeneutic interpretation of his own work. This procedure is potentially useful for an anthropology of contemplative practices, as the creative process, through catharsis, makes it possible to explain the relationship between meditation and identity from the point of view of Buddhist philosophy on inner suffering (which must be overcome precisely by getting rid of the identity). Furthermore, an ethnography of this cathartic act makes it possible to reconnect with medical anthropology and to unite the study of contemplative practice with the need that meditators have to seek well-being through a therapeutic form. Therefore, hermeneutics, catharsis and ethnography are closely related and can be used to gain further insight into the relationship between the self, identity and representation.

3.1 The perspective of Analytical Psychology

In Jung's personal experience, the *maṇḍala* was a tool capable of representing symbolic forms of the unconscious in the form of a self-analysis path (Slegelis, 1987, p. 301). The artistic production of such representations therefore entailed a total rearrangement of the personality, as reported by Slegelis. Furthermore, during his various travels around the world, where, like a self-taught anthropologist, he studied and analyzed different cultures, Jung believed he saw maṇḍalic representations in every cultural expression. Now, strictly speaking, the maṇḍala is a cultural production mainly associated with Buddhism, and it is in the historical-cultural Indian context that it has its genesis and specific elaboration. However, following Jung, it could be said that the intentions and objectives that Buddhism has subsumed in the elaboration of a specific artistic technique like the maṇḍala can be found, in a non-systematic and therefore implicit, but still analogous form, in many other cultures.

Jung therefore attempted to integrate the maṇḍala into his personal self-analysis and self-therapy, convinced that the creative process of the maṇḍala was in itself healing. The subject who embarked on the creative process became the interpreter of their own symbols, and thus by learning to know their inner symbols, became an analyst of themselves. Slegelis (1987) also points out that unfortunately today this type of practice is viewed unfavorably by the psychological community, which considers it "being too mystical and unscientific" (p. 301).¹

In the broader context of Medical Anthropology, where the clinic is studied by humanists and where one does not seek therapy but what Foucault very wisely called "self-care" (*le Souci de soi*), the *maṇḍala*, and with it meditation, falls within that existential path of self-care that cannot be dominated by clinical authority, but has always been the domain of philosophers, educators, mentors, and now anthropologists. Thanks to hermeneutics and the recovery of the importance of subjective experience, anthropology can derive from the *maṇḍala* path a very valid tool for reforming the ethnography of contemplative practices.

Slegelis provides an overview of the contexts in which predominantly circular maṇḍalas are used in art therapy (p. 302). For the purpose of this chapter, I re-studied the history of psychoanalysis and, in particular, Jung's relationship with the Eastern world. Freudian psychoanalysis also has numerous points of contact with Eastern philosophies, and perhaps Freud was more connected to India than Jung, who seems to show more interest in China than in India, although India is present in his works. Anyway, I started my analysis with mentors of Jungian and Hillmanian formation.

¹ This is actually part of a broader skepticism towards psychoanalysis, which, by its own epistemological statute, cannot be a science, leading to a well-documented conflict between its humanistic nature and the engulfing attempts of positivistic psychologies that wanted to appropriate the psychoanalytic method to make it a psychotherapy.



Fig. 7:

Both are a possible example of different maṇḍalas across the world. On the left a maṇḍala depicting the forms of Mañjuśrī (this work is in the public domain). On the right, published also by Jung (1980, p. 47) we see “Integra Naturae Speculum Artisque Imago”, *Utriusque Cosmi maioris scilicet et minoris metaphysica atque technical Historia*, Robert Fludd, (Oppenheim, 1617).

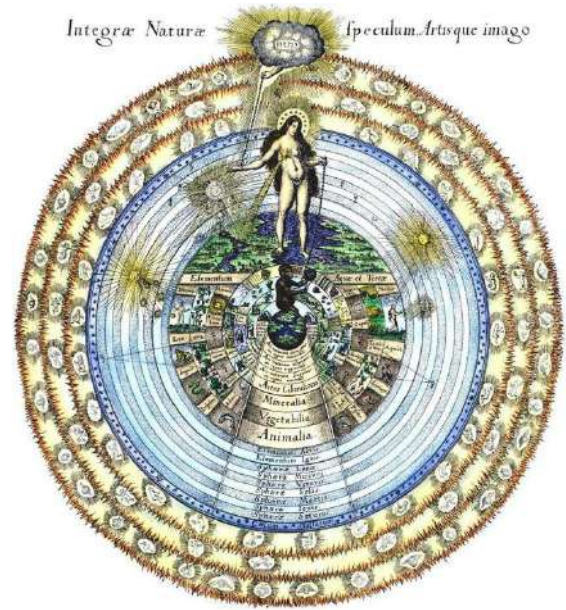


Fig. 8:

Psychoanalysis shows for my experience numerous points of contact with ethnography focused on individual subjects, and in psychosocial studies psychoanalysis often extends to superordinate contexts, revealing proximity so great with anthropology that, in my opinion, the distinction between the two methods is unnecessary. Beyond these considerations, Jung established his own *maṇḍala* diary, convinced that this form of contemplative art could make a person less dependent on the guidance of the therapist in the interpretation of symbols. Certainly, initial support was needed, but this would have been increasingly unnecessary as the hermeneutic interpretation of the patient’s inner symbols progressed. Jung began painting *maṇḍalas* in 1916, after a very turbulent three years caused by the historical break with Freud (1913) that caused problems such as hallucinations and manic-depressive episodes (p. 302). His experience with maṇḍala art also had another influence due to the war. From 1918 to 1919, Jung worked in a prison camp in French Switzerland, keeping a daily diary in which, every morning, he added a layer to a maṇḍala. Jung would later write that each layer was interpretable as his inner psychological situation of that period. From this came the idea of having patients also produce maṇḍalas, and that they fill the circular layers spontaneously, without suggestions from the analyst.

The images that were produced spontaneously in the cathartic process of maṇḍala production were attributed by Jung to archetypes, primordial images and the legacy of the evolutionary process of human anthropology (p. 303). These images obviously appeared analogously to the condition of the subject, representing unresolved interior problems and discomforts. In the context of our ethnography of consciousness, what will interest us most will be the constructive path that pushes certain subjects, in the interpretive-hermeneutic act, to attribute certain meanings rather than others. The center and the path that leads to the center of the maṇḍala will also be of fundamental importance, which functions as a labyrinth. Jung created numerous maṇḍalas, referring to them as ideograms of the unconscious (p. 303), and experimented with their usefulness in the lives of psychotics, as a tool for maintaining mental balance, similarly to the benefits that are now recognized in mindfulness. The link between the two practices is proven by the fact that the production of maṇḍala activity, like mindfulness, requires focused concentration on one point, and leads to the emergence of unconscious contents that must be experienced with serene detachment, in order to maintain concentration on the imaginative point. To apply this method to a contemplative ethnography, I studied various art therapy material related to the maṇḍala, and I can summarize as follows. The creation of a maṇḍala is a “self-healing process” in which “it is difficult to determine whether the artist or the process itself is in control” (p. 304); different forms, colors and shapes used can be traced back to different basic psychic conditions (Jung identified nine of them); maṇḍalas are quite adaptable to different needs: they can also be created in groups (for group therapies), in stages (during a long period) or completed in a single artistic-meditative session.

3.2 The ‘oriental’ influence on Jung

Regarding India, Jung’s fascination with the South Asian world is perhaps only comparable to that of Schopenhauer, whom he often draws inspiration from. We could even go on arguing how Schopenhauer’s misinterpretation of Indian thought has been, in its own way, detrimental, as it contributed to forming a generic and imprecise idea of India as a cauldron of vague and poorly reasoned ideas. Schopenhauer, however, despite primarily reading Indian works in translation, managed to grasp, in his own way, some fundamental concepts that became the basis of his most important philosophical conception, namely, the dichotomy between will and representation. One could extensively debate the applicability of this view to Indian thought, particularly Buddhist and Upaniṣadic, to which Schopenhauer claims to be indebted. However, Schopenhauer’s ideas are more of a free adaptation of certain aspects of Indian thought, and they are predominantly viewed through the lens of a European of his time, steeped in German Romanticism. What is certain is that the *Wille/Vorstellung* dichotomy, which, in theory, could be traced back to a Buddhist concept of

taṇhā/cetasika (desire/conception) and not, as some audaciously suggested, to *nibbāna/saṃsāra*, certainly underlies Freudian dualism, constituting proto-psychoanalysis initially and the theory of topic formations later on.

Indeed, it is beyond doubt, as Freud himself implicitly admits, that Schopenhauer is a kind of Ur-Psychoanalyst. The idea of *Wille/Vorstellung* undoubtedly forms the basis of the neural ϕ/ψ dichotomy, initially (Sirkin & Fleming, 1982; Tabin, 2006), and the Id/Ego later, where the Id, perfectly corresponding in Freud's mind to the impulsive psychic instance, is driven by preordained desires and wishes, as it is the species, as a superior biological force, that moves its intentions, while the Ego (Ich) operates through representations, constructions, images, identities, and social norms. It is not a perfect correspondence. The gigantic mediating force between these two wills, extending from the unconscious to the conscious, known as the *Über-Ich*, the internalized social instance, is an exclusively Freudian invention. It is remarkable, however, how these distinctions could have originated from the East, allowing us to discover elements within the complex and elaborate Buddhist psychology that could seamlessly fit into the Freudian psychoanalytic system, as demonstrated by De Silva's work (2010).

Therefore, while this is indirectly true for Freud, we should expect an even heavier influence from Jung, as the Swiss psychiatrist consciously delved into Buddhist and Indian works in search of valid elements for his psychology. Certainly, Jung's analytical psychology is rich in elements inspired by Buddhism and explicit references.

An undoubtedly positive attitude towards Jung's Buddhist-influenced thinking is provided by Young-Eisendrath, who offers a valid analysis of the relationship between Jung and Buddhism (Young-Eisendrath, 2008). However, we must also recognize that his ideas about India and Buddhism are sometimes confused, if not outright prejudiced. I do not intend to diminish his vision with this statement, as it certainly has numerous valid points. However, it is impossible not to acknowledge his effort to forcefully fit Buddhism into his psychological framework and, where he fails to do so, dismiss it as a thought impossible to comprehend for Westerners, as it is deemed inapplicable and therefore implicitly useless. Of course, the notion of uselessness is not directed towards the entirety of Buddhist thought, which Jung himself extensively utilizes, but rather towards certain aspects, particularly those concerning identity and ego theory, which Jung, in my impression, found bothersome.

To begin with, Jung's idea of the Buddha "as a symbol for the wholeness of the individual" (Daniel, 2007, p. 222) is at least debatable. Jung treats the historical figure of the Buddha with an importance that it hardly had on a religious level in Buddhism. The Buddha is not the Christ nor has the figure of him been used as that of the Christ in alchemy. Buddhism has always been much more interested in

principles than in people, and this is also true in its more symbolic expressions of the Mahāyāna, whose metaphors I am sure Jung appreciated much more. Furthermore, even if Jung really appreciated Buddhism, he expresses a general ambivalence towards all “Eastern religions” in general (p. 223), and also “[h]e was particularly critical of Westerners taking up Eastern yogic practices that had as their stated aim, the merger of individual consciousness (or the ego) into a transcendent consciousness or state of oneness”. This criticism is imputable to Jung’s attachment to the general idea of Self as essential for any psychology. Thus, the Buddhist goal of *anattā* seems to Jung impracticable: “such a goal would be entirely inappropriate for Westerners”. Moreover, in these utterances of his, “he conflates ideas from multiple traditions in Buddhism with other Eastern traditions such as Hinduism and Taoism”.²

Jung fluctuates quite a bit in the proposition of his ideas, between a Buddhism useful to the West and a Buddhism whose ideas are unassimilable for Europeans, but the point on which I find myself most divergent is undoubtedly his nihilistic interpretation of Buddhism, in which he deliberately uses the expression “non-existent existence” to explain what he believes is the paradox of Buddhism.³

² This also led to the most notorious “Jung’s critique of Westerners’ adopting Eastern spiritual practices and assimilating themselves to Eastern doctrines makes sense in the context of the Western European cultural milieu within which he lived” (Daniel, 2007, p. 224). Nevertheless, Jung had several times the opportunity to read the discourses of the Pāli canon in translation, and on one occasion in particular he prepared a commentary on the translation of Karl Eugen Neumann, which he greatly appreciated, and in which he affirmed the importance of these discourses also for the Western world, which could have learned from the Buddha the path of liberation from suffering through the extension of consciousness (p. 226). Again, Jung offers a personal interpretation, as he sees sati in Theravāda Buddhism as equivalent to consciousness, which could be debatable. After all, Jung’s interpretation of Buddhism, like Freud before him, was heavily influenced by Schopenhauer’s (p. 227).

³ It is appropriate to be clear beyond any doubt on this point: beside nostalgic and dated interpretations, this picturesque vision of a nihilistic Buddhism does not stand at all. The nihilistic reading of Buddhism is simply a translation error mixed with Western cultural prejudices: Buddhism is not nihilistic nor has it ever conceived of “nothing[ness]” in the Greek sense, since nihilism, as Severino explains (Severino, 2016), proceeds from the Parmenides’ parricide onwards, and it is at best a problem inherent in Western thought, but Buddhism certainly lacks it also because it makes explicit reference to the rejection of any form of nihilism or affirmation of the impossible possibility that being, or what which is, becomes non-being, i.e. what is not. The outcomes of this Parmenidean parricide have been discussed on multiple occasions. However, it is only through de Martino’s anthropological perspective that we can comprehend the extent to which nihilism, the foundational idea underpinning this conception, wherein being can at a certain point and under specific circumstances ‘cease to be’, is an idea explicitly intertwined with health-related concerns. The autonomy of the present subject, hence their consciousness-in-the-world, is constantly threatened by the nihilistic terror of potential annulment (de Martino, 1995, p. 101). Not solely death, but any circumstance capable of undermining this present autonomy, risks ‘crisis’ for the subject. De Martino eloquently argues the outcomes of this crisis in sections of his works dedicated to the psychopathological apocalypses of presence, as well as the crisis of mourning and the loss of domesticity in the world. It cannot be asserted that de Martino was a Parmenidean; conversely, it is plausible that he perceived the annulment of presence not merely as a threat but as a concrete risk. The “nothingness” de Martino refers to compels us to contemplate ontological issues in anthropology, albeit topics we will address at the conclusion of this work. Presently, the crucial focus lies in the connection between the “anthropological risk” (Idem 2019, pp. 128-9) of losing presence—i.e., feeling annihilated—and the protective function carried out by consciousness (Marraffa, 2012, p. 230). In defense against these threats, conscious presence establishes various safeguarding mechanisms effectively deemed ‘therapeutic’. Naturally, when de Martino speaks of healing shamans or techniques aimed at curing presence, he does not have modern clinical settings or Western biomedicine in mind but rather archaic forms where the distinction between magician and therapist had not yet been established. What is treated in this circumstance is rather a major theme of medical anthropology: the symbolic effectiveness of cultural devices and their healing potential (Beneduce, 2005).

3.3 Auto-analysis and auto-ethnography

As previously stated, the therapeutic value of this exercise will not be the central theme of this study, not because Medical Anthropology dismisses this aspect, but because it has already been extensively documented, and it is not the focus of this study to investigate this aspect of therapy through fieldwork. What is of interest to us is that the study of contemplative art, specifically maṇḍalas, has already been linked to mindfulness and meditation with positive outcomes for mental health (Campenni & Hartman, 2020). Designing maṇḍalas has also proved benefits in an experiment conducted on graduate college students (Duong et al., 2018).

It should be noted that maṇḍalas have a use also in tantric traditions. Nevertheless, there may be some noteworthy elements of contact. For instance, tantric maṇḍalas are linked to specific visualization techniques or *sādhana* (Bühnemann, 2017, p. 264). In the tantric context, these visualizations are intended for the veneration of particular figures. However, from a Hillmanian perspective, this could be understood as an alchemical process, in which the deities depicted in the maṇḍalas are nothing but archetypes.

The alchemists had an excellent image for the transformation of suffering and symptom into a value of the soul. A goal of the alchemical process was the pearl of great price. The pearl starts off as a bit of grit, a neurotic symptom or complaint, a bothersome irritant in one's secret inside flesh, which no defensive shell can protect oneself from.⁴

Bühnemann acknowledges indeed that two views of the maṇḍalas have been particularly influential in the modern conception of this art form, and these are, of course, the studies of Jung and Tucci. Joan Kellogg drew upon Jungian concepts of individuation in advocating for the use of maṇḍalas in art therapy. Her focus was primarily on the diagnostic interpretation of colors, shapes, and their placement in the maṇḍalas that her clients (i.e., patients) created. Kellogg developed her own therapeutic tool, the 'Mandala Assessment Research Instrument' (MARI[®]), which took the form of the MARI[®] card test in 1980. Her system ultimately identified 13 "archetypal stages of The Great Round of Mandala", with each stage corresponding to a specific mental state. As a result of Kellogg's work, maṇḍalas have become frequently employed tools in art therapy settings (Bühnemann, 2017, p. 266).⁵

⁴ Cf. Hillman, 1990, p. 19.

⁵ Another work focused on college students has demonstrated that creating maṇḍalas can facilitate a greater sense of authenticity, and humanistic theory propose that becoming more authentic leads to greater psychological well-being (Pisarik & Larson, 2011). The findings of this study provide support for the use of maṇḍalas as a tool for addressing normal developmental concerns among college students, in line with humanistic principles that promote personal growth and development. It is important to note that maṇḍalas may not be an appropriate intervention for addressing severe issues

In contemporary literature, the term maṇḍala is widely used to describe a geometric pattern, variously believed to represent or relate to the cosmos, subconscious or unconscious. Usually, no distinction is made between Buddhist and Hindū maṇḍalas or maṇḍala-like designs from Native American or other traditions.

I proposed to the ethnographic subjects to focus on their experience during meditation, and I left the final hermeneutic interpretation as the most important part of ethnography. Only secondarily did I intervene to ask questions and propose associations with symbolic culture. I also personally embarked on a maṇḍala creation journey. Inspired by Slegelis, I also decided to start with simple forms, that is, circular maṇḍalas, and then eventually move on to more complex things. However, Slegelis's experiment mainly produced works of art with symbolic elements drawn within a circular perimeter (Slegelis, 1987, pp. 307-9). Can we also speak in that case of maṇḍala layers? Of different 'levels'? I am skeptical about this, although they are certainly artistic elements that reflect subjective conditions. In a clinical study by Henderson and Rosen, the research did not specifically focus on the procedural creation of maṇḍalas, comparing an inner and contemplative path to a cathartic path through artistic creation. Indeed, we still see examples of symbolic representations inscribed within a circular perimeter (Henderson & David Mascaro, 2007, p. 152).

Closer to the Jungian style are the results obtained by the study of Potash et al. in which specific guidelines were provided. The medical students who were also the subjects of the study were guided by Potash as an art therapist to facilitate their creative work, but no artistic skill or training was obviously required for this type of experiment. The rigor of this study is different from previous ones because of the adoption of Kellogg's theory, which studied maṇḍalic art in therapy and developed a peculiar thesis. This led the authors of the study to strictly classify each of the maṇḍalas produced by their subjects into one of the twelve stages theorized by Kellogg, with a majority of maṇḍalas produced within stage 6, related to conflicts. Five of these, in relation to the opposite stage (stage 12) contained images of transcendent ecstasy, prefiguring the solution of the conflict (Potash et al., 2015, p. 20).

This system drastically alters the artistic canon of the Buddhist maṇḍala, which is mainly associated with geometric forms that establish multiple levels of a path. The maṇḍala should in fact symbolically represent the bird's-eye view of a mountain (Xu, 2010; Bushelle, 2020; Levine, 1971). Architectural works that represent maṇḍalas three-dimensionally are often built on tiered levels, where the center is also the highest point (like the *Candhi Barabudhur* in Java or the *Mahābodhi Mahāvihāra* in India). Alternatively, there are maṇḍalas similar to labyrinths, but in any case, the idea is that of a path

that may prompt first-year college students to seek counseling. The use of maṇḍalic exercises has also been successfully tested in therapy for adolescents diagnosed with ADHD (Green et al., 2013).

leading towards the center (see, for example, the *Shompur Mōhabihar*, or the *Sèwu* temple complex). All of this is lost in the artistic production of maṇḍalas that have as their only constraint the circular perimeter within which the work is inserted. Of course, Buddhism does not have such a rigid canon, but rather a ‘traditional’ way of work. Visually striking works like the Japanese *Taima Mandara* (當麻曼荼羅 13th century) completely depart from the geometric patterns of more traditional maṇḍalas (Tanaka, 2018), and represents a landscape, the paradise (*sukhāvatī*) of Amida (阿弥陀).

Since the purpose of my research is not therapy per se, but rather contemplative practice in the context of the question of personal awareness, I preferred to adopt a procedure that was halfway between that of Jung and that of traditional Buddhists. Moreover, in my ethnography, at least one subject blatantly and consciously decided to ‘break the rules’ and create very alternative and personal *maṇḍalas*, as he believed that only in this way he was able to express his subjective condition at that time.

Maṇḍalas can be conceived as both a schematic representation of the cosmos and a depiction of the subject’s psyche. In other words, a maṇḍala is a world, internal and external, or perhaps the two things together. The first maṇḍala Jung ever drawn is perhaps the *Systema Muditotius*, which has been analyzed in its geometrical and symbolic values (Harms, 2011b). The maṇḍala are certainly objects of art, and therefore the geometric ratio and the references to the beauty of the proportions is an element that must be duly taken into consideration. However, as a representation of the dual nature of the world, we must not get too stuck on the search for general rules but rather for principles of interpretation. Certainly, in Jung’s case, the excessive attention given to the formal aspect has a value that resides in Jung’s personality, and not in an absolute principle of the maṇḍala. As Harms writes (*ibid.*, p. 150).

Within the integrity of the Self, he drew the *Systema Muditotius* mandala as a synthetic unifying geometry of his psychic journey into our Western spiritual origins. With the *Systema Muditotius* mandala, there is substantive evidence to verify that the Divine Proportion is operable within the Self. With the Extreme and Mean Ratio there exists a universal synthetic order, from the center of the Self, the monad, to the limits of the pleroma, all of which is henceforth defined by Jung, as such, in the *Systema Muditotius* mandala.

The reading principle in this case (which being a principle in itself can be denied in other cases) is understood by Jung as universal, but for us it is precisely a functioning principle of the maṇḍalic design, which allows us to orient ourselves about the two main aspects: the spatial one (from the center to the periphery) and the figurative one (the elements that inhabit the space of the maṇḍala). In many cases the participants in this study autonomously interpreted the center of their maṇḍala as

the innermost part of their self, thus agreeing with Jung, but it is also true that not all of them opted for geometric perfection, however producing visually impactful representations and very rich in meaning. There are of course some elements to take into consideration, such as the vertical and horizontal axis, in which the self and the “inhabitants” of the psyche are oriented.

3.4 Forms and structures in the Maṇḍalas

As Harms points out, in Jungian logic, the importance of the maṇḍala is only assumed if we assume that the forms represented in it can lead to potential references to universal archetypes. For this reason, it is necessary to speak of geometric archetypes and pre-Euclidean forms (Harms, 2011a, p. 84). Anthropology can do without universalism, however, I personally do not disapprove of the idea that there are human universals. These, however, are not found in the claim of absolute objectivism, but rather in shared human tendencies.⁶ What was important for my research was to see how even the approach of psychologists towards the maṇḍala experience was actually a kind of unconsciously carried out autoethnography.

This is experience turned out to be a catharsis. After a number of months during which I sought the help of a psychologist, my personal mandala appeared whole. His experience of the distressed Self left me with an understanding of geometry’s *inner* importance. I was aware that my circle was divided into four segments. Alternate segments were sequentially missing in these spontaneously emerging images. I have come to understand that these experiences arose from the unconscious. In my work as an architect, geometry was a resource for the creation of design concepts. However, the formal geometry of Euclid did not address my personal psychological experience, whereas the inner philosophical-psychological geometry of the mandala, a symbolic communication from the Self, had meaning that affected me over time.⁷

According to Jung’s hypothesis, the maṇḍala composition would mainly reveal elements of identity psychology or, in our case, anthropological construction of the self. Taking the ideal model of the maṇḍala made of various concentric layers, Jung would interpret the outermost side as the limit of the sense of the Ego (p. 87). Jung elaborates this interpretation by proceeding in a transcultural way, as he applies Plotinus to the reading of the maṇḍala, taking up the statements of the Greek philosopher

⁶ The a priori existence of geometric value must therefore be reinterpreted from a universal fact because objective to an anthropological fact and unconsciously shared. Similarly, the reference to aesthetic forms and specific geometric proportions is referable to different layers of human interpretive possibilities, which overlap each other: subjective values given by experience, innate tendencies, education, superimposed on cultural values given by shared experiences, social dynamics, historical facts, and so on.

⁷ Cf. Harms, 2011a, p. 86.

that the soul would revolve around the center without ever reaching it, the center being the divine nature. This interpretation also reminds of an individual lost in a labyrinth. In this mixture of Greek and Indian tradition, Jung seems to prove his thesis of universal archetypes. The maṇḍala is, formally, a ‘cosmogram’, that is a schematic representation of the universe. But in the analytic exercise, the subject who draws the maṇḍala would be actually representing a map of himself, thus defining the limits of his inner world. Different layers inside the main circle of the maṇḍala can also be understood as concentric membranes, which separate deeper levels, while maintaining a certain permeability. Like in the Freudian model of the unconscious, from which some elements, filtered by the psychic membrane, emerge, transformed symbolically, in external behaviors, also the maṇḍala would represent similar dynamics. Anyway, Harms sustains this hypothesis also with his personal experience with these exercises (p. 88).

Jung’s method of exploration involves the concept of ‘apperception’, which refers to what is known, whether it be conscious or deeply ingrained in the personal and collective unconscious. The aim of his method is to bring the unconscious ‘apperceived’ content to consciousness. The terms *a priori/a posteriori* and *perceived/apperceived* were integral to the philosophy of the Enlightenment and, by extension, to Jung’s view of the philosophical-psychological self, which was heavily influenced by Kant.⁸

Jung’s concept of the “analog of the Self” incorporates the idea put forth by Kant that reasoning occurs from left to right. The upper-left quadrant represents the *a priori* insight, which takes the form of intuition, perception, and concept. The upper-right quadrant, on the other hand, represents the *a posteriori* apperception, which is the depository of knowledge. Jung expands on this concept of the Self by giving the unconscious an equal or greater role than that of consciousness and by expanding on the philosophical reasoning described by Kant.⁹

The four quadrants of the Self are defined by the distinctions of left and right, perception and apperception, and upper and lower—the cosmological day and night, conscious and unconscious. This geometric analogy illustrates the left-to-right, clockwise progression of the process of reason, from the upper consciousness of day to the lower unconsciousness of night (pp. 89-90).

⁸ These terms are employed to outline a new geometry that emerged during the Enlightenment, known as projective geometry. This idea was created by Jakob Steiner, an intuitive geometer who was a contemporary of Kant. Projective geometry expresses a new cosmological consciousness by extending lines beyond the limits of geometric configurations and, theoretically, to infinity. The geometric points of intersection of these lines with other constructed lines are the basis of this new geometry, including the concept of infinitely extended lines, such as the polar line. Steiner considered this new geometry as having an *a priori* intuitive origin and placed his polar constructions in a circle with other Euclidean geometric figures, which was not the practice of analytical mathematics at the time. The author then constructs a diagram of the geometry of the self, which is not intended to be a symbolic maṇḍala, but rather a geometric representation of the self that contains and rationalizes the holistic contents symbolized in the maṇḍala.

⁹ In his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant argues that the process of moving from the *a priori* to the *a posteriori* and from perception to apperception cannot be reversed, that is, it cannot go from right to left.

3.5 Kellogg's theory: a brief overview

Renée van der Venet and Caitlin Cassella question whether Kellogg's model—the effort to systematize Jung's experience with mandalas into a well-defined psychological analysis—can trace archetypal patterns similar to those theorized by Jung. Their study is comprehensive and detailed and served as a reference point for me to further delve into Kellogg's theory on a technical level (van der Venet & Cassella, 2020). Kellogg was particularly intrigued by the potential of mandalas as a therapeutic tool and began to collect thousands of mandala drawings from psychiatric and clinical settings. Through her analysis of these drawings, Kellogg recognized patterns in the circular designs and identified 13 (12 stages + a “stage zero”) basic structures. This led to the development of her “Archetypal Stages of the Great Round of the Mandala” theory.

To further apply this theory in practice, Kellogg developed the Mandala Assessment Research Instrument (MARI®), which is a registered trademark. This tool allows trained clinicians to use the information gathered from a mandala drawing to support the development of treatment plans, goals and objectives. Additionally, the creation of mandalas and use of the MARI® can be used at a later time to evaluate change and/or progress in the treatment plan. However, to effectively utilize the MARI®, additional training is required. This training includes learning how to evaluate mandalas against Kellogg's theories, how to use archetypal design cards, color cards, and MARI® stages, and how to apply this information to the counseling and therapeutic process. It is important to note that this training is not limited to creative arts therapists, but is available to all mental health clinicians, including counselors, social workers, and psychologists.

Stage 0	Clear light	Transpersonal space and the source of all being
Stage 1	Void	Deep unconscious, attachment, trust, and safety
Stage 2	Bliss	Passive/receptive, generative space; reflective, untapped potential
Stage 3	Labyrinth/spiral	Focused movement of energy
Stage 4	Beginning	Symbiotic, narcissistic space
Stage 5	Target	Defense, boundary setting
Stage 6	Dragon fight	Struggle, ambivalence, separation, shadow issues, confrontation of opposites
Stage 7	Squaring the circle	Integration, union of the opposites, commitment
Stage 8	Functioning ego	Self-identity, autonomy, individuality
Stage 9	Crystallization	Socialization, completion
Stage 10	Gates of Death	Acknowledgement of loss, return to the unconscious, endings
Stage 11	Fragmentation	Ego disintegration, chaos
Stage 12	Transcendent ecstasy	Change in consciousness, transformation

Table 1. Kellogg's “Stages of the Great Round”

This model presents a framework for understanding the various stages of development that an individual may encounter throughout their life. The stages outlined in the model represent a journey of psychological growth and self-discovery, akin to the individuation process described by Jung. The model is presented in the form of a circle, with the stages arranged in a clockwise direction. The center of the circle represents the starting point, or stage “zero”, while stage 1 is located at the 6 o’clock position. The stages above the horizon line are considered to be conscious experiences, while those below the line are associated with unconscious experiences.

The MARI[®] was created as a tool to operationalize Kellogg’s model. This instrument is composed of 39 archetypal design cards, 40 color cards, and 13 stages. Each stage is associated with three archetypal patterns or symbols. This tool is used by trained clinicians to gather data from maṇḍala drawings, and to use this information to support the development of treatment plans, goals, and objectives. Furthermore, the MARI[®] can be used to evaluate change and progress in treatment plans over time.

The process of creating a maṇḍala drawing using the MARI[®] involves clients being given a set of materials, including Holbein oil pastels, a piece of white paper, and a pre-drawn circle. Clients are asked to select six archetypal design cards, six matching color cards, one card they dislike, and additional color cards to improve the disliked card. The chosen cards are then placed on the chart of the Great Round to show the client’s selections. The interpretation of the choices made in terms of archetypal design cards, colors, and stages in the Great Round is based on Kellogg’s model and process.

The Great Round model, along with the MARI[®], provide a valuable framework for understanding psychological maturation and its relationship to therapeutic change. By identifying the stages of development and the psychological states associated with them, it is possible to create targeted treatment plans that address specific issues. The use of archetypal design cards and color cards, in combination with the MARI[®] stages, can provide further insight into an individual’s psychological state and aid in the therapeutic process.

The study conducted by Renée van der Vennet and Caitlin Cassella provides a thorough examination of the existing scientific literature on the topic of archetypal patterns and the MARI[®] Great Round. Through their research, they aimed to further explore the subject and answer specific research questions. These questions included: (a) Is there a higher occurrence of archetypal patterns and MARI[®] stages in the dataset compared to chance? (b) Do archetypal patterns correspond to significant events in the first author’s life more than just by chance? And (c) Are certain archetypal patterns related to specific types of significant life events?

To gather data for the study, the researchers collected descriptive information on the maṇḍalas, such as the type of art medium used, size, color, title, and date. Based on the data collected, the researchers formulated hypotheses. These hypotheses included the belief that there would be a higher occurrence of archetypal patterns and MARI® stages in the dataset compared to chance, that the archetypal patterns in the dataset would correspond to significant events in the first author's life more than just by chance, and that certain archetypal patterns would be related to specific types of significant life events.

The study aimed to examine the correlation between the creation of these maṇḍalas and the corresponding timeline of significant events in the first author's life.

The set of maṇḍalas consisted of 85 individual pieces, which were created by the first author either individually or in workshops as a means of personal growth. To ensure reliability and validity of the analysis, an additional eight standard maṇḍalas were also included in the set. These standard maṇḍalas were created with Holbein oil pastels on 12 by 12 in. paper, inside an 11 in. circle, based on eight pre-chosen archetypal patterns of the MARI® Great Round. In total, 93 maṇḍalas were analyzed in the study.

The maṇḍalas were randomly assigned a number and then mixed up, to ensure impartiality of the analysis. Each maṇḍala was independently rated by two MARI® practitioners, who were trained in Kellogg's Great Round and MARI® assessment. To ensure consistency in the analysis, the participants were trained by the first author to use the analysis form specifically designed for this study. The results of the study demonstrate that archetypal patterns based on Kellogg's Great Round in the MARI® exist in maṇḍalas created by the first author. Four specific MARI® stages and four archetypal maṇḍala patterns were found to be significant for the first author over the 15-year period. These stages, 2 (bliss), 6 (dragon fight/struggle), 8 (identity), and 11 (fragmentation/disintegration) related to transitions and change, conflicts and misunderstandings, professional identity, and fragmentation and chaos respectively. These stages were found to be correlated with significant life events in the first author's life, relating to family, friends, work, and education. Each of the four stages was found to be located in one of the four quadrants in the Great Round cycle.

These findings suggest that the first author moved through the Great Round cycle, which can be seen as examples of personal growth and change during this 15-year period. This movement through the stages of the Great Round can be seen as an example of movement through the process of individuation, as proposed by Jung. These results provide support for the use of the creation of maṇḍalas and the MARI® clinical tool in treatment planning and progress evaluation to support an individual's growth in their process of individuation. This concept has been previously supported by

the work of Jung, Couch, and Frame who have suggested using the creation of maṇḍalas as a clinical tool in treatment planning.

3.6 New possible interpretations

The examination of Kellog's model for the interpretation of maṇḍalic drawings has provided us with an overview of the current state of research on the topic. However, applying this rigid model to ethnographic analysis presents several challenges. Firstly, it imposes a pre-existing structure on the subject before they have the opportunity to interpret their work freely. By contrast, allowing a more open hermeneutic exercise through free elicitation eliminates potential biases in the interpretation of the experience under investigation, which is the true focus of this inquiry. The subject should therefore be free from predefined interpretative frameworks.

While I do not dismiss the possibility that shared and universal elements in human cognition may exist and manifest in interpretable symbolic forms, I do not believe that the exercise of visual elicitation would benefit from an approach that presupposes the discovery of specific themes or 'archetypes' in the participants' representations. In other words, I sought to allow the subjects' narratives, and only their narratives, to impart meaning and significance to the images that emerged on the paper. It is only after this process that I examined whether connections or similarities with previously known themes could be established.

In short, the core of this exercise is not so much about seeking out shared symbols and images, but about understanding how these visual representations can facilitate the narration of an experience that is deeply personal and difficult to express in words, as it touches upon themes such as self-awareness and the revelation of aspects pertinent to one's subjective experience. These aspects would otherwise be very challenging to document without running the risk of leading the subject towards themes we expect to find, in an attempt to help them articulate thoughts that are inherently difficult to express. Nevertheless, some antecedent studies may offer a potential trajectory for pursuing a more comprehensive examination. Notably, a comprehensive investigation authored by Roquet and Potts imparts profound insights into the multifaceted dimensions of maṇḍala research. While sharing similarities with the experimental framework proposed to our cohort of meditators, their study diverges in its research foci.

The ensuing discourse delineates their research framework, comprised of three discrete segments, devised to profoundly probe into the participant's personal involvement and comprehension of maṇḍala coloring (Roquet et al., 2021, pp. 266-7): (1) the scrutiny of the process underlying the selection of a geometric pattern for maṇḍala coloring, (2) the actual act of coloring a maṇḍala, and (3) an exploration of the participant's perspective on maṇḍala coloring. The initial two segments of

the study are designed to pave the way for further exploration, thereby setting the stage for the semi-structured interviews constituting the third segment. Given logistical constraints, modifications were made to accommodate both in-person and online participants during the second part of the study, as delineated subsequently.¹⁰

Their study exhibits a pronounced emphasis on the experiential dimension of color, while bearing striking similarities to my proposed experiment. This commonality lies in the symbiotic relationship between the visual product and its subsequent narration through interviews. However, it is worth noting that the authors of the aforementioned study diverge their focus from states of consciousness, instead centering on the relaxation benefits and artistic facets of drawing. Their outcomes underscore three key themes: participants' motivations for engaging in maṇḍala coloring practice, the perceived advantages and challenges, the contextual nuances, and coloring as an evolving emotional expression. These themes are substantiated through participant quotations, bolstered by a presentation of the value of analog and digital maṇḍala mediums. An integral design decision pertains to the distinct representation of mindful versus non-mindful states through color. This choice draws upon Gombrich's concept of the "beholder's share", where prior experiences and emotional memories guide the interpretation of visual data. In this vein, the metaphorical representation of mindfulness states through color stems from an initial user-driven selection of hues.

¹⁰ The first task is principally geared towards immersing participants within the realm of maṇḍala coloring, necessitating an initial exploration of their rationale behind the choice of a specific maṇḍala for coloring. To this end, a selection of four maṇḍalas, each characterized by distinct geometric attributes (e.g., angular versus curvilinear contours, varying outline thickness, diverse dimensions, and detail quantity), was presented to participants. While participants made their maṇḍala selection, they were encouraged to articulate their cognitive process. Interrogative prompts were utilized to solicit reflections on disparities between the maṇḍalas, encompassing inquiries such as: What particular attributes of each maṇḍala are most appealing, and what accounts for this preference? Conversely, what aspects are least appealing, and what underlies this aversion? Which maṇḍala resonates most strongly with your desire for coloring? The second phase concerns the coloring process. For participants engaging in face-to-face sessions, the directive was to color the maṇḍala selected during the first segment, using the art materials provided (i.e., colored pencils and felt-tip markers). The duration of the coloring endeavor spanned between 20 to 30 minutes, averaging at 25 minutes, and was visually documented. Online participants, owing to the logistical challenge of dispatching physical copies of their chosen maṇḍalas, were instructed to color one of their maṇḍalas and subsequently furnish a photograph of their completed work. This approach ensured a recent experiential immersion in maṇḍala coloring for participants, albeit within a controlled laboratory environment as opposed to their customary setting. Additionally, this methodological alteration enabled an observance of the coloring process, facilitating the refinement of semi-structured interview inquiries, informed by individualized practices. The final segment entailed semi-structured interviews, encompassing queries concerning participants' comprehension of maṇḍalas, their perceived benefits, challenges encountered, motivational factors underpinning their engagement, as well as contextual factors influencing their practice. There are many aspects that we could discuss at this point. Certainly, the interviews conducted by these two scholars are not ethnographies nor do they focus on the subjectivity of the interviewees, rather focusing on the main focus which is the experiential data to be analyzed. For example, subsequent to their preferences for materials and colors, interviewees were probed regarding strategies for rectifying errors and the rituals encompassing the conclusion of a maṇḍala coloring session. The search for a generalized point of orientation, such as an objective datum of color, can also be valid in itself. I do not believe that universals do not exist, but the conception that general tendencies can indefectibly explain human experiences or can be extracted from them and traced back to generalizable rules must also be taken with caution. Furthermore, an examination of technology's role in maṇḍala coloring was conducted, exploring participants' interactions with coloring applications, if any. This segment serves to encapsulate the multifaceted realm of participants' experiences and perspectives, with interviews spanning between 20 to 60 minutes on average, and the transcripts offering a comprehensive record.

Informed by mindfulness literature and traditional maṇḍala practices, which espouse the use of four fundamental colors, the study initiates with a set of core colors termed “seed colors”. This choice aligns with findings suggesting that frequent maṇḍala colorations typically employ three to five colors per maṇḍala, selected at the onset of the session. The manner in which these colors are used is indicative of various motivations. Mindfulness-oriented individuals layer colors methodically, embodying completeness and embracing mistakes as a conduit for non-judgmental acceptance. Conversely, other participants endeavor to craft intricate and aesthetically impeccable images, with little emphasis on error incorporation. The significance of mistakes in signaling mindfulness lapses is highlighted, coupled with their potential to facilitate non-judgmental awareness. Notably, these distinctions also extend to participants’ approaches toward maṇḍala creation. In my ethnography, I have documented a similar tendency, especially in the case of Leslie’s judgement of her own maṇḍala (see §2.6) which was heavily influenced by her mindfulness-based practice.

In the course of this research, it has also become relevant for me to be able to define what an image is from the point of view of the consciousness of the meditator, of the subject who experiences (or is experienced by) the image.¹¹

Do images have a life of their own, or are they mere copies of another image, which is the original phenomenon we attest? And if they are mere copies, should we hypothesize a *reductio ad infinitum* in which the potential uncontrolled proliferation of images and copies, and copies of copies of images, progressively devalues the sense of the visual? Certainly, this cannot be excluded, but on the other hand, we cannot reduce a photographic impression or a drawing to a projection that imitates something real, as this would devalue its intrinsic reality, immediacy, and ability to influence consciousness.

If we aim to recognize the performative power of images, as evidenced by the emotional impression they instill in us within the immediacy of perceptual experience, our engagement with them, this also holds true for maṇḍalas. When interpreting these constructions, we must avoid reducing what we see to pre-established schemas, at least initially, and rely on the gaze, the first glance, or its *trompe-l’œil* quality (Bredenkamp, 2018, pp. 204-5) i.e., the power that the initial glance conveys, the image that appears. It is well-known that images possess their agency—the ability to communicate with our consciousness. In the interpretations presented in this work, I assert that the constructive form of the

¹¹ If it’s the ‘conscious’ nature of the image what we are looking for an indispensable starting point must refer to their performative nature, or more precisely, to what can anthropologically be defined as ‘visual agency’. Numerous works have been carried out in this regard, and they do not exclusively pertain to the anthropology of art but extend to any act that leads to the appearance of an image capable of subsequently conditioning individuals and history. Consider, for instance, the astonishment that may have been provoked by the first X-ray image, and how one of these visual products can travel, spread, almost as if it had a life of its own, and with such diffusion influence, interacting with others’ consciousness, emotions, experiences, and historical events. Not to mention photography (Bredenkamp, 2018, p. 152).

maṇḍala is an impression of the interaction of consciousness between the meditating subject and the image invoked by their meditative journey. This is an explicit requirement to reference animism and hylozoism.

Within the framework of the religious anthropology of the 1800s, a theme of particular relevance engaged ethnologists, from Edward Burnett Tylor to James George Frazer before him (who inspired considerations on vitality, even for Freud himself), namely animism.

Animism was discussed with enthusiastic continuity but was then rapidly abandoned because it was associated with a discourse of a primitivist or evolutionist nature. In both cases, animism was associated with currents of thought that were suffering a disrepute from the academic community for obvious reasons. In the case of primitivists, animism was discredited because their consideration of it as a “purer” form of humanity was seen as a superficial and fanatical judgment. In the case of evolutionists, the problem was even more serious: branding animism or belief in magical powers as, at the opposite extreme, more involved forms of human culture was naturally a biased action, far from anthropological judgment. As de Martino himself notes (1941), it was the scientistic fanaticism of the growing faith in naturalism that influenced the judgment of these anthropologists. The result, however, was that being protected by two factions both discredited for different reasons, animism itself ended up being considered an outdated anthropological theory. However, the complete abandonment of animism due to its reduction to an outdated view of ethnological discourse is at least an adventurous fact, demonstrating the influence of logic akin to that of fashion rather than a serious ethnological discussion. All the more so today, with the rehabilitation of subjectivity in ethnographic investigation, animism deserves a reevaluation based on recent observations.

Images are not conscious in the sense that they have the capacity to think; therefore, they are not ‘sentient’. However, as conscious, they are subjects of history. What we derive from their perception are complex articulations from which we abstract individual forms, emptied of their belonging to the totalizing continuum, but still substantial enough to be defined as ‘alive’, or rather, ‘conscious’, if only by virtue of their undeniable agency.

The prospective interpretation of maṇḍala drawings from an anthropological perspective holds the potential to elucidate the intricate associations between these geometric configurations and human consciousness. Whether construed as symbolic manifestations of identity, ventures into self-exploration, or agents of visual communication within our inner realms, mandalas provide a fertile terrain for anthropological investigation. Through an exploration of the subjective encounters and cultural contexts surrounding mandala creation and interpretation, anthropology can illuminate the profound influence of these intricate patterns on the human psyche and our collective comprehension of consciousness. The study of mandalas, rooted in psychology and art therapy, presents a distinctive

opportunity for anthropology to bridge the divide between individual experiences and overarching themes in the human condition.

4. The ‘Signs’ of Maṇḍalas

This chapter will be devoted to developing an anthropological theory of the image in relation to my ethnographic experience with maṇḍala drawings. In addition to further analyzing ethnographic data in these final sections, I will focus on key theoretical dimensions. Specifically, my objective is to systematically elaborate on the theory of the image and its connection with states of consciousness experienced in the elicitation exercise. This theory observes that consciousness functions as an organizer of sensible reality. From distinctive normative instances—such as those identified by Buddhists as ‘names and forms’ (*nāmarūpa*)—consciousness organizes sensible reality before the subject, configuring it into what we call “world”. In this world, entities—what appears to us with specific forms and is identifiable through particular names—manifest themselves to the experiencing subject as usable or manipulable objects or as entities with which the subject can interact in some manner. This model underpins the inherent dualism within each consciousness, signifying the binary relationship between the observing subject and the observed object. In our case, this translates to the objectifying relationship that conscious subjectivity has toward that which it interacts with and extends to other subjects.

Nonetheless, the specific context of meditation leads us to delve into deeper states of consciousness where this dichotomous mechanism ceases to actively function. Instead, it is replaced by the more immediate ‘awareness’ that transcends dichotomies, perceiving everything in the world as an epiphenomenon of its unity. In other words, all worldly phenomena are merely different manifestations of various aspects of a singular consciousness. However, this unity only resurfaces to the contemplative subject when they dismantle the dualistic barrier of consciousness, which leads them to believe they are essentially separated from the ‘things’ they experience or from other subjects. This fundamental theory, which necessitates a drastic reconsideration of our ethnographic approach, is not solely based on a reading of Buddhist texts. It also draws from my personal ethnographic experience through images. Describing an experience as complex as the variation of states of consciousness or the progression toward awareness has proven to be an exceedingly challenging process. Utilizing images as a means to elicit these experiences isn’t merely a substitution for their verbal description; it enables the communication of experiences in a more direct and immediate manner, experiences that would be arduous to reproduce through words alone.

Furthermore, in the case of elicitation through images, we are no longer positioned within a dichotomous relationship where we are passive witnesses to an image presented to our consciousness, which then objectifies it through the mechanisms of nominal designation and formal recognition.

Quite the contrary, the image is evoked and imprinted by us onto the sheet, canvas, or any medium, echoing the same investigative process of consciousness that tends to dismantle the dichotomous relationship.

At this juncture, it becomes imperative to question the identity of the image that has been somehow brought forth through this unique practice. If indeed this image, evoked through contemplative drawing, no longer appears to us as a separate object but rather as something that attests to ourselves and is not attested by ourselves, then that very image emerges as a fracture in the boundary that would have separated the witness from the witnessed. However, to achieve this, it is necessary to recognize that this image, which disrupts the dualistic relationship with us and thus simultaneously constitutes both an *intrasubjective* and *intersubjective* dialogue, can only be ‘present’—or rather, it is itself a form of consciousness. This refers in particular to the possibility of an agency of images, and it is precisely this theory that I have extended starting from my ethnographic experience to talk about the consciousness of forms. The theory of an *agency of images* has been developed by many authors, but my main references were Gell (1998) and Mitchell (2005).

An image interacts with something that is not separate from itself but is another conscious part of a unified awareness. *The anthropological subject is an epiphenomenon of that consciousness*, much like the image it relates to, and they are in an inseparable relationship. One might even argue that images themselves are anthropological subjects, but such a transcendence would partially exceed the scope of this research. Conversely, it must be emphasized that in order to substantiate the aforementioned points, we will need to partially transcend the limitations of anthropological theory and turn to fundamental issues concerning language and reality.

On one hand, this is because the images evoked through contemplative practice, like all images, are rich in semiotic content, and thus, we cannot disregard this vehicle of meaning through which images, with their forms, convey meaning. On the other hand, the theme of semiotics reconnects with the theme of anthropological identity introduced in the initial chapters, as both linguistic signs and culturally attributed identities are products of conventional designations. They share the arbitrary nature of their construction. However, signs are particularly significant. Firstly, they share the dualistic nature that seems inherent in everything experienced in the anthropological world due to the mechanisms of consciousness that convey such dualism. Therefore, briefly studying linguistic signs aids in understanding how this divisive power creates a differential mechanism that distinguishes between various entities, precisely as anthropological identity distinguishes between different social actors, asserting that they are divided or separate monads that cannot communicate with each other. This divisive power is merely the misunderstanding of a void that should not be nihilistically interpreted; rather, it is simply an invisible connection underlying all conscious entities, whether

anthropological subjects or images. It is also important to highlight a significant point. The attribution of meaning that different languages assign to signs is undeniably the result of cultural convention, and thus, as cultural forms change, so do the associated images, and the names and forms linked to them (*nāmarūpas*). To use a Buddhist term, different designations (*paññatti*) correspond to these varying associations. Given the arbitrariness of this system, we might be inclined to disregard these semiotic images. However, as Mitchell (1984) points out,¹ their conventional nature does not diminish their importance; rather, it is an inseparable aspect of human experience. Consequently, even the forms of these conventions, and their arbitrary designations, are not random, but reveal something about consciousness.

Of course, this does not imply that anthropological subjects and images are one and the same, as there are evident differences allowing the anthropological subject to distinguish itself as such and for the image to appear as an image. Nevertheless, this distinction at times deceives, making us believe it is an irreconcilable division, leaving behind a void of incommunicability between divided entities.

In the course of our investigation, we made use of a category of maṇḍalas known as “free-form maṇḍalas”. These maṇḍalas are commonly employed in the practice of art therapy. Artistic intervention may consist of creating a maṇḍala through drawing or painting, assembling one from mixed media materials such as fruit, vegetables, or feathers, or crafting a maṇḍala collage composed of pearls, pieces of paper, fabric, or wood. Upon completion of the maṇḍala, analysis and interpretation of the work by both the therapist and the client is a critical component of the therapeutic process. The therapist may ask the client to title the maṇḍala or record descriptive phrases to impart significance to it (Bühnemann, 2017, p. 267). At times, words conceal far more than their common usage implies. It is interesting to note how the Greek “icon” referred more specifically to the meaning of “likeness, image, portrait, copy” (Mitchell, 1984, p. 521), thus being analogous to another Proto-

¹ To quote directly what Mitchell says about the conventional nature of images in our societies:

This realization can lead us to a perception of the *mise en abyme*, a nauseating void signifiers in which a nihilistic abandonment to free play and arbitrary will seems the only appropriate strategy. Or it can lead to a sense that our signs, and thus our world, are a product of human action and understanding, that although our modes of knowledge and representation may be “arbitrary” and “conventional,” they are the constituents of the forms of life, the practices and traditions within which we must make epistemological, ethical, and political choices. [...] Everything—nature, politics, sex, other people—comes to us now as an image, preinscribed with a speciousness that is nothing but the Aristotelian “species” under a cloud of suspicion. The question for us now would seem to be not just, What is an image? but, How do we transform images, and the imagination that produces them, into powers worthy of thrust and respect? One way of answering this question has been to dismiss the whole notion of imagination and mental representation as a Cartesian mirage. The concept of mental and verbal images, and all their stage machinery of mirrors and surfaces for writing, printing, and drawing—all this (as Richard Rorty argues) is to be abandoned as the machinery of an outmoded paradigm, the confusion of philosophy with psychology that has dominated Western thought under the name of “epistemology” for the last three hundred years.

(Mitchell, 1984, pp. 519-20)

It is important to underline that this relationship between images and epistemologies does not only lead us to the problem of how we usually perceive and experience images according to our systems of knowledge, but also how images help to construct them, in a circle of mutual influence between the two things.

Indo-European root, namely **h₂eǵm-*, which means “imitation” and is the origin not only of the Latin *imitārī* but also of the well-known *imāgō*.²

Throughout the course of Western history, the concept of the image has never managed to free itself from its negative reputation, which renders it a mere copy, often an inferior one, of an original. Philosophers have pondered what lies beyond the veil, believing that the image does not reflect any tangible or real truth, but rather constitutes a deceptive illusion that conceals the ‘true’ reality. One might assume that a similar conception developed in India as well, but this assumption is not entirely accurate. For a Buddhist, it is not the image itself but rather language, particularly the use of language directed towards the domination of reality, that truly conceals reality. Similarly to language, the image is neither true nor false in and of itself. Both the image and sound are real phenomena that are immediately perceived, and thus their reality is undeniable.³

The type of ethnographic exercise I proposed here utilizes visual elicitation and hermeneutic interpretation, prompting us to consider the image as the center of an anthropological function. However, in my personal endeavor to propose an integrated methodological approach, which will inevitably necessitate a dialogue between anthropology and psychoanalysis (see also §6.1), this interpretation of the image will be examined through various perspectives, particularly drawing from Hillman’s ideas.

Jung believed that the fundamental structure of maṇḍalas adheres to the quaternity model, which is a re-proposition of an archetypal scheme that is trans-cultural. In his book *Psychology and Alchemy*, Jung describes this process through a series of dreams that mostly dealt with ideas of the maṇḍala type, such as the circle and the quaternity. These images represent the goal of the unity of opposites, and they include the cross, circle, and sphere, as well as the less frequent images of the luminous character of the center or the image of a superior type of personality. The alchemist imagined linking the opposites both as a chemical procedure and as a mental and geometric one. The alchemist’s task is depicted in an image of the divine geometer, who brings opposites together into a grand design representing the Philosophers’ Stone (Marlan, 2022, p. 74). The Stone is created by harmonizing and

² The term “icon”, borrowed from French via Latin *īcōn* (borrowed from the Greek word εἰκών [*eikōn*]), derives from a reconstructed Proto-Indo-European root **ueǵk-*, whose archetypal meaning is “to separate” or “to divide”. The ancient concept of image/**ueǵk* thus encompasses the establishment of boundaries, a delineation that separates one reality from another. This represents the fundamental act of determining distinct components (see also Latin *vincō* and *victima*, from the same root). However, this root also possesses a nuance: that of “choice”. Naturally, if I establish a determination, a boundary, through a separation, I am also engaging in an act of decision, of choice. And so, **ueǵk-* slowly shifts its semantic domain from segmentation to decision, becoming more similar to what will later be the Greek *eikōn*. The image is a real fact that can be associated with another image while remaining real itself. It cannot be detached from its context, as no object in the world can exist in isolation, separate or cut cleanly from the world. The same applies to images: “La ressemblance n’est donc pas plus que la coexistence une force en troisième personne qui dirigerait une circulation d’images ou d’ « états de conscience »” (Merleau-Ponty, 1976, p. 42).

³ Deception lies in the subsequent processing, the attribution that associates these mental images with other images, and so forth, constructing a framework that ultimately culminates in normative, social, and religious power (Squarcini, 2012).

containing masculine and feminine energies that represent binary pairings, such as light and dark, spirit and matter, sulfur and mercury. The alchemist's contribution to the process is illustrated by the image of the alchemist holding a giant compass with one point touching the inner circle and the other resting on the outer sphere, thus linking the microcosmic unity of inner life with the outer wholeness of the macrocosmic world and exemplifying the famous adage, "as above so below". The work of linking above and below was a classic alchemical theme represented in numerous forms in alchemical literature and in the images that illustrated it (p. 75).

Everything we have discussed thus far raises a fundamental semiotic issue. The communicative potential of the images that take shape within the maṇḍalas of those who have participated in this study is a matter that must necessarily fall within the realm of semiotics. The elements, or what we could vulgarly and improperly define as parts, components, or pieces of the maṇḍalas, are somehow speaking, contributing to the self-explanation of both the maṇḍala itself and the meditator through the maṇḍala. These elements are not independent of the work to which they belong. We could say that their meaning lies only in the whole. Just as a text without context cannot properly communicate with us, a maṇḍala, without the consciousness of its observer and its creator, is more cryptic to us.

4.1 Experiences of Signs and Symbols

The sign, or mark, is defined in linguistics as the smallest unit of an articulated language. Like the atom, the smallest unit of matter, it is not indivisible despite its name; rather, the sign is itself seen as a compound. To be more precise, the sign is a two-sided entity that relates two significant elements: the signifier and the signified. Saussure was the first to provide this definition and is considered the founder of modern linguistics. However, it is worth noting a considerable influence from Indian grammatical traditions, which Saussure was familiar with, and which exhibit numerous affinities and even elements of identity with the type of linguistics pursued by Saussure (Divino, 2023a, p. 18). Although Saussure never spoke of "structure" but rather of a "system" (*système*), his studies are considered foundational to structural linguistics, and structuralism in general has captivated many, including anthropologists (De Palo, 2016). Lévi-Strauss brought structuralism into anthropology by seeking analogous models of functioning in human cultural systems to those outlined by Roman Jakobson's redefined phonology within structural linguistics. Although Lévi-Strauss's studies on the elementary structures of kinship (Lévi-Strauss, 2017) have been criticized for their rigid vision and challenged by others, I believe that the fundamental structuralist principle would still hold great value if applied correctly to anthropology. Let us, therefore, start anew and focus on what the *système* Saussure spoke of truly encompasses. As Nakassis writes, "not only are images made in and out of language, bodies, pixels, light, and so forth (their "media"); they also make such things" (Nakassis,

2023, p. 81). In anthropological settings we observe that “images and stories come alive and act not only through their interaction” (p. 82).

Within the field of communication, there have been various attempts to name that ‘something’ which constitutes the minimal unit of a statement, regardless of the medium through which it is conveyed, whether it be auditory, graphic, or tactile. Fundamentally, it is well-known that different means can be used to convey information, but information must have minimal units in order to be articulated, and therefore, the medium of communication also employs substitutes to represent these minimal units. Traditionally, in the sign, there is a one-to-one correspondence, meaning one signifier is associated with one signified, leaving no room for error.⁴

The position of Saussure on signs is controversial, and a detailed analysis of it would take us far away from our investigation into consciousness. However, we must essentially note that Saussure himself seems to implicitly adhere to a dualistic idea of the world. The elements that compose the sign do not have meaning in themselves, independently from their relationship, and more generally, the semantic substance seems to emerge from the association of two insubstantialities, two voids, which Saussure defines as *kenomes*, from κένωμα, “emptiness” (De Saussure, 2002, p. 93). Since the basic model of association is precisely between two elements, the entire language is characterized by this “incessant duality” (*dualité incessante*), beyond which it is difficult to grasp what is there because, if there is something, it does not mean “nothing”.⁵

Saussure seems sometimes to deny, sometimes to affirm all too clearly his adherence to dualism.⁶ On the one hand he rejects the opposition of form and meaning, but on the other he makes consciousness

⁴ Two other ways to express this association (originally *signifiant-signifié*) are that of the “acoustic image” on the plane of the signifier and “concept” on the plane of the signified. Of course, the acoustic image always refers to the primarily oral nature of language, but since a sign can also be communicated through other means, we can speak of an “image” in a much broader sense, such as a cognitive image, for example. Therefore, a symbol is an unbalanced element, as it condenses multiple concepts into a single image, while a sign tolerates an association between just one concept and a related image: “c’est que la langue comporte un côté volontaire, et non passif, par lequel nous faisons jouer nos organes à tout moment en vue de la langue. [...] L’acte phonatoire apparaît comme un instrument nécessaire, mais en soi aussi peu essentiel que dans le cas des signaux maritimes” (De Saussure, 2002, pp. 247, 248).

⁵ As Saussure writes: “Il est faux (et impraticable) d’opposer la *forme* et le *sens*. Ce qui est juste en revanche c’est d’opposer la *figure vocale* d’une part, et la *forme-sens* de l’autre. [...] Il y a lieu de distinguer dans la langue les phénomènes *internes* ou de conscience et les phénomènes *externes*, directement saisissables. [...] En cherchant où pouvait être le plus véritablement le principe premier et dernier de cette dualité incessante qui frappe jusque dans le plus infime paragraphe d’une grammaire, toujours susceptible en dehors des fausses rédactions de recevoir deux formules légitimes et absolument distinctes, nous croyons qu’il faudra en dernier lieu revenir toujours à la question de savoir ce qui constitue de par l’essence du langage *une identité linguistique*. Une *identité linguistique* a cela d’absolument particulier qu’elle implique l’association de deux éléments hétérogènes” (De Saussure, 2002, pp. 17-8).

⁶ “Le dualisme profonde qui partage le langage ne réside pas dans le dualisme de son et de l’idée, du phénomène vocal et du phénomène mental ; c’est là la façon facile et pernicieuse de le concevoir. [...] Rappelons-nous en effet que l’*objet* en linguistique n’existe pas pour commencer, n’est pas déterminé en lui-même. Dès lors parler d’un objet, *nommer* un objet, ce n’est pas autre chose que d’invoquer un point de vue A déterminé. [...] Une forme est une figure vocale qui est pour la conscience des sujets parlants *déterminée*, c’est-à-dire à la fois existante et délimitée. Elle n’est rien de plus ; come elle n’est rien de moins. [...] Il me semble qu’on peut l’affirmer en le proposant à l’attention : on se pénétrera jamais assez de l’essence purement négative, purement *différentielle*, de chacun des éléments du langage auxquels nous accordons précipitamment une existence : il n’y en a aucun, dans aucun ordre, qui possède cette existence supposée – quoique peut-

an internal phenomenon, distinct from the outside world, re-proposing the most classic of Western dualisms. And so on for every aspect related to perception and consciousness: without a relation between two entities, the classic subject/object binomial, nothing concrete can be affirmed.⁷ However, it certainly becomes evident that Saussure was a cognitive dualist, as he opposes “internal” facts, which he often designates as “psychic”, to “external” facts that are considered “physical”. This distinction also entails a differentiation of the domains of consciousness, with the latter being confined to the inner world.

In Saussure, the positivity of the sign is only achieved within the linguistic dimension of reciprocal inter-oppositions. This fact has incurred Saussure numerous criticisms on the phenomenological level, particularly regarding Merleau-Ponty's correction of this perspective, which instead acknowledges the evidence of human experience, namely that there can be no absolute negative, even where consciousness does not manifest itself, that is, does not become positive: “selon lui, les essences ne peuvent être séparées de l'existence, le langage ne produisant à cet égard qu'un simulacre dont il ne faut pas être dupe. [...] La séparation des essences par et dans le langage n'est donc, pour Merleau-Ponty, qu'apparente” (Roux, 2016, p. 277).⁸

In our case, this existence is manifested in the discrete element of consciousness, it is the space that allows for the oscillation between two parts: the interplay of gazes between the observer and the observed, which is nothing more than a grand illusion, two protrusions of the same consciousness that observe each other, forgetting their connection which is manifested as excess, surplus, or leftover, as Merleau-Ponty would say: “la signification d'un signe, produit de l'écart, et même d'écarts (puisque chaque signe est différent de tous les autres signes du langage) ne peut recevoir aucune

être, je l'admets, nous soyons appelés à reconnaître que, sans cette fiction, l'esprit se trouverait littéralement incapable de maîtriser une pareille somme de différences, où il n'y nulle part à aucun moment un point de repère positif ferme. [...] Il n'y a dans la langue ni *signes*, ni *significations*, mais des différences de signes et des différences des significations ; lesquelles 1° n'existent les unes absolument que par les autres (dans les deux sens) et sont donc inséparables et solidaires ; mais 2° n'arrivent jamais à se correspondre directement. D'où l'on peut immédiatement conclure : que tout, et dans les deux domaines (non séparables d'ailleurs) est négatif dans la langue – repose sur une opposition *compliquée*, mais uniquement sur une opposition, sans intervention nécessaire d'aucune espèce de donnée positive. [...] Rien n'est, du moins rien n'est absolument (dans le domaine linguistique)” (De Saussure, 2002, pp. 20, 23, 37, 64-5, 70, 81).

⁷ It is difficult to determine to what extent Saussure's dualism was radical. Part of the criticisms of Saussurean dualism may perhaps be attributed to the fact that little was known about his unpublished writings, which were only published in 2002, and in which it is more evident that this dualism must be contextualized within a system of relationships and connections between elements. Saussure himself does not seem to assert that beyond dualism there is nothing, but rather that no entity can exist as a separate and independent entity, but that everything is part of an inseparable context.

⁸ This concealment cannot be equated with its nonexistence, as we are undoubtedly aware of its presence, but we could not reasonably have awareness, and thus convincingly demonstrate, its total absence in any case: “car ce que Merleau-Ponty extrait de Saussure, c'est l'idée que les signes n'ont pas de signification intrinsèque, qui leur serait accolée isolément, indépendamment des autres signes linguistiques, mais que chacun ne tient son sens que du fait qu'il est le signe qu'il est et non un autre, et donc que sa signification lui est fondamentalement conférée par le fait qu'il est différent des autres signes existants” (Roux, 2016, p. 282).

définition autonome, positive, pleinement déterminée, mais ne semble être déterminée que négativement” (p. 283).

It is interesting to notice that the Sanskrit word *dhyāna*, “meditation” and also the verb *dhyāyati*, “think of, imagine” are both derived from the same proto-Indo-European root whence also the Greek *sēma* (σημα), “sign”, was formed.⁹ In the game of *maṇḍala*, which reflects the experience of a meditative act, we observe precisely this phenomenon: the accumulation of signs that create a complex system of communication, but also something that surpasses mere visibility. An invisibility that, nonetheless perceived despite its faintness, is not evidence of nonexistence, but rather evidence of an existence so all-encompassing that it is visualized as emptiness. Emptiness itself, indeed, plays a crucial role in the dynamics of *maṇḍalas*.

And it is in relation to negative power and waste that we arrive at the semiotic power of images. Didi-Huberman argues that the image is not so much an *écart* as it is a *déchirure*, a tearing, which is evidenced in the traumatic experience of the observer. However, this tearing, which undoubtedly leaves a gap, a certain excess of semantic content that cannot be encompassed by the rationalizing grids of thought, is also what remains as a residual element of implicit power of the negative in every image: “un *travail* du négatif dans l’image, une efficacité « sombre » qui, pour ainsi dire, creuse le visible” (Didi-Huberman, 1990, p. 174).

Finally, there is another dimension to consider, namely that of archetypes. Archetypes are considered to be “primordial images” that are subsequently organized by human language into more complex relational structures.¹⁰

The curious difficulty of explaining just what archetypes are suggests something specific to them. That is, they tend to be metaphors rather than things. We find ourselves less able to say what an archetype is literally and more inclined to describe them in images. [...] All ways of speaking of archetypes are translations from one metaphor to another. Even sober operational definitions in the language of science or logic are no less metaphorical than an image which presents the archetypes as root ideas, psychic organs, figures of myth, typical styles of existence, or dominant fantasies that govern consciousness.¹¹

⁹ Cf. the *Etymological Dictionary of Greek*, edited by Robert Beeks (Leiden, Brill 2010), p. 1323.

¹⁰ Saussure strongly emphasizes the arbitrary nature of these relationships, but Saussure’s excessive relativity has been criticized by some, including Merleau-Ponty, for reasons that I partly share and that can be attributed to the very nature of sense-endowed elements, which cannot be exclusively ascribed to cultural relativism. Sense, like everything else, cannot emerge out of nothing. It must already be given, and human beings have simply shaped it. However, one cannot shape nothingness, and since nothing comes from nothing, we must insist on the need to recognize some kind of semantic substance inherent in all forms even before the conventional designation operated by linguistic-cultural form. This substance appears to us precisely as an image.

¹¹ Cf. Hillman, 1990, p. 23.

The image, in a broad sense, as a communicative power, does not yet possess an identity, a name, and yet the image is indeed a significant force, capable of transmitting emotions and sensations. However, in order to communicate, the image has to be understood as an active subject, not the object, of communication. This subjectivity is what has emerged in my ethnographic journey as a possible interpretation of consciousness, even beyond the corporeal limits of human beings.

4.2 The faux image: meditating on illusions?

We have observed that there is no distinction between a speech act and the image of a maṇḍala, at least not on a semiotic level. What differs is that the maṇḍala does not express itself verbally, but through a set of symbols that convey the impression of a meditative act. By imprinting itself on a physical medium, a certain aspect of the consciousness of the one who created it emerges, a sort of photograph of their mind. However, the maṇḍala itself exceeds mere content, as it is inherently significant even when viewed by others. In the Buddhist context, maṇḍalas have always been used to facilitate meditation, and meditators would observe them, analyzing their various sections as if retracing a labyrinth, a path of consciousness (Tucci, 2001). The same could be done with the maṇḍalas created by the participants in this study. If they were unique and independent creations, they would not have the power to captivate others. Images establish relationships, construct conscious connections, and since consciousness itself communicates through images, the maṇḍala images also communicate with consciousness. Unfortunately, images have suffered from a negative reputation that can be traced back to the ancient Greeks in the Western world, who considered images as copies, fictions, and deceptions of reality. This holds partially true for Buddhists as well, but only to the extent that an image is separated from its context, idolized and venerated as an independent entity. In other words, when an attachment relationship is formed with it. What is misleading in Buddhism concerns the belief that individual images and opinions can constitute truth as such, whereas the meditator employs images to understand truth. Thus, there is no dichotomy between truth and falsehood where images are the antithesis of truth. According to Buddhists, both what is seen and what is dreamed, imagined, or fantasized about are equally 'real' (McMahan, 2002; Tripathi, 1969; Dennison, 2022). The same cannot be said for our Western tradition.

Plato develops this argument most comprehensively in the *Sophist*. Here he acknowledges the necessity to be able to discriminate between true and false propositions in language. This concession is granted in the form of a response to the Sophist's clever argumentation. Having accused the Sophist of using words in an 'imaginative' rather than 'truthful' way, Socrates is compelled to take stock [...]. Plato is forced to admit here that imagistic modes of expression

must have *some* portion of being, however small or modified, for otherwise it would be impossible to determine which propositions are false and which true. The imagistic figures of speech—be it metaphor, allegory or myth—are consequently admitted to partake of both being and non-being.¹²

Throughout the course of Western history, the concept of the image has frequently been subjected to prejudicial treatment, often being relegated to the realm of fiction. This perspective extends to theories concerning the image and the imaginary, which have also encountered similar interpretive biases. The prevailing notion characterizing the image as a ‘doublet’—a mere replication or duplication of an original—has further solidified its fictional connotation. In Western thought, the image is primarily perceived as a mirror reflecting the objective reality of the external world:

Sartre a montré que les psychologues classiques confondent l’image avec le doublet mnésique de la perception, meublant l’esprit de « miniatures » mentales qui ne sont que copies des choses objectives. A la limite l’imagination est réduite, par les classiques, à cette frange en deçà du seuil de la sensation, et que l’on nomme image rémanente ou consécutive. C’est sur cette conception d’un imaginaire dévalué que fleurit l’associationisme, effort louable, certes, pour expliquer les connexions imaginatives, mais qui a tort de réduire l’imagination à un puzzle statique et plat, et l’image à un mixte fort équivoque à mi-chemin entre la solidité de la sensation et la pureté de l’idée.¹³

Sartre remarks the risk to confuse between “l’imaginé et le remémoré”, however, his main purpose seems to be just that to avoid the objectification (*chosifier*) of the image. His idea of the image is defined by two main characteristics as Durand (1992) reports: 1) “transcendante, comme toute conscience”, and 2) “l’objet imaginé est donné immédiatement pour ce qu’il est, alors que le savoir perceptif se forme lentement par approximations et approches successives” (p. 17). That, for instance, differentiates the image from the imagination. As Agamben himself reveals, the history of the image in the Western thought begins with the idea of the faux-object, the unreal copy or imitation of an original, in other words, a phantasm (Agamben, 1993). In contexts where the comprehension of reality is perceived as superior (ἐπιστήμη), images are instead equated with mere opinion (δόξα), regarded merely as replicas of the real (Kearney, 1998, p. 92). Plato accuses humanity specifically of being an imitative species (μιμητικὸν ἔθνος), living through images and constructing societal

¹² Cf. Kearney, 1998, p. 101.

¹³ Cf. Durand, 1992, p. 16.

frameworks founded upon these imitations (μίμησις), which are precisely these imperfect copies of the world.¹⁴

The theoretical position proposed in this research, shaped by ethnographic experiences, navigates a middle ground between Plato and Sartre. While Buddhism underscores the randomness of images and their inherently deceptive nature, aligning with Platonic notions, it also acknowledges the pervasive presence of imagery. At least within the phenomenology of phenomena, all that we experience is conceivable as an image. Indeed, for Buddhists, everything is impermanent; thus, while an image merely constitutes an appearance—a reduction of reality to a small, misleading fraction—it does not imply nonexistence. In alignment with Sartre, we assert that “the image and the percept are not so much different *objects* of consciousness as different *ways of being conscious of objects*—i.e. the percept as a ‘real’ representation of its object” (Kearney, 1998, p. 226). In other words, images are not created by the mind which subsequently invest them with a specific symbolic meaning, on the contrary, images “are symbolically meaningful in and of themselves”, that is to say, they are somehow ‘conscious’. Sartre defines the images as “a *sui generis* act of consciousness independent of both the percept and the concept”.

Here, we must distance from the dramatic error of considering images as some form of nothingness that nevertheless appears to us. It also lies in the contradiction of denying the evident pervasive effectiveness of images, their interaction with subjects as if they were agents of history themselves, and thus touching our consciences in a way that only a substance can achieve.

The source of images—dream-images, fantasy-images, poetic-images—is the self-generative activity of the soul itself. In archetypal psychology the word “image,” therefore, does not refer to an after-image, the result of sensations and perceptions; nor does “image” mean a mental construct that represents in symbolic form certain ideas and feelings which it expresses.¹⁵

Hillman’s position on the imagination slightly diverges from that of his mentor Jung, partly deconstructing it (Vrbata, 2014). Indeed, Hillman’s idea regarding the potency of images, which some

¹⁴ According to Agamben (1993), it is in Plato’s *Philebus* (39-40a) that perhaps the first mention of images occurs, and this is done in terms of icons (εἰκόνας) drawn in the soul. However, these icons are phantasmic (φαντάσματα). In *Teetetus*, a similar discourse arises, starting from memory, which functions as an impressionable wax that retains the trace of the impressed thing for a limited time (τὸ εἶδωλον, 191d-e), but the image is still a mere copy, an imperfect replica. Aristotle describes it as an “imprint” that generates a sign (σημεῖον, see *De Anima* 424a), or “like a drawing” (ζωγράφημα, *De Memoria* 450a). However, in this reduction of the image to a mere copy of a real thing, and thus deprived of its real substantiality, it dangerously oscillates into the abyss of nothingness: the image becomes a non-entity, hence it is not, it does not exist. As Durand writes, this mortification of the image leads it to become nothingness: “l’image n’est qu’un « objet fantôme », « sans conséquence » ; toutes les qualités de l’imagination ne sont que « néant » ; les objets imaginaires sont « louches »” (Durand, 1992, p. 18).

¹⁵ Cf. Hillman, 2004, p. 18.

frame within a non-religious polytheistic framework, closely aligns with a form of panpsychism. However, he rejects the imposition of psychological structures onto the imaginative experience.

4.3 Landscapes in the Maṇḍala-Elicitation

We are unaware of the origin of the imaginary concerning maṇḍalas. Anthropologically speaking, we can confidently endorse the definition provided by Jung and later expanded upon by Hillman, which characterizes maṇḍalas as artistic objects that encompass a perimetric form (circular, square, or of another nature) containing a range of contents that refer, in various ways, to the structure of a ‘world’. This world can be either an inner world, as in the case of private maṇḍalas, or a cosmogram, as in the case of more complex structures associated with traditions that involve a more elaborate conception of the cosmos. Nonetheless, there exists a connection between the so-called private world and the world-system delineated by various cultures that generate maṇḍalas.

The circular states of repetitiveness, turning and turning in the gyres of our own conditions, force us to recognize that these conditions are our very essence and that the soul’s circular motion (which is its native motion, according to Plotinus) cannot be distinguished from blind fate. [...] Ultimately, the spontaneous mandala heals, it does so because it compels a recognition of the limitation of consciousness, that my mind and heart and will turn only in a circle, and yet that same circle is my portion of an eternal necessity.¹⁶

The conceptualization of maṇḍalas as symbolic representations of the universe has progressively gained credence over time. The purpose of this representation is to provide the meditator with a pathway for exploration and identification, projecting one’s Self into the labyrinthine reality, subsequently retraced as an initiatory path. The maṇḍala originated as a meditative conduit, presumably evolving into a more intricate and multi-layered form of meditation in conjunction with the *nimittas*.

Nevertheless, it also embodies the most archaic Buddhist traditions concerning the worldview (*loka*) and extends it to the realm of consciousness. The theory that a maṇḍala is a mundus, or cosmogram, is further substantiated by the processes employed in the creation of the so-called monumental maṇḍalas in Southeast Asia (Gifford, 2011).

In maṇḍalic drawings, elements of everyday life often appear in symbolic form. These elements are attributed by all participants to identity forms, both in their own maṇḍalas and in the interpretation of others’ maṇḍalas. Leo, upon seeing Layla’s maṇḍala, said, “the repeated motif of trees is clearly her

¹⁶ Cf. Hillman, 1979, p. 162.

identity mark, as if to say 'I am the spirit of the trees' or 'I recognize myself in the values that trees embody', but I see them repeated almost obsessively, as if wanting to safeguard her identity" (March 1, 2023).

Obviously, Leo, who commented on this maṇḍala in such a way, is not exempt from similar reasoning. What struck me the most is how the choice of the tree reflects an element that is also somewhat 'geographical' and is therefore analogous to another symbolization made by Leo, which is that of the city of Padua. This city is not only the location of the university where Leo is graduating but also the city where I myself lived for over a year, where I met Leo, and attended classes. Both of us have a controversial and similar relationship with this city. It is a place that has now shaped the landscape of our minds because it has been idealized to such an extent that it is almost dreamlike. To simplify the discussion: Leo and I experienced the city of Padua at a time, before the outbreak of the pandemic, when we appreciated many aspects of it that were in line with our similar characteristics. Firstly, its 'human-scale' nature, a small, peaceful city with a medieval and at times neoclassical style. The streets lined with rows of houses that almost embrace the walker who traverses them, enjoying this dreamlike atmosphere. In part, our love for Padua also stems from the idea of being able to build a life there. The element of the dream is very powerful in both circumstances.

I desired to pursue my Ph.D. there and perhaps build a future academic career, and Leo had the same desire for his field. Then many things happened; I was not accepted for Padua's university doctoral program right in the midst of the first pandemic in Italy. When we were finally able to walk the streets of Padua again, I had to bid farewell to that city, having no reason to stay there anymore, and Leo had to do the same because it made no sense for him to live in a city where he no longer had to attend classes but only had exams to take. The farewell to Padua was painful for both of us and was experienced as disillusionment, which in Leo's case coincided with recognizing his greater difficulties on the side of his thesis.

We had the occasion to meet again in Padua, evoking old memories of evenings spent chatting about philosophy until three in the morning and dreaming of the future in a place we thought we could call 'home'. In this, of course, there are also multiple anthropological aspects that pertain to our mutual subjectivities, the need for both of us, who are not natives of Northern Italy, to find a place where we can establish roots and dream of a new beginning.

I make this point because of its relevance to the interpretation of Leo's second and third maṇḍalas.

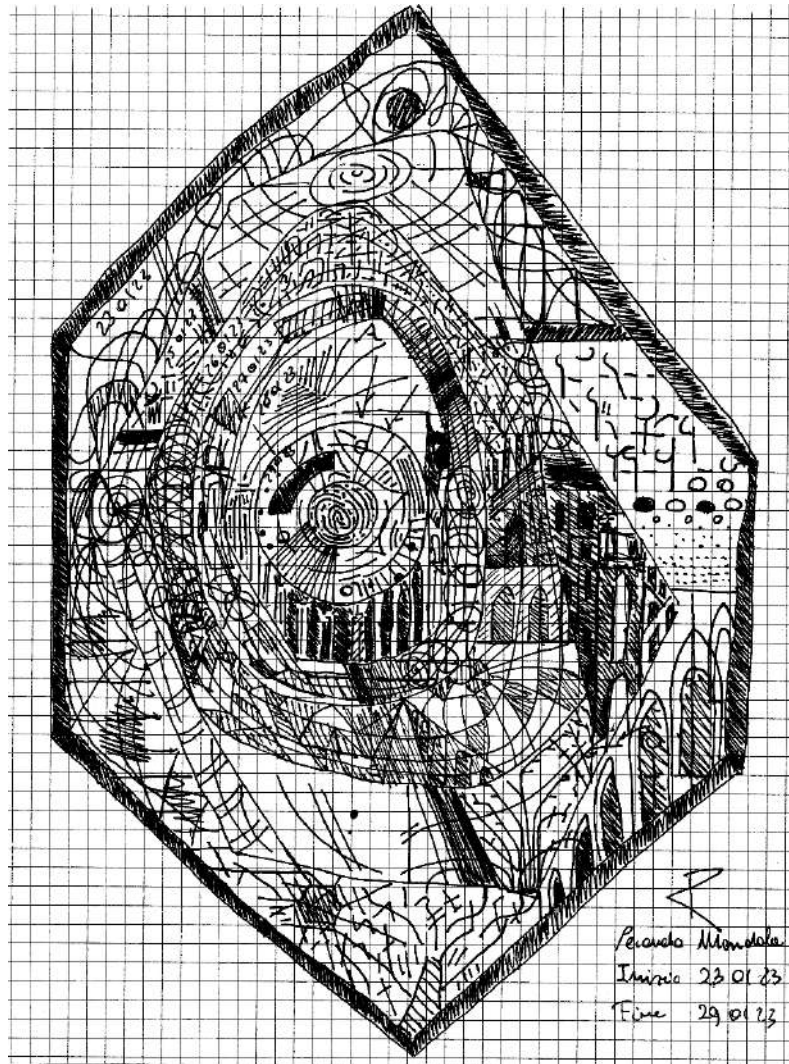


Fig. 9: Leo's Second mandala, completed on January 29, 2023

At first glance, I couldn't help but notice: I immediately recognized in multiple layers of his mandala the landscape of the city of Padua. I try to understand whether I am mistaken or not: "I can't hold back here... I see typical architectural motifs of Northern Italy... these architraves... I'm not sure how to define them...", but Leo intervenes immediately: "yes, there is a clear narrative... I arrived in Padua, and there is a square, by the way... but it's not from Padua... the square is, let's say, the only invented, quoted element because it's a square by De Chirico, who is the only artist who manages to distress me. But beyond that, there is a construction of buildings from Northern Italy... I think because I drew it while I was back in Padua [to take exams at the university], so it clearly recalls my time in Padua". Obviously, the element of anguish, identified in the reference to De Chirico that spontaneously came to him while drawing, is far from irrelevant.

I cannot hide my 'positioning' towards Leo, and therefore I emphasize to Leo that this relationship with the city of Padua is more than symbolic and needs to be explored further:

“naturally, it’s not there [the city] just because I returned”, Leo replies to me, “putting it in the bottom right corner, I think it’s accidental... it’s the first expression... then I continued to layer... build the city... the city is the external contingency, the biggest problem I had on the days I drew the maṇḍala... there’s the element of stone, exteriority... the opposite of interiority... my ever-changing, polymorphic interiority... the city, on the other hand, is stone, it’s static, it represents the norms of society... and an important element that returns... I also included trees in my maṇḍala... but they are the trees from the canals of Padua... and they are the trees that cover the sky... and those trees, from that avenue, which is the path I had to take to reach the exam room... so that avenue is for me the embodiment of what prevents you from looking at the sky... the embodiment of the fear that looms over me... extremely negative, and it’s a sign that I noticed I repeated even in the other maṇḍala, with the sun covered by a tree below... looking at this maṇḍala again, I remember... an emotion emerged, the same one I had while walking in that tree-lined avenue... for me, thoughts remain stagnant all day, and then when I meditate, they resurface and take shape... and the moment is that of me walking under the trees... towards the gallows [laughs].”

I ask him if he feels like talking more about it, if he somehow senses a crisis underlying the sense of anguish he depicted:

“let’s say... the thing is that in my opinion... this turbulent relationship I have with an element of reality has become a turbulent relationship I have with reality as a whole... in fact, there’s a change in the maṇḍala at a certain point... towards the penultimate layer, there’s a sort of Pope with a stylized hand... you see, during my walks, I talk to myself, to the other me, and somehow the old me, the one connected to that path there, which must come to an end, begs me to kill him, tells me to murder him and become someone else... and that Pope there is somehow the new identity that emerges, with this hand trying to separate... this relationship with reality... and let the new me free myself from this relationship with reality, and in fact, in the center, the maṇḍala is transforming, and the city disappears, the ties to the city disappear...”

In this last discourse, Leo is obviously referring to the never-ending problem of his academic future. The concepts of creativity and imagination manifest themselves unequivocally as determinants of human existence and individual expression—defined as the human “being-in-the-world” as a “world communicating with the world”. From a Jungian perspective, within Leo’s intentions lies a will for self-determination, manifesting in a multitude of internal identities that engage in an internal psychological conflict, all ultimately depicted within the maṇḍalic representation, in an attempt to establish control over the entire Self. Yet, this should not be mistaken as simple individuation in

Jungian terms, but rather as a complex imaginal stratification. What transpires within Leo's mind is in constant interplay with the so-called external world—it internalizes it, alters it, yet to what extent can we dare to postulate that Leo's world is a purely internal construct and that the images populating it are detached from the rest?

In the instance of the tree-lined avenue, the image is in and of itself an emotion—a sense of anxiety, of oppression, of apprehension for the future, of internal strife. All of this occurred on that avenue, the image of which was invoked in Leo's maṇḍala not as a mere symbolic replica of the event, but as the very embodiment of its appearance: “life's creative desire is never simply equated with what a person consciously wants. Creative desire is beyond the ego and, at times, demands a complex play between a personal and a cosmogonic force, and this complexity is likewise found in Jung's vision. Jung demonstrated that psyche's intention was not identical with the conscious will” (Marlan, 2021, p. 59).

In the third maṇḍala, Leo arrives at the point of acknowledging the emergence of particularly distinctive elements, which later surfaced within the theory that he personally conveyed to me. This theory pertains to the relationship between sign and maṇḍala, reality and representation, image and... image? These elicited considerations invite us towards a profound contemplation on the reality of the mere 'sign'.

4.4 Scenic Fiction: Elicitation of a Meditation on the Body

From Leo's perspective, the third maṇḍala is merely a progression from the second. This time, he solicits my interpretation, to which I reply that, in my estimation, it resembles a collection of stained glass windows from Gothic churches.

Moreover, I propose that the third maṇḍala bears greater similarity to the first than the second. In the second maṇḍala, the 'aperture-hole' is nonetheless present, manifesting as a minuscule door that, once again, frames, through the outermost layers, something larger, and of which only a fragment can be discerned through the central crevice-door, that which lies beyond.

However, this maṇḍala introduces at least two significant novelties: the square forms and the application of color.

Leo describes this maṇḍala as “a scenic fiction” in which “the inner layers have a temporal shift of about ten days compared to the outer layers... I wanted to break my meditation in this case, taking more time to see what changed with such a long detachment... because I had perceived a monotony that I wanted to break through contrast... moreover, what you call a 'door', for me is actually a mausoleum... they are the impossible architectures of the 18th century, like Newton's mausoleum... I see that... the typical arrangement of marble stones... which is a profound change that I developed

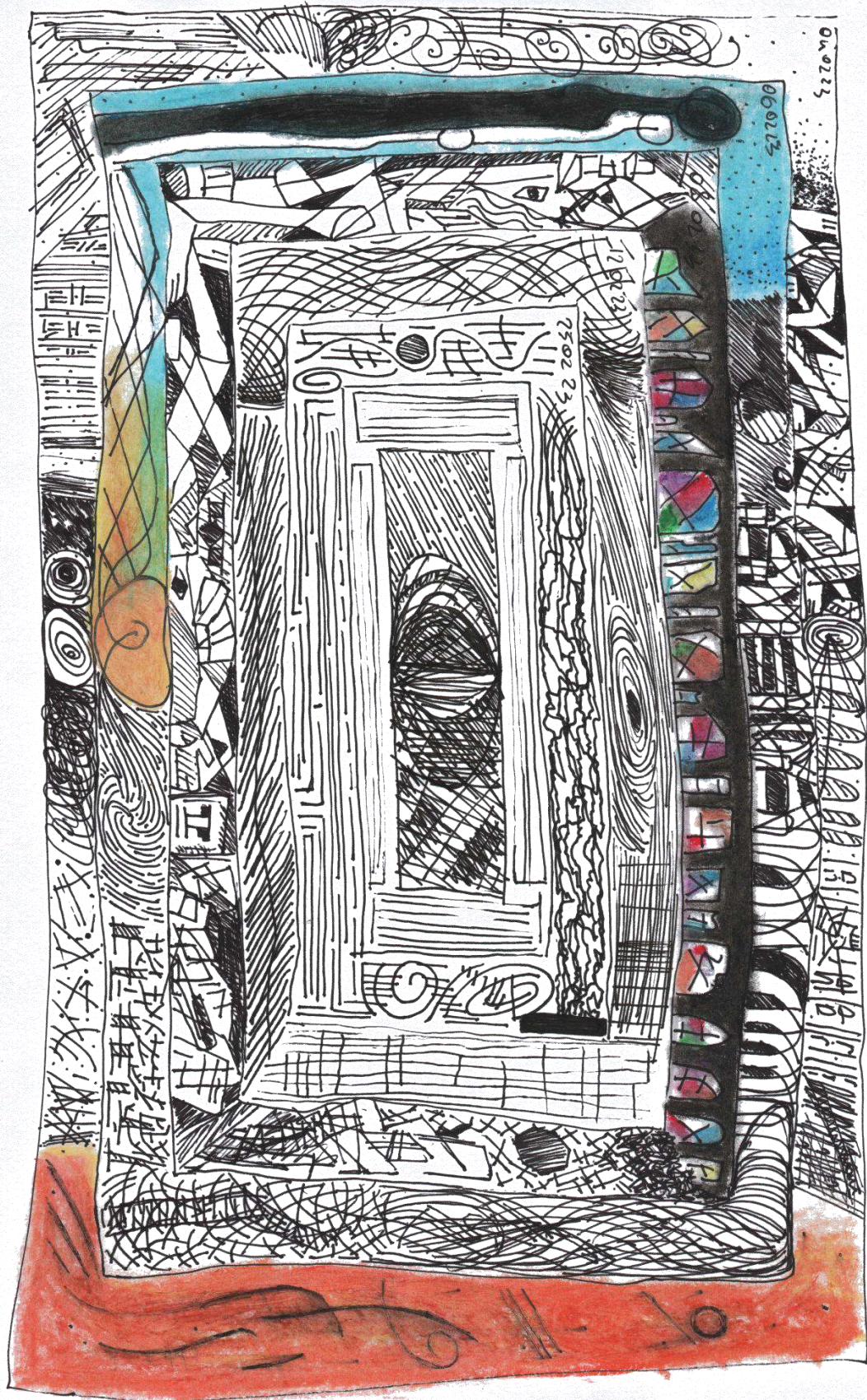
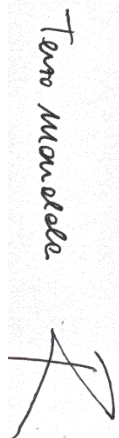
over these ten days... some ideas about the future and some different constructions... and precisely this monolithic and cumbersome mausoleum occupies the entire space of the visible... which is very invasive... but still, that is a window, you're right, there is a beyond, like in the first maṇḍala".

At this point, I ask him why he chose to paint part of his maṇḍala and why the choice of color emerged only now in his meditation. Moreover, while in the frame-layers, thoughts overlap in a chaotic manner, the center presents a clear dichotomy, which I saw as a dichotomy between a stormy landscape and a cemetery, separated by a kind of nucleus-bulb. Leo confirms,

"yes... but moreover, what seems like stained glass windows of cathedrals to you is related to the explosion of ideas... there was a phase for me where I was collecting many ideas in a confused way... and I was deciding which ideas they were... all the structures that I had seen up to that point about reality... and I visualized them as versatile and polychromatic... different expressions, different thoughts... then the analyticity intervened... the need to systematize... which changed everything and removed the color... I decided to build an order from these ideas... a mental process to refine what I had perceived in meditation... and obviously now I realize that the system is visually heavier, but also 'steadier'... by the way, among other things... I drew many bodies, even dismembered ones..."

Leo points out several of them, but I only recognize a face that looks like a Moai statue from Easter Island. The rest, as he himself says, "is cubist", which was his way to say to me that I can't discern them, even though for him "they are clearly visible", but of course, the artist has a much clearer idea of his work or his mind, or at least that's how it should be.

"Color possesses a dimensionality that does not belong to all things... at least not to metaphysical things... not to me... I have chosen corporeality in this past... because my vision has shifted towards the physical, the contingent, the everyday... the present... there is no longer a project of the future in the outermost layers... but in the absolute outermost layer, there is also a sort of meta-layer... because I have represented the moment when I draw the maṇḍala... at a certain point, you see a vortex through which the sun's rays enter my house windows... and there is the representation of representation... of I, drawing a layer, and there is also the bookshelf beside it... as if I have called to mind the present, the act of making present, and the corporeality of the present... which I see in my mind as the body... whereas the center, for me, is the formal doctrine... a division between these realities that I am within."



128

This discourse reconnects us to the premise I delineated in the introduction regarding my miniature prototype of a maṇḍala. On this occasion, I present to Leo both my first completed maṇḍala and the prototypical maṇḍala. I do so in response to Leo's discussion of the "symbols that populate" his maṇḍala. Leo harbors a profound admiration for structuralism, and for years he has engaged me in dialogues on linguistics, semantics, and semiotics, subjects that captivate him immensely from a mathematical standpoint. In his view, maṇḍalas are theatrical representations of a sign-filled tableau, akin to the representations of dismembered bodies. However, the sign is not construed as a rigid element or a reference. The sign itself is already the entity. Yet, this presents a logical impasse. We have been accustomed, since time immemorial, to perceive the sign as a relationship between signifier and signified, between concept and phonetic image, but this is, for Leo, a disguise of the authentic sign, which by its very nature is immediate, not mediated by mental content.

The experience of dismemberment constitutes a prevailing phenomenon within the context of ecstatic practices observed in diverse shamanic traditions. Mircea Eliade contributes nuanced perspectives regarding this distinct encounter. Notably, the Eskimo community provides accounts of the ecstatic ordeal wherein an animal entity (such as a bear, seahorse, or walrus) inflicts wounds upon the shamanic aspirant, leading to a rending of their corporeal form or even complete consumption, ultimately resulting in the emergence of regenerated flesh encompassing their skeletal structure.

Furthermore, analogous rituals are discernible between the initiation practices of Siberian shamans and those undertaken by Australian medicine-men. In both instances, the candidate undergoes an intricate intervention administered by semi-divine beings or ancestral figures, encompassing the deliberate disintegration of the physical body and subsequent rejuvenation of internal organs and skeletal components.

Moreover, it is worth highlighting that these rites transpire within a netherworldly realm or involve a descent into an infernal domain. These examples merely scrape the surface of the vast array of instances that could be adduced. Remarkably, the Dismemberment initiation stands as one of the earliest documented rituals within the realm of Ecstatic *trance*, representing a direct interface between human agents and spiritual entities. This profound ritualistic phenomenon finds portrayal even in the ancient cave art dating back to the Neolithic period.

The imagery surrounding the skeleton is both rich and diverse. It serves as an apt culmination for this work since the image of the skeleton or body dismemberment, alluding to a potential initiation rite of shamanic origin—which we do not intend to reconstruct here—resurfaces within the meditations of the participants in this study. For the time being, my focus will be primarily on Daniel, as he has offered a more exhaustive elucidation. The ethnography that has inspired me the most to integrate maṇḍalic elicitation in this work was conducted with Daniel in March 2021. This ethnography was

part of my personal research, which merged into my doctoral thesis when the project was accepted. Upon revisiting it months later, I realized that Daniel had provided the solution to the problem of describing consciousness states experienced during meditation using acceptable metaphors: he had specifically discussed maṇḍalic constructions, focusing on the deconstruction of the self through meditation exercises centered around the skeleton.

“That skeleton meditation... I constructed for months, so I studied. I bought myself an anatomy book, started to study the parts of the body, started first with the skin, then with the muscles, then with the skeleton, with all the individual bones. So, I kind of built this mental image a little bit similar to what you do in Tibetan Buddhism with *maṇḍalas*. So you visualize the levels and so on and so forth. I always had from childhood an attraction to the image of the skeleton. So instinctively, when I saw a skeleton it gave me a sense, it always gave me a sense of peace, tranquility. It is quite unusual and so this meditation also came quite easy to me. There are two there. Then one is the image that you construct through the visualization of the skeleton.”¹⁷

A pivotal facet of shamanistic transcendence involves the metaphysical dissolution experienced by the neophytes of this spiritual discipline. The Siberian shaman, Dyukhede, who practiced his craft during the 1930s epoch, delivered a graphic narrative of his spiritual expedition into the ethereal plane beyond the confines of physical reality (Vitebsky, 1995). His account intricately illustrates his progression through a crevice within a geological formation, where he has a profound encounter with an unclothed male apparition tending a fire by manipulating bellows over a receptacle. In a disturbingly explicit depiction, Dyukhede chronicles his own beheading and ensuing disarticulation by the ghostly entity. The distinct segments of his physical structure are thrown into the aforementioned receptacle, subjected to a slow cooking process over a three-year span.

¹⁷ Interview with Daniel, March 11, 2021. This ethnographic interview is part of another study previously published. In this context Daniel was speaking about the meditative exercise focused on a single “sign” (*nimitta*). He previously explained his way of doing *nimitta* meditation as follows: “The meditation that I practice is predominantly... precisely, *samatha* meditation, especially when... when I am in retreat, also when I am not in retreat. [...] Images are very important because in my experience meditation basically leads to images that can be *nimittas*. For example, in this case of *metta* meditation, you start by evoking an image or memory of a person, a situation that has a content akin to a sense of... benevolence, kindness, tenderness. I used for some time the image of a puppy, a kitten, a friend of mine, because as soon as I thought of that immediately the sense of caring tenderness emerged. And that emerges as its own, as a *nimitta*. It is not only a visual *nimitta*, but it is also a tactile *nimitta*. In some ways. It can be sometimes, for example, a sense of softening almost muscular softening of the body. I have a sense of expansion. Or the feeling of a smile arising. And that is the thing, so to speak... The *nimittas* are understood as a fullblown sign. It actually is, in fact. It is a sign that arises in correspondence to the manifestation of a mental element, in this case the arising of the inner state of *metta*. As for constructed imagery, however, for example... skeleton meditation” (Divino, 2023b, pp. 17-8).



Fig. 11:

Skeleton performing *zazen* on waves by Maruyama Okyo, 1787, Daijōji Temple, Hyogo, Japan. Photo by flickr.com/people/albill/ (CC BY-NC-SA 2.0).

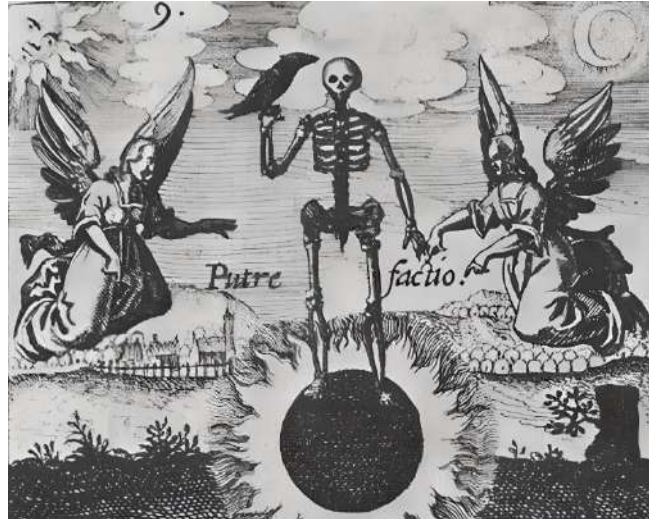


Fig. 12:

A Skeleton above the black sun, representing the alchemical stage of Putrefactio, in Philosophia Reformata by J.D. Mylius (Emblem numbered 9 and captioned 'Putrefactio', Engraved by Balthazar Schwan, 1622).

During this transformative phase, Dyukhede's skull is singled out, undergoing vigorous shaping on an anvil, further signifying this self-deconstruction. The skeletal debris and bodily tissues are expelled into a proximate water body, to be later retrieved, reassembled, and re-ensouled—a potent symbol of the shaman's rebirth. This rigorous trial leads to Dyukhede's reduction to his basic skeletal form, followed by a subsequent reformation, symbolic of a spiritual rebirth. This metamorphosis goes beyond personal significance, equipping the shaman with the ability to face and dispel spectral beings accountable for disease and scarcity within his community.

The symbolism of the skeleton is not solely found within Buddhist conceptions, but also emerges in the West as a representative of death, as one might well imagine. However, the symbolism inherent to this image is not so self-evident. In its more esoteric-mystical dimensions, the skeleton indeed approaches the Buddhist idea of renewal.

As an esoteric symbol (Koutny-Jones, 2015; Huang, 2015), the skeleton should be understood as renewal, transformation, and a necessary moment of change wherein one closes with the past and looks towards the future. The skeleton is often depicted as standing on a brightly green meadow. In other renditions, the skeleton is colored pink, reminiscent of human skin, symbolizing life once more, as can also be inferred from the active pose of the skeleton. Here too, despite symbolizing putrefaction, the *nigrēdō* is but the first phase of the alchemical process. Jung interprets this process as the confrontation with the Shadow, that which is invisible and darkest within us. Although this confrontation may induce fear, it is indispensable for the journey towards individuation. The skeleton

therefore does not indicate a radical death, but presupposes a rebirth, a resurrection, of which the individual who enters the alchemical path can be a beneficiary.



**Section from Fig. 10:
Dismembered body, details from Leo's third maṇḍala.**

This theme also emerges in an ethnographic interview conducted on June 8, 2023, where Leo showed me what would be the final maṇḍala of this study. Now, in this last maṇḍala, the theme of skeletons and dismemberment is not present. However, it is on this occasion that Leo, while talking to me about the pervasiveness of consciousness, the experience of images, and the stratification of consciousness, also recalls other aspects of his past maṇḍalas, in which he had explicitly drawn dismembered body parts.

He connects this tendency of 'dismemberment' of bodies to a natural consequence of the initial stages of meditation, the 'analytical' stages (in the sense of the Greek word ἀναλύω [*analúō*]). Since the subject of consciousness is always the body, the meditative process that aims to penetrate the layers of consciousness deeper and deeper ends up dismembering the body of the subject. These themes are not only present in the maṇḍala (referred to in Fig. 10) but also in others previously proposed by Leo.

Leo: "This is somewhat related to the sense of cubism... I don't think Picasso was a Buddhist... in fact, he wasn't... yet he believed that in order to understand reality through an image, that image had to dismember reality... reproduce it in forms that are not necessarily faithful or photorealistic... and I also dismembered bodies... I realize that... because I was exercising a 'seeing' that was multilayered... and this dismemberment of form and figure allows for the simultaneous representation of body parts... all on the same plane... placing them in a symbolically more complex reality... there is a principle of division, of splitting things... but with the perspective of representing them in their connectedness... collectively forming a body and an integrity... and perhaps even though Picasso was not a Buddhist, the essence of the two is the same... you know, through meditation, I better understood this problem... that we never truly perceive ourselves in our completeness... not even when we look in the mirror... think about it... apart from not seeing our own face except through artifice... but then the back... we never see our

own back! Yet, it is a part of us... a fundamental part of our wholeness... and... it's somewhat like the idea of Moscarda in Pirandello... when he notices his crooked nose... when the bodily perception is distorted... and so, it is beneficial to dismember this perception of the body... at least internally... and in fact, all the bodies I have drawn 'dismembered' in the maṇḍalas, I have represented them in the same way..."

Buddhism has always had a particular passion for 'dismemberments' and the analysis of the 'fragmented' body. It could be said that this ascetic process is indeed at the core of its meditation. If it is true, as some argue, that the *Satipaṭṭhānasutta* is the oldest attestation of the meditative technique, we must pay close attention to this section, present in the *Paṭikūlamānasikārapabba* of the *Kāyānupassanā* of the said text, in which the Buddha invites to meditate on the impurities of the body in order to overcome the very dichotomous conception of purity and impurity, leading the ascetic to the disconcerting awareness that within oneself, unseen, reside viscera and organs that if dissected would appear repulsive, and yet they are within, without us being aware of it. This profound anatomical attention of Buddhism is part not only of its ascetic heritage, which involved ancient medical knowledge, but it is perhaps, probably, also a symptom of a common tendency among those who engage in contemplative practices and experience states of expanded consciousness. The dismemberment of the body, as already mentioned, is a fundamental passage of shamanic initiation, and Buddhism seems to repropose it here in meditative form, anticipating what would later become famously known as meditation on the skeleton.



Section from Fig. 14:
Disassembled skeleton, detail of my second maṇḍala.

This represents merely the most prominent among a plethora of instances that could be enumerated, wherein Buddhism gestures, so to speak, towards the skeleton, or proposes a form of contemplation that is centered upon the skeletal structure or the dismemberment of the corporeal entity.

In the meditation on the skeleton (*Aṭṭhikamahapphalasutta*) it is said that "when the comprehension of a skeleton is meticulously nurtured and cultivated, it proves to be exceedingly advantageous and beneficial" (*aṭṭhikasaññā, bhāvitā bahulīkatā mahapphalā hoti mahānisamsā*). Also, "when the perception of the skeleton is developed and cultivated you can expect one of these two results:

enlightenment in the present life, or if there's something left over, the status of non-return" (*aṭṭhikasaññāya, bhāvitāya bahulikatāya dvinnaṃ phalānaṃ aññataraṃ phalaṃ pāṭikaṅkhaṃ—diṭṭheva dhamme aññā, sati vā upādisese anāgāmitā*). Finally, it is said that the contemplation on the skeleton grants a status of comfortable existence (*bhāvitā bahulikatā mahato phāsuviḥārāya saṃvattati*). The manifestation of the skeletal figure resurfaces not only during contemplative reflection but is consistently correlated with awe-inspiring and fantastical phenomena.



Fig. 13: My first ‘official’ maṇḍala, completed on February, 2023

In another discourse on the skeleton (*Aṭṭhisutta*), Moggallāna, a disciple of the Buddha, bears witness to the sight of a skeleton levitating in the ethereal plane whilst he was descending Vulture’s Peak Mountain (*idhāhaṃ, āvuso, gijjhakūṭā pabbatā orohanto addasaṃ aṭṭhikasaṅkhalikaṃ vehāsaṃ gacchantiṃ*). The aforementioned skeletal entity was persistently pursued by raptors, such as vultures, crows, and hawks, engaged in the continuous actions of pecking, clawing, and thrusting into its ribcage. This vision is characterized as astonishing (*acchariyaṃ*) and results in Moggallāna receiving an elucidation from Buddha; the skeletal creature was, in fact, a manifestation of a former human

entity, specifically, an embodiment of a cattle butcher in Rājagaha, who was undergoing this hellish retribution as a consequence of his actions. Thus, even within the realm of Buddhism, the duality of the skeleton’s symbolism is present, bearing both negative and positive connotations.

Nonetheless, the skeleton principally correlates within Buddhism to a meditative discipline centered on skeletal perception (*aṭṭhikasaññā*), a theme recurrently appearing in numerous discourses of the Canon. Across every instance, the meditation methodically invokes the commanding imagery of the skeleton to confound, to deconstruct the corporeal form, reducing it to its most minimal, nuclear essence. The accentuation on this imagery is not intended to incite repulsion, but rather to stimulate the meditator’s awareness of their own consciousness by extending bodily perception towards regions typically obscured from our view, towards the unseen elements of our own physicality.¹⁸

Leo commented on both of my first two maṇḍalas at the same interview, insisting on seeing the ‘maṇḍala No. zero’ that I didn’t want to officially consider as part of this study since I made it more as a sketch than anything else.

“Looking at both of them, I isolated three elements that repeat... in my opinion... in the more precise and perfect one, the elements repeat in different positions, but regardless of where you embedded them, these elements say the same thing... you have a sort of *horror vacuū*... and you do it in two ways... what seems like a fingerprint... that expression that fills everything and almost makes the figures float... isolates them... then there’s that very clear and precise expression which are the minority lines... while in the more complex maṇḍala, they are the core... the petals of the flower... they could have an opposite inner function, but towards reality, they have the same function... which is to fill the space... and it does so by creating bubbles... like bubbles... and then there’s the very important element of the strong presence of words... which is not an easy presence... it’s something typical of yours... but it’s not easy to use words... they are a key to the external world... and words, letters, signs... even the sound of a mantra... and the problem with words is that they hide their essence but at the same time, they are almost explicit... your reality is full of this essence... your maṇḍalas almost seem like a cell... then there are these words that are very powerful essences... there’s this reference to the structure of language... and it leads, in

¹⁸ Michel Mohr conducted a meticulous investigation into the conceptualization of purity within the Buddhist tradition, while also incorporating the anthropological perspectives put forth by eminent scholars such as Durkheim and Douglas. His analysis primarily centers on the Chinese Buddhist tradition, particularly focusing on the Meditation Sutra that originated in the early fifth century CE (Mohr, 2020). Upon thorough reflection on the multifaceted aspects of Buddhist contemplation regarding impurity, it becomes apparent that the notion of “purity” encompasses two distinct conceptions when examined through the prism of the pure/impure dichotomy. Firstly, purity can be perceived as a cognitive construct that emerges from the discursive operations of the mind, influenced by sociohistorical and linguistic factors, thus endowing it with a universal character. Secondly, this guide to meditation presents an alternative perspective in which contemplation on impurity leads to a direct apprehension of purity, symbolized by a “sign” signifying the culmination of the contemplative practice. This pivotal juncture signifies the successful attainment of the practice and aligns with the moment when practitioners catch a glimpse of their true essence.

my opinion, to a particular third element... the arrows... in the maṇḍala number zero, let's call it that... there are arrows that appear... in different directions... for me, those represent relationships and diversity... so you wanted to highlight... in my interpretation... the relationships of the structure, the relational aspect... and then these float in this plasma... with these reverberations inwards... so there's an explicit directionality with these arrows pushing outward but in a floating reality that compresses inward... and then there's the word... which is a constant in your maṇḍalas... the floating of words... even the lotus flower, in the complete maṇḍala... floats... why does it float?"

Naturally, it should be remembered that Leo knows me well, so he is more accustomed than others to seeing my characteristic traits in the symbols I represent. Knowing that my stay in Belgium was very difficult for me in the first year, due to a sense of disorientation as well as difficulties with integration, Leo did not hesitate to interpret the straight lines that populate the fourth layer as actually representing prison bars. However, while acknowledging that my use of the written word is certainly peculiar since I love language, poetry, and writing in general, Leo believes that the maṇḍala is populated by other types of 'signs' that acquire particular values, and these signs are maṇḍalic rather than purely linguistic signs.

This seems to be a characteristic trait that Leo also notices in my second maṇḍala, which he will comment on in a subsequent ethnographic meeting on March 21, 2023. This may seem like an inconclusive game, but this "anthropology of the anthropologist", which, like a reverberation, transmits information about what it has clashed against, this vision of others about me can also be anthropologically relevant. My maṇḍalas, as Leo always notes, are characterized by an apparent *horror vacuū*. Even here, the sign, the form, is contained. Information is form in action, and in the case of maṇḍalas, the form is acted upon by the elicited expression that reflects experience, interiority, and the world.

Leo defines my "form" as "baroque", which makes me smile since I don't particularly appreciate Baroque art. This reminds me of the opinions arouse in Joe too watching my second maṇḍala 23: "I see here a complexity and richness of details... if I had to imagine who created this thing, I can only say that's a complex mind, perhaps of one that already meditates from a long time... thus the mind of the one who produced it must be composed of multiple organized and harmonious levels, yet simultaneously rich in hidden worlds and symbolism that seem to dance in perfect harmony... I am also fascinated by the geometries placed in the center, which, in my opinion, indicate the attainment of a profound, almost primordial, state of knowledge" (July 23, 2023).



Fig. 14: My second maṇḍala, completed on March 17, 2023

In Joe's case, it cannot be said that his opinions about him were aroused by the fact that he associated these drawings with me, as he did not guess that I was the creator, unlike Leo.

Yet, Leo adds, "*horror vacuī* is not inherently bad... but your fillings are not decorative... it seems evident... it is two-dimensional... there would be empty spaces if it were a traditional maṇḍala, yours... but being two-dimensional, you fill everything... you want everything to be information... it's holographic... because there can't be too much empty space in the two-dimensional?"

I respond, "it's like a hole in a dress... it doesn't fit... it's ugly... it's not comfortable... even though in three dimensions I love the space to breathe, the silence...", then Leo interrupts me, "but you have used color... which belongs to a different dimensionality... like a superstructure... for me, it's your attempt to add a third dimension... and you do it in a way that is not symbolic... because you use black

for that... the winged lion, the moon, the sun, the people... for symbols, you use black... but colors, red, blue, and green... are even more primitive than symbols... how would you place them?"

And I reply that if I were to create a hierarchy, green is the purest and most important color, while red and blue are two archetypal opposites, red is wild, passionate, while blue is orderly and harmonious, but both are far from the perfection of green. Leo chuckles because red is his favorite color and he has a slight antipathy towards green. Leo continues,

"then there are turbulences... these waves... like the waves in your first maṇḍala... but now they seem more clearly like turbulences... like when you throw a stone into the water... interferences, yes... because then, among other things... these waves are emanated from symbols, from more concrete figures... they... vibrate... in some way... they create reality... or is it the other way around? Or are they created by vibrations?... and then there's the connection with the sky... zodiac signs... many references... in my opinion, if a medievalist were to take this maṇḍala, they would see many things... but obviously, it's your professional deformation, so to speak... not as a medievalist... as a scholar of psychoanalysis, I suppose... but then the center... this thing... have you thought about it? What is the geometer who, to measure the circle, strains all his powers, and finds, in thinking, that principle by which he seeks, such was himself, at that new sight... it's squaring the circle... I mean, I'm citing Dante again."

It was at that moment, thanks to Leo's reference to alchemical culture—through Dante, Leo wasn't consciously knowing he was citing an alchemical symbolism—that it became essential for me to start recovering Jung's works on alchemy, which would later be incorporated into the theoretical framework of this work. I began to think that these could be of anthropological interest starting from Leo's counter-ethnography of my maṇḍala, but also, ultimately, on all the maṇḍalas I encountered on this journey. However, I myself composed my maṇḍalas through a rigorous meditative exercise: I practiced meditation three times a week, and when a feeling of saturation arose within me, which needed to be impressed onto the paper, I would draw one layer upon another without caring about what I was constructing, without referring to superstructures or considering beforehand what to put on the paper, as everything had to be as automatic and spontaneous as possible, allowing a free flow from the unconscious, aided by the weakening of identity and superego through the contemplative exercise. In other words, I don't have to think about what "should be" what I am drawing.

4.5 Living Matter, conscious images

The images possess a certain degree of vitality. Throughout my ethnography and the experiences shared with me by the participants, I was compelled to eschew the notion that an image is merely a

product of its creator's creativity. Even the psychoanalytic interpretation, suggesting that the subject 'projects' their unconscious onto the paper, is a rather reductionist understanding of reality.

In my view, the situation is far more complex, significantly more intricate. From my ethnographic journal entry on May 23, 2023: "I spoke with Leo and Daniel once again about their elicitation experiences. We agree on the wholly peculiar nature of creating these 'objects'. The forms, in some way, 'beckon' the artist; they are not merely subservient to their will. It is as if the meditator, who represents their meditation on the page, is not merely describing themselves but also acting as an antenna, receiving something larger and more intricate, yet voiceless. During my meditation, this image came to me: a sculptor shaping a statue while listening to the subtle voices that whisper from the marble, saying, '*give us the form! give us this form!*' Thus, the sculptor is nothing more than the center around which intricate networks of relationships and interconnections are constructed... the marble, in a sense, possesses its own life: it is not sentient but conscious. Consciousness resides within the marble, although not sufficiently conformed to possess a strong enough will to assume a specific form. However, the artist is also conscious, more aware and complex than the marble, and thus can apprehend what comes to them from the material, asking to be brought into the light... the sculptor acts, yet is also acted upon by the material, which becomes alive in their work, forging its way into form, bestowing a narrative and also giving a story to the sculptor... hence, I believe this is more or less what occurs with the maṇḍala, with the distinction that the 'material' to which the meditator listens is the profound connection between their individual consciousness and the broader outlet that leads from their consciousness to the totality of things, the *anima mundi* as described by Hillman, or simply put, the voice of a world permeated by consciousness".

Months after writing these considerations, I come across a work by Morgan that goes in a very similar direction starting from Gell's anthropology: "The hammer I pick up can do things that my bare hands cannot, although it requires my entire body and mind to do them. In this way, the hammer acts on me, changing my relationship to the world around me. It is our symbiotic relation with objects that constitutes secondary forms of agency" (Morgan, 2014, p. 85).

Morgan, endeavoring to eschew animistic tendencies, expresses affinity with the likes of Bakewell and Mitchell. Their propositions posit images as not mere descriptive representations of reality but as enactments, thereby coining the term "image acts" to signify the functional capabilities of images. Similarly, art historian Horst Bredekamp has advocated for the transcendence of the speech-act model's linguistic boundaries to delve deeper into the study of image acts. This is with the objective of comprehending the inherent dynamism of the image itself, its autonomous power and potential to elicit reactions from spectators. According to Mitchell, an image "can also be verbal and acoustic" (Favero, 2018a, p. 5; Mitchell, 2015, p. 14). This should not be news to us, especially after Saussure's

lesson about the “acoustic image” and consequently, the idea that any cognitive instance can be considered a cognitive image.

Under this theoretical umbrella, an image isn’t primarily conceptualized as the spectator’s tool or a signifier of the spectator’s interpretation but functions as an autonomous entity exerting influence on the spectator’s cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses. Morgan finds the most intellectual safety in the theories of Mitchell who, in his recent work, advocates for a more modest conceptual structure than the dominating ‘power of images’ framework. He puts forth the idea that our focus should not be fixated on the presumed actions of images (such as deception, seduction, oppression), but rather we should endeavor to discern the desires of images. By this, Mitchell does not imply the desires of the image creators or the induced desire in the viewers. Instead, he suggests a shift of desire’s locus to the images themselves, prompting the question of what images desire. In the earlier stages of his career, Mitchell had associated images with language. However, the later phase of his work contends that images yearn for an equitable status with language and oppose being subsumed into it.

The idea that images can act, that work is performed visually and not as an illustration of ideas or texts, and that thought itself operates in a visual medium rather than a linguistic form has occupied the work of many anthropologists, art historians, and critical theorists of the image under the title of ‘image acts’ and, in German, *Bildakt-Theorie*, derived from the speech act theories of J. L. Austin and his student, John Searle.¹⁹

The peculiar configuration of the maṇḍalas that take shape is also noted. We must exclude the hypothesis that this universally emerged conformation in our subjects can be attributed to their influence by the ‘Western’ mode of thinking, of which they are certainly primary actors, as all maṇḍalas, including those of ‘Eastern’ origin, exhibit a similar structure. I am referring to the conflict between the center and the periphery, but above all between the dual style: one side characterized by order and rationalization, with defined forms and points, and the other side characterized by a holistic and all-encompassing nature that disdains clear boundaries. Regardless of the number of layers, every maṇḍala always has at least two facets because it can be interpreted in two ways: as a ‘mechanical’ composite of multiple elements or parts, or as an interaction between converging forms leading to a singular formality. Therefore, it is no longer possible to turn our backs on what McGilchrist has revealed to us about the very nature of human thinking and the conflict between the two hemispheres that inhabit it (McGilchrist, 2021a). However, before delving into that, I also wish to emphasize the

¹⁹ Cf. Morgan, 2014, p. 85.

power of the image that the maṇḍala of all subjects evokes—a connection between the consciousness of the meditator and the meditated object, which then assumes the form of the maṇḍala. Perhaps we have all been unwitting actors, like the sculptor who extracts form from the statue, whose consciousness calls out to the artist's consciousness to be brought into the light.

Shapland has put forth an anthropological interpretation of archaeological artifacts that appears to align with this perspective. Specifically, he asserts that the contemporary scholar ought not to be intimidated by theories concerning consciousness and the potential assertion of some form of consciousness even within inanimate objects, such as artifacts. Certainly “a higher sense of ourselves as beings in the world is part of our personal experience” (Shapland, 2021, p. 517), however, we should not be convinced that our personal experience of our own consciousness gives us the right to assume that only our existence is conscious. According to Shapland (p. 518) “all matter must be—to some extent—conscious. [...] Consciousness is a fundamental property of matter, just like gravity; as with gravity, consciousness is simply more manifest in some entities than in others”. When he refers to consciousness as the “omnipresent spectator” (p. 520).

If this holds true for the ‘objects’, why could it not also hold true for the images? Shapland describes panpsychism as the idea for which “all things have minds or a mind-like quality” (p. 521). If this is true, it would be also possible to trace some kind of “object biography” or “itineraries”. Objects have their own ‘body’ and transform themselves in the course of their use or simply being-in-the-world. This is especially true for manufacts: “the blades of early medieval swords were perceived as the ‘body’: the functional part of itself with which it performed its tasks” (p. 524), and this conception is not only medieval. As Shapland explains (p. 529):

Some past societies, including Viking Age Europe, considered that certain objects were living entities with personalities and minds. In contrast, the dominant paradigm for our own understanding of the world is that of rational, scientific thought. Yet we are now left with the possibility that these past societies were, in some senses, correct: objects do actually have minds, regardless of whether they are famous swords or cooking pots. Modern panpsychism in some ways tells us nothing new, it can be deemed a rational iteration of animism and it is as acceptable to the present-day scientific method as animism would have been to the belief systems particular to other human societies through time. [...] Many archaeological thinkers have sought to place objects on a more equal footing to human actors, to lend these objects a degree of agency, to trace the biographies of these objects' lives and to treat them as extensions of the minds of living people.

The visual system exhibits object recognition through the process of minimizing prediction errors and employing hypothesis-testing mechanisms. This principle extends to both tangible entities existing in

the real world and depictions of objects within artistic creations, indeed: “images do things to or for human beings. Even destroying them exerts a spiritual effect. Images operate as agents of one kind or another, and this makes them either dangerous or very useful” (Morgan, 2014, p. 84).

However, in environments characterized by darkness or low illumination, such as caves, the visual system encounters specific difficulties attributable to perceptual instability and multistability, wherein a single image can be perceived in distinct manners. This inherent instability stimulates the visual system to generate inferences and actively partake in the determination of the underlying causes responsible for the perceptual fluctuations. Within the confines of caves, rock formations that bear resemblance to animals can evoke a sense of multistability, wherein they may be interpreted as either rocks or living creatures at disparate intervals. This remarkable phenomenon likely elicited a perception of awe and enchantment during the Upper Paleolithic era, ultimately prompting the inclusion of animal-like attributes to consolidate and safeguard these images.

Hodgson has been engaged in an ongoing endeavor for a number of years, with the aim of establishing a connection between Paleolithic artistic expressions utilizing the visual medium and the anthropological phenomenon of magic. While it may be tempting to involve de Martino in this pursuit, the notion that these artistic manifestations are situated, as de Martino posited for the magical-religious apparatus, at the inception of early human existence, presents a multifaceted inquiry. For those of us who have been involved in the analysis of images in the contemporary era, the question arises as to what insights this visual production can offer us concerning prehistoric times.

Hodgson posits that a valuable understanding of Upper Paleolithic cave art can be derived by examining it through the lens of both the perceptual/visual system and the neuropsychological experiences associated with emotional stimulation. By recognizing that the perceptual elements identified are shared by Upper Paleolithic individuals and modern *Homo sapiens*, a dependable framework emerges for drawing inferences regarding parietal art and the accompanying artifacts (Hodgson, 2012).

According to de Martino, magic and religion can be regarded as cognitive technologies that arise in the prehistory of the human kind in response to the crisis of presence (de Martino, 2022). Presence, considered the primary essential human good, bestows meaning and faces the risk of being lost under certain historical circumstances. De Martino posits that the pivotal role of presence in the world lies in its function as a valorizing force. Valorization, within the economic framework, denotes the process of elevating objects from a state of mere existence (*Dasein*) to a state of usability (see Heidegger’s concepts of “being-present-at-hand”, *Vorhandenheit* and “ready-to-hand”, *Zuhandenheit*). However, this process necessitates the embodiment of objects. De Martino acknowledges this aspect only as a secondary observation, but it becomes apparent that human presence emerges from the realm of magic

only when it assumes a physical form. In other words, the body remains imperceptible until it is subjected to valorization. Consequently, the primary act of valorization is the embodiment of the body, achieved by condensing it from its state of being and conceptually separating it. To give a body to the body signifies a transition in perceiving the body, no longer as an integral part of the world, but as a presence within the world, thereby making it susceptible to utilization or manipulation by the world. In this anthropological conception, proposed by de Martino as the inception of culture, one can discern echoes of various historical Western ideologies concerning the body, all of which revolve around a fundamental issue, namely the metaphysical duality of the thing and the image.

However, de Martino does not delve into the magical implications of the image as a dispositive. Moreover, this apparent division between the physical body and the self-image is illusory, as evidenced by the state of *samādhi* attained through deep meditation, which unveils its deceptive nature. Given that this division is merely apparent, the 'magical' function of the image must be comprehended in terms of both its partially concealed character (the missing part) and its ability to remedy and evoke that which remains invisible. Hodgson endeavors to trace a mystical function within the images that commence to undergo elaboration in human prehistory, and endeavors to explicate their significance by drawing upon psychology and neuroscience: what “modern observers often fail to recognize is that, in an age where images are all pervading, we forget how the ability to make and perceive pictures must have appeared novel to the first picture-makers” (Hodgson, 2021, p. 489).

Hodgson also contends that, given the potential attribution of magical significance to the ability to depict animals, early humans ventured into caves to either witness pre-existing representations or create new ones, thus reliving the “magic” of these depictions.²⁰

²⁰ It is important to consider that when early humans beheld animals depicted in the evocative contours of the cave, the region of the brain known as the caudal inferotemporal cortex, specialized in animal recognition, would have been automatically activated. It is intriguing to note that this very same cortical area also experiences activation when presented with a reduced image solely depicting the outlines of an animal, and in some instances, even more so than when observing a corresponding real animal. This phenomenon arises due to the visual brain's responsiveness to specific key signals such as the contours encompassing prominent features like the cervico-dorsal line and the cranial region. In fact, the enchanting quality of animal representation appears to be associated with such equivalence. Recent research in the field of perceptual psychology provides “further evidence” of the utility of such an approach. Anthropological studies have also demonstrated that “the structure of the self varies systematically across cultures at the level of brain representations” (Kitayama & Park, 2010, p. 115). For example, the elaboration on self-thinking involves the work of the medial prefrontal cortex (mPFC), however, “when people think about the self from others' point of view [...] the mPFC activation disappears”. This marks a significant advancement toward a more constructive discourse between neuropsychological disciplines and social sciences with a greater humanistic inclination. It is a dialogue which I hope would not be solely driven by the popularity of the quantitative approach, given that psychology itself has recognized the importance of cultural studies, and the impact that cultural phenomena, which cannot be quantified or strictly reduced to statistical trends, exert on human beings: “it has become increasingly clear that the psychological tendencies are culturally aligned precisely because underlying neural activities are also culturally patterned” (Kitayama & Park, 2010, p. 121).

4.6 Consciousness and its Relationship with the Image

The desire to lay at least the foundations for a contemplative anthropology converges ultimately in the presentation of the latest ethnography with Joe, the one that most strongly inspired a visual theory of consciousness and allowed me to reconnect numerous aspects of the experiences of other meditators, including my own. In this section I will introduce new data collected from ethnographies with Joe and Daniel that allow us to further explore the anthropological theme of consciousness.

As previously mentioned in the introduction, the interview with Joe took place in a single meeting on July 29, 2023. During this encounter, we retraced some of his past before delving into the analysis of his meditative experiences. As he himself stated verbally, his journey has passed through various stages, some of which were retrospectively labeled as “popularized” or “simplistic New Age stuff”, and thus partially disowned. Nevertheless, he assumed that these experiences still formed part of a personal experiential path that proved useful in nurturing his spirituality. Following these varied experiences, he “settled” into his own interpretation, which he considered to be “more authentic”—or at least perceived it as such—of contemplation. All his ideas about the world and consciousness stem directly from his meditative experiences and are unmistakably recognizable in the descriptions he provides of his maṇḍalas.

Joe, along with Daniel, is the only one to have constructed his maṇḍalas from the center and radiated outward to the outer layers. Numerous considerations could be made regarding this choice, but as previously stated, this research does not aim to necessarily identify universal psychological trends; rather, it seeks to valorize the subjective experiences of the meditators. It will be in subsequent stages that we may attempt, if desired, to identify hypothetical common patterns in certain choices.

Like Daniel, Joe justifies this decision in a straightforward manner: “it felt natural for me to do it this way”. He even jokes that this choice might have been influenced by his left-handedness, but such hypotheses can only be speculative. Furthermore, since other subjects also confirm that the center represents the core and most crucial aspect, the only aspect worthy of reflection may be the choice of drawing it as the first or last element.

The ethnographic encounters with Joe have consistently taken place online, given the challenges we’ve faced in meeting in person. However, despite this, Joe and I have frequently communicated multiple times throughout this ethnography and even afterward. Joe, in a manner of speaking, is someone who has consistently emanated positive vibes. Although we don’t share a particularly deep friendship or a common background, considering there’s a considerable age gap between us—which, however, hasn’t been an impediment to the friendship that has solidified over the years.

Joe, in fact, is somewhat of a self-taught individual in meditation. He has traversed through various professions in his life, even delving into entrepreneurship, yet never had the chance to pursue

university education, despite his profound interest in Eastern philosophies. Honestly, although he described his approach as “very amateurish”, I must say that his personal experiences have always conveyed to me, from the perspective of genuineness that defines him, a clarity and depth of understanding that perhaps many scholars lack.

So, we each sit at our respective desks and initiate the video call. Almost immediately, Joe lights a cigarette, finding relaxation in doing so. At that moment, I feel fortunate not to be physically present with him, as the smell of smoke greatly bothers me. Joe spontaneously begins speaking to me, with an incredibly fluent manner of conversation. He scarcely needs my questions to realign the conversation and consistently shares very intriguing insights, to which I promptly pay attention.

While speaking, he occasionally reaches out to his bookshelf, retrieving a few books that provide a very accessible discussion on meditation or spirituality. He mentions that these books are part of his personal journey, acknowledging that they might not be particularly in-depth or specialized but have still communicated something to him—a sentiment he appreciates, be it their poetic nature or their way of expression. Following this, he returns to his drawings, showing them to me and indicating the elements on which he wishes to focus more within his meditative experience.

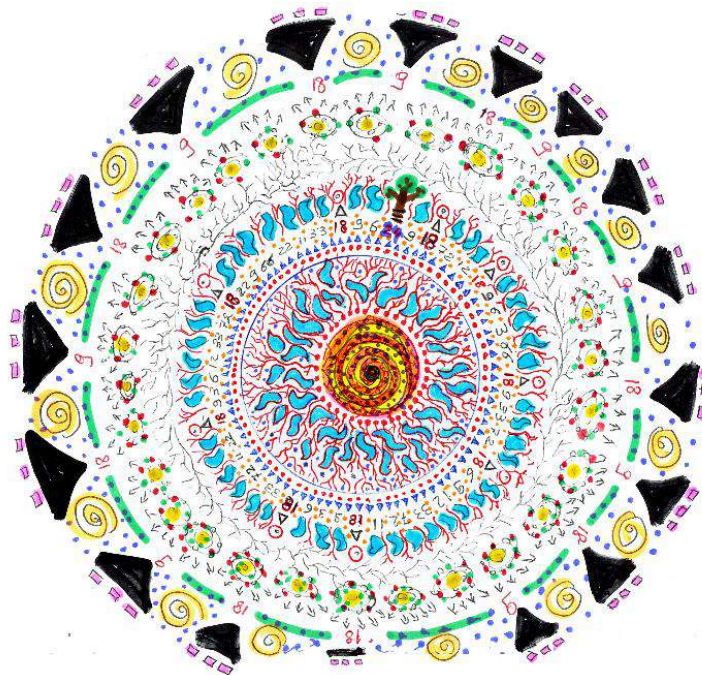


Fig. 15: Joe’s first prototype maṇḍala

His meditative experience has been marked not only by drawing but also by numerous phrases he felt compelled to write on the back of the paper. These phrases essentially represent quick insights that he couldn’t immediately relate to a logical sense and, according to him, are difficult to interpret even

after meditation, almost appearing disjointed. For this reason, he requested that I not include them in the ethnographic data. However, he still showed them to me, as he wanted me to be aware of this aspect of his meditation.

Moving into specifics, maṇḍalas depicted in Fig. 15 and 18 were created, according to Joe, around one or two in the morning after a particular experience. He explains, “I listened to sounds to help me concentrate, and I meditated for almost two hours... maybe it was too much, but I had a sort of waking dream in which I confronted a kind of entity to whom I asked for help in visualizing my inner self. Yet, this divinity told me to manage on my own because I am the creator. After this dream-like experience, I suddenly woke up, grabbed a piece of paper, and began drawing fervently, caught in a feverish state of excitement that I couldn’t stop... I know I should have created each layer in separate meditations, but I had this experience, and I didn’t want to interrupt it... a similar thing happened with the second maṇḍala... in fact, I struggled to stratify, as every time I meditated, everything wanted to come out at once... so for the third maṇḍala, I reduced the focused meditations to about half an hour, and then I managed to concentrate better”.

Even the stratified maṇḍala presents peculiarities that set it apart from those of the other subjects. As Joe will explain, his stratifications occurred without considering the layers as perimeters of the maṇḍala but through the gradual addition of details to a drawing that was already clear in his mind. This shape, above all others, fits perfectly within the definition of a cosmogram that we have mentioned in §4.4. A cosmogram is a schematic representation of the universe, often equated with maṇḍalas, but also found in numerous representations in the medieval European world.

The medieval cosmogram incorporates elements of cosmogony and cosmology, drawing from both Greek geography and Christian cosmology, with the Earth at the center, traditionally divided into its geographical regions (the “T” division, representing Asia, Europe, and Africa, reflecting the interpretation of the world based on biblical scriptures), and the heavens, which may feature astrological elements or relate to celestial angelic realms. These are beautiful and intricate depictions that fascinated Jung and various other scholars who noted similarities with maṇḍalas. However, I ask Joe to freely recount his experience, and he begins to narrate. In the course of my ethnographic interview with Joe, he shared profound insights into his artistic process, which intertwines with his meditative experiences.



Fig. 16: Tibetan *thangka* technique depicting a Mañjuvajra maṇḍala with 43 deities, 71 by 85 cm, held at the “Museo d’Arte Orientale” in Venice (this work is in the public domain).



Fig. 17: A typical example of a cosmogram from the book “Liber Divinorum Operum” by Hildegard von Bingen.

According to Joe’s experience of meditation “it’s crucial to maintain concentration and not be carried away by these images, which then lead to the dream dimension... the meditation”. The main purpose is to fall “into a sort of trance... not exactly sleep... the body sleeps, but the mind remains extremely alert... devoid of contaminating images... I see it as a kind of brain sabotage...”, however, “the mind is lazy... and afraid of emptiness... but when you actually make emptiness, the images are no longer intrusive... they become something from a completely different dimension... you really feel it when it’s like that... you’re not nervous... the images don’t cease, but they are no longer memories or symbols of everyday mundanity... they are something a bit different...”

In the course of my ethnographic interview with Joe, he shared profound insights into his artistic process, which intertwines with his meditative experiences. Joe revealed, “I’ve always had the need to draw... for me, it’s also a form of meditation”. He emphasized a shift in his artistic approach, stating, “I didn’t want these to be just sketches or simple expressions of release, but rather the residue of my meditation experience”.

Joe highlighted the challenge of filtering preconceptions during the creative process: “in many cases, certain things are still filtered through preconceptions, which is a problem”. To aid his focus during

meditation, Joe employs audio supports, such as nature sounds, emphasizing, “for me, it’s a need to eliminate external noises.” He eloquently described the evolution of his meditative experience, noting, “an idea starts to form... even a desire to explain something... when I go deeper, something clicks... like acquiring an idea... a light bulb goes off”.

As Joe delved deeper into his meditative experiences, he vividly described a transformative moment: “when I go deeper, it puts me in a feverish state... as if I’m chasing something... and that’s when I see this sort of spiral... like a kind of cell, which has a nucleus, but around the center, there’s this series of branches... and from these branches, all sorts of other things emerge... creating infinite worlds”.

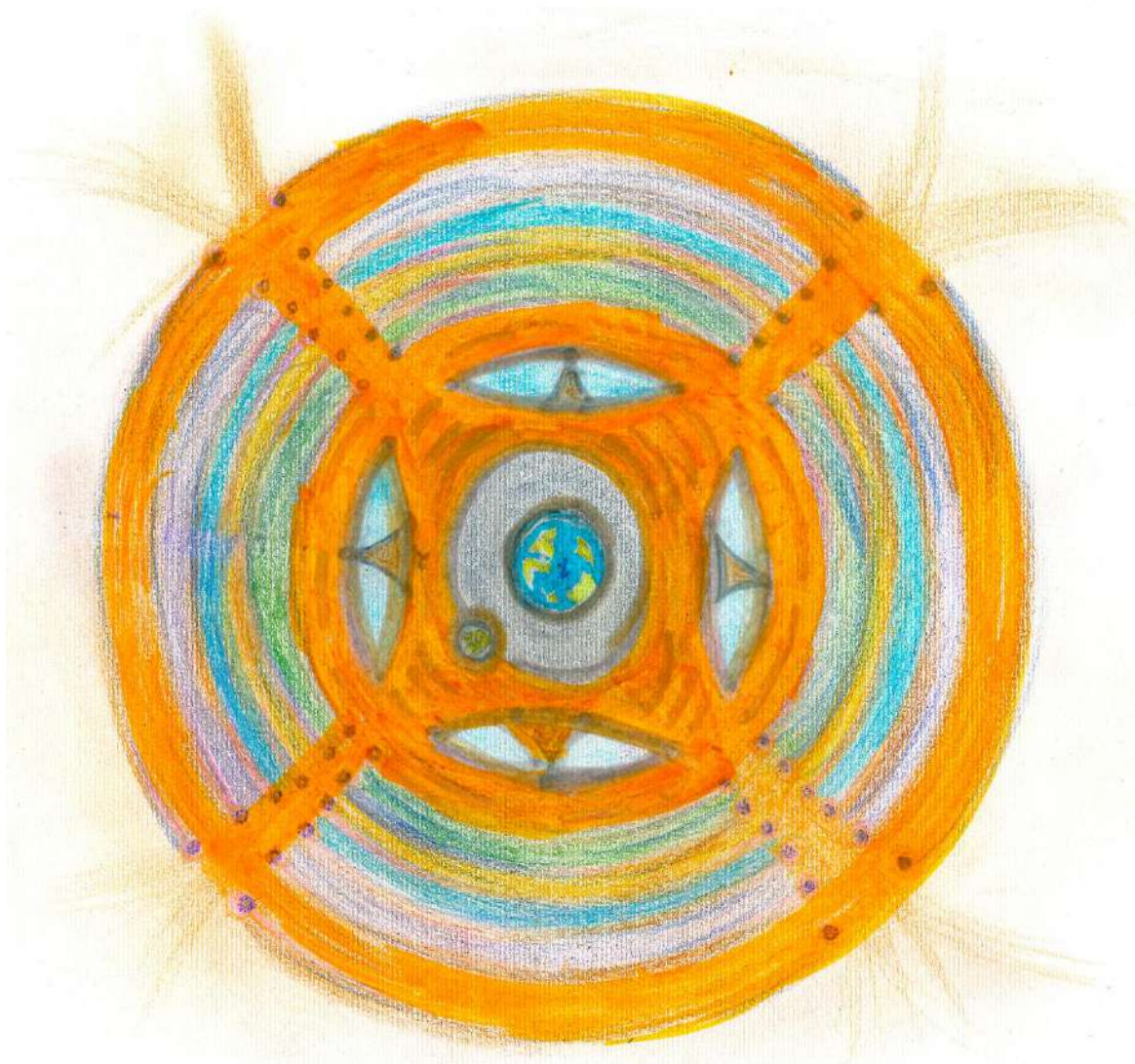


Fig. 18: Joe’s second prototype maṇḍala

This, according to Joe, serves as the essence of the endpoint of every deep meditation. In other occasions, Joe described a euphoria-like state: “you’re taken, possessed by this euphoria... in short... it’s a euphoric phase that follows the assimilation moment. If the relaxation phase is successful and I

go deep, I go through a sort of dimension where everything seems to proceed harmoniously... but I genuinely have to let go..." Thus, he vividly described the different phases of meditation and how they affect his perception and understanding of the world.

"...like when you see a very bright thing and then close your eyes or look elsewhere... you have the impression of that shape for a few moments... but when you're in that phase, you're totally immersed... and in the end, it's as if you've acquired information... you've understood something on an instinctual level, not rational... you're simply receptive and keep understanding, understanding, understanding, and absorbing... I've often found myself, at various times in my life... dealing with people who seem to live like zombies... regardless of age... they live automatically... rooted in their ideologies... dependent on their emotions... anger, frustration... and they throw themselves into institutions... in religion, politics... and these people are as far away as possible from the deep meditation phase... I associate them a lot with dark purple color... I associate each emotion with a color... even when I meditate, it seems that things reduce to their fundamental essence... like colors... and this dark purple is the emotional state in which I see many people trapped for example."

The incorporation of numbers in his art became another intriguing facet. Joe confessed, "I've always been obsessed with numbers", and he associated specific numbers like 9, 18, 22, 11, and 24 with symbolic significance, linking some to his date of birth. However, he acknowledged the challenge in rationally explaining their inclusion: "maybe they conceal a deeper structure... at a universal level". When I interrupted to inquire about Joe's concept of 'listening to the body' during meditation, Joe provided detailed practical insights: "Listening is a preliminary phase... it's among the first steps needed to descend into the deeper and more serene phase". He elucidated on the importance of 'making emptiness' and the time it takes, stating, "and to do that, I need to listen to the body... in a complete sense... not just auditory... but really 'feeling' it in a focused way".

Joe continued to outline his meditation process, emphasizing the need for relaxation and focus on individual body parts. He stressed the importance of preventing intrusive thoughts, stating, "the important thing when I do these focalizations is to stay on the point... because the body needs to be relaxed". Joe also provided practical tips, including stretching and jogging to relax muscles before meditation.

In my interview with Joe, he elaborated on the intricate process behind creating his maṇḍala drawings, shedding light on the layers of meaning embedded within each stroke and symbol. His explanation unfolded like a narrative, starting with the initial depiction of the earth and the encircling spheres,

gradually progressing through subsequent meditative sessions where details evolved and colors emerged.

According to Joe, these circles, initially perceived as mere eyes, took on a profound metaphorical significance akin to lenses. He outlined a meticulous sequence of meditation sessions that birthed these representations within the maṇḍala, each phase building upon the previous, culminating in the addition of colors that altered the perception of what transcends the outermost spheres. He expressed, “what passes through the outermost spheres... through the ‘lens-eyes’... is colored, that is, seen, differently”.

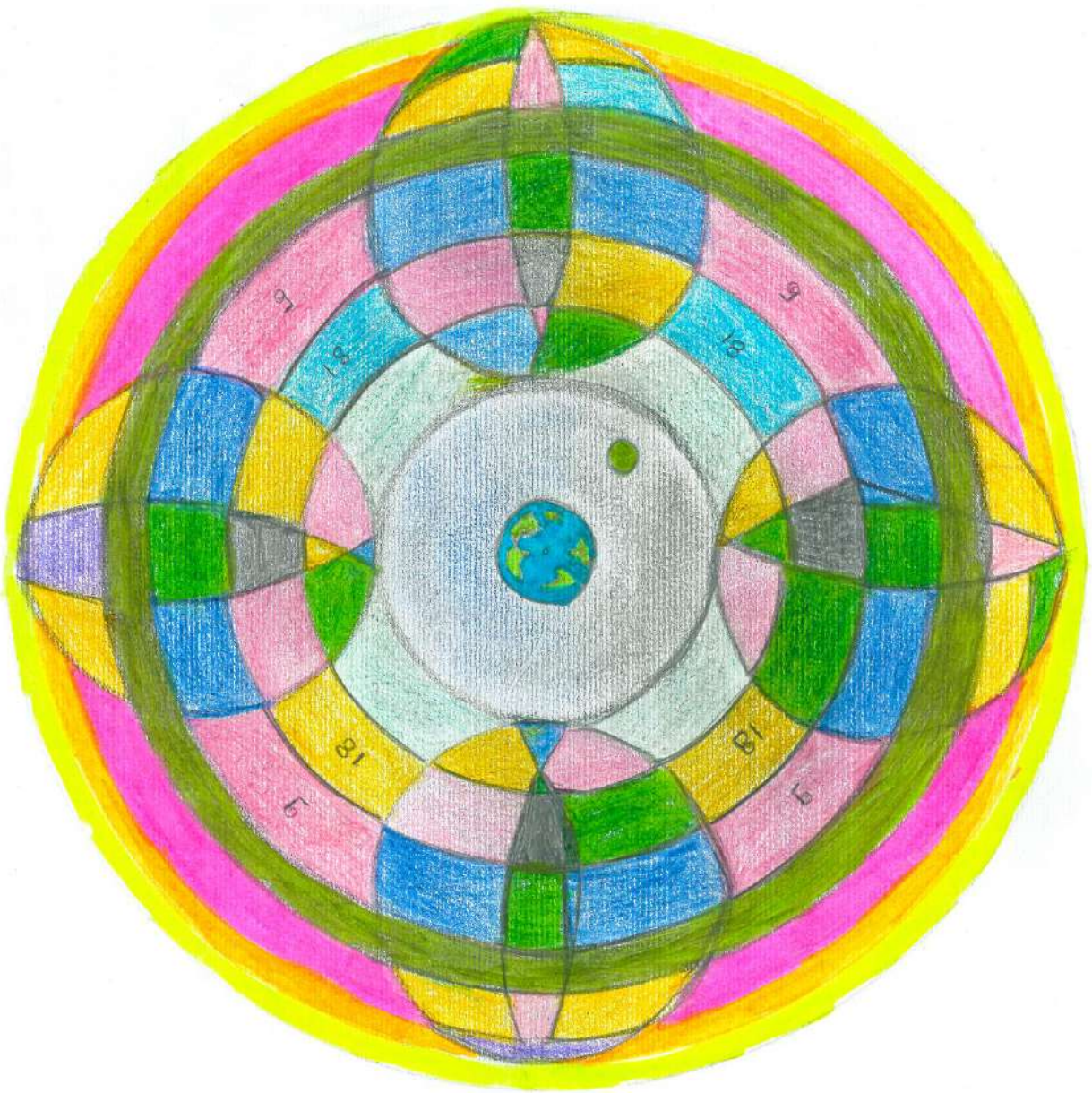


Fig. 19:
Joe's first complete maṇḍala

As I probed deeper into the essence of his interpretation, Joe offered a philosophical perspective, equating these 'lens-eyes' not only to his own perception post-meditation but also to an external observer. He believed these 'eyes' symbolized the consciousness inherent in everything, permeating the universe in myriad dimensions. "They transcend a boundary that mere matter cannot transcend... they reside in the experiential possibilities of everything".

When I inquired about his belief in the consciousness of images and whether this encompassed the mandala he had drawn, Joe expressed certainty in a dialogue between multiple consciousnesses through images. He distinguished his post-meditation state as an expansion of consciousness rather than an alteration, enabling him to perceive what the senses typically fail to capture. He conveyed, "I find myself with this sort of expanded consciousness... and in this state, it's as if I feel things that I normally don't feel".

Furthermore, he painted a picture of the intimate connection between his consciousness and the external world, where he acted as a conduit for consciousness to manifest visibly through his artwork: "it's as if consciousness is speaking to me... I become a servant of this consciousness, making it appear on the sheet, making it visible". Joe's description carried a sense of reverence for the interplay between his inner self and the consciousness he sought to externalize.

His explanation delved deeper into the idea that consciousness communicates through these images, striving to manifest and be acknowledged. He emphasized, "I believe that all of us... everything that makes up the universe... is part of that consciousness... we are parts of the very consciousness of the universe". He echoed the interconnectedness of all existence within this shared consciousness, dismissing notions of a separate, observing deity. Instead, he embraced the notion of collective participation in the universal consciousness.

Joe's insights, though somehow 'philosophical', resonated with a simplicity rooted in personal experience rather than esoteric or dogmatic beliefs. He acknowledged the vastness of this topic in the realm of spiritual and philosophical discourse but preferred a more grounded approach, drawing parallels with the Buddha's teachings on experience rather than lofty theological ideals.

This ethnographic interview illustrates a recurrent phenomenon observed among meditators, wherein consciousness is perceived as a dynamic system of relationships between the self and the external world. The emergence of mental images in this context can be understood as a manifestation of resonating elements within consciousness, contributing to the delineation of these intricate relationships. Notably, all meditators exhibit a shared proclivity to regard these images as imbued with consciousness or shaped by it, forming a complex network of relationships that transcend mere personal identity.

Joe's meticulous descriptions of his meditation experiences yield valuable contributions to the field of consciousness anthropology. Of particular significance is his emphasis on meditation as a vehicle for achieving heightened mental concentration and entering a meditative state akin to profound trance. He conceptualizes the meditative process as an interactive discourse between distinct layers of consciousness, where the individual connects with a vast cosmic consciousness. This perspective accentuates the profound interconnectedness between the individual and the universe, emblematic of a holistic comprehension of human experientiality.

4.7 An Anthropology of Consciousness

Throughout the course of my ethnographic investigation into the complex realm of consciousness, I have arrived at the conclusion that anthropology faces a fundamental issue that will be central to all discussions on the future of this discipline. Or, at the very least, if we do not make this debate the focal point of our anthropological discourse, we are destined to fail as anthropologists. The theme of consciousness is now more crucial than ever in order to understand the human being and their place in the world. Anthropology cannot estrange itself from its essence, and since its very name reveals that it is the study of the human being, it must also become a study of consciousness, as there is nothing more evident and immediate to us as humans than the fact that we possess consciousness. In fact, this fact is the only thing we can be internally certain of, while we have no concrete evidence of the presumed external, objective, and material world. This, at least, appears to be the most recent position of psychiatrists such as McGilchrist (2021b, pp. 1042-7), whose work on the human brain serves as an example for all those who seek to reconcile the so-called social sciences with the hard sciences.

Nevertheless, we anthropologists currently face the major issue of ethnographic dualism, which is the perpetuation of a mechanism of division that is constantly repeated in human experience, not only in the experience that generates the dichotomy of self/other, identical/different, but also in the one that internally divides our own perception into seer/seen, as in the case of imaginative experience. The subject, who is simultaneously the seer and the seen of their own experience (since other seeing subjects are part of it), is placed in this fundamental crisis that anthropology should address. In my investigation, I have witnessed more than a mere incorporation of maṇḍalic devices. The maṇḍala produced by visually eliciting the subjects is not a simple *dispositif*, as Foucault would say, nor a tool, device, technique, or any other concept that comes to mind in terms of utilization. Speaking also from my autoethnographic experience: we are observed by the maṇḍala. It is not only something that our unconscious projects onto a sheet at the end of a meditative process, nor is it an imprint, a print, or a photograph of a static situation, but something that engages in a dialogue with us, speaks to us,

whispers to us, and stimulates our consciousness. What is this thing? Why does my consciousness feel both in front of the maṇḍala and inside it at the same time? And why, in feeling inside it, does it only feel a part of it, while at the same time feeling alienated from a context in which it is 'taken' and 'experienced'? Certainly, this experienced state is not a passive fact; it is dynamic, but at the same time, it is also indicative of a tearing, an apparent progression of images that our consciousness recognizes as disorienting, only partially familiar.

When an image is realized – fully imagined as a living being other than myself – then it becomes a *psychopompos*, a guide with a soul having its own inherent limitation and necessity. It is this image and no other, so that the conceptual questions of moral pluralism and relativism fade in front of the actual engagement with the image. The supposed creative pandemonium of the teeming imagination is limited to its phenomenal appearance in a particular image, that specific one which has come to me pregnant with significance and intention, a necessary angel as it appears here and now and which teaches the hand to represent it, the ear to hear, and the heart how to respond.²¹

We must therefore avoid the error against which Hillman warns us. Even Leo, in his meditations, has recognized the same risk: if we enliven the image to the point of rendering it independent from us as observers, we encounter the *Heterogonie der Zwecke* and the image itself turning against us, seizing our life. Yet, we cannot deny the obvious perception of some form or force of vitality within the images we observe. It is somewhat akin to Nietzsche's abyss, wherein the danger always lies in being consumed by the abyss, becoming ourselves an image (*wenn du lange in einen Abgrund blickst, blickt der Abgrund auch in dich hinein*).

Nevertheless, this peril, which effectively threatens the presence from wavering in its firm assertion, is only a peril if we admit that the human being requires that mask of rigid identity, and cannot instead accept being an identity interpenetrated with other identities, where its consciousness is the structured epiphenomenon of a more extensive and omni-pervasive form of something that we still struggle to comprehend, be it a universal consciousness or otherwise. This extended will has other epiphenomena, and they gaze upon one another, speak to one another, and interpenetrate. The image is conscious because it can serve as an interlocutor for our consciousness to establish a presence, its own being-there, or being-in-between, oscillating between the image and its observer. Thus I do not completely agree with Didi-Humerman's differentiation between artistic images and oneiric images

²¹ Cf. Hillman, 1990, p. 56.

(Didi-Huberman, 1990, p. 188), since my ethnographic experience has showed a common nature of both.

The human ‘presence’ mentioned by de Martino is itself an image, but it arises from the resonance of two phenomenal fields. It is an epiphenomenon of a primordial presence, an extension of awareness that we cannot comprehend from the standpoint of our mere existence. However, since this sense of being is something that manifests, appears only in resonance, in the relationship between two consciousnesses, where does it reside the rest of the time? Where does it go when it is absent? Does it cease to exist, perhaps? Such a notion would be impossible. Nothing can truly cease to exist, just as nothing can vanish into nothingness in the universe. Therefore, we must acknowledge that even the image, in some way, already exists prior to its manifestation.

La présence et l’absence des objets extérieurs ne sont que des variations à l’intérieur d’un champ de présence primordial, d’un domaine perceptif sur lesquels mon corps a puissance. Non seulement la permanence de mon corps n’est pas un cas particulier de la permanence dans le monde des objets extérieurs, mais encore la seconde ne se comprend que par la première ; non seulement la perspective de mon corps n’est pas un cas particulier de celle des objets, mais encore la présentation perspective des objets ne se comprend que par la résistance de mon corps à toute variation perspective.²²

We engage here in reasoning through images in an expansive sense. However, this is how our consciousness operates: the imagination, the act of engaging with images, represents nothing but the manifestation of information. The unseen does not equate to the nonexistent, and in fact, it plays a role; it is present in its absence, and has an influential bearing despite our unconsciousness of its conditioning effect on us. Much like the theme of the skeleton, introduced in §4.4, there are unseen images that populate the dimension of our consciousness, layering it with experience, and acting within their hidden nature.

The skeleton constitutes our most vital structure, without which we would be unable to maintain an upright stance, and would instead be reduced to a state of invertebracy, flaccidity, and slackness. Yet, we do stand, imposing our presence in all its entirety, due to an unseen structure, a part so integral to us that we never witness it in its raw form. This is the image of the invisible that must have so profoundly struck the Buddhists that they developed a meditation tied to its recall: invoking the mental image of the skeleton, of one’s own skeleton, constitutes an ancient contemplative exercise that perhaps conceals more than mere symbolism.

²² Cf. Merleau-Ponty, 1976, p. 121.

However, we must also observe a duality, a bifurcation in meaning, within the theme of the skeleton. In numerous cultures across the world, including our own, the skeleton is associated with death. The skeleton remains as the sole residue of a decomposed body, thus becoming the symbol that most succinctly encapsulates the negative, the absence, the physical demise of the individual. This explicit duality within the image of the skeleton is a recurring theme in every form of the imaginal. Something so fundamentally essential to our ability to stand also signifies the end of presence.

When the image of the skeleton is invisible, encapsulated within our flesh and limbs, it enables, through its concealment, the projection of our presence. Ironically, when the image of the skeleton emerges from invisibility and asserts its presence, our existence is replaced by its presence.

Le « monde » des images ne rejette pas le monde de la logique, bien au contraire. Mais il en *joue*, c'est-à-dire, entre autres choses, qu'il y ménage des lieux – comme lorsqu'on dit qu'il y a du « jeu » entre les pièces d'un mécanisme –, lieux dans lesquels il puise sa puissance, qui se donne là comme la *puissance du négatif*. [...] Je ne sais pas, à dire vrai, si le mot de *négatif* est bien choisi. Il ne le sera qu'à la condition de n'être pas entendu comme la pure et simple privation. C'est pourquoi, dans cette optique, nous désignons le *visuel*, et non pas l'invisible, comme l'élément de cette contrainte de négativité où les images sont prises, nous prennent. C'est encore pourquoi le négatif ne revêt ici aucune connotation nihiliste ou simplement « négativiste », pas plus qu'elle ne vise à une nostalgie ou à une quelconque philosophie générale de la négativité.²³

We must pay close attention to these words of Didi-Huberman, as they reveal one of the major concerns of Western identity, which in my opinion is a transcultural issue that only some cultures have shown an interest in addressing. The awareness of the impermanence of identity is indeed an anxiety-inducing factor, and as de Martino wisely points out, the mechanisms of presence care that cultures often employ to mitigate the risk of crisis are often devices that function as sources of reassurance. They seek to ensure the continuation of presence because the prospect of its decline is distressing. However, just as an image can fade into invisibility without ceasing to exist, we understand presence in excessively limited and unaware terms of its dependence on the recognition of others. The image of oneself is substantiated by the reflection it projects onto others, and in this exchange of images of presence lies the sense of interdependence among entities as described by the Buddhists.

²³ Cf. Didi-Huberman, 1990, pp. 174-5.

5. Meditation, Dreams, Consciousness

In his famous work entitled *Milton: a Poem*, William Blake wrote the following: “The Imagination is not a State: it is the Human Existence itself” (Blake, 1907, p. 51, v. 32). This notable assertion provides a compelling springboard to delve into the intricate confluence of image, imagination, and contemplative techniques—specifically, Buddhist meditation—and their entwining relationship within the realms of anthropology and contemplative studies. Through Blake’s assertion, we are invited to transcend the common conception of imagination as a mere psychic state, but rather, as a fundamental component of human existence.

The Blake quote I have placed at the outset will serve as a guiding principle for introducing the theme of this chapter, which represents a step forward towards outlining a theory of imagery and anthropological analysis of consciousness through visual elicitation and communication with and through images. The theory, partly hinted at earlier and continuing to develop in this chapter, suggests that images and visual products in general are epiphenomena of a continuum of consciousness: images can be considered an active part of our consciousness which can emerge only through our relating to *something*—including ourselves—of which images are a continuity rather than a product or creation, a separate ‘object’ that is merely a ‘representation’ of something. What we understand as representation is akin to a photograph of a dialogue with this complex phenomenon of consciousness, which exists not only in the human engaged in meditation but also in works that, through contemplative exercises, bring forth other aspects of this consciousness in an imaginal form.

In order to comprehensively address these themes, an array of perspectives from diverse authors will be employed, encompassing image theory, consciousness studies, dream interpretation, and the intricate interplay between cultural and philosophical contexts. In this sense, the theme of dreams will be analyzed, which has become of a certain importance especially through the ethnographies with Leo, but also with some considerations of other participants such as Layla and Joe, in which the dream has often been recalled as fundamental.

These ethnographic accounts underscore the significance of exploring the notion of “presence” and its dynamic manifestations within diverse cultural and psychological frameworks. Specifically, this exploration aligns with Jung’s concept of active imagination, wherein the engagement with the unconscious involves the integration of symbolic images into conscious awareness.

Jung’s conceptualization of image and imagination is deeply rooted in his analytical psychology. For Jung, images are the primary language of the unconscious, and imagination serves as the bridge between conscious and unconscious realms. This dialectic facilitates the process of individuation—

the journey towards self-realization and wholeness. The symbols that arise from the unconscious, often taking the form of images, are not merely fanciful constructs but vital signposts on the path to individuation.

For Jung, such grand images are attempts to express the complexity of the Self and the individuation process. They aim to represent psyche's attempt to achieve order and wholeness and, like the "self", to contain and organize the wholeness of psychic reality.¹

Moreover, Hillman's archetype-based understanding of the soul broadens this exploration by encapsulating the imaginative facets of human nature, which encompass reflective thinking, dreams, imagery, and fantasy.

These psychoanalytic theories demonstrate a striking compatibility with Mitchell's anthropological reflections on "families of images", prompting a reconsideration—also in light of the ethnographic data presented here—of a multidisciplinary reevaluation of the problem of the image in human experience. Mitchell invites us to consider images like a "family" (Mitchell, 1984, p. 505), and thus images can migrate through time and space, evolving and changing during this process. This means also that our interaction with images is an active process of mutual transformation. Images, intended in a broader sense (graphic, optical, perceptual or sensorial, mental, dreams and verbal) interact actively with humans and thus are an integral part of our lives.

De Martino's perspective regarding the substantial reality attributed to dream images in certain societies serves as a pivotal focal point. This is exemplified through an anecdote involving a missionary accused of theft based on a native's dream observation, emphasizing the potency and authenticity ascribed to dream experiences within specific cultural milieus.

The discourse further extends to encompass visual theory and discussions on Didi-Huberman's elucidation of Freud's unconscious within artistic representations and Morgan's proposition of images as ecological constructs, forming intricate networks involving both human and non-human agents. These discussions enrich the comprehension of how images and representations contribute to shaping our consciousness and reality.

Ultimately, this chapter converges upon the premise that our perception of reality, presence, and consciousness is intricately interwoven with the fabric of cultural, psychological, and historical contexts. It underscores the variability in the interpretation and significance of images, dreams, and consciousness across diverse frameworks and traditions, thereby accentuating the intricate and multifaceted nature of human perception and experiential understanding.

¹ Cf. Marlan, 2022, p. 76.

5.1 The Dream and the Image

Personally, I consider Leo's fourth maṇḍala to be his best work. I am not judging from an artistic point of view, and this is not a book in art studies, but I speak for what this elicitation has communicated to me as well, I cannot censor my subjective point of view. Here, I saw the soul, as James Hillman intended, expressing itself with its entire voice and even its forms. Leo had already shown me the fourth maṇḍala during its completion when the central layers were still missing... and he had also commented, saying that the sensation was peculiar, pivotal in a sense. Leo shows it to me all brightened up and begins his speech:

“speaking of consciousness... this deserves a separate space... but upon reviewing it... I believe it is enough to say just one thing... because I desired to overlay three painting techniques, as three dimensions of consciousness... that is, color is a layer in itself, above the layers... where there is, let's say, a kind of unconscious world that flows during meditation... while what is expressed by the black pen is reality... the real... it's actually a different level, in which I address the concrete... but then there is a level that overlaps all the others, made with oils... with oil brushes, which is my transcendent dimension... the Self that overlaps reality... pushed between a boundary that is the unconscious, which is the foundation of my feeling... and then above, like a dome... this representation of the Self... and reality lies in this space between the structure of consciousness and what lies beneath consciousness... but for me, this is precisely the maṇḍala of consciousness... the one in which the process of delving deep becomes more predominant... after a long time of training in meditation.”

I can't help but notice that the central part of the maṇḍala is not in color, and this needs to be explained. Leo responds,

“well, each layer is a different day and a deeper meditation... yes, especially in the center, there's no oil... but there is color... it's gray... and then wait... go to the layer marked as 0403... there's a dream, a vision... I depicted a phase of the half-sleep state where I was still in the meditation mood... and I'd like to tell you about that dream because it's very peculiar... half of that layer is the dream, and the other half is the reproduction of the image of the room when I woke up... well... in my dream, I was at home... my normal home... but at a certain point, a girl appears... she is clearly defined... she's a black girl whom I don't know in real life... the girl goes out of the house and disappears... then time passes, and the girl returns... we are in a room together with my family... I stare at her... she looks like the same identical girl... she's... sufficiently identical to the previous girl... but she has changed something... an indefinable quality... and I understand that

she is not identical to before. When I understand this, I realize that even the things around me change... for example, the flowers... they go from being even to odd... in number... and other objects in the room have changed in number... I tell my parents that she's the same girl... but they say she's not. Several times, the girl will come and go, and each time she returns with a subtly changed characteristic... I understand that she is the same girl... but my parents insist she's not. At this point, the girl is called outside, I am worried and follow her... and there's this man on a rail... like those of trains... he takes her and kidnaps her... I start screaming, and my family members come out... my brother manages to grab the girl's hand, but the rail ends in a chasm... and both of them fall into the abyss... I wake up screaming... but I hadn't realized yet that my brother had fallen... and it was actually a dream within a dream because I am in a hospital bed... I didn't actually scream... at that point, I wake up definitively and find myself in my dark room."

Knowing that I have undergone personal training in psychoanalysis, Leo asks me what I think about it. My idea is that the girl is somehow Leo's soul, understood in archetypal psychology. This soul is spontaneous, pure like a child, but it is crucial that her imperceptible changes are noticed by Leo, who, however, judges her as "the same as before", while others, the members of his family, do not recognize her. Like the Ship of Theseus, the "pieces" that change in the girl do not make the subject, Leo's soul, ontologically different from before, even though she has changed. Yet, and this is typical of Leo's anxieties, his fear is that others, the people who symbolically make up his family, which we can also understand in an extended sense as society or those from whom Leo desires approval, will reject him (his soul), saying that these changes imply that the soul is something else. It should also be noted that Leo interprets this fall into the ravine as a risk of "losing soul", but what distresses him the most is the fact that his brother falls with her, and that is why Leo screams in the dream.

Then, Leo suddenly said: "sorry, I omitted a detail... there is also a scene in which I am teaching the little girl about physics... the others are in another room, and there is me and the little girl in a different room... and she is writing in a book, and I see that they are notes on relativity... and therefore I ask her if she knows physics, and I tell her that if she wants, she can learn more from my library... this is a strange thing because I won't... I'd let no one touch my books... but I almost feel sorry for her... because I think she comes from another time... like racist America... and therefore she doesn't have the possibility to deepen... even if she's brilliant".

Concerning the soul, Hillman writes: "by *soul* I mean the imaginative possibility in our natures, the experiencing through reflective speculation, dream, image, and *fantasy*—that mode which recognizes all realities as primarily symbolic or metaphorical" (Hillman, 1990, p. 21).

INIZIO AVANTI: 02/03/23
FINE AVANTI: 07/03/23

Quanto Mandala

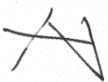


Fig. 20:
Leo's fourth maṇḍala, completed on March 7, 2023

Indeed, the episode of Leo's dream intersected with meditation and the elicitation of the mandala greatly stimulated me to seek further answers, wondering what Freud, Jung, Hillman or Lacan would have said. Freud would likely look for latent content hidden in the manifest content of the dream. The girl might represent a repressed desire or an unresolved issue from Leo's life, and actually we see that this is coherent with Leo's problem of acceptance in the academic world and his anxiety about the future. The act of teaching her could be an expression of a paternal instinct or a desire for authority and control. The repeated denial of the girl's identity by Leo's parents could signify a conflict between Leo's *Es* (personal desires) and *Über-Ich* (moral restrictions). The kidnapping could represent a fear of loss or abandonment, which Leo fears in relation to his future in the world of mathematics. However, there's the 'transformation process' of the girl which needs to be further analyzed. Lacanian would perhaps view this dream through the lens of the "mirror stage" and the "Other" (Turner, 2023). The girl who changes subtly each time she returns could represent the elusive nature of the "Ideal-Ego" that Leo is chasing. Leo's teaching physics to the girl can be thus seen rather as his attempt to impose symbolic order (language, knowledge) on the "Real" (unmediated experience) that she might represent. The man on the rail and the chasm could symbolize the traumatic intrusion of the Real into Leo's symbolic world. The dream within a dream could be seen as the "gaze of the Other", an external perspective that disrupts Leo's subjective experience. In this meditative process which culminates in this peculiar dream, the "Other" Leo's chasing might actually be himself. For Jung, the man on the rail could be interpreted as the "Shadow", another aspect of the unconscious that embodies everything the person refuses to acknowledge about themselves, including negative aspects. The kidnapping and the chasm could symbolize the struggle between consciousness and the shadow. The fall of the girl and Leo's brother into the abyss might symbolize a failure in integrating these aspects, leading to a psychological crisis. Hillman, finally, would look at the dream as a direct experience of the soul and its desires. Here, the girl could symbolize an unfulfilled desire or a neglected part of Leo's psyche. The dream could be inviting Leo to connect with these neglected or oppressed aspects of himself, represented by the girl from "another time", who lacks opportunities. Hillman might advise Leo to foster a deeper relationship with these elements, symbolized by offering her access to his library. The concept of image assumes a pivotal role in James Hillman's archetypal psychology. To Hillman's mind, "man is primarily an image maker and all psychic substance consists of images, dreaming, fantasy and imagining become the road to the psyche" (D'Heurle & Feimer, 1975, p. 290). Hillman's revolution involved more than merely altering the name of Jungian analytical psychology. It must also be noted that Hillman regards images as imbued with a certain vitality of their own. They are not mere vehicles of communication but possess the capacity to guide us, actively participating alongside us in the shaping of our individual destinies (Hillman, 1996).

By introducing the descriptor “archetypal”, Hillman was able to clarify the objectives of the new psychoanalysis and liberate it from the inflexible semantic positions of Freudianism and Jungian conceptualism. According to Hillman, Jungian conceptualism failed to recognize the true potential of images. Hillman contends that archetypes are essential and foundational images that possess the ability to direct processes of fantasy and psychic activity. Unlike linguistic signs, archetypes cannot be rigidly defined. This is significant because the metaphorical aspect of Freud’s dream interpretation process, which is often called into question, is actually a translational mechanism that interprets dream images not as symbols (i.e., polysemous) but as signs. Freud believed that the manifest image (i.e., the dream representation) concealed a hidden image (latent content) that represented its true meaning.

Freud’s representational mechanism is semantic, logical, and based on a one-to-one correspondence between x and y . While not all dream images have a hidden meaning, Freudianism is often criticized for its interpretive perspective and rigid correspondence. Jung employed the idea of symbols, but Hillman accused him of sliding into conceptualism, which obstructed his ability to appreciate the immediacy of the imaginative act. To be clear, the image does not obscure or refer to anything beyond itself. It is immediate, its meaning cannot be reduced to simple translations or conceptualizations.

In 1972, Hillman delivered a lecture at Yale University in which he made a groundbreaking declaration that the faculty of imagination lies at the core of his psychological framework and the psychic domain, thus constituting the genuine realm of phantasmagoric imagery (p. 293). Memories and narrations produce images (Favero, 2018a, p. 107), but the same power is possessed by the mind, if we can call it that, in any area of human experience that concerns the imaginative capacity. The experience of dreams therefore appears as a sort of faded memory, just as the imagination, which is presumed to create something new, speaks through images.

I conceptualize Freud’s notion as a ‘semantic’ interpretation owing to the inflexibility inherent in his conception of dreams. Every sign embodies this twofold relationship, and Saussure established this semantic principle. Freud did not demonstrate any direct familiarity with the incipient general linguistics literature; however, the cultural milieu of Europe at that time could have facilitated a similar parallel. The same sign, inherently possessing two facets, signifier and signified (abbreviated as S/s), reveals itself to a listener or speaker, who must use it, thereby re-establishing the same duality in their relationship, placing itself as the interpretable in a relationship between interpretant and interpreted. Similarly, Freud perceives dream images in this way; however, Hillman endeavors to subvert this subordination. Indeed, “he follows Jung, who emphasised that the imagination is a ‘psychic reality’ more ontologically and existentially immediate than any physical reality” (Adams, 1989, p. 147).

As someone who has delved into the practice of meditation, I consider the aforementioned concepts as pertaining only to the intricacies of perceiving reality. For Early Buddhism, there exists indeed an issue with conceptualization (*paññatti*) and its distortion of reality. Specifically, the concept becomes a hindrance that obscures the true nature of the perceived object, and acts as an intermediary between the perceiver and the perceived.

What concerns Hillman, however, is not just that analysts resort to an actual dictionary of symbols; it is that they rely at all on concepts in order to interpret, or define, images. Even free association culminates in an interpretation, a translation of images into concepts – into what the dream ‘really’ means. [...] Hillman insists that the dreamer should experience the image rather than reduce it to a concept – rather than demystify, interpret or translate it [...].²

In a well-established metaphor, Freud, who was inclined towards the conceptual rather than the imaginal, asserted that the Ego (*Ich*) must subtract land from the sea of the unconscious (Id or *Es* in German), similar to the Dutch’s reclamation of land from the *Zuider Zee*. However, such a metaphor can only lead to a strict reductionism of brain functions, which Freud himself would have disapproved of. Interestingly, modern neurology stratifies brain functions in a similar manner to Freud’s classification of the psyche (Tabin, 2006; Sirkin & Fleming, 1982).

Returning to Hillman’s theory, it can be argued that the significance of images is rooted in the recognition of their centrality in all human processes. This assertion is supported by the revelation of dreams themselves. Whereas Freud and Jung view images as a means of accessing the meaning of dreams and imagination, Hillman regards them as more vital than concepts. In fact, Hillman finds that contemplating the image in its immediate sense is more efficacious than conceptualization, albeit not to the extent of rendering conceptual language wholly useless. Therefore, even if this approach leads to a proliferation of images in the process of psychological reflection, Hillman does not deem it detrimental (Adams, 1989, pp. 152-6).

5.2 Dreams in Anthropology

The role of dreams in anthropology has been of great interest well before Freud’s work. The founder of anthropology, Edward Burnett Tylor, in his main work entitled “Primitive Culture” (1871), noted that some non-Western societies have a different way of interpreting dreams. While in the Western and Eurocentric view, dreams are seen as brain activity that arises from the nervous system of the

² Cf. Adams, 1989, p. 148.

dreamer, helping him or her to explore their emotional and mental patterns, in other human groups they take on different meanings.

In some cases, dreams inform the dreamer and their community about the events and social relationships in which they will be involved; dreams are perceived as a form of knowledge and guidance that is seen as superior to that which is learned in waking life. Unlike Western conception, which leads to considering dreams as an individual matter, other cultures emphasize their interdependence with reality and place them at the center of social life. In other cases, dreams represent solutions to problems of various kinds, resolve conflicts, or treat particular pathologies. Throughout the world, dreams are transformed into narratives. In the West, dreams are told to friends or specialists, who when they are not seers/charlatans, are operators of the psyche.

As Augustine Nwoye explains clearly in her essay (Nwoye, 2016), the perception of dreams among the majority of African populations is based on broader paradigms, and the individual does not dream just for themselves. Herdt introduces the concept of discourse frames to elucidate this phenomenon. Within the Sambia society of New Guinea, Herdt identified three distinct discourses that encompassed the exchange of dreams: public talk, secret talk, and private talk (Heald & Deluz, 1994, pp. 100-1). Each discourse adhered to distinct structures based on cultural norms, underlying assumptions, and behavioral expectations, serving as organizing frameworks. Public discourse emerged as the most prevalent form, enabling participation from any member of the social group. Secret discourse entailed the transmission of ritual secrets and was segregated by gender. Private discourse revolved around personal secrets, often pertaining to sexuality. This particular instance underscores the importance of recognizing which aspects of dreams remain unshared. In a study involving dream work groups, a notable incident occurred when participants divided into small groups to discuss their recent dreams. One group consisted of three women who coincidentally shared dreams featuring feces. With great amusement, they confessed that they would not have disclosed these dream contents had they not been in a small, same-gender group. Instances of group members withholding sexual aspects of dream imagery, especially when referencing other members of the group, were frequent and surfaced during individual interviews. Thus, the unexpressed elements can hold as much significance as the expressed ones. These examples illustrate the significance of comprehending group dynamics and social processes when interpreting shared dreams.

In his work “The World of Magic”, Ernesto de Martino connects dream images to manifestations of the world of presence, whose reality is on a different plane but not inferior to that of waking life (de Martino, 2022). For de Martino, there are societies in which presence has not yet been rigidly established as inhabiting the waking plane, and thus dream images can represent a real world, or even more real than reality. Once a native of the Paraguay accused the missionary Grubb of stealing

pumpkins from his garden simply because he had seen him in a dream commit this act. Although the missionary tried to convince his accuser of the falsity of the accusation, he held fast: Grubb had stolen the pumpkins, because he had been seen entering the garden and taking them away in a dream. Here, one might say, is an event that is clearly ‘unreal’: the native is a visionary who cannot discern between a phantasy and reality, and Grubb did not steal anything at all.

However, when it is asserted that the missionary Grubb absolutely did not steal the pumpkins, one commits, upon reflection, a sort of metaphysical transfiguration: Grubb, the historical form of his presence, his sense of reality historically determined, and, mediately, the cultural order that has made him such and such a determined man, with that presence and that world that makes itself present, are removed from historical movement and rigidified into an absolute criterion, valid for all historical epochs and for all civilizations. The proposition “Grubb did not steal the pumpkins”, on the other hand, is valid only within our civilization (pp. 137-9).

The analysis of dreams and their role in different cultural contexts highlights the importance of understanding the cultural and social background in which they arise. Dreams are not just individual experiences, but are embedded in social and cultural contexts that shape their interpretation and meaning. Anthropological research on dreams has shown that they are not only a source of personal insight, but also reflect the social and cultural environment in which they arise. They can be a way of communicating with the spirit world, ancestors, and other supernatural entities, or a means of resolving conflicts and addressing societal issues, but also marking the absence as a wound.

When we are placed in front of the oneiric image, both dreamed and meditated upon, and therefore reflected in the maṇḍalas of this experiment, this image is not only at the antipode of an interaction of frequencies between my consciousness and the making itself present of the image itself which generates a presence, but is also the revelation of a breach, a *déchirure* as Didi-Huberman would call it.

Voilà pourquoi l’analyse freudienne des « moyens de présentation » ou de « figuration » du rêve (*Darstellungsmittel des Traums*) va se déployer comme un travail théorique d’ouverture de la logique autant que d’ouverture de l’image. [...] Mais, là encore, la négativité qui émerge de cette constatation n’a rien à faire avec l’idée d’une pure et simple privation. La négativité devient travail – le travail de la « présentation », le travail de la *Darstellung*. Incapable de représenter – de signifier, de rendre visibles et lisibles comme tels – les rapports temporels, le travail du rêve se contentera donc de *présenter* ensemble, visuellement, des éléments qu’un discours

représentatif (ou une représentation discursive) auraient normalement différenciés ou inférés les uns des autres. La relation causale disparaîtra devant la *coprésence*.³

This process of *déchirure* could also be intended as the coming forward of a disturbing proposition of absence, the risk of a crisis of presentification.

In contrast to the passive reflective function commonly attributed to images, Didi-Huberman advances the concept of images as active, transformative elements with the potential to mold our perception of the world. He elucidates the capacity of images to generate affects, evoke emotions, and intervene in our comprehension of historical occurrences and cultural phenomena. He thus envisions images not as static entities, but as dynamic forces contributing to the construction of reality.

While recognizing that images are products of specific processes of production and reproduction, Didi-Huberman underscores their materiality and the inherent agency they possess. He proposes that images have the potential to carry echoes of the past, eliciting a sense of presence, even when deemed ‘copies’. In doing so, he disrupts the rigid dichotomy between original and copy, implying that images can hold their own reality and significance.

Le modèle archéologique a occupé Freud tout au long de sa vie. Sa pensée du temps – c’est-à-dire des paradoxes et des malaises dans l’évolution – en fut souvent redevable, par exemple lorsque la question des *stades* ou des *states* se rabattait sur une question de *strates*, c’est-à-dire de profondeurs matérielles. [...] L’histoire des images est traversée de revenances, de survivances, parce que la culture – aux yeux de Warburg comme à ceux de Burckhardt, de Taylor ou de Nietzsche – est chose « vivante ». [...] Il en serait donc des images comme de ces « formations psychiques » dont Freud répète qu’elles ne peuvent pas « vraiment subir une destruction totale ».⁴

A critical component of Didi-Huberman’s thesis is the notion that certain images possess a “survival power”, an ability to endure and leave a lasting impression over time. He postulates that these images, typically linked to traumatic incidents or historically significant moments, endure in our collective memory, continually influencing our comprehension of the present. Such images can be viewed as living entities or, perhaps, manifestations of a consciousness, which facilitates their non-dualistic communication with the observer. It may appear that this interpretation pushes the bounds of Didi-Huberman’s theory. However, he himself acknowledges the enduring presence and significance of certain images throughout history.

³ Cf. Didi-Huberman, 1990, p. 179.

⁴ Cf. Idem, 2002, pp. 324, 326.

He encourages readers to contemplate the persistence, haunting quality, and challenge these images present to our understanding of the past, urging an engagement that is both critical and ethical. Further, Didi-Huberman explores the interrelationship between memory and visual representation, examining how these surviving images serve as conduits of memory and provide a means for confronting and acknowledging collective traumas. His work illuminates the complex interplay between history, memory, and image-making, emphasizing the critical role of interpretation and spectatorship in grasping the affective and mnemonic power of images.

This ontological reconsideration of images, as proposed by Didi-Huberman, holds substantial implications for the practice of meditation, particularly within traditions that incorporate visual elements as part of the meditative process. If, as Didi-Huberman argued, images are not mere passive reflections, but active, transformative entities with the potential to mold our perception of the world, this fact would align with the role of images in certain meditative practices, such as the crafting of maṇḍalas or visualization exercises, where images are used not just as mere symbols or representations, but as active tools for transformative cognition.

Furthermore, Didi-Huberman's disruption of the dichotomy between original and copy has profound implications for meditative practice and the experience of non-dualism (*advaita*). It raises questions about the 'reality' experienced in meditation, suggesting that the images or visions that surface in meditative states may hold their own reality and significance. This parallels the Buddhist concept of emptiness, where all phenomena, including the images encountered in meditation, are devoid of inherent existence and are instead dependent on our perception and interpretation.

The Demartinian notion of presence, as an ongoing process of historical and cultural negotiation, mirrors Didi-Huberman's emphasis on the Freudian conception of dream representation as an active process of "presentation" (*Darstellung*). For both thinkers, the border between presence and absence, or reality and dream, is not a rigid division but a permeable interface that is actively negotiated through various interpretative and representational practices. As per Didi-Huberman's reference to Freud's analysis, the dream-work does not simply mirror temporal relationships but presents a visual amalgamation of elements that would otherwise be differentiated or inferred in representational discourse: the absence is 'present' in the phantastic dimension, where phantasy and phantasms influence our experience being de facto the presence of an absence (Agamben, 1993, pp. 31-5, 71-6, 81-2, 136-156).

This gives also value to the presence of a seemingly absent, or non-real, element, like the stolen pumpkins in the dream. In the Demartinian context, the accused thief Grubb is not only physically absent from the crime scene but also metaphysically absent as his understanding of reality, shaped by his own cultural order, does not accord with the native's. Nevertheless, his dream presence becomes

a significant reality in the native's societal context, signifying that the reality of presence is not an absolute criterion but contingent on culturally and historically specific perspectives. Consequently, the interplay of Demartinian presence and its absence in relation to Didi-Huberman's reading of Freudian dream theory underscores the active process of "presentation" as crucial to understanding the fluid dynamics of reality in differing cultural and historical contexts.

This was also one of the most controversial points that de Martino made by citing the story of missionary Grubb. This episode compelled to formulate thought-provoking considerations regarding the concept of truth and its different cultural interpretations. For instance, de Martino argued that truth is culturally determined and that there is no universal truth.

A recently published scholarly work elucidates the intricate interplay between Buddhism, dreams, and psychology (Mota-Rolim et al., 2020). Specifically, it delineates how Tibetan Buddhism, an offshoot of the Vajrayāna School, incorporates the practice of Dream Yoga (*svapnadarśanayoga*) as a unique meditation technique that concentrates on fostering awareness within the dream state. The progressive stages of Dream Yoga encompass the recognition of the dream, surmounting fears, reflecting upon the dream, striving to manipulate the content of the dream, acknowledging the immaterial essence of the dream body, and envisioning deities. Moreover, the manuscript delves into the nexus between lucid dreaming (LD) and the discipline of meditation. It posits that seasoned meditators might exhibit an amplified rapid eye movement during REM sleep, a factor potentially augmenting the frequency of LD. The underlying mechanisms contributing to this occurrence remain elusive, but they could potentially be tied to the autonomic activation during phasic REM sleep. LD is also correlated with an escalation in alpha band power and global coherence in the gamma band, phenomena that are typically observed during states of relaxed wakefulness and meditation (Dentico et al., 2016; Ferrarelli et al., 2013; Matiz et al., 2019; Baird et al., 2022).

The incorporation of Tibetan sleep and dream yoga techniques, bearing evidence of neuroplastic effects, could potentially contribute to preventative strategies for mental illnesses within contemporary societies. In contrast, the study notes that the experimental exploration and intentional cultivation of dreaming within Buddhism present a stark departure from the traditional approach observed within Abrahamic religions. However, this should not lead us to hasty conclusions or to excessively general formulations. In fact, in the West there remains too generic an idea of what dreams are for Indian traditions, and in general I would shy away from statements like "[i]n the Indian Hindu tradition dreaming is placed above waking reality in the hierarchy of realities" (Heald & Deluz, 1994, p. 99).

The individuals who participated in my ethnography through maṇḍalas, often described it as a dreamlike experience. It is true that in this context we have an easy play: meditation itself is an

experience very close to the dream state and, therefore, often connected to both hypnosis and lucid dreaming. It is a crossing of the traditional boundary of dreams, in which the subject-observer is not fully aware of inhabiting a constructed reality. Some argue that this could also be true for the waking state. Buddhism itself has always played with the nature of dreams, describing reality as a kind of collective dream state. The difference between the images seen in dreams and those experienced in the presumed objective reality would only be quantitative in nature: in dreams, a single subject produces them. However, this is not always true even for dreams, and in fact, Buddhism falls into those traditions that attribute profound or interpretable meanings to dreams beyond the dreamer's simple unconscious desire. Nonetheless, it is the imaginative nature of dreams that Buddhists use to render their concept of relative reality: the bubble of foam, something that can always change as the tide changes.

*pheṇūpamaṃ kāyamimaṃ veditvā,
marīcidhammaṃ abhisambudhāno;
chetvāna mārassa papupphakāni,
adassanaṃ maccurājassa gacche.*

Knowing that this form is like foam,
Understanding that it is just a mirage,
And cutting off Māra's blossoming,
Vanish from the King of Death.⁵

The participants in the ethnographic study did not hesitate to acknowledge this connection, and of course, I also speak from personal experience. When you start meditating frequently, even dreams and the perception of dream images change. The separation between sleep and wakefulness thins, and thus the two experiences draw closer: dreams appear more lucid, and in dreams, the presence of the subject is stronger and more aware to the point, at least in my experience, of being perfectly aware that one is dreaming. Conversely, the waking state appears increasingly polished, somehow unreal. It's as if what we experience when awake is actually distant from us, more hazy and light, but no less real. Trust in images changes, the conviction that what appears to us is indisputably reality is lost, and instead, it is perceived as a fragment, a bubble floating in an immense sea.

In Leo's case, the dream played a predominant role in its elicitation. The meditative practice had changed Leo's experience of reality to such an extent that he felt the need to "fix" a dreamlike process

⁵ Cf. Dhammapadā, *Puppha Vagga*, v. 56.

and the moment of wakefulness even in the production of one of his maṇḍalas. The dream itself became part of the ethnography, as Leo wanted to discuss it. The dream mixed with visual expressions, penetrating the layers and meditative experience of Leo. It is not excluded that it was somehow stimulated by the introspective path he was pursuing.

The expression “like a dream” has been used several times by Layla to better describe her ‘shamanic’ experience. The practice of mental imaging through which she induces her meditative journey has clearly been identified with a form of lucid dreaming, and she herself has explicitly confirmed to me in various ways that the power of dreams, channeled here by the shamanic will she pursues, is the fundamental key to her experience.

On the other hand, Daniel has a more controversial relationship with dreams. Daniel had expressed his position on the proximity of dreams and meditation in one of our ethnographies. Daniel has contributed to my meditation research on multiple occasions, and overall, we have stayed in touch over the years in what could be described as a sort of “continuous ethnography”. During my personal ethnographic research in 2021, then partially merged into this doctoral research, I followed Daniel and other subjects to document how meditation influenced their relationship with reality. Daniel extensively shared with me the connections between imaginative practice and contemplative exercises. Part of these preliminary ethnographies I have decided to bring together in this work, since the path with Daniel naturally evolved towards this research.

Heretofore, our discourse has focused on the validity of images, replete with extensive discussions on dreams, which epitomize modern Western attitudes towards images. To wit, images are commonly perceived as ephemeral simulacra, akin to dreams. Yet, from the vantage point of Buddhism, the dichotomy between the dream state and wakefulness is negated, given the shared illusory nature of all phenomena we encounter within our perceived ‘reality’. The ultimate enlightenment, or *bodhi*, sought through meditative practice does not, however, eradicate images; it merely allows us to perceive them from an unfathomable perspective of totality.

The illusion surrounding any image, whether conjured in a dream or perceived with our very senses, stems from the notion that ‘images’ are mere fragments of a more comprehensive truth. This truth can be envisaged as a unique image or a singular symphony that envelops the entirety of all conceivable symphonies. This poses a formidable challenge to our comprehension of what a meditator experiences while crafting a maṇḍala, manifesting images within the intricate architecture of this sacred symbol.

The brief study on contemplative anthropology I have previously outlined is naturally one of the many tributaries that converge in this work, and Daniel also accompanies us here in his meditation process. After nearly a couple of years, he reaffirms the connection between dreams and meditation, but also

how this dimension emerges in maṇḍalic elicitation, which he found to be a more challenging exercise compared to others, precisely due to the difficulty of giving an ‘artistic’ form to a semi-dreamlike process. We certainly do not intend to refer here to the great painters who have attempted to depict a dream or dreamlike sensation, as this is not an artistic exercise *strictu sensu*, yet the difficulties can be considered analogous. Nevertheless, the idea of images possessing a “survival power” resonates with the role of meditative practices in accessing and processing enduring memories or traumas (Didi-Huberman, 2002). These images, arising in the mind during meditation, could be viewed as living entities or condensations of consciousness, interacting with the meditator in a non-dualistic manner. This lends itself to the therapeutic potential of meditation in helping individuals confront and process such enduring images, thereby fostering healing and transformation.

5.3 Dreaming Maṇḍalas

On March 21, 2023, after following the various steps that led Leo to create two new maṇḍalas, we decided to hold a new ethnographic meeting for a ‘hermeneutic discussion’ on the elicitation process that led him to these two new ‘creations’. During these weeks, Leo has continued to meditate fervently and has never stopped drawing layers for his maṇḍalas, often taking a few days off. This is perhaps the most intense period of Leo’s creative process compared to his last maṇḍala, which will be produced much later than these others and marks, in many ways, the conclusive process of his journey as a beginner in meditation.

The ethnographic encounters with Leo are always quite unique. I have already explained in previous chapters my positioning regarding this person, who is a dear friend. Naturally, this places him in this study in a much different manner compared to other ethnographic subjects. However, it should be emphasized that over time, I have developed friendships with all the individuals who participated in this study, including those involved in other ethnographies related to meditation that might have merged into different studies.

After all this process, it becomes absolutely inevitable: those who frequent meditation-related environments tend to form friendships with the ethnographer when they participate in such studies. Even newcomers, like Leo or Joe, who approach meditation for the first time either self-taught or otherwise, are treated by me on perfectly equal terms. I do not consider these individuals ignorant in any way due to their novice status in meditation. Anyone who meditates knows well that this methodology does not provide certainty; rather, it often creates more doubts. Consequently, anyone with meditative experience has something to teach.

This leads us to the second aspect of this ethnography: the equality I aimed to establish with all ethnographic subjects, whether experienced or inexperienced in meditation. It should be considered

that I, myself, am a meditator who has spent considerable time in meditation centers. However, I became disillusioned with them and decided to continue meditation on my own through studying texts and experimenting with practices. As explained in the earlier chapters of this work, my attempt to conduct this research within meditation centers or groups following a form of leadership guiding their meditative experience was a failed experiment. I find it difficult to place myself in relation to guides or spiritual masters. Simultaneously, I observed a particular wariness among religious or non-religious environments forming specific social groups around this practice, a wariness shared by other participants. Some engage in group meditation merely as a brief respite or a momentary escape from their hectic lives, lacking the desire to form deeper connections with fellow participants. I noticed that they barely interact or know each other, limiting themselves to sporadic and hurried greetings. This indicated to me that, apart from those specific circumstances of meditation sessions, no significant bonds exist among them, akin to individuals practicing yoga or attending a gym. While friendships may exist outside these groups, it is increasingly rare in modernity, particularly in these specialized groups where people meditate primarily to find a brief moment of peace amid the modern life's exhaustion that envelops us in contemporary Western society.

That being said, this partly explains why I chose not to rely on meditation centers or specific groups for this particular ethnography, opting instead to select individuals independently and focus on their personal stories and subjectivity, separate from the social or cultural dynamics that could develop within groups. On the other hand, this also elucidates why I consistently developed a personal relationship with these subjects. There is nothing wrong with this; rather, establishing a dialogue of friendship is fruitful for anthropological investigation, allowing for a deeper exploration of these aspects. It's worth mentioning that this does not place me above the subjects studied; instead, I aim to engage in a dialogue on equal footing, open to learning from their experiences. This doesn't position me below them either, as we are all individuals with our own meditative experiences, learning from one another, fostering not a unidirectional learning environment but an ongoing exchange.

Initially, Leo showed skepticism towards meditation and anthropological phenomena, such as magic or parapsychological incidents, topics also studied by de Martino. However, over the years of our friendship, Leo gradually became more open, revealing sides of himself that I never expected. Despite being deeply rooted in scientific methodology, Leo, the mathematician who had blind faith in the scientific method, formed a close friendship with Federico, an anthropologist critical of objectivism, and instead interested in phenomena regarding subjectivity, consciousness, and cultural relativity.

Our mutual influence became evident over the years. Leo increasingly opened himself to philosophical and religious domains, while I gradually absorbed aspects of scientific rigor, despite

maintaining a critical perspective on the naïve exaltation of science (or ‘naturalism’, in de Martino’s words). Our discussions often mirrored the ambiance of our initial lengthy conversations, where we were constructing our friendship.

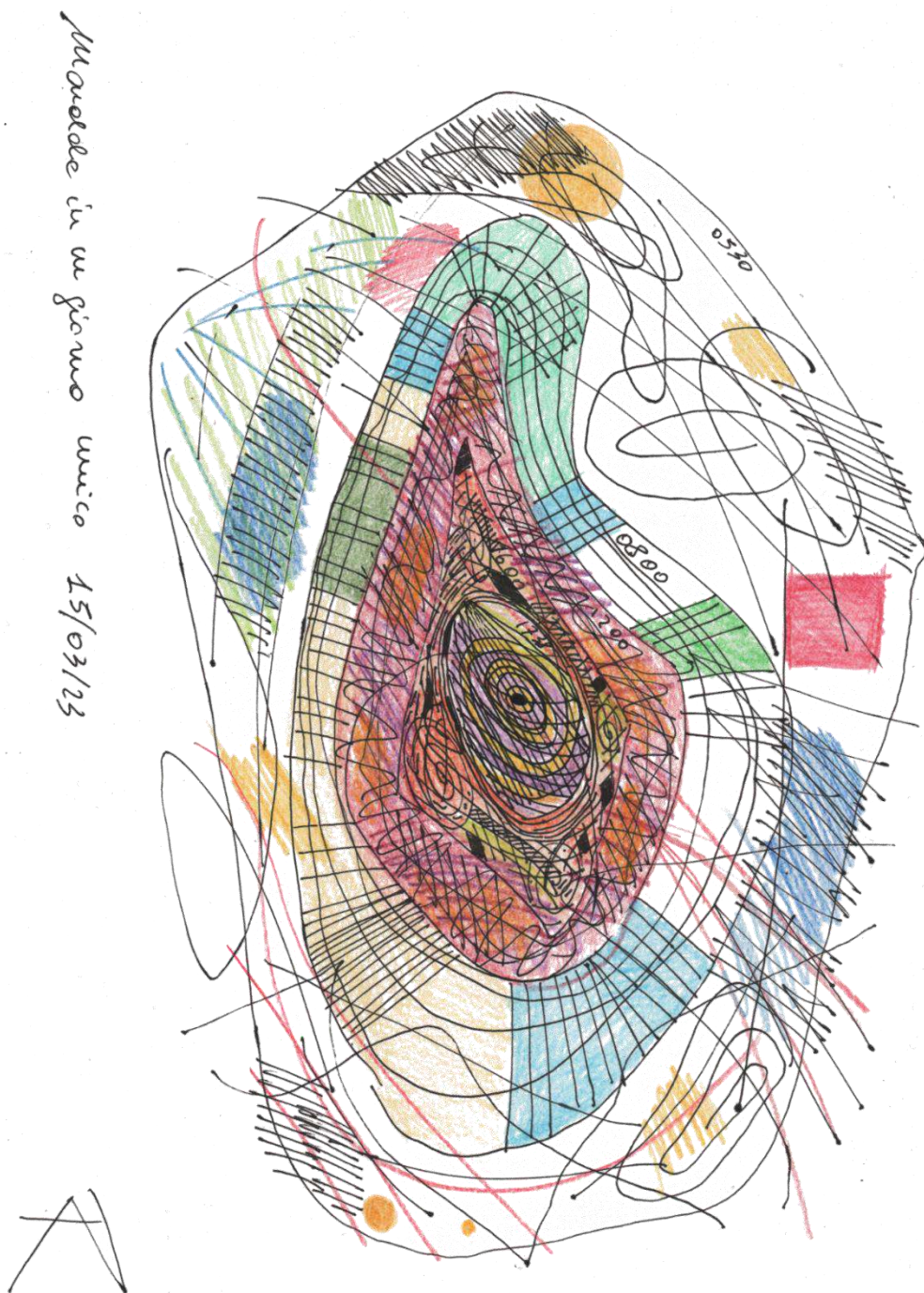


Fig. 21:
Leo's fifth maṇḍala, completed on March 15, 2023

When Leo visited my (temporary) house in Belgium, or even during online encounters due to geographical distance, our friendship dialogue remained consistent. Our discussions had the peculiar characteristic of mentally isolating us, transcending our physical surroundings, creating a space where time seemed suspended. These conversations delved into matters that truly transported us, sometimes lasting for hours on end, oblivious to the passage of time.

Leo begins by describing the second maṇḍala (the fifth relative to his entire production), as this one is the most particular for him. It was created entirely in one day, on March 15, where the various layers represent different phases of contemplation throughout the day. Leo immediately notices that starting from the outermost layer, at the beginning of the day, there is a lot of dynamism but also some confusion, while as you move towards the center, not only does tiredness increase but paradoxically, the calmness of contemplation as well. In this maṇḍala, Leo marked the time when each layer was fixed: the outermost layer at 5:30 in the morning. The center, around 17:30,

“is an attempt to describe the strange sensation of sleep... for me, it is emblematic, it’s like Proust’s search for lost time... but the opposition with the first layer is strong... there is this dynamic energy that transcends the layers, pushing towards the future, towards the outside... it’s chaotic... it’s an explosion of energy...”

As in his previous drawings, Leo documents a process of active change and transformation through the layering of the composite image he was bringing to light. However, while in other meditative exercises this layering process was recorded over the span of several days, this experiment demonstrates how, within the course of a single day, distinct phases can be observed in the contemplative process. Leo himself describes these phases with precision.

“I noticed, however, that in the second layer, the one at 8 in the morning, after three hours of work, I didn’t just meditate, things change... the first layer had a vague and undefined boundary, and even the second layer has transcended its boundaries, almost imposing itself forcefully to reaffirm its identity and persistence within the context of the maṇḍala... and so it opposes the first layer with a particular form and regularity... to reach the third layer where I am more tired... and in fact, I chose purple, which communicates tiredness and exhaustion to me...”

The images actively participate in his contemplative practice. They serve as tools that the meditator wields throughout their journey, and when used skillfully, they facilitate these exercises or even become companions in the process. In Leo’s case, color itself explicitly conveys certain states, functioning as a vehicle for clear communication. He often refers to ‘form’, as if he wishes to

communicate the purest manifestation of information, which aligns closely with his distinctive way of thinking, with which I am well acquainted. Indeed, what distinguishes information from chaos is precisely its form. To take on a form, to assume a form, or to give something form is an act of determination: the desire to organize in a specific way is the manifestation of information. In other words, for Leo, information is that-which-takes-form. However, form does not fully submit to his conscious will. Something automatic, autonomous, and not entirely under his control presents itself as a barrier, and it is part of his contemplative intent to meditate on the reasons why the image assumes this particular configuration.

“it opposes the entire production, marking a limit to the things that can be done... to me, it is evident that there is a sort of wall... form opposing form, the flow of energy and projects... if you see the layer at noon, we are talking about a form and a color that opposes the previous forms, principles, everything that was there before... and as rest is approaching and I can meditate better... the layer becomes sweeter, with peach or soft yellow colors... mellifluous lines... when concentration is more relaxed... and then it merges into the last layer, which is a boundary between the conscious and unconscious state, like when you are about to fall asleep... and that’s it... I wanted to meditate by describing the arc of a day... forget about my strange hours, during this period, I wake up very early in the morning...”

Leo concludes, curious to hear my opinion. I agree with him that the outermost side is the one that opposes the rest of the maṇḍala most strongly, starting from the second layer. I find the association between color and concentration interesting, as well as his symbolization of fatigue. Similarly, it reminds me automatic behaviors, especially in the first layer, which is also the layer most similar to self-identity in the Buddhist sense: something that proceeds automatically, that serves to make you active and productive, telling “you are this, you must do this other thing”.

However, when work duties are absent, fatigue sets in, along with more contemplation, and the “form deforms” or, as Leo says, “opposes the form”. This artwork is also full of signs, especially in the second layer, where a strong normative instance emerges, reminding me a lot of a musical score. I share these reflections with Leo, adding, “on a side note... you always create something that evokes the carnal... the corporeal... in this case, it seems like a wound, especially at the center... it’s as if one looks inside the flesh... here it reminded me of a deep wound, looking inside the flesh, beneath the skin... but the theme of carnality, which is evident in the center, is also present on the outside because there is a crossing of boundaries, strangeness... but this sinuous movement and breaking of boundaries is like a body coming undone... like a dance”.

There is a moment of silence, during which we both carefully analyze the maṇḍala. Then I point out: “I notice that you focus a lot on the outer layer”. Leo reflects on it and responds,

“the flow of energy in the first layer is something that prevents sedimentation... and that sedimentation is identity... which truly emerges in the second layer, only to fade away toward the center. The layers after the first are almost manic, homogeneous, repetitive, alienating... the outermost layer is magmatic... it’s diversified... so, yes, it’s psychological automatism... but it’s not yet identity... it’s energy that still needs to be channeled... it’s not meant for condensation or identity... it doesn’t ‘recognize things’... whereas on the carnal side... the central core... I don’t know what to tell you, honestly [laughs]... maybe you give it that carnal interpretation because of the center... I don’t know... maybe this time it’s the use of color... the red evokes blood for you... but I can’t really say... I recognize the musical score in the 8 a.m. layer... you’re right... I was writing my thesis, and it’s a style of writing that leaves little room for creativity... it’s all mathematics, but it captures all my attention and energy, and so my mind becomes scanning, piercing, surgical... it has to conform to the score... to the logic of rhythmic repetition... so that layer is the least meditative because I was completely absorbed in work.”

Inquiring into the significance of color, I prompted Leo, who articulated that color serves to delineate form, although its indispensability varies. He noted the intricate correlation between form and color within the specific framework of a maṇḍala. Elucidating further, he posited that the inclusion of color stands in contrast to the form, implying that if identity is inherent within the form, it manifests within the unmarked spaces devoid of delineated form, signifying a lack of identity.

The relationship between colors and emotions has been widely studied and documented (Valdez & Mehrabian, 1994). Colors are connected not only to the transmission of emotions (a color triggers or enhances an emotional state) but also to the expression of thoughts. In other words, an emotion is psychologically associated with a chromatic scale (Simmons, 2006), and this applies even to conditions other than synesthesia, which is notoriously known for this type of phenomenon. However, colors often carry a wide range of symbolic significance, and these meanings can vary broadly across cultures. For example, while white may symbolize purity and weddings in Western cultures, it can symbolize mourning in some Eastern cultures. Red might represent luck and vitality in one culture but signify danger or warning in another. Thus, despite the attempts to outline a general and universal theory of colors in human cultures numerous controversies have instead revealed a profound relativity in the designation that associates a color with specific functions (Sahlins, 1976), and therefore although there may be elements that connect some general principles in the feelings that human beings

associate with certain colors, the historical choices that then lead these colors to take on certain meanings in particular rather than others is a complex cultural evolution (Hutchings, 1998).

I know that at this point what I'm saying may seem to push towards an interpretation that could appear forced, but I couldn't help but reconnect the use of red, in the core of Leo's maṇḍala, to the alchemical phase of *rubēdō*, the final stage of transformation where the distillation of the philosopher's stone is achieved according to Jung's alchemical theory. Colors are also an essential theme here: Leo articulated a profound affinity for the color red, attributing to it a significant connotation denoting strength and stability. He regards this hue as a pivotal element in his personal conflict, particularly concerning his apprehension of assimilating into the academic realm. Both Leo and the interviewer share a nuanced relationship with academia; Leo encountered rejection and a sense of inadequacy within the field of physics, primarily due to the dismissal of his ideas by fellow physicists. This adverse experience fostered apprehensions regarding his potential pursuit of mathematics, fearing an intensified disillusionment. Leo perceives a disjunction between his scholarly endeavors and his intrinsic identity, striving to reconcile this disparity through his thesis by integrating personal facets, albeit self-censoring to forestall potential critique.

Fundamentally, Leo's narrative illuminates an inner conflict arising from the tension between conforming to academic standards and expressing his authentic self. He aspires to inhabit a sphere unbound by rigid definitions, akin to Wittgenstein's approach to language. Both Leo and I grappled with troubles and crises for acceptance within their respective academic spheres, confronting a pervasive fear of estrangement—a sensation of disconnection or dismissal along their academic trajectories. This exchange delineates Leo's tribulations within academia and his yearning for validation and the liberty to express his genuine identity.

According to Leo's interpretation, the choice of red in his maṇḍala signifies a quest for strength and stability amid internal conflicts. Leo's fear of inadequacy and rejection, stemming from his unconventional ideas in physics, engender a sense of identity annulment and distance within academia. His attempts to integrate personal interests into his work highlight a desire for authenticity, yet self-censorship underscores the tension between conformity and self-expression. This fact, however, has already been discovered by Jung, who noticed the intricate relations between the form of the maṇḍalas, especially the center, and the emergence of the Self, which for Jung is different from mere psychological identity.

In spite of what appears like confident statements about the Self, Jung remained somewhat uncertain about his discovery. It was very personal and emerged out of a deep struggle with his nearly overwhelming confrontation with the unconscious. The notion of the Self helped Jung feel

stabilized, through the experience of this superordinate center. Jung came to feel that his notion of the Self was a “compensation for the conflict between inside and outside” and that the circular mandalas he was drawing were symbolic expressions of the dynamic quality of the Self.⁶

The limitations imposed by academic rituals, exemplified by page restrictions, are viewed as constraining creativity and intellectual exploration. Leo’s apprehension about transitioning between disciplines and the fear of rejection from mathematicians expose the challenges of boundary crossing and maintaining a coherent sense of self. Ultimately, his discourse conveys the shared vulnerability and longing for acceptance experienced by other people.

5.4 Phantasy, Consciousness, living images

In the context of an ethnographic interview on the 8th of June, 2023, during which Leo presented to me what would be the final maṇḍala of this research project, he also proffered insights that carry significant implications in relation to our discourse herein. The themes addressed are not solely embodied within the maṇḍala (as seen in Fig. 22), but also permeate the others previously proposed by Leo, hence, I have endeavored to incorporate this segment from the ethnographic study herein. Everything commenced when Leo indicated to me his belief that within his maṇḍalas there exist “elements present in their absence”. He suggested that “even though they are not visible... they are not delineated by clearly distinctive and recognizable symbols... we are aware of their presence... they are present... yet, they are not there, they are invisible or hidden”. At this juncture, we engaged in a dialogue in which I interjected, prompting him to revisit his earlier maṇḍalas.

Upon scrutinizing Leo’s artwork on this occasion, my analysis drew parallels to Jungian concepts, particularly the notion of the shadow. This comparison aimed to underscore the existence and influence of certain elements despite their apparent absence. Similar to a footprint in the sand digs a cavity, an absence, which is however evidence of a presence, that of the one who traced that footprint, Leo’s earlier maṇḍalas revealed a recurrent motif—a figurative orifice unveiling a concealed realm within the layered composition.

Leo: “In my opinion, Da Vinci’s idea was precisely that... that the human, with its beauty, has interposed itself between nature... well... it comes to mind that for my maṇḍalas... everything we are seeing... is like the mask of actors... it is the ‘*Persona*’... and the maṇḍala is a sort of surface, a substrate that actually conceals what is behind it... but makes it clear... it says ‘there is something more behind’... revealed by the peephole of this door [Leo points to the center of his second

⁶ Cf. Marlan, 2022, p. 44.

maṇḍala]... but it is unsettling because ‘it’s me’, do you understand? So, the unease lies in the fact that the substrate of the maṇḍala is me... but I am disoriented by myself with that central hole that indicates the unsettling that lies beyond... it may be somehow that the membrane of the maṇḍala is the essence of everyday life... having produced it in phases as I meditated... it’s as if the maṇḍalas have taken on the same symbolic conception of becoming... of my projection into the world... the point is that there is this peephole... this hole... but there is also the unease of what lies behind...”

The window-like central opening that often appears in Leo’s maṇḍalas did not function as a literal layer but rather as a suggestive aperture offering a glimpse into an alternate dimension. In Leo’s third maṇḍala, this recurring theme manifested differently, symbolized as a door framed within the artwork. This imagery implied the existence of something beyond immediate perception, akin to the enigmatic background landscape subtly depicted in the iconic painting of Mona Lisa. Such representations hint at an unsettling potential lying outside the confines of what is visually portrayed.

“I would call my unease existential loneliness... because if at a certain point the maṇḍala ceases to exist... if... if the mask of the persona collapses... the projection of the actor collapses... if one understands being actors... but lacks a reference... let’s say... towards the absolute... a leap towards a thread of absoluteness... what you are then dissolves in the mask... it is not absolute... and when the mask stops interposing itself and the Mona Lisa leaves, revealing only the landscape behind... it is very difficult to comprehend the meaning of that landscape... it is just loneliness and existential unease... which is very difficult to hide... it is the unease hidden within the most mundane everyday life behind the veil of an existential being... not a being existential... and in fact, I have always considered myself an anti-idealist... we can imagine eternity, but it doesn’t mean that it belongs to us... I am somewhat solipsistic... but in the sense that I feel alone in the world... and when you attempt to reach the peephole beyond reality... you have to deal with unease...”

All of this discourse reminds me of a quote by Merleau-Ponty: “de ma fenêtre on ne voit que le clocher de l’église, mais cette contrainte me promet en même temps que d’ailleurs on verrait l’église en entier. Il est vrai encore que, si je suis prisonnier, l’église se réduira pour moi à un clocher tronqué” (Merleau-Ponty, 2004, p. 120). The presence, our sense of being part of the network, is a property from which consciousness can only benefit in relation. This relationship is with other parts of itself, other consciousnesses, with which it ‘resonates’, and in this resonance, it somehow experiences its own presence. However, in the absence of these presuppositions, in the absence of alterity to relate to, consciousness is emptied of its own expression. As in the case of the doors or orifices in Leo’s

maṇḍalas, this emergence beyond the interwoven fabric of presence allows us to catch a glimpse of the anguishing realm of pure vibrations, which we normally perceive as resonances but which, in the absence of this agreement, seem like noises that speak to us of an unknown and unsettling reality. Leo, peering out from his little door, sees this form of unease which, later on, in his final maṇḍala, he will describe as the omnipervasiveness of whiteness. Therefore, it is not something truly threatening but rather frightening to our habits, to our everyday life.

Leo: “In my opinion, it doesn’t have a dynamic dimension... it’s not a ‘being existential’... it’s not the condition of being existential... but it’s a mode of being that coincides with Being, with a capital ‘B’... and it is in this coincidence that the problematic point lies. [...] The maṇḍala is the convergence between dream and meditation... meditation is very similar to a dream... how much of a dream is there in the maṇḍala? If you ask me, I wouldn’t know how to say... especially because I don’t know the relationship between reality and surreality... if you remember, in this maṇḍala [Leo takes his fourth maṇḍala and points to it] there’s a representation of a moment when I was in a state of semi-consciousness... just awakened from a dream... which I also told you about... but I want to point out in this maṇḍala... the dream here occupies an essentially equal position to that of the other layers... where there’s an almost faithful representation of reality [points to the outermost layer], and as you go deeper... [slides his finger towards the center]... but well... I don’t want you to think that there exists an imaginal dimension as a result of passive imagination... I mean... not for me... there’s no possibility of being lived by images as if they were different from us... and similarly, reality is not different from a dream... at least after meditating, that’s the idea I have”.

Federico: “What do you mean by the fact that one cannot be lived by images?”

When Leo began to open up more with me and changed in some way his mental framework and openness towards the phenomena I was studying, he also started to recount to me some truly interesting episodes. I chose not to include all our conversations in this ethnography to avoid the study primarily focusing on a single person. I wanted to leave space for other subjects. However, Leo’s episodes are certainly very important and significant to me. On a day not particularly noteworthy in terms of when it occurred—as it wasn’t formally an ethnography but a circumstance when Leo had come to visit me at home after we had just finished studying his drawings—Leo told me about an episode he had only briefly mentioned in the past, which deeply struck me.

It’s important to note that Leo is from Apulia and his family has historical memories that, had de Martino been alive, would surely ignite his interest as an anthropologist. Essentially, during a typical

evening of dialogue between him and me, Leo began recounting how two members of his family, particularly his mother and his uncle, had been firsthand witnesses to magical practices still performed in Apulia. He spoke with immense fascination as he recounted them to me.

In one episode, his mother was cured of an illness deemed incurable by doctors. She was taken to a very, very old witch and subjected to a fascinating ritual, as Leo recounted based on his memories of what his mother had told him. He is, therefore, a second-hand witness in some way. These episodes do not formally fit into this ethnography; I recount them only as contextual note to better frame my relationship with Leo.

As I was saying, his mother underwent this very particular magical ritual where the lengths of her limbs were measured by a cord. Initially, these two measurements did not match. The following morning at dawn, the witch told them to return and remeasured the height, finding it coincided. Then, she burned the aforementioned cord. According to Leo's mother's experience, as recounted by Leo to me, this illness that was supposed to be lifelong in the child disappeared.

Another similar episode involves another illness experienced by Leo's uncle. It was also cured using similar measures by an Apulian witch in a specific location amidst the woods. This illness was even more visible as it affected the skin, and its sudden disappearance after this magical ritual caused even more astonishment. Interestingly, Leo mentioned that this uncle was told after the ritual that he must never accidentally return to the place where this illness was cured. Since then, this uncle has cautiously avoided that place because he was warned that the illness would reoccur if he set foot there again. Hence, for decades, that place has been deliberately dodged.

There are truly many episodes concerning Leo's life that have been recounted to me during these ethnographies, but elsewhere as well. Leo confided in me as a symbol of trust and faith in our friendship. He wanted to show me that the episodes he was initially skeptical about were starting to interest him. In one instance, he even told me that he had bought and started reading Ernesto de Martino's *Magic: A Theory from the South* (de Martino, 2015) on my recommendation. He delved into the magical formulas de Martino had recorded in his Apulian ethnography, knowing, for instance, that his mother had received one of these magical formulas from his grandmother before her death to ward off the evil eye. He also knew that this formula couldn't be uttered aloud unless it was being passed on to a successor who would inherit this gift of dispelling the evil eye.

Therefore, Leo questioned his mother, telling her not to disclose the specific formula she possessed but to indicate if those mentioned in de Martino's book were more or less similar to the ones she knew. This small examination yielded positive results and further intrigued Leo in the study of these phenomena. Besides his mother, one of his aunts in the family also had the reputation of knowing magical formulas and rituals. Leo swore to me that on one occasion, he witnessed another of his

relatives, initially skeptical about the power of this aunt, telling her he was ready to be subjected to a spell at any moment. She agreed but warned him that she would not precisely inform him when this curse would strike. Indeed, after a few hours without any warning, this person fainted for a few minutes, supposedly due to this aunt's actions.

All these episodes, which I do not present as ethnographic data since this study is not about contemporary Apulian magic, I narrate as a personal note and provide further detail on the life of an ethnographic subject that intersects with my anthropological interests during this study. Initially, Leo was not fascinated by these phenomena, but through our dialogue, he rediscovered them. In my opinion, this partly explains why Leo, a scholar strongly committed to an objectivist method, gradually reopened himself to his family's past involving phenomena considered magical, allowing him willingly to participate in this ethnographic investigation on meditation. He was starting to become fascinated and interested in these phenomena beyond the cultural confines of his family and region. He sought to integrate his personal passion for mathematics, not just as a methodology for understanding the universe but also consciousness.

This integration reconciled two seemingly contrasting aspects of Leo—his artistic drive, his newfound interest in painting and art, and his fascination with consciousness as a phenomenon that, according to him, could partly be understood through mathematics. However, this needed to be balanced with his need for artistic and imaginative expression.

At this juncture, we find ourselves amidst the delineation of a theoretical framework that dovetails with this ethnographic work. The image was initially explicated, drawing upon the pioneering studies of Morgan on the Sacred Gaze and the dialectical relationship between the observer and the observed. Indeed, Morgan has, in previous works, postulated a theory of the image that aligns with the definitional stance held by Leo, albeit in a somewhat divergent fashion. Importantly, Morgan acknowledges that images, particularly in the West, bear the burden of the pejorative perspective that has been ascribed to them since the times of Plato. In Book X of *The Republic*, they are portrayed as mere simulacra, 'distorted copies' in contemporary parlance, of a misrepresented sensory reality, the true source of which are divine ideals (Morgan, 2014, p. 83). Morgan, akin to Leo, refers to the power of the image as a 'mask', or as the *Persona* of the Greco-Roman theatrical context. The image donned by the actor somehow ends up altering the actor himself, and this influence of images on individuals is among Socrates' concerns, who "worried that images degraded those who regarded the world through them", on the contrary, "the Byzantine Orthodox tradition held that the sacred image or icon is a relay that directs human attention to the image's celestial prototype. Icons mediate between heaven and earth. This was not just a matter of a symbolic reference, but of presence" (p. 84).

Herein, I can introduce one further consideration. Indeed, it is only fitting to once again invoke the insights of Morgan, given that Leo appears to provide a contemplative examination of reality based on his unique anthropological perspective, specifically a perspective characterized by an engagement with the realm of the imagination.

Leo: “Well, I am still a physics graduate... you often talk to me about the idea of considering images as ‘alive’ [makes air quotes with hands]... and that’s true... but not in the sense that the image can impose itself on me... the image appears reflecting a gradient of consciousness... which is its own... and it speaks to my consciousness... but this is a dangerous fusion... because the object... in itself... that should be experienced... so even the image that should be experienced... at a certain point takes on a life of its own... as if the image that arises and presents itself, because a subject has produced it... is born to be the possibility of the subject... but then it begins to assume its own reality independent of the subject? This is impossible... it’s like language... this urge for the permanence of things... of images... unlinking them from the subject’s way of living... that’s why it’s a dangerous perspective... to say that images are alive... attention... it’s a dangerous matter because if we admit that the image is alive... this life drains the fundamental characteristic of the one who sees the image... but then what remains? The visible without the observer, what sense does it make? The observer dies... but at that point... yes, okay... the images are experienced... they are representations of an experience... but they are not alive... not in an organic conception... that’s why I mentioned physics to you... it’s true that by looking at images, I am also ‘looked at’ in a certain way by the images... but your way of looking is different from mine... but is there a component of life independently from you and me, who look at the maṇḍala? Because if you look at my maṇḍala, you make it come alive in you, from you, for you... and maybe for you, it has similar values or even completely different ones from mine...”

Importantly, my emphasis here is drawn to a specific assertion made by Leo on this occasion: “and so in this sedimentation of experience, consciousness emerges from it... almost from this constant network... from this overlapping of... of experiences”. Morgan utilizes the notion of the ‘network’ to articulate the interactive patterns between entities and images, and his framework is built upon Mitchell’s theory of images. According to Mitchell, what images ostensibly demand are cultural analysts who are capable of interpreting them beyond mere signs or discourse, or mere objects of aesthetic appreciation (Mitchell, 2015; Idem, 2005).

I would propose that images are indeed significant; they are not mere symbols, and this is not because they serve as models of something that is distanced, superior or inferior. Rather, their importance lies in their capacity to facilitate transitions to other images, each as delicate and humble as the last, yet distinct. Morgan, however, does not aspire to propose anything akin to an animistic ontology of self-

propelling entities. What I propose instead is an approach that perceives images as components of tangible acts of visual perception, thereby integrating humans into expansive and extended networks. The ecology of an image is constituted by those entities and forces with which it interacts—these include viewers and creators of images, but also the availability and chemical composition of pigments, the forestry industry, the marketplace, and even trees themselves. These elements collectively produce the panels upon which images are created. The panels are in turn shaped by factors such as weather conditions and pests that wear down wooden supports over time, sunlight that leads to pigment fade, fashionable methods of framing and exhibiting images, the commerce of aesthetics, the rich and detailed histories of genre, theme and subject matter, as well as the style, medium and technique of painting. Additionally, the perpetual influx and efflux of images, which spawn and dissolve into countless acts of tribute, comparison, emulation, and rivalry, also play a role. This intricate ensemble of human and non-human agents forms the foundation for comprehending any given image (Morgan, 2014, p. 86).

According to Morgan, “an image is an interactive device that responds to being seen by co-creating a relation with its viewer, whose consciousness takes shape with the image in intertwining structures of feeling, memory, and expectation”, nevertheless, “the definition easily ignores the social context in which an image takes place”, therefore he claims he wants to “investigate is not images per se, but acts of seeing” (p. 87), that’s why the “network theory” is so useful to him. From here, we reconnect to maṇḍalic images and the ethnographic hermeneutics I was doing with Leo that day.

“Through meditation, I have clarified many things... the question is... if we can put it that way... archaeology... symbolism... they are all structures... forms of relationality... so even that experience we call the archaeology of the object... I mean, Foucault’s concept... is a proposition of relationality... but relationality only happens through subjects... so... even the symbol... if there is a lived experience of things, it’s only the subject that possesses that possibility... so it seems to me... for example... that the whole animistic perspective... or the hylozoistic perspective... all these viewpoints that are now entering physics... granting consciousness to things... it can be a dangerous imposition... in this transition of the object from being-lived to being-alive... even biological life is a complex matter... strange... I mean... biological beings are always lived... from our point of view... and that’s the only perspective we have... so to say that consciousness is in everything... certainly... maybe even an ox or a rock has its consciousness... but from our perspective, it’s always a lived experience... not a living being... that’s the viewpoint we have... nothing else... I know you might not fully agree with me... but I think we can approach the absolute... but taking that final step would mean renouncing the lived experience... I don’t know if we want to... I don’t know if we can.”

Yet, the very image that appears and presents itself to us is inherently an entity that manifests in its being observed by us. The instant-gaze that captures this entity is immortalized within this relationship, but it cannot extend the appearance of the instant *per se*, that is immediately followed by another instant in our perception of concatenated phenomena.

In this succession of frames, we mistakenly perceive the consequential emergence of these images as movement, as they unravel within the complex phenomenological network. This fractal experience, described not only by Buddhists in their Abhidhamma but also in certain more ancient texts, is intrinsic to meditation and therefore is reflected in the structure of the maṇḍala, which evokes these complex instances. According to Morgan's perspective, this is part of an ecology of images, managed not by "a single shape with a directing center; it is a shifting form of relationality that results as human and non-human actors interact in the transient shape of an assemblage. The focal object, however, is an apparent center in networks producing visibility, an ideologically charged hub that addresses itself to viewers and regards them in a particular way" (Morgan, 2014, p. 95).

There exist two quandaries that this ethnography presents before us, from which we cannot abstain from addressing. However, only one of these will be scrutinized also on a theoretical level, as the other poses a conundrum that I personally deem insurmountable. Such an issue is the question of art. If you are an anthropologist, your observation of human cultural systems and subjective instances inevitably leads you to formulate your philosophy on them, which is nothing more than an explanatory model. Similarly, an implicit philosophy exists even in those who believe themselves to be above it, and if they are unaware of this implicit philosophy, it does not mean that it does not act in their way of constructing explanatory systems, and this applies to hard sciences like physics or chemistry too. And so forth, we can do an ontology or metaphysics of language or legal systems, but we must see it from the viewpoint of a speaker or a subject of law.

Outside of this context, there is nothing. Then the 'pure philosopher' cannot exist, because he always speaks from a context. Conversely, art can be 'made' from many perspectives: an architect imposes his 'art' on the buildings he designs, a painter does the same on canvas, but the painter is first and foremost a painter, just as a writer is a writer. The art and philosophy that permeate his pages are implicit in his *raison d'être* as a writer. When it happens that we invent the figure of the 'artist', detached from any context or perspective, it is thought possible to create an impossible art for art's sake, like a word whose only reference is itself, and in this self-reference, in the pursuit of pure and bare forms, there is nothing to see.

Can an image perhaps self-see? It would lose the very sense of being an image. Leo struck me with this perspective, which brings us back to the second aspect, or rather the second quandary, presented

to us by this ethnography, and which is the central theme of everything: consciousness. Although we cannot define it as a form of ‘life’ from Leo’s point of view, which I may or may not agree with, we cannot deny that of consciousness we can only acknowledge its existence. The external world as something completely independent from our perception is something seriously hard to demonstrate. Contrariwise, if there is something that is absolutely undeniable, it should be our consciousness. What this ethnography has altered in my view, and I hope can also change in others’, is that consciousness is not only ‘ours’, but the presence it produces in interference with other parts of itself, can only be evidence of its pervasiveness even beyond our identity boundaries. In other words, images are in some way conscious, perhaps not as we are, but they speak to us, they make themselves talked about and make themselves present: they are bearers of a being-there that is in dialogue with us. And in attempting to understand this dialogue.

Georges Didi-Huberman has advanced a profoundly contemplative and multilayered approach to the interpretation of artworks. His philosophy refrains from reducing artworks to isolated objects to be dissected solely based on their formal, aesthetic qualities. Instead, he comprehends them as multifaceted entities encompassing historical, sociological, and psychological dimensions. It could be posited that the crux of Didi-Huberman’s philosophy of perception and observation closely parallels the principles propounded by Merleau-Ponty, with substantial areas of convergence between the two scholars’ perspectives.

5.5 Experience and sedimentation

I had the last ethnographic meeting with Leo to discuss his fifth maṇḍala on June 8, 2023. All our ethnographic encounters took place online due to distance constraints, but also due to my interest in exploring this form of communication, particularly since the field reflection outlined in the initial chapters had already convinced me that physical co-presence was not necessary for exploring a spatially undefined field such as consciousness. Instead, the vehicle of imagery and its elicitation in multiple stages (initial composition and subsequent reinterpretation by those who had elaborated upon it through meditation) were deemed sufficient to convey to me those emotions and experiences concerning the intricate dynamics of consciousness. The ultimate success of this experiment remains uncertain, but it undeniably yielded a wealth of intriguing data.

However, for our latest meeting, we seized the opportunity of Leo’s visit to Belgium, where I resided during the research, and thereby established a dimension specific to our relationship, owing to our long-standing friendship. In this dimension, exchanges are based not only on managing spatiality but also on the dynamics of intimacy that have since solidified. Leo enjoys discussing various subjects

with me, making it impossible to isolate solely the testimonies arising from meditation without the conversation branching off into numerous divergent paths.

During this occasion, Leo also shared his renewed interest in de Martino, a stark contrast to his initial skepticism regarding anthropology. I undoubtedly bear considerable influence in his rediscovery of his Apulian roots, particularly the transmission of magical formulas within his family and his newfound interest in episodes of magic-therapeutic rituals involving his mother and uncle. He had previously hinted at these episodes, but now, he evoked them with genuine interest, dispelling past skepticism towards works like de Martino's "The World of Magic". Leo sits across the room. Two armchairs are separated by a small table. He occupies one chair, while I sit on the other. His gestures while speaking are subtle; he exhibits a very delicate and composed manner, reminiscent of a calm and quiet professor. I have seldom seen him perturbed. Restless perhaps, or melancholic, but agitation or fervor of any kind is not characteristic of him. He does not have the drawing with him, as I strictly prohibited him from packing it to prevent any damage. However, we observe it from a distance. Nevertheless, he has contemplated his works more than anyone else, taking notes, revisiting them multiple times, recording observations, and meticulously noting down every relevant detail.

Armed with his notebooks, which are also filled with methodical formulas and illustrations expressing his dual nature as a mathematician and an artist, a stickler for formulas, and a poet enamored with Pessoa and Sartre, he proceeds to present his considerations to me. This meeting was very special because we covered various different topics and sometimes even went back to his previous experiences. Leo's latest maṇḍala (Fig. 22) is the most unique of all, seemingly the most chaotic and eccentric, an overlap of shapes and colors that can also appear more like a scribble, but not to me. This maṇḍala struck me in multiple ways, but of course, I let Leo explain it himself before me asking questions. Moreover, in this same meeting, I also showed him my own latest maṇḍala (Fig. 15) for his opinion, and considering it was a work that was somewhat painful in a way, this mutual interpenetration that was our last ethnographic meeting produced many interesting observations.

Leo: "Well... to go back to the moment when I made it... it was March... it was essentially a special moment when I was wondering... I was meditating on consciousness... in a deeper way... and the point that is the basis behind this maṇḍala is that in my meditation, I realized that consciousness is something that settles down... and that's the feeling I have now when I look at this maṇḍala... different layers sedimented, like the consciousness I meditated on... this is a point of arrival, not definitive... but we can consider it as such... so you might wonder how I meditate... the practical act... well... let's say when I meditate... I have my own particular way... usually, there is a focus that I direct my attention to... and I tend to do this before going to sleep, towards the end of the

day when there is silence and I can enjoy a special space of tranquility and isolation from the world... and I think... I focus... but sometimes a problem that haunts me arises...”

Leo’s meditative experience was deeply introspective, wherein he broke down and recombined thoughts and images. At first, he is haunted by unresolved issues, which began to resurface in his everyday life, only to dissect these layers of thought and envision them in meditation. His process is one that is lengthy, laborious, yet necessary for focusing.

Distractions such as music, once soothing, now become noise from which he must actively separate himself in order to attain an immanent state of focus. This mental exercise allows him to understand how his mind works, how he can change from noise to clarity, and finally how he can use this as a way to “photograph” consciousness.

“I recognize that it’s something I want to solve... and this thing emerges, but it also emerges in everyday life, it haunts me, it comes back... and even though it returns in different forms, it always does... during the day, it distracts me, but when I meditate, I can break it down... precisely recognize the various layers of sedimentation... and then I constantly visualize in my mind the possibility... the way it’s possible... to reassemble the image... and initially, it comes to me immediately... the image comes right away... but then the concepts condense, they come back until they are exactly as they should be... it’s a process of recombination of things... it’s a slow and laborious process... but it’s also typical of how I work... when I need to concentrate, it’s crucial... and all this construction takes shape in the exercise you proposed to me... which I really liked because it somehow gives a plasticity to the thing... it gives a form to this contemplative ritual, and it makes me better understand how I think, how I reason... for example, I often work with background music but I always know that at some point I will have reached a level of concentration where I perceive that music as noise, as interference, and I have to remove it... that’s it... I often do this on purpose, to facilitate the transition of my concentration into a transcendent state... blocking that background noise that needs to cease and that has shifted from being a relaxation element to being a disturbance... for concentration... to photograph consciousness.”

If these images are in some way a photograph of consciousness, then the evocation of each image, from the portrait to the camera itself, is nothing but a form of reflexivity on consciousness. These thoughts, along with Joe’s words regarding all his drawings, have prompted deep reflection on the theme of the lens as a form of reflexivity on consciousness. Although not directly related to photographs here, a substantially analogous mechanism arises when we attempt to ‘capture’ an image: it is the manner in which the image presents itself to us that reflects our presentation of the image. This dual reciprocity, mediated through the photographic lens the moment we raise it and prepare to

shoot, or through a lengthier process of imprinting the image using our hands on a sheet, engages us in a dialogue with the image before it is even ‘imprinted’. The impression—interestingly, a term also connoting the idea we form of something or someone—is merely the process through which our ‘conscious’ dialogue takes shape through the image.

Every artefact is a ‘performance’ in that it motivates the abduction of its coming-into-being in the world. Any object that one encounters in the world invites the question ‘how did this thing get to be here?’ Mostly, the answers to such questions are so taken for granted as not to play any part in one’s conscious mental life (but somewhere or other in one’s psyche, there must be a device which identifies the familiar *as* familiar).⁷

In the relationship between photographer and subject, the former seemingly vanishes behind the lens, not the subject of the image; however, the image is imprinted solely due to the photographer’s activity. Thus, this apparent eclipse merely conceals a revelation in a different form, akin to drawing. Certainly, I can place the camera on a table and position myself alongside the object or person I wish to photograph, but even so, I am revealing myself while hiding—in this case, concealing my role as the imprinter of the image through a meta-narrative that places me in front of the lens. How does this differ from a self-portrait? This latter form of drawing preoccupied Leo for a certain period in 2021. His self-portraits were simultaneously the presence and absence of his consciousness, revealing him in his act of concealing within the image. Hence, his reflections on the evocation of the image and the complex process leading him to imprint those forms during meditation bring back these memories. While describing the layers, Leo gestures with small circles in the air, and the metaphor of sedimentation is apt in evoking the slow process of imprinting their forms.

“I meditate by imposing that the space around me is perfectly suited for the creative act... when I drew this, I had to make the room perfectly tidy... there should be no content outside... the content is all in the creative act... this makes me reflect, in the end, I did it for every maṇḍala... and it connects my meditation with the way I give shape to contemplation. In this case, I consider my meditation as something that has reached a point... of depth... it’s a journey that lasted several months, and you have also seen that my maṇḍalas have evolved over time, but also because I have refined my meditation and it perhaps brought out different things each time... at this point... looking at this maṇḍala... I feel that I have my consciousness in front of me, in its pure state... not in the sense of being unspoiled, but my mere consciousness as it functions... and this functioning is a process of sedimentation... the sedimentation of experience... and so in this sedimentation of

⁷ Cf. Gell, 1998, p. 67.

experience, consciousness emerges from it... almost from this constant network... from this overlapping of... of experiences... that give rise to a different pattern... a construction... a different structure... and so in this maṇḍala, I mainly see this overlap... as you can see, there isn't a clear temporal division... there is only a way in which I tried to create a distinction between the various meditation sessions that opposed each other... but it's a distinction I made on a different level... using different colors or painting techniques... I didn't create conventional layers... and yet, even though I am satisfied with this creation..."

Leo describes how, through a gradual disappearance of recognizable elements within a more general experience, parts become absorbed into a single whole, giving rise to a new level of perception. His making of this particular maṇḍala (Fig. 22) represents this change, with overlapping forms symbolizing his evolving insight into consciousness. Unlike earlier versions, this maṇḍala features less clear temporal distinctions, creating a more fluid, interconnected process that resonates with the conceptual blending of various perceptions and experiences.

"I realize that it is a loss of information... there are things that leave no trace... there are elements that you can recognize in the whole... but they are not distinct, they are not visible... they are lost... there is this abundance of experience and this progressive loss of structures... all to reach... to reach... how can I put it... a system... a level of perception of the world and reality that is different... and so this maṇḍala is built with this idea... that being said... it wasn't built in a day... as you can see, I wanted to mark the days on which I meditated... but the condensation unfolded in a more... overlapping way... there isn't a clearly defined temporal distinction in the forms as I chose to do in the first maṇḍalas... here, the forms overlap, yet they are related to each other... related to the whole... although, of course, I felt it necessary to frame it... to establish the boundary of the whole maṇḍala's content... as you can see... if I felt the need to go beyond, I would have made a cut... like the cuts in Fontana's canvases... I would have broken the dimensionality... but here, it's like seeing frames of a film that overlap... and I'm satisfied with how it turned out... compared to what I experienced while meditating on consciousness... in fact, the maṇḍala helped me elaborate my ideas and conceptions, as well as my way of meditating... and I think that in the end, this idea of overlap is also present in the other maṇḍalas I made... in different ways."

At this juncture, Leo recedes into silence, awaiting any inquiries or comments from my side. His smile triggers contemplation within me, leading me to the realization that a research project of this nature, albeit exploratory, could not have culminated in the results it did with him, had we not already established a rapport of companionship. This translates into reciprocal trust and an absence of embarrassment during the exploration of profound themes.



Fig. 22:

Leo's Sixth maṇḍala, completed on March 25, 2023

Indeed, visual elicitation has enabled those participants who would otherwise have been reticent in expressing their complexity, but ultimately, nearly all elected to fabricate a singular maṇḍala and “conclude the journey” with a solitary experience. Naturally, it would have been unethical to coerce them into further exploration, a course of action I abstained from. I concede the inevitable: despite elicitation enabling subjects to articulate their intimate experiences and express themselves more efficaciously than a conventional interview, it still remains an insurmountable challenge to glean insights that only a human connection can offer.

Having accompanied them for long periods, discussing topics at times unrelated to meditation did not necessarily precipitate the development of a personal bond, nor could I impose one, given the innate nature of how sympathies and affections are built, which resist subjugation. Naturally, one might posit that a traditional ethnographer who ‘ventured into the field’ to forge a bond with the ‘natives’ might glean more information from them by immersive techniques, convincing them of their shared identity, and adopting changes to assimilate their distinctiveness. Nonetheless, to what degree can we rely on the veracity of someone who professes, ‘I have cultivated a robust and sincere rapport with the natives’? At times, this may hold true, while at others it may not. An even more complex question arises: who, precisely, are my natives?

Establishing the non-existence of the ‘physical field’ in this research, assuming we do not categorize the field as the domain of human consciousness, we are obliged to acknowledge that the inhabitants of this field are the humans themselves. Consequently, the bond I have formed with them, whether it endured only a year as in Layla’s case, has been extending over several years as in Daniel’s situation, or has developed into a profound friendship as with Leo, also contributes to the ethnographic study of this ‘humanity’ and their consciousness. I ask Leo if there’s a difference between the circular-concentric layers and the edge-like square that frames the maṇḍala.

Leo: “The actual layer is the color... for example, everything in a certain shade of blue was done after a particular meditation... the same goes for different colors... but those circles are no longer like the previous layers... they don’t distinguish one meditative phase from another... they’re just... there.”

Federico: “I see... now you have to explain something to me... you corrected all the dates... initially, you wrote all the dates with the wrong year... 2021... then I see that in red, on a specific day, you noticed the mistake and corrected them all to 2023... what’s with 2021?”

Leo laughs again. He knew or maybe expected that I would notice this, and he doesn’t delay in explaining it to me:

Leo: “You’re right, it’s a *lapsus*. I realized it at the last moment and wanted to correct it in a way that would still remind me of the error... throughout the period of this last meditative session... and even when I marked the date when I gave form to the meditation in the maṇḍala layer... unconsciously, I was convinced it was 2021”.

Federico: “That’s an unusual thing, you know better than me. Because you’ve made other maṇḍalas before... in fact, this is the last one, and you’ve never made a mistake before... how did you have such a prolonged oversight... lasting for days... were you in a trance? [laughs] But jokes aside... I really ask... why is this coming up only now?”

Leo: “Yes, I can’t deny that it’s peculiar. I noticed this slip on the last day... if you ask me why... [sighs]... you would talk about some kind of fixation... I don’t know if it’s correct... but you know... thinking about it now... my time stopped at the end of 2021... it’s as if I haven’t lived 2022 and 2023... that’s how it feels... and it’s not because of the pandemic, which started before... it’s due to my personal issues, my personal experiences... everyday life... something changed after 2021, time froze...”

Federico: “You know, I understand... I would probably do the same... but with 2020... in my case, it’s the year after which things darken a bit... partly because of the pandemic, but also for other reasons that you know...”

Leo: “Yes, it’s true, in 2020 my experience in Padua ended as well, and I left that place we’ve already talked about... but in 2021, I still had the feeling of ‘moving forward’ or ‘doing new things’... then in March 2021, something happened that had never happened in my life... when I had a difficult exam that almost made me give up everything... break the world’s patterns... so much so that the day before, which was also your birthday... March 18... if you remember... the exam was on modern physics, special relativity... well, if you recall, I withdrew from the exam abruptly... then I paused writing... I paused everything... I took a break... except for the art... during those months, I threw myself into it headfirst... do you remember that period? I sent you paintings on WhatsApp... but after that... nothing... everything slowed down until it stopped...”

Putting trivialities aside, within this ethnography, we have perpetuated the exploration of themes from Leo’s maṇḍala that I have alluded to in disparate sections of this research, such as themes addressing the skeleton and the fragmentation of the body, of dreams and the imaginary. These are subjects that

Leo has chosen to tackle, drawing from elements of his previous maṇḍalas, along with reflections on his relationship with imagery and the unseen.

Hence, in order to circumvent the repetition of these themes that are present elsewhere in the book, I shall proceed with the analysis of this latest maṇḍala from Leo based on the set of distinct inquiries that I have posed to him. I asked Leo about the recurring theme of spirals in his artwork, pointing out their prevalence even in the latest maṇḍala. He noted that unlike previous ones, this maṇḍala had a white center, devoid of a 'core' except for the last yellow whirl.

Leo responded by acknowledging the significance of the white center, explaining that while it appears absent, the essence itself, the center, is represented by white. He highlighted that amidst the polyphony of forms that exist and are real, white stands as the one thing that doesn't need value or importance. According to Leo, everything dances wonderfully around a reason, around a motive, emphasizing the significance of this absence within the artwork's composition.

Leo: "That is the true definition of the self... you're right, I've included them in all the maṇḍalas... and then the spiral is a kind of mini-maṇḍala... because it reproduces the fundamental structure... it has a center of radiation and within its core, it frames a circle from which structures branch out... so the spiral is an identity that has no interactions with the world... it's time and labyrinthine evolution of things... it has its own completed nature... to the extent that in this maṇḍala, there are even spirals that are colored with specific patterns... and in that case, there is an even stronger closure."

Federico: "So for you, spirals are identity instances that interfere? Because I see many here. As if there were also overlapping planes of reflection... as if on one hand, there's your meditation on consciousness... that moves towards transcendence... but on the other hand, there are the spirals..."

Leo: "The spirals puncture!"

Federico: "Ah... they're a kind of intrusion of the various parts of your identity?"

Leo: "At first, I didn't know why these spirals were reproducing. You told me to draw instinctively without pause to create symbolism or mystification... to do something spontaneous that represented meditation... and these spirals kept appearing, reproducing... and I didn't know what they were... I left them there... I had some ideas... but you know... initially, I thought that the stains... the dots... were representations of identity instances... well, now I think that the dot is just a very concentrated spiral... because the dot is closed in itself... then I understood that the

spirals could be... let's say... a complex proposition of a dot... like a person's identity... it's complex... and that complexity is not limited to others... and we are not a monolithic identity... that's why there are so many spirals... different representations of me... but... and here I also come back to meditation..."

At this juncture, I could evoke once more the metaphor of the photographer that I employed earlier. Similarly, the subject preparing to capture an image positions themselves as one endpoint, while the other end resides within the image they intend to capture. However, the act of imprinting occurs precisely within that fundamental domain oscillating and pendulating between the photographer and the subject being photographed. In the case of the contemplative drawings under consideration here, what the meditator conscientiously recalls through the drawing of their meditation represents yet another endpoint, opposite to the self, yet not estranged from it; to reclaim it, however, oscillation is necessary. The drawing embodies the reverberation, the impression of the interaction between the two extreme points of a consciousness engaged in contemplation. Leo continues:

"I believe that the vision of structures... and also of various philosophical constructions... at a certain point is constantly pierced... it's invaded by the reiteration of identity... the spiral... which occasionally resurfaces... saying 'I am here'... and manifesting itself almost as if it were something other than me... it's something I place an intermission in... maybe because I still don't consider this form to be the most intimate one... in some way, there's a point of arrival but I still don't feel capable of understanding that intermission... that heart... that core... that nuclear being... which, however, remains 'in between'... do you understand? [...] Who knows, maybe one day I'll understand what the content of that spiral is, and perhaps I'll draw it."

The notion of existing 'in-between' invokes the Greek concept of *μεταξύ*, hitherto primarily employed in philosophical discourse, but that may bear considerable relevance in the realm of anthropology. If we understand the Demartinian *presence* as a pendulating element between the subjectivities in relation, that *μεταξύ* can also be perceived as the oscillating factor underpinning the foundation of a world, for which the *maṇḍala* acts as a representation. This mediation or state of being "in-between" (*μεταξύ*) signifies the ideological divide among things. It is nothing more than ideological. Indeed, the experiences of the meditators seems to prove that they feel this relation as a plurality of possibilities coexisting together, not as separate, but as a unity. We could adopt in this case also Virno's definition of multitude. Rather than being monolithic, a multitude is internally differentiated by the presence of many different subject. What makes them appear unitary is not a common sense of identity, but shared general values or *τόποι κοινοί* (Favero, 2018a, p. 32).

According to Severino, the first significant *μεταξύ* was introduced into Western thought by Plato, and it is the oscillation between being and nonbeing. For Severino, this primordial dualism dictates the fate of the West. So, what does Severino mean by a ‘thing’? For Severino, a thing is that which oscillates (*επαμφοτερίζειν*) between being and nothingness. The entity is “one and the other” (*τὰ ἀμφοτέρω*). The sign is conceived, or ideated, and it is the Platonic *ιδέα* that substantiates it.

However, such a conception of the entity inevitably perceives it as oscillating (*επαμφοτερίζειν*) between being and nothingness. It is worth noting that such oscillation is purely a “virtual” condition; hence, it is not the truth of being, but rather how things are perceived: incessantly in a state of vibration between existing and non-existing. In relation to the entity’s freedom, construed as its oscillation between the idea of being and that of nothing, Severino assigns this freedom to the *ἐπιστήμη* (Severino, 1980, pp. 27-57). This concept is also utilized in the philosophies of Vögelin and Weil to signify the permanent place in which man finds himself between two poles of existence, such as the infinite and the finite reality (the divine mind) of existence, or between the beginning of existence and the beyond of existence. In technical terms, Vögelin defined the *μεταξύ* as the connection of the mind or nous to the material world, and the reverse connection of the material world to the mind as the “consciousness of being” (McMahon, 1999). The separation of things, which according to the Buddhists is at the origin (*samudaya*) of the world, also poses the constant risk of its end (*lokassa atthaṅgamo*, or *lokanta*) if the force maintaining the perception of things as constantly oscillating between the idea of being and the idea of non-being (the nothingness-of-being), is transcended.

I showed my latest maṇḍala to Leo during an ethnographic interview on June 8, 2023. This most recent maṇḍala has taken the longest time span to create, between two to three months of meditative sessions. I promptly inform Leo that this piece does not meet my own aesthetic satisfaction. The second maṇḍala that I crafted remains my favorite, one that delivers the greatest degree of gratification, reflecting a meditative practice that I felt I had conducted more serenely and efficaciously. The third maṇḍala, however, gradually unfolded before me, element by element, in a manner somewhat arduous and contentious, mirroring the challenging and strenuous meditative practice that brought it forth.

During my recent residency in Belgium, I began to experience heightened discomfort stemming from cultural displacement. I had not anticipated or envisaged facing such difficulty in assimilation, since in other foreign countries where I had resided, I had generally found myself at ease, even nurturing hopes of prolonged residence. Belgium presented a conundrum to me, its internal division, the existence of two regions and three cultural and national realities within a single country, coupled with my need to master the local language to feel more at home, a task I failed to accomplish in this

instance. This, along with the strains of academic studies, financial difficulties due to the historical period I was living in, and apprehension towards an increasingly distressing future with blurred and unclear prospects, led to the resurgence of my old issues with insomnia and anxiety attacks. Deprived of sleep, a vicious cycle of exhaustion and fatigue began, with ensuing difficulties in both work and meditation. I cannot omit these autoethnographic aspects, as my third maṇḍala is imbued with these elements, which have intruded into the meditation and layering of the maṇḍala.



Fig. 23:

My third maṇḍala. Completed June 7, 2023

While the second maṇḍala was the outcome of a series of meditations conducted with greater serenity on my part, allowing me to delve deep, in a very spontaneous manner, and to experience a more ‘correct’ meditation from my viewpoint, particularly in reference to what Buddhist texts assert, this third and final maṇḍala reflects more my contemporary emotional state, which I was unable to ‘heal’

fully with meditation alone. Leo observes this third maṇḍala and promptly points out that structurally, it mirrors my initial experiment, the one I dubbed “maṇḍala zero”. On a visceral level, the two maṇḍalas in question are, according to Leo, “identical”.

I found myself deeply perturbed by a recent realization, initially unaware of its significance. The striking resemblances in forms and the arrangement of elements within the maṇḍala’s strata brought forth a recollection of past trials during my early days in Belgium—experiences fraught with sleep disturbances and anxiety, which seemed to momentarily dissipate with the New Year’s arrival only to resurface with this new maṇḍala. Leo consistently brought technical insights to my attention, emphasizing my determination and self-awareness. He commented on my clear understanding of my own identity, strengths, limitations, and the distinctiveness of my line strokes, portraying a resolute and sharp drawing method. He pointed out moments within my drawings where intentional softening contrasts with this determined style, suggesting a tension between personal identity and external expectations.

Leo remarked that this contrast becomes apparent during my meditation sessions, reflected in the maṇḍala’s composition. I responded by noting the overflow of elements beyond circular layers and the placement of the true center, highlighting the off-center alignment of celestial bodies as symbolic representations of my inner center.

Leo engaged further, comprehending the perpetual tension between personal identity and societal expectations, prompting inquiry into the representation within the maṇḍala. He referenced past imagery, recalling a lion devouring the sun in a previous maṇḍala, contrasting it with the current representation of the sun at the center, unthreatened. The discussion then delved into the symbolism of a serpent and a lotus within the maṇḍala. Initially envisioning a lotus as a meditative focal point but eventually leaving it vacant due to its lack of resonance during meditation.

Leo probed further, questioning the symbolism of the serpent’s actions and connecting it to purity amid adversity. He referenced narratives like Gilgameš, wherein a serpent foils the attainment of immortality. Drawing parallels to mythological narratives, we reflected on the circularity of themes, emphasizing the serpent’s role in defining the maṇḍala’s perimeter yet suggesting an escape from its influence. Leo concluded by acknowledging the intricate interplay of themes, finding fascination in the intentional departure from traditional symbolism within the maṇḍala, specifically noting the vacant lotus emitting light from a corner as a departure from conventional representations.

In conclusion, the anthropological analysis we can extrapolate is anchored on the cultural interplay between symbolism and reality, as visualized in the maṇḍala. We both explore the intricate relationship between symbolic elements such as the lion, the serpent, the sun, and the lotus. There’s an evident embrace of universal motifs of consumption, immortality, and cyclical existence. The

dialogue touches on the mythical narratives in different cultures, spanning from the Epic of Gilgamesh, the Judeo-Christian creation myth, to Nordic and Indian cosmologies, suggesting a pervasive human fascination with the interplay between life, death, renewal, and the struggle for transcendent wisdom.

My decision to leave the lotus—a symbol of purity and transcendence—empty in his maṇḍala, appears to represent an acknowledgment of the transient nature of such a quest and a response to the inevitability of cyclical devouring. The recurring symbolism of the serpent underscores the human experience of cyclical renewal and eternal return.

Finally, Leo's observation about moving my 'real Self' to a corner where he emanates light from within the circularity of the maṇḍala conveys the notion of the individual's role in their journey for meaning and purity, perhaps suggesting that despite the engulfing nature of existence, there is an inherent capacity for illumination, creativity, and transcendence.

The discourse underscores the potency of symbolic systems in reflecting and shaping human perspectives on existence, mortality, wisdom, and self-realization. It's a testament to the shared mythical and symbolic constructs that pervade human societies, ultimately attesting to our interconnectedness despite cultural divergences.

Consciousness of this sort is reflective, watching not just the physical reality in front of the eyeballs and by means of them, but seeing into the flickering patterns within that physical reality, and within the eyes themselves. It is a perception of perception, or as Jung said about images: they are the self-perception of instinct.⁸

Consciousness can be intended as the substantiation of two opposing images. Throughout our ethnographic endeavor, we have observed that consciousness manifests itself by evoking a symphony of images. However, not all images are visible, and maṇḍalic elicitation has demonstrated that there is a way in which even the image of the invisible is somehow made manifest. This invisible aspect, the shadow that opposes the light of the most superficial identity, is a constitutive element of consciousness, and something that is destined to manifest in the journey of self-awareness. This metaphor of the invisible becoming visible, sometimes symbolized as a black sun, the paradox of something emitting a non-visible light, is also known as *enantiodromia* (ἐναντιοδρομία). According to Hillman, enantiodromia holds in Jungian psychology fundamental significance, but its roots can be traced back to the philosophy of Heraclitus, who believed that becoming is manifested in the interplay of opposites, the conception that everything that exists passes into its opposite (p. 181).

⁸ Cf. Hillman, 1979, p. 52.

5.6 Shape and transformation

In anthropology, we can understand it as a principle of balancing human tendencies, inherent to presence. Just as no identity can self-substantiate, relying on the confrontation with otherness from which it depends, presence also encompasses the possibility of absence; otherwise, it could not be present. Absence is therefore present in presence as its shadow, as an invisible instance, while simultaneously representing a clear image of its oblivion. At this point I think it is an appropriate time to describe the last maṇḍala that has to be introduced, which is one that could present some problems, and which therefore needed to reach this stage of the discussion before being introduced.

Daniel's first maṇḍala was closer to Layla's experience. But Daniel's second maṇḍala, on the other hand, reminds me a lot of the 'deconstruction' process that Leo progressively carried out in his maṇḍalas. Daniel's second maṇḍala would also struggle to be defined as a maṇḍala. It has no boundaries, no elements of circularity, nor clearly recognizable content. However, I did not reject this experiment by Daniel because, when looking at it, it still communicated a significant experience to me.



Fig. 24:

Daniel's second maṇḍala. Completed on June 28, 2023

Therefore, I chose to discuss it with Daniel anyway, even though he showed some skepticism about the ‘legitimacy’ of this second creation. Daniel’s narrative, detailing his experiences throughout the creation of maṇḍala illustrations, provides a comprehensive examination into the intricacies of the meditative procedure and the subsequent symbolic elucidations emanating from it. His narration underscores the dynamic interaction between personal interpretations and the archetypal components encapsulated within the maṇḍalas.

Daniel explicates a perceived sense of vacuity in the second maṇḍala, correlating this state with tranquility and an experience that transcends the ordinary. This association exhibits parallels with Buddhist philosophies of emptiness, albeit Daniel acknowledges the variance in his personal interpretation from the conventional comprehension. The prominent presence of the hue blue in the second illustration indicates its critical role as a manifestation of emptiness, as perceived by Daniel. Furthermore, the incorporation of yellow and green colors invokes a linkage to nature, manifesting his profound affinity with the natural world, as already seen in Fig. 5.

The introduction of the color red, possessing multiple meanings for Daniel, signifies a multi-layered exploration of emotional states and fervor within his meditative regimen. On the whole, Daniel’s narrative accentuates the unstructured and spontaneous nature of his artistic endeavor during meditation, exposing the intricacies of individual experiences and elucidations involved in the production of maṇḍala illustrations.

Daniel: “This maṇḍala was more... empty... it came out exactly as you see it... in the sense that... at a structural level, I felt like... I had said everything, so to speak... in the previous one... and therefore, this one is a bit... deconstructed, if you will... in the sense that... the things that imaginatively presented themselves as elements of a structure in the first maṇḍala return here in a more archetypal form... as pure colors... you see the blue... the green... the yellow... then here I added some red... which, however, has a different connotation from the red in the other maṇḍala. It’s as if the inner landscape of my psyche at this moment is this... an inner landscape towards pacification... an emptiness, if you will... even though emptiness is not exactly an experience for me... at least not as Buddha intended it, in my opinion... how can the experience of an absence of experience be? Of course, if you understand it as Nāgārjuna does, then perhaps emptiness is something else... but for me, if I have to represent, as I did, the maximum experience of emptiness... then that would be the color blue... as you can see, it predominates in this second drawing... which also recalls one of the two deepest experiences I had meditatively.”

We must not be deceived by the limitations of terminology, as suggested by Hillman. The image goes beyond mere visual data (Hillman, 1979, p. 55), and through our ethnography, we have learned that there can also be invisible images, cognitive images, semantic images, symbolic images, semiotic images, and perceptual images. This idea is paralleled by Mitchell theory of images as a complex family (Mitchell, 1984). I have introduced this theory at the beginning of this chapter.

Drawing upon anthropological considerations on Daniel's second maṇḍala, it becomes evident that the study of maṇḍalas extends beyond their mere visual form. Rather, these maṇḍalas represent an entity that exists beyond the surface-level perception, invoking the intersection between visual anthropology and cognitive anthropology. This intersection prompts a deeper exploration of the symbolic meanings and subjective interpretations attached to the maṇḍalas.

Daniel: “But there are also other colors... again, yellow and green, which deeply resonate with the idea of nature... we have already talked about it, but this aspect has reappeared here as well. It's a transcendent experience... not a simple bodily experience because the body keeps you confined... but the transcendent is an experience of connection with a larger living organism. The red, on the other hand, is not fire here... because when I saw it in this meditation... which is a single meditation in which I created the maṇḍala... the red appeared to me as a glow... dawn... and for me, that color... I have always had difficulty relating to the intensity of emotions...”

What Daniel's meditative experience reveals is some kind of in-depth introspection of the emotional world by means of color and form. As he reflects on preferring rarefaction, he feels that there is some kind of subtle tension between bliss and aversion to intense feelings; he feels afraid of the depth of feeling. His meditative practice in Australia culminates with an artistic release in which his usual structural approach gives way to spontaneity, allowing colors and emotions to float to the surface—unforced and unplanned. This artistic expression mirrors his inner journey where pastel shades point toward a more diffused connection with passion and emotion.

“I have always felt more inclined towards rarefaction... which I also bring to the meditative experience... and indeed, it is a very interesting thing that I had the opportunity to see during my retreat in Australia... where we spent almost three months meditating... once a week, we had a conversation with the master... and I noticed how, for some people, the aspect of bliss... *pīṭisukha*... was overflowing, very powerful... whereas for me, it has always been rarified, not like a state of physical ecstasy... but it's also true that I might have a fear of emotions... I'm thinking about it now that I'm in a relationship after several years of being single... so that bluish-pink tending towards red... which, for me, is both twilight and dawn... is a kind of connection with

emotions, with passion... you know, I've never liked bright red as a color... I have always been more attracted to pastel colors... green, blue, yellow... so it's as if in that single session when I created this drawing, I experienced it as... I don't want to say deconstruction... but I can't think of another term... well, let's say deconstruction, even if it's not exactly what I mean... it also makes sense compared to the previous one that shows a clearer path, landscape, structure... while this one is more immediate... everything exploded together during meditation... after days of trying to build a structure, I gave in... and the images, or rather the colors, emerged on their own... like automatic writing, without thinking too much about it..."

Cognitive anthropology further illuminates the complexities of the meditative process and its role in shaping the production of maṇḍalas. For Buddhists, cognition holds a dual nature, as described by the interviewee. Uncontrolled cognition can be perilous, leading to distraction and detachment from the present moment. However, when cognition is restrained and harnessed, it becomes a latent potential, facilitating the meditative experience and the subsequent creation of maṇḍalas. This highlights the intricate relationship between consciousness and artistic expression within the meditative context through active imagination.

Active imagination aims not at silence but at speech, not at stillness but at story or theater or conversation. It emphasizes the importance of the word, not the cancellation of the word, and thus the word becomes a way of relating, an instrument of feeling.⁹

The concept of active imagination, as articulated by James Hillman, aligns with Daniel's description of his meditative process. Hillman emphasizes that active imagination does not seek silence or stillness but rather aims for speech, story, theater, and conversation. In this view, the word becomes an instrument of feeling and a means of relating experiences. Daniel's spontaneous and automatic creation of the maṇḍalas reflects this idea, as the colors and symbols emerged without conscious deliberation, akin to automatic writing. The maṇḍalas become a visual language through which Daniel communicates his meditative experiences, imbuing them with personal and subjective meanings. This suchness beyond the determinate identity, which is merely perceived by us as a visual datum but is in itself an indeterminate 'thing', constitutes the focal point of every visual study. It is the juncture where visual anthropology intersects with cognitive anthropology, prompting the realization that we must delve into this 'beyond' if we are dissatisfied with what the mere 'thing' communicates to us. Simultaneously, we must avoid succumbing to the facile deceptions proposed by normativism. Each

⁹ Cf. Hillman, 1990, p. 57.

culture adopts its own norms, perpetuating them through language. These norms imbue identity upon the ‘things’ of the world, assigning names to forms and constructing rules and associations that reveal nothing about the mere ‘thingness’ of the ‘thing-in-itself’. This is precisely what warrants our attention. Consequently, cognition is a double-edged weapon for Buddhists: when uncontrolled, it is perilous (*anattāya*), but when restrained (*saṃvutaṃ*), it becomes a latent potential. The forms (*rūpa*) are seductive and deceptive, yet they are not entirely ‘false’ in an absolute sense.

When we are subjects, separated from the object, we live in a dimension of conflicts: the subject undergoes the world, is subjugated, thrown under it (*subiectus*, *subiciō*), while the object lies before us, appearing as separate, as that which, however, comes towards us (*obiectum*, from *obiciō*, “I throw towards or against”). In this dynamic, the image, the object of our gaze yet the subject of its own appearing before us, contributes to the interplay of glances and references that conceals, beneath its form, a univocal suchness (*tattva*).

Le voici donc, le sujet du savoir : il est spéculatif et spéculaire en même temps, et dans le recouvrement du spéculaire sur le spéculatif – de l’auto-captation imaginaire sur la réflexion intellectuelle – gît précisément ce caractère *magique* de la boîte, ce caractère de clôture résolutive, de suture auto-satisfaisante. Comment donc sortir du cercle magique, de la boîte à miroirs, quand ce cercle définit nos propres limites de sujets connaissants ? [...] Celui qui choisit de *savoir* seulement aura gagné, bien sûr, l’unité de la synthèse et l’évidence de la simple raison ; mais il perdra le réel de l’objet, dans la clôture symbolique du discours qui réinvente l’objet à sa propre image, ou plutôt à sa propre représentation. Celui, au contraire, qui désire *voir* ou plutôt regarder perdra l’unité d’un monde clos pour se retrouver dans l’ouverture inconfortable d’un univers désormais flottant, livré à tous les vents du sens ; c’est ici que la synthèse se fragilisera jusqu’à l’effritement ; et que l’objet du voir, éventuellement touché par un bout de réel, disloquera le sujet du savoir, vouant la simple raison à quelque chose comme une déchirure.¹⁰

According to Didi-Huberman, this fracture (*déchirure*) is what the seer experiences as a traumatic act within their subjective experience. For us, who have witnessed how the relationship between a meditator and the imprint of their own consciousness on the sheet takes the form of a maṇḍala, such a fracture is caused by the unconscious trauma of division—the division that the meditator’s consciousness recognizes as the implicit foundation of their own experience and reproduces by sensing the call of another ‘consciousness’, a determination that is determined through a dialogue with other conscious determinations. In this game where consciousness positions itself both as

¹⁰ Cf. Didi-Huberman, 1990, pp. 171, 172.

internal and external to the meditator and gazes upon itself through another part of itself, there is also the traumatic element of division, of fracture. The *déchirure* represents a rupture or a tear in experience, wherein one is confronted with something traumatic or disturbing. It can be a rupture in historical continuity or a wound in individual and collective consciousness. This laceration can be caused by historical events such as political violence, genocide, or personal trauma. However, I want to reinterpret Didi-Huberman's work, as I believe that the *déchirure* is an intrinsic aspect of the human experience itself; it is implicit in our very being as humans, a generated malaise of existence (*dukkha*) that permeates every state of human existence in which divisive perception continues to reiterate itself.

6. Ontology of the Image

It has reached a point where it is time to draw conclusions from this research work. The topic that I particularly want to clarify is primarily an aspect that some would not hesitate to define as ‘theoretical’. However, it must be said that the division between theory and practice is precisely one of the aspects that this work has sought to criticize from the very beginning.

In anthropology, this translates into a critique of the division between ‘fieldwork’ and theoretical elaboration on ethnographic data. I have addressed this issue by questioning the very idea of the field, such as the condition of an anthropological investigation into consciousness that shifts the focus of the field to an aspect that is extremely human but at the same time not quantifiable in terms of ‘cultural products’ in the strictest sense. At the same time, there is nothing more human than consciousness, and we can argue that consciousness is indeed the only aspect of which we can have certain and direct evidence (McGilchrist, 2021b, pp. 1042-9), whereas all other human experiences seem to be mediated by consciousness itself or by the tools of ‘measurement’ of real data adopted by what we call the hard sciences. Therefore, any investigation into a cultural aspect of humanity is, willingly or unwillingly, an investigation into an aspect of consciousness.

However, I also want to emphasize the fundamental point of anthropology: the anthropologist is *par excellence* the scholar of culture, but culture is a phenomenon as complex as it is mysterious, which is constructed within the frameworks of relationships between consciousnesses themselves and is therefore inseparably linked to the study of consciousness. It is here that anthropology must necessarily establish a partnership with philosophy of mind, providing the necessary counterbalance for the study of consciousness to take into account the distinctly human phenomena that characterize it, thus avoiding that the study of consciousness takes the unpleasant drift of a materialistic reductionism that fails to consider the extreme complexity of this phenomenon which, according to McGilchrist cannot be reduced to a sum of neural impulses or a series of random accidents that lead from matter to the emergence of consciousness (pp. 1049-65).

The anthropologist who has most profoundly understood the study of consciousness in this way is de Martino. Therefore, in this concluding chapter, I will once again take up his ideas to show how they, however embryonic and incomplete, can find new life and vigor, establishing themselves as the precursors of an anthropology of cultural phenomena in general that starts precisely from the definition of the problem of consciousness. In de Martino, the partnership between anthropology and the study of consciousness is firmly established and demonstrated, although it needs to be reevaluated in light of more in-depth studies of his striking intuitions that we find in his notes and posthumously

published writings, and that belong more to the realm of grand inspirations halfway between the philosophical and the ethnological considerations.

Having cleared the field of the pernicious and detrimental distinction between theory and practice, and thus reclaiming the right to an anthropology that is proudly also a philosophy, a reflection on the human being, and not just a collection—whether quantitative or qualitative—of data, we can then ask the fundamental question: what problems does this research on meditation pose to us? These problems primarily fall into three categories: ontological and methodological issues have already been partly examined, but in this chapter, I will sum up and understand to what extent these problems are important for modern anthropology and how it is possible to find a common solution that starts precisely from the proposal of a contemplative anthropology and the acceptance of contemplative practice as a valid means of investigation. This also concerns the epistemological status of anthropology.

In the perspective of a proposal to redefine the discipline, it is also necessary to understand on what basis it can rely. It is in this context that de Martino's work, in its interdisciplinarity and dialogue with other authors, ethnologists, historians of religions, and philosophers, opens us up to new possibilities of a concrete reestablishment of "total anthropology" under the aegis of the study of consciousness, an aspect that today, more than ever, proves to be fundamental.

Specifically, it is necessary to establish a solid foundation regarding several essential topics: how de Martino's work has become the starting point for the development of a theory of consciousness through contemplative inquiry, how this inquiry challenges the notion of the ethnographic 'field', compelling us to establish a 'non-dualistic' anthropology, and how this investigation has evolved over time and why it has taken on the characteristics of a study of consciousness through the production of images.

Furthermore, we need to know how these images have called into question the role of our relationship with the appearance of the visual dimension within our consciousness, even leading to the hypothesis that the evocation of the image in the meditator's experience is not a process of creation *ex nihilo* but rather a recall of the emergence of an extension of consciousness through the visual medium—a revelation of what was previously invisible within the visible, something that is not created or produced but simply manifests and is 'conscious' to some extent. Finally, we must justify the use of certain theoretical tools, particularly those belonging to psychoanalytic theory and that are related to transformative processes and self-improvement through imagery.

6.1 On the Dialogue between Anthropology and Psychoanalysis

In the context of this work, the mention of psychoanalysis is notably relevant. The presence of psychoanalysis as an influential factor in anthropological theory has long been contested, and today the two disciplines are no longer as robustly engaged as they once were. However, I intend to argue that this dialogue should be revived. Not only has it been beneficial for the discussion of my research, but it also holds potential benefits for the future. In these conclusions, I will briefly articulate the relationship between psychoanalysis and anthropology and the reasons why the two should resume their dialogue.

The relevance of psychoanalysis for my study stems not only from Jung's initiation of the meditative exercise employing maṇḍalas, which inspired the methodology of this work, but also from de Martino himself founding his theory on interdisciplinary dialogue. As Charuty aptly illustrates, "the dialogue with psychoanalysis remains a faithful need that reveals once again the topicality of interdisciplinary subjects constituted by de Martino, a need which, however, in France, has been fully affirmed only starting from Lacan's theoretical work, and by his crucial comparison with the models of intelligibility distinguishing structural anthropology" (Gallini & Massenzio, 1997, p. 31). Among his favored disciplines, alongside philosophy and history of religions, unquestionably stands psychoanalysis (Charuty, 2010).

De Martino's theoretical outline extends beyond the scope of simple ethnological data, encompassing his ethnographic investigations of the popular traditions observed in southern Italy like tarantism, a cultural phenomenon with roots in Italian peasant and rural heritage which has significant implications in the field of trans-cultural psychiatry too.

These psychopathological data help us to understand the nature of the risk for which the metahistorical horizon of Lucanian magic works of possible individual crises of presence in the face of an unleashing of the negative's power. The ideology of magical power, binding, possession, enchantment, and exorcism offers a representative framework that is stable, socialized, and traditionalized, in which the risk of alienation of single presence is converted into a metahistorical order, a level on which the recovery and reintegration of risk can take place to the extent that a current or possible negativity of becoming can be ritually de-historified.⁶³

Ernesto de Martino's book, "The Land of Remorse", considered his most important ethnographic work, offers a comprehensive analysis of this phenomenon. De Martino characterizes tarantism as an archaic affliction, primarily affecting women and marked by a problematic existential anguish that

⁶³ Cf. de Martino, 2015, p. 101.

stems from a supposed spider bite. The author delves into the symbolic function of the spider as a malicious entity that magically “binds” and “bites” the patient, thereby injecting the disease. This phenomenon occurs mostly during the hot season, and musical tunes are played to perform a sort of exorcism, freeing the patient from the supposed poison. The symptomatic manifestation of tarantism involves a unique pose that de Martino accurately identified as “a classic hysterical arch” (de Martino, 2023b, p. 67).

De Martino contends that terms such as madness, paranoia, and schizophrenia are all names that historicize and naturalize a more complex and articulated unease. However, by giving it a name, this unease takes on a form that can be controlled by an apparatus. Instead, cultural enhancement of the given situation involves the ethical impetus that de Martino refers to as the “ethos of transcendence”, which is an attempt to demarcate human presence in the world and to affirm its opposite - the negative or risk of not being able to exist in any possible cultural world. De Martino’s seminal thoughts on health and disease are evident in his unfinished work, with early indications present in “The World of Magic”. The starting point for his analysis is the recognition of syndromes of cultural origin, such as *olon*, *latah*, and *amok* (Sehdev, 1999). However, he goes beyond mere recognition of different manifestations of discomfort across cultures, and instead endeavors to provide a unique interpretive theory based on the concept of “abdication of presence”. This refers to the condition of an individual whose presence in the world is not guaranteed, or is misunderstood or suffocated by a particular emotional content that polarizes and eclipses their presence (de Martino, 2022, p. 73).

In de Martino’s theory, magic serves as a tool to assist the individual in their struggle to maintain their *being-there* when faced with attack or threat, even in situations where presence is placed in critical positions due to unusual effort. This perspective also informs the use of magical techniques, such as trance, to weaken presence. Thus, a new element that intervenes in the historicity of magic, which de Martino identifies as “an entity inserted in the network of relationships, in the cosmos of figurations, which form the cultural tradition” (p. 92) including, of course, religion as one of the most important cultural manifestations of presence.

Consequently, this discipline holds dual importance, as we must subject it to critical scrutiny while proposing a variation of the Jungian exercise on mandalic drawings. These drawings, adapted to anthropological needs, aim to surpass certain limitations encountered within Jung’s methodology. We are therefore neither able to completely dismiss psychoanalysis, claiming anthropology as an entirely superior method, nor can we feign ignorance of its limitations. Psychoanalysis remains a valid methodology, holding much relevance for anthropologists when directing our investigative focus toward experiential pathways centered on individual subjects.

In particular, eminent scholars have dedicated significant attention to the delineation and exploration of the convergences and complementarities intrinsic to these two disciplines (Heald & Deluz, 1994). In this sense, interdisciplinary works and dialogues have been proposed in various ways (Molino, 2004). I cannot deny my position in this sense, even if I realize that the issue discussed is very controversial. It is my firm conviction that the scope of these scholarly investigations should extend beyond merely identifying basic points of intersection and potential synergies between the two disciplines. I propose that the boundary separating anthropology and psychoanalysis should be conclusively dissolved. Instead, these two fields should be viewed as a unified, comprehensive approach to the study of the human condition.

An anthropologist is immediately able to discern the complexities and criticisms inherent in this Freudian theory, and indeed, this was observed by Lévi-Strauss in his work on Structural Anthropology, wherein he identified these manifest issues.

Lévi-Strauss was heavily influenced by psychoanalysis. For instance, he understands the unconscious as a symbolic system of thought that pervades all cultures. He asserts that the unconscious is not a repository for drives, desires, or traumatic experiences, as it is in psychoanalytic perspectives, but rather as a symbolic classification system that facilitates the attribution of meaning to the surrounding world. In other words, Lévi-Strauss conceives of the unconscious as cognitive structures that operate beyond the realm of our consciousness, yet are integrally entwined with our capacity to make sense of the world (Rossi, 1973).

Lévi-Strauss has faced substantial criticism for his perceived misunderstanding of the Freudian concept of the unconscious, or for his attempts to impose it as an explanatory framework for cultural phenomena that did not readily align with this model. It should be acknowledged that Lévi-Strauss is well aware of the limitations and relativity inherent in the psychoanalytic model, and he skillfully utilizes it while recognizing its merits, such as having “remis en cause l’idée d’une conscience unitaire que récuse aussi l’ethnologie” (Denieuil, 2009, p. 88), not to mention having “introduit l’idée de représentation”. Nonetheless, he refrains from making claims of universalizing Freud’s model across all cultures. His merit lies in his endeavor to explore an alternative path—a cultural unconscious, flawed though it may be. This approach has at least established a foundational principle that enhances our understanding of complex phenomena.

On the other hand, Freud and Jung perceive the unconscious as a mental sphere that harbors repressed desires, drives, traumas, and emotional experiences that are removed from consciousness through repression. For Freud, the unconscious is where repressed sexual and aggressive impulses are hidden, whereas for Jung, the unconscious consists of archetypal and symbolic elements, including complexes and collective images. In summary, while Lévi-Strauss conceives of the unconscious as a system of

symbolic thought that allows us to make sense of the world (Iurato, 2015), Freud and Jung view it as a psychic realm where repressed desires and drives reside.

In the Buddhist conception, the aim of meditation is to bring every single gesture into mindfulness, beginning with the exercise of breath, which prompts the meditator to focus their attention to make conscious an act that is usually automatic. In this sense, the Buddhist notion of mindfulness (*sati*) and de Martino's concept of presence are highly similar, and from here, the author will reframe the notion of the unconscious. The unconscious comprises not just automatisms or "repressed" elements, as Freud proposed (traumas, memories, repressed desires), but also and above all, universal contents. According to Lacan, the unconscious, structured like a language, could metaphorically contain the same universal principles that facilitate linguistic comprehension.

However, this implies accepting a considerable capacity of the unconscious, meaning that the membrane that separates the contents of the unconscious from those of the preconscious or subconscious, and which acts as a "filter" in Freudian theory, containing those contents that are unpleasant to the conscience (in this case, managed by the Super-ego), does not exist only in a "vertical" sense, between the conscious and unconscious dimensions of the subject, but also in a horizontal dimension, separating the individual unconscious from the collective unconscious. I do not necessarily adhere to this or Jung's idea of the unconscious, nor to Lévi-Strauss's structuralist unconscious conceived as an alterity or middle ground between the subject and the other-than-itself (Chang, 1984). However, it must be recognized that human behavior can be distinguished between actions that are carried out with the full mental presence of the acting subject and others that instead fall within automatisms, be they habits or the result of beliefs to which we uncritically adhere because they are culturally conditioned, and which therefore they lead us to reason or behave in a certain way without an awareness of the reasons underlying this choice.

Contents, universal 'psychic' images common to all humanity, permeate this highly permeable membrane, enabling the entire unconscious to be shared. Thus, if the collective unconscious functions as the repository of primordial images, psycho-anthropological contents of a universalistic and potent nature linked to fundamental and nuclear concepts Jung referred to as "archetypes", a collective subconscious must also be postulated, which shares historically more determined contents, i.e. the cultural elements that are built upon and adapted from the basic archetypes by different societies. This dimension must be distinguished from that of the unconscious, as it is much more variable and composed of norms whose shared nature exists solely at the socio-cultural level.

Within this dimension and the communication between the subconscious of individuals who belong to a cultural community and the collective subconscious (which can be referred to as the sociocultural subconscious), various processes take place, such as Bourdieu's agency, Lévi-Strauss's kinship

structures, Douglas's pure and impure perception context, and the organization into social categories through language, as found, for instance, in George Lakoff's work.

The primary point of contention concerns the purported universality of Freud's method. While conceding that psychosexual development does indeed transpire according to the dynamics as delineated by Freud, it must be noted that this is circumscribed to the patrilineal cultural model that was characteristic of his societal context. At the time, there may have been a prevailing belief that the "normal" familial structure consisted of a father, a mother, and children, all maintaining a specific hierarchical relationship within the household, and that behavioral distinctions—including those related to sexual behaviors—were stringently imparted based on the binary construct of masculinity and femininity. However, anthropology has persistently demonstrated that societies arbitrarily (historically, for de Martino) structure their social and behavioral models. Hence, in societies where the parental "models" are constructed entirely differently, healthy individuals still emerge, and this casts doubt upon Freud's theory which stipulates potential psychological disorders in the absence of a stable "paternal figure".

Despite possessing ethnological knowledge, Freud paradoxically maintained that certain familial models are 'healthier' than others. Nevertheless, in the intervening period (between 1915 and 1918), Bronisław Malinowski was conducting meticulous ethnographic studies on the "sexual life" of the Melanesians in the Trobriand Islands that was poised to seriously challenge the Freudian theory.

Over the years, anthropology has amassed a significant amount of material evidence to substantiate that different social and cultural ways of thinking correspond to diverse kinship structures. In certain instances, the dualistic model of father/mother is entirely subverted by the complete dominance or absence of one of the two, or by an "overabundance" of educators all positioned at the same level. This ultimately demonstrates that the Oedipus complex represents but one of many possible pathways of psychosexual development, and it is neither the only one nor the healthiest.

Thus, recognizing the primary cases of psychological or even psychiatric suffering and discomfort of individuals not as an alleged 'innate' disorder of their biology,⁶⁴ but rather as a conflict between the

⁶⁴ A similar stance, primarily concerning psychiatry, was already advocated by de Martino.

In order for contemporary psychiatrists to adequately address the "sick" mind and for historians to sufficiently assess the culture of the "healthy" mind, an interdisciplinary research platform must be established. This is due to the fact that every "sick" individual becomes ill in the context of a specific society and culture, as well as its associated cultural history. On the flip side, every historical-cultural world, epoch, and civilization has struggled to overcome the risks of crisis, thus necessitating an in-depth comprehension of sickness and health.

(de Martino, 2019, p. 200)

Within the realm of academic discourse, the intersection of psychoanalysis and anthropology has been considerably strained, an outcome of the protracted dispute that arose concomitantly with the incipient stages of the ethnopsychological sciences. This category encapsulates such fields as ethnopsychiatry and ethnops psychoanalysis, which are intrinsic to a broader critique of psychoanalysis predicated on the assertion of its universal applicability. A commendable analysis and deepening of the debate between Anthropology and Psychoanalysis around the Oedipus complex was proposed by Smadja

individual's being wanting to freely express their subjectivity, and the social and cultural models imposing norms and constraints, philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari engraved the final epitaph of Freudian thought with the two volumes of "Capitalism and Schizophrenia", the first of which, "Anti-Oedipus" (Guattari & Deleuze, 1972) serves as a clear statement of intent. However, it must be acknowledged that unlike other psychological schools—overly specialized and sometimes unaware in interdisciplinary matters—the anthropological interest of psychoanalysis has at least enabled a dialogue that, arising from critical psychiatry, has allowed for a transcultural approach. Indeed, the main critics of the method are raised from psychoanalysis itself. Even Guattari, co-author of the aforementioned anti-Oedipus essay, was nevertheless a psychoanalyst.⁶⁵

(Smadja, 2018). Prominent anti-psychiatric movements, most notably embodied in the work of Anti-Oedipus, have exerted substantial influence in undermining the credibility of psychoanalysis. In response, anthropology has found it necessary to underscore cultural relativism to challenge the universality of concepts which Sigmund Freud postulated as such. These include kinship structures, psychosexual development, and the formation of trauma. It is contended that these elements are significantly more diverse than Freud's limited purview of Western patients would suggest. Nonetheless, this ought not to engender a misapprehension that psychoanalysis holds no relevance for anthropology. Quite to the contrary, it possesses notable explanatory potential. A paramount tenet of Freudian psychoanalytic theory was the Oedipus complex. While the nomenclature "complex" was originally attributable to Carl Jung, this term has subsequently been etched indelibly into the annals of psychoanalytic history. This particular complex is situated within the broader Freudian discourse on psychosexual development. Freud theorized that human sexuality traverses a series of distinct phases, each corresponding to the libidinal investment in specific erogenous zones, concomitant with behavioral and psychological transitions. The inaugural phase is characterized by an infantile fixation on the oral region, succeeded by a second phase focused on the urethral/anal region. The third phase, colloquially known as the genital stage, is also marked by the emergence of the Oedipus complex. For Freud, the human body interprets the accumulation of energy as a state of discomfort, while the release of energy as a state of pleasure, and therefore the need to release the exceeding energy. It is interesting to note how the primary process "is linked developmentally to the earlier concept of the constancy principle and the later Nirvana principle" (p. 233). The relationship between Buddhism and psychoanalysis is not solely based on the use of unique metaphors, but is also rooted in theory. Direct and indirect influences from Indian thought on psychoanalysis are evident in Freud's work, which he openly acknowledges as deriving from the Schopenhauerian lineage (Galimberti, 2005, p. 40). This philosophy is a Western interpretation of primary aspects of Indian thought, particularly Buddhist teachings (Cross, 2017). Fundamental themes of Buddhism, such as the inherent discomfort of humanity and suffering as the central issue of human problems, are also central to psychoanalysis (De Silva, 2010). In the Buddhist perspective, two different kinds of passions/drives exist. One may be surprised to learn that Freud elaborated a nearly identical theory. These two 'sister' passions are complementary to some degree and are both part of the human soul. The first is the life or existence drive (*bhavataṇhā*), and the second is the drive of death or self-destruction (*vibhavataṇhā*). Freud conceptualizes precisely the same drives in his psychoanalytic theory and refers to them as "Pleasure principle" (*Lustprinzip*) and "death drive" (*Todestrieb*). However, it is well known that Freud attempted to reconstruct a general theory of sexuality, and of the human psyche as well, looking for universal laws and processes which, however, were strongly inspired by those of the Europe of his time, and did not make him duly take into account other problems that only a transcultural look would have revealed. Indeed, the conflicts that arose between Freudian doctrine and future developments in ethnopsychiatry and ethnops psychoanalysis can be attributed to its inaccuracies in the universal description of phenomena such as sexuality and family constitution, during a period when anthropology was laying the groundwork for the science of kinship and Malinowski was examining the "sexuality of savages" (Smadja, 2018, pp. 23-9).

⁶⁵ Devereux was also an anthropologist and psychoanalyst in a country that continued to regard non-medical psychoanalysts as belonging to a lower rank. His therapeutic method, combining anthropology and psychoanalysis—therefore self-dubbed as "complementarist ethnops psychoanalysis"—is considered pioneering in anthropological psychiatry (Smadja, 2018, p. 185). Along with Tobie Nathan, who continued his method, Devereux established "Ethnopsychiatria", the first ethnopsychiatry journal. Devereux's goal, beyond proposing mere interdisciplinary syncretism, was to re-conceptualize the key concept of anthropology, 'culture', and to react (in the chemical sense of the word) this notion with the problem of psychiatry: the distinction between normal and pathological. Therefore, in this vision, ethnopsychiatry is neither psychiatry nor anthropology, but something new, born from both, but transcending its "parents" by demonstrating more than a mere union of their contents. Of course, there is no shortage of criticisms of the ethnopsychiatric method as well, considering it excessively culturalist and, in Nathan's case, heavily skewed towards suggestive practice, a real scandal for psychoanalytic thought, that of suggestion and patient influence, which conversely represents one of the

Blaming Freud would be historically unfair. Anthropology also embraced the positivist dream of being a ‘hard’ science, ignoring the fact that it diminished their capacity to study subjectivity. Anthropology underwent a significant internal revolution to abandon objectivist claims and embrace phenomenological empiricism free from positivistic prejudices (Desjarlais & Throop, 2011; Kapferer, 2010).

This concluding section does not aim to fully justify psychoanalysis as an absolutely valid methodology. Instead, I have sought to contextualize its historical relationships, both direct and

operational profiles in the therapeutic techniques of not a few healers (but not only, as is noted by a brief overview of contemporary cognitive-oriented psychotherapeutic techniques). The most significant contribution to Italian ethnopsychiatry has been made by Ernesto de Martino. His work is an interdisciplinary investigation among anthropology, history, philosophy, and psychoanalysis. Ernesto de Martino often refers to phenomenology, from which he draws inspiration for the concept of presence, if not being-there (*Dasein*), used to interpret both cultural constructions and ritual and sacred traditions, and even, in his monumental posthumous work, psychopathology. For this reason, de Martino repeatedly invoked ethnopsychiatry to praise its interdisciplinary spirit (Bartocci & Prince, 1998). The focus of his work is the analysis of conditions of vulnerability, of psychic instability, of risk which proceeds in parallel to the understanding of the magical-ritual apparatus and its protective capacities. What we are fearing here is more than a simple interdisciplinary dialogue, but the willingness to recognize that these two disciplines are closely interconnected. What is currently referred to as anthropology or sociology was frequently denominated as “psychology” or “ethnology”, with these terms being employed interchangeably (Mattingly et al., 2008). The genesis of psychology as a distinct discipline, separate from anthropology, was Wundt’s choice, who fervently sought the emergence of an experimental psychology (Mischel, 1970). At this juncture, the clinical orientation that characterizes the conceptualization of contemporary psychology, primarily perceived as psychotherapy, was yet to materialize. Psychiatry, having been established several decades prior (Kendler et al., 2022), had already secured a dominant monopoly on the psychic dimension, situating it within the medical domain. Wundt promptly acknowledges that this experimental psychology diverges from a more comprehensive and expansive psychology, thereby allowing for the delineation of other psychologies, such as the psychology of peoples (*Völkerpsychologie*), which must address broader processes that we would presently define as sociocultural (Danziger, 1983; Greenwood, 2003). Wundt himself unreservedly utilizes the term *ethnologie*, that is, anthropology as we comprehend it today. It is no mere coincidence that Wundt may be credited with the schism between Anthropology and Psychology, or more specifically, the emergence of a German-style ethnological school, which would subsequently shape the perception of anthropological epistemology in the years to come (Hahn, 2022). Freud drew significant inspiration from Wundt; however, his seminal work, the “Project”, established a psychological framework that diverged from Wundt’s approach, steering the analysis of the psyche towards a convergence with ethnology. Indeed, Freudian psychoanalysis represents an initial attempt at this convergence—an experiment that was partially successful and partially unsuccessful due to the presumptive universality of psychoanalytic principles, which were, in reality, specifically applicable to *Mitteleuropean* society at that time. Efforts to assimilate psychoanalysis into psychotherapy through psychodynamic psychotherapy and similar methods proved futile, ultimately leading to the bifurcation of psychoanalysis into two branches: one therapeutic, situated within psychotherapies, and the other humanistic, referred to as “lay psychoanalysis” (*Laienanalyse*), championed by prominent intellectual figures such as Hillman (D’Heurle & Feimer, 1975, p. 296), who was a philosopher by training, Lacan (arguably the most idiosyncratic, with a background in psychiatry), and initially by Theodor Reik, Otto Rank, Anna Freud, Erik Erikson, Ernst Kris, and Harry Guntrip, to name just a few pioneers. Thus, Despite Freud’s initial positivistic ambitions, psychoanalysis has consistently remained more humanistic than tied to hard sciences. It has struggled significantly to be acknowledged as a ‘science’, and even today, the debate remains inconclusive. Conversely, the concepts developed within psychoanalysis have greatly contributed to humanistic disciplines, spanning from philosophy to art, literature, and even anthropology, albeit amid various conflicts. As a small anecdote to support this assertion, I humbly recall that Freud, despite being a neurologist, was not awarded a Nobel Prize in Medicine; instead, in 1930, he received the Goethe Prize for literary merits. Ultimately, Freud himself admitted that his work was, to a certain extent, humanistic and transdisciplinary (Schröter, 2004; Murray, 1988; Bergmann, 1988). Consequently, psychoanalysis was denied scientific status due to its interpretative model, which relied heavily on metaphors, symbols, and language rooted in the history of philosophy. While Freud continued to view psychoanalysis as a science, it was not objectivist. The dissonance inherent in this controversy stems from the fact that psychoanalysis, despite its non-scientific status (Grünbaum, 1979; Grant & Edwin, 2005), has been effective, adaptive to historical and social changes. However, the scientific nature of a method is not a guarantee of effectiveness or certainty, as Freud’s successors, such as Jung, Hillman, and Lacan, have learned.

indirect, with anthropology. This is because I have utilized psychoanalytic theory—revised, adapted, and reinterpreted to suit my needs—for the benefit of the ethnographic research I conducted. I must explicitly acknowledge the dialogue between these two fields, particularly since the practice of drawing mandalas as an analytical technique was initially introduced by a psychoanalyst. It is through this study that this methodology transitions from the psychological to the anthropological domain. The same can be said for the visual theory, that in this research has been developed not solely from the domain of social sciences and visual work, but also from the philosophical instances of a notorious psychoanalyst like James Hillman, whose ideas about the imaginal world I considered worth of attention. Therefore, to account for this transition and the theoretical dialogue I have consistently maintained between anthropology and psychoanalysis, I deemed it necessary to specify the points discussed thus far.

6.2 The Access Way to the Image

Although he has not fully accomplished the purpose of a radically non-dualistic vision in anthropology, de Martino's effort is undoubtedly remarkable and one of the most commendable in terms of revealing the weaknesses of the ethnographic method and the limitations that a dualistic perspective imposes on the study of human phenomena. Far from being outdated, de Martino has not only anticipated the phenomenological turn but has, through his critique of naturalism, already laid the groundwork for discussing the phenomenological turn itself: the attempt to shed one's own perspective to put oneself in the shoes of another is simply pointless. This is the idea that de Martino clearly asserts in his writings. Excessive cultural relativism is not only useless but also counterproductive in his view, and ultimately, the "historical" richness of the anthropologist is still something that constitutes a form of enrichment in its own way. Certainly, one can criticize this view by saying that de Martino somehow considered the Western perspective as the only one capable of transcending ethnocentrism, and that the claim of being able to do it without one's own perspective is susceptible to the same criticism for which today it is said that we must abandon that perspective seeking objectivity.

Paradoxically, the phenomenological turn, in its attempt to approach subjectivity, has asked subjects to divest themselves of an essential part of their *being-subjects*, namely their mental background, or what we might call 'implicit philosophy'. In criticizing ethnocentrism, de Martino reveals that things are much more complex, and that simply shedding one's own identity and cultural subjectivity is a futile and harmful exercise. In fact,

encounters with other cultures show us ways of being human that are different from the ones that we ourselves occupy, revealing to us what it means to be human in our own culture. In order to achieve this fusion of horizons, however, it is necessary that we begin with a critical consciousness of the limits that circumscribe our own cultural world. This critical consciousness does not arise from a simple act of self-reflection carried out in the solitude of one's deepest self, but involves instead a "double thematization" of one's own world and that of the other.⁶⁶

The claim of superiority of one's own culture or perspective is the real problem that is fought in the form of the arrogance that Western epistemology has assumed in *naturalism* (de Martino, 1941), but it does not mean that everything that comes from that thought is negative, and de Martino provides evidence that intercultural dialogue is possible when he adopts (and adapts) Western philosophy and psychoanalysis to explain cultural phenomena far removed from the Western world, yet manages to explain them with surprising effectiveness, also demonstrating how cultures are not isolated and incommunicable worlds. This is as close as it gets to a non-dualistic conception. Then it is up to us to take the next step, and that next step must necessarily go beyond the Demartinian conception of presence as an essential fact of human life only.

Images show their own capability to *dialogue* with us, they are 'present' in their own way, and they take part in the conscious activity of determination and self-determination of presences, contributing to the history of which they are part of. To some extent, it is possible to equate the notion of presence with the consciousness of the subject, to the point that the crises of presence are better understood, in their devastating harm, precisely because this model is rooted in the very making of culture, and cultures are inevitably present in every society. However, the idea that there is only one possible choice: stable presence or presence in crisis, can be misleading. Can humans exist without presence, but at the same time not experience their 'absence of self' as a 'crisis'? This is where meditation comes into play.

It is precisely with the intent to uncover the non-dualistic perspective of meditation through anthropological investigation that I have chosen to develop the methodology of *maṇḍala-elicitation*. Specifically, my approach entailed requesting subjects to spontaneously generate images while emphasizing a sequential, layered approach. This deliberate choice aimed to preclude the image from becoming a singular—albeit stratified—representation of the intricate nature of contemplative practice. Proposing a trajectory spanning several hypothetical meditation sessions conducted over multiple days, I deemed it essential to maintain a record of the meditative journey. This could be achieved through two distinct methods: either soliciting the creation of an image at the conclusion of

⁶⁶ Cf. Stanghellini & Ciglia, 2013, pp. 16-7.

each meditation session or instructing subjects to produce a single, complex image in multiple phases. The latter approach permitted the compositional elements of the visual data to progressively emerge, influenced by and reflective of the evolution of the contemplative journey. Notably, both in my autoethnographic exploration and in experiments conducted with other subjects, there was a discernible propensity to generate maṇḍala-like images from the outset.

Recognizing that the overly analytical approach frequently sought by psychology may not be congruent with anthropological objectives, I opted to devise a unique method. This method draws inspiration from Jungian experiences while remaining firmly grounded in ethnographic and autoethnographic practices, visual elicitation techniques, and micro-phenomenological theory (Petitmengin, 2021). These findings also served as the foundation for arguments regarding the necessity of contemplative anthropology.

My approach entailed inviting meditation practitioners to depict their spontaneous thoughts, emotions, and experiences without predefined meanings or artistic constraints, employing the maṇḍala as a conduit for visual elicitation. This technique is extremely valuable in terms of allow elements of their personal experience to emerge from the subjects in a more spontaneous and less forced way: “researchers may also take advantage of non-(technically) mediated or directly observed aspects of visual culture (signage, architecture) and of studying and using nonphotographic representations (e.g., drawings, paintings, murals, graffiti, maps, charts). In many cases “fixing the shadows,” however, by producing a permanent (most often photographic) record is helpful or even necessary” (Pauwels, 2010, pp. 555-6). I decided of course to focus on the realization of visual products through drawing.

The creation of multi-layered maṇḍalas during various phases of meditation provides a unique window into the evolving states of consciousness during contemplative practice. The research methodology employed in this study is predicated on three fundamental principles.

Firstly, participants must embark a meditation practice, regardless of their previous level of expertise or adoption of a specific meditation technique. It is important that they express a clear intention to engage in some form of contemplative practice. This study acknowledges concentration, the cessation of superficial cognitive processes, and the exploration of deeper layers of consciousness as essential components of the contemplative experience. This stage is fundamental because in the phases of visual production so that “participants can control the exchange of information, introduce ideas and concepts they consider relevant and significant, and participate meaningfully in the research process. Giving participants greater control can also yield data that more authentically reflect their conceptual categories—for example, by revising, adding to, or omitting stimulus materials” (Barton, 2015, p. 182).

Secondly, in terms of visual ‘production’, participants have been encouraged to craft multi-stage maṇḍalas during their meditation sessions, with each stage representing their evolving states of mind and experiences. Participants enjoy creative freedom in selecting the shape and progression of their maṇḍalas, enabling spontaneous and unencumbered artistic expression. There is one thing to say. As Pauwels points out, this technique was initially popular among psychologists and was only later adopted by the social sciences, but even then, it primarily resulted in the use of photography.

The technique whereby images are used as a stimulus in the context of an interview was originally applied in psychological research. It was subsequently adopted by a number of social scientists and is now primarily known as ‘photo-elicitation’, though in fact many types of images can be used (still and moving, paintings or drawings, etc.), and thus ‘image-elicitation’ or ‘visual elicitation’ would be a more appropriate term. The visual materials used as ‘stimuli’ to obtain unique kinds of information from respondents and informants may include pre-existing ‘societal imagery’ (historic or archive pictures of cities, advertisements, etc.), as well as researcher—or respondent-generated materials.⁶⁷

The adoption of drawings as a tool for visual elicitation is inherently distinctive. However, I had to adapt it to my specific requirements, without entirely excluding the dialogue with other disciplines, especially psychology, which in the past, inspired by Jung, has utilized this technique but in a markedly different manner. This aspect is what convinced me to stipulate that the interpretation of the images should not be influenced in any way by pre-existing cultural backgrounds or educational biases regarding the value of symbols. While I acknowledge that this aspect is the most challenging, I endeavored to uphold it as rigorously as possible. I requested, as the third characteristic of the methodology I developed, that the interpretation only take place at the conclusion of the drawing process and that it, too, remain free from biases but be emotionally influenced solely by what the images conveyed. In other words, I asked that *after* the meditative phases leading to the emergence of the drawing, the meditator would contemplate once more, but this time focus their attention on what had emerged: the maṇḍala they had created. This meditation on the image is what subsequently yielded the most captivating results in terms of visual theory.

As explained in the introduction, the process of ‘interpretation’ empowers participants to assume the role of ‘experts’ in their own visual creations, fostering open and candid dialogues concerning their meditative encounters. Initially, the anthropologist functions primarily as a listener, employing

⁶⁷ Cf. Pauwels, 2015a, pp. 96-7.

questions to explore intriguing aspects of the artwork. In certain instances, the anthropologist may propose interpretative hypotheses, thereby encouraging participants to contribute their insights.

The majority of participants opted to layer from the outside to the inside, reserving the ‘core’ for last. While this choice was not universal, it prevailed among meditators, while others preferred to outline the core first or even adopt a multifocal concept of ‘layer’, creating apparent overlapping shapes. This research has brought to light the subjective background of the participants, both cultural and deeply personal, providing us with an insight into modern Western society of meditators. This society often maintains access to a dimension of interiority or ‘spirituality’ that is not extinct but is very much alive. This vitality can also contribute to the investigation of consciousness within the field of anthropology.

For example, in Leo’s case, the cores reached the end of the meditation session as the culmination of the practice, reflecting the deepest contemplative moment. Layla’s approach was heavily influenced by shamanic practice. She asserts that the images evoked in her maṇḍalas are either revealed to her by her spirit guides or emerge during deep phases of contemplation. Conversely, Joe has developed a personalized contemplative practice centered on breath control and focused attention.

Layla initially employs mental imagery to invoke a setting that guides her into a “profound” state from which she embarks on her shamanic journey. This is actually a common pattern in modern forms of spirituality related to animism: “practitioners of nature spiritualities create new meanings, relationships and connections through participation; these helps formulate different holistic world-views” (Greenwood, 2005, p. 90).

Joe utilized focal concentration to relax the body, subsequently unlocking the capacity to experience the mundane in an entirely different manner—a form of expanding one’s consciousness. Notably, Joe is one of the only two subjects (along with Daniel) who chose to depict his maṇḍalas in a ‘radial’ form, originating from the center, as he believes it mirrors the most natural developmental pattern of things.

In ethnographic interviews conducted with meditation practitioners, it becomes evident that by removing the element of mediation and requesting an uncritical drawing—one that is not the result of an effort to translate images into representations of something else—that which spontaneously emerges in the meditator’s consciousness after dissolving the dualistic structures of their conception through meditation, such an image is perceived as something conscious in itself. It reflects, in some way, the consciousness of the one who ‘summoned’ it into the visible. There is an imaginative dialogue with what gradually appears on the paper, as if the artwork were not entirely ‘produced’ but instead constitutes a fragment of consciousness summoned into the visible through a dialogue with the meditator’s consciousness, arising from the contemplative practice itself. As the subject engaged

in meditation over the course of days or months, details were added to the drawings, or in the initial stages, different drawings were generated.

I believe it is necessary to clarify the value that visual production holds for this research. In many cases, the ethnographic subjects who participated in visual elicitation, by producing drawings, referred to these outputs as “works”, implicitly alluding to them as artistic creations (‘work of art’). Furthermore, the theoretical reflection accompanying the analysis of these ‘works of art’ partially falls within the realm of visual anthropology, and therefore inevitably overlaps with theoretical considerations that could also be applied to art pieces. This raises a delicate issue, as the definition of what can be considered art or not appears somewhat arbitrary, at least in the opinion of the author.

I must acknowledge that many of the anthropological considerations, within the scope of anthropology as intended in this work, concerning the production of visual works, can easily be applicable to artistic creations, and this should not be disregarded. However, I invite readers not to view this research solely in the context of art, as the production of visual elements is embedded within the exercise of elicitation and the anthropological investigation of states of consciousness experienced in contemplative practice.

This visual production should not be strictly understood as art, nor can a visual theory assert itself as a comprehensive explanation of art as a whole. On the other hand, art, through the inspiration of the artist, is a subject of anthropological interest that falls within the multi/interdisciplinary scope of our investigation (Mitchell, 1995).

Captivated by inspiration, the sculptor (but this can be applied to all artists in general) is gripped by an internal tremor, a sense of lucid madness that illuminates from within, making clear what was previously confusing and blurred. Inspiration, so challenging to define, renders the world teeming with voices and colors hitherto unknown, similar to how hierophany (ἱεροφάνεια) unveils the meaning concealed within an apparently ordinary event; likewise, the artist, inspired by this strange inner force, experiences an event that is almost spiritual. The voices metaphorically beckon him, and thus the sculptor approaches the block of marble, and from the cold and rigid veins of the bare stone, there arises a whisper, a request: “give me this form, give me this shape!” (see §4.5). The artist, wielding his chisel and possessed by the ‘vision’ now clearly emerging in his mind, responds to the marble’s plea and ‘extracts’ from it the image that was previously imprisoned within.

This metaphor, presented in narrative form, refers to a sensation that I experienced during this research, drawing on autoethnographic reflection, and inspired by previous visions I had of Michelangelo’s so-called ‘unfinished’ sculptures.



Fig. 25: 'St Matthew' by Michelangelo, 1504-08 Florence, Galleria dell'Accademia
Photo by Jörg Bittner Unna (CC BY-SA 3.0)

I emphasize this image, hoping not to appear pedantic, as it serves the purpose of conveying a clear idea of the process of evoking an image, which also fits the case of recalling shapes and colors that meditators had to 'listen to' from their unconscious and 'invite' onto paper in a specific form rather than another. Furthermore, as Carabell notes, these works by Michelangelo highlight the anthropological problem of the fluid and changing nature of identity: "established as an ongoing process that must, by definition, remain unfinished" (Carabell, 1997, p. 100). Can contemplative practice be compared to artistic inspiration? Certainly, Michelangelo's 'unfinished' sculptures are evocative precisely because they allude to a sort of liberation of the image from the stone, which unfortunately, due to the incompleteness of the work, remains trapped in a limbo, between presentation and concealment behind the heavy veil of marble that still conceals them from view.

In this example, sculpture calls for an awareness of matter or finds in that portion of matter its contingent conjunction, driving it to emerge in a certain form that reflects its demands. In the case of mandalas, it is not so much the paper that whispers to the artist, just as the canvas does not whisper to the painter. This whisper, which is a descriptive device for us, is evoked by the means that sharpens the ear, so to speak, during meditation and opens up towards one's consciousness, turning to the paper as a mirror but capturing, in this reflection, the murmurs of something that extends beyond the limits of the identity determined by the psychophysical aggregate that is inherent to it: discrete projections on the continuum of knowledge. This meditation takes them beyond, and only in the reverberation of

their own reflection colliding with something else can the impression of this contemplation be precisely impressed onto the paper in a specific form. Certainly, the sculptor can do the same, and indeed, this hearing of inspiration coming from the outside is only a pretext for their consciousness in contemplation to engage in dialogue with the complexity that transcends the usual boundaries.

In this context, the work of art serves as both the manifestation of its author's consciousness, imprinted in the configuration of the image, and the representation of the relationship between the author's consciousness and a part of the world that seizes upon this inspiration as the moment to emerge. Consequently, it cannot help but resonate with others and discusses itself as if it were an independent subjectivity, possessing its own will and destined for its unique narrative. The work of art possesses a presence akin to that of the artist's consciousness, although the strength of this presence may be subject to debate. Nevertheless, like any presence, it can only exist within the context of a relationship and cannot determine itself in isolation. Moreover, the image is not created *ex nihilo* (since the principle "*ex nihilo nihil*" is so self-evident as to be undeniable). Instead, it can be given or unveiled, emerging as an image as a result of the tension between two conscious polarities.

For time immemorial, images have pursued their intentions in human cultures through a significant *performative power*. Images suggest, decide, and communicate. However, while the humans who produce them may feel somewhat in control of the images, they are often unaware of how these images can, in turn, influence them. I am not referring to a simple notion of being acted upon, as any extreme interpretation could be perilous. Certainly, images do not assert themselves as full-fledged subjects of history, capable of determining the fate of a culture as if they were independent entities. Nonetheless, we cannot deny that they possess a certain autonomy that partially transcends that of their creators or observers.

It is evident that images have their own life cycle, which interacts with that of the observers but is not entirely determined by them. Each image exists in relation, inseparable from its connection to something else, much like human subjectivity. Thus, once liberated from the notion of strict objectivism, the image appears to behave like a conscious subject, although it possesses less autonomy in determining itself than a human being does. At this point, the only difference between a human subject and an imaginary one lies in the gradient of consciousness, where the image requires more interaction with human consciousness to manifest, appear, and develop a narrative.

The issue of the vitality of images has long been a prominent concern within the field of anthropology, with roots in contentious matters pertaining to the religiosity of diverse cultures and the imbueing of a divine essence into icons or objects. A seminal scholar in this regard is Marc Augé, who extensively scrutinized the notion of whether a culture can genuinely consider an idol or statuette as 'living' (Augé, 1988). Augé's inquiry primarily centers on the concept of the "object-god" (*le dieu-*

objet) within the context of African polytheistic religions. He critically examines how material objects and mythical representations serve as intermediaries, facilitating communication and interaction between humans and deities. The “object-god” serves as a tangible expression of the multifaceted relationships between humans and various types of divinities, ranging from indifference to conflict and even love. I would interpret these findings quite differently, not in the traditional form of ‘projection’ of cultural and symbolic forms *to* the object/image, thus conferring it their peculiar performative power, but rather as an inter-conscious dialogue that *can* involve symbols and cultural forms, but that also involve some conscious-driven force capable to determine itself through a dialogue with human consciousness. Therefore, the figurine of a deity crafted by some artisan in a particular culture would not be a mere *representation* of that particular deity, but something *perceived as* the deity itself, taking shape *into* that figurine. The stone or wood which it is made of is *alive* in its own way, not because we *project* our symbolic expectations into that, but because *something* which is *already* in that stone or wood calls for us to be interpreted in such a way: attracting our symbols for us to perceive it in that way.

Augé’s anthropological perspective highlights a dual nature of the “object-god”. On one facet, it exists as a material object, such as statues, totems, or other artifacts utilized in religious rituals. These objects are regulated, manipulated, and employed by humans to establish a connection with or exert influence over the divine entities. On the other aspect, the “object-god” assumes the role of a mythical figure with its own history, symbolizing a divine entity characterized by distinct powers and attributes.

In the African polytheistic religions presented by Augé, the uniqueness of the “object-god” lies in its plurality. The deities are not discrete individual entities but rather deified powers and figures that intersect with one another. They may embody ancestors or revered deceased individuals, natural elements like the sky or the sea, or mythical characters with distinctive narratives and characteristics. Moreover, Augé emphasizes that the “object-god” is intrinsically linked to social, familial, and communal relationships. The divinities embodied in these objects actively impact the lives of believers, influencing their destinies and participating in human interactions. The relationships with “object gods” can be intricate and ambivalent, involving both feelings of veneration and love as well as conflicts or indifference.

This concept of the “object god” offers valuable insights into how African polytheistic religions perceive the divine and the sacred, intricately interwoven with everyday life, nature, and society. In this worldview, there exists no clear demarcation between the human world and the divine realm; instead, the deities actively pervade the material reality and human interactions. As a result, the

“object god” serves as a mediator facilitating communication, influence, and comprehension of the forces and powers surrounding individuals.

In the eyes of early scholars studying the idolatry of cultures colonized by Europeans, the material component of these practices received significant attention. To European observers, it seemed as though the indigenous people worshiped mere objects or ascribed divinity to these objects. Consequently, they labeled such ‘uncivilized’ beliefs as ‘fetishism’. Fetishism denotes the attribution of supernatural qualities to an object, turning it into something ‘supernatural’ (*sinnlich-übersinnlich*), obscuring its production process, and sanctifying it as a fetish, according to Marx.

The paradox of modern society lies in its tendency to objectify subjects, compensating for the denial of their intrinsic value by science. Individuals, in turn, subjectivize objects. For instance, Agamemnon’s scepter symbolized his power and, beyond being a mere object, possessed a rich history forged by Hephaestus at the behest of Zeus, conferring it with divine power. Consequently, the symbol converges diverse elements, uniting the powers of deities and the right to rule, and materializes them in an object that embodies these powers, not merely symbolizes them (Fabietti, 2014, p. 41).

Rudolf Otto perceives the object as a medium of the numinous, crystallizing the unfathomable otherness that eludes human comprehension and embodying the mysterious and numinous force where belief finds its foundation. Fetishes become objects that harbor an authentic presence, endowing the object with depth at a symbolic or spiritual level, which remains beyond representation and visibility outside the object. De Brosses, on the other hand, viewed fetishism as a primitive custom born out of ignorance, where ‘mere matter’ is ascribed supernatural and religious attributes, attributing ‘religious’ structures to it.

However, the significance of the matter extends beyond religious power, assuming that one can precisely delineate religion. Instead, it encompasses the entire universe revolving around the object, the person using it, and the transfer of qualities to the object in some manner. The object is “artificial”, an artifact crafted with skill. In this sense, the Portuguese term *feitiço* refers to artificial artifacts, hence “fictitious”, derived from the Latin *facticius*. This led De Brosses to perceive belief in objects (fetishism) as an ascription of supernatural and/or religious powers to mere matter, akin to believing in something artificial, fictitious, or fetishistic. Nevertheless, considering the European world from which De Brosses emerged, it becomes evident that even in advanced stages, such as highly civilized positivist science, humanity continues to project psychological power and metaphysical sentiments onto objects.

Contemporary anthropology has demonstrated that, beyond a primitive belief, the capacity to invest matter with symbolic meaning is, in fact, a universal human trait characterizing all societies. Its

comprehension is inherently linked to psychosocial and humanistic studies. The symbol exudes its power so long as its significance remains veiled, but once unveiled, it becomes a mere image. This characteristic ambivalence of the symbol is identified by the renowned anthropologist Mircea Eliade as an integral element of hierophanies, denoting manifestations of the sacred.

In modern Indian culture, the religious act of *darśan* continues to persist, denoting the act of “vision” (derived from the Sanskrit *darśana* “vision” and the root *dṛś* “to look”). This sacred act falls within the realm of theophanies, where a divine spirit can manifest itself ‘to the view’ of the observer in a unique reciprocal relationship. In this process, the observer’s gaze, directed toward the image of the god, enables the deity to manifest and become ‘visible’. The *darśan* is reciprocal, as it can be received by a person from a divinity or spiritual master, while also being a gaze returned by the worshipper, thus facilitating veneration within Hindu culture.⁶⁸

Augé proposes a plausible explanation for fetishism rooted in the sanctity of death. The non-living, inanimate, and deceased entity exists in a dimension inconceivable to the living community. Incapable of fully grasping the utter otherness of the inanimate, humans instinctively attribute animate characteristics to it. The truly unthinkable aspect for a human is that which represents an extreme otherness to life. To make raw and lifeless matter conceivable, it is animated, enlivening it and establishing a profound connection between matter and the sacred.

Idolatry entails the substitution of the representation of the symbol (the object) with what it represents. In this context, the object ceases to be a mere representation of a person, deity, power, title, or function; rather, the object is perceived as embodying the very essence of the person, deity, or power itself. Consequently, without possessing the object, the power associated with it is lost. Sigmund

⁶⁸ In this scholarly endeavor, Favero (2019) posits that icons, despite their prominent figurative elements depicting Christ or the Virgin Lady, hold a fundamental purpose in transporting worshippers to distinct realms and facilitating transformative experiences through the power of vision. He contends that icons, akin to Hindu devotional images, extend beyond mere representations of external realities, instead acting as portals to alternate experiential dimensions. Favero introduces the novel concept of “visual ascesis”, as advanced by Lindsay Opie, to elucidate how icons elicit contemplation, presence, and transformation, transcending conventional narrative functions (p. 9). Favero accentuates a marked departure from the Renaissance perspective, emphasizing that these artistic techniques position viewers in the co-presence of potential diverse worlds, drawing intriguing parallels with the philosophy of Buddhist nonduality. Through a myriad of thought-provoking associations, he propounds that viewers are impelled to confront the limitations of their perceptions and meditate upon the intricate interplay between body and mind, as well as the relative nature of the self. Favero contends that comprehending such profound insights necessitates a departure from Western dualistic epistemologies. He advocates for the adoption of Buddhist philosophical tenets, such as the principle of non-duality or double negation, as indispensable aids in navigating the intermediary space of neither ‘self’ nor ‘not-self’. He elucidates that Buddhism’s resistance to binary oppositions facilitates the contemplation of simultaneous existence as ‘self’ and ‘not-self’, or as ‘neither self’ nor ‘non-self’. This Buddhist perspective conceives the world as impermanent and continually evolving, engaging in a perpetual process of ‘confrontation’ instead of seeking fixed, absolute truths. It operates as a dynamic method rather than an entrenched system of knowledge, embracing contingency and ambiguity while acknowledging transcendence and the inherent limitations of complete comprehension (pp. 6-11). Favero applies these deliberately unstable epistemological principles to illuminate the experiences of viewers in virtual reality (VR) and mixed reality (MR) environments. Within these immersive spaces, viewers undergo transformative shifts in their sense of identity, existing in a state of neither complete ‘self’ nor absolute ‘not-self’, oscillating between ‘presence’ and ‘absence’, and embodying elements of ‘body’ and ‘not-body’.

Freud reached a similar conclusion in psychoanalysis, exploring the nature of relationships with the other, wherein adoration of a specific detail of a person predominates over their totality.

In 1927, Freud expounded on fetishism as a manifestation of libidinal gratification projected onto objects that subsequently become fetishes. He draws an analogy primarily concerned with synecdoche, whereby an object becomes imbued with excessive meaning. Freud contends that pathological behavior emerges when an individual, terrified by a relationship or confrontation with the other, employs the mechanism of fetishism to redirect their entire libidinal interest toward an object that replaces the genuine relationship. As a consequence, the person completely eschews the relationship with the other, concentrating all their attention, including sexual interest, on the fetishized object, which serves as a substitute for the real person.

Even within the domain of psychoanalysis, the anthropological relationship between identity and otherness, as well as the interplay between the self and the other, cannot be avoided. I have previously elucidated through Buddhist philosophy the fictitious and illusory perception that this division between subject and object constitutes. This ethnographic work has significantly expanded on this notion, also providing ethnographic material to support the thesis of a non-dualist experience of reality reached during meditation, which also compels us to reflect again on the need for an ontological theory in anthropology (see §5.6).

6.3 For an Anthropology of Consciousness and Identity

The hermeneutical shift in anthropology has opened up the prospect of considering participant observation as a critical tool in studying meditation. This gives rise to a complex inter-subjective relationship in which the identities of both the anthropologist and the subjects under scrutiny are weakened by the practice of meditation, leading to increased levels of consonance and mutual understanding. Anthropologists have always endeavored to enter the subjectivity of the other without relinquishing their own, as Geertz and others have advocated, and contemplative practice offers a distinctive opportunity to accomplish this objective by allowing for a higher level of inter-subjective encroachment than any other research methodology.

Contemplative practice is a valuable resource for anthropology since it enables a more profound comprehension of the subjectivity of others. The hermeneutical approach to ethnography of contemplative practices facilitates an improved understanding of the association between meditation and identity, making it feasible to integrate contemplative anthropology into the realm of medical anthropology, and ultimately enabling the investigation of contemplative practice as a therapeutic form.

I proposed that Ernesto de Martino's anthropological framework is the most suitable foundation for establishing a theoretical apparatus to ethnographically examine the problem of consciousness, including within contemplative practices. De Martino deliberates on the nature and origins of consciousness. Recognizing that consciousness requires an object to understand itself, de Martino suggests the possibility that consciousness must also exist *within* a historical context. For de Martino, consciousness is indeed a "positive" cultural phenomenon (de Martino, 2019, p. 429), which finds meaning in its opposition to the idea of its own annulment, where, in the context of the historical drama of the world of magic, the overcoming presence struggles to assert itself in the face of a "negative", since there is no history of the negative, nor can it be made (2022, pp. 74-5).⁶⁹

Being, as the totality of conceivable and unconceivable phenomena, is *partialized* by consciousness, which cannot coincide with the "whole possible Being" (cf. Manuscript A₁ in de Martino, 1995). Consciousness "stands before Being in order to reflect it" (p. 99), and in this immediate encounter of a self-reflected in one of its parts and vice versa, what de Martino calls "valorization" occurs, that is, a conceptualization and contextualization of a given entity in culture. De Martino posits that for anthropology to be truly effective, anthropologists must possess a philosophical perspective and base their research on a strong theoretical framework. Without this, there is a risk of "succumbing to superficial and overly casual descriptivism" (Signorelli, 2015, p. 45).

It has been observed that "anthropological theory has tended to disappear, swallowed up by ethnographic particularism" (Brigati & Gamberi, 2019, p. 226). As de Martino aptly observed, the centrality of ethnography has led to a "descriptivism of the ethnologists of the positivist era who minutely described the facts of the primitive custom, obtaining from it an involuntarily ridiculous image, like the technical gestures of swimming repeated by one who is out of the water" (de Martino, 2019, p. 399). The need for impact with otherness and the collapse of the rigidity of one's world to open new horizons and different worlds is a fundamental aspect in de Martino's ethnology, who already presents this kind of reflections from his earliest work. Firstly, he posits that a non-Eurocentric ethnology is virtually impossible (Idem, 1941, p. 206), because anthropology is inherently a European science, predominantly practiced by Europeans.

Currently, there are two dominant trends in academic science: homogenization and the flattening of knowledge to universal laws or extreme particularization, where each case is treated as an exception and there are no general laws or trends (Stanghellini & Ciglia, 2013).

⁶⁹ This is a fact generally acknowledged also by Sartre when it comes to the problem of consciousness and perception: "[l]a chose c'est, avant toute comparaison, avant toute construction, ce qui est présent à la conscience comme *n'étant* pas de la conscience. Le rapport originel de présence, comme fondement de la connaissance, est négatif" (Sartre, 1976, p. 253).

As far as the study of the human being, culture and subjectivity is concerned, it is futile to feign complete estrangement from oneself; instead, it is beneficial to perceive the other through one's own perspective. The primary issue de Martino identifies is prejudice or the judgment of value, which is unfounded precisely because it ignores cultural relativity. The intent of entirely estranging oneself to understand the other is unnecessarily pretentious. Rather, it is through the acceptance of one's personal, educational, subjective, and socio-cultural background—through acknowledging one's 'being in history'—that one can comprehend otherness. This understanding is not achieved by attempting to erase one's past, which de Martino deems impossible, but by embracing it, recognizing its significant flaws as well as its merits. These merits can provide valuable insights into understanding and interpreting the otherness one encounters. Therefore, what must be eradicated is not one's cultural identity but rather the prejudice against otherness, the sense of preconceived superiority, and the notion that one can authoritatively speak about the lives and histories of others without first internalizing them.

This does not mean that de Martino is a relativist, but he certainly opposed deterministic and naturalistic readings, such as Jung's archetypes (notoriously, Jung considered the archetypes to be somehow codified in the human genes), considered "too ingenious hypotheses, in which it seems that the ancient myths are inextricably mixed with the narratives of their modern interpreters" (de Martino, 2013, p. 41). Moreover, as de Martino (2019) already pointed out, "it is not necessary to go very far into space to express coded behaviors: our neighbor or our relatives themselves can demonstrate this on a daily basis" (p. 323). De Martino's anthropological research aimed initially to reveal the "will of history" of the lower classes and their "cultural institutes". However, it ultimately resulted in the discovery of a general theory of human behavior. The cultural institution serves the purpose of providing answers and can be regarded as a technical means for doing so (Charuty, 2015, p. 8). His project was for a "reformed ethnology" (p. 16), which aimed to understand the needs of these groups and can be defined as a "culture clinician" (p. 17) who can analyze the clinical account of his own experience of suffering as an ethnographic experience.

In his philosophical works, de Martino delves into profound discussions of the nature of being and consciousness, which were essential for understanding the concrete consequences of a society dominated by technology and the resulting crises of individual presence (Campagna, 2018, p. 53; de Martino, 2021, p. 41).

De Martino's *Anthropology of Consciousness* starts with ontological ideas and develops into a theory of consciousness and presence. The anthropologist, by being aware of the historical, cultural, and social context, can grasp the manifestations of suffering and the culturally-made means to overcome it, particularly in the interpretation of culture-bound syndromes (Levine & Gaw, 1995).

For a long time, anthropology struggled with the problem of ethnocentrism, which was considered a stain on its epistemology. It eventually believed that the hermeneutic turn was a way to overcome ethnocentrism and restore the anthropologist's ability to study human beings without the weight of this controversial chapter in their history.

Madness, as proposed by Lesce (2019), is a form of collapse of presence in the face of a perceived oppressive world. This collapse of presence leads to the one potential solution, as posited by de Martino, of venturing into nothingness through the desperate struggle of asceticism. Through this risky journey, the ascetic does not discover nothingness but rather, a regulated relationship with auditory "spirits" leading to their victory over the world, their "redemption" (de Martino, 2022, p. 74) and the rising of "magic" (Geisshuesler, 2021, pp. 168, 183-172). Lesce further argues that, for de Martino, one's Being is considered sick when the subject is unable to produce and recognize the signs of their own actions in the external world (Lesce, 2019, p. 178). It should also be noted that within Buddhism, this condition is considered intrinsic to the world, with the self and the world being born in a state of loss and illness, respectively.

Ethnographers engage in cultural immersion as they study a particular society and its traditions, acquiring knowledge of its language, customs, and beliefs. This practice can be cathartic for both the ethnographer and the subjects of the study. The process of ethnography can prove to be personally transformative for the ethnographer, as it enables them to attain a deeper understanding of themselves and their own culture. Through their immersion in another culture, they gain an outside perspective on their own culture, and this can foster a greater appreciation of its strengths and weaknesses. This transformative experience can promote personal and professional growth for the ethnographer. In addition, cultural immersion can also be cathartic for the subjects of the study. The ethnographer's presence can validate cultures that may feel marginalized or overlooked by mainstream society. By documenting their customs and beliefs, ethnographers can help preserve and celebrate the uniqueness of these cultures. This, in turn, can serve as a source of pride and empowerment for those being studied.

In his first anthropological work, de Martino criticizes the ethnological sciences which conducted research from a naturalistic point of view (de Martino, 1941, p. 7), ultimately reducing the human being to an object, thus precluding their understanding. The outlining of the problem of cultural apparatuses aimed at protecting socio-historical presences from the risk of crisis, shows important psychoanalytic as well as philosophical references (Berardini, 2015), and conceives a humanistic therapy that has nothing to do with clinical models, but at the same time he deems it necessary for the anthropologist to become a "doctor", albeit in a non-technical sense of the term. Lanternari, among

others, contributes to define de Martino's Ethnology as a "complex epistemological unit" (Gallini & Massenzio, 1997, p. 93).

In this sense, for de Martino magic is the power to place personal and social events on a meta-historical level, in the sense of "being outside history", in order to perform defensive functions and give an interpretative sense to historical manifestations. The meta-historical plan is also a laboratory of de-historification, where events lose their historical weight and are re-signified. The magical protection founds in its way the horizon in which crisis is expelled with respect to the individual event. Thus magic has a psychological as well as protective task, being capable of reintegrating an asset at risk and fundamental to be protected.

If we consider the recent anthropological studies on the relation between consciousness and magic (Greenwood, 2005), a modern anthropological theory of consciousness based on Buddhism and ethnographic experiences related to meditation is much closer to the Demartinian theories than one might think. Consciousness is a central theme in ancient Buddhism, with meditation as a body technique aimed at achieving liberation from suffering and cognitive limitations through a thorough psychological examination of perceptions. This is reflected in the Pāli corpus and texts of later traditions, which contain numerous sections dedicated to the analysis of consciousness, identity, and perception (Karunadasa, 2019; De Silva, 2010; Fasching, 2008). It is important to note that meditation is a unique cultural phenomenon that has intersected with Western psychology at a specific point in its history (McMahan, 2009). This intersection between two vastly different psychological models has led to the emergence of a new phenomenon of transculturality, offering further insights into the study of consciousness.

There have been few attempts to relate Buddhist thought to current trends in brain psychology. This is not surprising since the dominant force in contemporary psychology, that of a modular cognitivism, considers mental contents to be logical solids that interact in a function space – an approach that is incompatible with a metaphysics of relation and change, and equally inhospitable to process philosophy.⁷⁰

Many studies devoted to the cultural analysis of identity construction seem to have no remark the point. It is a well-known fact by now, that there is a link between psycho-anthropological reality and identity constructions, and historical and social context are not sufficient to explain the complex web that characterizes the identities of individuals or groups (Markus & Kitayama, 1991, p. 225), yet precisely because of this study of identity should guard against macro-categorical generalizations, as

⁷⁰ Cf. Brown, 1999, p. 261.

unrepresentative of the multifaceted reality that then, in fact, proves to be more complex than general principles.

Individualism and collectivism are certainly cultural ideas, and thus, in the construction of an idea of self, membership in certain cultural reservoirs influences so-called internal reasoning activities, but it must be said that none of these general principles can entirely describe how the construction of self works. This should be said especially despite certain popular ideas in identity anthropology, according to which on such an individualism/collectivism axis Euro-Atlantic cultures were divided from Asian cultures in many abilities as, for example, in the aptitude to focus on an object at the expense of the context and vice versa (Kitayama et al., 2003; Han & Northoff, 2008, p. 647). Much more interesting is the neuro-anthropological conception of the self as a reality made up of interconnections and intersections between multiple interacting selves (Markus & Kitayama, 1991, p. 226). However much, then, a self may think of itself as independent or interdependent, it remains a fact that the independence of an identity is inherently impossible since identity is defined by relationships.⁷¹

Nonetheless, the condition of non-self (*anattā*) is not experienced by the meditators as an annihilation, but rather as a breaking down of any mental, physical, or temporal boundary between oneself and the world as a whole. Here, then, in selflessness time division no longer exist, and the becoming is clearly visible as a single event, like a panorama from above, no longer bound to a restrictive frame. For instance: “In selflessness, a person literally reclaims the sense of investigation and experimentation of childhood before any solid patterns confined imagination” (Pamutto, 2017, p. 175).

I said that in Buddhist thought, there is no separation between the physical and mental dimensions, and therefore the two phenomena are broadly the same reality in different forms of interaction. Consequently, the analysis of cognitive processes follows the analysis of matter, and the two things are reflected in the modalities of manifestation. The phenomena are all identifiable as the interaction of minimal entities (*dhamma*) with each other in a relationship of mutual codependency. This complex state can also be called phenomenological *homothety*. According to this interpretation,

⁷¹ Although one opposes an interdependent model to an independent one in defining the concept of identity in different cultures, I find it improper to juxtapose the former with a Buddhist view of identity, which appears far more complex than how interdependence is described in these research. Curious, for example, is the fact that an interdependent self, for Markus and Kitayama, coincides with a self-subservient to one's social duty, occupying “one's proper place” (p. 230), which is exactly the definition of moral duty (*svakarma*) that defined in Brāhmaṇic India the importance of social caste membership, a fact rejected and opposed in toto by the many Buddhist schools, which also preached to the interdependence of identities. Identity in Buddhism is a complex fact, and complex is its deconstruction. While preaching that identity is interdependent on mutual recognition and cognitive attribution and designation mechanisms, Buddhists base their practice on a radical social protest seeking freedom from caste duties, from “having to be” (*svabhāva*). The self is a device aimed at motivation, in other words, identity serves people to “motivate them to action” (Markus & Kitayama, 1991, p. 230), and this explains why it is perceived as deceptive by Buddhists. Similarly, if we accept the drastic division between Eastern and Western cultures in the construction of selves, we remain in the same mechanism that uses identities as motivational facts, internal to the logics of self-awareness and recognition, of which the same ideas of East and West are part (Cohen, 1994b; Jenkins, 2014; Kashima et al., 2014).

reality is like a house of cards that appears as a whole as a defined phenomenon only because its individual elements are mutually supportive. There is no phenomenon *x* that is totally dependent on a phenomenon *y*, but *x* and *y* are totally interdependent: they generate each other (*sahajāta*), they condition each other (*aññamanna*), and they support each other (*nissaya*). This description sketches the picture of a complex network in which phenomena are co-implicated and in which, therefore, the presence (*atthi*) and permanence (*avigata*) of the event itself is due to the necessary codependency of these factors, which are thus 1) inseparable from each other; 2) make sense only in the reciprocal relationship; 3) the sense of an individual factor depends on its positional condition within the network, which determines its role in relation to the other phenomena from which it is inseparable. This complex relationship of reciprocal relations tells us something else: studying the Buddhist concept of momentariness, Brown shows a model of reality as a “holographic representation and fractal self-similarity”, where “each point-instant is a microcosm of a phase in becoming, and each phase in becoming is a microcosm of the mental state” (Brown, 1999, p. 273).

Nonetheless, our cognition is deceptive, for it isolates the individual parts, but in isolation it remains not the substance but a meaningless void (*suñña*). Emptiness is indeed the true nature of all phenomena. However, emptiness is not nothingness, nor does emptiness implies that the manifold phenomena are meaningless. Nonetheless, they are all mutually dependent, not self-sufficient nor autonomous. They are thus ‘void’ of self-meaning, self-subsistence. Emptiness is their true nature because they are indeed empty if cut, separated or isolated. The void is not ‘nothingness’, there is no question of an impossible annihilation of what is, but of the fact that the substantialities attributed using the processes of designation (*paññatti*) are only conventions (*vohāra*) that do not recognize that each part in fact contains the whole within itself, and that is not “being in itself” (*sabhāva*), but appears as determination only in relation to the whole, to the infinite number of other parts. Name and form, signifier and signified, are two voids that in their reciprocal relationship form a fullness, a meaning. This discourse has everything to do with identity and self-consciousness.

It is assumed that it is possible to generate a body from pure cognition (*citta-samuṭṭhāna*), and in general cognition can create certain phenomena, which, however, it must be specified, are not created *ex nihilo*, as these phenomena are only the result of modifications on dependent matter, and therefore are in turn dependent phenomena. Buddhism has been wrongly labeled nihilistic, for nowhere is it written that an entity can perish “into nonexistence”, as this misunderstanding lies in “confusion of an entity with an identity” (Brown, 1999, p. 264).

The human mind processes and interprets the world it experiences as a series of isolated entities. In Buddhist thought, ‘consciousness’ (*viññāṇa*) is primarily understood as an isolating cognition, a *vi-jñāṇa*, which means “knowing through divisions”. Just as consciousness determines and discerns by

imposing divisions on the world, it also self-determines and self-discerns by delineating itself within the world. Consequently, even though it is forgetful of its natural unity with all things, it manifests as discrete projections on the continuum of knowledge. Thus, one consciousness can sense another, akin to whispers calling out and communicating, revealing that beyond the illusory construct founded on the belief that determinations (divisions) represent a real separation of things from the whole, consciousness itself experiences the impossibility, the aporia, of separation. It realizes that the only way to know something is through what ancient Buddhism calls *phassa*, “contact”, which is *entering into a relationship*.⁷²

The contact between an effector and a perceiver, a sensory organ, establishes a relationship. Just as I communicate verbally with another consciousness through this sensory exchange, sophisticated by the structure of verbal language, I can also communicate with an animal, which does not share my language but will still use visual and auditory effectors to enter into a relationship with me and communicate. The relationship is always reciprocal and never unidirectional. Nothing can passively

⁷² Substance is something that appears *in the association*, but when this association is broken, substance does not appear, it is invisible. This is often confused with nonexistence, as Buddhists place great emphasis on analyzing this emptiness. Now let us read again what Brown says about this:

the problem of a perishing into nonexistence is a confusion of an entity with an identity, the construal of a non-existence with a change in the identity of an entity, not the assumption by the entity of an altered state. The entity is no longer the same entity and in that sense no longer exists (as that entity), but one ought not to confuse nonexistence with unreality or nonbeing. The nonexistence of an occurrent entity at an antecedent or subsequent moment is its existence in another state, not its absolute nonexistence. The misconstrual of nonexistence with nonbeing results from a confusion of the momentariness of an entity with the persistence of that entity over the moments of its occurrence. [...] In sum, an entity does not arise from nothing nor does it perish into nothing, but is a transition from one baseline state to the next.

(Brown, 1999, p. 264)

Brown correctly recognizes that the vacuity of which Buddhism speaks (initially identified as *anattā* i.e., absence of independent identity, and later as *śūnya* by authors such as Nāgārjuna) does not refer to a nihilistic ‘nothingness’, but to an impossibility of self-subsistence on the part of a concept whose identity depends on inter-relating with a complex network of inseparable unity. In the appearance of the entity contextually to a phenomenal chain, inseparable from the continuous flow, it is part of a whole. But in the cognitive concept of things, which tends to isolate them in names and forms the phenomena of the world, identities are nothing but empty because they are believed to be isolable from the context on which they depend (p. 265). They are just “seemingly concrete entities” (p. 266). However, any entity pertains a complex “whole-to-part” relation (p. 268). Since everything is just a series of concatenated moments in an ever-lasting flow, time is just the appearance of consequentiality given by the impossibility of conceiving the whole in its unity. The mind analyzes the infinite sequentially, following a consequentiality on which temporal perception depends. Brown calls “momentariness” this Buddhist theory: “Each mental state is an encapsulated moment” (p. 272). The idea that a moment is an irreducible point (p. 273) is a common Theravāda position. Indeed, in ancient Buddhism, there are positions advocating to Brown’s idea of microgenesis, which envisions appearance due to a fragmentation of a reality made up of “holographic representation and fractal self-similarity” (p. 273) where “each point-instant is a microcosm of a phase in becoming, and each phase in becoming is a microcosm of the mental state”. This means that:

The points do not exist individually, nor do the phases, without a transition over the series. The state must actualize to become real, so its phases can also become real. As there is no arising without a perishing, there is no arising/perishing without another arising/perishing, so that any phase in the continuum depends on those phases in which it is embedded. The principle is the same in Buddhism and microgenesis.

Finally, what we perceive as change is just part of “the relational quality of the points”, and the whole world is itself “the derivation of the conceptual into objects”, which are categories that “obscure a knowledge of the reals” and that, because of this, meditation seeks to eliminate (p. 274).

undergo my relationship; everything responds to me, and in responding, demonstrates that it is in a dynamic interaction with me. Therefore, when I grasp a stone and perceive its roughness, weight, coldness, and size, its ‘form’ (*rūpa*) through visual means, the stone is not merely ‘available’ to my sensors but ‘responds’ in a dialogue. The tactile sensor calls, and the stone responds with its roughness and temperature, just as the eye seeking form receives a response from the stone.

When, in ethnography, participants often described their visual experience with drawing as a kind of *dialogue* or *discourse with the image*, I considered numerous anthropological possibilities. However, all of them pushed me beyond the idea of representation, of mere figurativeness of the thing. What emerged was not merely a ‘representation’ of the meditator’s subjectivity, but rather a ‘testimony’ of a conscious dialogue that had assumed the form of that complex image, as a response to this dialogue. How I arrived at this conclusion is a lengthy process, passing through the most obvious and traditional hypothesis, which I do not dismiss, but I believe it needs expansion. Thus, it was the ‘structure’ and ‘representation’ that I initially sought.

It is essential to understand that the Buddhist conception of identity is not simply elaborated philosophically but rather originates from the practical experience of meditation. The fundamental truth for Buddhists, as Hamilton correctly notes, is “not-separate-self-hood”, that is the fundamental unity of all configurations.

In separating the factors of our experience in this way, we are conferring on each of those factors, including ourselves, the notion of having an independent identity, of being what we call a ‘self’.

In this respect the notion of self-hood is applicable not just personally but also generically.⁷³

In the synthesis we can derive from this, identity is portrayed as an impermanent construct that relies on a series of conventions: the arbitrary association of names and forms, i.e., the designations of concepts to which the individual associates themselves and “appropriates” in order to construct a social image of themselves that is reiterated through recognition and approval from the collective. The crux of this matter lies in the fact that such construction entails dichotomous thinking: the self/other axis, identical/different, known/unknown, and all the divisions based on this dichotomy, which are used to build sociocultural and anthropological beliefs and conventions (Dubuisson, 2011). Furthermore, there is a clear correlation between consciousness and identity, where consciousness plays the role of dichotomizing, i.e., it operates the cognitive divisions from which identity subsequently takes shape.

⁷³ Cf. Hamilton, 1999, p. 79.

From Lévi-Strauss onwards (Lévi-Strauss, 1958), the idea of universals in anthropology has gradually and unfairly been discredited, seen as, in the worst cases, an imposition of ideology on native culture. In reality, within the context of a genuine decolonization of cultural biases in anthropology, it is also necessary to recognize the paradox of wanting to understand alterity by nullifying every vision or attempt to derive principles or structures from it. In fact, in the most extreme cases, we have arrived at the denial of any possibility of understanding alterity, which inevitably translates into the abdication of anthropology itself by anthropologists.

Lévi-Strauss has been strongly criticized (Friedman, 2006; Rendtorff, 2014), but he was unfairly vilified in his noble attempt to recognize a “common denominator” in cultural facts. His investigation of the issue of identity was rigorous and commendable. Since 1974, he has brought together scientists from every discipline—biology, linguistics, ethnology, and even mathematicians—to resolve the dilemma of identity. Despite this diverse panorama, he managed to demonstrate that identity does not self-subsist but is a product of conventional designations. This also demonstrates that the attempt to construct identity through conventions is a phenomenon embraced by all cultures and can thus be considered a human universal.

The resonance with the idea of the non-substantiality of identity for Buddhists is remarkable. Lévi-Strauss’s effort to “déconstruire la notion d’identité” has not only shown that “ce concept touche toutes les disciplines” (Denieuil, 2009, p. 83) but also that it must be at the center of anthropological debate. This endeavor is akin to de Martino’s advocacy for a humanistic ethnology that does not eschew the pursuit of universal structures. Paradoxically, asserting the absolute difference and unknowability of every culture would appear more racist than acknowledging that the foundations of every human endeavor are shared, and thus that it is not impossible to fully comprehend another culture even through the means of a particular one. Furthermore, the effort to transcend oneself and transcend the notion of “self” as proposed by Buddhism aligns even more with this direction. Far from being an “ideological colonialism” (*colonialisme idéologique*, p. 84) or any other trivialization such as the sacrifice of the originality of one culture in favor of the explanatory models of another (*sacrifier leur originalité distinctive et leur caractère ineffable en les assujettissant à des formes mentales propres à une époque et à une civilisations*), Lévi-Strauss’s effort is commendable precisely because of its transcendence of individual identities. The word “ineffable” is the key here. This conception assumes that a given culture is “unconceivable” from the point of view of another, but also that is impossible to free oneself of one’s own cultural point of view. Lévi-Strauss strongly criticized the proponents of this idea for being too rigid, to the point of a new obscurantism. Actually, those who “prétendent que l’expérience de l’autre, individuel ou collectif, est par essence

incommunicable” is at the same level of those who adhere to a rigid dogma, which he describes as “se réfugier dans un nouvel obscurantisme” (p. 85).

Returning to the issue of identity, it now becomes evident to us how, following a meticulous ethnological analysis and the exposition of identity models from various cultures, Lévi-Strauss arrives at the same universal principle that he had identified in Buddhism regarding the nature of identity. This principle posits identity as a construct “substantialisée” but that at any moment can explode, becoming “éclatée ou multi facettes, et se trouve subsumée par la soumission au code social et par l’emprise structurante de la société sur toute initiative individuelle. C’est alors que la nomination s’impose comme la première déclaration d’identité” (p. 87).

The idea that identity is interdependent is an accepted fact in various cultures (Markus & Kitayama, 1991, p. 228). However, according to de Martino, cultures always seek a way to ensuring that presence, while fully aware of its interdependence, does not collapse when the “economic” requirements mentioned by de Martino are no longer met. These “economic” requirements pertain to the value systems and cultural instances that govern the management of a society and the progression of history. In this context, Buddhism develops a series of “tools” or “instruments” in contemplative practice to address the issue of transcending presence.

Buddhist concepts, then, are *artifacts*, in the literal sense of the word; that is, symbolic “things” made by human beings for a specific purpose. According to my teacher, they can be regarded as representational “aids” in the development of Buddhist wisdom and compassion, yet they are not able to represent “truly” the experience of enlightenment, because enlightenment cannot be represented (as in made present “again”) through sign systems.⁷⁴

This must be articulated, as beyond the strict neurophysiological interpretations of states of consciousness experienced during contemplative practices, which I do not deny approaching with profound skepticism for I find them overly reductive, it is ultimately the experience of the meditator that holds paramount importance. Within this experience lies something immeasurable, a testimonial of transcendence from the mundanity that has been documented since the inception of contemplative practice. This transcendence, coinciding with a sense of absoluteness, conscious presence, or extended awareness, is what should truly engage our interest from a holistic perspective, as it shapes even the most theoretical and traditional aspects of the discipline. Moreover, it is present within these images, which, beyond depicting a journey towards this center, towards this gateway opening to a

⁷⁴ Cf. Brummans, 2008, p. 143.

hereafter perceived as disturbing to some and comforting to others, stand as the testimony of a labyrinthine, arduous, transformative path.

Experiencing interdependence entails seeing oneself as part of an encompassing social relationship and recognizing that one's behavior is determined, contingent on, and, to a large extent organized by what the actor perceives to be the thoughts, feelings, and actions of *others* in the relationship.⁷⁵

A path in this direction has already been embarked upon by some, alluding to certain deeply intriguing anthropological endeavors in anthropology of consciousness through analysis of meditative experiences and the anthropological discipline itself (Williams, 2007). Yet, this alone is insufficient to arrive at the kind of radical non-dualism that is to be adopted as an interpretive approach. The journey being proposed in this discourse encourages us to perceive human consciousness, and thus also the consciousness of the anthropologist, as an expansive phenomenon, which is not limited to the fluctuating boundaries of historical-cultural presence determined by interactions, but may be non-local, hence experiencing the image of the other as one experiences one's own in a manifestly conscious form. Yet, it must be underscored that this is not simply achieved through mere rhetoric, but through a process involving contemplative ethnography and existential as well as essential self-analysis. If anthropology is to equip itself with a theory of consciousness that remains abreast of the times, it must embrace the disconcerting possibility that consciousness may not be a phenomenon that is strictly biological or human in nature. Rather, consciousness can be conceived as a self-organizing force that is found in every phenomenon of the world which follows 'general tendencies' of self-regulation or structuration (McGilchrist, 2021a; Idem, 2021b).

6.4 A 'Buddhist' Solution for the Ontological Problem

As presented hitherto, especially in §5.4, this dissertation navigates the ontological quandaries that arise from ethnographic exploration of meditative experiences, via the elicitation of images conjured through contemplative practice. On this matter, reference has been made to the work of Didi-Huberman, who contests the dominant perspective that posits images as mere facsimiles or portrayals of a presumed original reality. He counter-argues for the ontological independence of images, deeming them "living objects" with their own distinct existence.

⁷⁵ Cf. Markus & Kitayama, 1991, p. 227.

My aim at this point of the work is to further develop a transcultural theory of the image by examining the intersection of theoretical anthropology and Indian philosophy of perception, providing a critical reflection on the ontological problem in anthropology.

This ontological reevaluation of images bears crucial implications for the practice of meditation, particularly within traditions that integrate visual components into the meditative process. If images are not simply inert reflections, but dynamic, transformative entities capable of molding our perception of the 'world', this concept corresponds with the function of images in specific meditative practices, such as the creation of maṇḍalas or visualization exercises, where images are harnessed as active instruments for transformative cognition.

Moreover, Didi-Huberman's philosophical subversion of the dichotomy between original and copy bears significant implications for meditative practice and the experience of non-dualism (*advaita*). It provokes inquiries about the 'reality' experienced in meditation, implying that the images or visions that emerge during meditative states may harbor their own reality and relevance. This parallel with the Buddhist concept of emptiness underlines the proposition that all phenomena, including the images encountered in meditation, are devoid of inherent existence and are instead dependent on our perception and interpretation.

This ethnography further delves into the anthropological study of states of consciousness, thus broaching the prospect of a novel anthropology of images. The dissertation probes the tangible experiences of individuals, such as Leo's dialogic encounter with image production, indicating the potential consciousness intrinsic to images. Thus, I contemplated the hypothesis that images possess their own consciousness and engage in a dialogue with us, challenging traditional conceptualizations of images as inert entities. In addition, the dissertation addresses the subjectivity of experiences by scrutinizing the narratives of individuals, such as Daniel's exhaustive accounts of creating maṇḍala illustrations. His narration unveils the dynamic interaction between personal interpretations and the archetypal elements embedded within the maṇḍalas. Likewise, Layla's imaginal experience underscores the possibility of perceiving ostensibly external elements as embodying their own consciousness, thus extending the comprehension of consciousness beyond individual parameters.

Our journey led us to investigate also the issue of distinguishing between imagination and reality, specifically in relation to the construction of reality depicted in Leo's and Layla's maṇḍalas. These portrayals carry personal and symbolic significance, mirroring the inner journey and self-perception of the individuals. However, the demarcation between image and reality is a cultural and social construct. Various cultures and individuals attribute divergent levels of reality or significance to images and representations, underscoring the cultural relativism inherent in such distinctions.

The contemplative paradigm intrinsic to Buddhist meditation has been proposed as a potential locus for reassessing both ethnographic methodologies and the broader theoretical frameworks of social sciences. As such, this paragraph advocates for a detailed exploration of the Buddhist conceptualization of ‘image’ as a potential resolution to the ongoing debates concerning its ontological status. Indian thought is deeply rooted in the problem of vision and perception of what we call ‘world’ (*loka* in Sanskrit and Pāli).

Thus, it is important to revisit the fundamental issues at hand. To begin with, Buddhism bases its philosophy on the problem of ‘correct vision’ (*sammādiṭṭhi*). Other scholars have explored this issue in detail, and therefore I will focus on a few key terms. In Buddhist thought, form (*rūpa*) is central to everything. It is an ambiguous datum that requires determination and conformation through the process of consciousness segmentation (*viññāṇa*, more accurately translated as “discernment”), which associates forms with names (*nāma*). This process is the foundation of perceptive dualism.

Observation is thus inherently susceptible to deception, depending on its orientation. If it is oriented towards things as they truly are, towards their essence (*sat*), then it is categorized as right understanding; otherwise, it is deemed to be a form of delusion or misconception (*micchādiṭṭhi*, lit. “false view”). Fuller has published an extensive examination of the nature of *diṭṭhi* (Fuller, 2005). However, the question remains as to how to define the thing that merely “is”, beyond the realm of opinions.

Two primary approaches to this issue have been advanced by Western scholars, but before we examine them, we must first understand how the dilemma of dual truth develops in Buddhist philosophy. While attempting to transcend ethnocentric and colonial perspectives, the recent ontological turn in anthropology has also perpetuated a fundamental problem inherent in the dualistic epistemologies of the Western tradition, which are premised on subject/object, or observer/observed, and anthropologist/field dichotomies.

Modernity claims to have abandoned all metaphysical aspirations; however, according to proponents of the ontological turn, every conceptual operation we engage in—especially the paradigmatic imposition of scientific thought—is entirely embedded within a specific metaphysical tradition rooted in Platonism and Cartesianism. Without this bifurcation between subject and object, between Nature and Culture, the very possibility of hypothesizing the existence of scientific knowledge would not arise. What these authors refer to as *ontological dualism*—the division between the world of the object and the world of the subject—underpins all contemporary modes of knowledge. The consequences of this dualism, particularly in the anthropological realm, manifest in the production of specific forms of colonialism over thought

and bodies, as well as in the creation of ecological and political models that are heavily skewed towards the subject and culture.⁷⁶

Although the ontological turn holds considerable potential for surmounting this problem, it remains entrenched in an interpretative paradigm of reality. I advocate for the adoption of an anti-dualist perspective to transcend this paradigm. By doing so, it offers an alternative framework that can potentially resolve the ontological problem in anthropology from a transcultural perspective.

The Indian philosophical tradition, particularly Buddhism and Yoga, has offered a wealth of insights into cognition and perception, providing a valuable source for comparative analysis. However, Western anthropology and epistemology are largely rooted in the intellectual history of ancient Greece and subsequent European developments, while non-Western epistemological systems remain largely unexplored.

In a thought-provoking discourse published in the journal of Visual Anthropology, a multitude of challenges pertaining to the visual dimension of the discipline were presented. Of particular interest was MacDougall's contribution, which questions the ontological essence of imagery and instigates a discourse that has remained implicit and under-discussed in the realm of visual and cognitive studies.

What does the image, with its accompanying sound, represent? Theories about this range from the belief that the image is a physical imprint of an object or event, making possible subsequent studies as though from the original, to the more temperate view that it is merely indicative of some aspects of the object, to the idea that it is a subjective interpretation often expressing more about the ideological and embodied responses of its maker than the object it is supposed to represent.⁷⁷

The ontological impasse confronts a pivotal moment today. The quandary of ascertaining reality, notwithstanding its culturally constructed dimension, engenders cognitive, perceptual, and philosophical predicaments. Anthropologists grappling with these predicaments can no longer remain oblivious to their challenges. Anthropology, as an academic discipline, has put forth numerous potential solutions to address the issues it faces. One such approach was proposed by Ernesto de Martino. He also tackled the problem of reality for anthropologists by introducing the concept of "culturally conditioned nature" (Signorelli, 2015, p. 50).

Notably, de Martino found it unacceptable to assume that indigenous communities devised reality frameworks devoid of validity and were merely fabrications or delusions. Consequently, he

⁷⁶ Cf. Dei et al., 2021, p. 10.

⁷⁷ Cf. Hockings et al., 2014, p. 444.

transcended (or at least he tried) Eurocentrism and positivism, prevailing paradigms of anthropology during his time, by acknowledging the authenticity of the anthropological experience. However, such a recognition necessitated a drastic reevaluation of reality, where culture could determine nature. This perpetuated a dichotomy between nature and culture, and de Martino chose to validate the reality of certain phenomena as natural while seeking scientific acknowledgement of paranormal and metaphysical phenomena. Therefore, he still partly adhered to a positivist perspective, endeavoring to incorporate the subjective and paranormal into the realm of science. His stance was indeed revolutionary for anthropology during his era, yet it remained replete with methodological dualism. In 1941, de Martino identified the Eurocentric worldview as “naturalism” in his initial critique of ethnology. Since his work went largely unnoticed, naturalism has only recently been acknowledged as a core tenet of Western ontology (Brigati & Gamberi, 2019, p. 101), and it refers to the conviction that a distinct and autonomous nature, governed by physical and biological laws, exists apart from human beings who inhabit it.⁷⁸

The proposal of a contemplative anthropology as a method of comprehending the human being is intertwined with the human understanding of reality, its perception and conception. I already suggested integrating the ethnographic experience with the meditative approach. This proposal stems from my previous encounters with the ethnography of meditation, which compelled me to entirely re-evaluate the effectiveness of the ethnographic method, as well as the epistemological foundation of anthropology.

The question of the ontological turn has been brilliantly summarized in some literature that I will reference. Its primary issue, for some unwavering scholars, is the tendency to blur the boundaries between social science and philosophy (Heywood, 2012; Kelly, 2014a; Idem, 2014b). The ontological turn has predominantly been a theoretical position in anthropology that emphasizes the role of material culture, objects, and artifacts “rather than (inter)action or speech” (Paleček & Risjord, 2012,

⁷⁸ If scholars venture into the intricacies of images in pursuit of the mysteries that lie within appearance and form, it is inevitable that they must also address ontological and phenomenological questions. Investigating perception can lead to various avenues, but the two main ones both entail considering the nature of reality itself. If we acknowledge that everything that appears to our perception is nothing but an illusion constructed by the mind, then images and their appearance are fictitious. By affirming the reality of this fiction, the anthropologist becomes a philosopher and inevitably encounters the need to determine to what extent the ontological nature of the phenomenon is concrete and independent of our perceptions or created by our minds. In either case, what is the structure or system that sets in motion the creation of this internal reality or on which the realization of external reality depends? The other problem, which concerns the assertion of a coincidence between the perceived phenomenon and essential reality, still drags the anthropologist into the need to define how and to what extent reality organizes itself to unfold before us. On the other hand, the anthropologist studies the human being, but what is supremely human is their capacity to organize knowledge into complex systems. Human beings generate knowledge about the world, which then takes the form of cultures and traditions, social tendencies, and so on. Every system of knowledge, whether it be science, religion, or philosophy, descends from a cultural need to explain the world, and this explanation generates the organization of a system of knowledge, of understandings, that reflect upon the world.

p. 5). This approach does not devalue the role of culture but instead studies it in the context of how “objects, relations, and categories are manifest in different groups of people”.

However, this recent movement has faced significant criticism (Dei et al., 2021), though I intend to defend certain aspects of it, arguing for its validity in light of ethnographic experience with visual elicitation. Brigati for example, who had previously defended the ontological turn, has recently revised some of his positions, particularly concerning an excessive drift towards theorization—an issue that, in my view, would not be problematic if grounded in a solid philosophical background (including indigenous or alternative philosophies and epistemologies).

Theory is too often a source of apprehension in anthropology, as de Martino, accused of being overly philosophical, well knew. His alterity was not sufficiently ‘other’, so to speak: for anthropologists, de Martino was not ‘enough’ of an anthropologist for too many were his philosophical and historical digressions. For this reason, as Signorelli notes, his work seems to be appreciated by almost everyone except anthropologists (Signorelli, 2015, p. XV). Nevertheless, precisely because of his research on the efficacy of magic—without necessarily resorting to theories involving symbolic efficacy or representation—de Martino has been recognized as having a surprising affinity with the conceptual work of Viveiros de Castro within the ontological turn (Dei et al., 2021, p. 163, note 6), as exemplified by de Martino’s commentary on Grubb’s episode, which I discussed in §5.2.

The ontological turn proposes a “contamination” of native ontologies with those of anthropologists. Cultural worlds constructed by different societies are not seen as products of structures, representations, or symbolic systems, but as actual ontologies. Cultures are not representations of being but are genuine modes of being, collapsing the dualism between world and representation in favor of a single possible reality (Paleček & Risjord, 2012, p. 10). However, Brigati criticizes that if the contamination promoted by the turn does not translate into practices but remains confined to beliefs, this risks not only “essentializing” the Western category of “ontology”, rendering it meaningless, but more importantly, reducing “the native to a virtual instance within the ethnographer’s experience” (Dei et al., 2021, p. 306), which implicates that “history and the complex system of relations between agents and material situations disappear” (p. 308).

This danger exists if, and only if, the anthropologist approaches the ontological problem superficially. Generally, the belief that everything is a matter of practice—that everything is woven into relationships and actions, materiality, and concreteness without underlying thought, ideas, norms, or conceptions—risks leading to the opposite extremism. This was already evidenced by an ethnology that celebrated fieldwork but found itself too weak in the face of philosophers and sociologists due to a lack of a robust theoretical framework to support its claims. Where does the importance of ethnographic data and the anthropological mission lie if we do not attempt to answer fundamental

questions about humanity? Ethnography risks being reduced to mere observationalism, a chronicle of ‘other’ worlds for its own sake, serving only to entertain those curious to indulge in accounts of distant and unknown cultures. This is the danger I see looming over modern anthropology—the risk of reducing it to a mere ‘this is how it is done here’, without considering how that ‘doing’ might spark a debate on how we might improve *our* ‘world’, or what the other can teach us in addressing atavistic and universal questions about the human condition. Merely noting the different for its own sake, out of fear of expressing an opinion on why the different is such, or why we ourselves are as we are.

Consciousness is a universal problem, and as such, it must be addressed. I chose to seek otherness in my closest neighbor, demonstrating that even in those who apparently live in our same ‘world’, there is much more than we believe we see. Indeed, discovering otherness in our closest neighbor is even more shocking precisely because we do not expect it. We are accustomed to our neighbor; they do not frighten us; they are part of our everyday life. Should we fear those who walk the streets with us? If so, we would lose all certainty, every reassuring aspect of daily life. And yet, that is precisely the case. In different forms—more evident where culture explicitly manifests them, but also less evident, where cultural habits conceal the subjects, the individuals, who are part of these networks but are also worlds in themselves that contribute to weaving those networks. Each of them is a consciousness that participates in the ‘determinations’ of the aspects of those worlds, but also something that ‘determines itself’ within those worlds. In this dual aspect of consciousness—as a *force that determines and determines-itself*—relationships, identities, cultural forms, but also subjectivities, emotions, and experiences are constructed.

In this ethnography, I allowed the experiences of the subjects to guide the theoretical direction. I could not conceive of theory and practice as two distinct activities, but I endeavored as much as possible to ensure that the process was a unified one. Elicitation does not, of course, involve only drawing, a medium I chose because I recognized it as the most accessible for all participants. Other forms of creative production can be used for elicitation, such as construction, sculpture, painting, photography, or even the use of one’s body, as in dance. What I observed using elicitation as an ethnographic tool is that subjects tend to perceive their drawings as both objects and concepts, symbols and concrete acts. This aligns with the ontological turn’s conception that the object and the thing (the image) are not strictly distinct, and hence it follows that (Paleček & Risjord, 2012, p. 8):

The object becomes the symbol. In practice, the collapse of object and symbol means that the practitioners of the ontological turn attend closely to what objects do in a particular context. [...] For the ontologists, the extended mind hypothesis provides one way to understand what it means for objects to *create* relationships, powers, and persons.

In the dynamic relationship between the subject and the maṇḍalic drawing, there is no artistic intentionality, nor is there any predetermined decision about the form that the mandala should take. Meditation serves to dismantle these volitional mechanisms, and during the act of drawing, the subject expresses not so much their conscious will, but rather forms of relationality that seemingly ‘represent’ their meditative journey—a kind of dialogue or relationship between consciousness and itself, or the consciousness of the subject in that pre-reflective state that Buddhists refer to as *samādhi*, wherein the identity dynamics between subject and object are diminished (Shulman, 2014, p. 3).

The ‘object’ drawing, to some extent, ‘self-determines’ through the subjects who attest to engaging in a sort of dialogue with that image; however, the image simultaneously represents another part of themselves that emerges as ‘conscious’ and thus potentially capable of dialogue. Representation is part of the prior cognitive framework, where the object is *subjugated* to the will of the *subject* (see the Greek concept of ὑποκείμενον). When these dynamics collapse, the ‘subjects’ are no longer merely subjects but both objects and subjects simultaneously—they can observe and, at the same time, be observed by the drawing. The maṇḍala they have produced is not a representation of their consciousness, but the conscious dynamic itself taking shape through that exercise.

The idea of representation is linked to the idea of the first-person authority. But how can we rid ourselves of this picture of our mind in the world? [...] Insofar as we are not able to separate our knowledge of the object from the object itself, we are not able to separate our knowledge of ourselves from the knowledge of the others.⁷⁹

My position differs slightly from that expressed in the ontological turn. On the one hand, it is true that a fundamental problem exists: we must liberate ourselves from the dualism that separates the knowledge of the object from the object itself. However, I also believe that achieving this goal is feasible, and that contemplative practice has demonstrated its possibility, especially in the sense that “Meaning arises from a web of interactions, and properly understanding meaning requires entry into this web” (p. 21).

The Buddhist doctrine develops a critical anti-dualism that elucidates the mechanics of deceptive perception. According to this doctrine, the only reality is perceived as manifold. Many possible manifestations of reality constitute our *relative perception* of reality, thus creating an absolute-relative dichotomy. Although these manifold aspects (the relative realities) may seem like different worlds,

⁷⁹ Cf. Paleček & Risjord, 2012, p. 14.

they are, in fact, part of the one and only absolute reality and exist on several superimposed planes (Jones, 2018; Jones, 2020; Ferraro, 2013).

This particular conception is aptly conveyed in the early Buddhist texts, such as the *Paṭhamanānāṭṭhiyasutta*, where the metaphor of vision, blindness, and perception is explored. In this discourse, a group of blind people are asked to describe an elephant by touching different parts of the animal without seeing it in its entirety. Each blind person produces a partial description that distorts the true nature of the elephant. When one is unaware that one perceives only a part, one confuses the part for the whole. Therefore, perception is deemed deceptive not merely because it is partial but also because of this confusion. The metaphor of the elephant illustrates the double truth doctrine in Buddhism, which posits that there are two ways of understanding reality: the absolute and the relative.⁸⁰

This is not the sole instance. Within the canon, there exist certain passages that exemplify this concept, as evidenced by the *Saṅgītisutta*. This particular passage delineates the prospect of a “conventional knowledge” (*sammutiyā ñāṇa*) within a fourfold system of feasible epistemological modes (*cattāri ñāṇāni*), which encompasses not only phenomenal knowledge (*dhamme*), but also inductive knowledge (*anvaye*), that of alterity, or analytical knowledge (*pariye*).

The subsequent commentarial analyses constituting the Abhidhamma schools revisit the affirmation of conventional truth (*sammuti*). This convention contrasts with another term already established in ancient Buddhism, i.e. *paramattha*, or “ultimate meaning” (*parama-attha*). The Abhidhamma builds an apparent dualism between *sammuti* and *paramattha*, which is later taken up by the Madhyamaka school of Nāgārjuna (Garfield & Priest, 2003). However, Nāgārjuna replaces the term *sammuti*, derived from the root *man-* “thought” and the prefix *saṃ-* “together”, with a different root, creating the word *saṃvṛti*. This modification slightly alters the intended connotation of the term, imbuing it with notions of covering, concealment, suppression, and hiding. Nāgārjuna’s system is described as “dialetheic” (*dve satye*, literally “two truths”), not because it posits the existence of two distinct realities, but because it builds on the ancient Buddhist model of a single ontological truth that manifests itself phenomenologically as ontic multiplicities.

These positions are perhaps comparable to those of a pre-objective being by Merleau Ponty (1964). For Merleau-Ponty, the pre-objective being represents a more fundamental and primordial level of

⁸⁰ The distinction between the two truths begins with the recognition of the literal (*nīta-attha*) and the attributable (*neyyattha*) senses of the Buddha’s words. This distinction arose initially for philological reasons, which differentiated the exoteric message from the esoteric one. However, Buddhist commentators later discovered that this distinction also applied to the problem of the image and its referent. Consequently, the concept of attribution (*neyyattha*) evolved into conventionality (*paññatti*). Regardless of how one interprets the sense, it must still refer to a previous semantic substantiality. This view emphasizes that meaning and reference are critical components of Buddhist philosophy. Buddhism, since its inception, has espoused an unambiguous anti-dualist stance (Karunadasa, 2018).

experience that is prior to any distinctions between subject and object or self and world. It is the ground of our perception and thought, and it challenges traditional Western philosophical assumptions about the nature of reality and the relationship between subject and object.

In his 1963 article “Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man”, Wilfrid Sellars explores the fundamental issue in science, which is the contradiction between two worldviews: the manifest image and the scientific image (Sellars, 1963). Sellars’ two-images model posits the existence of two distinct images: the scientific and the manifest. The latter is a conceptual framework that allows humans to develop self-awareness within the world. Sellars likens the manifest image to Max Weber’s ideal types, with the caveat that its primary features “took shape in the mists of prehistory”. This image represents the dimension in which humans encounter themselves for the first time, and is also an empirical or categorical depiction of the original human perspective. The scientific image, on the other hand, represents an interpretative ‘convention’, rather than an objective reality. Nonetheless, it serves a useful purpose by enabling us to define a particular way of perceiving the world. It remains ambiguous, however, whether Sellars views the scientific vision as a necessary concession to truth or as a strictly formal exercise of reductionism.

This theory has been compared to the Buddhist concept of *dve satye* (Duckworth, 2018), which recognizes that cultural constructions and frameworks are part of the realm of the conventional, forming the basis of a world founded on arbitrary distinctions. Sellars posits that the manifest image represents an anthropocentric perspective that stands in clear opposition to the descriptive and cataloguing language of the scientific worldview. His aim is to integrate these two images in a “stereoscopic” vision, without one worldview dominating the other.

However, Sellars’ cultural limitation is his failure to recognize the cultural construct of “nature” itself as a product of scientific point of view. This assumption affects his very definition of human beings, who are conceived as single logical and metaphysical subjects that have the capacity to act at will within a world governed by natural laws. This ideological stance necessitates the postulation of certain unobservable entities, which are essentially understood as being non-normative and non-conceptual in nature.

While Sellars’ theory shares similarities with the Buddhist concept of *dve satye*, it falls within the dualism that characterizes the relative dimension. Sellars’ approach is fundamentally different from the absolute/relative binomial posited by Nāgārjuna. The two Sellarsian images appear to belong to the conventional aspect, with no concept comparable to that of *paramārtha*, except perhaps the stereoscope itself. The stereoscope presents an integrative perspective on all conceivable relative constructions, which approaches everything without taking the necessary step from a mere mathematical summa to a totality.

Through a close reading of Nāgārjuna's works, it becomes apparent that a stereoscopic distinction between images would inevitably lead to an undesirable infinite reduction, resulting in cognitive proliferation of images as copies of a supposed original. This proliferation fails to resolve the problem of how one thing can be simultaneously true and false, which is central to Nāgārjuna's philosophical concerns. Nāgārjuna's approach involves defining a datum using a complex system of negations capable of rejecting any position or point of view. This approach is not an assertion that truth does not exist, but rather an acknowledgement that any definition would necessarily entail a reduction of it. Consequently, Nāgārjuna adopts the fourfold negation of all positions (possible views) as the only viable solution.

In the context of images and visual perception, this leads to a completely non-dualistic experiential position. Nāgārjuna's intricate model, however, has at times been likened to a dialetheism (Jones, 2018), which posits the plausibility of a double truth. Yet, this should be construed as a twofold manifestation of reality: a comprehensive one, representing the ultimate truth (*paramārtha*), and a conventional one, populated by opinions (*saṃvṛti*). Hence, it should not be misconstrued as a position too akin to that of the ontological inflection point, wherein opinions triumph over reality and, consequently, over the possibility of attaining truth. Nāgārjuna believes that an ipseity (*tattva*, lit. 'that-ness', 'such-ness'), which is fundamental to existence (or perhaps the mere existence itself), is attainable in all respects and thus endorses it, although he underscores that his words must be used with caution, as they do not capture actual reality but merely serve as an ideal (Jones, 2020). This ideal is precisely the absolute non-duality (*advaita*). If Sellars' explanation does not furnish an exhaustive account of *advaita*, it should be noted that another 'visual' metaphor, distinct from that of the stereoscope, can offer a better comprehension of Buddhist thought. This concept has been elucidated in several works by Kaplan, who employs a holographic metaphor.

In his 1983 article, Kaplan introduces the concept of holography as a metaphor to elucidate the Indian philosophical notion of illusion (*māyā*), and its compatibility with an ontological vision of reality that eschews nihilism and absolutism. Kaplan posits that Indian philosophies suggest the projection of consciousness, whereby the images perceived by an observer as existing "out there" are in fact not separated from the experiencing subject (Kaplan, 1983, p. 367). Kaplan contends that this view of the mind as a projector of images, with no distinction between inside and outside the perceiver, aligns with *Advaita vedānta*'s portrayal of a holographic reality. In this perspective, physical realities are represented as holographic objects, memorialized as visual information through a finely interwoven pattern of interference fringes with the use of coherent laser light. The image formed by the interference fringes is characterized by a three-dimensional illusion.

The holographic theory maintains that the production of perceptual images is consequent upon information from both the sense organs and existent, neural holographic patterns. Therefore, perceptual images are constructions (*savikalpa*). [...] Our perceptual images, like holographic images, are projected “out-there”.⁸¹

The hologram’s most striking feature is its omni-pervasiveness. As Kaplan himself writes (2007, p. 188), holograms “record information about the whole object [...] as three-dimensional. [...] Holography is a lensless process of optical recording and reproduction. The hologram refers to the medium on which the information necessary to reproduce a three-dimensional image is recorded. [...] The interference patterns do not resemble in any way, shape, or form the object that is being filmed”. Furthermore (p. 189), “the film exhibits redundancy. In this context, redundancy means that each piece of the hologram can reproduce the entire holographic image”. Kaplan expands his holographic theory in a subsequent article (1990), specifically applying it to Buddhism. However, he focuses exclusively on Vasubandhu’s doctrine, neglecting the fact that older forms of Buddhism already contain the presuppositions for a holographic theory. Kaplan concentrates on Vasubandhu’s apparently intricate claims, such as the existence of the non-existence of duality (p. 71). Such claims can only be partially explained through the stereoscopic idea, while holography, as a system that contains the totality in every part of its, anticipates that a contradictory element will become evident precisely through manifestation, as demonstrated in a previous work exclusively devoted to the holographic perspective in Buddhism (Divino, 2023a).

In the human perception of reality, Buddhists regard the incompleteness and partiality of experienced manifestations or designations (cultural conventions?) as an affirmation of the existence of absolute truth, which is intrinsically confirmed in the incompleteness of these dimensions. Such a non-judgmental and non-dual position could prompt the anthropologist to revise their ethno-ontological stances. This position is also well elaborated in Kaplan’s analysis of the dual relationship between truth (*vidyā*) and falsehood (*avidyā*) as two simultaneous and coterminous elements in traditional Indian thought. The absolute manifests and illuminates itself in every aspect of the relative, without negating the relative’s limited and non-comprehensive nature (Kaplan, 2007).

Merleau-Ponty represents in his thinking a non-dualism, which is quite compatible with the Buddhist one, and many of his considerations will also serve us as a guideline for our ontological problem. Important comparative studies have been published in Berman (2004) and Michaels (2023). In particular, we must pay attention to the idea of chiasm as a potential comparison to Buddhist radical non-dualism between world and body or perception and perceiver. Although Merleau-Ponty does not

⁸¹ Kaplan, 1983, p. 374.

explicitly reference the holographic principle, he espouses a fundamental assumption that aligns with it. Specifically, he posits that in the immediate perception of human experience, there exists an implicit meaning in things that is inextricably linked to human perception (Merleau-Ponty, 1996). Merleau-Ponty presents a nuanced non-dualist stance, asserting that the human being is both the sense and the determinant of this sense through perception, which delimits the parameters and modes of sense-making. It is important to note that meaning does not exist as an objective function of the perceiver, but rather, it is to some extent the perceiver himself. The perceiver draws upon the original sense of boundaries, which demarcate more constrained fields relative to perceptual boundaries (*champ visuel*), giving rise to conventional meanings.

Anthropology, in one way or another, fails to relinquish its A/B dualism, thereby oscillating between identity and otherness. In an attempt to surmount colonialist and ethnocentric viewpoints, there was a notion to obliterate the anthropologist's subjectivity. However, this engenders another paradox, yet "ontologists do not kill their Western souls entirely", and this leads to another contradiction: "they develop an inconsistent meta-ontology. Ontologists insist in the 'truth' of indigenous ontology in the name of realism, and they attack Western ontology in the name of contingency" (Paleček, 2022, p. 160). It is incumbent upon us to acknowledge reality: "it is impossible for us to be entirely free of ethnocentrism" (p. 163). De Martino similarly asserted this notion during unanticipated periods (Saunders, 1993). Nevertheless, such a position does not preclude the viability of anthropology as a crucial discipline.

The West is well organized to discredit stories of other worlds, casting them as defective apprehensions, the products of deranged minds—the mad and drug users. Such visions do not correspond to anything that exists, and the seer should be helped to stop seeing them, with anti-psychotic drugs and drug rehabilitation programs.⁸²

These barriers, even if unintentionally created by the ontologists, yield divergent ethnographies that tend to accentuate differences and widen the chasm between self and other. My idea, instead, advocates for a convergent ethnography, wherein the barrier separating the anthropologist's identity and otherness is overcome. It is thus neither the intention of A to eliminate itself and become B, nor must A see B through its own lens. Rather, A and B coalesce into two Cs, thereby enabling them to contemplate the identities of A and B as a surreptitiously separate entity. This approach relinquishes the nihilistic paradox of refuting any real reality and embraces the ontic plurality of the one world.

⁸² Cf. Pickering, 2017, p. 144.

The correlation between the perceiver and the perceived encapsulates the paramount issue of all visual anthropology. Within this divisive axis, the entire discourse revolves around whether it pertains to cultural or religious matters. Nonetheless, it is within the religious sphere, involving the realm of emotion, that greater transport exists, and thus greater power of the visual. David Morgan postulates an anthropology of visual practices, acknowledging that each culture is endowed with a visual element capable of forging an experiential relationship with individuals that is characterized by the sensation of absorption in the image (Morgan, 2005, p. 2). The modes for this experience can differ: contemplative or mind-numbing. This contributes to the formation of what he terms as a “gaze”, that is, the visual field that interconnects the perceiver, the perceived, and the visual conventions, bridging physical, cultural, ritual, and historical dynamics. This relationship, generalized as object/viewer, can be extended to include other viewers who can interact with the same object or the principal viewer, producing a complex inter-relation of vision. Whenever images are employed to shape, sustain, or transform social sensibilities to construct the cultural world, it can be construed as “visual culture” (p. 33). This “image” also encompasses the dimension of imagery. Morgan’s interpretation of vision posits it as an active process, whereby sensory impressions are not passively received as data but instead undergo transformation through “a selective and constructive activity, a way of making order, of remembering, and of engaging people and the material world in relationships” (p. 48). He compares this process to the religious act of *darśan* “observing” in Hindū religious traditions, which is both “seeing and being seen by the deity, an encounter that occurs within the gaze of a statue or image in the temple or at the shrine”.

Images constitute an integral part of the orientation of any practice, including religious ones. From a visual-semiotic perspective, a religion can be considered a system of organized symbols that serve as both cognitive images and physical vehicles. Such symbols are employed to efficiently communicate various values, orders, beliefs, notions about the world and life (p. 53). There is a realm of “invisible” images, which are not entirely inconceivable but rather not-visible in the physical dimension. When someone thinks of something generally believed to be incorporeal or abstract, they inevitably rely on visual anchors, such as colors, undefined shapes, geometrical forms, or symbolic referents with slightly modified details. Even when not materially present, images serve as a means of thought. Moreover, abstract ideas of so-called concrete realities are also processed through images. For instance, the term “yoga” might immediately evoke an idealized man seated in the classical *siddhāsana* position. Owing to their intrinsically powerful nature, images are used in the social dimension for various purposes, such as organizing space and time in religious practice (p. 56). This fact highlights the multiple levels of the image. No ontological distinction can be made between a mental image and a supposed real one. What differs in our experience is the phenomenology of a

particular image. This idea is also present in Buddhist meditative experience, which posits different ‘images’ as manifestations of the same Buddha through different bodies (p. 64).

Images, in and of themselves, are not true. One may, however, assert the truthfulness of a certain image for a variety of reasons, such as communitarian expectations, authority, comparison with a previous given system, or its desirable or ideal state (p. 77). This discourse is formalized by Buddhists in the problematic of false views (*micchādiṭṭhī*). Images share the same nature as words and possess the power to create semantic primacy (Squarcini, 2012). Like words, images can be propagated to promulgate a particular episteme, a knowledge of commonly organized rules, ideas about the other, and a description of reality. We might think of a representation of something as a ‘depiction’. Different models of reality can be depicted based on various epistemological premises. However, each depiction is a discourse on the same reality (Morgan, 2005, p. 129). This is a potent means, particularly if it is used to ‘draw’ a denigratory picture of the other. Images and language (or more accurately, signs) therefore suffer the same fate when recognized as an element of agglomeration of ideas. Consequently, the controller might want to destroy them for practical reasons (p. 137).

Images, akin to signs, bear a significant performative power. The meditative practices of Buddhism provide a striking example in this regard. These exercises rely on intricate visualization techniques wherein the sign-image, denoted by the term *nimitta* that signifies both a mental construct and a linguistic sign, is conjured by the meditator’s mind, and subsequently introjected into their body, thereby conferring certain benefits. In particular, *nimittas* depicting sacred mantra syllables or buddha images are deployed in these meditative practices to purify one’s cognitions (cfr. *Visuddhimagga*). The image, therefore, is susceptible to manipulation, originates from the mind, and is performative, as it wields a concrete and efficacious capacity to impact the reality of the subject who evokes it (Harvey, 1986). This compels us to ruminate on the ontological essence of mental objects, a notion that de Martino had already underscored in his seminal works concerning the theme of nature in anthropology. Nowadays, “Ontologists try to approach human reality without any presuppositions that distinguish what is “real” and what is not” (Paleček, 2022, p. 155). Undoubtedly, this stance is laudable and aligns well with conventional thought, however, the pervasive trepidation among ontologists regarding the potentiality of succumbing to a particular, colloquially termed ‘colonial’, epistemological construct inhibits their capacity to affirm any ontic reality unequivocally. This subsequently ensnares them in an intricate paradox, positing serious implications for their philosophical credibility.

For instance, “that the ontological turn brings to this practice is the emphasizing of objects and artifacts themselves as opposed to their meanings, arguing that the division between signifier and signified is misleading and arbitrary” (Sivado, 2015, p. 85). Language is indeed a critical component

of the anthropology of the ontological turn, as it serves as a means of understanding the complex relationships between humans and non-human entities.

Through an exploration of language games, including the ideas of Wittgenstein, Lyotard, Austin, and James, Latour emphasizes the need for an anthropology that recognizes the purifying tendencies of language games and their role in shaping our perspectives and positioning (Fischer, 2014, p. 332). Philippe Descola offers a counterpoint to this view, reminding us to think with the pre-Moderns and their diverse perspectives. Recent ethnographic work with Amazonian communities, such as the Ayoreo, Runa, and Yanomami, further emphasizes the importance of language in shaping our understanding of the world and our relationships within it. Ultimately, the study of language is a critical aspect of anthropology that provides insight into the ways in which humans make meaning of the world around them.

The role of anthropology of the ontological turn is to emphasize the fundamental importance of the sign's semantic flexibility in enabling an interactive meeting between anthropologists and informants, and to acknowledge the dynamism of the humanistic, epistemological concept of culture in encompassing both differences and similarities. As Lévi-Strauss has highlighted, it is not the ontologically inelastic 'signified' but the 'sign' itself that allows for potentiality and change (Vigh & Sausdal, 2014, p. 67). Culture, understood as a seizure of the world, constitutes a practical grip and conceptual understanding of social life that is continuously unfolded and refolded into the world.

6.5 Visual theory and the problem of perceived reality

So far, I developed some reflections on the ontological turn, attempting to build a bridge between a Buddhist theory of images and the ethnographic data collected for this research, which lead me to consider images as agents capable of actively interacting with our consciousness. This hypothesis has already been proposed within the field of anthropology.

Mitchell's theory of the image takes issue with the conventional assumption that images are only material, pictorial representations (Mitchell, 1984, pp. 521-4). He contrasts this with a tradition in which the image represents primarily something spiritual, or even something abstract, like the one in religious texts where humans are made in the "image" of God. Within this tradition, the image is not so much a picture as a reflection of core, spiritual reality, as claimed by figures like Maimonides. He argues that true images are mental or spiritual shapes, that material images are corruptions of that concept.

Mitchell says that the distinction between spiritual and material images has profound religious, political, and social implications. It is a history of the debate over idolatry in which spiritual images had to be distinguished as such from material representations in order to keep religion clean. The

confusion between likeness and picture may well have arisen through drift in metaphor and expediency such as the education of a non-literate public.

Mitchell carries this debate to the next state, where he searches how this tension plays out in literature, more so in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, where the image of God in humanity comes out, more so visually and spiritually ("The image of thir glorious Maker shone, Truth, Wisdom, Sanctitude severe and pure..."). Milton's Adam and Eve are the embodiment of this duality; in physiognomy, both characters present divine characteristics, whereas the real 'image' remains within the spiritual contents, which reflect attributes such as truth and wisdom. It reflects a more general historical shift in which spiritual likenesses came to be conflated with material images, a transformation central to the understanding of images, according to Mitchell.

Mitchell quotes to show how the relation between spiritual and material images is in the Western tradition complex if not contradictory. Milton's treatment of Adam and Eve gives an exemplification of a dual sense of 'image': the outward, visual appearance of human beings as "erect and tall" with a "nobler shape", and the more profound, spiritual qualities of "Truth, Wisdom, Sanctitude severe and pure". Mitchell underlines that Milton deliberately plays on this ambiguity by using "looks", a word which can variously denote physical appearance and the less tangible qualities of their expressions. Central to Mitchell's theory is an example of this dualistic character whereby images are, in their very essence, visual yet carry deeper meanings that are immeasurable.

Mitchell's point is that Milton's work is proof of a conflict—the historical and theological struggle—between iconoclasm, a total refusal of material images, and iconophilia, an obsession with visual ones. The tussle between the two sides is reflected in his poetry by the waxing and waning of an iconoclastic lack of trust of images to an iconophilic attraction towards their power. Milton cannot simply reject the power of the visual, for he is a poet who relies heavily on images to critique superficiality about material images.

Mitchell exposes a crucial aspect of his theory through the use of Milton to quote: the historical transformation of the meaning of the image from an entirely spiritual likeness to something associated with material forms. Such evolution is part of what characterizes Milton's own work: the image ceases to reflect divine qualities and becomes more associated with physicality. Thus, ambivalence characterizes Milton's treatment of the image, representative of much larger cultural and theological tensions around the place of images in human understanding and religious practice. If anything, then, it is in these ways that Mitchell uses Milton to epitomize how the image, both spiritual and material forms of it, has worked as a site of perpetual negotiation between distinct modes of representation. One particular formula of expression used in connection with the ontological turn attracts my attention, and this formula is that of "things as they are". In Buddhist contemplative practice, it is

understood as the ultimate goal of the meditator and is referred to as *yathābhūtam*, translatable as suchness or that-ness, literally “as-it-is”. In the ontological turn it is said more appropriately that the aim is not to study things “as they are” but “as they *could* be” (Pedersen, 2020, p. 614).

Initially, the ontological turn redirected the focus from the concept of representation to the prospect that cultural objects possessed genuine value, rather than just metaphorical significance.⁸³ Thus, for the anthropology of the ontological turn, a cultural object (and everything we label is inherently cultural) is not solely a symbol of belief but instead engenders belief at the moment it operates in the ritual (Brigati & Gamberi, 2019, p. 14).

Three stimuli lead to the ontological turn and represent significant challenges to the field of cultural anthropology. The first is the crisis of representation, which has complicated the subject/object separation and further complicated the dualisms inherent in Western ethno-anthropology. These dualisms include the division between people and things, including humans and non-humans, as well as the separation between linguistic meanings and extra-linguistic reality, i.e., concepts and objects. These dualisms have been central to the Culture/Nature distinction, which has been a mainstay of Western ethno-anthropology (p. 278). Starting from this point, we can discern the vast potential of the ontological turn. The integration of contemplative practices in anthropology necessitates an empirical exploration of non-dualism, which is experienced firsthand by anthropologists who adopt this perspective as a mode of inquiry. Buddhist meditation embodies an unequivocally anti-dualist philosophy. Nonetheless, it is imperative to thoroughly comprehend the reasons and mechanisms

⁸³ Three elements can be recognized as constitutive of the ontological turn (Paleček, 2022, p. 157). These elements include (a) the acknowledgement of a legitimate indigenous ontology that can be reconstructed through anthropological inquiry, (b) the conceptualization of indigenous categories, intended to avoid linking elements of local ontology with Western ontology, and (c) the (auto)ethnographic experimentation of these categories in one’s fieldwork. This perspective holds the conviction that it is impossible to view all human beings as having the same problems; they are instead united by the act of knowing, albeit in different ways. Anthropologists, fearful of ethnocentrism, reject the comparative medium and refrain from asserting that even in different parts of the world, two distinct cultures have contemplated the same concept but in different ways. However, if we accept that every ontology is legitimate, we have already resolved the problem of ethnocentrism, allowing us to listen to what different ontologies have to communicate, without apprehension of applying them to already established knowledge systems. In this context, anthropology must take a cue from comparative philosophy, which has long since dispensed with the ethnocentric prejudice and engaged in constructive, productive and fertile dialogue among thinkers from various cultures, such as Indian, ancient Greek, Chinese, and Arab, among others. It must be said, however, that the ontological turn provides a good basis for revolution, since it applies this principle to fieldwork in order to “incorporate key theories of contemporary philosophy of science and philosophy of mind into a methodological model for a specific social science” (Sivado, 2015, p. 97). This is precisely the problem of the ontological turn: pluralities in cultures “are to be viewed as irreducible differences and alternatives to our own categories” (p. 158). On the second point, I concur with the argument; however, I must express my disagreement with respect to the first point. The emphasis on radical difference, rather than the more encompassing notion of multiple determinations, poses significant methodological problems for this approach. In particular, the post-human and post-social character of the other within the ontological turn presents a significant challenge for communication and translation between radically different ontological worlds. If we accept the premise that the worlds we seek to study are fundamentally incommensurable, we require a compelling account of the trans-specific similarities that enable us to bridge these ontological divides and engage ethnographically with these singular realms. Such an account is necessary if we are to mediate these differences and gain a deeper understanding of the diverse ontological perspectives that exist within the anthropological project (Vigh & Sausdal, 2014, p. 57).

underlying non-dualism in India to avoid unfortunate misunderstandings. While overcoming the dichotomy between nature and culture is undoubtedly a commendable objective of the ontological turn, it could mislead anthropologists if they fail to recognize that dualism is not exclusive to Western culture, and that the issue of the observer's standpoint is transcultural, as are various manifestations of dualism.

The second stimulus pertains to the beginning of an ethnography of science and its social applications, particularly in light of the political use of it. This approach challenges the notion of absolute scientific truth that had previously dominated anthropology with its ideological paradigm. By examining science as a cultural phenomenon that can influence social dynamics for better or worse, anthropology acknowledges the historical and cultural nature of scientific thought. Anthropology must become a discipline that recognizes and analyzes the ideological power of science, highlighting possible problems, finding solutions and focusing on the benefits, thus directing human beings toward a better future (p. 279).

Finally, De Castro posits that the ultimate goal of the new anthropology is to become a true discipline that not only studies human beings but also provides guidance for them. Anthropology must abandon the notion that all cultures have equal dignity and that they are beyond criticism, instead acknowledging that some elements of other cultures are better or worse than those of one's own culture. It is the duty of the anthropologist, who has already abandoned ethnocentrism, to identify the significant problems within their own culture, and to learn from other cultures in order to improve. Anthropology should strive to recognize and preserve the best elements of each culture, while opposing the worst, without claiming the superiority of any culture. The study of the infinite cultural possibilities, both within and outside one's own culture, can help us confront the forthcoming challenges, such as the "ecological catastrophe and its dialectical link with the economic crisis: the well-known problem of the end of the world or the end of capitalism" (p. 281).

In recent years, the validity of the ontological turn has been called into question. In my view, this is due more to limitations on the part of ontologists than to any inherent weaknesses in the focus on ontology. Although certain intrinsic limitations of the method have been emphasized, I do not believe that this should result in the abandonment of the ontological turn altogether. Rather, it should serve as a catalyst for its renewal, pointing toward a direction that surpasses the premises that previously hindered its full realization.

Given the participation of scholars such as Latour, Ardener, Descola, and De Castro, it is difficult to consider the ontological turn as a singular movement. To aid our cause, it would be appropriate to abandon the sterile polemic that emphasizes the division between Philosophical Anthropology and Socio-cultural Anthropology. This division is unnecessary and appears entirely superfluous, if not

anachronistic, even considering the apparently different genesis of the two disciplines which nonetheless have always shared the common goal of understanding humanity.

In the context of sociocultural studies, the anthropologist often celebrates differences by treating them as ontologically distinct, when the focus should be on finding unity in the diverse (ontic) representations of reality. Anthropology has tended to divide rather than unite, both in positivist anthropology which was founded on the principle of the superiority of Western culture and which ontologically separated it from indigenous cultures labeled as primitive, and in modern anthropology after the Geertzian revolution (Geertz, 1973; Idem, 2008) which, albeit its indispensable importance even today (Sussen, 2024), it still maintains the same ontological distinction, though in a more nuanced form.

Different cultures are no longer evaluated in terms of superiority or inferiority, but the emphasis on the uniqueness of each culture and the irreducibility of each cultural manifestation has the effect of creating a division, a dualistic and sharp separation between cultures which are essentially unique phenomena, incomprehensible to the anthropologist who can only attempt to mitigate their subjectivity. This leads to what I refer to as a nihilistic contradiction. In the past, anthropologists belonging to culture A looked at culture B through the prejudice of their own cultural roots in A, thereby distorting their view of B through the lens of A. In more recent times, however, the anthropologist sees their belonging to A as a fault to be atoned for, and they struggle to look at B while eliminating any trace of A, in order to prevent even a shred of A from contaminating B. This is naturally impossible, and even though the introduction of hermeneutics into anthropology has softened the absurd claim of eliminating one's subjectivity, and has given value to the exchange and interaction between A and B, it is still believed that fully understanding B is impossible, as A will always have its perspective as A. Yet De Saussure (2002, p. 23) wrote in his reflections on general linguistics, "nommer un objet, ce n'est pas autre chose que d'invoquer un point de vue A déterminé". However, even though the scope of the anthropologist is "to (1) extend our knowledge, and (2) extend the scope of our imagination", we must sadly recognize that "ontologists display a tendency to abdicate from the first and emphasise the second" (Paleček, 2022, p. 159).

Although the impossibility of erasing A to view B has been acknowledged, the experience of B remains elusive to A. That A can only produce new experiences from the A-B encounter without moving beyond its own belonging to A or identifying with B. This discourse serves to demonstrate that in every model that has succeeded each other so far, anthropology has consistently maintained a dualistic approach based on the A/B model.

I propose a radical reassessment of the problem at hand. The ontological turn has primarily focused on reductionism and the nature/culture dichotomy, which are perceived as integral components of the

Western ontological worldview. It similarly rejects objectivist monism and the notion that there exists only one world from which different cultures derive their interpretations, representations, and symbolizations.⁸⁴ However, if we assume that each culture represents a world in and of itself, we are imposing an ontological difference, thus starkly dividing cultures and creating a system of isolated and non-communicative worlds, separated by emptiness. This nihilistic paradox can be resolved if we consider cultural differences as ontic rather than ontological. According to Mitchell,

there is something curiously anachronistic about the modern attack on the notion of mental images as “privileged representations” when the main thrust of modern studies of *material* images has been to take away these privileges. It’s hard to debunk a picture theory of language when we no longer have a picture theory of pictures themselves.

The solution to our difficulties, then, would not seem to be a jettisoning of representational theories of mind or language. That would be as futile as iconoclastic attempts to purge the world of images have always been. What we might do, however, is retrace the steps by which the notion of the image as a transparent picture or “privileged representation” took over our notions of mind and language.⁸⁵

We cannot relinquish our affirmation of the substantial unity of every phenomenon, and in the case of humans, declaring human cultures as independent ‘worlds’ would also condemn them to isolation, thus frustrating the anthropologist’s very objective. Hence, the world is, in fact, one; the only variation is in the various cultural perspectives of the world. This, however, does not imply that one can casually assume the superiority of one viewpoint over another. In other contexts, the ontological turn has affirmed the legitimacy of every worldview, which is precisely the point. We must acknowledge the legitimacy of every possible worldview not merely to preserve the right to a distinct epistemology and protect it from the domination of a hegemonic one, but also because the solution to human dilemmas lies solely in the vision of totality. Each culture possesses a portion of the answer, which is unknown to other cultures. However, this standpoint can only be attained by overcoming dualism, and herein lies the significance of the contemplative proposal.

The Nature/Culture distinction highlights the significance of boundaries in shaping perceptual abilities. Boundaries play a pivotal role by dividing entities and allowing determination and

⁸⁴ Representationalism is a theoretical framework that relies on a disguised game of images. In this ancient anthropological concept, cultural objects, images, rituals, and other elements are viewed as metaphorical aids. According to this perspective, a statue is not a divinity itself, but rather a symbolic substitute imbued with the essence of the divinity that refers to it without being identical to it. The recent ontological turn has emphasized the real value of cultural objects rather than their purely metaphorical role, i.e. the thing encountered in the field is per se significant, and does not stand for something else (Sivado, 2015, p. 85).

⁸⁵ Cf. Mitchell, 1984, p. 520.

distinction between them. The dualistic principle is essential to both semantic and visual perception, which underscores their close interrelation. However, some scholars have expanded the implications of this problem to the anthropological reality itself. The perceived external reality not only differs from our expectations and beliefs, but its independence from the perceivers is also crucial. Moreover, the internal dualism of the perceivers, which evolves on the axis of inside/outside the body, contributes to this misunderstanding. The question of a boundary between the inner and outer world has been debated by scholars such as Uexküll in biology and Merleau-Ponty in philosophy (Brioschi, 2023). Both positions have had significant repercussions for anthropology.

The problem of dualism can also be understood in the form of an axis that can be labeled as Thing/Image, or Original/Copy. Notably, this axis is employed not only in the field of visual anthropology but also in other anthropological sub-disciplines such as cultural, religious, and medical anthropology, to name but a few. It is noteworthy that this employment is often inadvertent. According to the conventional theory of identity, the latter is merely a representation of reality.

In the cultural domain, social and traditional structures that bind together beliefs, rituals, and customs are founded upon images that constitute different identities. Similarly, in religion, the images that inhabit the spiritual realm serve as centers of emanation for specific normative orders. However, if identity is regarded as nothing more than a self-image, then it must also be acknowledged, as anthropology implicitly recognizes, that it is not ‘real’. The ‘Western’ cultural thought commonly maintains that an image is nothing more than an imperfect replica of an original. As a mere replica, an image can only be restrictive, insubstantial, and a mere reference to something else, which is the ‘thing itself’. Similarly, complex cultural systems such as medicines are understood in medical anthropology as an arrangement of signs and particular images, such as the notion of the impure and the pure, the sick and the healthy, and the symptom. These cardinal concepts are structured around an ideal, imaginal epicenter that renders them conceivable. It is significant that all contemporary theories implicitly feature the image as a fundamental element.

The term “image”, stemming from the Latin *imāgō*, can be traced back to an Indo-European root conveying the concept of “imitation”. This root etymologically embeds the sense of an ‘imperfect copy’ of a prototype. Notably, the Sanskrit term *yāma*, signifying “pair, twin”, is another lexeme derived from the same source.⁸⁶ If we go back as far as Vasubandhu, we notice that the idea of the mirror and reflected image, used as a metaphor to indicate cognitive copy, is also in this case that of a mere imitation. The problem of determining the reality of the image, in this case the reflected image, is a problem that leads Vasubandhu to say that “when we see reflections in fact we see nothing but

⁸⁶ Cf. *Etymological Dictionary of Latin and the other Italic Languages*, edited by Michiel de Vaan (Leiden, Brill 2008), p. 298.

the reflecting entity, but we are deluded into seeing something besides the mirror because of a particular causal complex involving the presence of a mirror, light, a specific angle, and so on” (Ratié, 2017, p. 209). In this circumstance, it is not necessarily the case that Vasubandhu saw the reflection as a copy of the original. His idea certainly implies a uniqueness of reality, where there are no originals and copies but only a substance that is reflected in these appearances of reality. Yet, even this view implies a certain degree of separation between the real and its elaboration.

In the humanities, the notion of field has various applications. To delve into the issue, a brief examination is required. From the Gestalt perspective, the field of perception can be distinguished from the field of totality, the latter being a collection of elements apprehended simultaneously but in an over-summative relationship (*Übersummativität*). The importance of Gestalt *Übersummativität* lies in its recognition that an object, although analyzable by our knowledge as comprising parts, cannot be reduced to the mere sum of these parts. From a visual standpoint, each component is an image in its own right, but the starting image is not a mere aggregation of images, as it, in turn, is an image that can also be a part. Consequently, the notion of component is immediately challenged. Discourses on visual perception in anthropology are also affected, for instance, by considering the performativity of objects in a specific cultural context. The image is an entity that functions as a whole, and the whole is itself an image. Perceptions, on the other hand, are centered on the complex images’ set (*Gestaltqualität*).

These images are related but not coincident. Such a theme is also discernible in Gestalt theory, where they are referred to as *Verbindung* (conjunction) and *Gestalteten* (configuration). Similar to language (De Palo, 2020, p. 336), visual perception can be considered as a double articulation system, which, beginning with a limited number of units, can generate an infinite number of possible configurations. In the language theory, Bühler proposes a separation S/F or symbol and field (*Symbol/Feld*) which enables the relationship between discourse and context through reciprocal presupposition. One could note the similarity in pronunciation between *Feld* (field) and *Welt* (world) of these technical terms, as Bühler’s *Feld* seems to call to mind another theory that implicates the field, referred to as ‘world’, in an interpenetrating relationship for describing visual perception, namely Uexküll’s phenomenology and biosemiotics (Brigati & Gamberi, 2019, p. 34).

The *Feldbegriff* discourse, as developed by Hering and subsequently by his students, posits that the sensible datum relies on the variable totality of perceptual events, resulting in the differentiation between the internal field (*Infeld*) and the peripheral field (*Umfeld*). Linguistics, through the *Zweifelderlehre* or Double Field Theory, also employs a stereoscopic view of perceptions. The semantic value of each sign is determined by the internal dispositions to the field, with spatial metaphors assuming a fundamental role. Deixis identifies three ways of determining the sign: *ad*

oculos, per anaphora, or *absentia* (De Palo, 2020, p. 340). Anaphora allows for the evocation of a presence through its absence, which not only recalls Agamben's ghost theory I mentioned in the previous chapter (Agamben, 1993), but also resonates with Buddhist conceptions of the relationship between presence and absence in the vision of form (*rūpa*), where unity constitutes minimal perception. These ideas will be instrumental in advancing a non-dual approach to visual anthropology. The axis linking *Umfeld* and *Infeld* presents a number of difficulties. As De Palo notes, "the perception of color spot is influenced by the surrounding field" (De Palo, 2020, p. 341). This assertion appears to echo Wittgenstein's proposition 216 of the *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, wherein he posits that a stain (*Flecke*) is only visible by virtue of the support in which it appears (which may be a blank sheet). The aforementioned example is revisited by Merleau-Ponty (1976, p. 26), who derives from it a well-known imaginative exercise of a stain and its substrate, prompting an ontological contemplation:

La couleur de la figure est plus dense et comme plus résistante que celle du fond ; les bords de la tache blanche lui « appartiennent » et ne sont pas solidaires du fond pourtant contigu ; la tache paraît posée sur le fond et ne l'interrompt pas. Chaque partie annonce plus qu'elle ne contient et cette perception élémentaire est donc déjà chargée d'un *sens*.

Thus, the sign of the stain is interdependent on its support, which Wittgenstein refers to as *Umgebung*, or the surrounding environment. Given that no image or sign can be isolated from its context (*Umgebung* or *Umfeld*), a phenomenological problem arises. While physics can measure the wavelengths emitted by two colors and identify them as identical, human perception may sense even two physically identical colors as different.

This difficulty is resolved by recognizing that a physical entity itself is a phenomenological body, endowed with its own perceptive characteristics that describe its own *Infeld*. An analogous discourse is found in Merleau-Ponty (1976, p. 81). Therefore, the image is a concrete fact that cannot be disentangled from the field.⁸⁷

⁸⁷ In Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, the "*champ phénoménal*" (Merleau-Ponty, 1976, p. 84) refers to the total range of possible experiences, perceptions, and sensations that a subject can have at any given moment. It is a broader and more comprehensive term than the "*champ visuel*", which specifically refers to the visual field or the range of visual experience. The *champ phénoménal* includes not only visual experiences but also all other sensory experiences, such as touch, smell, taste, and sound, as well as more abstract experiences like thoughts and emotions. It is a dynamic and constantly changing field that is influenced by various factors, such as the subject's past experiences, cultural background, and physical surroundings. This concept challenges the traditional Cartesian dualism of mind and body, and emphasizes the inseparability of perception and embodiment. For Merleau-Ponty, perception is not just a passive reception of sensory information, but an active and embodied engagement with the world, in which the subject's body and mind are deeply intertwined in the creation of meaning and understanding. Notwithstanding, Merleau-Ponty appears to employ the concepts of interiority/exteriority intermittently in an equivocal manner. To Merleau-Ponty, the act of visual perception entails the positioning of an object at the periphery of the visual field, enabling the subject to apprehend and respond to

Nonetheless, the notion of the field as a network of relationships surrounding the images establishes a dualism between the field and the images that it coordinates. Of course, an image cannot be self-semantic, but the crucial point is that the bond between field and image is so close as to render the distinction between the two irrelevant.

Theories of visual perception necessitate a comprehensive theory of information. Every visual image represents a distinct quantity of information. The term “information” derives from the Latin verb *īnfōrmāre*, which means “to give shape” (*in-fōrmō*), thus emphasizing the fact that every image comprises forms in motion. Nevertheless, this proposition poses some crucial issues: form in its absolute sense is invisible without a specific arrangement that accentuates its unique determination. In essence, information denotes the action of form, a configuration that can distort and revert to an imperceptible state. However, such forms require a plane where minimal units of vision interact, unless one relinquishes the atomistic approach that regards the elementary formal components as disjointed and adopts a continuous theory of form.

its solicitations. Nevertheless, following the fixation of the object in perceptual awareness, the subject proceeds with an “internal” investigation of the object: “je continue à l’intérieur d’un objet l’exploration qui, tout à l’heure, les survolait tous, d’un seul mouvement je referme le paysage et j’ouvre l’objet” (p. 95). The ambiguity inherent in the inside/outside relationship in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology has been acknowledged in relation to yogic practice (Sarukkai, 2002). Although Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology strives to eliminate barriers between body and world, Sarukkai observes that the specific treatment of this spatial dualism may appear to be contradictory. However, Sarukkai asserts that this terminology can only be utilized in a conventional sense and not as an indication of duality (p. 463). According to this phenomenology, body and world are interdependent to the extent that the body shapes the world. The existence of a distinction between the field (world) and the body (sign) does not preclude the possibility of different fields, even interpenetrating each other. In this context, the yogic perspective can provide valuable insights. Sarukkai invokes Patañjali’s yoga, although it should be noted that the relationship between interiority and exteriority is already present in the Buddhist meditation Satipaṭṭhāna, in which each phase of meditation is experienced, according to Buddhist texts, as internal (*ajjatta*) and external (*bahidda*). This dual dimensionality is therefore not rejected even by yoga, which situates the mind as an internal organ. This does not imply dualism. The dual conformation inside/outside is considered real by these philosophers, but it is not substantial (Westerhoff, 2020). The inside and the outside subsist with the raising of a membrane, which isolates the subjectivities. Contemplative practice, which includes yoga, leads to *samādhi*, the permeability of this membrane. In the state of *samādhi*, which can be experienced in meditation and studied ethnographically, the subject witnesses a state of ‘*confusion*’ with the object towards which they direct their meditative attention: “[t]he suspicion of the ‘visual’ arises because of the possible contamination and distraction of the mind by the objects-of-sight. [...] The language of perception is itself dominantly visual although reference to sound occur intermittently” (pp. 467-8). If the meditation is conducted proficiently, the subject also extends their perception “outside”, which means they have transcended the dualism between inside and outside (p. 471). Meditative experiences are relevant anthropologically, and it is significant that the subject can experience an extended state of consciousness, not only in relation to another living being but also to an object. These are highly unusual experiences that involve a complete upheaval of perceptual habits. In the ethnographic field, we are still developing investigations on the me/other axis, anthropologist/anthropologized, and it is important to recognize that the anthropologist will never be able to eliminate their subjectivity entirely to the point of fully understanding that of the other. Rather, the anthropologist must acknowledge the relationship of meeting/clash between worlds. Contrarily, we argue that it is not only irrelevant to erase one’s subjectivity, but it is also possible to comprehend the other, accepting their viewpoint as one’s own and becoming the other. This fundamentally reevaluates the work of the anthropologist and demands serious consideration of the importance of analyzing states of expanded consciousness in meditation.

6.6 The New Ways of the Image

This research began as an anthropological investigation into consciousness, but it has also contributed to the debate on anthropological theories of the image. In truth, by the end of this journey, it becomes clear that the two subjects are intimately connected, although this may not seem evident at the outset. In the context of our anthropological investigation, the maṇḍala-elicitation technique served as a means to study contemplative practices and the phenomenon of extended consciousness. By having participants create maṇḍalas through meditative processes, I aimed to explore the subjective experiences and individual stories of the participants. This technique diverges from traditional objectivist approaches, focusing more on the hermeneutics of the subject and the interpretation of the visual works within the context of contemplative practice.

The prospects for a new theory of the image in the maṇḍala-elicitation are now to be summed up. By applying contemplative anthropology and utilizing the maṇḍala-elicitation technique, one can delve deeper into the complexities of extended consciousness and the transformative power of images. The theory challenges conventional assumptions about the passive nature of images and encourages a more nuanced understanding of their agency and influence in shaping human experiences.

Furthermore, this theory bridges the gap between anthropological investigations and artistic creations. While the visual production in the form of maṇḍalas is not strictly considered art in the conventional sense, it still falls within the scope of anthropological interest, especially in the context of contemplative practices. This approach allowed us to explore the inspirations and immersive desires of the participants as they engage in the creation of maṇḍalas.

Paolo Favero's theory on the immersive images has also explored the notion of presence, contemplation, and efficacy in the engagement with images in both Western and non-Western cultural contexts (Favero, 2018a, pp. 47-58). He argues that images are not just passive representations but possess agency and can evoke emotional and transformative responses in viewers. For example, in non-Western cultures like India, the act of seeing an image is seen as reciprocal, with the divine being literally present in the image. In such contexts, images are "things that matter", and the act of looking is also an act of being looked at, resulting in a full immersion in the image. Similarly, in Western art movements like Cubism and Futurism, artists attempted to capture multiple perspectives or moments of observation on a single canvas, challenging the notion of fixed representation and engaging the viewer in a dynamic visual experience.

A new theory on the image in the context of the maṇḍala-elicitation technique also aligns with Favero's exploration of the presence, contemplation, and efficacy of images. By focusing on extended consciousness and employing contemplative anthropology, this investigation offered a unique perspective on the transformative potential of images and their significance in contemplative

practices. The prospects for the theory lie in its potential to provide valuable insights into the dynamic and influential role of images in shaping human consciousness and experiences.

The connection between these two theories lies in their shared focus on the significance of images beyond mere representation and the potential for images to function as active agents in the human experience. Important is the challenge the traditional Western understanding of images as passive, static copies of reality and instead emphasize their dynamic and influential role in shaping consciousness, emotions, and behaviors.

The final theory I can draw from this research centers on the maṇḍala, which is not simply an inert image but rather a representation of a meditative act and an imprint of the creator's consciousness. The maṇḍala communicates with consciousness and establishes connections, going beyond its creator to captivate others and facilitate meditation. I suggested that the maṇḍala, like the sculptor's interaction with the marble, engages in a dialogue with consciousness, embodying a form of agency and vitality.

Thanks to Favero (2018a; 2018b; 2019) we know many ways in which images are engaged with and experienced in various cultural contexts. He highlights the presence and contemplation in non-Western visual cultures, where images are not considered mere representations but are perceived as powerful objects that matter, evoke emotions, and facilitate reciprocal relationships between the viewer and the divine. He argues that these images possess agency and efficacy, influencing the worshipper and enabling a deeper emotional connection.

Now the image is viewed as an active participant in the interaction between the viewer and the depicted subject. This agency challenges the conventional notion that images are passive reflections or copies. Instead, they become agents that evoke emotions, elicit responses, and engage in a form of dialogue with the viewer. The idea of the image-representation is a popular theory in visual anthropology. Nonetheless I do not entirely agree with this particular thesis. According to Descola, images and visual artifacts take part in defining the body of those who interact with them and, to some extent, have to be considered a corporeality on their own.

Les artefacts rituels, masques et costumes ne sont qu'un détournement de ce corps-image, employés par les humains afin de faciliter les interactions avec la foule discrète des non-humains qui les entourent : comme dans les bals masqués d'antan, personne n'est dupe de ces substitutions d'identité, mais l'on en jouit quand même pour un moment, dans la conscience de se retrouver entre soi dans le carrousel des faux-semblants.⁸⁸

⁸⁸ Cf. Descola, 2021, p. 621.

By mentioning Verworn, Descola speaks also of the theory of interaction between art and consciousness. The work of art possesses some kind of agency, a capacity to express “des processus de conscience avec les moyens que l’artiste lui-même crée afin qu’ils soient perçus par les organes des sens” (p. 635).

From an anthropological perspective, these theories expand the understanding of the image as more than a visual representation but rather as a dynamic force that operates within cultural and social contexts. By examining the role of images in various cultural practices, both theories shed light on how images can shape beliefs, emotions, and relationships within a community.

We must now encourage scholars to move beyond a mere analysis of the visual content and consider the agency and impact of images within cultural contexts. Anthropologists can explore how images are engaged with, treated, and experienced by individuals and communities. They can study the rituals and practices surrounding images, understanding how they are used to convey and enhance meanings, emotions, and beliefs.

Additionally, the theories challenge the dichotomy between truth and falsehood in relation to images. The understanding that images can communicate with consciousness and evoke responses calls for a more nuanced approach to interpreting the role of images in cultural practices. Instead of dismissing images as mere fictions or deceptions, anthropologists can explore how they function within specific cultural frameworks and contribute to the construction of meaning and belief systems.

As wisely observed by de Martino, the question of the vitality of things, whether they be objects or figures (both of which, inevitably, reveal themselves to our cognition as mere ‘images’, a term which we may thus employ unambiguously), can be traced back to an issue already known to the history of religions. Building upon the reflections of van der Leeuw in his *Phänomenologie der Religion*, de Martino underscores the significance of the mere phenomenon as the residue of a ‘divine’ power that becomes evident. In our case, we can speak of images that unveil themselves, becoming evident by virtue of this very ‘phany’ (from the Greek φάνεια, lit. “what appears”, cfr. φαίνω). Certainly, this capacity to become *evidence* has long been attributed to powers of a religious nature: it is the deity who holds being and nothingness in the palm of its hand and, by its will, displays or manifests itself as a creative power under unfathomable circumstances.

There is no reason to appeal to an indiscriminately divine nature of images, and yet, if this undeniable capacity to fascinate and communicate has been understood as a divine power, where it is merely conscious power, this would explain de Martino’s thesis without the need to invoke old religious anthropologies and discourses on the sacred. In the case of the sacred, the individual who experiences its power “is conscious of encountering a quality that cannot be further derived from nothingness”, and this is de Martino’s crucial point.

The individual who admires this ‘power’ is almost compelled to attribute it to the sacred or to something that “always signifies suspicion or the premonition of the absolutely different, the wholly other” (de Martino, 1995, p. 52). But why this estrangement of consciousness from itself? Why does the image arrive like a snare, seemingly separating an inseparable unity? On this, de Martino does not reflect, except for a lightning-like intuition on the introspection of consciousness that will find no greater development except in his unpublished writings.

De Martino understands it as *Erlebnis* and disassociates it from any reductionistic form of ‘interpretation’ of an elusive natural law or from any interpolation of cultures that offer their view. In other words, the so-called ‘sacred’ is power in and of itself, not merely a placeholder to replace something that science could explain differently, and that a supposedly ignorant culture has labeled as divine power. The sacred stands there as an undeniable “vital or existential datum” that “does not exhaust its own productive power in magic and religion, but has a much broader extension”. It is a sphere “of the human vital domain which is individual presence as the center of decision and choice beyond mere organic or bodily or animal vitality” (p. 58). The presence becomes incarnation (partial, in my view) of this vital power, and emerges as the “primary human vital good” (p. 59), constantly at risk of losing its determination and thus falling back into the indeterminate, which it fears from the moment it, so to speak, detaches itself through *imagination*.

This intricate unveiling process is exemplified through a myriad of visual elicitation endeavors undertaken within this study, wherein the subjects’ attempts to bring forth these images were regrettably left incomplete due to a multitude of factors impeding their seamless continuation. Analogous to the phenomenon of Michelangelo’s ‘unfinished’ works, these attempts divulge the intricate process of image emergence—a phenomenon that, although disrupted and inchoate, encapsulates the image’s active volition to materialize into perceptibility, thus transmuting from latency to manifestation. This conceptual framework parallels Didi-Huberman’s assertion that images possess a certain vitality capable of engendering viewer engagement and evoking responsive sentiments. The act of ‘emerging’ substantiates a trajectory of movement, transformation, and the unfurling of significance, thereby mirroring Didi-Huberman’s inquiry into the enduring influence of images over time, metamorphosing them into resilient entities that persistently resonate (Didi-Huberman, 2002).

If one were to consider images as ‘conscious’ entities that ‘emerge’, they can aptly function as intermediaries facilitating a symbiotic exchange between disparate realms of consciousness. Much like the maṇḍala-elicitation technique’s objective of delving into subjectivity and personal narratives, images serve as conduits that interlink individual cognizance with broader cultural, spiritual, and historical dimensions. This mode of mediation between individual and collective consciousness

aligns seamlessly with Didi-Huberman's proposition concerning images as vessels carrying collective memory and cultural import.

The notion of image 'emergence' can also be thoughtfully intertwined with the concept of images serving as conduits for traversing altered states of consciousness. Much akin to the creative process undertaken by participants in the maṇḍala-elicitation technique, where drawings evolve through meditative mechanisms, images can be wielded as tools for venturing into states of heightened awareness. The process of engrossment with an image, coupled with contemplation of its forms and symbols, possesses the latent potency to precipitate shifts in perceptual and cognitive faculties. This alignment echoes Didi-Huberman's exploration of how images instigate diverse emotional and cognitive reactions over temporal spans, thereby underscoring their inherent transformative potential. The phenomenon of images as somehow conscious entities accentuates their proclivity for traversing cultural and historical confines. Analogous to the reciprocating act of image observation within non-Western societies, where the divine essence is believed to be immanent within the image, these visual representations forge connections across a tapestry of cultural milieus. This interconnectedness seamlessly aligns with Didi-Huberman's emphasis on the enduring survival of images throughout disparate historical epochs and cultural contexts, effectively bridging temporal and spatial chasms to communicate resonantly with heterogeneous audiences.

To perceive an image as a conscious entity undergoing 'emergence' impels us to view it as an active participant engaged in a multifaceted dialogue with the observer. This dialogue transcends mere visual and cognitive aspects, delving into the emotional and spiritual dimensions. Analogous to the discourse broached within the essay regarding the interplay between viewer and depicted subject, Didi-Huberman's contemplation of surviving images intimates a lengthy dialogue that extends beyond the moment of inception, affording viewers the opportunity to engage with the image's strata of significance over the continuum of time.

That the image is not a mere representation seems like a statement that generates bewilderment. To say that representation is the arbitrarily imposed relationship between two or more images, or even a closer bond within the semantic network of the real, appears even more incomprehensible than disconcerting. But the image is not a fleeting fact, no more so than anything else, at least. What escapes us about the image? What, in this intricate web of relationships that get lost in the chaos of our cities and in the existential anxieties we carelessly nurture like precious things, eludes our understanding? We miss the emergence of the thing, but this emergence, like every image that reaches our comprehension, is immediate and evidently powerful, disruptive, even bewildering.

The image is not something reducible to mere visible data, nor to the framed photograph, the painted canvas, or an array of pixels assembled on an expensive high-resolution screen. The image is not even

that set of electrical impulses resulting from the processing of light captured by the retina and sent from the optic nerve to the brain to be processed in specific areas.

Perhaps the image is *also* this, and therefore it is not merely this. It certainly isn't the visual data, even though what we recall in memory 'appears' to us, and in doing so, it manifests itself imaginatively, not being any different from visually observed data 'with our eyes'. Both are immediate, bursting into our cognition 'as such'. They conceal something else: their immediacy is certainly not synonymous with honesty in revelation, but they certainly are as they are, and this holds true for auditory data as well as tactile data. Every image is, in reality, a complete sensory datum, including information, which can associate with other sensory images, but in itself exists only as imagined information.

In other words, the conceptual framework casting images as acting entities enriches our comprehension of images as dynamic, transformative, and participatory agents within the tapestry of human consciousness. This perspective harmoniously dovetails with the notions expounded upon within the research, resonating seamlessly with Didi-Huberman's inquiry (albeit not entirely) into the surviving image and the current visual anthropology. In this vein, the proposition underscores the vitality, agency, and enduring resonance of images in shaping human experiences, emotive responses, and cultural paradigms.

This is merely a concluding consideration that perhaps points towards the prospect of novel inquiries centered precisely upon that elusive element, that event which serves as the progenitor of all events and yet, paradoxically, eludes notice more than any: that fleeting instant in which, swift as lightning, emergence becomes perceptible for the first time, only to be subsequently imprinted, like a dazzle, in the complete and finite form that has been unveiled. This instant, from my autoethnographic experience, is scarcely graspable during certain moments of meditation, yet it constitutes the focal point of the entire cognitive transcendence experience that accompanies those phases otherwise referred to as 'ecstatic', wherein I would assert that one lingers within the foundational, timeless, and unequivocally pivotal instant of image 'revelation'.

Within the domain of visual anthropology, the concept of image emergence resonates profoundly with the investigation into the gradual unfolding of visual representations within distinct cultural paradigms. Analogous to a gradual revelation, wherein latent existence and agency become manifest, visual anthropologists confront the intricate task of unraveling strata of significance embedded in cultural artifacts, rituals, and visual narratives. This parallel underscores an inherent interconnection between the process of image emergence and the ethnographic pursuit of deciphering the nuanced expressions of human societies.

Furthermore, the discourse engaged with visual anthropology can be extended to contemplatively consider the function of images as intermediaries bridging individual subjectivities and expansive collective experiences. Much like the *maṇḍala-elicitation* technique that enables individuals to externalize internal experiences through visual renditions, images within the milieu of visual anthropology can aptly serve as potent instruments facilitating the confluence of personal narratives with communal cultural sagas. This interplay aligns harmoniously with the visual anthropologist's aspiration to elucidate the interwoven lives of individuals within the intricate fabric of cultural and societal dynamics.

Moreover, the concept of image emergence beckons visual anthropologists to plumb the transformative potential intrinsic to images as they transition from latent conceptualizations to perceptible configurations. This metamorphic journey, akin to the visual anthropologist's pursuit of encapsulating cultural phenomena through audiovisual documentation, accentuates the dynamic essence of images as they traverse the boundaries demarcating invisibility and visibility. Such contemplation prompts an exploration into the adaptive, evolutionary, and resonant attributes of images, mirroring the evolutionary trajectory of cultural practices and their resonance among diverse audiences across temporal expanses.

The discourse on image emergence provides a conduit for probing the dialogic nature characterizing image engagement within the realm of visual anthropology. Just as the act of 'emerging' implies a reciprocal engagement between the image and the observer, visual anthropologists frequently navigate the intricate terrain of reflexivity, subjectivity, and the interpretive process. This analogy fosters a contemplative examination of how the 'emerging' image, *embodying conscious agency*, engenders an ongoing dialogue with the beholder, inviting a multiplicity of interpretations and responses—a phenomenon that aligns congruently with the visual anthropologist's contemplation of the polyphonic symphony resonating within visual narratives.

In conclusion, the concept of image emergence unveils a fecund terrain for discourse within the domain of visual anthropology, inaugurating avenues to explore the convergence of image ontology, cultural representation, and the contours of human consciousness. This dialogue enriches our comprehension of the manner in which images, as they 'emerge', sculpt and are sculpted by cultural milieus, human perceptual frameworks, and the intricate interplay knitting the visible and the concealed—a trajectory of exploration that reverberates harmoniously within the multilayered expanse of visual anthropology.

List of figures

Fig. 1 My Maṇḍala No. ‘zero’	p. 19
Fig. 2 Leo’s first ‘official’ maṇḍala	p. 45
Fig. 3 Layla’s Maṇḍala	p. 57
Fig. 4 Squaring the circle	p. 60
Fig. 5 Daniel’s first maṇḍala	p. 66
Fig. 6 Leslie’s first maṇḍala	p. 77
Fig. 7 Possible example of different maṇḍalas across the world (pt. 1)	p. 93
Fig. 8 Possible example of different maṇḍalas across the world (pt. 2)	p. 93
Fig. 9 Leo’s Second maṇḍala	p. 124
Fig. 10 Leo’s third maṇḍala	p. 128
Fig. 11 Skeleton performing zazen on waves	p. 131
Fig. 12 Skeleton above the black sun	p. 131
Fig. 13 My first ‘official’ maṇḍala	p. 134
Fig. 14 My second maṇḍala	p. 137
Fig. 15 Joe’s first prototype maṇḍala	p. 145
Fig. 16 Tibetan thangka	p. 147
Fig. 17 A typical example of a cosmogram	p. 147
Fig. 18 Joe’s second prototype maṇḍala	p. 148
Fig. 19 Joe’s first complete maṇḍala	p. 150
Fig. 20 Leo’s fourth maṇḍala	p. 161
Fig. 21 Leo’s fifth maṇḍala	p. 174
Fig. 22 Leo’s Sixth maṇḍala	p. 192
Fig. 23 My third maṇḍala	p. 198
Fig. 24 Daniel’s second	p. 201
Fig. 25 ‘St Matthew’ by Michelangelo	p. 222

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