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# A Parapsychologist, an Anthropologist, and a Vitalist Walk into a Laboratory: Ernesto de Martino, Mircea Eliade, and a Forgotten Chapter in the Disciplinary History of Religious Studies

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**Abstract:** While the work of the Italian historian of religion, Ernesto de Martino (1908–1965), has frequently been compared to that of Mircea Eliade, Claude Lévi-Strauss, or Clifford Geertz, he has hardly received any attention in anglophone scholarship to date. Taking an all-but-forgotten controversy between de Martino and Eliade at a conference on parapsychology in France in 1956 as its starting point, the article fills part of this lacuna by first reconstructing the philosophical universe underlying the Italian thinker’s program of study. In the process, it introduces the reader to three Weimar scientists, who have never before been inserted within the canon of the study of religion, namely the parapsychologist Albert von Schrenck-Notzing (1862–1929), the anthropologist Leo Frobenius (1873–1938), and the biologist and philosopher Hans Driesch (1867–1941). Contextualizing these thinkers within their historical context, it becomes clear that they were part of a larger scientific crisis that affected the Western world during the first half of the twentieth century. Finally, the article uncovers surprising affinities, particularly the fact that the Romanian thinker had his very own parapsychological phase during his youth.

**Keywords:** history of religions; Italian School; Ernesto de Martino; Mircea Eliade; scientific crisis; parapsychology

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## 1. The Parapsychology Controversy of 1956: Eliade and De Martino Between Meanings and Facts

In 1956, at a conference held at the Royaumont Abbey north of Paris, the Italian historian of religion Ernesto de Martino (1908–1965) gave a talk entitled “History of Religions and Parapsychology.” It formed part of a life-long academic interest in the study of psychic phenomena for the benefit of understanding religion, which started under the tutelage of his early teacher Vittorio Macchiore (1880–1958) in the 1930s. In his talk, de Martino lamented the utter lack of enthusiasm for examining the reality of miraculous phenomena amongst his colleagues. The respondent to what is one of the few papers offered by de Martino outside of his native land was none other than what is likely the most renowned scholar of religion of the twentieth century, namely Mircea Eliade (1907–1986) (De Martino 1956).

In response to his colleague’s presentation, the Romanian giant took a radically critical stance. He argued that the factual reality of parapsychological phenomena is irrelevant for scholars of religion because this type of interrogation failed to shed light on subjective experience as well as mythical and symbolic representations. De Martino, in turn, retorted by emphasizing that the historian of religion’s task should not be limited to the interpretation of subjectively experienced meaning, but rather should focus on practices and their efficacy. Empirical research of parapsychological phenomena, such as we

find them in shamanic practice, are worthy of being studied and taken seriously—not only as ideas or experiences—but as facts.

To these reservations, Eliade responded directly by arguing that “the belief in the existence of all these myths, rites, and images of ascents [and] flight is already very important because it proves the admirable continuity of the magic-religious experience of the most primitive societies in always differing cultural contexts” (De Martino 1956, p. 103).<sup>1</sup> De Martino, once again forced to formulate a rejoinder, explained that his focus lies not on “what the fact that the shaman claims to penetrate the sky means for a society [ . . . ] but to know if the shaman really flies” (De Martino 1956, p. 106). Since the historian should never “limit himself to the evaluation of ideas” (De Martino 1956, p. 106), de Martino argued for a “collaboration” between anthropology and parapsychology “based on experimentation” (De Martino 1956, p. 101).

The world has not paid any attention to this exchange for many years after it took place and it was not recovered in the awareness of scholarship until the 1990s. Since then, however, it has led to the flowing of much “ink,” or, given the combative nature of the positions asserted, it might be more appropriate to say “blood” (Mancini 2003; Charuty 2001; Mancini and Méheust 2002). Unfortunately, the debate, with which Giordana Charuty and Silvia Mancini covered the pages of the French journal *L’Homme* in the early 2000s—divided between a posture interested in meaning of magic and another one investigating the actual reality of magic—is essentially a reenactment of the “dialogue of the deaf” at Royaumont half a century earlier (Mancini 2003, p. 522).

This is unfortunate because the Royaumont debate involved not only the century’s greatest thinker on religion but also what is likely the discipline’s most underestimated counterpart. In fact, while it has frequently been noted that de Martino’s position within his country’s intellectual landscape is comparable with that of Mircea Eliade, Claude Lévi-Strauss, or Clifford Geertz, he is—unlike any one of these thinkers—hardly known outside of the Italian peninsula (Ferrari 2012). Even more importantly, the parapsychology debate points both to one of de Martino’s most important methodological innovations, namely what he called “ethno-parapsychology” (“*etnometapsichica*”), and a larger scientific debate that raged within the discipline of religious studies throughout the twentieth century.

Finally, despite the fact that the opposition between de Martino and Eliade seems radical in the encounter of 1956, the two thinkers were much more closely related to one another than commonly understood. The two authors not only shared teachers—particularly Vittorio Macchioro and the founder of the Italian School of History of Religions, Raffaele Pettazzoni (1883–1959)—but they also articulated their approaches to religion in direct response to a crisis, which they both recognized as extremely urgent.

## 2. The Philosophical Universe of Ethno-Parapsychology: Schrenck-Notzing, Frobenius, and Driesch

In a first step, it is now time to look at de Martino’s writings on parapsychology in more detail in order to uncover their complex philosophical presuppositions. In an article entitled “Extrasensory Perception and Anthropological Magic” (1942 and 1946), which was published in Pettazzoni’s journal *Studies and Materials in the History of Religions*, de Martino spoke of three parts to his work with psychic phenomena: first, their experimental analysis through parapsychological research; second, their ethnographic exploration as spontaneous manifestations in indigenous cultures; and third, the contemplation of the ideology and the belief in paranormal phenomena in a specific cultural context. The portrait of his tripartite intellectual program only receives its fullest expression if it is painted through the brush strokes of three thinkers from the preceding generation, who allowed de Martino to draw up his approach to religion, namely the parapsychologist Albert von Schrenck-Notzing

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<sup>1</sup> All translations from Italian, German, and French are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

(1862–1929), the anthropologist Leo Frobenius (1873–1938), and the biologist and philosopher Hans Driesch (1867–1941).

In “Fundamentals of Ethno-Parapsychology,” his new method’s self-declared “manifesto,” de Martino accused anthropologists, such as Edward Burnett Tylor, of studying magic merely as “half-proven facts” inasmuch as they consider these phenomena only in their “ideological” dimension, i.e., ideas and opinions, rather than as “empirical” manifestations (De Martino 1942a, p. 116). In his attempts to put ethno-parapsychology on an empirical and experimental footing, de Martino drew on the work of one of psychology’s most intriguing personalities, namely Albert von Schrenck-Notzing. Referencing his work with a medium named Rudi Schneider, he spoke of “important recent experimental research on the ‘reality’ of the so-called paranormal phenomena,” and concluded that “these results of parapsychology as an experimental science cannot be neglected by anyone engaging in the problem of the magic mentality” (De Martino 1942d, pp. 351–52).

De Martino’s choice to take Schrenck-Notzing and the experiments with one of his most famous mediums as his inspiration was no random move. Part of the noble class of Germany and therefore frequently addressed simply as “Baron” (“Freiherr”), Schrenck-Notzing was Europe’s most influential psychic researcher during the first decades of the twentieth century (Walter 2004; Kuff 2011; Dierks 2012). Over the course of his forty-year-long career, he installed a sophisticated laboratory in his villa at one of Munich’s best addresses, playing an instrumental role in the establishment of an experimental science of parapsychology, premised on empirical reliability and repeatability (Linse 2016). The *Geisterbaron* also invited the world’s best mediums—one of them being Rudi Schneider—and controlled the leading journal of psychic research, *Psychische Studien*.<sup>2</sup>

During the early 1940s, we find de Martino’s emphasis on empirical and experimental evidence from parapsychology complemented by a consistent interest in magic and shamanic phenomena in extra-European cultures. His writings are chock-full with long lists of even longer citations of up to two pages in length, taken from the ethnographic works made available to him by Pettazzoni. In *The World of Magic*, intent on reinforcing the cultural weight of his argument, de Martino dedicated thirty pages of the first chapter exclusively to such extracts (De Martino 2012, pp. 10–40).

It was in this pursuit of cultural sensibility that he came to appreciate the scholarship of Leo Frobenius. Unlike the young de Martino, who was a “traveler in slippers” (“Pantoffelreisender”)—what the Anglophone world calls an “armchair anthropologist”—Frobenius was a great proponent of ethnographic fieldwork (Chevron 2004, p. 161). On 12 expeditions between 1904 and 1935, Frobenius took on the role of the “discoverer” of Africa, spending years of his life in the desert, the savanna, and the rainforest (Chevron 2004, p. 154). After initially visiting the Kongo and the Kasai province, he then traveled for four years through West Africa, before exploring Morocco, Algeria, Libia, the deserts and mountains of the central Sahara, to reach Egypt, Sudan, until he finally made it to South Africa.

In November 1942, eight months after his initial introduction letter to Giulio Einaudi, de Martino described Frobenius in celebratory terms as “one of the few anthropologists whose work is permeated by vast and lively cultural preoccupations.” (De Martino and Pavese 1991, pp. 53–54) By that point, the *Purple Series* had taken on more solid contours, and its editors were intent on introducing Italian readers to the international studies on religion, psychology, and anthropology. Unsurprisingly, both de Martino and Pavese were convinced that Frobenius would fit perfectly into the mix (De Martino and Pavese 1991, p. 52).

Today, the German anthropologist is most famous for his theory of “cultural circles” (*Kulturkreise*), which argued that all cultures resulted from the diffusion of certain traits of original cultural centers. As part of his theory, Frobenius theorized that cultures were passing through stages of childhood, adolescence, and maturity. More than a discoverer of Africa, who documents the spirit of a people

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<sup>2</sup> The journal *Psychic Studies* (*Psychische Studien*) was renamed to *Journal for Parapsychology* (*Zeitschrift für Parapsychologie*) in 1925.

through the collection of empirical evidence, Frobenius could be described as a “cultural embryologist,” who attempts to study culture in its purest and most vital childhood state (Heinrichs 1998, p. 24).

Studying organisms and embryology, of course, was the expertise of Hans Driesch, the third key figure for our understanding of de Martino’s philosophical universe (Wenzl and Driesch 1951, p. 11; Freyhofer 1982, p. 44). Driesch, who undertook a decade-long series of experiments with sea urchin eggs in Trieste and Naples, discovered that even if he cut their eggs into tiny pieces, the little organisms would be smaller in size while still manifesting in their complete form (De Issekutz Wolsky and Wolsky 1992, p. 156). Out of this biological experimentation, Driesch formulated a type of thinking for which he is best known today, namely the philosophy of “neo-vitalism.” Revitalizing a current of thought from the nineteenth century, Driesch opposed mechanistic interpretations in biology that tend to study living organisms as if they were machines. In accordance with the vitalist conviction that they are fundamentally distinct from non-living entities, Driesch claimed that a basic life drive—which he called “*entelechy*”—accounted not only for the development of cut-up sea urchins but also for the evolution of humanity and the cosmos (Driesch 1899).

While it is by no means common knowledge within the scholarly reception of his work that de Martino passed through the intellectual orbit of the biologist-philosopher, there are several indications that point to the fact that the Italian thinker was receptive to Driesch’s permeation. Specifically, there are certain textual references that point to such an influence, as the German thinker’s name surfaces in several of de Martino’s reviews during those years (De Martino 1941a, p. 217; 1941b).

More generally speaking, the centrality of Driesch’s thought in *The World of Magic* is rooted in the book’s overall philosophical orientation. Driesch’s philosophy had a tremendous reach and was particularly appropriate for a thinker intent on bridging different worldviews and disciplinary camps. De Martino himself was fully aware of this fact. In the review of Werner Leibbrand’s *Romantic Medicine* from 1941, he mentioned Driesch together with Karl Jaspers and Ludwig Binswanger as part of a group of contemporary thinkers that stands for a “requirement, which is becoming ever more full-blown in changing special domains of European culture, to reconstitute [ . . . ] the unity of culture that appears, in our civilization, as dispersed” (De Martino 1941b, p. 212). Driesch, so de Martino specified, is one of the figures who offered a “unified vision that re-stabilizes the interrupted circuit between the separate fields, in which European knowledge seems to be fractioned” (De Martino 1941b, pp. 212–13).

In *The World of Magic*, de Martino’s own uneasy three-step process that he took as the foundation of his science—experimental parapsychology, ethnographic encounter, and the study of the underlying ideology—is held together by organicist metaphors largely borrowed from Driesch’s vitalist philosophy. In one instance, de Martino explicitly pointed to the dialectic movement between his different fields of interest as a process that parallels those “taking place in a living organism” (De Martino 1946, p. 47).

### 3. Ethno-Parapsychology and the Border-Scientists as a Response to the Scientific Crisis of Reason, Self, and Reality

Schrenck-Notzing, Frobenius, and Driesch have rightly been described as “marginal figures” (“*Randfiguren*”), at home in the “border areas of science” (“*Grenzgebiete der Wissenschaft*”). The trio’s scientific training was anything but orthodox. Frobenius was an autodidact who never even finished high school (Schivelbusch 1985, p. 29; Chevron 2004, p. 154). As a consequence, he never received a full professorship and his work has been surrounded by controversy (Heinrichs 1998, p. 82). He has often been described as an “exceedingly erratic” thinker (Radin 1933; Kramer 1995, p. 98), and one commentator gave the German anthropologist only 50% credit for being scientific, attributing a significant part of the rest of his appeal to his talents as an “advertiser” (Evans 2010, p. 127; Streck 2014, p. 10).

Schrenck-Notzing, although a recognized doctor, neglected his practice more and more to dedicate himself fully to the study of his mediums. Although he attempted to establish links to academic circles in Munich, apart from a few limited experimental sessions in the university’s laboratory, his efforts remained unsuccessful (Dierks 2012, pp. 308–9). Throughout his career, Schrenck and his mediums

were frequently accused of “fraud” (Dierks 2012, pp. 251–58). Particularly, the publication of his *Materialisationsphänomene* (1914/1923), although attracting the fascination of the public, provoked “a general uproar in German scientific and academic circles” (Tabori 1972, p. 133).

Unlike Frobenius and Schrenck, who remained in marginalized academic positions, Driesch’s career was marked by academic recognition (Wenzl and Driesch 1951, pp. 18–19). After giving the Gifford Lectures in Aberdeen—which culminated in the publication of *Philosophy of the Organic* (1908)—and teaching philosophy as “extraordinary professor” at the University of Heidelberg—where he took the position held by Wilhelm Windelband during the latter’s illness and eventual death during 1915–1916—Driesch was appointed as “ordinary” professor at the University of Cologne in 1920, working alongside Max Scheler, and then at Leipzig in 1921. Nonetheless, Hans Driesch was still an academic *Aussenseiter* as he was neither a biologist, the discipline in which he was trained, nor a philosopher (Freyhofer 1982, p. 96). Ultimately, since giving the Gifford Lectures in 1907 and 1908, he had more success as a self-trained philosopher because his vitalist teachings proved to be enormously relevant for the humanities (Dierks 2012, pp. 288–89).

Although some readers might be tempted to attribute this random amalgamation of three border scientists to de Martino’s idiosyncratic personality, they form part of his conscious effort to respond to a challenge specific to his times. Already as a young scholar, de Martino was convinced that his own continent suffered from a massive civilizational crisis. It is well known that the crisis of historicism in the early twentieth century precipitated a sociopolitical crisis by challenging modern Western civilization’s claim to supremacy (Bambach 2013). Historicism’s core idea, which was that all human thought is necessarily historically determined, was not only a destabilizing force on this sociopolitical level, but more generally a crisis of the very presence of the Western self-conception.

One of the most significant areas of crisis during the early twentieth century was science. While scientification progressed steadily throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the early twentieth century witnessed the explosive rise of historical and cultural relativism, which brought with it a critical questioning of three key categories of our civilization, namely “reason,” “self,” and “reality.” De Martino believed that the Schrenck-Notzing, Frobenius, and Driesch—emerging from disparate areas of inquiry but with a shared position somewhere in between cultural relevance and scientific dilettantism—offered valuable tools to articulate a response to the crisis of their age.

### 3.1. The Crisis of Reason: Ethno-Parapsychology as Experimental and Empirical Science

It is well known that secularization and the rise of a progressive-evolutionary worldview were comprehensive processes that included every aspect of the modern Western reality, including science. In the nineteenth century, the empirical or evidential paradigm emanating from the positivist natural sciences, particularly in France and England, gradually came to encompass the humanities by relying on a straightforward relationship between a person—the observer—and the universe—the object of study (Ginzburg 1989). As a consequence, psychological and biological theorizing replaced philosophical discourses in discussing human affairs (Iggers 1969, p. 14; Klein 1992; Bambach 1995, pp. 13, 22). The emergent natural sciences were not only incredibly successful, but they also quickly produced a bewildering number of new disciplines and subdisciplines (Carson 2013, p. 180), leading to increasing specialization and division of knowledge generation (Fisch 2002, p. 317).

For the intellectual elite of Western society, this relativizing of disciplines and methods was largely unproblematic, and it could even be argued that historicism and positivist science—united in their exclusive emphasis on the “collection of data” as the only legitimate form of science—were complementary movements (von Engelhardt 1989, pp. 166–67). In the years following World War I, however, the crisis of Western civilization undermined this balance as specialization turned into a destabilizing force. In the early twentieth century, the relativist worldview in the humanities, particularly in German-speaking lands, started to raise serious doubts concerning any claims to objectivity for both the humanities and the natural sciences.

De Martino himself, formulating his ethno-parapsychology during those years, intended his new science to respond to this crisis in myriad ways. On the most obvious level, he sought to recover the legitimacy provided by the empirical paradigm of the natural sciences for the study of religious phenomena. This is nowhere as apparent as in his reliance on Schrenck-Notzing's parapsychological science.

On the whole, de Martino attributed higher scientific status to parapsychology than to anthropology as the references to the "reality of magic phenomena" were always closely tied to parapsychological research. He notes that his ethno-parapsychology is premised on the idea that the ethnographers of religion, such as Henri Trilles (1866–1949), Knud Rasmussen (1879–1933), Martín Gusinde (1886–1969), and Sergei M. Shirokogoroff (1887–1939), describe in their books a "psychic phenomenology that is glaringly paranormal," to be explicitly associated with the findings of the famous experimental parapsychologists of his time, namely Schrenck-Notzing, Osty, or H.H. Price (1899–1984) (De Martino 1942d, pp. 351–52).

De Martino rightly understood that by entering the Baron's laboratory, parapsychology moved supernatural phenomena out of spiritualist circles into the experimental context and offered legitimacy through scientific categorization. While de Martino opted for a concurrent study of cultural and psychological "facts," spending the early 1940s collecting detailed empirical "documents" from anthropology and experimental parapsychology, it is relevant that the "systematic" categorization of these findings was taken from the latter science (De Martino 1946, p. 33). The ethnographic notes on pre-modern societies preserved in his archives are organized along the lines of parapsychological faculties, collecting phenomena about clairvoyance, precognition, telepathy, telekinesis, ectoplasma, and cryptaesthesia.<sup>3</sup>

Schrenck had a particular interest in physical phenomena, documenting them relentlessly in the belief that these manifestations had the distinctive advantage of being provable and repeatable under laboratory conditions (Tabori 1972, p. 167). In his most important work, *Phenomena of Materialization: A Contribution to the Investigation of Mediumnistic Teleplastics*, first published in 1914 and issued in a second, considerably enlarged edition in 1922, he displays astonishing photographs of various mediums to detail his investigations of physical manifestations in his mediums between 1909 and 1921.<sup>4</sup> Of particular interest is his documentation of a sheer endless list of experiments, which he undertook with the French medium Eva C. (Marthe Béraud, b. 1887),<sup>5</sup> who had a particular talent for materializations, so-called "ideoplasma" or "teleplasma" (Kuff 2011, p. 282). Materializations would usually manifest as a pale, malleable substance that could take on the shape of bodies, heads, and limbs, frequently issuing from mediums' orifices during a trance (Wolffram 2009, p. 135).

De Martino was attracted to experimental psychology because of this shift in focus from purely psychic phenomena, such as telepathy and clairvoyance, to physical phenomena, such as telekinesis and materialization (Wolffram 2009, p. 136). In his discussion of Martin Gusinde's findings on the Selk'nam Indians, for example, he is particularly fascinated by their concept of *wàiyuwen* ("power"), which he associates with two aspects of experimental psychology: "In the first sense [ . . . ], the *wàiyuwen* is the 'secondary personality' that takes the place of the normal person in the deep *trance*," while "in the second sense, it is the compendium of the energy and the force of the wizard, the totality of all of

<sup>3</sup> The parapsychological as well as the ethnographic "documents" are to be found in binder 3. For the parapsychological phenomena, see 3.12, 3.15–3.17, 3.23. For the ethnographic phenomena, see 3.6–3.8, 3.25, 3.27, 3.64, 3.69, 3.87. Some of these materials have recently been published, see: (Satta 2005).

<sup>4</sup> The book, originally entitled *Materialisationsphänomene: Ein Beitrag zur Erforschung der mediumnistischen Teleplastie*, was translated into English in 1920 and then again in 1923. I will be citing from the latter: (von Schrenck-Notzing 1923).

<sup>5</sup> Schrenck-Notzing was introduced to "Eva C.," Richet's Marthe Béraud, after she had moved to Paris in 1908. The séances stretched from May 1909 until June 1914, practically to the outbreak of the First World War and were held in Paris, Biarritz, St. Jean de Luz, Munich (during three months in July, August, and September 1912) and La Baule. The adventurous story of this medium, including several changes of names—from Bien Boa, to Marthe Beraud, to Eva Carrière—is well documented in (Dierks 2012, pp. 222–40).

his capacities and activities that develop themselves in his body; a force that he can, at times, express [and make] operative outside of the body" (De Martino 2012, p. 65). These two themes, the split self and extrasensory powers, particularly of a physical nature, are two key ideas of parapsychological research that resurface repeatedly in de Martino's thinking throughout these years.

More specifically, de Martino was impressed by experiments that demonstrated physical mediumistic phenomena by means of "automatic photography," (De Martino 2012, p. 47) and it is well known that Schrenck was the first parapsychologist to use photography as a technical tool to represent psychic phenomena (Kuff 2011, p. 282). The pictures contained in *Phenomena of Materialization* were shot with the help of an entire armada of cameras—up to nine at a time—literally illuminating every aspect of the manifestations appearing in front of the black-out curtain in the darkened séance room (Tabori 1972, p. 163).

Only in 1919, after the publication of the first edition of his book on materializations, did Schrenck-Notzing meet the medium Willi Schneider (1903–1971) and, a few years later, his younger brother Rudi (1908–1957). With these new mediums, Schrenck gradually moved away from the obsessive and quantitatively overwhelming collection of photographic evidence to personal reports written by the observers of the séances. Nonetheless, Schrenck published the protocols of hundreds of people who attended sessions with the Schneider brothers in his palatial residence on Karolinenplatz, amongst them 23 professors, 18 medical doctors, 13 experts on psychic phenomena, and a host of other cultural luminaries, such as Thomas Mann (1875–1955), Ludwig Klages (1872–1956), Gustav Meyrink (1868–1932), Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926), and Hans Driesch, the neo-vitalist philosopher whose influence on de Martino's thinking I discuss shortly.

Even after Schrenck moved away from photographic methods, experimental parapsychology was still aiming to be a "*Tatsachenwissenschaft*," a science of facts, asserting its scientifically legitimizing superiority by replacing subjective experience with various paraphernalia intended to measure physical particulars. This becomes apparent in Driesch's accounts as he attended several of the sessions that were held with Willi between December 1921 and July 1922 and with Rudi in 1928 (von Schrenck-Notzing 1923, 1924). Just like many other observers, Driesch describes the proceeding before and during the session with great precision, portraying them as quasi-ritualistic performances.

Like most of the attendants, who were compelled to redact their protocols as a condition for their attendance, Driesch also placed special emphasis upon the precautionary measures to prevent fraudulent manipulation on the part of the medium: The room was searched before entering it, the door was bolted and sealed from the inside, the medium was undressed and strip-searched, at times even examined by a gynecologist, before being dressed in special pajamas equipped with an electrical control apparatus with the hands and feet in view of all the participants (Böhm et al. 2009, pp. 29–30). The protocols also emphasize that instead of experience, which was seen to be susceptible to deception, delusion, or hypnosis, experimental parapsychology relied on self-registering balances, stereoscopic cameras, sphygmographs, and thermometers, all of which were adopted from medical, psychological, and physical laboratories (Wolffram 2009, pp. 12, 132; Kuff 2011, p. 137).

This emphasis on empirical science is equally evident in the works of the other two thinkers explored in this article. As for the first, Hans Driesch made himself a career as a "brilliant experimenter" in his own right (De Issekutz Wolsky and Wolsky 1992, p. 156). Originally trained in zoology and biology, Driesch, around the turn of the century, became part of a new scientific orientation within embryology, which shifted from a purely morphological and descriptive paradigm to an experimental approach (De Issekutz Wolsky and Wolsky 1992, p. 155).

Finally, even the anthropological methods used by Leo Frobenius, who has been described by one of his biographers as a "lover of details [and] of research of the concrete," can be defined as empirical (Heinrichs 1998, p. 15). After starting his career in heterogenous anthropological museums in Bremen, Basel, and Leipzig, Frobenius remained a collector of anthropological materials for the rest of his life. In his archives, we find over 250,000 excerpts, images, and maps, most of them written and drawn by himself, in which he documents his findings from his expeditions. His massive 12-volume *Atlantis*

retells vast amounts of African myths, and, while none of the innumerable everyday items and sacred objects he brought home from his expeditions are to be found in the institute in Frankfurt, having been sold to museums to finance his expeditions, his archives preserve five hundred original copies of photographs of rock paintings. Located in the Sahara and Southern Africa, Frobenius and his team were the first to document these treasures scientifically with German precision and rigor.

Schrenck-Notzing and Frobenius—not unlike detectives and criminologists that endeavor to track traces of something hidden (Kuff 2011, p. 279)—used the most effective means for documenting the cultural and psychic “manifestations” available to them, namely photography. Just as Frobenius photographed, copied, and published hundreds of rock drawings and appropriately called them “picture-book of world history” (*Bilderbuch der Weltgeschichte*), Schrenck’s vast documentation of materialization phenomena has rightfully been called a “*Bilderatlas* of experimental mediumism” (Tabori 1972, p. 167; Kuff 2011, pp. 274, 282, 287).

While Schrenck was able to capture some of the ideoplastic protrusions, sending samples to a medical laboratory for chemical, microscopic, and bacterial testing, he was most convinced by the “power of persuasion of the visual,” photography being the tool that gives “positive proofs in the truest sense of the word” (Kuff 2011, p. 286). De Martino, it seems, would have concurred with the German parapsychologist, betraying himself to be particularly impressed by experiments that attempted to demonstrate physical mediumistic phenomena by means of “automatic photography” (De Martino 2012, p. 47).

### 3.2. *The Crisis of Self: Ethno-Parapsychology as the Study of Psycho-Cultural Alterities*

Besides precipitating a crisis of reason that required scholars to reconsider the relationship between empirical data and personal experience, the scientific crisis induced by the historicist relativism also had consequences for the categories of “self” and “reality.” In the early twentieth century, the sciences questioned both their object of study, which was no longer a substantive objective reality, and the subject, which was now part of a complex relationship between people and the world surrounding them (Castoriadis 1984, p. 150; Scholtz 1991, p. 173; Oexle 2007, pp. 69–70; Makkreel and Luft 2009, p. 31; Krois 2013, p. 101).

How closely the crisis of reason and the crisis of the self were related during those years can be seen in one of the twentieth century’s best-known works on crisis, namely Edmund Husserl’s *The Crisis of the European Sciences*. In this piece, written in the last years of his life between 1934 and 1937, the German phenomenologist argued that the crisis of positivist science ultimately led to a crisis of meaning of humanity and its cultural life. His response, as we all know, was the establishment of a transcendental phenomenology that would salvage not only the status of reason, but also of the subject.

Husserl was a typical expression of his age as the status of consciousness, perception, and the human psyche—what Althusser called the “most theoretically sensitive point in the entire system of bourgeois ideology”—was afflicted by a crisis throughout many disciplines (Althusser 1991, p. 25). Indeed, the epistemology of the intersubjective encounter required a reassessment of the traditional conception of both “self” and “other” (Mancini 1989, pp. 71–72). In order to regain a scientific footing, many disciplines—one can paradigmatically think of philosophy, biology, the physical sciences, or in linguistics—opted to premise their methods on a situated and relational reason (Hughes 1979, pp. 98–99; Mancini 1989, pp. 139–40; Koch 2017, pp. 98–99).

De Martino was not only passionate about Schrenck’s new experimental parapsychology due to its emphasis on experiment, which entailed the replacement of subjective experience with technological verification, but also because it replaced angels, gods, and voices of the dead with unconscious powers. The writings leading up to *The World of Magic* can all be read as expressions of a profound fascination with the self as afflicted by psychological crisis. In his 1941 review of Werner Leibbrand’s *Romantic Medicine* (1937), de Martino made special reference to an aspect that is of minor importance in the German historian’s work itself, namely altered states of consciousness. “The crepuscular and

dreamlike psychic states, magnetic sleep, dream, and telepathic phenomena,” so de Martino writes, “were reawakening the attention of romantic scientists” (De Martino 1941b, p. 212).

Starting in an article published in 1943, de Martino moved further beyond his theoretical discussion of ethno-parapsychology to focus on specific issues, such as phenomenological accounts of altered states of consciousness and specific techniques and practices used to induce them. As part of this turn to practical issues, de Martino also references the abovementioned protocol of Hans Driesch from the sitting with Rudi in 1928. The German philosopher reports that he was purposefully refraining from engaging in small talk to be able to focus on the session without being distracted. However, so de Martino summarizes Driesch’s protocol, “the strong and rhythmic music and the free conversation,” lead not only to the induction of Rudi’s secondary trance personality, “Olga”—a state marked by a significant increase in breathing frequency, body contractions, and an erection that would frequently lead to ejaculation (Tabori 1972, pp. 164–65; Méheust 1999, pp. 191–92)—but also to a “characteristic condition of psychic passivity necessary for the production of phenomena” (De Martino 1943, p. 487).

Based on Driesch’s testimony from what took place within Schrenck’s mansion, de Martino believed that the condition of darkness, music, and conversational chatter, which were all requested by the mediums themselves, should not be seen as means to facilitate cheating, but rather as technical tools necessary for the alteration of consciousness (De Martino 1943, pp. 479–80). He maintains, “[T]he metagnomic phenomena [ . . . ] are always produced in a condition of a more or less profound psychic dissociation,” so that it appears that “the weakening of the psychological synthesis [is] a fundamental function for the manifestation of metagnomic attitudes” (De Martino 1946, pp. 69–70).

The dimming of lights and the immense importance of rhythmic music is particularly attested in the case of the Schneider brothers, who would usually fall into a trance-like state after about 5 min. De Martino even referenced Olga’s preference for military marches over classical music—obviously believing that the rhythmic beat of the former was more conducive to an alteration of consciousness. Other sources not only mention that he/she was particularly fond of the Bavarian Parade March, but even describe moments of conflict between Willi’s mediumistic persona and Schrenck-Notzing, as the latter was a great lover of classical music (Tabori 1972, p. 165). With the music as backdrop, the trance was further facilitated by the swaying of the “sitters,” as the attendants of the séances used to be called (Tabori 1972, p. 165).

Following the characteristic dual structure of his new approach to religion, de Martino also addressed the “ethnographic document” as he encountered in shamanism. Here too, he emphasized altered states of consciousness, stating that the “strong individual differentiation” of the psyche is purposefully interrupted in shamanistic practices (De Martino 1943, p. 487). Based on his extensive reading of ethnographies, de Martino noted that many of the anthropologists—particularly Martin Gusinde, Knut Rasmussen, and Sergei Shirokorogoff—were equally observing that many of the manifestations of paranormal phenomena seemed to be based on the purposeful induction of trance states and the emergence of secondary personalities or unconscious activity.

In *The World of Magic* alone, he dedicated half a dozen pages to the detailed description of ethnographic accounts of the techniques used to induce altered states of consciousness (De Martino 2012, pp. 85–90). Citing Gusinde, for example, de Martino noted that the shamans use monotonous and repetitive songs in order to induce an auto-suggestive state, described as a sort of autohypnosis (De Martino 1943, p. 480). Similarly, a passage by Shirokorogoff, in which he explained that the Tungunese shaman uses specific techniques, such as the repetitive playing of drums, to induce ecstatic states, is cited in support of de Martino’s claim that these states represent a “doubling” (“*sdoppiamento*”) personality (De Martino 1943, p. 483).

The anthropological context offered de Martino a richer array of trance-inducing stimuli than the parapsychological setting, where the striving for scientific legitimacy and universal repeatability stripped the mediums of many of their spiritistic techniques and paraphernalia. Throughout the 1940s, our author’s list of practices included solitude, obscurity, fasting, extremely challenging trials, orgiastic dances, concentration, monotonous singing, the rolling of drums, incubations, fumigations,

and narcotics (De Martino 2012, p. 85). De Martino also attempted to offer a more general explanation of induction techniques noting that they involve a limitation of external stimuli through either deprivation or concentration:

Hence, just as in the monotony of the lullaby or in the drumming, concentration or polarization is obtained by means of the iteration of an acoustic content; likewise, by means of the fixation of a brilliant point or [ . . . ] an object, concentration or polarization is obtained by means of the iteration of a visual content: in this case, the technique consists in the voluntary institution of a sort of optical monotony. On the other hand, concentration or polarization can also be obtained without these perceptible supports and reduce themselves to the simple internal concentration. This type of concentration can also consist in the methodic refusal of contents, as they gradually present themselves to consciousness. In this case, the beyond is tackled by robbing the presence even of the substance needed to move beyond itself (De Martino 2012, pp. 87–88).

Schrenck-Notzing's scholarship was firmly rooted in research on the active and voluntary induction of altered states of consciousness that facilitate the production of psychic phenomena. Not only was there a general and longstanding association between photography and hypnosis, but Schrenck himself started his successful career as a psychiatrist and later as a parapsychological researcher on the basis of his early experience as a hypnotist (Kuff 2011, p. 33). In that capacity, Schrenck first learned to manipulate the consciousness of his subjects, a skill he would later use on his patients and on his mediums to heal or produce the paranormal facts he wanted to document (Kuff 2011, p. 33). How deeply ingrained his procedure had become for the Baron becomes evident in light of his surprise upon realizing that the sixteen-year-old Willi, during their first meeting in 1919 in Braunau, did not ask him to be put into a trance before the session (Dierks 2012, p. 274). It appears, indeed, that Willi and Rudi, unlike his previous mediums, were not hypnotized but instead used a form of self-hypnosis, putting themselves into an altered state of consciousness (Tabori 1972, p. 165).

Not unlike Schrenck, Hans Driesch too dedicated much of his career—be it in “Body and Soul” (1916), “Basic Problems of Psychology” (1926), “Parapsychology” (1932), or “Everyday Mysteries of Psychic Life” (1938)—to the exploration of the power of psychological alterity, the unconscious (Driesch 1916, 1926a, 1932, 1938). Driesch was not only convinced that the morphological materializations emerged out of the medium's unconscious, but also argued that they offered the most convincing proof of the reality of the vital force of entelechy (Wolffram 2009, pp. 196, 204).

While both Driesch and Schrenck can therefore be considered as thinkers of the split self, the position of Frobenius is not as easy to define. Frobenius epitomized the German context during the Weimar years, when the association between explorations of psychological and cultural forms of alterities was reaching its apex. Like other thinkers of his age, Frobenius' discussions of culture were emotional, and frequently related to controversies surrounding spiritual, esoteric, and religious topics (Kippenberg 2002, pp. 175–84; Linse 1991; Marchand 2013; Haki 2014, pp. 33–34). De Martino participated in this German cultural trend, as he was not only an avid reader of Frobenius, proposing his books as one of the first to be published in the *Purple Series*, which he co-edited, but even published an article entitled “Religionsethnologie und Historizismus” in the German anthropologist's journal *Paideuma* (De Martino 1942e).

In the two books that de Martino and Pavese were debating for publication in the *Purple Series*—*Origin of African Cultures* (1898) and *Unknown Africa* (1923)—Frobenius asserted himself not only as a discoverer and a collector of African treasures, but had also created a reputation as an innovative theoretician of history and culture (Frobenius 1898, 1923). Today, Frobenius is primarily remembered for his theory of “cultural circles,” which is premised on the idea that civilizations manifest according to certain forms or morphologies (Mancini 1999; 2012, p. 201). As the founder of the Research Institute for Cultural Morphology (“Forschungsinstitut für Kulturmorphologie”), Frobenius is acknowledged

as the architect of what is known as the “Frankfurt School,” an often-forgotten alternative version of the famed school that formed a few years later around Adorno and Horkheimer.<sup>6</sup>

In his most important book on the philosophy of history and civilization, entitled *Paideuma: Outlines of a Culture- and Soul-Theory* (1921), Frobenius argued that each culture has its own soul or spirit. He used the term “*paideuma*” to describe this expression of cultural genius, which manifests in material artifacts produced by individual peoples.

*Paideuma*, culture, is itself metaphysical. From time to time, however, it expresses its essence (*Wesen*) in some form (*Gestalt*). In some periods, in gender-ordering forms, in others, in number- and myth-formations, in yet others, in artistic figures. Through such periodic configurations (*Gestaltungen*), the metaphysical *Paideuma* is also accessible to our senses. They are tied to times and spaces, but in principle only as forms. It is in these configurations that some essential trait of *Paideuma* is announcing itself, becoming comprehensible for us. Only a thorough feeling (*Durchfühlen*) of all these expressions of *Paideuma*, fundamentally speaking, only foudroyantly twitching through the cosmos, can gradually become an attainable experience of world-culture, even for the weak human comprehensive capacities (Frobenius 1921, p. 129).

Even though by speaking of *Paideuma*, Frobenius was advocating for an experiential rather than an experimental-empirical approach to religion, his conception of this “experience” shares many basic traits with that of Schrenck and Driesch. Indeed, Frobenius calls the experience that he hoped to relive *Ergriffenheit*, a “being seized” by the world surrounding humanity. *Ergriffenheit* was conceived as a passive state in which culture is moving and shaking through people (Chevron 2004, p. 172). “Being seized” is also the crucial event in the emergence of culture through works of art, the birth of genius, or a religious experience. As a feeling of ecstasy and primal awe, *Ergriffenheit* is marked by a high sensitivity for the surrounding environment and an utter passivity of the person that is “seized.” In this sense, *Ergriffenheit* is a state that is strikingly like the altered states of consciousness that de Martino found in the shamanic and mediumistic context.

Upon closer analysis, it becomes furthermore apparent that Frobenius aligns closely with his two contemporaries in terms of his interests in psychological otherness, but Schrenck and Driesch share important concerns with their anthropological counterpart. Indeed, all three German thinkers display a fascination with cultural alterity. Frobenius loved spectacle and used to present the exotic artifacts from Africa by means of colorful processions—with him, known as “Unser Afrikaner” (“our African”), riding on elephants amongst the applauding masses—through the streets of Frankfurt (Ehl 1995, pp. 135–36).

Both the parapsychological Baron and the philosophical biologist complemented their exploration of psychological alterity by engaging in extensive journeys into realms of cultural otherness. Schrenck, for one, not only moved tirelessly through the world in search of the latest mediumistic talent, but he also traveled extensively through Europe and Northern Africa. Together with his friend and fellow medical doctor Hugo Kleist, he even wrote a book about his journeys, entitled *Tunis and its Environs: Ethnographic Sketches* (1888) (von Schrenck-Notzing and Kleist 1888). Even more striking is their repeated use of photographic metaphors in regards to the collection of ethnographic data, particularly when describing their book as a “collection of momentary images” (“*Sammlung von Momentbildern*”) (von Schrenck-Notzing and Kleist 1888, p. 243).

As for the vitalist philosopher, the son of the internationally active gold and silver salesmen Paul Driesch, Hans was used to traveling from an early age. After leaving Germany to spend a decade of his youth in Trieste and Naples on the Italian peninsula, Driesch not only traveled extensively through Europe, spending his summers in Zurich, but he also undertook two long trips to India, dedicated to the tropical marine fauna and Indian and Burmese architecture. Considering his extensive interests

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<sup>6</sup> The Institute was founded in 1922 in Munich and was moved to Frankfurt three years later in 1925. For a comparison between the two institutes in Frankfurt, see (Schivelbusch 1985).

in documenting old constructions, fellow travelers frequently thought Driesch to be an architect, and indeed he accumulated an important collection of photographs of these cultural monuments (Wenzl and Driesch 1951, p. 11).

After getting married, Driesch continued to travel extensively along with his wife: visiting first Egypt during their honeymoon; then undertaking a long journey starting in Russia, from St. Petersburg to Moscow, Kiev, Tiflis, Baku, all the way to Turkestan; then to return by crossing the Aegean and the Adriatic seas to reach Bari; and finally traveling extensively through China and Japan. They undertook this last journey after Driesch was invited to teach at several universities in those countries in 1923. Just like Frobenius and Schrenck, they conceived of themselves as ethnographic discoverers of cultural alterity, even publishing a book entitled *Far East: As Guests in China (Fern-Ost: Als Gäste Jungchinas)* based on their trip.

Following Didier Michaux, who distinguished four types of induction techniques for hypnosis premised on differing types of relationships with the “other,” and Thierry Melchior, who defined hypnosis as “a signifier of alterity, a signifier of distance and difference,” de Martino’s attraction to the eclectic group of Weimar scientists can be explained by the consistent enthusiasm for alterity that flows through the productions of Schrenck-Notzing, Driesch, and Frobenius in various guises (Chertok and Stengers 1992, pp. 259–60; Melchior 2008, p. 279). Their association of cultural and psychological otherness points to a general trend within the Western consciousness as it was around 1900 that the figure of the shaman, who rose to prominence during the nineteenth century through missionaries and anthropologists, was gradually complemented and associated with the medium, a sort of “Western Shaman” (Méheust 1999, pp. 194–95). Hans Driesch, for example, made this explicit when he cited Charles Richet’s words in his memoirs with the following words: “The light does not come from the Orient; light comes from our laboratories.” (Wenzl and Driesch 1951, p. 239)

### 3.3. *The Crisis of Reality: Ethno-Parapsychology and Historical Reality*

As I remarked, the crisis of reason not only leads to a crisis of the self, but also of alterity and, thus, to a “crisis of reality” (Ringer 1969, p. 295; Bambach 1995, p. 47; 2013, p. 134; Carson 2013, p. 179). The Cartesian and Newtonian conceptions of a world “out there,” independent of man, came under such heavy attack that “the very possibility of achieving sure knowledge had been called into question” (Wohl 1979, p. 212). The most extreme example of this loss of certitudes and relativization of the physical and material world is possibly Oswald Spengler’s claim that even mathematical numbers are ultimately relative (Laube 2004, p. 41; Carson 2013, p. 193; Bambach 2013, p. 138).

De Martino was interested in the works of the Weimar thinkers not only because they were relying on empirical research of psycho-cultural alterities in the form of collecting anthropological and psychic facts, but because they displayed an ability to combine this empiricism with a concern for philosophical questions about the status and nature of historical reality. The association between these two tendencies is present in all three scientists: On the one hand, Schrenck’s obsessive accumulation of photographs of materializations, Driesch’s decades of separating sea urchin eggs and his years of writing detailed reports of parapsychological séances, and Frobenius’s sheer endless hunger for material artifacts from Africa, point to their concern for factual and empirical research. On the other hand, the empirical collection of facts is a testimony to the materializing and manifesting power of a force and power that is found in unconscious parts of the human psyche and experience.

De Martino himself addressed this tension when he talked about the relationship between the paranormal facts and the reality that people live in.

We are thus transported in front of the fact in its true concreteness, in its organic integrity: the two abstract moments, the mere ideology believed to be true, on the one hand, and the mere eventual reality of the content of the belief, on the other. These moments, which are only analytically distinguishable, now recreate themselves in their living synthesis of ideology. This synthesis can, in conformity with belief, introduce a new determination into reality; and from this new determination of the real, in turn, the belief itself can also be modified (De Martino 1946, p. 46).

For our author, the relationship between empirical fact and historical reality seems dialectical. On the one hand, the belief in the phenomena affects whether these very manifestations are successfully produced. On the other hand, the efficacy of the phenomena themselves influences people's attitude towards them, thus shaping the reality that they live in. In other words, believing in magic makes it come true, just as the truth of magic makes people believe in it.

More generally speaking, as Cases rightly observed, de Martino's book is marked by an "irregular gait" inasmuch as "the reader is forced to take his time with minute ethnographic [and parapsychological] explorations," before being "raised into the sphere of great philosophical problems," until the whole process "starts again from the beginning" (Cases 1973, p. xvii). This double attentiveness was also the result of de Martino's growth as a thinker during the years of the war. If, at the beginning of WWII, he had great hope that the empirical and experimental study of paranormal phenomena could provide sufficient proof for the reality of magic, by the time he finished *The World of Magic* in hiding during the Resistance, he knew that the reality of magic did not depend on empirical proofs but on the category of "reality" itself (De Martino 1941a, 1942c).

Returning to the trio of Weimar scientists, this ability to face the crisis of reality based on empirical evidence is nowhere as apparent as in the work of Hans Driesch. The vitalist philosopher used his experiments with sea urchins and his sittings with mediums to speculate about a metaphysical reality and the fundamental life force that pervades all of life. Even though the term entelechy is borrowed from Aristotle and the philosophical conception of a life force owes to his reading of Arthur Schopenhauer, "Driesch the philosopher" was inseparable from "Driesch the experimental scientist" (Garrett 2013, pp. 135–36).

Biographically, his second career started around the turn of the century with the publication of *The Localization of Morphogenetic Processes: A Proof of Vitalistic Occurrences?* (1899) and his move from Naples to Heidelberg in 1900. Intellectually, this association between thought and experiment is even more conspicuous: Not only did his first intuition for entelechy as a vital principle emerge during his embryological studies—where he noticed that organisms are not machines made out of predestined cells, but rather dynamically constructed beings in which each single part tends to support the self-construction, self-maintenance, and self-reproduction of the whole (Garrett 2013, pp. 136–38; Kuff 2011, p. 334)—but he further developed his ideas in tandem with his experiences with parapsychological phenomena. As one interpreter observed, "just when Driesch's ideas had ceased to be interesting to most biologists, they became so for philosophers and psychologists" (Normandin and Wolfe 2013, p. 9).

While Driesch took a very careful position towards parapsychological phenomena in his first structured account of vitalism, entitled *Vitalism as History and Doctrine* (1905), he would soon become one of the rare thinkers whose philosophical reflection was accompanied and fed by a constant concern for parapsychology (Wenzl and Driesch 1951, p. 153; Wolffram 2009, p. 200). Gradually being exposed to this emergent science in the second decade of the twentieth century, it was in *Theory of Reality: A Metaphysical Attempt* (1917) that he publicly asserted the possible reality of occult phenomena for the first time (Driesch 1917). Having become a member in 1913, Driesch was even appointed as the first German president of the Society for Psychical Research in 1926 (Wolffram 2009, p. 203; Kuff 2011, p. 336). De Martino himself, noted on this synergy in his review of Johannes Jacobus Poortman's book, where Driesch is mentioned as a thinker who demonstrates how "parapsychological facts" support "neo-vitalism" (De Martino 1941a, p. 217).

That Driesch attended several sessions at the Munich laboratory of Schrenck-Notzing, writing detailed accounts of his impression of the séances, the laboratory setting, and the specific paranormal occurrences, is hardly a coincidence. Schrenck's philosophical conceptions relating to parapsychology were rudimentary at best, and his relationship to the materializations has rightly been described as a fetish. The Baron was driven by a "longing for hidden pictures" and treated the ideoplasma—the white shimmering plastic materializations—as real "treasures" ("*Kostbarkeiten*") (Kuff 2011, p. 361; Wolffram 2009, p. 156).

Although Schrenck made his own attempts to localize the power allowing for the manifestations he observed—speaking of “anonymous artistic intelligence,” “unknown factors,” or “unknown authors”—it is only with the entrance of Driesch in parapsychological research that the Baron himself felt more comfortable about hypothesizing about the greater implication of his discoveries (Kuff 2011, p. 315). Indeed, as Schrenck himself wrote, it is only with the “entrance of this scholar” that occultism became an “official science,” henceforth to be known as “parapsychology” (von Schrenck-Notzing 1932, p. 24).

Driesch and Schrenck were collaborators in the establishment of the new science of parapsychology (von Schrenck-Notzing 1932, pp. 402–3). If the parapsychologist liberated his science of the spiritist paraphernalia by introducing the experimental conditions of the laboratory, Driesch’s vitalist philosophy offered an alternative to spiritist explanations of the spectacular yet controversial materialization phenomena (Dierks 2012, p. 290). With the publication of “Occultism as a New Science” (1923), Driesch took on the robes of the philosopher of parapsychology. He explicitly spoke about the multiple links that he perceives running through his vitalistic theory of entelechy, the new directions within biology and psychology, and the parapsychological phenomena of Schrenck-Notzing (Driesch 1923).

If the occultist attributed the manifestations to the spirits of the dead, Driesch’s conception of a dynamic life force, which he, based on his experiments with sea urchins, believed to form organic matter, offered a newer model for insight. Driesch and Schrenck relied on entelechy to explain the materialization phenomena as an expression or externalization of the remarkable creative powers of the life force (Kuff 2011, p. 336; Wolfram 2009, pp. 196–97). In 1926, in his “Presidential Address” to the Society for Psychical Research, Driesch described materializations as a form of supra-normal physiology, which differ in range but not in their underlying principles, from well-established biological events, such as embryology:

The only difference between ordinary vitalistic and parapsychological control relates to the range or area of controlling; this area being of far greater extent in the second case than in the first. But in a sense, embryology is already “materialization” from the vitalist’s point of view. Think of the little material body, called an egg, and think of the enormous and very complex material body, say, an elephant, that may come out of it: here you have a permanent stream of materializations before your eyes, all of them occurring in the way of assimilation, i.e., of a spreading entelechial control (Driesch 1926b, p. 173).

A similar process of producing “realities” can be found in the writings of Frobenius, who believed that the empirical facts were not only the expression and representation of a deeper reality, but were also the foundation for new experiences of that ultimate reality. Material artifacts and photographs of cave drawings were not only making something visible that was otherwise invisible, but they allowed for the experience of the African *paideuma*. The purpose of his processions was not primarily to bring home proof to support his theories but to allow the participants to relive an experience of cultural creativity that was purer and more vital than that offered by his contemporaries in his crisis-ridden homeland. Thus, Driesch’s empirical data did not reflect an effort to make visible what is invisible, but to lead from the visible to that which is invisible; and not to make explicit what was only intuited through his experience, but to use the explicit in order to gain access to intuitive experience.

Just as Frobenius believed that African culture would give him access to an embryonic form of the organism of culture in its most rudimentary yet vital manifestation, Driesch and Schrenck believed that the materialization phenomena were “paranormal embryology.” (Driesch 1932, p. 101) The idea that these phenomena were akin to ordinary reproductive functions was further reinforced by location of the externalizations—they emerged sometimes from the medium’s mouth, navel, or armpits, but most often from the breasts and genitals—the gradual development of the manifestations—the luminous and plastic emanations were formless at first and started taking on form later—and the moaning sounds of the medium—obviously reminiscent of intercourse or childbirth (Tabori 1972, p. 145; Wolfram 2009, p. 196).

While all three Weimar thinkers were united in their intention to discover an underlying worldview behind the empirical facts that they discovered, Driesch's psycho-biological theory of entelechy was the broadest and most integrative philosophy of the three. Entelechy, as Driesch himself notes, "does not 'create' matter but is only ordering pre-existing matter" (Wolffram 2009, p. 201). In this sense, it could be argued that Driesch is the most "bridging" thinker of the trio and that his life force, which he found in biology, is the active force both behind Schrenck's parapsychological ideoplasma and in the cultural *paideuma* of Frobenius (Coppo 2003, p. 194; Heinrichs 1998, pp. 39–40; Wolffram 2009, p. 203; Köpping 2007). In a climate that generally valued the unification of discourses in all sorts of holistic concepts (Hakl 2014, p. 349; Von Stuckrad 2014, pp. 64–70, 160; Bugge 1995, pp. 90–92), amongst the three thinkers, entelechy was a pan-disciplinary concept that explained the nature, morphology, and growth of organisms just as it accounted for the development of psyches and cultures (Heinrichs 1998, p. 98).

De Martino himself recognized the great unifying force behind the ideas of Hans Driesch, explicitly lamenting that his thinking across boundaries "does not appear to have encountered much favor amongst the Italian public" and speculating whether the cause of this disregard might be the fact that "our medical doctors do not bother about humanistic culture and our philosophers and persons of letters prefer to stay in the limbo of their empty philosophical and literary metaphysics?" (De Martino 1941b, pp. 212–13).

De Martino's writings of this period are filled with dozens of biological metaphors. Several unique formulations—such as "organic insertion" or "organic unity"—surface 16 times throughout *The World of Magic* alone. The following passage from another article written during the war, offers a paradigmatic glimpse into de Martino's psycho-bio-philosophical universe:

Within anthropological magic there subsists an ideological and institutional *organism* that regulates and feeds the paranormal attitudes of knowing in their manifestation. This organism also expresses itself in these attitudes, bending them towards a human intention and finality. On the other hand, inasmuch as the metagnomic powers are really efficacious, the ideology and the beliefs are subjected to the influence of success, drawing themselves *nourishment* from it: encouraged by the success, the ideology develops itself, the belief *consolidates*. We are thus transported into the presence of the fact in its true concreteness, in its *organic integrity*: the two abstract moments, the mere ideology believed to be true, on the one hand, and the mere eventual reality of the content of the belief, on the other. These moments, which are only analytically distinguishable, now recreate themselves in their *living synthesis* of ideology. [...] We will try to analyze the *organic nexus* that fastens the beliefs and the ideology [...] to the metagnomic powers (De Martino 1942b, p. 46).

#### 4. Eliade's Forgotten Parapsychological Phase: Revisiting the Parapsychology Controversy of 1956 in Light of the Crisis of Science

Having illuminated de Martino's ethno-parapsychological science in the despair of a crisis of science as well as in its philosophical richness, it is now time to revisit the parapsychology controversy between de Martino and Eliade from 1956. As it turns out, the two great historians of religion, despite their apparent disdain for each other's positions, had much in common. Not only did they share a youthful infatuation with totalitarianism as a mode of cultural revival, which I have investigated elsewhere, but also a shared vision for the discipline of religious studies.

Guided by common teachers in Pettazzoni and Macchioro, both thinkers believed themselves to be part of a discipline of religious studies with a sheer endless scope (Mincu and Scagno 1987; Eliade 1995). More specifically, they imagined their discipline reaching far beyond Otto's "Lutheran" current of phenomenology (Dubuisson 2003, p. 171). Already as emerging scholars, they opted to conceive of religion as a broad phenomenon, embracing particularly the wilder forms of religion that they found in indigenous cultures and the phenomenon called "shamanism." Even more, bathing in a similar cultural-linguistic context during their formative years on the Italian peninsula, where the field of religious studies was a newly emerging and, thus, a thematically and methodologically negotiable construct, both de Martino and Eliade actively contributed to the shaping of a discipline

by speculating about an empirical science that would be premised on the study of magical facts and parapsychological phenomena.

It could even be argued that de Martino's own ethno-parapsychological program was, at least indirectly, stimulated by the work of Eliade. In 1938, Vittorio Macchioro encouraged his new son-in-law to read *Yoga: An Essay on the Origins of Indian Mysticism* (1936)—introducing its author as his “unique Romanian disciple” (Di Donato 1989, p. 241). It is well known that Eliade, then a young student in his thirties, went through a very similar phase as de Martino, dedicating many of his early articles in Romanian student journals to the giants of anthropology and the discipline of religious studies (Scagno 1987, p. 156). Just like de Martino, the avid reading of ethnographic reports on indigenous culture and religion allowed him to “open windows onto other worlds” to “communicate” with “a Paleolithic hunter, a yogi or a shaman, [or] a peasant from Indonesia” (Allen 1998).

During those same years, Eliade's journeys into worlds of magicians and shamans were accompanied by a consistent enthusiasm for parapsychological research. While this aspect of the Romanian giant's scholarship might come as a surprise to most readers, Italian scholarship—possibly the first to develop a robust intellectual critique of Eliade's thought—has shed ample light on the unorthodox youthful passions of Eliade (Mancini 2003; Angelini 2012; Ermacora 2015; Montanari 2016, pp. 16–21).

While we find an interest in “psychic powers” (*siddhi*) already in his early explorations of Indian tantra, it is in “Folklore as Instrument of Knowledge” (1937) that Eliade's sympathy for parapsychological findings stands out most clearly.<sup>7</sup> Here, Eliade brought “contagious magic,” a concept developed by James George Frazer (1854–1941), into contact with parapsychology in order to redeem it as a valid and possibly efficacious way of acting. Eliade used the concept of a “fluidic link,” a psychic force or vital energy that has been shown to have a long history in spiritist and occult thinking since the eighteenth century, to explore whether persons could be “tied to objects through contact” (Eliade 1978, p. 174).

Eliade noted that “these primitive and popular beliefs,” which scholars have denigrated as “a false logic, [ . . . ] the primitive spirit, the pre-rational, a superstition, a false generalization in no way justified by experience,” could also be “approached from another point of view” (Eliade 1978, p. 173). In so doing, he moved his scrutiny out of the anthropological context where Frazer used it to argue that magic was based on false human reasoning and illogical thinking and into the realm of parapsychological experimentation. Eliade first observed that such a “‘fluidic’ link is today still recorded amongst subjects belonging to the European and American cultures,” where it is invoked as an explanation for paranormal phenomena, such as the possibility of seeing people and their lives merely by touching objects that belonged to them (Eliade 1978, p. 174). As a consequence, Eliade argued, “We need to first of all ask ourselves if such a ‘fluidic’ link between man and the object that he has touched is entirely contradicted by human experience [in] its full extent and not only on its normal levels” (Eliade 1978, p. 174).

In support of his ideas, he mentioned the examples of Jean-François-Charles Dufay (1815–1898), Étienne Eugène Azam (1822–1899), Georges Descormiers Phaneg (1866–1945), Gustav Pagenstecher (1855–1942), Charles Richet (1850–1935), and Eugène Osty (1874–1938), all of whom were contemporary parapsychological researchers engaged in the experimental exploration and scientific reproduction of the surprising powers found amongst pre-modern people (Eliade 1978, p. 174).

Discussing the famous French parapsychologist Osty and his studies on paranormal perception, so-called *cryptesthesia*, Eliade noted that the experimental study of this phenomenon is of “immense importance” for his investigation because once it is proven that “human experience includes pragmatic cryptesthesia, we have no longer the right to *a priori* reject the reality of facts and of beliefs on which

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<sup>7</sup> The article was originally published in Romanian as “Folclorul ca instrument de cunoaștere” and then translated and published in French only in 1978. I cite from the French version (Eliade 1978).

'contagious magic' is based, describing them as 'superstitions,' 'creations of primitive mentality,' and so forth." (Eliade 1978, p. 175) While Eliade was clear that not all "testimonies collected" by anthropologists and folklorists are based on a "concrete fact," he nonetheless believed that "experimental verification of some of these beliefs and superstitions" can demonstrate that the fluidic link between man and the objective world surrounding him "could exist" and that a sorcerer or a shaman could establish it (Eliade 1978, p. 174). The impression that Eliade had his own "parapsychological prehistory" is further reinforced by the fact that Eliade referenced his own articles on the relevance of parapsychological studies for the understanding of religion and magic, some of which go all the way back to his time as a student in 1926 (Eliade 1927).

Moshe Idel, in his recent study on Mircea Eliade, defined his attitude towards the reality of magic during these early years as "ergetic" and "metastatic":

It is possible to call Eliade's approach ergetic, which means that understanding of a certain universe is a matter of doing, performance, techniques, and rituals, and not only a matter of cognition of the nature of reality. This ergetic approach is coupled by an assumption that may be called [ . . . ] metastatic; namely, the possibility to change the structure of reality (Idel 2014, p. 8).

Even as late as 1948, a mere eight years before the controversy at Royaumont, Eliade seemed to be sympathetic to de Martino's position. In his review of de Martino's *magnum opus*, for example, Eliade is adamant about the reality of certain paranormal phenomena—such as the voices shamans hear from guiding spirits (Eliade 1948).

Like de Martino, Eliade was an expert at blending religion and science, meaning and legitimacy, orientation and empiricism. In fact, both of them were putting on the prophetic mantle to emerge as new cultural leaders in a civilization that was hampered by a crisis that involved the realms of science, reason, self, reality, and so forth. Both de Martino and Eliade were fully aware of the scientific crisis and its tension between legitimacy gained through specialization and the capacity to create meaning and orientation lost because of it. In a well-known article, entitled "Crisis and Renewal of Religious Studies," for example, Eliade argued for a method that he defined as a "*Gesamthermeneutik*" to respond to the twentieth century's "increasing loss of creative energy and a concomitant loss of interpretative cultural synthesis in favor of a fragmentary, analytical type of research" (Eliade 1965).

Similarly, de Martino made the theme of unifying cultural division a key theme of his research. If he wrote that "our civilization is in crisis," because it is "divided in separate entities ("*compartimenti-stagni*") and lacks [ . . . ] unity of thought" in his first book (De Martino 1997, p. 56), he turned his attention to magic in his second book. Magic, for de Martino is a "unifying problem," that "could make apparent the artificial nature of the separation, break the boundaries of the empirical partitions of knowledge (the spirit blows where it wants!),"<sup>8</sup> and reveal the nexus and the differences between the two documents, in order to perceive the limits of the comparison and point out the path and the goal" (De Martino 2012, p. 186).

The unity of our culture is essentially entrusted to unifying problems, which are, by means of their nature, apt to break the limits of the academic partitions of knowledge, which specialists sometimes mistakenly hold for determinations of things that exist *in re*. Thanks to their "connecting" function, they are apt to defeat the enduring influence of positivistic particularization and chipping. Now, the problem of the history of magic constitutes precisely one of these unifying problems. The historian, the philosopher, or the man of culture, who has nourished himself from the sources of modern humanism, finds the most favorable conditions for coming together with the psychological enthusiast, the psychiatrist, and generally any naturalistic thinker, on this ground. Here, he finds the conditions to pick up the "human" discourse, which seems to be interrupted since the period of romanticism, together with his colleagues (De Martino 2012, p. 5).

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<sup>8</sup> In parenthesis, de Martino is citing the New Testament. See John 3:8.

Schrenck-Notzing, Frobenius, and Driesch can be regarded as the quintessential unifiers of their divided disciplines. All three thinkers were “pioneers” in their respective fields, attempting to establish their own methods and theories on the margins of orthodox anthropology, psychology, and biology through a distinctive integration of empirical and experimental research methods with holistic theories of culture, psyche, and nature, premised on anti-mechanistic, anti-materialistic, and anti-naturalistic worldviews (Ringer 1969, p. 347).

De Martino and Eliade shared certain other fundamental traits with the scientists of the previous generation: Balancing on the edge between crisis and renewal, they all favored visionary and utopian palingenesis over decline. Seeing themselves as prophetic figures, they argued that their new sciences, premised on such concepts as morphology, synthesis, and holism, offered a newfound sense of orientation and unity of culture and set free the energies for the civilizational renewal that Europe so desperately needed (Sharpe 1975, pp. 161–62; Gladigow 2005, p. 24; Von Stuckrad 2014, pp. 64–70, 160).

Like Eliade, who was part of the famous Eranos group in Southern Switzerland, Frobenius and Driesch participated in Count Hermann Keyserling’s (1880–1946) “School of Wisdom” (*Schule der Weisheit*), whose objective was the “synthesis of mind and soul,” in order to “overcome [the] fragmentation [of an] excessively scientific approach” (Heinrichs 1998, p. 83; Hakl 2014, p. 39). In his involvement between Keyserling’s movement and Schrenck-Notzing’s laboratory, Driesch was accompanied by another intellectual offering revitalizing experiences, namely Thomas Mann (1875–1955). Recognizing the affinity between those two experiences, Mann explicitly situated the baron’s experimental parapsychology within the historical context of social crisis and moral void in the wake of the First World War and within the need for a new science as carrier of palingentic energy (Mann 1924).

In strikingly similar ways to Eliadean terms, such as “hierophany,” the trio used their own Greek-inspired neologisms to indicate the perplexingly quick move from the collection of empirical data to the generation of an underlying metaphysical worldview. The use of neologisms, such as “ideoplasma,” “paideuma,” and “entelechy,” however, did little to clarify their scientific *modus operandi*. Contrariwise, commentators repeatedly commented on the fact that their description of these universalizing processes—moving from the observation of particular cultural, psychic, or biological facts to grand theories about culture, psyche, and the natural world—is marked by lack of precision (Freyhofer 1982, p. 51; Kuff 2011, pp. 304–5). In some ways, the neologisms were attempts to describe processes that our thinkers themselves could not truly understand. They were placeholders for the incomprehensible and intuitively experienced transitions from the invisible to the visible, from the particular to the universal, from the inorganic to the organic.

## 5. Conclusions

This being said, the Royaumont controversy points to significant differences between the thinking of the two great historians of religion. While the present study does not allow for a more thorough investigation of the reasons for Eliade’s harsh criticism in 1956, it is most likely the result of a very different trio of influences. If de Martino looked to the three border scientists of Weimar Germany, the Romanian scholar took inspiration from the ontology of *verstehen* of Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911), the experientialist phenomenology of Rudolf Otto (1869–1937), and the *Epoché* of Edmund Husserl (1859–1938).

In this article, my focus was elsewhere as I showed that de Martino’s “ethno-parapsychology,” far from being a methodological flight of fancy of a psychologically unstable young scholar projecting his own ego-fragmentations into the culture surrounding him, was rather a reasonable and sophisticated response to a profound crisis afflicting Western science during the twentieth century. The Italian historian of religion rightly noticed that what unified the disparate projects of Schrenck-Notzing, Frobenius, and Driesch was their shared understanding of the crisis afflicting modern science and their commitment to return it to both legitimacy and orientation.

I also demonstrated that, despite the 1956 controversy between Eliade and de Martino surrounding the use of parapsychology in the study of religion, the two emerging scholars of religion shared in a common vision regarding the role of religious studies as a discipline of cultural recovery. This commonality received its most radical expression in their writings during the 1930s and 1940s, when even Eliade shared in de Martino's enthusiasm for parapsychology as a valuable tool for the study of the efficacy of religious phenomena.

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