The Sense of the End: Revisiting Ernesto De Martino's Legacy in Navigating Eco-Emotions

El sentido del fin: Revisitando el legado de Ernesto De Martino en la navegación de las eco-emociones

Lampredi, Giacomo*

Department of Philosophy "Piero Martinetti", University of Milan, Italy.
giacomolampredi@unimi.it

Abstract

In recent years, the climate emergency has fueled a widespread *sense of the end*, generating collective emotions that reflect an experience of existential precariousness and historical disorientation. The so-called *eco-emotions*—such as eco-anxiety, solastalgia, and eco-angst—are not merely individual responses to the ecological crisis but symptoms of a historical and existential rupture. This article proposes interpreting these emotions through Ernesto De Martino's concept of the *crisis of presence*, which describes how the risk of the world's dissolution translates into an affective experience of displacement and disorientation. From this perspective, eco-emotions appear as manifestations of a crisis in temporal orientation and the continuity between past, present, and future, amplifying the apocalyptic perception of climate collapse. However, De Martino's thought offers a key to recognizing these emotions not only as signs of crisis but also as potential instruments of redemption and transformation. Through social mobilization, the construction of new forms of ecological belonging, and the creation of alternative narratives, eco-emotions can be transformed into practices of resistance, enabling a redefinition of the relationship between humanity and the world—even in the face of the looming *sense of the end*.

Key Words: Sense of the end; Eco-emotions; Eco-anxiety; Solastalgia; Cultural apocalypse.

Resumen

En los últimos años, la emergencia climática ha alimentado una sensación generalizada de fin, generando emociones colectivas que reflejan una experiencia de precariedad existencial y desorientación histórica. Las llamadas eco-emociones —como la eco-ansiedad, la solastalgia y la ecoangst— no son meras respuestas individuales a la crisis ecológica, sino síntomas de una ruptura histórica y existencial. Este artículo propone interpretar estas emociones a través del concepto de crisis de presencia de Ernesto De Martino, que describe cómo el riesgo de disolución del mundo se traduce en una experiencia afectiva de desplazamiento y desorientación. Desde esta perspectiva, las eco-emociones aparecen como manifestaciones de una crisis en la orientación temporal y la continuidad entre pasado, presente y futuro, amplificando la percepción apocalíptica del colapso climático. Sin embargo, el pensamiento de De Martino ofrece una clave para reconocer estas emociones no solo como signos de crisis, sino también como potenciales instrumentos de redención y transformación. A través de la movilización social, la construcción de nuevas formas de pertenencia ecológica y la creación de narrativas alternativas, las eco-emociones pueden transformarse en prácticas de resistencia, permitiendo una redefinición de la relación entre la humanidad y el mundo, incluso ante la inminente sensación de fin.

Palabras claves: Sensación de fin; Eco-emociones; Eco-ansiedad; Solastalgia; Apocalipsis cultural.

* PhD, Research Fellow at the Department of Philosophy "Piero Martinetti", University of Milan. His research interests revolve around the sociology of emotions and the ethics of care, with a particular focus on the politicization of civic life: a focus that has informed his empirical investigations into the role of emotions and care in pro-migrant solidarity, environmental conflict, climate activism, and animal solidarity. ORCID: 0000-0001-8407-2367

The Sense of the End:
Revisiting Ernesto De Martino's Legacy in Navigating Eco-Emotions

Introduction

In recent years, the climate emergency has generated a wave of collective emotions, shaping an affective field that has become increasingly central to contemporary social and political dynamics. These emotions, often grouped under the labels of eco-emotions (Cianconi et al., 2023), *climate emotions* (Pihkala, 2022), or *earth emotions* (Albrecht, 2019), are not merely individual reactions to the ecological crisis but historically and culturally situated phenomena that reflect how societies grapple with the transformation of their relationship with the planet. Affective experiences such as *eco-anxiety* (Clayton, 2020), *solastalgia* (Albrecht, 2005), *eco-angst* (Goleman, 2009), and *eco-guilt* (Nielsen & Gamborg, 2024), do not merely describe personal emotional states but also conditions of collective disorientation, where the future appears threatening and the present, precarious. Frequently, these emotions take the form of *apocalyptic emotions*— genuine senses and perceptions of the end of the world. They constitute an *affective apocalypse*, in which future threats reverberate into the present through emotions like fear, anguish, and anxiety, tied to the sense of the end.

From this perspective, the works of Ernesto De Martino (1948/1973, 1958/2021, 1959/2015, 1961/2005, 1977/2023), widely recognized as classics of Italian anthropology, provide a particularly fertile interpretative framework for understanding eco-emotions. The concept of the crisis of presence, developed by the scholar in his ethnographic and philosophical works, allows eco-emotions to be interpreted not merely as psychological symptoms but as expressions of an existential and historical rupture. The crisis of presence is an existential situation that involves the "existential collapse" associated with the risk of not being in the world, and in some cases "in any world possible" (De Martino, 1977/2023, p.

311). The crisis of the individual and the crisis of the world overlap and coincide in the crisis of presence. In the years before his death in 1965, De Martino dedicated himself to investigating the "sense of the end" and the "cultural apocalypses" of the Western world. He provided original reflections that were then scarcely known outside the Italian borders. Applying this perspective to the ecological crisis, eco-emotions emerge as signals of a disintegration of the bonds between individuals and their environment, memory and territory, and past and future, respectively, taking on radical tones and moods.

The aim of this article is to use the framework of the crisis of presence to explore eco-emotions, particularly those eco-emotions that manifest as apocalyptic and distressing feelings in response to the threats of climate collapse. This is a theoretical and exploratory investigation of *end-of-the-world sensibilities*. Such sensibilities involve an affective perception of how ecological deterioration endangers individuals' and communities' ability to navigate the world and envision the future. Furthermore, the article reflects on possible forms of redemption: the strategies through which these emotional states can be transformed into tools of resistance and reappropriation of presence.

For De Martino, cultural creations serve as *exorcisms* to shield individuals from the ontological risk of the crisis of presence. He argues that security comes from the ability to draw upon retrospective memories (1977/2023) that remain effective in the present in order to reshape reality. Presence, therefore, manifests in the extension of retrospective memory into the future, linking past and present. The disruption of this temporal continuity constitutes the crisis of presence. The incompatibility between habitual ways of facing the future as well as the threat of impending events—such as ecological disasters, climate collapse, or drought—emerges as a radical menace to personal, social, and ecological existence.

The crisis of presence thus describes the *fragile* and *non-guaranteed nature* of life that is exposed to the risk of dissolution. The crisis of presence can only be overcome through cultural requalifications of individual existence. Interpreting eco-emotions through the concept of the crisis of presence allows for these emotions to be recognized not only as symptoms of a profound existential rupture but also as potential drivers of political transformation. Rather than promoting a psychologization or medicalization of these emotions, De Martino's framework situates them within a broader cultural and political history without which they cannot be fully understood. The primary risk, in fact, is that these emotions become individualized or depoliticized, leaving intact the very structures that produce the climate crisis. However, through social mobilization, political activism, the construction of new forms of ecological belonging, and the creation of alternative narratives, eco-emotions can become tools for reclaiming presence: transforming crisis into an opportunity to redefine the relationship between humanity and the world.

Crisis of Presence

De Martino dedicated his life to describing the cultural mechanisms that enable individuals to shield themselves from anguish in moments of crisis (1948/1973, 1958/2021, 1959/2015, 1961/2005, 1977/2023). The crisis of presence is one of the central concepts around which De Martino's (1908–1965) work revolves, and it is developed through his anthropological and philosophical research on the dynamics of subjectivity in contexts of both individual and collective crises. According to De Martino, each person's presence in their own world—their ability to situate themselves within it with meaning and intentionality—is a cultural dynamic that must be continuously reaffirmed to prevent the risk of its dissolution (De Martino, 1948/1973). Thus, De Martino argues that human beings are constantly engaged in constructing their own presence. The crisis of presence emerges in moments when individuals experience a collapse of their subjective unity. It concerns the precariousness of human experience, understood as the risk of losing the ability to *be* in the world in a meaningful, continuous, and coherent way.

De Martino's primary interest lies in understanding how human societies have developed symbolic and ritual strategies to counteract the fragility of human experience. This vulnerability manifests not only in individual experiences of psychological crisis but also (as will be discussed in the following section)

in the collective phenomenon of cultural apocalypse, whereby entire societies see their horizon of meaning begin to waver. If presence is the possibility of existing in the world, then the crisis of presence is the concrete possibility of no longer existing in the world—or, in some cases, "in any world possible" (De Martino, 1977/2023, p. 311). If presence is movement and the continuity of one's habitual way of being in the world, its crisis marks an interruption of that movement, akin to mourning, alienation, illness, or the loss of a cultural world. The paralysis of presence, of being unable to transcend a given situation, is marked by anguish and it can escalate into apocalyptic moods. Anguish, in this sense, expresses the resistance of presence against its own disintegration (Marraffa, 2021). Unlike Heidegger (1927/1962), who views anguish as a revelation of *being-there*, De Martino instead sees it as resistance to the breakdown of the ways in which one is present in a given world. Anguish is thus a response to cultural apocalypses, a response that involves a particular way of being in the world that dissolves along with its values, priorities, and meanings.

In his book *Il mondo magico* [The Magical World] (1948/1973), De Martino describes "presence" as an individual's ability to situate themselves in the world in an active and conscious way, feeling in control of their actions and destiny. However, this presence can enter into crisis when an individual loses control over their own existence, experiencing a condition of estrangement or dissolution of the self. Presence, in this sense, is the state of being in the world as a subject—that is, as an active center of decisions and initiatives. When this center disintegrates, the individual falls into a condition of existential powerlessness (De Martino, 1948/1973).

The crisis of presence is therefore a moment in which an individual or a collective experience a rupture in their relationship with the world: an *absence* that can manifest as disorientation, anguish, or psychic fragmentation. Within the theoretical framework of *Il mondo magico*, magic is interpreted as a *technique of presence*, a symbolic means of reconstructing the boundary between subject and world, thereby preventing the individual from dissolving into formless anguish. In this context, magic is not an illusion or superstition, but an effective form of action aimed at restoring presence and the subject's control in the face of existential crisis. Magic serves as a response to situations of vulnerability through rituals that provide ontological security and social cohesion.

In summary, the crisis of presence is a permanent anthropological risk that underscores

the inherent fragility of human experience. For De Martino, overcoming this crisis occurs through cultural mechanisms—myths, rituals, religion, and symbolic structures—that allow for the reestablishment of world order and provide individuals with a stable sense of existence. Throughout his work, De Martino identifies various causes that can lead to the crisis of presence, distinguishing between individual and collective factors. For example, an individual may experience a crisis of presence during periods of intense emotional instability, including cases of grief, trauma, or depression. The loss of symbolic and cultural references can lead to a state of extreme vulnerability. De Martino associates this condition with phenomena such as mystical ecstasy, trance, and psychic dissociation, interpreting these phenomena as attempts to respond to the dissolution of the self (De Martino, 1961/2005).

However, crises of presence are not limited to individuals or small communities—they can affect entire societies, particularly in times of historical transition. De Martino examines how wars, revolutions, and social transformations have produced collective disorientation and, in turn, prompted communities to develop rituals and symbolic practices aimed at restoring order.

In _La terra del rimorso_ [The Land of Remorse: A Study of Southern Italian Tarantism] (1961/2005), De Martino analyzes the phenomenon of _tarantism_ in Southern Italy: a form of possession, crisis, or affliction attributed to the bite of the tarantula, a spider mythologized in local folklore. Those affected by this crisis—often women suffering from pain and social marginalization—were immersed in a ritual dance accompanied by music, thereby allowing them to express their distress and regain a sense of self. For De Martino, the tarantistic ritual is not merely an expression of popular superstition—it is also a cultural mechanism that facilitates the reintegration of the individual into their community (1961/2005). It is a _performative rite_ that functions as a cultural device to reestablish presence in the world.

Cultural creations—rituals, symbols, works of art, institutions, and more—are, for De Martino, the fundamental human tool for overcoming the constant threats to presence. Myths, narratives, values, and historical accounts provide frameworks through which pain, crises, and death can be confronted, offering a symbolic structure that allows crises of presence to be processed and overcome. The security derived from presence comes from the ability, in moments of crisis, to draw upon _retrospective memories_ of effective behaviors that have modified reality in the past,

alongside a _prospective and creative consciousness_ of what must be done moving forward. Presence thus unfolds and extends to the continuity between retrospective memory and forward momentum, linking past, present, and future. The disruption of this continuity constitutes the crisis of presence. For De Martino, culture and its creations function as mechanisms that enable individuals to overcome crisis. Even religious and political institutions have historically played a role in stabilizing presence by providing individuals with models of belonging and symbolic references. The problem of the crisis of presence, therefore, concerns culture as a whole and the ways in which social cohesion and a sense of belonging are maintained.

However, according to De Martino, modernity has weakened many of the traditional mechanisms that once ensured stability of presence. Scientific progress and secularism have eroded the power of rituals and collective beliefs, leaving individuals increasingly exposed to new forms of alienation. In particular, the extreme rationalization of the modern world has generated new existential crises: for example, individuals often find themselves without symbolic tools to process their crises, making them more vulnerable to a state of anguish from which it is increasingly difficult to emerge. Among the contemporary manifestations of the crisis of presence, De Martino would likely have included phenomena such as the rise of anxiety (both social and ecological), depression, social isolation, and the fragmentation of cultural identities. The symbolic order appears estranged, ineffective, and caught in the grip of a cultural apocalypse.

Cultural Apocalypse

In _La fine del mondo_ [_The End of the World_] (published posthumously in 1977 and translated into English in 2023), De Martino introduces the concept of cultural apocalypse: the loss of a society's historical and symbolic sense of reality. This condition arises when a group, community, or society is no longer able to assign meaning to its own existence. When history is no longer capable of grounding presence, the risk of apocalyptic anguish emerges. To confront the crisis of presence, societies have developed symbolic mechanisms of protection, ranging from religious rituals and institutions to therapeutic practices. However, even these mechanisms can at times prove ineffective. The cultural apocalypse represents the most extreme form of the crisis of presence: the total collapse of the symbolic coordinates that enable a

society to exist. This occurs when an entire culture loses the ability to transmit shared meanings, thus plunging into existential chaos that can manifest in various ways including the loss of collective identity, violent disruptions, fundamentalist movements, or the dissolution of historical memory.

However, while in *Il mondo magico* [The Magical World] (1948/1973) the crisis of presence primarily concerns local cultures and traditions facing dissolution, De Martino later deepens his exploration of the existential aspects of presence in *La fine del mondo* [The End of the World] (1977/2023). He describes the presence as composed of both an ontological fragility and the cultural creations that repeatedly allow individuals to overcome its potential dissolution. When cultural tools to confront specific crises are lacking, the symbolic order becomes estranged, ineffective, and trapped in a state of cultural apocalypse. Only through the creation of new symbols, values, and modes of presence can individuals transcend the crisis. Today, the theme of the crisis of presence is more relevant than ever, particularly in the face of global warming and environmental catastrophes.

In *La fine del mondo* [The End of the World] (1977/2023), De Martino explores the "apocalyptic disposition of minds and spirits in the contemporary West" (De Martino, 1977/2023, p. 11), which threatens the continuity of presence with recurrent crises. In the first part of the book, he examines how, throughout history, the danger of the world's end has been "a permanent anthropological risk" (De Martino, 1977/2023, p. 127), ultimately defining human culture itself as "the solemn exorcism against this radical risk" (De Martino, 1977/2023, p. 39). For De Martino, the crisis of the world and the crisis of being within it constitutes a single, indistinguishable rupture. The crisis of the world is, in essence, the crisis of the way in which one is present within it. It represents the radical threat "of the end of any possible world" (De Martino, 1977/2023, p. 96). In this book, De Martino analyzes the role of the apocalypse through a wide range of sources. These sources include historical accounts—exploring the role of the apocalyptic concept in religions and history; literary works from his time (such as Alberto Moravia's *La Noia*, Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus*, and Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea*); and psychiatric cases.

Notably, De Martino discusses the famous case of the Bernese Peasant, a 23-year-old man hospitalized due to a "schizophrenic delusion of the end of the world" (De Martino, 1977/2023, p. 17). The young peasant initially enters a state of crisis after uprooting some shrubs, an act he experiences as *guilt-ridden*. Later, his father uproots an oak tree, from which water begins to seep, spreading across the surrounding soil. As a result, the ground becomes unstable, soft, and unsteady. Additionally, the door of their house is replaced, altering both its shape and color, which in turn changes the way sunlight illuminates the home, disrupting the familiar cycle of light to which the peasant had been accustomed. The young man's psychotic state is triggered by these two significant events. The oak tree, deeply rooted in the domestic landscape, symbolizes continuity and stability for him. "All of the world's becoming was as if it had been jolted by the uprooting of this oak, and its stricken roots get identified with the very roots of life" (De Martino, 1977/2023, pp. 28–29). The door that is subsequently replaced functions as a symbolic boundary between the safe interior space and the external world. This change alters the symbolic relationship between the father's house, the door, and the rest of the world—a relationship now in crisis, reflecting the individual's own psychological turmoil. The modification of the door disrupts the peasant's sense of protection and familiarity. As a result, the once-familiar landscape becomes unrecognizable, leading to feelings of disorientation and alienation. These transformations cause the young man to experience a profound disintegration of his world, a loss of spatial reference points, and a sensation of cosmic collapse. He perceives the entire order of the world as crumbling, with the ground seemingly sinking beneath him. De Martino uses this case to illustrate how the crisis of presence can emerge when external events deeply destabilize an individual's psychological equilibrium, leading to an *apocalyptic perception of reality*.

This case presents a symbolic image of the collapse of the world, the breakdown of its *domesticity*, and the crumbling of its *inhabitable order*. The crisis affects the ground, the paternal home, the sun, and the overall loss of familiarity in the young man's life. The loss of the world's *normalcy* is, ultimately, the loss of its *familiarity*—it ceases to be *his* and instead becomes foreign, strange, and threatening. Furthermore, through this case, De Martino foreshadows themes that later become central to the study of *eco-emotions*. At the heart of the peasant's crisis, as described by De Martino, is his simultaneous participation in the loss of domesticity—both as a *victim* and as a *responsible agent* of the catastrophe. The entanglement of *loss, guilt, powerlessness,* and *anguish*—in varying degrees—are defining characteristics of many contemporary eco-emotions.

Can climate collapse be understood, through the lived experiences of individuals, as a form of crisis of presence? Given that De Martino, particularly in *The End of the World* (1977/2023), explores the individual's crisis in parallel with their experience of the crisis of *their* world—mediated through anguish—it would seem so. The end of the world, as described by De Martino, is perceived through an "apocalyptic disposition of minds and spirits" (De Martino, 1977/2023, p. 11) and "apocalyptic moods," highlighting the central role of emotional and affective dimensions. However, the historical context in which De Martino writes is far from recognizing climate change as a concrete threat capable of shaping social and political concerns. Instead, his work focuses on the symbolic relationship between individuals and the *world* in a broad sense. Nevertheless, his analyses remain highly relevant today for they examine the affective-symbolic processes through which one's relationship with the world transforms into a source of existential threat. Indeed, it is precisely the way in which the *familiar* becomes *estranged* that imbues experiences with anguish, turning the world itself into a threat to one's presence.

Anxiety about climate collapse represents a specific case of the crisis of presence. Unlike the crises described by De Martino—such as mourning, where the rupture has already occurred—this form of anguish and unease is an *anticipatory* crisis, actively unfolding rather than fully realized. The future scenario (heralded by increasingly frequent natural disasters) spills over into the present. The environment and climate are undergoing relentless transformation, with looming large-scale catastrophes capable of disrupting societies and the familiar ways in which we inhabit the planet. The crisis of presence is fundamentally a rupture in the continuity of one's way of being in the world, the continuity of one's image of the future, and the continuity of one's image of the planet itself. This form of crisis of presence can be understood as a breakdown of what Giddens (1991) refers to as *ontological security*: the stability of the connection between *self-identity* and the *sociomaterial environment*. The restoration of this *ontological security* fosters a sense of *being at home*, experienced when one feels in control of their surroundings (Dupuis & Thorns, 1998; Saunders & Williams, 1988). The crisis of presence arises when these connections are severed, leading to a sense of *not feeling at home*, a failure to derive comfort and reassurance from one's environment, and ultimately a feeling of *displacement* (Ramsay & Askland, 2022).

The originality of De Martino's approach lies in identifying, within the relationship between individual and environment, both the feelings of the crisis of presence—anguish, loss of familiarity, and estrangement—and the way in which the individual–world relationship is embedded in networks of social and ritual meanings. The displacement of the world (of trees, land, objects, and animals) is inseparable from the individual's own displacement. The world collapses and sinks along with its values. The *crisis of the future* is simultaneously a crisis of one's temporal continuity in the present. The incompatibility between habitual ways of approaching the future and the looming threat of future events, such as ecological disasters, climate collapse, and drought, emerges as a radical threat to personal, social, and ecological existence. This is the affectivity of a "felt" apocalypse, in which future threats retroact upon the present through fear, anguish, and anxiety tied to the sense of the end.

The Senses of the End: The Affective Aspects of Climate Crisis, Place Transformations, and Environmental Disasters

The disconnection between individuals and their natural environments can lead to pain, anxiety, and anguish. Climate change is recognized as one of the greatest threats to humanity's survival, and the Australian Medical Association (2019) has stated that it is already causing severe health consequences in humans, including feelings of loss, anger, and hopelessness. Increasingly, as landscapes undergo rapid transformations, biodiversity declines, and environmental disasters—such as floods, wildfires, and hurricanes—become more frequent. New concepts and neologisms have emerged to capture the relationship between affectivity and ecological change. For instance, "eco-anxiety" (Coffey et al., 2021) describes the chronic fear of ecological disasters and the anxiety associated with worsening environmental conditions as an affective response to climate crisis. "Ecological grief" (Cunsolo & Ellis, 2018) refers to the anticipatory mourning of the loss of the natural world. "Eco-angst" (Goleman, 2009) refers to the despair linked to the perceived fragility of the planet. "Solastalgia" (Albrecht, 2005) describes the existential distress of *no longer feeling at home while still being at home*—a kind of homesickness experienced as one witnesses the disintegration of their life-worlds. It is unsurprising that, in the face of global warming and its apocalyptic implications, these neologisms predominantly describe painful,

distressing, and anxious emotions. The emotionality that binds individuals to their environments is increasingly revealed through the toxicity of this relationship. Many scholars have criticized approaches that psychologize (Parker, 2007) and medicalize (Kalwak & Weihgold, 2022) eco-emotions, framing them as issues of individual mental health (Clayton et al., 2017) while failing to recognize the deeper cultural and political roots of these emotional experiences.

This paper argues that emotions related to the climate crisis—or more broadly, end-of-the-world sensibilities, given their apocalyptic tones and dispositions—can be understood as specific forms of the crisis of presence. However, the historical context in which De Martino writes is far removed from recognizing climate change as a concrete threat capable of shaping social and political concerns. Instead, De Martino explores the *symbolic* relationship between individuals and the world in a broad, phenomenological sense. Despite this distinction, his insights remain highly relevant today (Remotti, 2022), particularly in analyzing the affective-symbolic processes underpinning the climate crisis. The crisis of presence in relation to ecological collapse represents a rupture in the continuity of one's way of being in the world, the continuity of one's image of the future, and the continuity of one's image of the planet itself. This form of crisis of presence can be understood as a breakdown of ontological security (Giddens, 1991), or the stability that sustains and restores the connection between self-identity and the socio-material environment. The restoration of this ontological security fosters a sense of *being at home*, experienced when individuals feel a sense of control over their environment (Dupuis & Thorns, 1998). Conversely, the crisis of presence emerges when these connections are severed, leading to a feeling of not being at home and the loss of comfort and identity restoration, eventually culminating in a sense of displacement (Ramsay & Askland, 2022). Overcoming the crisis of presence requires ongoing care and a process of requalifying the sense of "being at home" for individuals in a world undergoing profound ecological transformation.

However, the affective relationship between individuals and their environment extends far beyond experiences of pain and loss—it also encompasses the sense of home, belonging to a place, and connection to its landscapes, flora, and fauna. It is about dwelling (Ingold, 2000): inhabiting the ecological world that sustains individuals through sensibility. Dwelling is a continuous process of rooting oneself in lived experiences, shaped by the intertwining of spatiality and temporality. It is within this process of dwelling that we must trace the connection between affectivity and the environment. In this connection, emotions become the site where intersubjective, intergenerational, and even inter-natural memories intertwine and blur, where different forms of life coexist and co-inhabit one another. Dwelling is not merely about ecological interaction within nature but about ways of inhabiting landscapes through practices, perceptions, sensitivities, and attachments. The specter of climate collapse, the relentless transformation of the planet, and the rise of apocalyptic emotions represent a radical case of the crisis of presence. Rather than confronting a crisis that has already fully materialized, this form of distress is a crisis in becoming—anticipatory, incomplete, yet perceived as both concrete and inevitable. The environment and climate are undergoing profound transformations, with large-scale catastrophes looming, threatening to disrupt societies and the familiar ways in which we inhabit the planet. The anticipated future (foreshadowed by increasingly frequent natural disasters) spills into the present through emotions of crisis.

To maintain a clear analytical focus and effectively bridge De Martino's framework with the field of eco-emotions, the remainder of this paper will concentrate on two key eco-emotions: eco-anxiety and solastalgia.

Eco-Anxiety

One of the most frequently cited definitions of eco-anxiety is the "chronic fear of environmental doom" (Clayton et al., 2017, p. 68). Other definitions emphasize the distress caused by climate change, mental distress, or a state of anguish related to environmental uncertainties (Higginbotham et al., 2006). However, literature does not offer a single, universally accepted definition or a coherent framework for its various operationalizations (Coffey et al., 2021). The growing social awareness of the ecological crisis, often accompanied by catastrophic narratives, contributes to fostering a shared sense of urgency and vulnerability. Eco-anxiety is distributed unevenly across societies and countries. The groups most exposed to the consequences of climate change—such as Indigenous communities, populations in the Global South, or economically disadvantaged groups (Clayton et al., 2023)—experience an anxiety that is deeply intertwined with material experiences of loss and precarity. At the same time, young people tend to be particularly affected by eco-anxiety, as they

perceive the future as profoundly uncertain and feel the weight of a compromised environmental legacy.

Anxiety differs from fear in its specific focus: while fear is directed toward a concrete danger with immediate negative consequences, anxiety does not target a clearly defined threat but rather an uncertain and potentially menacing event (Miceli & Castelfranchi, 2005). Uncertainty is thus the core of anxiety (Averill, 1988), making it a future-oriented emotion (Kendall & Ingram, 1989) that constantly oscillates between fear and hope. Although fear also involves some degree of uncertainty, it is centered on the threat itself, whereas anxiety focuses on uncertainty itself and the difficulty of tolerating it. For this reason, anxiety has been considered an "epistemic emotion" (Miceli & Castelfranchi, 2005), tied to the need for control over events and the reduction of uncertainty. Psychological studies focusing on the individual highlight various strategies for managing anxiety. For example, some people attempt to reduce uncertainty through practical control over their environment, whereas others transfer the threat onto a more defined and manageable object or else engage in "preparing for the worst" (Miceli & Castelfranchi, 2005), transforming anxiety into fear, which is often easier to handle. Phenomenological perspectives on anxiety emphasize its existential dimension. Heidegger (1927/1962) highlights how anxiety reveals the indeterminacy of being-in-the-world, exposing the contingency of existence and opening up multiple possibilities. Sartre (1956), on the other hand, views anxiety as the result of radical freedom. Rather than paralyzing individuals in the face of an inevitable and predetermined catastrophe, anxiety reminds them that the future remains open, confronting them with the responsibility of their choices. In a certain sense, all forms of anxiety can be seen as eco-anxiety, as they always relate to uncertainty and the precariousness of the environment—whether social or physical—which is constantly subject to uncontrollable transformations. From this perspective, eco-anxiety represents an internal conflict between responsibility, urgency, and the overwhelming scale of the climate crisis—one that is impossible for a single individual to resolve alone.

Eco-anxiety, as it is centered on the ecological crisis, must be understood not only as a psychological and cultural phenomenon but also as a (geo)political one, rooted in the intersection of multiple scales of experience. On one hand, it manifests at the situated and lived level; on the other, it is linked to geopolitical dynamics, where efforts to address the climate crisis appear fragmented, poorly coordinated, and relegated to a secondary position in political priorities. Some political and educational institutions attempt to mitigate eco-anxiety by promoting more constructive narratives about the future, while others ignore or delegitimize it as an exaggerated reaction. In certain cases, eco-anxiety is even individualized and medicalized, reducing a systemic issue to a psychological condition that is to be managed with individual coping strategies rather than through collective and structural responses. Eco-anxiety thus emerges from the tension between the awareness that political action is possible and the perception that it is unattainable (Davidson, 2024). In some cases, eco-anxiety is closely tied to the perception of political inaction on climate issues and a sense of betrayal by institutional politics (Clayton & Parnes, 2025). This makes the perception of political inaction one of the very conditions that foster eco-anxiety. For this reason, rather than being a direct reaction to the physical impacts of climate change, eco-anxiety stems from the friction generated by the difficulty of collectively coordinating responses to the crisis.

Eco-anxiety can be interpreted through the lens of the crisis of presence, as described by De Martino. The ongoing ecological collapse undermines the possibility of inhabiting the world with a sense of continuity and security, generating an experience of disorientation and existential instability. In this state, individuals lose their ability to navigate the world and to see themselves as agents capable of influencing their own existence. For De Martino, the crisis of presence is also a crisis of historicity, the loss of the ability to situate oneself within a meaningful temporal trajectory. Eco-anxiety arises when historical time seems to lose direction. Progress, once narrated as a story of advancement and development, now appears as a destructive force, while the future is framed more as a threat than a promise. Instead of offering a space for agency and possibility, the future becomes a looming horizon of uncertainty, where both individual and collective meaning begin to fracture.

Eco-anxiety is not merely the distress of particularly sensitive individuals; it is a symptom of a structural uncertainty that concerns humanity as a whole and its relationship with the future of the planet. As De Martino pointed out, the risk is that this crisis could lead to cultural and political paralysis rather than becoming an opportunity to redefine the relationship between humanity and the natural world.

Solastalgia

The concept of solastalgia was first introduced by environmental philosopher Glenn Albrecht (2005) to describe the existential distress of no longer feeling at home while still being at home. It was described as a form of homesickness experienced in place, as one witnesses the disintegration of their vital world. It captures the emotional turmoil that arises when familiar environments undergo irreversible change, creating a sense of displacement without physical relocation. Examples of this condition include residents of areas increasingly ravaged by wildfires, who experience solastalgia as they watch their homes, forests, and familiar landscapes be reduced to ashes. Similarly, Indigenous communities suffer from solastalgia when the rainforests they rely on for survival and spiritual connection are cleared to make way for plantations and livestock farming.

The word solastalgia is derived from *solace*—which originates from the Latin solari and solacium, meaning comfort, consolation, and relief from distress—and *algia*, which refers to pain and suffering. Solastalgia is defined as "the pain experienced when there is recognition that the place where one resides and that one loves is under immediate assault" (Albrecht, 2005, p. 48). It represents an attack on one's sense of place and an erosion of the sense of belonging. This emotional distress arises from a lack of comfort, absence of care, and the loss of feeling at home due to the rapid transformations of one's natural environment. Unlike nostalgia, which refers to longing for a place or time from which one has been separated, solastalgia is the anguish caused by environmental changes while individuals remain physically connected to their everyday surroundings. As Albrecht (2005) puts it, "In short, solastalgia is a form of homesickness one gets when one is still at 'home'" (p. 48). It is an affective disruption—a direct assault on one's sense of place and a profound erosion of belonging. The concept of solastalgia (Albrecht, 2005; Albrecht et al., 2007; Brown, 2023; Galway et al., 2019) provides a framework for analyzing the felt and irreversible disconnection between lived experience and the transformation of places (Lampredi, 2024).

However, some scholars have criticized the framing of solastalgia as "a new mental illness" or a clinical diagnosis (Askland & Bunn, 2018; MacSuibhne, 2009), highlighting how its social and anthropological dimensions remain largely underexplored. While solastalgia effectively illustrates the unfolding fracture between individuals and places—or, as Albrecht (2005) describes it, "the fracture between ecosystem and human health"—its potential for explaining this rupture within the broader landscape of meanings, relationships, political dynamics, and power disparities remains underdeveloped. Solastalgia poses a threat to ontological security (Giddens, 1991), disrupting the continuity between self-identity and the socio-natural environment: the very foundation of the feeling of being at home. The concept captures the lived experience of disconnection between individuals and the web of relationships that link them to places, eroding and reshaping their identities (Albrecht, 2005). It emerges from the absence of comfort and the disruption of one's sense of continuity with meaningful places.

Solastalgia is a concept that enables the identification of emotional processes as the link between individuals' psycho-social health and environmental health. It allows for an understanding of how phenomena such as drought, desertification, land degradation, and infertility are connected to rising levels of anxiety, depression, and suicide rates. The emotional experiences associated with solastalgia can be triggered by various factors—both "natural," such as floods, wildfires, and tornadoes, and "human-induced," such as wars, rapid institutional changes, and targeted interventions. However, as the case of global warming demonstrates, human and natural factors are so deeply intertwined and overlapping that they cannot be considered separate or merely connected. Moreover, the negative experience of solastalgia does not affect all individuals in the same way. It tends to impact most severely those social groups that live in close interdependence with their environment. Rural communities, for instance, are particularly vulnerable to the losses induced by environmental changes, as these losses directly affect their livelihoods. In contrast, members of other social groups may have alternative means to cope with such losses. Environmental disasters often lead to depression among farmers, driven by unemployment, debt, loss of trust, and fear of the future.

Solastalgia can be interpreted as a form—or as the affective dimension—of the crisis of presence in De Martino's terms. It represents a condition in which the subject loses the ability to existentially orient themselves in the world due to the negative transformation of the environment they inhabit. For De Martino, the crisis of presence occurs when an individual can no longer situate themselves within a meaningful historical and cultural trajectory. Solastalgia can thus be understood as a specific manifestation of this crisis within the context of ecological devastation and the loss of familiar landscapes. The following is precisely what solastalgia

entails: the disorientation and distress experienced when one's environment—the very space that provided stability and existential continuity—is destroyed or irreversibly altered. The loss of a familiar landscape creates a rupture in the bond between the individual and the world, generating a profound sense of estrangement and vulnerability.

Discussion and Concluding Remarks: Political Creation as Ecological Exorcism

Eco-emotions, or end-of-the-world sensibilities, can be analyzed through De Martino's concept of the crisis of presence. This perspective allows for an understanding of these emotions not only as subjective experiences but also as historical and social phenomena, revealing how environmental devastation threatens both individuals' and communities' ability to situate themselves in the world with a sense of continuity, agency, and purpose. In this sense, eco-emotions can be interpreted as symptoms of both existential and collective crises. Ecological deterioration is not merely a physical threat but also a symbolic rupture that undermines the ability to inhabit the world with security and intentionality. The fear of climate collapse paralyzes the capacity to imagine the future in terms of progress and improvement, fostering a sense of powerlessness and vulnerability.

According to De Martino, the primary risk of the crisis of presence is the loss of agency, which can manifest as passivity, existential paralysis, or cultural alienation. In the context of the ecological crisis, this translates into several problematic responses: eco-anxiety and solastalgia are often reduced to psychological states to be managed through individual coping strategies (such as therapy, mindfulness, or personal resilience). This framing obscures the fact that these emotions are symptoms of a structural crisis, preventing the formation of a collective response. The danger is that people may come to perceive climate collapse as an inevitable fate rather than as the outcome of political decisions and power structures that can be challenged and changed. It is therefore essential to cultivate and nurture forms of hope that actively shape (and prefigure) new connections between past, present, and future (Scribano, 2023).

De Martino suggests that the crisis of presence can be overcome through practices of resignification, collective rituals, and the reappropriation of historical meaning. Applying this perspective to eco-emotions reveals several possible pathways that can be interpreted as forms of reclaiming presence in a political key. Radical ecological movements and activists—such as Extinction Rebellion, Fridays for Future, or Last Generation—can be seen as attempts to transform eco-anxiety into political agency. Their symbolic actions—such as road blockades, hunger strikes, or defacing artworks—take on a ritual function, bringing the climate crisis to the center of public space and redefining the relationship between individuals (Kleres & Wettergren, 2017). Moreover, if the climate crisis threatens the sense of belonging to the world, one possible response lies in the creation of alternative communities based on ecological care and social justice. Concrete examples include communities resisting environmental devastation, such as Indigenous movements defending their lands in the Amazon or campaigns against large-scale infrastructure projects that harm ecosystems. Additionally, climate mutualism networks experiment with ecological solidarity through self-sufficiency practices, community gardening, permaculture, and participatory climate adaptation.

For De Martino, the crisis of presence is not merely a psychological issue but a historical and anthropological problem concerning how societies grapple with the fragility of human existence. He demonstrates that cultures have always sought to develop strategies to face this existential risk and argues that modernity has left a profound void, making it increasingly difficult to find meaning in historical disorientation and loss.

Bibliographical references

Albrecht, G. (2005). 'Solastalgia': A new concept in health and identity. *PAN: Philosophy Activism Nature*, (3), 41–55. https://doi.org/10.4225/03/584f410704696

Albrecht, G. A. (2019). *Earth emotions: New words for a new world*. Cornell University Press.

Albrecht, G., Sartore, L., Connor, N., Higginbotham, S., Freeman, B., Kelly, H., Stain, A., Tonna, G. and Pollard, G. (2007). Solastalgia: The distress caused by environmental change. *Australasian Psychiatry*, *15* (1), S95–S98. https://doi.org/10.1080/10398560701701288

Askland, H. H. & Bunn, M. (2018). Lived experiences of environmental change: Solastalgia, power and place. *Emotion, Space and Society*, 27, 16–22. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2018.02.003

Australian Medical Association (2019, September). *Climate change is a health emergency*. https://ama.com.au/media/climate-change-health-emergency

Averill, J. R. (1988). Disorders of emotion. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, *6*(3-4), 247-268.

Brown, A. R. (2023). "Homesick for something that's never going to be again": An exploratory study of the sociological implications of solastalgia. *Society & Natural Resources*, *36*(4), 349–365. https://doi.org/10.1080/08941920.2023.2165205

Cianconi, P., Hanife, B., Grillo, F., Lesmana, C. B. J., & Janiri, L. (2023). Eco-emotions and psychoterratic syndromes: Reshaping mental health assessment under climate change. *The Yale Journal of Biology and Medicine*, *96*(2), 211–216. https://doi.org/10.59249/EARX2427

Clayton, S. D. (2020). Climate anxiety: Psychological responses to climate change. *Journal of anxiety disorders*, *74*, article 102263. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.janxdis.2020.102263

Clayton, S., Manning, C., Krygsman, K. & Speiser, M. (2017). *Mental health and our changing climate: Impacts, implications, and guidance*. American Psychological Association and ecoAmerica.

Clayton, S. D., Pihkala, P., Wray, B. & Marks, E. (2023). Psychological and emotional responses to climate change among young people worldwide: Differences associated with gender, age, and country. *Sustainability*, *15*(4), Article 3540. https://doi.org/10.3390/su15043540

Coffey, Y., Bhullar, N., Durkin, J., Islam, M. S. & Usher, K. (2021). Understanding eco-anxiety: A systematic scoping review of current literature and identified knowledge gaps. *The Journal of Climate Change and Health*, *3*, Article 100047. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.joclim.2021.100047

Clayton, S. & Parnes, M. F. (2025). Anxiety and activism in response to climate change. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, *62*, Article 101996. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2025.101996

Cunsolo, A. & Ellis, N. R. (2018). Ecological grief as a mental health response to climate change-related loss. *Nature Climate Change*, *8*(4), 275–281. https://doi.org/10.1038/S41558-018-0092-2

Davidson, J. P. (2024). The politics of eco-anxiety: Anthropocene dread from depoliticisation to repoliticisation. *The Anthropocene Review*, *11*(2), 427–441. https://doi.org/10.1177/20530196231211854

De Martino, E. (1973). *Il mondo magico. Prolegomeni a una storia del magismo* (B. Boringhieri, Ed.), (Original work published 1948)

De Martino, E. (2005). *The Land of Remorse: A Study of Southern Italian Tarantism* (D. Zinn, Trans.). Free Association. (Original work published 1961)

De Martino, E. (2015). *Magic: A theory from the South* (D. Zinn, Trans.) Hau Books. (Original work published 1959)

De Martino, E. (2021). *Morte e pianto rituale. Dal lamento funebre antico al pianto di Maria*. P. B. Einaudi, Ed. (Original work published 1958)

De Martino, E. (2023). *The end of the world: Cultural apocalypse and transcendence* (D. Zinn, Trans.). University of Chicago Press. (Original work published 1977)

Dupuis, A. & Thorns, D. C. (1998). Home, home ownership and the search for ontological security. *The Sociological Review*, *46*(1), 24–47. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-954X.00088

Galway, L. P., Beery, T., Jones-Casey, K. & Tasala, K. (2019). Mapping the solastalgia literature: A scoping review study. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *16*(15), Article 2662. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph16152662

Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and self-identity: Self and society in the late modern age*. Stanford University Press.

Goleman, D. (2009, September 27). *The age of eco-angst.* The New York Times. https://archive.nytimes.com/opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/09/27/the-age-of-eco-angst

Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and time* (J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson, Trans.)*.* Harper Collins. (Original work published 1927)

Higginbotham, N., Connor, L., Albrecht, G., Freeman, S. & Agho, K. (2006). Validation of an environmental distress scale. *EcoHealth*, *3*, 245–254. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10393-006-0069-x

Ingold, T. (2000). *The perception of the environment: essays on livelihood, dwelling and skill*. Routledge.

Kałwak, W. & Weihgold, V. (2022). The relationality of ecological emotions: An interdisciplinary critique of individual resilience as psychology's response to the climate crisis. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *13*, Article 823620. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.823620

Kendall, P. C. & Ingram, R. E. (1989). Cognitive-behavioural perspectives: Theory and research on depression and anxiety. In P. C. Kendall, & D. Watson (Eds.), *Anxiety and depression: Distinctive and overlapping features* (pp. 27-49). Academic Press.

Kleres, J. & Wettergren, Å. (2017). Fear, hope, anger, and guilt in climate activism. *Social Movement Studies*, *16*(5), 507–519. https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2017.1344546

Lampredi, G. (2024). Solastalgia as disruption of biocultural identity. The Mount Amiata geothermal conflict. *Society & Natural Resources*, *37*(11), 1508–1527. https://doi.org/10.1080/08941920.2024.2381204

MacSuibhne, S. P. (2009). What makes "a mental Illness?" What makes "a new mental Illness"? The cases of solastalgia and hubris syndrome. *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy*, *5*(2), 210–225.

Marraffa, M. (2021). Ernesto De Martino su crisi e riscatto della presenza. *Bollettino della società filosofica italiana*, (3), 59–72.

Miceli, M. & Castelfranchi, C. (2005). Anxiety as an "epistemic" emotion: An uncertainty theory of anxiety. *Anxiety, Stress, and Coping*, *18*(4), 291–319. https://doi.org/10.1080/10615800500209324

Nielsen, R. S. & Gamborg, C. (2024). The moral potential of eco-guilt and eco-shame: Emotions that hinder or facilitate pro-environmental change? *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics*, *37*(4), Article 17. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10806-024-09938-w

Parker, I. (2007). *Revolution in psychology: Alienation to emancipation*. Pluto Press.

Pihkala, P. (2022). Toward a taxonomy of climate emotions. *Frontiers in Climate*, *3*, Article 738154. https://doi.org/10.3389/fclim.2021.738154

Ramsay, G. & Askland, H. H. (2022). Displacement as condition: A refugee, a farmer and the teleology of life. *Ethnos*, *87*(3), 600–621. https://doi.org/10.1080/00141844.2020.1804971

Remotti, F. (2022). De Martino e l'Antropocene: La fine di un mondo. *Comparative Studies in Modernism*, (21), 15–28. https://doi.org/10.13135/2281-6658/7209

Sartre, J. P. (1956). *Being and Nothingness*. Philosophical Library.

Saunders, P. & Williams, P. (1988). The constitution of the home: Towards a research agenda. *Housing Studies*, *3*(2), 81–93. https://doi.org/10.1080/02673038808720618

Scribano, A. (2023). Founding women, sociology, and hope. *The American Sociologist*, *54*(1), 36–55.