

SUMMARY

Dariusz Czaja

A PALAEOLITHIC DREAM (HOW FAR AWAY, HOW NEAR)

The present essay is an attempt to answer the fundamental question: whether communication with the sphere of the sacred, as experienced in old cultures, is still possible in the present-day period of the proliferation of 'religion of secularism' (Roberto Calasso). The above question is almost synonymous with another one: is a return to the past – especially to the most remote one, whose manifestations the present author has searched for in the Palaeolithic – still possible? In other words: have we, in our thinking and feelings, been entirely submerged in the notions and categories developed in our time, or can various voices from the past still reach us in some way?

At the empirical level, the author has turned to the following two cultural testimonies, which are reliable as far as the problems under discussion are concerned: *The Songlines* (1987), an unusual genre-bustling book by Bruce Chatwin, and the documentary film *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (2010) by Werner Herzog. This choice was determined by a tension, clearly revealed in these works, between archaic mentality, immersed in the world of myth, and the technologised present, based on the decrees of enlightened reason. *The Songlines* is a sort of recording of an initiation into a cognitive and spiritual world of the eponymous 'songlines', radically different from ours, while the *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* is a filmic account of a process of getting to know and experiencing cave paintings dating from 32 thousand years ago, by contemporary people with their present-day sensitivity.

In this paper, the author reveals in detail the cognitive strategies adopted by both of the artists ('amateurs') who, by artistic means, try to get the present-day audiences acquainted with the spiritual worlds that are utterly remote from contemporary mentality, and also to influence performatively our attitude towards our existential situation. He demonstrates that a work of art – even one originating in the past as remote as the Palaeolithic – always transcends its creation date and touches those who go out to meet it. And this could mean – this suggests – that the present is not a tightly sealed off historical formation, and that (against all the odds) it may be able to 'meet' the Palaeolithic past. Obviously, what is meant here is not a literal imitation of the religious universe of the Palaeolithic. Rather, something more subtle is intended: a peculiar *r e p e t i t i o n*, an innovative reproduction within oneself, in one's inner experience, of the spiritual gesture that had stood at the origin of that former creation. What is meant here is a conviction that the *Homo spiritualis* – whose existence had been independently discovered and named by Chatwin and Herzog – still dwells in us. In other words, it is suggested that the sources of creation and perception of the world, discovered by our predecessors

in the Upper Palaeolithic, have not entirely dried up; conversely, they are a still available, real, spiritual *o p p o r - t u n i t y* arising before us, one that should surely be given some thought.

Finally, the paper expresses a strong disapproval of the detrimental and sterile methodology of historicism, and at the same time subscribes to the study of the humanities that radically breaks up with all relics of positivist ideology. Because – contrary to inflated declarations – its spirit has been still faring well in the research practice in the humanities.