

## Review

### *Memory and Its Expressions. On Two Recent Books by Emmanuel Anati*

To philosophers, Emmanuel Anati's work is interesting for two reasons. On the one hand it has assembled an iconography of the origins of human history that covers the whole of primitive art, developing methods of deciphering that have highlighted common stylistic elements within this corpus of documents. On the other hand comparative analysis of these ancient documents lets us enter that universe of 'primordial myths' which has already been explored, via the cosmological route, by Giorgio de Santillana in his well-known book *Hamlet's Mill*. Through primitive art, we can go back to the home territory of human expression and observe the initial dynamic between oral tradition and written accounts.

It is a synthesis between these two aspects that is now attempted in two books by Anati, *La struttura elementare dell'arte* and *Lo stile come fattore diagnostico dell'arte preistorica* (Edizioni del Centro Camuno di Studi Preistorici, vols 22 and 23, 2002). The basic argument, set out in the first few pages, states that human knowledge 'has three types of memory: a primary memory, a memory of the distant past and a memory of the recent past'. Primary memory, a concept that here remains somewhat unclear, 'is always present, though not always at a conscious level': it calls up at the subconscious level those 'archetypal signs that our conscious memory can no longer define but that trigger deep associative reactions', source of, among other things, the evocative and emotional power of psychograms. The two other kinds of memory, however, 'occupy, each in turn, a pre-eminent position in the art of different periods . . . thus revealing the dominant type of mental reality'. So the distinction between these two types of memory is associated with the representation of different worlds. The mythical world of the 'distant past', peopled by supernatural, magical creatures related to cults peculiar to the various cultures (cult of the moon, the sun or the underworld), precedes historically a 'recent past' in which the memory of human events refers to the social dimension of life (hunting, battles between tribes, etc.). Though the first seems to be 'more ancient and deep-rooted than close, contingent memory', the variations in the different types of memory 'represent an essential

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thematic and stylistic element of prehistoric and tribal art, and are in turn connected to their makers' cognitive processes' (Stile, p. 8).

Anati brings out from these points a method detailing the evolution of styles in rock art through the different stages of prehistoric societies. This is the most interesting part of his work. Anati uses his own theory of the syntax of primordial art, which distinguishes three basic types of sign: *pictograms* (identifiable representations of beings or figures, even if 'behind the image there may be hidden a symbolic, allegorical, metaphorical meaning, or mythogram'); *ideograms* (repeated signs found everywhere, such as 'the dot or series of dots, the line, the circle . . . the V, the T, the S, the square, the rectangle, the triangle, the arrow, the branch, the cross, the star, the snake-shaped sign, the zigzag, the phallic sign, the sign for the vulva, the shape of lips or fingers, the grid'); and *psychograms* (unique, non-figurative signs that it is assumed 'do not represent either objects or symbols, being instead visual expressions of feelings and concepts . . . , a kind of discharge of energy, like exclamation marks'). These are combined in increasing degrees of complexity that range from *simple associations* (two graphemes) through *complex associations* (several graphemes) up to *sequences* and the *scene* (which describes 'a moment, event or action'). Thus the 'style' is defined by several elements: the works' syntactical structure; the degree of balance between pictograms, ideograms and psychograms; the presence of a dominant figure; the underlying themes of the scene (that can be summarized, for all primitive art, in the trinome sex/food/territory and in mystical, cult or shamanistic representations); material and technical characteristics; choice of location, incline and forms and the works' positioning.

In the art of the 'Early Hunters', that is, those populations 'hunting large animals without using the bow', pictograms representing animals are normally more prevalent than anthropomorphic representations. The 'scene' does not appear yet, the main subject being linked to ideograms by recurring associations (sequences) of a symbolic or metaphorical nature. The first 'psychograms' also appear. Though the animal is at the centre of this style, the image expresses a dualistic conception of the cosmos, where the human and animal worlds rub shoulders and are searching, through 'mediation' (anthropozoomorphic) figures, for ways to communicate: animals 'also embody spiritual creatures that humans must deal with in order for the hunt to be successful and in order to coexist harmoniously with nature and ensure their survival' (*Struttura*, p. 51). The representation of the animal requires the quarry's integration into a complex imaginary universe, which explains the presence of symbols of life (sexual, animistic signs, etc.) over the images of the animals. Recurring forms of association between pictograms and ideograms have been found among tribes of early hunters in very far-off regions; the main figures are surrounded by secondary subjects, an expression 'of a fundamental primary choice accompanied by a subsequent choice'. Thus thematic analysis points up 'typologies of figures, signs, graphemes, that are in some sense the art's "vocabulary"'. So, for instance, the woman/bison binome, which was first studied by André Leroi-Gourhan and seems to be associated with a 'complex conceptuality', is typical of European rock art.

On the other hand, anthropomorphic figures are central to the art of the populations of 'early gatherers', people 'whose economy was mainly based on sponta-

neously gathering fruit and vegetables'. Here 'the dominant figures represent unreal anthropomorphic creatures. The rare animal figures represent fantastic species, which are probably given totemic significance.' This style, though not widespread, possesses nevertheless 'an acute allegorical sense describing a surreal world. . . . This exuberant imagination reveals the presence of a flourishing mythology and an imaginary world rich in supernatural beings and epic events' (Stile, p. 45). There are often representations of dances or group celebrations. The scene makes its appearance, together with the sequence and with complex associations. From the Mesolithic the evolution of these gatherers and the advent of a fishing economy heighten the abstract character of the representations, which are now centred on the ideogram: 'signs possessing a numerical value are found alongside repeated associations of dots and lines . . . , as if to denote objects – perhaps snails, shells or molluscs'. Naturalistic figures 'have almost disappeared, while associations between ideograms and pictograms become more and more numerous'. The art of the gatherers, which is very much in the minority when seen over the whole of primitive and tribal expression (its main examples are in Tanzania and the Sahara, in Central America, in the Australian Kimberley and in the style called 'macroschematic' in the Spanish Levant), is nevertheless the source of some of the richest and most complex concentrations of rock art.

However, the scene as a form of representation comes into its own among the 'advanced hunters', populations 'whose economy is based on hunting small to medium-sized animals with bows'. Abstract symbolism gives way to narration centred on hunting, war, rites or the celebration of a cult; new weapons become frequent in the figuration and a new character appears with occult powers that can decide the fate of the hunt or a war, the shaman, who is especially widespread in the art of southern Africa. The style 'is *realistic-dynamic* and brings out the sense of movement . . . . Animal figures generally represent edible quarry.' Only a few traces of this style exist in Europe; they are mostly found in southern Africa among the Khoi-San.

Scenes 'from daily life, of family groups, girls chatting together, people looking after animals, dancing or playing music' are peculiar to pastoralists, whereas the art of populations with a complex agricultural and commercial economy is centred on 'human beings and the mythical beings that resemble them', prelude to the development of writing civilizations. The style becomes complex and can be divided into 'two distinct categories: one based on the scene and showing episodes from mythology or daily life . . . while the other's syntax comprises abstract signs and motifs'. The ideogram is often prominent and rock art gradually gives way to other forms of artistic creation (carved and decorated objects, masks, *tapas* . . .) that can be traded and disseminated more widely.

Expression loses its universal character and becomes increasingly 'vernacular', acquiring specific local features. The climatic changes that took place towards the end of the Pleistocene (around 10,000 BC) and marked the end of the Ice Age, caused an upheaval in the ecosystem. The predominance of small animals (rabbits, deer, wild geese) led to a fragmentation of social groups, which were gradually moving towards a family-based organization. Ancient art centred on totemic figures of gigantic animals slowly declined, leaving in its place either 'mannered' representations (epipalaeolithic) or increasingly abstract forms 'characterized by non-figurative

graphics, chiefly ideograms, sometimes psychograms'. Thus the ideogram performs a conceptual function that, for the reader able to decode its meaning, relates the figures in a sequence to one another: 'in Arizona an Indian guide was amazed that Europeans could not understand the "absolutely clear" meaning of the little dot carved near the feet of an anthropomorphic figure: that meant *walk* or *go*', a reading the guide said was 'so obvious that it did not need any explanation' (*Struttura*, p. 59). However, over and above this gradual regionalization then 'culturalization' of codes, Anati seems to distinguish them here from cognitive functions: the meaning attributed to the different ideograms may vary from one culture to another, but their 'conceptual' functions remain much more stable. The question remains open.

Anati's research here leaves the most ancient terrain and comes to an end. Comparative analysis of the different concentrations of rock art meant common cognitive, logical and communicative models could be identified; the origins of primitive art show 'a basic syntactical and grammatical homogeneity: with the same graphemes combined in a similar way, with the same associations of pictograms, ideograms and psychograms. This could be a single linguistic structure that is gradually articulated and acquires regional characteristics' (*Stile*, p. 103). Thus the presence of a basic syntax in the visual art of primitive and tribal societies brings out the presence of a universal 'human logic' and universal processes of conceptual association. This universality of modes of expression is the most ambitious – and controversial – thesis in Anati's palethnological research: ruling out the existence of direct contact between these populations in fact means postulating:

a common conceptual origin that would link us with the original archetypes of the *Sapiens* . . . . Beyond the linguistic, ethnic and religious barriers that have been created one after another, we find the fundamental elements of thought, logic and basic associations that represent the primordial conceptual framework of our mental mechanisms. (*Struttura*, pp. 74–5).

Rock art seems to express a universal primal language, articulated in visual archetypes that still today influence our culture and transmit messages on a deep level.

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Translated from the French by Jean Burrell

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