

## COMMENTARY

### DREAMTIME

Hans Peter Duerr's *Dreamtime* could best be described as the sort of book that Carlos Castaneda might have written if he were a German philosopher.\* In the Introduction Duerr mentions an encounter he had in 1963 at the Greyhound bus station in Albuquerque, New Mexico. There he met a Tewa *yerbatero* and asked him where he could find out about Hopi snake dances:

The Indian looked at me for a while, then he smiled and said that if I wanted to find out about the dances in the kivas, then the best place at a pueblo for that was the University of California at the Pueblo of Our Lady of the Angels [i.e. Los Angeles]....

This is the reason why this book is less a record of the experiences I might have gained in the kivas, at the 'navel of the world', that about what I discovered in the library at Los Angeles and other unhappy places. (pp. x-xi)

Anyone familiar with Castaneda's work could not fail to miss this allusion to Castaneda's first meeting with Don Juan as described in *The Teachings of Don Juan* (Castaneda 1968). Duerr identifies himself with Castaneda, jousts and quibbles with him throughout the book and even tries to usurp the master's authority in certain passages such as the one where he claims, on the basis of his own experimentation with *datura*, that Castaneda's reports of the drug's

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I thank Burkhard Schnepel for discussing Duerr's work with me.

\* HANS PETER DUERR, *Dreamtime: Concerning the Boundary between Wilderness and Civilization* (transl. Felicitas Goodman), Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1985 [1978]. xi, 370pp., Bibliography, Index, Plates.

effects are inaccurate.<sup>1</sup>

One obvious difference between Duerr and Castaneda is that the latter felt free to incorporate the work of others without any sort of citation.<sup>2</sup> Duerr, by contrast, lets nothing pass without a footnote. The section of notes to *Dreamtime* is almost three times as long as the text itself. For good measure this is followed by 86 pages of bibliography. At first I thought this was a tongue-in-cheek jibe at the reader or perhaps at pedantic academic colleagues. In the end they are no joke. Such a critical apparatus takes considerable time to compile, and indeed this mode of presentation had already been utilised in his earlier work *Ni Dieu - ni mètre* (1974) (text 58pp., notes 111pp., bibliography 45pp.) and has been repeated later in *Sedna* (see below) (text 261pp., notes 165pp., bibliography 68pp.). Duerr is definitely serious, although he takes after Nietzsche (whom he ranks just above Wittgenstein as his favourite philosopher) in embracing philosophy as a 'gay science'.

The example of Castaneda's enquiry into the analytical world of the Yaqui Indians, into their 'separate reality', is crucial as a forerunner to Duerr's work. His thesis in *Dreamtime* is that simple (he calls them 'archaic') societies had or still possess - in those parts of the world today where they continue to exist - elaborate conceptions of spirits, ancestors, or of gods existing *beyond* their own world. Examples would be the Australian aboriginal sense of 'the dreaming', whence the book's title, or the notion of the spirit world in shamanic societies. Not only do these supernatural realms exist in a timeless and archetypal dimension beyond everyday reality, but the societies upholding them possess numerous means, and an avid concern, for experiencing and communicating with this dream world. Furthermore, it is precisely this contact with the beyond and the wisdom gained through it which inform the here and now and provide people with an understanding of themselves:

The fence or hedge, separating the domain of the wilderness from that of culture, was not an insurmountable boundary to the archaic mind. At certain times this fence was, in fact, torn down. Those who wanted to live *consciously* within the fence, had to leave the enclosure at least once in their lives. They had to roam the forest as wolves, as 'savages'. To put it in more modern terms, they had to experience the wilderness, their *animal nature*, within themselves. For their 'cultural nature' was only one side of their being which by destiny was inextricably bound to their animal *fylgja* ['hide'], visible only to him who stepped across the dividing line, entrusting himself to his 'second sight'. (p. 64)

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<sup>1</sup> For more details on the Duerr / Castaneda relationship - the two actually met in 1982 - one may now consult Seger-Coulborn's (1983) essay on this topic in the collection of studies devoted to *Dreamtime* edited by Gehlen and Wolf (1983).

<sup>2</sup> On his expropriation of Herrigel's *Zen in the Art of Archery* (1953) see Needham's convincing documentation in *Exemplars* (1985).

This contrasts with the predicament of modern man. In industrial societies such as those of Europe or North America, the other side of the fence is denied all reality and is treated rather as a projection of our own psyches or as a misperception. Modern societies have increasingly colonized the wilderness and claimed it as part of civilization. According to Duerr, this whole tendency undermines our ability to understand ourselves. We lack perspective. Our thought is fragmentary, while that of archaic societies is holistic.

The title of the final chapter of *Dreamtime*, 'Road Bilong Science', is Duerr's own elaboration on an Australian aborigine saying ('White man got no dreaming / Him go 'nother way / White man he go different / Him got road bilong himself'). Here he states what could be taken as the summation of his argument:

In contrast to our own culture, the societies possessing what we called 'archaic' cultures have a much clearer idea about the fact that we can *be* only what we are if at the same time we are also what we are *not* and that we can only know who we are if we experience our boundaries and, as Hegel would put it, if we cross over them. (p. 125)

In this light we may comprehend the appeal which *Dreamtime* has held for 'freaks' and the so-called '*alternativer*'. I first encountered the name of Hans Peter Duerr in 1979, on a remote beach in Greece. A couple of disaffected Germans - self-confirmed 'freaks' - spoke enthusiastically of his new book *Traumzeit (Dreamtime)*. In their eyes it clearly amounted to far more than just a cross-cultural survey of shamanic practices, witchcraft beliefs and rituals involving mind-altering drugs. That summer, the book circulated from hand to hand among like-minded individuals, while back in Germany it was an unqualified success. In various editions it has sold well over 100,000 copies in German to date, and the English translation is also selling apace, especially in the United States. Not since the works of Margaret Mead has an anthropology text had such mass appeal.

At the time of its original publication, *Dreamtime* and Hans Peter Duerr were closely associated with the German 'alternative movement'. Now, with his latest book *Sedna* (see below) he has moved to a position compatible with the philosophy of the Green Party, which is in many ways the continuation of *die Alternative* into the '80s. Both books, therefore, tell us a considerable amount about the strivings of modern German society, and they should be read through this prism.

*Dreamtime* served as a charter for a generation which found society repressive and which sought to escape it by a) physically leaving it, b) cultivating a higher consciousness which could transcend it, or c) getting so stoned that one either did not notice what was bad or else was not troubled by it. In *Dreamtime*, Duerr urges us to look toward archaic societies to see people who are truly happy and at one with themselves, largely, it seems, because they are able to trip out whenever they like.

Duerr is able to assemble plentiful and, it must be said, fascinating material on dream worlds cross-culturally. Yet nowhere is there a recorded statement from one of the participants in the

rites mediating contact with these worlds which says directly, 'I am moved to make contact with the dream world so that my life will make sense, so that I will have a consciousness of myself'. Such a question would hardly make sense, granted that this dream world constitutes an integral part of their life or religion. Australian aborigines think in terms of the dreaming because that is the way they have learned to think: they do not oppose it to anything else. By the same token, dreamtime rituals in shamanic societies are what one performs at moments of illness or impending death. It is basic to one's identity as a member of the group, not indicative of emergence into a qualitatively different consciousness in respect to the rest of the group. The use of such individualist concepts as 'consciousness' (p. 74) and '[one's] own essence' (p. 42) reveal more about the preoccupations of European culture than they do about the strivings of archaic societies.

Duerr's use of ethnographic data to construct a moral parable, an object lesson for our own society, will perhaps arouse scepticism among academic anthropologists. Ethnographic data are applied to original, but nonetheless highly relativistic ends. If x or y society finds it important to transcend the boundaries of its own world, does this necessarily mean that our society should as well?

While such assertions may be open to criticism, they are more than compensated for by the wit and verve of Duerr's presentation. Analytically he is at his finest when considering the difficulties of describing a transcendental experience in language. He notes that anthropologists can be broken down into two groups: those who have experienced the beyond and cannot describe it, and those who have not and can. Looming over the discussion is Wittgenstein's famous dictum that the boundaries of one's world are defined by the limits of one's language. In many respects, Duerr's treatment of these questions grows out of his earlier and bristlier philosophical tract *Ni Dieu - ni mètre* (1974).

*Sedna oder die Leben zum Leben* (Sedna or the Love for Life), Duerr's most recent book (scheduled to appear in English translation) continues the programme of *Dreamtime* by compiling comparative ethnographic material in order to criticise aspects of modern society and other alternatives.\* In *Sedna*, the theme is that simple societies were / are much more integrated with nature. They live in harmony and sensitive balance with the natural world which they both fear and love because it provides them with the means for life. A symptom of this symbiosis with nature is the large number of rituals which these societies boast, especially rituals linked to the year and life cycles. Duerr concentrates principally on fertility rites, particularly those which involve an aspect of 'sacred marriage', that is, where a deity is represented as copulating with a human being or another divine representative of nature. This intercourse assures the benevolence of nature for another year.

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\* HANS PETER DUERR, *Sedna oder die Liebe zum Leben*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1984. 535pp., Bibliography, Index.

Whereas *Dreamtime* presents an extensive file of ethnographic instances of dream worlds, *Sedna* comprises a Frazerian mass of details on fertility rituals around the world, from the Cheyenne buffalo ceremony to the ancient Greek crane dance (*geranos*). Those who enjoy comparative ethnography will be pleased by *Sedna*, as indeed they would be by *Dreamtime*.

While *Dreamtime* may be taken, naively I think, to support the interest of alternative cultures in drugs or other means of consciousness altering which allow contact with 'other' worlds, *Sedna* is meant to buttress modern-day ecological movements which urge greater sensitivity toward the environment and a 'small-is-beautiful' attitude toward industry. On the dust jacket, it is described as a 'Green Party Philosophy'. In *Dreamtime*, the existence of dream-world rituals among simple societies serves to justify the use of drugs as a means to consciousness and integrity in the present. In *Sedna* the evidence of fertility rites in world ethnography sanctions unlimited sacred intercourse as the path toward unity with nature. Having been given sex and drugs readers will no doubt expect Duerr's next book to offer a cross-cultural survey of folk music with the message that rock and roll is the secret of life. In fact, however, he is about to publish a volume entitled *Nacktheit und Scham* (Nudity and Shame), an ethnography and cultural history of modesty. One anxiously awaits to see what inferences he will draw from such a study.

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