

# The difficulty with Wagner

Martin Holbraad (UCL) – [m.holbraad@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:m.holbraad@ucl.ac.uk)

The article is a synthetic account of some of Wagner's most luminous thoughts – and, in my humble opinion, the luminosity of his thought has no comparison. Luminosity, however, is not the same as clarity. People do often complain of Wagner that he is too difficult to follow, sometimes with an indignation borne of the feeling that he does it on purpose. In a sense he does, I will suggest, though I doubt there is malice in it. Speaking from limited (but intense) experience, my sense of him was of a tender, somewhat shy man, who delighted when the aura of his genius lifted, allowing him to connect with people. Two points, then, on why he was difficult.

First: the question falls within the scope of the present article's argument about the reciprocity of perspectives – assuming that writing and reading are both just that (twice over). If the reciprocity of perspectives is difficult to understand not because it is too complex but because it is too simple, as Wagner suggests, that goes also for Wagner's enactment of it. Thinking from within its own coordinates, Wagner writing is what he calls 'underspeech', which is itself an underspoken gloss on Daribi *porigi* – "power-speech".

Second: I believe Wagner's whole trajectory was dogged by the condition Edwin Ardener (2006), with whose thinking Wagner's has considerable affinity, ascribed to prophets. A prophesy, according to Ardener, is either incomprehensible or it is banal. The prophet speaks not of the future but from it, so until that time arrives he remains opaque, and when it does he becomes passé. There is a basic sense in which this is true of Wagner. While the fact that even his early works remain 'difficult' shows that we have yet to reach Wagner's 'now', it is also true that in certain quarters of anthropology Wagner's basic outlook as expressed all those years ago has by now become intuitive (e.g. Murray & Robbins 2002; Pitarch & Kelly in press).

But this is more than a question of Wagner's relationship to the passage of time. For Ardener's distinction between the banal (the 'has') and the incomprehensible (the 'will') maps also onto Wagner's conception of the self, with which the article ends. A recollective self that "contains everything we know or could know" exists in relation always to an anticipatory self that is "irresponsible but absolutely necessary for *action*... proactively projecting and intending oneself forward beyond the confines of order or memory to unpredict the course of events that are about to happen." Wagner's writing, then, is self-prophetic in that it acts in just this way. It adumbrates projections that serve to 'unpredict' the knowledge readers may otherwise have hoped to encounter. Being 'difficult' is how, and what, Wagner's writing operates. As such, it is immune to the passage of time: it 'contains' history much as myth does for Lévi-Strauss (1981). And, as with myth too (Viveiros de Castro 2007), it does not die because, as far as we can *know*, it never lived either – even as it *did*.

## References

Ardener, Edwin. 2006. *The Voice of Prophecy and Other Essays*. Oxford & New York: Berghahn Books

Lévi-Strauss, Claude. 1981. *The Naked Man – Volume 4 of the Mythologiques*. Translated by John and Doreen Waightman. Chicago: University of Chicago Press

Murray, David, and Joel Robbins. 2002. “Reinventing *The Invention of Culture*”. Special Section of *Social Analysis* 46(1): 1-91.

Pitarch, Pedro, and José Antonio Kelly. In press. *The Cultures of Invention: The Anthropology of Roy Wagner in the Americas*. Canon Pyon: Sean Kingston Publishing

Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo. 2007. “The crystal forest: Notes on the ontology of Amazonian spirits.” *Inner Asia* 9(2): 153-72.