

Philosophy of Prehistoric Painting and Cinema: Werner Herzog's *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*

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Werner Herzog's *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (2010) is a 3D documentary film about the Chauvet-Pont d'Arc Cave on the Ardèche River in Southern France.¹ Discovered by cave explorers Jean-Marie Chauvet, Éliette Brunel, and Christian Hillaire in 1994 "a few days before Christmas", the cave contains the oldest known paintings on earth, "paintings dating back some 32,000 years". (Recent radio carbon-dating sets some of the works to 36,000 years ago.) 20,000 years ago a massive rockslide covered the entrance to the cave sealing and protecting the interior, which is "about 1,300 feet long." A "pristine" and "perfect time capsule" of prehistoric culture, the cave is "one of the greatest discoveries in human culture." So upon its discovery, authorities immediately resealed the entrance with a "steel door like a bank vault." Only a handful of scientists may enter and only under the strictest conditions. But the French Minister of Culture granted unprecedented access to Herzog and a small crew to film the cave for their documentary, *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*.

For any viewer expecting to be pleasantly charmed by primitive stick figures inelegantly scratched upon the interior walls of the cave, those expectations are immediately dashed with the breathtakingly gorgeous Panel of the Horses in the Hillaire Chamber-North. As Former Head of Scientific Research of Chauvet Cave Jean Clottes declares, "It's one of the great works of art in the world." Herzog similarly comments on the incomparable importance of the paintings: "It was not a primitive beginning or a slow evolution, it rather burst onto the scene like a sudden explosive event. It is as if the modern human soul had awakened here." In an interview with *Archaeology Magazine* Herzog reiterates this point: "No doubt in my heart that this is art, and it's some of the greatest that the human race ever created, period. It can't get any better, and it hasn't gotten much better. That's a great mystery."² A century ago, T. S. Eliot in

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“Tradition and Individual Talent” (1919) similarly claimed that “art never improves” but springs into being fully formed, and appears in this form even as far back as the “rock drawing of the Magdalenian draughtsmen.”³ The Magdalenian Era in Southern France dates from 17,000 to 12,000 years ago, which is at least 20,000 years after the Chauvet Cave paintings.

But if art does not improve through history, and appears fully formed in the Chauvet Cave, neither does the art of the cave appear to change in style over thousands of years. As Herzog comments:

“By comparing all the paintings in the cave, it seems certain that the horses of this panel were created by one single individual. But in the immediate vicinity of the horses there are figures of animals overlapping with each other. The striking point here is that, in cases like this, after carbon-dating, there are strong indications that some overlapping figures were drawn almost five thousand years apart.”

From the perspective of the present, this difference in modes of temporal self-understanding appears to be unfathomable. As Herzog comments: “The sequence and duration of time is unimaginable for us today. We are locked in history, and they were not.” The people of the region appear to inhabit a more cyclical and almost otherworldly dimension of time, even as they occupy the very height of artistic genius. Herzog asks, “Will we ever be able to understand the vision of the artists across such an abyss of time?”

But despite this “abyss of time” the cave artists also seem to speak directly to the modern mind. “The painters of the cave seem to speak to us from a familiar yet distant universe.” The world of the cave is “familiar” partly because of the freshness and brilliance of the paintings, but also and perhaps especially because the paintings appear to have been created to be viewed as if they were moving. Herzog casts artificial light upon a panel and comments.

“For these Paleolithic painters the play of light and shadows from their torches could possibly have looked something like this. For them, the animals perhaps appeared moving, living. We should note that the artist painted this bison with eight legs, suggesting movement, almost a form of proto-cinema. The walls themselves are not flat, but have their own three-dimensional dynamic, their own movement, which was utilized by the artists. In the upper left corner, another multi-legged animal, and the rhino to the right seems also to have the illusion of movement, like frames in an animated film.”

The walls of the cave appear to function like screens for proto-cinematic animated films, but unlike modern rectangular two-dimensional film screens, the walls of the cave have their own three-dimensional waves and rifts and turns. The artists scraped and smoothed these waved walls at eye level, with close attention to their natural movements, and then painted with mastery of line and shading vivid three-dimensional animals in motion. Herzog filmed *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* in 3D precisely to capture this three-dimensional effect of the animals and the walls, which also renders the film

a three-dimensional film about three-dimensional prehistorical films. In the Panel of the Horses the horses appear to be running with their necks extended and manes aloft, while a bison is painted with eight legs instead of four to convey motion. In the End Chamber a rhinoceros appears with a long horn, and two further horns of the same shape and length appear layered in front of it, and four of these horns appear layered just behind it. Seen in the flickering firelight the rhinoceros may have appeared to run and run thrust its horn, or perhaps the horns evoked the scene of a stampede. The experience of the films may have been something like a 3D animated motion picture or even a prehistoric version of virtual reality.

In the Venus Pendant in the End Chamber a Minotaur appears embracing a woman. "This is the only partial representation of a human in the entire cave," notes Herzog. Archaeologist Dominique Baffier, who serves as Curator of Chauvet Cave, also comments on the image: "And here we are, some 30,000 years later, with a myth that has endured until our days. We can also find this association of female and bull in Picasso's drawings of the Minotaur and the woman." The twisting and turning and tunneling corridors, and the several hidden chambers of the dark cave concealing the Minotaur, may have also rendered the cave a vast underground cinematic labyrinth.

No less strange than the presence of the Minotaur is the absence of figures of human beings, for one may reasonably have expected to see a painting of a man hunting a bison or a reindeer. But perhaps human shadows interacted with the moving pictures, even as the animals interacted with one another upon the walls. As Herzog comments in *Archaeology*, "There is a row of fires which was used for illumination, but placed in a way that when you are close to the Panel of the Horses your own shadow becomes a part of the image, apparently as an integral part of the staging." Perhaps children sat on bison fur skins and observed a shadow of a man approaching the horses, or stalking bison or reindeer, while a sage woman narrated the action in voice-over, and an old man played flute, like the flute found near the cave and shown and played in the film. If others with heavy wooden instruments pounded the ground to mimic fleeing horses or bison or reindeer, then these sounds would have been felt in the ground and heard echoing through the cave as a vast resonating chamber, deepening the immersive cinematic and virtual reality experience.

The most haunting and beautiful panel in the cave is the Panel of the Lions, found in the End Chamber. In *Archaeology* Herzog comments:

"The lions in particular are just incredible because a whole group of lions is looking, is stalking something. The intensity of their gaze, all looking exactly at something, focusing on something. You don't know exactly on what they focus and it has an intensity of art, of depiction, which is just awesome."

At the top of the Panel of the Lions, two lion's heads (with their necks) seem to extend from the base of one lion's neck. One of these lion's muzzles points to the ground, and the other points forward. Even if these two lion's heads belong to two separate lions, in the firelight they could have appeared as one lion lifting its head and

sighting its prey, with a kind of motion analogous to the motion of the eight-legged bison. Another and more striking form of motion appears at the back of the Panel of the Lions, and here too the motion appears to be perspectival. All of the lions in the panel appear in profile, all moving in the same direction, hunting, and many appear layered one over another to convey motion, so that for any lion only one eye appears (appropriately). But the two most beautiful and detailed and otherwise most realistic lions, seen at the back of the panel (and possibly the one beneath them), appear with two eyes each. The combination of a profile image of one lion and two eyes creates an opposition within the image, so that the lion would appear to look forward toward its prey, and then outward toward the viewer. In the same chamber of the Panel of the Lions, the End Chamber, a bison appears with its head turned to sight the viewer, as if sighting a hunter, though seemingly without the appearance of animation. But here in the Panel of the Lions the two lions appear to sight the viewer by slightly turning their heads, and the animation of shifting perspective appears to be achieved entirely by distortion of the eyes. Following Baffier's insight into the relationship between the cave Minotaur and Picasso, the image of the deranged eyes of the two lions may also recall Picasso's *Portrait of Dora Maar*, or *Maya With Her Doll*, or *Guernica*. Only here, in the cave, the distortion of the eyes would be seen in firelight and the lions would shift their gaze.



Lions often hunt in pairs, maintaining one another in their sights, while stalking their prey, much like the two lions at the back of the Panel of the Lions. A reindeer turning its head toward its tail to sight two lions behind it would see not two eyes but four and know the danger, while a reindeer seeing only one eye of a lion would know far greater safety. Any Paleolithic man of the region sighting two sets of lion's eyes would also know grave danger, while the same man seeing two lions in profile and one eye for each lion would know far greater safety. In the cave, however, the viewer seeing the two lions in profile, and then the same lions with two eyes each, might experience an alternation of safety and danger. This seeming alternation of the perspectives of the lions also suggests a philosophical dimension of the cave films, and the people of the region. The cave viewers in viewing their films would have employed concepts of appearance and reality, and apparently possibility in the form of subjunctive conditionality as they projected the action of the animals in time within their imaginations, as well as somaesthetic appreciation of the paradoxical emotional experience of real fear at unreal things. But perhaps most importantly the viewers would have possessed philosophical insight into the reflexive (or self-conscious) quality of their animated films. For if the viewers saw moving pictures of lions turning their heads to see and know they were being watched, the moving pictures would seem to break with their own representationalism, effectively challenging that representationalism, and raising questions about the very nature of the medium of film within the cave, such as What is the nature of an animated cave film, after all? And if shadows of men and women reacted to the alternating gaze of the lions, then the cave films may have achieved an additional layer of philosophical complexity and self-consciousness in an already highly complex form of art. While art appears to spring into being fully formed in the Chauvet Cave over 30,000 years ago in the form of a synthesis of painting and cinema, philosophy itself also appears to spring into being at this time and to take its earliest form in prehistoric cinema.

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Notes

Photograph by Arnaud Frich (<http://archeologie.culture.fr/chauvet/en>).

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² Zach Zorich, *Archaeology*, vol. 64, no. 2, March/April 2011.

³ T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and Individual Talent," *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1975), 39.