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"But the Image Wants Danger": Georges Bataille, Werner Herzog, and Poetical Response to Paleoart

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Abstract

The high-profile theatrical release of Werner Herzog's feature-length documentary film *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* in Spring 2011 invites reflection on the way in which paleoart is and has been engaged with at a cultural level. By Herzog's own account, the film falls on the side of poetry, rather than science. This article considers what is at stake in a "poetical" engagement with the scientific findings concerning paleoart and argues that such approaches harbor value for humanity's understanding of its own history. To this end, Herzog's work is brought into dialogue with Georges Bataille's writing on paleoart, in particular, Lascaux—a precedent of poetical engagement.

Keywords: Georges Bataille, Werner Herzog, Chauvet cave, Lascaux Cave, *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, poetical methodologies, disciplinary limits, lens-based media

Introduction

The high-profile theatrical release of Werner Herzog's feature-length documentary film *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* in Spring 2011 invites reflection on the way in which paleoart is and has been engaged with at a cultural level.[1] A three-dimensional (3D), high-definition(HD) video production, documenting a recent visit to the Chauvet cave, France, Herzog's film presents paleoart as a cinematic spectacle. Moreover, it makes a strong contribution to the reinvigoration of widespread public interest in paleoart generated by the discovery of the Chauvet cave in 1994, and which had been firmly established by the discovery of Lascaux in 1940. Consequently, we must now consider it common knowledge that the Western tradition of art is at least 35,000 years old. By Herzog's own account, the film falls on the side of poetry, rather than science. This article considers what is at stake in such a "poetical" engagement with the scientific findings concerning paleoart.

The precedent for this poetical engagement can be found in Georges Bataille's writing on paleoart, in particular his work concerning the cave art at Lascaux (Bataille 1955, see also Bataille 2005). This article explores the many resonances between Bataille and Herzog to argue that poetical engagements with paleoart —such as theirs—harbor value for humanity's understanding of its own history. Poetical and scientific methods of investigation will be considered equal and complementary, with both contributing to a richer if always partial understanding of paleoart. The significance of alternative modes of inquiry is plain in an exciting era where myriad discoveries about paleoart and the emergence of human culture and consciousness are being hotly debated, embraced, and contested. What some might consider a crisis in the discipline, the authors see as an index of a staggering effort to do justice to our own heritage and contemporary situation.

Paleoart is simultaneously an inspiring and traumatic area of study for a wide range of disciplines. It signposts the blurring of disciplinary borders, most significantly between the arts and the sciences, and, at different times and in different ways, can shake hallowed models of human existence. And yet, it simultaneously calls for a wide range of illuminating methodological approaches. Herzog's film frames these diverse and potentially incompatible positions, thereby sustaining several hypotheses within its overall structure. Here, we see the disciplines of archaeology, geology, anthropology, topography, perfumery, filmmaking, and—fundamentally—graphic art, combined in an attempt to generate a deeper understanding not only of the paleoart in question, but of the ongoing construction of the ontology of humanity—an ontology founded upon and maintained by an opposition to the perceived chaotic and mindless forces of nature.

Herzog's film is an endorsed contribution to paleoart study; the endorsement being underwritten by the French Ministry of Culture and embodied by those figures closely involved with the Chauvet site and the film itself, including Jean Clottes, Dominique Baffier, Jean-Michel Geneste, Carole Fritz, and Wulf Hein. Although this article as a whole is concerned with assessing non-standard contributions to paleoart study, it is worth sketching out the position *Cave*

of Forgotten Dreams occupies in this regard. The film certainly operates at a populist level. However, Herzog's authorial stamp rebuffs accusations of triviality. Furthermore, the footage of the cave, if not the film as a whole, is offered as a reasonable surrogate to an actual visit to the site: a possibility denied the vast majority of paleoart scholars, let alone the rest of humanity.

Bataille's work has likewise been recognized within the archaeological community for its potential to "trigger and clarify our thinking on [paleoart]" despite being "flawed by inadequate knowledge of the archeological data" (Lorblanchet 2007: 98). Michel Lorblanchet's criticism is apposite, however it should be stressed that Bataille—who enjoyed direct exchange with many major figures associated with archaeology and anthropology, including Abbé Henri Breuil—was writing over half a century ago, when knowledge of the field was less extensive and nuanced than it is today. Lorblanchet makes clear that the value of Bataille resides elsewhere than in the rehearsal of the "facts"; Bataille is a catalyst—a position construed here as being "poetical" in character.

Herzog's (b. 1942) prolific fifty-year career has consistently straddled documentary and fiction forms. Indeed, Herzog persistently challenges the distinction between the two, seeking to demonstrate in and through his work that "there are deeper strata of truth in cinema, and [that] there is such a thing as poetic, ecstatic truth" (Cronin 2002: 301). Thus it comes as no shock that the director explicitly approached *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* with "a sense of poetry," claiming, "I am not responsible to total fact, but to poetry" (Herzog 2011).

Herzog: The Cinema, the Cave

Filmed over mere days in Spring 2010, the film documents one of the annual scientific visits to Chauvet cave (Figure 1). To be permitted access to the cave, Herzog struck a deal with the French Minister of Culture whereby the film could be used for pedagogical purposes. The HD 3D equipment and heatless lights used by the filmmakers satisfied the preservation demands placed on the cave art, thereby allowing the film to be made, albeit within a series of strict time slots, further limited—in terms of points of view—by all visitors to the cave having to remain on narrow aluminum gangways.

Cave of Forgotten Dreams follows the format of many of Herzog's documentaries: interview, fly-on-the-wall, and (aerial) landscape material are elegantly interwoven; the filmmaking process is laid bare; the director provides an authorial voiceover; Herzog appears as a central character as a consequence of the previous two factors; and a rousing soundtrack (by Ernst Reijseger) is given a prominent position. Significantly, the film addresses its subject matter (Chauvet cave/paleoart) as much as it does the experiences of some of the people closest to it. Put differently, Herzog pursues the subject matter through its human protectors or conduits.

If, as Eric Ames (2009: 61) observes, "the idea of sacred landscape has emerged as a major *topos* of Herzog's work [and] one that he has mainly explored in the documentary mode," then *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* must stand as exemplary. Ames elaborates,

> Landscape pictures serve not merely to project the filmmaker's subjectivity

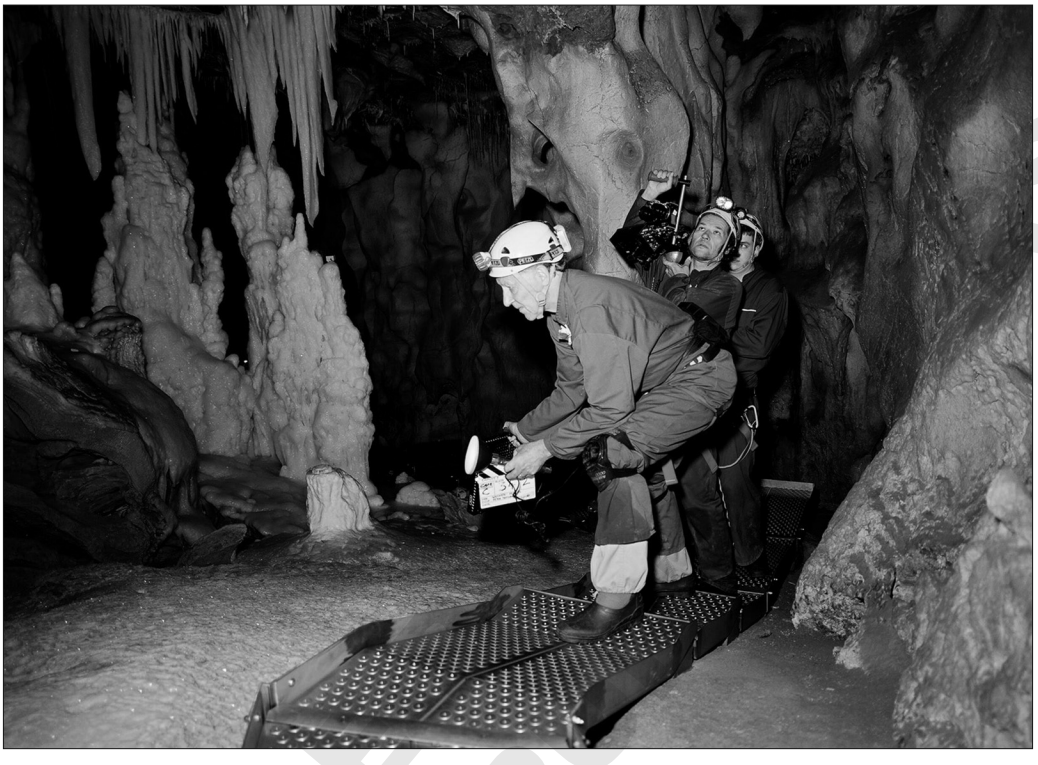

Fig 1 Herzog at work on his film inside the Chauvet cave. © Picturehouse Entertainment. Image reproduced with permission.

> into space. They position the spectator vis-à-vis the depicted world in ways that foreground the production of affective experience and its mediation by image-making technology. (ibid.: 65)

Ames thus finds in landscape a unifying touchstone for the various aspects of Herzog's practice. Notable is Ames' suggestion that Herzog's films simultaneously encourage audiences to respond emotionally; to analyze that response (as they experience it); and to understand this process in relation to a technology-infused cultural arena. In *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* an obvious example of this process is the way in which the aerial footage is used. It provides information about the landscape, firmly situates the film (and its focus) in a part of the world, and is often accompanied by Herzog's monologue. We see the aerial camera's traversal of the locale prior to the filmmakers' entry into the cave. As the film progresses, the aerial sequences become more pregnant, a stark contrast to the journeys into the dark, claustrophobic cave. The film explicitly makes clear the mutuality of the two for humanity; suggesting the rather Bataillian hypothesis that we cannot reach aesthetic heights without enduring

earthbound, even subterranean experience and perhaps peril (the Chauvet cave exudes toxic gases). At the close of the film the aerial camera turns toward the film crew. As it draws near we realize that it is attached to some kind of radio-controlled plane or helicopter, judging by the presence of a large radio-controller in the hands of a young man. As it lands, the digital image is briefly disrupted (i.e. damaged), exposing the mechanism underpinning the film's realism.

Herzog has stressed,

> My films are … anthropological only in as much as they try to explore the human condition at this particular time on this planet … I work with human beings because the way they function in different cultural groups interests me … My goal is always to find out more about man himself, and film is my means. According to its nature, film does not have so much to do with reality as it does with our collective dreams. It chronicles our state of mind. The purpose is to record and guide, as chroniclers did in past centuries. (Cronin 2002: 213–14)

According to Herzog, the deeper human truth he seeks in and through cinema "can be reached only through fabrication and imagination and stylization" (ibid.: 301), and he speaks openly about the extent to which he uses these strategies in his documentaries.

Herzog's disinclination to distinguish between fiction and documentary—"for me, the boundary … simply does not exist" (ibid.: 240)—was also shared by Jean Rouch:

> For me, as an ethnographer and filmmaker, there is almost no boundary between documentary film and films of fiction. The cinema, the art of the double, is already a transition from the real world to the imaginary world, and ethnography, the science of thought systems of others, is a permanent crossing point from one conceptual universe to another; acrobatic gymnastics where losing one's footing is the least of the risks. (Rouch 2003: 185)

The meeting of Herzog and the archeologists throws up an interesting question regarding the fiction-documentary dynamic. For *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* Herzog has surrounded himself with authorities, specialists. The impression this presents is that, whatever the degree of Herzog's intervention, his subjects' field of research, and therefore their professional mode of address, while rooted in the concrete traces of emergent humanity, is already marked by imagination, stylization, and, in its widest sense, fabrication (consider the reconstructed archaic weapons and musical instruments).

With this in mind, it is important to point out that Lorblanchet's assessment of Bataille (discussed above) holds equally for Herzog: *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* functions more valuably to "trigger and clarify" our conception of paleoart than as a representative "factual" account of the origins of human culture. Indeed, the factual view promulgated by Herzog and his archaeological collaborators is one that, while currently dominant, is looking increasingly untenable, namely: modern humanity appeared suddenly through advanced art forms—in harness with anatomical and cognitive developments—in Europe some 35,000 years ago. Regarding the Chauvet cave art, Herzog has commented, "This is the modern human

soul emerging vigorously, almost in an explosive event" (Hoffman 2011: 30). Official Chauvet literature (Clottes 2003 [2001]) corroborates this view directly in its title *La Grotte Chauvet, l'art des origines* (translated as *Return to Chauvet Cave: Excavating the Birthplace of Art: The First Full Report*). Accounts committed to considering a global and temporally wider range of evidence (such as Bednarik 2003—and responses 2008; Wendt 1976; Lorblanchet 2007) reveal the extent to which the Eurocentric account of paleoart is a product of the disciplinary conventions of the Western sciences, rather than of an objective assessment of the evidence. This is, of course, an important (and contested) matter. The high praise Herzog's film has received is doubtless due in part to its contribution to populist pedagogy or so-called general knowledge. Its viewers would not be wrong for feeling better informed. However, the advance made by *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (and the official Chauvet literature before it) is to substitute the 17,000-year-old "miracle of Lascaux" (Bataille) for the 35,000-year-old, and no less spectacular, Chauvet cave, and in so doing, remain within the bounds of the questionable, outdated Eurocentric view. This is unfortunate, in that Herzog is an ideal figure to challenge that model. Unfortunately, this "mis-education" of the public extends beyond interpretation-presented-as-fact to some basic errors, thankfully marginally placed (in the press, rather than in the film itself). *The Guardian* newspaper's five-star review of the film inaccurately informed readers that the Chauvet artworks were created by Neanderthals (Bradshaw 2011: 13). Elsewhere, Herzog corrects this view with the equally erroneous comment that, "Neanderthal men never created culture: there were no burials" (Wrigley 2011: 28).

These issues indicate a need to integrate paleoart into our wider cultural framework with more care. Bednarik calls for "systematic uncertainty" in archaeology in place of the chain of ever-supplanted interpretive "certainties" (Bednarik 2006: 88). In terms of archaeological thinking, both within the wider cultural sphere and the discipline itself, systematic uncertainty would involve sensitivity toward the possibility of new discoveries, thus new models/accounts, awareness of the timescales involved in human (cultural) evolution, and awareness of the shifting forms of conscious experience underpinning that process. On one hand, this must be informed by empirical data from across the sciences, on the other, by purely qualitative, imaginative, artistic, poetic meditations that draw out what sits, as it were, between the scientific lines. Humanity deserves a rigorous *sense* of its past that keeps pace with its present development. So while the above criticisms could be used to roundly dismiss or attack Herzog's film, they may also be used to throw into relief its poetical contribution to paleoart study (Figure 2).

Bataille: Lascaux and Mythical Anthropology

Georges Bataille (1897–1962) sits among a number of figures who have elaborated upon certain proposals traceable to the modernist artistic avant-garde by applying them to scholarly activity and in so doing have helped to define the current scope of the humanities. From 1928 until his death, Bataille published and lectured on a wide range of topics mapping out what he described as

Fig 2 A promotional montage in which Herzog appears to stand in front of a panel of Chauvet cave art. © Picturehouse Entertainment. Image reproduced with permission.

a "paradoxical philosophy" (Bataille 1986 [1958?]: 106) engaged in identifying essential constants in the human condition and, in the same move, "declassifying" those constants as well as his own system. Bataille states his case succinctly when he writes, regarding *l'inform* (formless), one of his signature terms, "*formless* is … a term serving to declassify, requiring in general that every thing should have a form" (Bataille et al. 1995: 51). For Bataille, belief in the advancement of knowledge entailed a simultaneous advance toward "non-knowledge" (Bataille 2001b). Put differently, Bataille saw a necessity for an openly acknowledged paradox within his model of thought.

Bataille pioneered an "anti-museographic and anti-institutional form of knowledge … that would render visible that vision which [modern scientific and social discourses] repress" (ffrench 1999: 119). One of the (early) ways in which he approached this was to imagine a brutal exploitation of scientific anthropology by a mythical anthropology. Mythical anthropology would take revenge on science which had "blindly empt[ied] the universe of its human content … enslav[ing] science through the use of weapons borrowed from it" (Bataille 1985: 81) and putting it to work "like a beast of burden, to accomplish ends which are not its own" (ibid.: 80). For Bataille, this was necessary in order to offer "a description of human life that goes back to the origins" (ibid.: 79), unlike 'impotent theories of prehistory … [that] almost always kill [themselves] or timidly prostrate [themselves] before science' (ibid.: 80).

Although Bataille's view retained its basic premise, this brash approach developed into something more subtle and tactful (a consequence, we might speculate, of his contact with members of the scientific community). This less confrontational approach is on display in Bataille's high-brow coffee-table study, *Prehistoric Painting: Lascaux; or, the Birth of Art* (published in 1955 as the first installment of Editions Skira's series The Great Centuries of Painting) and in the recent collection of his shorter texts on prehistoric art and culture (Bataille 2005).

As Steven Ungar (1990: 247) argues, Bataille's methodology nevertheless

remained designed to provoke. In the Lascaux book specifically,

> What begins as a [philosophical] meditation on the origin of art soon engages questions involving specific forms of cultural expression that increasingly fall under the aegis of the social sciences. The resulting inquiry oversteps … conventional [disciplinary] limits. (ibid.: 247)

For Ungar, Bataille's strategy reflects a desire to articulate

> [His] awareness that culture is continually invented and reinvented not merely by an accretion of understanding, but because the very claim to knowledge from which such understanding derives is itself the product of systems of meaning and representation. *Lascaux* illustrates that for Bataille, the origin of art—wherever we locate it in space, time, and history—is always sought and invented in a present that remains open to ongoing supplement and disclosure. (ibid.: 262)

While Ungar lucidly unpacks the deeper dynamics of Bataille's book, he does not tie his findings into its more obvious—but no less complex—structure and position pertaining to its engagement with the discipline of archaeology. The book consistently and deftly combines documentary material (color photographs and maps) and descriptions with Bataille's distinctive views. In his preface, Bataille (1955: unpag.) states, "with regard to the archaeological data, I have simply used what prehistorians have established at the price of an immense labor that has always called for patience—and often genius." Compare this with the following remark made by Bataille later in the book: "I seem to find something missing in the greater part of the writings that deal with prehistoric times. Prehistorians inspect documentations accumulated with immense patience and labor…But, obedient to the single method that befits a specialized discipline, they confine their thoughts to reflections upon the evidence in hand" (Bataille 1955: 31). Both these remarks make clear that Bataille's study is positioned *after* and *at a remove* from the archaeological findings. On one hand, it repeats the archaeological account for the layperson, on the other, it supplements and critiques that account, directing thought (as Ungar shows) in other directions. *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* presents the same dual perspective.

Correspondences

That Bataille's book and Herzog's film were also produced in similar ways points to procedural aspects shaping the marketability of and discourses surrounding these poetical responses to paleoart. Just as Herzog's film presents Chauvet cave in 3D video, Bataille's book was the first to present the Lascaux cave art in color. Bataille's publisher, Albert Skira, remarks in his foreword,

> A good many difficulties were encountered in the course of producing this book. There were nights spent working underground in the intense light cast by projectors trained upon [the] magical world [of Lascaux] whose details and color nuances, invisible under the subdued lighting installed for visitors, sprang out vividly in all their pristine beauty. We would rest during the day … at Montignac … and every evening, after the regular visiting hours were over, we

> would go back up to Lascaux and start in again. Any number of times we came away feeling that at last our work was over. But each time, having developed our plates and checked the results, we decided to make a fresh start, for what the eye sees is not necessarily what the camera registers. The truth is that the Lascaux paintings mysteriously shift and change … [They] literally defy the camera. (Bataille 1955: unpag.)

Skira's account—which resonates with the production process of *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, evident in the film and Herzog's subsequent remarks—raises a number of points: both projects are presented by their makers as being demanding privileges conducted on behalf of humanity that present the sites in ways blocked to ordinary visitors and as the products of intense, well-planned and executed activity, the success of which relied significantly on the presence of talented technicians. This is an opportunity for the filmmaker, photographer, or writer to step out of the shadow of the archaeologist: if only for a moment (or series of moments), there is an endorsed perceptual shift from artifact to commodity that will be retained in the end product. The poster for *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, depicting the lone figure of Herzog casting torchlight on one of the adorned walls of the Chauvet cave, illustrates this well.

The preceding remarks serve not as criticisms, but to highlight the way in which both "poetical" projects hardly seem to stem from traditional conceptions of poetical circumstance. They are, at least partially, commercial, technologically grounded group efforts. Where then, we might ask, is the poetry?

Herzog's conception of poetical practice has been discussed above. Here is Bataille's:

> Poetry is only a detour: through it I escape the world of discourse, in other words the natural world (of objects); through it I enter a sort of tomb in which the infinity of possibilities is born from the death of the logical world. The logical world dies, bringing forth the riches of poetry, but the possibilities evoked are unreal, the death of the real world is unreal … [However,] all of the real is valueless and all value is unreal … The poetic is the middle term: it is the unknown masked with brilliant colours and with the appearance of existence. (Bataille 1998: 218)

For Bataille, poetry provides the means to renew and share with others our relationship with the phenomenal world, our sense of its limits, and the structures of our own inner being. This process he traces back to the earliest art. From his vantage point in 1955 he writes, "At Lascaux, new-born mankind arose for the first time to measure the extent of its inner, its secret wealth: its power to strive after the impossible" (Bataille 1955: 15). This marks a high, closing point in what Bataille (2005: 57–80) calls "the passage from animal to man," the crux of which lies in the way "prehistoric man depicted animals in fascinating and naturalistic images" (2005: 60) while reserving a "crude and deforming art … for the representation of the human form" (ibid.: 40) and/or "'conceal[ing] his unique, distinguishing features beneath those of the animal that he was not … Partially divulge[ing] his human body … [giving] himself an animal head" (ibid.: 60). (While the evidence suggests that these practices were far from universal, Bataille has certainly

noticed something of value.) Perhaps reflecting, above all, his own understanding of art, Bataille repeats the value of poetry in this process:

> What these admirable frescos proclaim with a youthful vigor is not only that the man who painted them ceased being an animal by painting them but that he stopped being an animal by giving the animal, and not himself, a poetic image that seduces us and seems sovereign. (ibid.: 60)

According to this schema, the emergence of human culture follows a process of "othering." Hominids must have found themselves increasingly "other" to a world of "wild life," and to each *other* (those from *other* social groups). Defining what they were *not* seems to have preceded defining what they *were*. Or rather, humanity had yet to present itself as the primary subject of its own attention, its

> art was informed not by tradition, but by nature … The norm came from *outside* … The work of art was … not yoked by the methods and manners which might have determined its form from *within*. (Bataille 1955: 129)

And yet, the sense that the world was already an object *for* humanity seems also to have been present in this "otherness." Indeed, in the above remark we should not read Bataille as denying inner expression, rather that he regards it as being unimpeded during this period. Bataille (2005: 145) observes: "If the first 500,000 years of human life saw human beings in opposition to animals, it was a slow change, a change of infinite discretion." Following Bataille, and bearing in mind the earliest evidence for symbolic activity (Bednarik 2003, 2008), we might speculate that this "change of infinite discretion" took the form of a drifting in and out of an ever-intensifying interpersonal poetic consciousness attending survival. Inventing a world and cosmos, as we know, is far from straightforward.

Herzog and Bataille share similar views about the universe and nature, which may be seen to inform their respective notions of poetry. In Bataille's words,

> Nature herself is violent … There is in nature and there subsists in man a movement which always exceeds the bounds, that can never be anything but partially reduced to order … The universe that bears us along answers no purpose that reason defines. (Bataille 2001a [1957]: 40)

While in Herzog's words,

> The Universe is not harmonious and beautiful, it is dangerous and hostile … Yet the more we know, the more fascinating it gets. There's an inherent curiosity in the human race to understand the Universe that's around us. That distinguishes us from the cow in the field. (Hoffman 2011: 30)

In the perspective Bataille and Herzog present, poetry stands as a key to establishing human value and reason.

It is also clear that Bataille and Herzog do not have "verse" in mind. Rather they propose what may be called a "poetical methodology"—but one that cannot be theorized away through a "poetics." How then should we approach such poetical methodologies? And what is their relationship

to the scientific disciplines they associate themselves with? Firstly, the proposals made here trade on the principle that:

> The coalescence of a research paradigm creates the possibility of an accumulation of knowledge and thus the phenomenon of scholarly progress. What is less often recognized, for the human sciences at least, is that any consolidation of a paradigm depends on the exclusion or relegation to the status of "art" of those elements of the changing discipline that call the credentials of the discipline itself into question, those research practices that … work at the edges of disorder. (Clifford 1988: 135)

Paleoart study is something of a special case in that, as Jean-Luc Nancy (1996 [1994]: 70) remarks (in the wake of Bataille), "what men subsequently will name with a word that means knowledge and know-how, *tekhnē* or *ars*, is at man's beginning the total of his science and his consciousness. (But will he ever have ceased beginning again?)." In other words, here, art and science (to say nothing of religion, sexuality, or daily life) are indistinguishable. One of the aims of paleoart study, then, is to imagine how the archaic "imager" "proceeds neither at random nor according to a project. His hand advances into a void, hollowed out at that very instant" (Nancy 1996 [1994]: 75). In credit to Herzog and his archaeological collaborators, this endeavor is frequently evoked in *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*.

Poetical Methodologies

The word poetry has its roots in the Greek *poiēsis*. Aristotle distinguishes *poiēsis* (making) from *praxis* (doing) thus: "making aims at an end distinct from the act of making, whereas in doing, the end cannot be other than the act itself" (quoted in Balaban 1990: 185). *Tekhnē* is the skill that attends *poiēsis*. Hans Robert Jauss (1982) underlines the term's political dimension:

> In the Greek tradition, all producing (*poiēsis*) remains subordinate to practical action (*praxis*). As the activity of slaves who are rigorously excluded from the exercise of the virtues, *poiēsis* occupies the lowest rank in social life. (1982: 591)

Jauss sees the emergence of poetry as it is currently understood as

> a process during which aesthetic practice freed itself step by step from restrictions imposed on productive activity … If one understands this process as the realization of the idea of creative man, it is principally art which actualizes this idea … In the competition between technical and artistic creation, [*poiēsis*] explicitly claims to be a production of a special kind. It is in the history of the concepts *labor* and *work* that the restrictions become most palpable. (1982: 591)

Jauss's schema rightly proceeds from the etymological root of *poiēsis*. However, the terms of *poiēsis* outlined by both Jauss and Aristotle can also aid our thinking through Bataille's conception of the archaic relationship between work and art: "Man, in his status of the worker, of the technician, is by and large reduced to the size of the *means* whose *end* is the animal being, never subject to work, never technically skilled" (Bataille 1955: 127). Man thus works—as a "poet"—to achieve a momentary state of animal grace. Animal being, aligned with

praxis, would be the impossible state, at once sub- and sur-human. It is worth noting that in the relationship Bataille sets up between scientific anthropology and mythical anthropology (discussed above) it would be the former that is aligned with *poiēsis*, the latter with animality/*praxis*.

The *poiēsis-praxis* opposition has been broken down over time—at least in terms of its common usage. A synthesis of the original and current applications of the terms suggests the proposal that they designate two dimensions of the same process: *poiēsis* referring to methodology, *praxis* to its physical application.

Documentary filmmaker and British advocate of surrealism Humphrey Jennings's (1995 [1985]: xxxv) model of "imaginative history" can inform our conception of poetical methodology. Jennings (1907–1950) sets his imaginative history apart from political, mechanical, social and, economic histories "because the Imagination is a function of man whose traces are more delicate to handle than the facts and events and ideas of which history is usually constructed." He considers this function of man active in religion, the arts, and poetry in particular, although it is "not necessarily confined to them or present in all their manifestations." Key for Jennings, as for Bataille and Herzog, is the possibility that the products of the imagination

> represent human experience. They are the record of mental events. Events of the heart. They are facts (the historian's kind of facts) which have been passed through the feelings and the mind of an individual. (1995 [1985]: xxxvi)

At the base of Jennings's model lies a juxtaposition of the figures of the poet and the (historian) scientist, not as a means to "invalidate the analytical method" of the latter, but to place the two on equal footings: for Jennings, poetry provides a "different method of tackling, of presenting the same material, the same conflicts" as science, the strength of the former lying in its ability to "present … the sense of complexity—the type of pattern and so the type of interactions" attending a given topic (Jennings 1995 [1985]: xxxvi). Jennings pushes the binarism further, holding that "the poets are the guardians of the Animistic system, the scientists of the Materialist system" (ibid.: xvi). As Jennings acknowledges, this proposal originates in remarks made by Edward Burnett Tyler in 1871 that "the deepest of all religious schisms [is] that which divides Animism from Materialism" (ibid.: 326). Jennings appears to have understood Animism as Tyler did: "to be drawing in its outposts, and concentrating itself on [its] first and main position, the doctrine of the human soul" (ibid.: 325). The conceptual twist we can recognize in Jennings's model, as well as in Bataille and Herzog, is the attempt to reunite Animism and Materialism in such a way that they retain some or all of their subsequently differentiated characteristics. Consider the following from Bataille:

> I am keen to speak as a materialist, I feel in agreement with everything that is materialist, on the condition that one does not believe that, in order to be a materialist, one is forced to suppress what is all the same richness: those ecstatic or religious emotions. (1998: 224)

Tyler's stark division of Animism and Materialism thus emerges as a discursive aid rather than an existential given. In 1800, William Wordsworth remarked that the Poet could stand at the side of the "Man of Science," responsible for "carrying sensation into the midst of the objects of … science itself" (quoted in Jennings 1995 [1985]: 113)—an apt description of Bataille's and Herzog's efforts.

Again, paleoart appears as a special case, given that the object of the science is "art." The poet brings "sensation," "feeling" to the art, positively contaminating the perceived impersonality or objectivity of science. But has the "sensation" ever been absent from the art? Yes and no. During the period these works remained hidden from humanity, the sensation and the art were severed from one another. But the severance was not clean, traces remained on both sides (the art: in our cognition, our culture; the sensation: in the sealed cave). Science has charged itself with reuniting the two. Our fascination toward archaic artworks surely comes from this feeling of reconnection which must be understood in relation to the time during which the sensation and the art were separated and yet had remained physically, terrestrially, close to each other. Of course, this is no different to recognition of the old age of our total environment. But these traces of humanity hold special significance as they belong not to a natural order that would seem to proceed with or without us, but to our own founding interventions.

More to the point, the exclusion of (contemporary) artistic, poetical practices from a field devoted to (past) artistic, poetical practices would seem to be pure folly. Archaeology is not blind to this. The faithful reconstruction of the Lascaux artworks (in Lascaux II, a simulacrum of the cave), the presence of artist-scientists in the Chauvet teams and the computer mapping of the latter cave all represent valuable interdisciplinary efforts. Likewise, so-called cognitive archaeology (see, for example, Renfrew 1982; Whitley 1992; Beach 1998) makes room for similar interactions, at the no less important conceptual level.

Adopting a liminal, poetical stance toward paleoart attunes us to the need to refute, as André Leroi-Gourhan (1993 [1964]: 364) does, the argument that art emerged as and remains a non-utilitarian practice. If art is one of the fundamental characteristics by which we define ourselves as humans and has given rise to many complex forms of communication and thought that contribute massively to human society and its values it is impossible to state when art would ever have been non-utilitarian.

Time and Space

Without knowing the long-term outcomes, the paleoartists helped set the terms by which we would arrive at what we now call the fine arts and media arts. Lens-based media, such as photography, cinema, and stereoscopy, cannot help but flaunt their status as composites of art, science, and technology. Herzog's film literally throws into perceived relief the confrontation between archaic and contemporary documentary art and technology (the implications of which are discussed below), with Herzog equating, as others have, the cave art with "proto-cinema." In doing so, Herzog seems to miss out on tapping the history of stereoscopic technology—widely recognized as a key proto-cinematic device

whose cultural presence Thomas Elsaesser (2011) has rightly highlighted as being continuous since its invention by Sir Charles Wheatstone in 1833. In 1859, another pioneer of stereoscopy, Oliver Wendall Holmes, described photography as "the most audacious, remote, improbable, incredible … triumph of human ingenuity" (Holmes 1980 [1859]: 73). He felt that "[Certain] inventions force themselves upon us to the full extent of their significance," thereby requiring no "poetical or rhetorical amplification" (ibid.: 73). Photography, however, "*the mirror with a memory*, and especially that application of it which has given us the wonders of the stereoscope, is not so easily, completely, universally recognized in all the immensity of its applications and suggestions" (ibid.: 74). Consequently, it is in need of some "poetical or rhetorical amplification." To this end, Holmes ventures, "By means of [the stereoscope's] two different views of an object, the mind, as it were, *feels round it* and gets an idea of its solidity. We clasp an object with our eyes … *Form is henceforth divorced from matter*" (ibid.: 75/80). Like Herzog, Holmes clearly sought a deeper truth in and through his medium. More significantly, Holmes's description might also stand as a description of the kind of mental efforts made by paleoartists—what else is the deft rendering of animal figures onto the contours of cave walls? Such consideration productively engages with the field of media archaeology, the concern of which, in Siegfried Zielinski's (2008–9: 65) words, lies in "research into the deep time interplay between art, science and technology." Under the banner of "anarchaeology," and informed generally by many figures including Bataille and Foucault, Zielinski "do[es] not seek the old in the new, but … [the] new in the old" (2006 [2002]: 28). By focusing on "the possible … reality, [that] which has actually happened, becomes a shadow by comparison" (ibid.: 28). Contrary as Zielinski's approach might appear, it can provide a valuable way to think through many of the issues that concern us here, most notably in terms of the modes of consciousness and temporalities at work. Of current interest in terms of media archaeology is also Pauline Stakelon's account of *c.* 1900 uses of "movement and narrative in topological stereoview collections of Europe" (Stakelon 2010: 407) and her conclusion that film, photography, and stereoscopy "continually reconstruct the idea of what it means to travel through the world" (ibid.: 420).

Graphic paleoart, indeed any art, exists as much in time as it does in space. What confounds us is that we can only engage with it in our own time. Herzog's audiovisual confrontation with the Chauvet site both telescopes and microscopes these temporalities. It does so through "media delay" (the film's general release came one year after it was shot). This reminds us of the question of access—how many of us will ever experience the aura of Chauvet or Lascaux? And of those more readily accessible sites or artifacts—how many will penetrate "tourist time" to reach the special time set aside for scientists and other experts? The simple fact is that for the majority of humanity, direct access to its own archaic heritage is denied—for the greater good of humanity. For archaeologists and lay people (although to different degrees), paleoart is as much an idea as it is a material record. Second-order objects (objects about objects), such as books, photographs,

and films, are taken as points of contact and as evidence. The bottom line is that knowledge about our own heritage changes consciousness, thought, curricula, social policy. How we let that progress depends on our creativity. In our consciousness of paleoart we recognize much and little. It asks us to grasp both extreme difference and extreme similarity, perhaps even of an unfamiliar kind. Its indecipherability might be painful, taunting us that we have lost full access to a part of our own cognitive, psychological, social, and cultural history. The later Chauvet paleoartists were, it seems, in equal contact with their past: in the cave, we are told, are works dating from periods thousands of years apart. A novel like Alan Garner's *Red Shift* (1973) makes an admirable, *poetical* effort to unpack these temporalities.

A Hall of Mirrors

Towards the end of *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* we are presented with footage of cave art exposed to passing light—perhaps mimicking the effect of torchlight—set to Reijseger's modern score performed on modern instruments. Here the *tekhnē* of the film itself must be considered as entirely separate to the *tekhnē* of the cave art. The film produces its affect through the modes and forms specific to it, in accordance with its own history, and in relation to Herzog's directorial intent. The archaic artworks produce their own affect through this process of mimesis, filtered through the techniques used to record and present them. They are understood through the disciplines of art or science, or a combination of the two. That is to say, they are always reconstructed in accordance with contemporary technological innovations and assimilated into current models of thought. In short, the elusive birth of art and of humanity sought in the cave art is always lost amid the conditions of a system of knowledge which—as we have discovered—cannot support an absolute mythology or science of our origins. The cave art, therefore, contributes to and confuses our own understanding, our current epistemologies, and the disciplinary separations they entail. Whatever origin we search for in scientific or physiological terms can only be ratified with regard to a secondary system of understanding which must be considered to be drastically different from that in which the archaic artworks were produced: a system that to some extent predetermines the parameters through which its origin may be seen to occur.

Just as paleoart cannot be understood with regard to the source epistemology of which it was a product, so too does it complicate any retrospective ontological narrative we might construct. Once religious models are replaced by their scientific and institutional equivalents, it may be that the origin of humanity can be found in the darkness of the Chauvet or Lascaux caves. It is the presence of art, recognizable to us in accordance with our current understanding of the term, which elicits this feeling. Not something, we might say, to do with the works themselves, but something implicit within them. It is plausible that this inherent, invisible, silent quality is what we now call poetry/*poiēsis*. For Bataille, as stated above, poetry is a detour; an escape from the world of objects, a negation—through reconstruction—of the real which is itself unreal. It is, however, in this unreality, in this non-objective realm that we recognize

ourselves. Paleoart presents concrete signifiers of that which has no object: human interiority, human consciousness. At least this is how we interpret them; this is the interpretation they seem to encourage. Although we cannot say what they mean, we know they have meaning. And this has to be sufficient.

Indeed, for Herzog, whose films eschew didacticism in favor of a lyrical openness toward their material, this conception of poetry is most apt. As stated above, Herzog considers his films to chronicle a state of mind, to refer more to a collective dreamscape than to the conditions of material reality. In this way, his films point outside of themselves, as does cave art, to an interior psychic referent for which they are highly structured, aestheticized signs. Following both Herzog's and Bataille's lead, we can propose that poetry is extreme artifice; human experience sublimated through aesthetic contrivance. Terrestrial observation mingles with abstract experience through imaginative transposition. This generates endless environments that may be elaborately mapped onto the terrestrial world one on top of the other by human society. In this sense poetry *is* experience, made communicable through a process of externalization, through the process of making, of *tekhnē*. It is perhaps through this feature of the Chauvet artworks that we most forcefully recognize our own fully-fledged humanity within them. They represent the discursive and self-reflective aspect of human existence which Bataille theorizes as "play" and formulates as an activity or set of activities differentiated from work or labor in that they serve no immediate material end (although this is their sovereign function, but not in the sense of "art for art's sake"). It is this characteristic that supposedly separates Neanderthal from *Homo sapiens*, and which, at its assumed point of emergence, inaugurates the era of the anthropologically modern human being. Bataille proposes that "Never, prior to our discovery of Lascaux, were we able to obtain a reflection of that interior life of which art—and art alone—assumes the communication, and of which, in its living warmth, it is, if not the imperishable expression, at least the enduring survival" (Bataille 1955: 12). For Bataille, Lascaux is the material proof of our internal animism.

Cave of Forgotten Dreams forms, therefore, a relation with the cave art that is an example of *mise en abyme*. Herzog's film becomes a mirror held up to the cave art, just as the cave art reflects the terms of the film, and, by extension, the sense of poetry sought by Herzog through the filmmaking process. In short, the cave art and the film reflect the deeper, ecstatic, poetic truth Herzog speaks of. Both also refer to time past and an unattainable place. Thus, the truth is also lost in the resulting "hall of mirrors" where we find an infinity of reflections that our eyes can never exhaust. It is this uncertainty, this liminality, however, which characterizes the realm to which both the film and the cave art aspire, the referent for which they are the fixed signs. If a truth is revealed, it is mutable, fleeting. It is a human truth, one that cannot be categorized or decoded, but one that, nevertheless, somehow perseveres through digital stereoscopic technology as much as it does through art on the walls of caves. It is recognizable yet implacable, essential yet spectral.

Crocodiles and Conclusions

The quotation "but the image wants danger" (Bataille 2005: 182) used in the title of this article is taken from Bataille's notes for a film (written *c.* Winter 1952–3). The image in question is defined multiply: "Greek nude male, a youth or bearded / prehistoric man represented by himself / erotic / already sacrificial / … already murder / … animal … gods / Egyptian gods" (ibid.: 182). Herzog's film concludes—or rather does not conclude—with footage of albino crocodiles that live near Chauvet cave. Shortly before the film was released, several of the crocodiles apparently escaped and one is still at large. Herzog believes that these creatures, far older than humanity, will soon "reach Chauvet Cave and penetrate it" (Wrigley 2011: 30). Yet this closing sequence is, in Herzog's (2011) own words, "science-fiction." The presence of these monstrous, ancient creatures both aggrandizes and belittles the bold achievements made in Chauvet cave. Nature had perfected its most fearsome hunters long before human beings learnt how to trace the shapes of animals on cave walls, long before they delineated the contours of their otherness to the natural world. Herzog's fantastical epilogue destabilizes all that has preceded it. Whether the crocodiles ever enter the cave or not, the metaphor remains, and is potent: this prehistoric monster is a threat to the order—to any order—we might seek to impose both on the natural world and through the construction of our own history. It is a reminder of the uniquely human oscillation, perhaps felt most acutely by the paleoartists, between reverence for, and mastery of nature.

Accompanying the crocodile footage, Herzog's plaintive voiceover suggests to us: "nothing is real, nothing is certain. Do we really meet, or is it a reflection?" Here Herzog appears to acknowledge the role his film plays with regard to the cave art. Perhaps it reveals nothing of the people who created it, but rather reflects an image of our contemporary selves that calls for interrogation, for constant reformulation—a view endorsed by the philosophically inclined paleoanthropologist, Leroi-Gourhan:

> The only real significance of prehistory, whether resting on religious metaphysics or materialist dialectics, is that it situates the peoples of the future in their present as well as their most distant past. Were this not so, prehistory would be, explicitly or implicitly, no more than the substitution of a scientific myth for the countless religious myths that dispose of the problem of our origin in a few words; or else it might be seen as a kind of epic poem narrating the prestigious adventures of heroes who were not humans. (Leroi-Gourhan 1993 [1964]: 4)

The final image of *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* is a negative handprint, which, more than any other single graphic work on the walls of the cave, illustrates our relation to their creators: we can know them only through the traces that signify both their enduring presence and their ineluctable absence. If we choose not to solve the problem of our origin in "a few words" the problem becomes manifold and increasingly complex. The arts and the sciences are required to reintegrate in search of that which, properly speaking, lies outside of their respective remits, that is, just beyond

the borders of that which we can claim to know. Poetical methodologies, seeking, as they do, esoteric and fleeting truths, cannot produce the empirical evidence upon which scientific fact depends. Yet it is this very poetical inclination, itself oblique and evanescent, that signifies, more than all else, our humanity, and purportedly separates us from the other tool-wielding hominids to whom history has not been so reverent, so kind.

Note

1 A pre-release screening of Herzog's film took place at the Anatomy Theatre and Museum, King's College London, as part of a series of public events which channeled some of the general interest in paleoart generated by Herzog's project down artistic, "poetical" and thought-provoking avenues. Curated by Dr Catalin Partenie and Professor Alan Read and entitled *Caves*, the program of events ran from February 14–17, 2011. Full details are online at: http://atm.kcl.ac.uk/series/2011/caves.

Bataille scholar Professor Patrick ffrench spoke on Marguerite Duras's film *Les mains negatives* (*Negative Hands*, 1979), which could be construed as another example of poetical engagement with paleoart. The authors would like to thank Professor ffrench for his thoughts on the topic discussed in the present article and for alerting them to the *Caves* program.

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