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CAVE ART THEORY

The earliest theory of the meaning of Upper Paleolithic art—based on portable art discovered in the 1860s and 70s—was that it had no meaning. It was doodling, play, “art for art’s sake.” This view reflected the anti-clericalism of such scholars as Gabriel de Mortillet who refused to believe that ancient people had any religion. Like nearly all of the theories that have followed it, it was a blanket theory, and one that distracted attention from details in the actual work, envisioning the artist as a kind of ancient gentleman (a gender bias that was hardly noticed for a hundred years), and one with lots of time on his hands, whiling away the hours. I will come back to this now discredited theory, as it has recently been re-envisioned by Maxine Sheets-Johnstone in a way that deserves our attention.

With the authentication of prehistoric art at the turn of the 20th century, and a dawning awareness of the often elaborate compositions involving animals and signs in caves, it was becoming harder to believe that primeval art was completely meaningless. Not only was this art complex, but it was often placed in remote and nearly inaccessible areas that suggested initiations, rituals, and other magical motives. Other evidence for genuine antiquity made use of any or all of the following: parts of paintings covered over and sealed by layers of ancient calcite; objects or paintings covered by archeological deposits; depiction of long-extinct species; stylistic affinities with antlers and other organic surviving materials from which radiocarbon estimates (beginning in the 1950s) could be obtained.

That prehistoric art might have been produced as part of a ritual hunting magic was supported by Spencer and Gillen’s work (1899) on the life of the Australian aboriginal Arunta said to perform ceremonies in order to multiply numbers of animals. Such ceremonies and sacrifices involved drawing the likeness of animals in the sand or on rocks. Fraser’s *The Golden Bough* (1890) argued that before there was religion, there was magic which attempted to manipulate the material world. The notion that like produces like was the basis of “sympathetic magic,” which gave further support to a Western understanding of Arunta sand and rock rituals. The prehistorian Salomon Reinach’s position, based on both Arunta ethnography and *The Golden Bough*, was that the only way to know why cave dwellers painted and sculpted was to ask the same questions of living primitives. This position, based on the assumption that ethnographic parallels

provide meaningful information about the past, has continued to proliferate through the 20th century, achieving its most popularized form here in the cross-cultural mapping of Joseph Campbell in his tetralogy *The Masks of God* along with the best-selling *Hero with a Thousand Faces*.

Hunting magic theory enabled scholars to understand lines and v-shapes on painted animals as spears and wounds—that is, wounding the animal on the wall was done to insure good luck in the hunt. Claviforms became clubs, penniforms arrows, and tectiforms huts, traps, or soul houses. The Abbé Henri Breuil, who wielded enormous influence in the understanding of primeval and primitive art for many decades, adopted the hunting magic theory because he felt that Upper Paleolithic art expressed hunting anxiety about the availability of game. Such also explained, from Breuil's viewpoint, pregnant horses: artists were expressing the tribe's hope that animals would reproduce and flourish to provide food. Regarding the human sphere, fertility magic theory, yoked to hunting magic, proposed that the so-called "Venus statuettes" were pregnant and that sexual imagery (cupules, vulvas, ithyphallic male figures etc) indicated a preoccupation with conception and childbirth.

There are many problems with both hunting and fertility magic theories. Here are some of the most basic: there are no verifiable hunting scenes in Upper Paleolithic art. Very few of the animals depicted are wounded: Paul Bahn claims about 3 to 4 %, while R. Dale Guthrie claims more than 10% but some of his data is questionable. And we are not sure that all spears signs, for example, are spears: Alexander Marshack, using infra-red filters, claims that some so-called spears are actually grasses. The animals depicted do not correspond in any predictable way to species eaten. The most striking discrepancy in this regard concerns reindeer which abound in middens (at Lascaux, for example, reindeer account for 90% of the bones, while only one is found engraved in the Apse), but are rarely depicted. At Altamira, peopled seemed to eat red deer, but drew bison.

However, in this regard, we must also take into consideration that large mammals like mammoths were probably slaughtered at kill sites, with only the meat brought to camp, thus there is no record of their bones in middens at the edge of camps. And it is possible that those who painted certain images were not the people who slaughtered the animals whose bones are found in the middens.

In regard to problems with fertility magic: we now know that Upper Paleolithic

hunting and gathering peoples inhabited much richer and varied environments than do modern hunter-gatherers like the Canadian Inuit. Herds of horses, reindeer, woolly mammoth, woolly rhinoceroses, bison, deer, elk, megaloceroses, and aurochs inhabited Western Europe in great numbers. Such availability throws into question Breuil's assumption that anxiety over game was the driving force behind portable and parietal art. Because art depicting copulation is very rare, and depictions of childbirth (with one controversial possible exception, from Laussel) completely non-existent, and because the presence of pregnancy is not verifiable (the mares could have been well-fed, the "Venus statuettes" based on obese women), fertility anxiety seems, on the basis on the visual evidence, a very minor preoccupation.

In *Shamanism: The Beginnings of Art* (1967), Andreas Lommel proposed that prehistoric and primitive art is largely based on the outgrowth of shamanistic practice. For Lommel, the shaman is the central figure in what he calls "hunting societies," a composite magician-priest, medicine-man, and healer, who, acting under inner compulsion, enters into trance states in which he has an amazing array of psychic experiences, including flights to paradise and to the underworld, battles with ancestor shamans, the escorting of the recently dead to their final resting place, the rescue of lost souls, and the penetration of the source of animal vitality. In these senses and others he acts as a kind of magnetized psychic quagmire for his group, and often, especially as a novice, experiences symbolic destruction (his body cut up and cooked, his organs torn out and replaced with solidified light).

While the shaman may be the best candidate that we presently have as an ur-prototype of the self-creative artistic personality, all evidence that Upper Paleolithic art is shamanistic in practice rests on cross-cultural comparisons with relatively recent historical hunting societies in Siberia, Greenland, Alaska, Australia, and North and South America. Lommel's evidence, in fact, when strictly focused on Upper Paleolithic art itself, is meager. He proposes parallels between man-animal representations, hybrid or grotesque figures, men and animals fighting, and drawings in X-ray style. However, he actually produces no examples of Upper Paleolithic X-ray style, and as for men and animals fighting, he simplistically states that the Lascaux "Shaft" scene with the ithyphallic man and the disemboweled bison represents a fight between two shamans, one of whom has

assumed the form of a bison.

I must acknowledge that it is very tempting, in trying to trace the figure of the poet (or the artist, at large) back through shamanism, to sense his primordial presence in a small but potent series of compositions involving mysteriously wounded or killed male figures as well as bison- or bird-headed males, some of which appear to be in magical conjunction with animals. While I do not agree with Lommel that the disemboweled bison is another shaman, I am willing to accord magical significance to this composition, to see the bird-headed man as in a trance and definitely not, in this context, representative of a hunter (who would wear a bird mask to hunt a bison, let alone the rhinoceros in the left side of the composition?). So while I agree that the traces of something that looks like shamanism can be discerned in Upper Paleolithic art, I do not believe that shamanism can be confirmed as a general theory. Given our present awareness that Upper Paleolithic art did not have a single beginning and a single line of development and disappearance, I think that the era of seeking single theories to explain this art is over.

After Breuil, the dominating theorist was André Leori-Gourhan, whose range of research, at once quite complex and very simple, is set forth, in English translation, in *Treasures of Prehistoric Art* (1967). Breuil's tack was to look at the animals on the cave walls as isolated figures, presumably done on a one by one basis. Leroi-Gourhan intuited that not only whole galleries might contain an all-over compositional motif, but that each decorated cave might represent a compositional lay-out permeating all of Upper Paleolithic cave art. He decided that the animals were not to be taken literally (as in the hunting/fertility hypotheses) but that they were symbols that participated in a complementary/oppositional dualism, tied to male and female principles (he later, in the 1980s, rejected the sexual component, but kept the primary dualism). Using a computer, he studied the contents of sixty-six caves (not all of which he visited—thus he was sometimes piggyback on early observers whose research would have been questionable by 1960s standards), identifying the species, counting them, noting what was next to what, and in what location of the cave. Because he found some evidence that bison images might be considered to be interchangeable with images of women (on the underside of a Pech Merle wall), he decided that bison (and aurochs and mammoths) represented the female principle, and that horses (along with ibexes and stags) represented the male. Since bison and horses

are the most often depicted animals, and since, according to Leroi-Gourhan's research, they appeared mostly in the middle portions of the caves, they became the centerpiece, as it were, of his evolving system, with less-depicted animals located at the peripheries of the central zones, and seldom-depicted animals (bears, felines, rhinoceroses) located in the most remote areas.

Seeing a relationship between triangles, ovals, and vulvas, he determined that all enclosure-oriented signs were female (variations on the vulva) and that their complementary male signs consisted of lines (variation on the phallus). Dots remained indeterminate, as did seldom-depicted animals. Leroi-Gourhan formulated an "ideal sanctuary" in which the female category was central, the male category semi-central and peripheral. The image of female centrality encroached upon as well as guarded by a male periphery has deep mythological resonance and is sympathetic with theories that posit matriarchal organizations—about which there is no solid evidence—for ancient cultures which were destroyed by patriarchal invasions.

Before offering some criticisms of Leroi-Gourhan's system, I want to acknowledge that regardless of its limitations and inconsistencies, it has made everyone involved in the deep European past look much more carefully at its art than before. Just by countering his proposals, new aspects of what can be hypothesized as a multiphasic and regionally-specific art come to the fore.

I became suspicious of Leroi-Gourhan's layouts while visiting Combarelles in the 1970s. On the basis of his map of the cave in *Treasures of Prehistoric Art*, one is given the strong impression that there are roughly a hundred or so figures and signs there. However, the Combarelles guide and care-taker, Claude Archambeau, pointed out that Leroi-Gourhan's map left out a number of figures and was designed to highlight material that supported his over-all theory (as of 1997, Archambeau claimed there are over six hundred engravings in the cave).

Leroi-Gourhan himself acknowledged, regarding his map of Lascaux, that he had not taken into consideration the hundreds of engravings in the cave (presented in the 1979 book, *Lascaux inconnu*). He also noted that he had never visited the three "Volp" caves in the Pyrenées: Les Trois Frères, Le Tuc d'Audoubert, and Enlène—the first two of which are of major import—because he had bad relations with the Begouen family on whose property the three caves are to be found.

Furthermore, his survey was based only sixty-six caves and rock shelters. When he did his research, over one hundred and thirty caves were known in France alone, not counting Cantabrian Spain, Central Europe, and Russia. Many caves with only a few paintings or engravings which would not have supported the “ideal sanctuary” concept are left out of the survey. In short, the combination of selecting only certain materials within his limited choice of sites seriously undermines Leroi-Gourhan’s theories. There are other problems as well. Caves are all different and their shapes and sizes vary considerably. It is often impossible to determine what the central zone is, relative to peripheral areas. In some cases, the original, or Upper Paleolithic, entrance is either unknown or not the same as the entrance discovered in the 20th century (thus throwing into question locations of first and last decorated areas, the exactness of which are essential to Leroi-Gourhan’s schema).

Alexander Marshack has also used a technological approach to cave research. He believes that microscopic photography of primarily portable objects enables him to read the mechanics, micromorphology, and ballistic traces of incisions. On the basis of excellent photographs and blow-ups (which enable the nearly unreadable to be read), he has worked out a thesis that grants intentionality to notches on bones that were in the past considered to be random doodlings. In *The Roots of Civilization* (1972), he argued that there is a conformity, on portable objects, between notch series and lunar phase cycles. This is a fascinating proposal which implies that a single, formal notational system existed in the Upper Paleolithic. In Marshack’s view such a system would have enabled people to calculate the passage of time, to predict the seasons, and to juxtapose carved images of plants and creatures according to the time of their mutual appearance. Marshack calls this process “time-factoring.” After carefully observing an engraved bone from La Marche with a horse head, an apparently pregnant mare, and many notational marks, he writes:

The Mare drops its foal in the spring after an eleven month gestation and so the mare may be a seasonal image. The associated darts and signs may then represent rites, sacrifices or acts of participation related to the time of foaling. The combination of naturalistic “art,” sequences of darts and signs, and a lunar notation hints at a complex time-factored symbolism and mythology.

At work here is almost sheer guesswork based on a primary assumption that we are dealing with people who think like we do. The seasonal message that Marshack extracts from the composition is based on counting the notches (some of which he acknowledges are lost on a broken portion of the bone!), and coming up with a count which he interprets as “a possible lunar phasing” which “gives a perfect tally for 7 ½ months.” To make a solid case for lunar phases (or for that matter, menstrual periods, which he does not address), Marshack would have to demonstrate repeated sets of 28 to 31 notches, representing lunar months. Such groups of notches within the “7 ½ month” period do appear, but many other groups do too, with much larger and much smaller numbers.

Like Breuil, Lommel, and Leroi-Gourhan, Marshack (on the basis of portable art alone) has come up with a provocative if very questionable theory (that often disappears into circling generalizations in his writing), to interpret, as he puts it, “the roots of civilization.” At this time, it makes sense to suggest that there are undoubtedly traces of hunting and fertility magic, shamanism, and intentional notation based on observation in what has been rediscovered of what is left of the image-making from this 25,000 year continuum. Recent improved and solid carbon 14 dating has revealed that Cougnac and Pech Merle, for example, may have a multiphasic decoration period spanning 10,000 years. It is possible that one set of images came from a people involved in hunting magic while another set (or an addition to an earlier composition) was made by people who used the cave for shamanic initiation and who had developed a notational system which associated female shamanistic rites with menstrual cycling. Images may be layered with differing world views even in a single composition.

In her essay, “On the Origin and Significance of Paleolithic Cave Art,” in *The Roots of Thinking* (1990), Maxine Sheets-Johnstone argues that all theoretical approaches to the significance of Upper Paleolithic cave art fail to take into consideration the experienced character of the caves themselves and what might have moved someone to make marks on their interior surfaces. Sheets-Johnstone believes that merely being inside a cave was a magical experience for Cro-Magnon people.

“To engrave or paint on the inside surface of a cave is precisely to enter actively into the potential magic of insides. To draw on the inside walls of a cave is to be part of

the potential transforming powers of insides.” In other words, she believes that a flurry of lines on a cave wall need not have been connected to hunting or fertility or shamanism or time-factoring to be experienced as magical. She proposes that merely to draw a line on a stone wall was to animate a surface and that it was through such animation that the wonder of enveloping forms was discovered. For Sheets-Johnstone, an oval has impact as an oval, or a closed enclosure, and before it could represent a vulva or a wound, it must have generated a kind of aesthetic pleasure based just on being an enclosed shape, implying interiority, in the cave’s enclosed space.

Her thinking here seems to me to be a sophisticated and thoughtful re-envisioning of the old “art for art’s sake” theories of the late 19th century. Sheets-Johnstone’s ideas fill in an important gap between the unadorned cave wall and the various theories that have been brought forth to account for why someone might draw or scratch there. She has grounded what might be called a “line for line’s sake” approach in the physical, kinesthetic sensation of participating in an “insideness.” She sees cave art as an extension of ancestral stone tool-making, in as much as both were generated by manual concepts, the results of “handiwork,” and the creation of spacial forms. Reflecting on her work, it occurred to me that a person standing before a cave wall with a burin-like object was in a position to redirect the tool initially involved in destruction/survival to an involvement in creation: the pleasure of inscribing a wandering or containing line. The wall itself becomes, in a sense, a tool-extension of the burin redirecting gouging and tearing (as in the case of hides) to a lateral glide.

A line in itself, especially an engraved one that cuts into a surface, creates a kind of *suspended insideness*, somewhat thwarted in that the stone resists direct penetration and by its often large and semi-flat surface encourages an off-shoot exploration. It reminds me of the thrill of ice-skating, of cutting into a surface and then horizontally extending the cut to form figures that with every drive and swoop not only contain their own integrity but imply an ongoing, even endless, charge of creative integrity.

Of course, we will never know why someone made the first line on a cave wall. Such a move might have been stimulated by cave bear claw scrapes, interesting cracks and fissures, or someone with a dirty hand slipping and grabbing for the wall.

At the point the engraver associates a curving line with an animal’s dorsal line, and is then in a position to add a head and legs, or to draw a specific animal marked by

certain signs, Sheets-Johnstone's ideas become less relevant. At the point we can say that a curved enclosure is probably a vulva (or a tooth or horse hoof), then all of the theories I have briefly discussed become worthy of consideration. There must have been many occasions in which the drawer of a wandering line saw, in his mind's eye, a bison's dorsal line and was thunderstruck by the sensation that the bison which was not there *was there*.

In bringing up the matter of the experienced character of the caves themselves, Sheets-Johnstone touches on a possibility that to my knowledge has not been discussed in studies of Upper Paleolithic cave art: that becoming part of the potential transforming power of insides might involve experiencing the cave insides as a living power whose presence the visitor might feel compelled to depict. While such activity evokes shamanism and may merge with shamanism in certain instances, it does not require shamanistic "credentials," as it were, to experience a force outside of oneself in an isolational situation—especially one of prolonged time. The difference might be that unlike the uninitiated visitor, the shaman would have a mythic system to draw upon in explaining to himself and to others the power structure he is participating in.

In her essay, "Sensory Isolation and Vision Quest" (1980), Barbara MacLeod reports that a shaman's assistant—an uninitiated apprentice, I gather—left alone for some hours in the Balank'anche cave (near the Maya temple complex, Chichen-Itza, in the Yucatan peninsula) reported feeling a chill, after which "four times he heard noises from the water, as if something was moving on its surface. The shaman told him that he had been listening to the Galames—underwater jaguar spirits commonly propitiated in Yucatecan cave ceremonies."

For the Maya, the sun in its night aspect became the Jaguar God of the Underworld, often depicted on Classic Maya monuments. Thus it would make uncommon sense for the Jaguar God to manifest itself in a cave—even today. In a similar way, certain Upper Paleolithic animals may have become associated with caves, and have been thought to sound or to manifest themselves in particular caves. The night-jaguar-underworld complex of the Mayas makes me think of the Upper Paleolithic depiction of predators, usually found in the most inaccessible or terminal areas of caves. With seventy-three lions in full view, Chauvet, discovered in 1994, in the Gorge d'Ardeche, is an exception to this.

Were a cave to manifest itself as bison or as horse power, it would be understandable if the person who experienced such would leave an image of that animal on the wall as testimony. Were the cave's power to have been indeterminate—a power neither animal nor human—then hybrid and/or grotesque depictions might be the coming to terms with a power that challenged visualization.

None of the Upper Paleolithic archeologists I have read or spoken to have reported visions or other psychic experiences that came about through prolonged time spent in a cave. Implicit in this lack of psychic experience is a position that treats the caves as potent in this respect only in the deep past. And it is possible that the power of a cave like Lascaux, having been magnificently received and documented in chamber after chamber, is now *contained*—having been “trapped” and applied to the walls some 17,000 years ago, it only exists today as the images themselves. Another thought: might cave decoration, or cave ensouling, been exorcistic in nature, in which fearsome powers were “tamed” by being “translated” from psychic manifestations into concrete images anyone could observe?

Given the lack of reported visions, it was very fascinating to read MacLeod's account of the first of a series of experiments in sensory isolation in the caves of Belize. In November, 1972, with a Peace Corps companion, she spent 48 hours without lights or watches “an hour's scramble from the entrance” of an unnamed cave. She and her companion, Kim, had water, food, foam pads, ponchos and sleeping bags (brought into the cave with the help of friends who were instructed to return 48 hours later). Given the fact that MacLeod's account is believable and genuinely mysterious, along with the fact that such experience has yet to be brought to bear on the meaning of Upper Paleolithic cave imagery, I feel that it is worth quoting here at length:

At first I perceived the darkness as two-dimensional—a flat screen spattered occasionally by drifting, bluish cloudlike images whose edges continued to unfold. I had observed this on other occasions, on caving trips, waiting in darkness for five or ten minutes. These images were the same whether my eyes were open or closed. A ripple in the visual field accompanied the motion of my hand back and forth before my face; this too was unchanged by closing my eyes. I assumed that my brain could somehow translate positional information (it “knew” after

all what my hand was doing) into visual experience. The ripple itself seemed to be a barely perceptible shift from the very pale illumination to no illumination. Throughout the stay this phenomenon did not vary.

The most striking feature of the early phase, beginning within some four hours, was synaesthesia. While we were in total silence but for the sounds we ourselves made, the cave occasionally yielded a murmur—a drip plunking into some distant pool. This triggered a brilliant geometric pattern before my eyes (open or closed) much like the visual displays produced by psychedelic drugs (with which I had been familiar for eight years). Duration of these images was measurable in fractions of a second, yet they occasionally occurred in rapid-fire sequence. The scrape of Kim's foot on rock (but not my own) triggered them as well. More "realistic" content appeared: street scenes, images from last week, last year, Little Lulu scenarios, faces of elementary school playmates. The dredging up of early material, while not emotionally charged, was unsettling; I felt that "anything" could happen. Otherwise I had the impression of being "not quite awake"—in an eternal hypnopompic state. At no time did I think the visual phenomena were outside my head. Struggling to "awaken" and shake off the growing uneasiness, I began to explore my immediate surroundings with my fingertips, and found fascinating complexity in the variegated landscapes of the cave floor. Somehow reassured, I gave in more easily to the random visual play. We discussed this briefly; as soon as each was satisfied that the other was experiencing the same thing, we returned to silence. Thus it seemed that acceptance of the inner kaleidoscope was facilitated by occasional external contact.

My only panicky moment came upon awakening from my first sleep. I found myself in interstellar space, chest tight, heard pounding. Then I felt the ground beneath me, and heard Kim's even breathing, and knew where I was. It was an important transition point. The visual displays were much diminished after this first sleep period, and another phenomenon prevailed instead. The darkness had acquired three-

dimensionality, and seemed to be illuminated by a light behind and above my head. There was of course nothing to be seen, and the infinity of the field before me seemed to take me into itself, such that I was no longer contained in my skull. The “illumination” varied in intensity. Briefly I considered this light against that of flashlights, carbide lamps—and the thought of the latter made me wince. Artificial lighting was a deception, a lie. Stalagmites knew the truth. Had I undertaken a walk to another part of the cave—even out into the adjacent room—with this attitude, I’d likely have had a come-uppance, but I felt no more need to move than stalagmites did, and I was amused at the absurdity, the simplicity, the profundity. I perceived the incessant, now disorganized verbage in my head as a disintegrating tapestry. I watched warp and woof drift apart, watched threads slide silently off-stage... this is it... all there ever was...I could not hold my concentration for long, but that was it, and I returned easily to it, letting the last thought go, again and again. It was a gentler yet more profound merger with that elegant emptiness than any I had ever experienced with LSD. Much of the last half of the stay was spent in this state, or drifting in and out of it.

Two auditory phenomena were noteworthy, in that they were unexplainable, and we both heard them. Nearing the halfway point (as best I can judge) I heard a tinkling sound on the ceiling—some two meters above my head, as though two soda straw formations had been repeatedly struck together. Only a human (or the unthinkable...) could make such a sound. I told myself it was a cave cricket... doing a staccato drum tap on a soda straw with his antennae? Impossible! Still, it was a cave cricket. Fifteen minutes later Kim asked me if I heard that sound, like a small bell tinkling. He’d been pondering it too. The other unexplained sound came perhaps three hours later. I heard a series of howls coming from the direction of the entrance. This time there was no delay:

“Did you hear THAT?”

“I SURE DID!”

End of conversation. My disordered mind grappled with explanations... a dog at the entrance in pursuit of game? No, the entrance was too far away. Another small entrance hitherto unsuspected? A possibility. The Maya K'ank'in dog, who guides the souls of the dead on the first leg of the journey into the underworld? A possibility, as good as any other, and for that matter, that was no cave cricket. Now I knew I had crossed a discriminatory threshold, beyond which supernatural explanations worked as well as any other, and rather than fear for my sanity I welcomed the chance to meet ancient Maya gods head-on. Much later:

“Isn't the entrance too far away?”

“Much too far away.”

The supernatural tour de force was not long in coming. Kim was suddenly struck by a chill. He climbed, trembling, into his sleeping bag (the cave was a stable 74 degrees) and I wrapped mine around him, and then put my arms around him. On contact, I felt his chill as an energy field, and my trembling was that of fear. There was something else in here with us. My last vestiges of rationality crumbled, and I felt like the sorcerer's apprentice who'd thumbed the wrong spell book. Neither of us could speak for several minutes, and during this time I had an image of the “presence” as an amoeba-like consciousness which was the cave, rather than some spook flitting around in it. I knew the several kilometers of its corridors quite well, and now I felt myself to be everywhere in it at once. I suddenly realized that this was only the portal—that I could still choose to enter or not—into a relationship with this entity. I chose to postpone the apprenticeship, to be better prepared before I sought it out again. (I have not yet encountered it again, nor have I consciously sought it out, though I have had other remarkable experiences in this domain.)

When we could speak, Kim and I concurred that we had been three, and were again two. He had felt no more prepared to deal with the Other than I, though, like myself, he had considered it essentially

benevolent. Thereafter, until our friends came (moreoverless when expected), the rest of our sojourn was tranquil, anti-climactic. At the distance of this writing, it is extremely difficult to grasp the certainty I had about the entity and the potential apprenticeship. I feel that the strategy of a second approach requires a long solo sit in the same place; I have not yet done it. On the other hand, if this entity was a projection from within myself, it should be accessible in another cave, or in the isolation tank. The concepts of “strategy” and “approach” are linear; I actually have no adequate way of thinking about a second encounter. May we meet again. May I not blow it.

What for the shaman assistant was something moving on the surface of the water has, in the context of MacLeod’s experience, become an “entity” with whom one could enter into a relationship. MacLeod’s sensing it as an “amoeba-like consciousness” evokes two things for me:

- 1) A fusion between Macleod’s projected subconscious material and the forceful presence of the cave’s stone and darkness—an unstable fusion, to be sure, a wavering intermixing that could be sensed as “amoeba-like”—
- 2) The hybrid heads and figurations in Upper Paleolithic caves in which there appears to be a struggle going on within the head (or figure) itself, as if some amoebic power were on the brink of division (elsewhere I have identified these figures as “grotesque,” recalling that the word means “of the grotto, or cave).

I have also elsewhere suggested that in Upper Paleolithic art we may be witnessing the result of the crisis of Cro-Magnon people separating the animal out of their about-to-be human heads. On the basis of Sheets-Johnstone’s and MacLeod’s writing: what role did the caves themselves play in this process?

I more and more think that the empirical daytime world of hunting and surviving

effected a widening gap between early human culture and animal life, a gap that was fraught with ambivalence: via tools and weapons (spear throwers and bows and arrows in particular) which led to increasing group coordination, man was no longer fundamentally prey. In fact he was beginning to assert himself as superior to animals which were increasingly his materials as well as his arsenal: he used their bones and antlers to help him kill them. At the same time, they were still his teachers, awed with a sense of perpetuity, extraordinary display and variety, and innate survival instincts so mysterious as to make them divine. Cro-Magnon had entered a separation continuum with creatures upon which his life depended, with whom he must have felt a profound bond.

Under such circumstances, it would seem that a terrible need welled up in Cro-Magnon to somehow deal with sensations that were psychologically tearing him apart. I think the caves may have presented themselves as a kind of primordial laboratory in which this unsettling innerness—sensations that were completely inexplicable—could be dramatized, or more simply, expressed. In comparison to the animal-filled, flurry of a world above, the caves were a *tabula rasa*: blank *and* receptive once the play on “insides, that Sheets-Johnstone discusses, charmed people into simple, mimetic gestures involving scrawls and meandering lines.

At the same time, the caves were hardly a *tabula rasa* at all: they possessed personalities with their marvelous natural formations. They were fearsome, awesome, and charged with an atmosphere in which the burgeoning human subconscious may have become aware of itself as part of a conjunction experienced as the “entity” of a particular cave.

Returning to the two numbered points I made following MacLeod’s commentary, it seems possible that the amoebic “entity” experience (an unstable fusion between a person and the cave itself) was transformed, on the cave walls, into grotesque and hybrid figures which, on one level, represented a momentary truce in the separation continuum—Cro-Magnon rejoining in image his world-in-division. And as I have also elsewhere written, proto-shamanism may have come into being as a reactive swerve from this separation continuum, to rebind human being to the fantasy of a paradise that did not exist until the separation was sensed.

Now it might appear that after meandering lines and crude cup-shaped indentations (called cupules), the earliest figurations would have been grotesque and

hybrid formations, and that once Cro-Magnon spotted the emergent animal as part of a hybrid, he would have been in the position to draw the animal itself. However, several considerations lead me to believe that this perspective is false, and a trap.

It will probably turn out that hybrids appears in all periods of Upper Paleolithic image-making, and that realistic animals do too. Chauvet, with its earliest figures (realistic animals) dated earlier than 32,000 years ago, contains what appears to be a Minotaur-like figure bending over a large black vulva. I think this set of figures is considered to be around 30,000 years old. Combarelles, whose engravings are dated (stylistically) between 13,000 and 11,000 B.P. contains over 50 human figurations, many of which are hybrid or quite grotesque.

Furthermore, I tell myself, I must not fall into a new blanket, monolithic theory trap of positing a gradational scale of image evolution for the entire Upper Paleolithic. Since it is turning out to be multiphasic and highly regional, a kind of magma of appearing and disappearing creative peaks and hollows, one needs to study a specific regional culture from start to finish to be able to assess the changes in its image-making. This will most probably never be possible..

Finally, I think we must acknowledge that there is a significant difference between experiencing an “entity” in isolational cave darkness, and the kind of work that appears to have taken place in Lascaux: many lamps, scaffolding indications, and a high probability of coordinated team work. I suspect that a significant number of the animals, especially in the Rotunda and the Axial Gallery, were painted by people who went into the cave with the intention of painting them.

In the long run, the images most difficult to get a grip on may turn out to be the realistically-depicted animals either in isolation, such as the single engraved bison at La Grèze, or in groups that appear to have no narrative connection (the Salon Noir of Niaux). Most of the cave art theories over the past one hundred years have been based on exceptions, not rules:

- the “hunting hypothesis” was based on the relatively small percentage of wounded or “struck” animals;
- the fertility theory on the tiny percentage of questionably pregnant figures and childbirth scenes;
- shamanism on what I have found to be around thirty hybrid or

“magical” figures;

--Leroi-Gourhan’s “ideal sanctuary” on a statistically inaccurate “ideal” model and his “sexual pairing” on an arbitrary symbolization of animals and a Freudian reductionism of signs;

--Marshack’s “time-factored,” “storied” symbolism on arbitrary “lunar” readings of notches on portable objects alone.

All of these theories have two serious faults:

- 1) On the basis of a small percentage of questionable evidence (are the animals really wounded? Are the notches really lunar countings? etc), over-all blanket theories resulted which attempted to sweep everything under a single explanation.
- 2) No theory has accounted for realistic, unwounded, non-pregnant, non-narrative animals, almost always depicted from a side view, for the most part horses and bison, that make up by far the largest percentage of Upper Paleolithic imagery.

Hans Peter Duerr writes: “concepts such as *fylgia*, *nagual*, and *chargi* designate that part of human nature about which we can say nothing, or at least nothing that would be intelligible to those who have never cross the boundary.”

Since no one today has crossed what might be called “the Upper Paleolithic boundary,” some of us find ourselves like hungry ghosts hovering a primordial psychic feast that we can sense, and see, but cannot contextualize. It touches something in us that we struggle to unlock, and by attempting to do so find a grounding and belonging that historical antecedents do not provide.

I continue to intuitively believe that there is a core complex radiating through certain aspects of Upper Paleolithic image-making: animal figurations, whether partial, hybrid, or whole, represent the collective passing of certain Ice Age fauna through Cro-Magnon mind. As the animals pressed through, this mind infused them with its own animality about which it felt so ambivalent—with the end result being a simulacrum of the animal world on the surfaces of a cave’s “insides.” Stone walls became a kind of image

range containing the paradoxical application of animal outlines on stone as emergence of animals from stone. The facilitator of such two-way traffic may have been, in any region's cultural turmoil, the fusion of a person and a cave, stuff moving out of each to "grotesque," as it were, in the lamp-lit or total dark.

Such experiences were certainly not limited to shamans or artists or even to adults. The wavering spectrum of groping crudeness to masterly finesse offers a foundational dream for universal creativity: art can be made under almost any circumstances by anyone, anywhere.