

Reflections on the Chauvet Cave

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An alternative title for what follows might be: The Chauvet Cave Minus Werner Herzog. Don't misunderstand; I'm a huge Herzog fan. I've seen all his films, and I generally adore the quirky, irony-inflected, absurdist sensibility with which he examines his themes and subjects. The issue here is that all the things I love about Herzog – his signature quirkiness, irony, and absurdism – simply have no place in his recent probing of humanity, *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*. Watching it last week in a crowded theater, I struggled repeatedly against the urge to blurt out: “Werner, you're in the wrong movie!” For the subjects of this film – works of art made some 30,000 years ago, and, in haunting absentia, the human beings who made them – speak voluminously for themselves, and in so doing reduce Herzog's voice-overs, interviews, and other intrusions to a litany of the superfluous we endure with varying degrees of restraint. But ultimately the filmmaker's mistreatment does his subjects no harm, for it is clearly they who have the last word. In its undeniable beauty and palpable probity, the cave makes a mockery of irony in a way few things in our century have. So, with all due respect – and no small amount of gratitude for his gaining access to this place that will be forever forbidden to the rest of us – I'd like to reflect a bit on the cave itself and leave aside entirely the filmmaker whose work has occasioned these reflections.

The sense of awe and excitement we are struck by upon being led into the cave is in no small part due to the cave itself; that an opening inside the earth as otherworldly as this exists is alone a wonder. Spires of stalactites and stalagmites tower overhead, surrounded on all sides by undulating walls whose surfaces seem to buckle and roll, approach and recede, in a rhythmic subterranean dance. But it is the drawings that charge the space with a presence more palpable and more immediate, I would argue, than that which fills the Gothic spires of Chartres Cathedral. For here it is a human presence rather than a divine one that permeates the space, and the overwhelming sense is one of identity, of familiarity, of a visceral sameness utterly impervious to the passage of millennia.



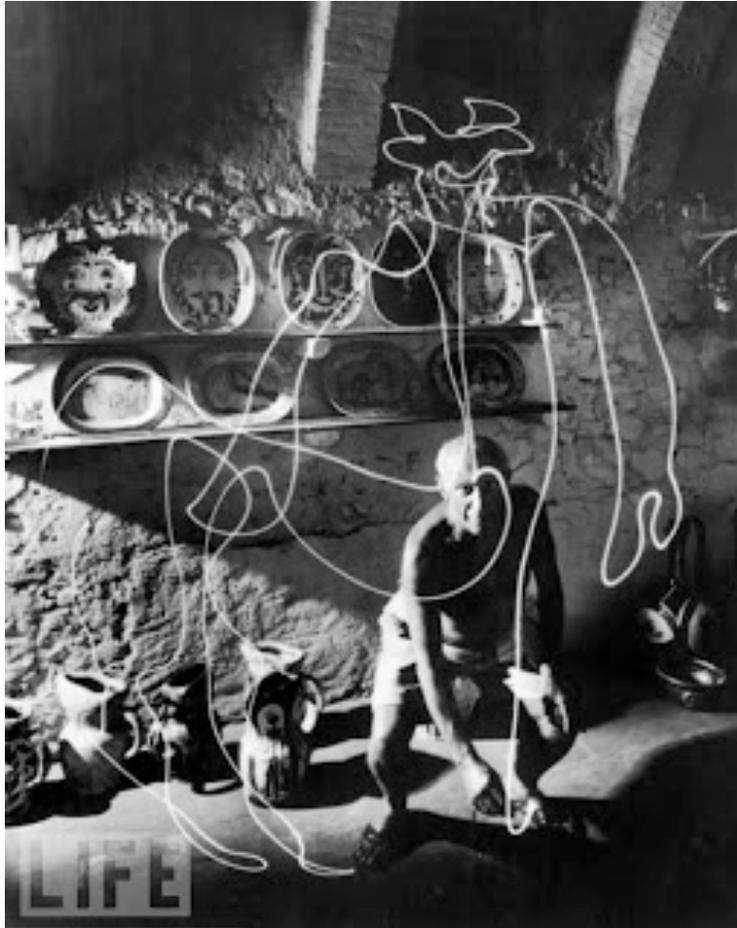


That I call them drawings rather than paintings is intentional, and, I believe, significant. With its predominance of line – that rich, sumptuous, velvety black line – the art that inhabits this space is emphatically drawing and not painting. Why does this matter, you ask? I press the distinction because here drawing – the poor handmaiden of a medium whose subservience to painting we typically take as a given – is revealed for what it is: the most fundamental, most ontologically pure medium of visual

expression known to humans. To privilege painting over drawing because of the former's supposed sophistication and technical complexity is to miss one of the fundamental truths about art – namely, that technical mastery is preceded by, dependent upon, and absolutely nothing without, a knowledge far more complex and mysterious than itself. Drawing – the making of marks on a surface as a human response to the world – is the purest expression of this knowledge that we have, and is indeed the bedrock upon which the entire edifice of art history has been erected.

Many have marveled at the sophistication of the drawings inside the cave, implying, it would seem, a certain degree of surprise. But why, really, should we be surprised? If by sophistication we're referring to the fluidity and elegance of the line, the extraordinary economy of means with which the complex (mostly mammalian) subjects are depicted, and the astonishing degree to which the animals' movement is made palpable, then I suggest we would do well to question our assumptions of superiority. To make a mark – and then a series of marks – in such a way that body and instrument capture the essence of the thing you mean to evoke requires great skill and extraordinary knowledge, certainly. But it does not require years of academic training, any kind of historical perspective, or the inheritance of any of the intellectual wealth we generally associate with culture. (In fact, it could be argued that the latter serve more to occlude the kind of knowledge possessed in such abundance by our forebears than anything else, but that's another story.) So, if it is not any of the things just mentioned, what is it that the Paleolithic artist knew that can account for the drawings' perceived sophistication? What is the nature of his knowledge?

I would argue that perhaps it is not so much *what* he knew, but *how* he knew. In making the drawings of the various animals that populated his life – the bison, reindeer, bears, wolves, etc. – inside the cave, it seems reasonable to assume that the animals being drawn were not immediately present to the artist – were not posing, as it were, while the artist recorded the contours of their bodies. This, in other words, was not drawing from observation – an analytic activity par excellence – but rather drawing from another source entirely – one much more deeply internal to the artist, much more intuitive than analytic, and one that involved not only his visual memory but also his bodily memory. To realize a concrete image of a bison in the absence of the bison (not to mention the absence of much light) requires that one know the bison from the inside – that one come to inhabit the bison, if only for an instant, and *become* its energy, its heat, its weight, its heartbeat, etc. Only by means of this internal, bodily knowing can one capture, in relatively few strokes and limited materials, the “essence” of a thing.



When I introduce gesture drawing to my students, I do so by way of this image. In this celebrated photograph taken by Gjon Mili in 1949, Picasso is frozen in the instant immediately after drawing a bull with a flashlight in the dark. It's a long-exposure photograph, so it could have taken the artist several seconds to compose the image, but clearly his movements had to be fast as he drew through the darkness with his light. Two significant questions arise: First, how do we recognize the image of a bull in a single, wavy streak of light? And second, how did Picasso draw what we perceive to be a bull so quickly, in the dark, and with nothing but his imagination to guide him? The answer to the first question is, I suggest, more complex and more telling than it might initially seem. Clearly we recognize the bull by its telltale features: hoof, horns, ears, bulking torso, etc. But our assumptions become more questionable when we ask ourselves: Are real bulls circumscribed by undulating white lines? Are they translucent on the inside of those lines, like the shape delineated by Picasso's streak of light? Do real bulls "have" any lines at all? The answer, of course, is that real bulls look nothing like the one drawn by Picasso; what we recognize as bull is not visual verisimilitude or even semblance, but rather something subtler, something more like the "essence of bullness."

How was Picasso able to do it? What I suggest to my students is that Picasso's chosen subject was not arbitrary but in fact quite meaningful, and that when he drew bulls he did so because, to a certain degree, he identified with the bull. Fierce, virile, raging and indomitable: This is how Picasso saw himself. So it was not such a leap for Picasso to "inhabit" his subject while he drew it in the dark with his flashlight. (One wonders if he could have evoked a mouse or a housefly as convincingly.) By becoming the bull's energy, its internal impulses, weight, and movement, Picasso was able to move his body in such a way that the light carved out in space something of the essence of bullness. That the resulting image is not a

perfectly rendered, naturalistic depiction of a bull does nothing to detract from its sophistication. In fact, it has nothing to do with it. The sophistication – the genius – lies elsewhere entirely.

The sophistication we attribute to the cave drawings is a function of the same kind of genius possessed by Picasso – a kind that is deeply internal, intuitive, bodily, and participatory. As such, it should come as no surprise that human beings thirty millennia ago possessed this ability, for it is a *human* genius and not one that is specific to any particular place or time. Wherever there are humans, there will be those endowed with the extraordinary ability to empathize with otherness, inhabit it, and evoke its essences in this way.

We'll never know *why* the Paleolithic artists drew animals on the cave walls. Was it for ritualistic, ceremonial, religio-spiritual reasons? Was it, as some have suggested, a means of coming to terms with fear (e.g., Wilhelm Worringer's "creation in order to subdue the torment of perception")? As strongly inclined as we might be to attribute religious or spiritual motives to the drawings, doing so seems presumptuous in the absence of real evidence. For me, the fact that we can't know the *why* of the matter does nothing to diminish the *that* of it; the cave drawings are emphatically alive, and they bespeak a knowledge as relevant to contemporary life as it was, albeit for different reasons, to Paleolithic man. Indeed, in light of today's irony-saturated, distancing, and value-challenged media environment, a renewed recognition of this kind of knowing might now be more urgent than ever.





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