

# The Cave of Doxa

*Reflections on Artistic Research and on Cave Art*

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## Introduction

In order to situate this article, as well as the position from which I write, in the contemporary academic and epistemic field, a few words on my epistemological stance is needed.<sup>1</sup> In calling my approach to the current epistemological situation *doxological*, I am not evoking a theological turn in the theory of science. Rather the opposite, actually. I want to emphasise and recognise the fact that all knowledge is created by humans, and thus is *human* knowledge and never epistemic (in the Platonic and, perhaps, theological sense). This is not a new insight, nor am I the first to focus this anthropic conditioning on all that we claim to know. But it has been downplayed in the history of Western thought, neglected as something both evident and unimportant in the scientific quest for ever more knowledge.

The term doxology has an established usage both in theology and in liturgy, denoting different forms of praise of God. My usage of the term, however, is pre-theological, in the sense that it reconnects with ancient philosophy and the debate between philosophers and sophists about the nature of knowledge. Siding with rhetoricians and sophists, I claim that all knowledge is doxic, that is, anchored in, and born not only by language and different symbolic forms, but also, and perhaps most importantly, by practices, bodies, rites, and rituals. In fact, what has been called epistemic knowledge is, and has always been, produced within and by some kind of doxa. Be it a doxa that is scientific, social, historical, artistic, it consequently has no better claim to objectivity, timelessness or reality (in the traditional sense of these terms) than doxa. Hence doxology, instead of epistemology, is a more fitting name for teaching about human knowledge and knowing.

1. In Art Monitor #1 2007 I presented the outlines of my doxological stance. Hence I will give only a very brief introductory presentation of the doxology that I have been developing over the last few years, before approaching my topic proper.

Doxology takes heed both of the postmodern critique of the traditional concepts of knowledge, subjectivity and intentionality (among others), and of our need for being able to distinguish true from false, real from unreal, and fact from fiction. In this sense, it is a post-postmodern stance, trying to rework the traditional concepts without resorting to, on the one hand, blindfolded empiricism or, on the other, free-floating relativism. Our knowing is always conditioned by what is always already at hand (practices, prejudices, documentation, and so on), but is by no means determined by these conditions. Doxology allows human creation to play a central part in scientific endeavour.

Protagoras was, perhaps, the first in Western thought to adopt a doxological position concerning the possibilities of knowing and knowledge. That is, he chose human imperfection, unsure belief and unavoidable change instead of Platonic immobility and certainty. His famous dictum about man as the measure of all things, the *homo mensura*-fragment, is perhaps the most poignant expression of this position. What we learn from Protagoras, and what has, thanks to the rhetoric tradition, been present ever since (though as an undercurrent), is that no apprehension escapes the anthropomorphic conditions of knowledge alluded to in the fragment. For instance, our knowledge is always embodied (as part of our biological being); formulated and/or preserved in some language, institution or ritual; practised and upheld by one or many individuals, always in one historical moment or other and within the admittedly diffuse framework of an ever changing but still specific social situation. All these factors co-determine our knowledge, making it a part of a fluctuating, always changing, and multi-layered doxa. Each claim to universal knowledge is, to use Chaïm Perelman's formulation from his seminal work *The New Rhetoric*, an attempt to convince a universal audience (and moreover a universal audience more or less of one's own choosing and constitution).<sup>2</sup> Consequently, doxa does not reveal reality as it is in itself, but as it appears to us, being the kinds of beings that we are, in the specific situations and bodies in which we find ourselves. I like to think of doxology, not as a teaching about apparent or illusory knowledge, but as a teaching about situated, variable and interested knowledge. That is, a teaching, prolonging, using and modifying the rhetorical tradition, about how we actually create the knowledge that we need to live in our human cave, from which there is no escape, no matter what Plato may have said. So it is no coincidence that I have chosen cave art as my prime example in an attempt to apply doxology to a contemporary field of research.<sup>3</sup>

However, my main focus in this essay will not be cave art itself, nor doxology. I want to see what we may learn about the possibilities for, and the limits of, the emerging field of artistic research; through looking at some aspects of the development of a traditional Humanities discipline, where art has been a central and pivotal concept. Doxologically speaking, I am convinced we need to explore the areas where art and science have already been obviously intertwined conceptually and in practice. This is necessary in order to avoid reproducing sterile oppositions (as art *or* science, knowledge *or* creations, conceptual work *or* practices), when trying to develop concepts and procedures which will allow us to create the field of artistic research as a new kind of scientific-artistic field for production of knowing and knowledge. Artistic research cannot be a question of adapting science to art and art to science, as if the two were distinct and homogenous entities. Artistic research offers the possibility of a genuine creation (in the sense cherished by Cornelius Castoriadis), which is a creation of a new form, an academic-artistic field.

2. For an introduction and discussion of Perelman's concept of audience, see Rosengren (2004)

3. In the yet unpublished manuscript *Caveopenings* I use the story of the discovery of cave art and the subsequent development of the discipline cave art studies to further develop my doxological stance.

But there is a tricky methodological problem at play here, how am I to avoid closing and structuring this new field in the making when speaking: firstly from a position within the Humanities; secondly using all the old words; and thirdly importing and reproducing within this new field, the same conceptual oppositions and notions that have haunted Western science in the form of a logocentric metaphysics of presence? (Using Derrida's formulation as an abbreviation for a long and tortuous argument.)

This is a question calling for a strategy of writing, as well as a strategy of reading: I, as a writer, will use cave art research as a supplement (once again in a Derridian sense), which allows me to address problems and propose solutions that I find pertinent both for cave art studies, and indirectly, for the formation of the field of artistic research. You, as a reader (positioned in a specific field, be it art, science or whatever), will, if you like, be able to incorporate and transform what I say, and use, abuse, translate it, or just simply apply it within your own field or when working with or relating to issues of artistic research.

A strategy of writing, reading and perceiving is needed to avoid a premature structuring of a field that is still all-too-vulnerable to usurpers of all kinds, not least the benevolent ones. In Deleuzian terms: The only way not to impose the same arboric thinking on the field of artistic research, as is dominant everywhere else in science, is to respect that the growth must be allowed time to establish itself as a sufficiently complex rhizome before we can start grafting on to it, without running the risk of immediately transforming it into a tree.

Nevertheless, the law of genre in the Human Sciences, demands that I state my position clearly, and that I will do, but only occasionally, mostly from the side and always passing through cave art studies. Though when it comes to doxological matters, I will speak plainly, hoping to give some reasons for shaping artistic research in consonance with doxological thinking. To put it bluntly, I hope that by confronting some of the issues that have arisen within the field of cave art studies during the last century with a doxological perspective, I will somewhat help to further the formation of a new form for knowing and knowledge.

When reproductions of the paintings in Altamira, the first of the painted caves in Europe to be discovered, were first published in 1890, they were immediately seen as aesthetic objects, and mainly due to these aesthetic qualities, rejected as fakes by the scientific community. It was not until 1901, after the discovery of several painted caves undoubtedly from the Paleolithic Period (between ten and forty thousand years before the present), that mural cave art was scientifically accepted. Consequently, the years following this scientific consecration were filled by discoveries, and rediscoveries, of painted caves. Most famous are the cave of Niaux and the cave of Bedehilac, both in the Pyrenees.

Elsewhere, I have discussed the intriguing conceptual problems involved in this discovery and rediscovery. Here I will limit myself to two aspects of the discipline of cave art studies: the use of the term art, and the history (and presumed validity) of image interpretations found in the caves.<sup>4</sup>

## **Cave 'Art'?**

In calling what we find in the Paleolithic caves 'art', we say far more than most of us would want to or, for that matter, are entitled to. In fact, to call the markings found on the walls of the caves 'art' is to not make a neutral description of what kind of things they are. It is, one may argue, to inscribe them into a

4. See Rosengren (2007a)

large, but nevertheless specific (Western) aesthetic context that was formed in the Eighteenth Century. This will, in many often barely discernable ways, limit, and to a certain extent, guide our perception and understanding of these markings. Using the term 'art' in connection to what we find on the cave walls is, if one accepts this point of view, like already deciding from the start what kind of objects we are dealing with, and hence what attitude to adopt towards them.

From a doxological point of view, the usage of a term or concept is never 'innocent' or neutral.<sup>5</sup> Taking its cue from ideas that were central for the early Jacques Derrida, doxology does not naively think that replacing an old, entrenched concept or term with a new one (through a new definition, or by adopting an old word to a new usage, or by paraphrasing etc.) will leave us in control of the new term, the new sense we are aspiring to. Every new term, new definition, or paraphrase, has to insert itself into the already-existing and ever-changing grid of terms, concepts, and practices that condition meaning and possible usage to a much larger extent beyond general acknowledgement. But, and I would like to emphasise this to avoid the accusations of reductionism or determinism that tend to spring forth as soon as one talks about the conditions for our human sense-making, this conditioning is not to be understood as determination. It does in fact leave room for what Castoriadis calls radical imagination, or what Derrida calls *différance* (with the famous 'a'), and hence for creation of new concepts. What it does *not* leave room for, is an explanation of the meaning of a term or concept *only* in terms of the intentions of the users, or *only* in terms of definitions (be they of the stipulative, the usage, the ostentative, or any other kind), or *only* in terms of social usage. *This* would be considered an unfounded reduction from a doxological viewpoint.

But what is it precisely that we do when we call the drawings, etchings, the macaronis, the carvings, and the figures we find in the caves *art*? Are we applying a concept and a term that represents some kind of 'closest match' to what we are already familiar with? Are we recording similarities that are already out there in the world for us to pick up, or are we creating an object that was not there before? Or all of these at once?<sup>6</sup>

Since the usage of the term 'art' became an issue in the field of cave art studies (1980's), there seem to be at least two different, and opposite, views on this matter.<sup>7</sup> As the interest in this debate hinges on details in the different ways of approaching the topic, and in order to give each position a fair presentation, I will render them through quite lengthy quotes. This will also make it possible for me to pinpoint the places where a doxological view would differ from both.

The first position is that of Margret Conkey and Olga Soffer. In the introduction to their book with the telling title *Beyond art: Pleistocene Image and Symbol* (1997), they spell out their argument concerning the use of the term and concept of 'art' in connection to what was found, and what we still find in the caves:

*Although most of us would agree that many of these images are indeed aesthetically pleasing, to call them "art" is both misleading and limiting. There are two assumptions behind the term "art" that are particularly troublesome. First, as defined in the past century, art is a cultural phenomenon that is assumed to function in what we recognize and even carve off separately as the aesthetic sphere.*

5. I have written about this before, see especially chapter 3 and 4 of Rosengren (2006), but also, in English, Rosengren 2004 for a somewhat less detailed discussion concerning the usage of the term "epistemology".
6. Term and concept are of course not identical – but it is not possible to make the distinction between a term and the concept it is supposed to be representing in a general way – one cannot disconnect the concept from its representations. The distinction term/concept may and must in many cases be drawn – but it can never be an absolute distinction; it has each time to be situated and motivated within a specific epistemic and/or linguistic situation, in relation to (linguistic) practices and to the dominant (linguistic) doxa. And if this is nominalism, so be it.
7. As we will see below, the term "art" was adopted without any hesitation from the very first moments of cave art studies – it was only with the impact of post-structuralist and post-modern modes of thought that this usage became an object of concern.

*There are longstanding debates, even within the Western intellectual and cultural traditions about the definition(s) of "art". This aesthetic function is something that we cannot assume to have been the case in prehistory. [...] The equally troubling second assumption behind the term "art" as applied to these very early visual cultures is this idea that it is somehow transcendent and therefore provides us with transcendent values. To claim Lascaux, for example, as the "first masterpiece" of human art history reveals more about our cultural categories and constructions than about the contexts of prehistoric social action within which the production of such imagery as Lascaux took place and had meaning.<sup>8</sup>*

I do of course agree that we should avoid a naive projection of our own contemporary categories onto the objects we think of as belonging to history or prehistory. To claim, like Georges Bataille and many others, that art in our sense was 'born' in the Lascaux or any other cave, just seems to be plain wrong. Doxologically speaking, there are no transcendental values hidden in the signs and symbols in the caves, nor are they vehicles transporting sense through the ages. They are ever standing possibilities for us to interpret and try to make sense of. This is a conceptual work that has nothing to do with the recuperating of hidden meanings, but everything to do with our semiotic, discursive, hermeneutic, scientific practices and abilities.

So what are our alternatives? We have to remember Derrida's warning that the step outside metaphysics, out of our Western tradition, with all its terms and concepts, is by no means easy to effectuate, if at all possible. But, as he also says: not all ways of giving in to this state of affairs are equally valid. It is a question of the critical responsibility of one's own discourse, a problem related to an economy of language and of discursive strategy.<sup>9</sup> And one possible strategy here would be to keep using the term 'art', always keeping in mind the historical overload of sense it carries, and try to counteract the senses that seems most threatening in different strategic ways. We are in a position where we have to be 'bricoleurs', where we cannot ever aspire to become 'engineers', no matter how hard we try.<sup>10</sup> Or, as Castoriadis perhaps would have said: We are always already downstream, and that is where we have to start.

Keeping this in mind is essential, not only for cave art studies, but also for the domain of artistic research in the making. Bricolage, as both a practical and conceptual strategy, seems to be one way of disarming the age-old oppositions that still seem to govern our thinking and doing. But exactly how such a bricolage should be performed cannot (for reasons already stated above) be spelt out as a recipe. It has to be reinvented, recreated in each specific situation within the field itself, and according to the specific demands of artistic, scientific, institutional, political, and aesthetic circumstances.

The second position concerning the usage of the term 'art' within cave art studies is articulated in the work of Michel Lorblanchet. In oppositions to, among others, Margaret Conkey (the allusions in the following quote are to an earlier article of hers), he claims that we are well advised to be wary when employing the term 'art' to avoid inscribing what we find in the caves in a too narrow, aesthetic paradigm:

*[t]he term "art" is in no way reducing. It does not imply a "monolithic interpretation", nor a semantic classification in "one*

8. Soffer and Conkey (1997: 2-3)

9. Derrida (1967: 412-414)

10. For Derrida's now classical discussion of Lévis-Strauss's terms "bricoleur" and "ingénieur", see Derrida (1967: 418)

*and the same category” since it does not, in fact, imply any particular interpretation at all. It is just the expression of the freedom and sensibility of men facing the productions of the past, but freedom does not imply ignorance: In recognizing the historicity of the significations and the usages of the rock images [des images rupestres], we know that we are contemplating prehistoric works with a different regard than that of our faraway predecessors.”<sup>11</sup>*

Lorblanchet is trying to distance himself from what he thinks of as an all-too-narrow aesthetic understanding of the term 'art'. Instead he invokes the broader sense of art as 'artefact' in general, and claims that even though Conkey et al are right in warning us against the possible consequences of the usage of 'art' when designating what we find in the caves, these consequences are by no means inevitable.

Lorblanchet is quite right when he points out that 'art' does not imply a monolithic interpretation or a classification in one and the same category. At the same time I think he underestimates the danger that Conkey points out. In reducing this danger to just an “expression of the freedom and sensibility of men facing the productions of the past”, he seems to ignore that the very act of calling the findings in the caves 'art' in fact inscribes them into the aesthetic sphere of the early Twentieth Century. The archaeological discoveries in the caves in the beginning of the last century were treated as surveys of art history, and integrated into a realm where notions of beauty, disinterest and of an eternal yearning for the aesthetically pleasing were central. And this aesthetical inscription is still being upheld, both within the field of cave art studies and in the general doxa concerning art and cave art. A telling trace of this general doxa is found printed on a postcard depicting a bull from Lascaux that was recently sent to me by a French colleague and friend, Pierre Dumesnil, in September 2007. It says, first in French, followed by an English translation:

*“Nothing better has been painted since”, declared Picasso of the paintings in the cave at Lascaux, which date back to the Aurignacian period (Upper Paleolithic, 15 000 BC). By the light of oil lamps, no brighter than candlelight, men depicted the animal world around them, perhaps as a part of an initiation rite. The careful way that pigments were projected onto the rock, and the usage of its surface to render the animals' rough coats, suggest that these hunters mastered artistic technique. Often referred to as the prehistoric Sistine Chapel, these cave paintings are the beginning of art, such is the emotion they inspire.<sup>12</sup>*

11. Lorblanchet (1991) The quotes are, according to the information in Lorblanchet's text taken from Margret Conkey, “New approaches in search for meaning? A review of research in Paleolithic Art”. *Journal of Field Archaeology* 14: 413–430, p 414.

12. Grotte de Lascaux, *La grande salle des taureaux*, carte postal (2004) Editions la noisette/ le baobab

These words, signed by a certain Pierre Maisoncelles, of whom I know nothing, condenses, as I will be showing below, many themes and opinions that are still current in the field.

In his emphasis on the freedom and sensibility of the first archaeologist's choosing to use the term 'art' to designate paintings in the caves, I think Lorblanchet, in his 1991 text (just quoted), is underestimating the aesthetic pull of the term, and that he is putting too much faith in the transparency of intentions behind this choice.



Returning to the topic eight years later, in the book *La Naissance de l'art* from 1999, Lorblanchet basically maintains the same position. He seems to have listened to what his critics had to say, but only to state his own case even more forcefully. After contending that however we may define 'art', it will 'generally' contain a notion of 'beauty' and 'pleasure' that is dominating in "contemporary art that has lost its religious content", he accepts that "one ought to be careful with modern aesthetical discourse".<sup>13</sup> The goal of cave art studies, he concludes, should be "to recreate the perception and usage of the images of the peoples in the past." In the following paragraph he writes:

*Despite the utility of the invitations to be careful when using the word "art" about the productions of faraway periods, let us be frank and say clearly that the debate brought up by the Anglo-Saxon school [i.e. Conkey et al] is a false debate.*

*The notion of "art" certainly has a history. Its definition has often varied during the past. Nevertheless, in spite of these variations, art has for a long time had an utilitarian function, most often a religious one, but at the same time it has always had an aesthetic content. It would be reducing and entirely false to deprive the man of origin of an aesthetic sense. It is even probable that art is born from the pleasure of perceiving forms and colours, and that it was for hundreds of millennia essentially an aesthetic play before becoming a religious activity for some tens of millennia only to, recently, perform a sort of return to the sources.<sup>14</sup>*

Lorblanchet goes on to discuss the relationship that, according to him, was never an opposition between the aesthetic and the utilitarian functions (beauty and efficiency are always mutually supportive). The beauty of Paleolithic art is first and foremost functional, Lorblanchet concludes, before providing us with the definition of art that he intends to use in his book:

*[...] the original works of art are defined as "the mind's marks on nature", as works that seem to go beyond the needs of immediate survival to express, on the contrary, an aesthetic kind of care, theoretically linked to playful or symbolic behaviour, without it being possible to always separate or even demonstrate them. Therefore we will consider as manifestations of art in its beginning man's appropriation of nature's strange productions and the human creations that, no matter their aim or content (that we generally ignore), imply a play of materials, colours and forms (that we perceive). We will of course be wary of projecting the aesthetic tastes of our time onto the productions of our very far away ancestors.<sup>15</sup>*

I find Lorblanchet to be more convincing in his 1999 discussion than he was before, especially when it comes to his attempt at providing a workable definition of art for the purposes of his book. But I do not agree that the debate raised by Conkey and others is a false debate, far from it. And when Lorblanchet talks about the aesthetic sense of our forebears as something given, I am even more reluctant to follow. He does not seem to notice that his very usage of aesthetic (aesthetic content, aesthetic sense) does exactly what Conkey warned

13. Lorblanchet (1999:8)

14. Lorblanchet (1999:8)

15. Lorblanchet (1999:8)

against, it projects a specific way of conceiving, a specific concept, onto an object out of the Pre-Eighteenth Century past. But then again, as I noted above, how are we to avoid this kind of projection? We have the terms and concepts we have which tend to wring itself out of our grip and escape our intentions.

It is, as stated above, a problem of critical awareness, economy and strategy, rather than a problem of definitions or 'real' meaning. And I find that Lorblanchet's attempt at a working definition is a good strategy to counteract the pure aesthetic sense of art. In stubbornly emphasising the sense of 'art' for all kinds of artefacts and as "works that seem to go beyond the needs of immediate survival", Lorblanchet (no doubt unknowingly) opens a possible route of investigation that may prove interesting for artistic research: To see science as an art and art as a production of artefacts (among which we find, knowledge) both showing, as Lorblanchet would have it, "an aesthetic kind of care, theoretically linked to playful or symbolic behaviour, without it being possible to always separate or even demonstrate them."<sup>16</sup> What is lacking here is an explicit reflection on the way such a usage would change the sense of both art and science, but attempting to frame such a development would no doubt be premature in this setting. It is the task of every artistic researcher to reflect upon, and to effect this change in his or her work.

### The validity of interpretations

In posing the question of how to evaluate interpretations in this context, I am evoking a problem that should, *mutatis mutandis*, be central to artistic research. Let me be explicit about my intentions here. Through a brief presentation of the history of Paleolithic cave art interpretations, I would like to highlight some features, intrinsic to every scientific discipline, that co-determine the production of knowledge within the discipline in question. The constitution of a specific epistemic field, the field affects (among which we, of course, find the tendency to write works and histories about the field), the topics. Since there are, as Bourdieu repeatedly says, invariants in the fields, we may hope to learn something about how the field of artistic research is being formed by looking at how the field of cave art studies, (where both science and art has been and are at stake) was formed. In the last part of the article, I will directly address some epistemic issues raised within the study of cave art that are doubtlessly directly relevant to the domain of artistic research. I have already said that I do not intend to prescribe anything positive or conclusive in relation to artistic research, nor would I presume that I could. No, the point of this exercise is to make possible a good use of what is already at hand in one of the fields of the human sciences. Artistic research has to constitute itself and its field in forming its own criteria, but not out of nothing, nor into nothing. It will, as an academic field, inevitably be (and already is) conditioned by its scientific and artistic past, but it is not thus determined. And in this gap between conditioning and causing, a radical formation may take place, but only if one minds the gap.

After the consecration of Paleolithic mural cave art in 1902, the academic history of cave art studies is a story of multiple efforts of making sense of the material at hand:<sup>17</sup> ranging from the most simple (the making of cave art was just a pastime in between other activities); to the most elaborate (cave art as a complicated multi-layered 'language'). This history is intimately connected to changes, struggles and epistemological conflicts in the human and social sciences in the last century. Consequently, as the field of cave art studies

16. I am consciously transforming the sense of Lorblanchet's text here – please compare with the unaltered quote just above, before ascribing this view to Lorblanchet himself.

17. Laming-Empeire, 1962, p. 72



consolidated itself on (rather than within the boundaries of archaeology, anthropology and ethnography), soon, what Pierre Bourdieu calls field effects, began to appear. (Works that talk about the field, contribute to writing its history and thus play a part in forming its identity.<sup>18</sup>) Marc Groenen writes about the constitution and birth of the discipline:

*But this long course of events, leading from André Brouillet who unearths the engraved Chauffaud-bone just after 1834 and the young Maria de Sautuola who noticed the bison of Altamira in 1879 to Emile Cartilhac and his Mea culpa d'un sceptique in 1902, represents the gestation and the birth of a new discipline about which one may say, even at this moment, that it still remains to be constructed in its entirety. Everything must be marked, collected, published and interpreted.<sup>19</sup>*

The pioneering works of Henri Breuil, his theories, and especially the reproductions from the caves he visited and investigated, came to constitute the core of the discipline for the first decades of the Twentieth Century, and, in many ways, all up to the 1960s. In 1962, Annette Laming-Empeaire published her thesis *La Signification de l'Art Rupestre Paléolithique*, in which she gives an authoritative presentation of “the hypothesis and theories regarding the signification of paleolithic cave art” up until her own contribution.<sup>20</sup> In doing this, she sets the form for, and to a large extent, defines the content of the history of the discipline. (If one is to judge from contemporary publications engaging in similar overviews: for example David Lewis-Williams’ *The Mind in the Cave* (2002).) Thus, the new discipline was born in France, and remained an almost exclusively French affair until at least the end of the Second World War. In 2003, Emanuel Anati, who, while adding a few extra details, reproduces the same structure regarding the history of interpretations, writes that:

*[...] the first studies of the signification of prehistoric art were made by French researchers. Recently, this interest has extended to other countries and continents, but the French research has kept its supremacy. Not long ago, due to the then prevailing idea according to which prehistory was a regional discipline, the academic establishment regarded with perplexity the comparisons between the Paleolithic art of Western Europe and the art of archaic hunters of non-European regions. The main hypotheses about the motivations for the most ancient artistic production deals essentially with European Paleolithic art, but other theories have been formulated since then.<sup>21</sup>*

Since my intention is neither to write the history of the discipline of cave art studies, nor to present an exhaustive discussion of all theoretical attempts within the field, I will not venture an in-depth discussion of some of the dominant scholars in the field: Henri Breuil; Max Raphael; Anette Laming-Empeaire; or André Leroi-Gourhan and their respective contributions. Instead, I will content myself with a critical discussion of some aspects of their theories, allowing myself to highlight features that may shed some light on questions relating to the field of artistic research.

So, let me briefly retrace the structure established by Laming-Empeaire,

18. For field effects, see Bourdieu, many places, for example “Quelques propriétés des champs” in *Questions de Sociologie*, Minuit, Paris, 1980, pp. 113-120.

19. Groenen, in Leroi-Gourhan, 1992, p. 7

20. Annette Laming-Empeaire (1962), p. 63

21. Anati, 2003: p. 45-46. For Anati’s version of the history of interpretations, see 2003, pp. 44-56. The only additions to the structure established by Laming-Empeaire (see below) are what Anati calls “La théorie des calendriers” (p. 51), “La théorie du Chamanisme” (p.51-52), “La théorie de la déesse mère” (p. 53) and “La théorie ‘instinctive’” (p. 54-55).

and comment upon some of the different suggestions that have been made about the possible significance of cave art.

### Art for art's sake

As soon as doubts about the authenticity of the Paleolithic mural cave art dissipated, the question of its significance became unavoidable. Not surprisingly, the first attempt to make sense of the strange act of painting in the deep places of the earth did not focus upon the paintings themselves.<sup>22</sup> No, the motives and the form of the paintings were evidently seen as stemming from the everyday experience of the prehistoric man, and hence, unproblematic. The fact that he (There never was any real question about the gender of the painters, nor has there been up until the 1980s.) painted was explained in two steps. Firstly, game was plentiful during the period when the paintings were made, leaving much spare time to be filled with some activity or another. Secondly, an assumption was made about man's innate desire to create art. The combination of these two assumptions made the answer almost obvious, since man has this desire to create 'art' (in this context, 'beautiful things'), and since the Paleolithic Man had an abundance of time to do so, he simply created 'art for art's sake', just for the fun and pleasure of it.<sup>23</sup>

This explanation leaves, to say the least, some questions unanswered. Why would man, even if he had the time, be at pains to venture deep into caves, (taking with him all the material needed for lighting, painting, and getting around to paint), and often in hard-to-reach places? And is it really true that man has this eternal aesthetical desire for making disinterested art? Here a small digression into a domain of some relevance to artistic research is unavoidable.

### The uncanny 'modernity' of cave art

Popular notions die hard. Consequently, one finds an abundance of references to man's aesthetic needs or desires in recent attempts at understanding cave art. For example, in 2006 Gregory Curtis wrote:

*[...] the cave painters may not have had the idea of art as we understand it, but when they chose to draw an appealing line instead of an awkward one, they were thinking and acting like artists trying to create art in our sense of the word. [...] The multicoloured and stylized Chinese Horses in Lascaux, the pride of the hunting lions with their eyes ablaze in Chauvet, and the weighty, yet delicately curving bison in Altamira and Font-de-Gaume all prove that beauty truly is eternal.*<sup>24</sup>

I do not quote Curtis in this connection to make fun of him or of his work. I find his book both well thought out, and well written, one of the best that I have encountered in the semi-popular genre, where you tend to find most books on cave art, which are not written by specialists for a specialist audience) but focus on something (apart from the untenable notion of art and beauty as eternal in some way that I find both very problematic and probably unavoidable when one deals with mural cave art). Curtis formulates my query in this way: "How is it that they (the cave paintings) could be locked away in caves, unknown or misunderstood for eons, and yet, once discovered, fit naturally in the Western cultural tradition?"<sup>25</sup>

22. For this summary I rely mainly upon Clottes and Lewis-Williams (2001), Curtis (2006), Laming-Emperaire (1962), Groenen, in Leroi-Gourhan (1992) and Lewis-Williams (2002).

23. Laming-Emperaire (1962), pp. 65-70 (especially pp. 68 and 70). Laming-Emperaire mentions Cartailhac as one of the representatives for this point of view, but notes (p. 67) that he rejected the notion of leisure as a precondition for making art.

24. Curtis (2006: 228)

25. Curtis (2006: 229)

I do not believe that the natural fit Curtis talks about, is natural at all. Seeing cave paintings (like seeing any other object) is a question of organising what you see in a form that makes sense for you. And in the case of complex objects, like cave art, this organising presupposes the acquisition of a concept, or more likely a set of concepts, and such acquisitions are definitely a social matter. So the fact that we now readily see the paintings in the caves as paintings of fauna from prehistoric times does not really tell us anything about what the painters say “to us so directly across the millennia,”<sup>26</sup> but it definitely does raise the following question: why are these paintings are so accessible to us, so similar in style to many in the Western pictorial tradition, despite their antiquity and there being no connection (as far as we know) between the last cave paintings (8500 BCE) and the earliest beginnings (10,000 BCE) of the Western aesthetic tradition?

From a doxological point of view, the answer will not be found in the postulation of an eternal sense of beauty, nor in a natural aesthetic instinct in man, neither in some presupposed universal 'realism' in art, to explain the similarity. Following a strand in Castoriadis's thought, I would say that the forms created by prehistoric man have the somewhat eerie, quality (I have to admit) of being easy to re-cognise, and hence make sense today, up to a certain point. We who partake in the Western pictorial tradition of the early Twenty-first Century (given the concepts of depiction and art that we have) readily see the traces in the caves as pictures of different animals we are more or less familiar with. But we do not as readily see the 'why' and the 'wherefore' of these images.

Of course, the core of the question still remains: why are these traces so easily integrated into our conceptual schemes? Part of the answer no doubt lies in what we share with the cave painters: our belonging to the human race, and our being *Homo sapiens sapiens*. But this seems to be only a minimal, though necessary, precondition, not explaining very much.

Max Raphael, to whom I will come back soon, develops this idea a bit further, suggesting an analogy between the position of mankind during the Second World War and the Paleolithic cave painters. He writes:

*[If] the cave paintings strike us as being modern in conception, and therefore familiar, the reason is that they were produced in a unique historical situation and are a great spiritual symbol: for they date from a period when man had just emerged from a purely zoological existence, when instead of being dominated by animals, he began to dominate them. [...] The Paleolithic paintings remind us that our present subjection to forces other than nature is purely transitory; these works are a symbol of our future freedom.<sup>27</sup>*

It is obvious that Raphael's answer is profoundly impregnated by the concerns and problems of his own time, and we may find it a bit naïve, not really addressing the question it tries to answer. But the most recent attempt at an answer that I know of, that of Gregory Curtis, is hardly more convincing. He writes:

*The paintings speak to us directly across the millennia because they are the conservative art of a stable society, because they have a comic rather than tragic view of life, and because they are part of a classical tradition.<sup>28</sup>*

26. Curtis (2006: 229)

27. Raphael (1945: 1-2)

28. Curtis (2006: 229)

Curtis devotes the last chapter of his book to argue for the validity of his thesis, highlighting important aspects of the cave art (most notably that its repetitions suggests a constancy in social practices that must have been satisfying for the Paleolithic man), but his arguments still seem, at least to me, to be gratuitous, especially when it comes to seeing “the cave paintings as scenes of comedy, not tragedy”.<sup>29</sup> Both Raphael and Curtis teach us three things: to be wary not to project onto the walls of the caves what seems to be evident to us at a certain conjecture in time and historical space; to keep our desires for a universal taste for beauty in check; and to be careful in choosing our concepts and topoi (they may bring on more than we bargain for). Keeping the last point in mind is of crucial importance when talking about words, objects, and phenomena within a fairly new field such as artistic research.

How are we then to understand the accessibility of Paleolithic art? I am afraid that I have no ready answer at this stage. Following a doxological line of thought, the answer would have to be sought through addressing the conditions through which anything at all in the caves is perceived. More specifically, we need to address our tendency to configure the traces in the caves as primarily *aesthetic* objects, as ‘art’ in the narrow sense evoked by Conkey. I have presented the somewhat heated debate concerning the use of the term ‘art’ in this connection, and also suggested some strategic ways of dealing with it. For the moment, I can add nothing more.

## Hunting magic and totemism

When the ‘art for art sake’ explanation was found wanting, the next step was (remember that we are at the beginning of the Twentieth Century, when Sir James George Frazer (and his *The Golden Bough*) still was one of the more influential scholars in the domain) to see if an explanation based on sympathetic magic would fare better. According to Laming-Emperaire, the article written in 1903 by the pre-historian Salmon Reinach, *L’art et la magie*, opened the way for a more profound explanation of the pictures in the caves.<sup>30</sup> Most importantly, Laming-Emperaire writes that Reinach initiated “a new mental attitude that was to become that of the researchers of the Twentieth Century”. Henceforth prehistoric art was considered to be the material trace of a number of beliefs and rites whose equivalents it is possible to find among the primitives of today. All attempts of interpreting prehistoric art were founded in comparative ethnography.<sup>31</sup> Thus, the ‘argument by analogy’ (that we can understand the way of living as well as how people thought during Paleolithic times by comparing with ‘primitive’ cultures supposedly living in more or less the same way as we think our forebears did) was established in cave art studies. This argument has been much criticised, and for good reasons, but like the ‘art for art sake’ explanation, it lingers, and from time to time, still pops up in contemporary attempts to make sense of the traces in the caves. I will return to this argument shortly, in connection with the most recent attempts of interpretations.

The new attitude that Laming-Emperaire talks about, was embraced and further developed, most prominently by Henri Breuil, into a theory of mural cave art completely explained by hunting magic: Why paint horses, unless it was seen as a way of increasing their numbers? Why paint bisons, if it is not seen as a way to ensure good hunting?

Breuil and his thoughts were to dominate debates on prehistory and

29. Curtis (2006: 232)

30. See Laming-Emperaire (1962: 72-75) for references.

31. Laming-Emperaire (1962:75)

especially cave art studies in France until after the Second World War. Summing up the alleged advantages of the hunting-magic hypothesis, Lewis-Williams writes:

*At first the explanation seemed to explain why so many of the images were hidden in the dark chambers: magic would be performed out of sight. Then, too, the explanation seemed appropriate to the species depicted in the caves. When images of felines and other dangerous animals were found, ones that it seemed unlikely people would consciously hunt or want to increase, Breuil explained their presence by saying that the artist hoped to acquire the strength or the hunting skills of the predators. The elasticity of the explanation did not end there. Quadrangular signs [...] were said to depict traps into which animals would fall. Other signs were taken to be hunters' hides or dwellings of spirits.<sup>32</sup>*

But the elasticity of the hypothesis could not hide blatant contradictions such as: most of the animals that were hunted and eaten during this period are not, or only rarely, depicted in the caves. While others that were not hunted at all, or not frequently hunted, appear in the caves. Nor does it give us any hint whatsoever as to understanding why the pictures were made as they were made: their 'style' is what it is.<sup>33</sup>

If hunting magic cannot explain the 'why' of the content and form of the pictures in caves, then, so it seemed, one has to turn to totemism. According to this hypothesis, the pictures in the caves should stage conflicts, alliances, co-operations, inclusions and exclusions of different tribes, represented by different totemic animals such as: 'the bear clan'; 'the horse clan'; 'the bison clan'; or 'the mammoth clan'. The only problem with this approach is that there seems to be no conclusive (whatever that could mean in this context) evidence to be found neither for nor against totemism. According to Laming-Empeaire, who does not seem to regard the totemism theory as even a possible candidate for the status of scientific explanation, what we find in the caves "seems to be irreconcilable with what we know about contemporary totemism".<sup>34</sup>

## Structured messages – art as language

The aforementioned art historian, Max Raphael, was according to the current consensus of the field, the first who stopped seeing the Paleolithic mural paintings as pictures in isolation, and started looking for a pattern or a composition in the make-up of the caves.<sup>35</sup> He states his position quite clearly on the very first page of his *Prehistoric Cave Paintings* (1945):

*It has been said that Paleolithic artists were incapable of dominating surfaces or reproducing spaces: that they could produce only individual animals, not groups, and certainly not compositions. The exact opposite of all this is true: we find not only groups, but compositions that occupy the length of an entire cave wall or the surface of a ceiling; we find representations of space, historical paintings, and even the golden section! But we find no primitive art.<sup>36</sup>*

32. Lewis-Williams (2002: 47)

33. See, for example, Jouary (2001: 66).

34. Laming-Empeaire (1962: 117)

35. Clottes and Lewis-Williams (2001: 84) Curtis (2006: 122), Lewis-Williams (2002: 52), Jouary (2001:66) and also Laming-Empeaire, (1962: 119), even though the latter seems to consider Raphael's contribution mostly as a more developed form of totemism.

36. Raphael (1945: 1)

Raphael's position in the field is quite unique. He did not publish any major book on the subject during his lifetime (apart from the one just quoted), but he corresponded with Breuil and Anette Laming-Emperaire (see below). In a large number of surveys of the field, he is said to be unduly forgotten, and hence he is not forgotten at all, at least not anymore. For example, Groenen,<sup>37</sup> Lewis-Williams<sup>38</sup> and Curtis<sup>39</sup> all give initiated and mostly positive presentations of his work and theories, he is mentioned by White<sup>40</sup> as an important precursor to structuralism and Anati, in his very dense survey, lists him as an inspiration for "la methodologie structurale".<sup>41</sup> So, it seems that we have encountered another field effect here, the objective consensus about the importance of a specific author, not so much due to what he actually did or wrote (as is the case with Breuil, Laming-Emperaire, Leroi-Gourhan and many more), as to what his thoughts initiated, made possible and still makes possible. Raphael, seems to be a name around which it is possible, to construct and to uphold the doxa of the field today, as well as challenge at least some parts of this doxa.

To my mind, Raphael's book from 1945 is a strange mixture of acute observations and critiques (the one just cited is but one example). on the one hand, and quite arbitrary interpretations presented with force and conviction on the other. Laming-Emperaire goes as far as saying that his work "is unfortunately not possible to use". Commenting that "the thesis about totemism is adopted without any real demonstration, without ethnographical examples and without critique of this ethnographical method. The hypothesis concerning the historical signification of the representations is also adopted without discussion."<sup>42</sup> To this critique one may add a number of rather gratuitous connections, as for example what Raphael says in the process of establishing his own version of totemism:

*Ibsen said that that in every human face one can see an animal which discloses the deepest essence of its possessor's soul; likewise, in every animal of the Paleolithic paintings (and even more so in every animal species) there is the face of a human or a human group which reveals its fundamental needs and motive forces through the animal.*<sup>43</sup>

Thus, despite the obvious interest in Raphael's basic position for a structuralistic reading of the caves, I find Laming-Emperaire's laconic statement "It is difficult to follow Raphael in his conclusions"<sup>44</sup> quite understandable.

Lewis-Williams adopts quite a different view. He writes that Laming-Emperaire, in her book on Lascaux from 1959 (preceding her thesis by three years), seems to follow Raphael in a number of important ways. She:

- questions the value of ethnographic parallels;
- argues that the difficulty of access to many subterranean images pointed to 'sacred' intentions;
- rejects any simple form of totemism;
- proposes that the "the mentality of Paleolithic man was far more complex than is generally supposed"; and
- argues that images should be studied as planned compositions, not as scatters of individual pictures painted "one at the time according to the needs of the hunt".<sup>45</sup>

37. Groenen (1992: 92pp)

38. Lewis-Williams (2002: 52pp)

39. Curtis (2006: 121)

40. White (2003: 56)

41. Anati (2003: 49)

42. Laming-Emperaire is here (1962: 119) referring to a then unpublished manuscript that Raphael sent her in 1951, and not explicitly to his 1945 book, though this latter is listed also in her bibliography.

43. Raphael (1945: 11).

44. Laming-Emperaire (1962:119)

45. Lewis-Williams (2002: 56-57)

The quotes within the quote are from Laming-Emperaire (1959), page 200 and page 180, according to Lewis-Williams own notes.



Lewis-Williams suggests that Laming-Empeaire might have refrained from mentioning the Marxist Raphael in her Lascaux book because of the Cold War. This seems rather far-fetched, since she, as we have just seen, discusses him and his theory in her thesis only three years later, when the Cold War by no means was over. So I cannot follow Lewis-Williams in seeing her rejection of Raphael's theory in her thesis as an "inexplicable *volt-face*".<sup>46</sup> I would rather see Lewis-Williams's siding with Raphael as a strategic move in order to prepare the ground for his own theory.

Marc Groenen, who obviously sees some problems in Raphael's theory, admits that his conclusions may "make us smile" but that Raphael, was quite aware of their precariousness and that he saw them more as illustrations than as conclusion.<sup>47</sup> Be this as it may, Groenen continues, the important thing is that Raphael's fundamental idea about the structure of Paleolithic art as intentionally created ensembles, rather than individual works, remains valid.

This idea was indeed developed into full-fledged structuralism in the work of Laming-Empeaire and, especially, in the work of André Leroi-Gourhan. Together they were to occupy a central position in the field of cave art studies in France, from the early sixties up until the general decline of structuralism in the 1980s.

Leroi-Gourhan developed his theory of the mural Paleolithic art as a theory about the 'language of prehistory'.<sup>48</sup> He claimed that this 'language' was based on binary oppositions such as male-female, represented, in his case, by depictions of horses and 'straight' signs versus bison and 'rounded' signs.<sup>49</sup> He tried to uncover the 'syntax' of the caves, paying great heed to the cave as a structured space with different areas (entrance, passages, halls, sideways, end) with different functions. Leroi-Gourhan based his approach on an extensive statistical survey of the then available material,<sup>50</sup> and he hoped (and sometimes claimed) that his theory would have a predictive value. Lewis-Williams, who acknowledges Laming-Empeaire and Leroi-Gourhan, as the "two researchers who [...] made the greatest twentieth-century contribution to the study of Upper Paleolithic art,"<sup>51</sup> recounts a conversation he once had with Leroi-Gourhan:

*He felt that, in a cave he had never before entered, he could foretell the presence of, say, a horse to complement an image of a bison that he had just been shown – to the astonishment of his guide. But he registered an important reservation: he believed that the horse:bison::male:female opposition was only one characterization of the mythogram. For him, the mythogram was a vehicle that could carry a wide range of meanings.<sup>52</sup>*

The importance of Leroi-Gourhan's work and legacy within cave art studies, as well as in prehistory at large can hardly be overstated. Suffice it to mention that he revolutionised the methods of excavating by "rotating the axis of an archaeological dig by 90 degrees"<sup>53</sup> and thus, in a truly structuralist manner, initiated a focusing on the horizontal relations between the findings, making it possible to reconstitute the life of prehistory, not just unearth interesting objects.<sup>54</sup>

But even though the structuralist contribution likewise revolutionised cave art studies, in shifting focus from what (is depicted) to how (is it made; what

46. Lewis-Williams (2002:57)

47. Groenen, in Leroi-Gourhan (1992: 95)

48. Cf. The titel *L'art pariétal – langage de la préhistoire*, Leroi-Gourhan (1992).

49. Laming-Empeaire came to the opposite conclusion, claiming that horses represented the female position, and bison the male one (Clottes and Lewis-Williams 2001: 86) – but this is not as paradoxical as it might seem, since it is the principle of opposed poles around which the language is structured that is central to the structuralistic position, not which (type of) picture is attributed to which pole.

50. Curtis (2006: 161)

51. Lewis-Williams (2002:55)

52. Lewis-Williams (2002:63)

53. Curtis (2006: 156)

54. In a discussion we had in the spring of 2003, professor François Lissarague, Centre Louis Gernet, EHESS, Paris, confirmed the importance of Leroi-Gourhan's approach to the whole milieu of archaeology, ethnology and anthropology in France in the 1960s. He especially underlined the importance of his work at Pincevent for a whole generation of researchers. (Curtis writes about Pincevent – see 2006:156 pp.)

structure does the images display), the theories of Leroi-Gourhan could not sufficiently account for new findings made. Newly-found caves did not display the syntax that Leroi-Gourhans theories predicted and not everything found on the cave walls could be explained by simple binary oppositions, nor was the basic contention of Paleolithic art structured around a sexual opposition very convincing. Structuralism was successively abandoned, in the cave art studies as elsewhere within the human sciences.<sup>55</sup>

## Art as reports of shamans

After the end of structuralism's predominance in the mid-1980s, there was, for a time, a tendency to abandon the search for the meaning of the paintings altogether. This period may perhaps be characterised as the return of positivism in cave art studies. Seeing that so many scholars had tried and failed, there was a tendency to simply put the question of meaning aside, restore the allure of hard science to the discipline, and go for the facts: What animals are depicted where? How many?<sup>56</sup> But, of course, even a positivist attitude requires quite a large amount of interpretation, and in the turmoil of post-structuralist and postmodernist thought, this attitude did not last for long. The time was soon ripe for another attempt: the theory presented by Jean Clottes and Lewis-Williams in their book *Les Chamanes de la Préhistoire* [The Shamans of Prehistory] (1996).

Clottes and Lewis-Williams clearly state that they are not the first to suggest a shamanist interpretation of cave art, but they claim to be presenting a new foundation for seeing and understanding the paintings in the caves, as reports of shamanistic activities.<sup>57</sup> They found their argument on two basic premises:

First, the assumption that the human nervous system (that is the nervous system of *Homo sapiens sapiens*) is basically the same today as it was around forty thousand years ago and that this, in turn, guarantees that if we can have hallucinations, then so could (and had) our forebears.<sup>58</sup> In Clottes' and Lewis-Williams' version of shamanism, the different stages of altered consciousness during the shamanistic trance play an important part. According to the authors, "neuropsychological research in laboratories have shown that one can distinguish between three major stages with possible overlaps."<sup>59</sup> During the first phase, the subjects entering the trance 'see' geometrical forms "like points, zigzags, grids, collections of parallel or meandering lines or curves".<sup>60</sup> In the second stage, the subjects "try to rationalise their geometrical perceptions. They transform them, in their illusions, to objects loaded with religious or emotional significance, sometimes depending on the state of mind of the participant. Westerners, for example, may interpret a round and luminous form as a cup of water if they are thirsty, or as a bomb if they are afraid."<sup>61</sup> To reach the third stage the subject has to pass through a 'vortex', into which it is drawn and at the end of which there is a bright light. In the vortex, the subject has its first real hallucinations, and once emerged from it, the subject enters "into the bizarre world of trance: [where] monsters, humans and environment are intensely real."<sup>62</sup> Clottes and Lewis-Williams contend, that since these different stages depend upon our nervous system, we are entitled to believe that our Paleolithic ancestors had the same kinds of illusions as we, and, given that shamanism was practiced during the Paleolithic period, we may therefore identify the different kinds of pictures and signs in the caves as 'reports' relating shamanistic trance experiences.

55. Curtis (2006: 164) and Clottes (2001/1996: 88)

56. Clottes and Lewis-Williams (2001: 90)

57. *Ibid.* ( 89, 152)

58. *Ibid.* (14, 93)

59. *Ibid.* (17)

60. *Ibid.* (17)

61. *Ibid.* (17-18)

62. *Ibid.* (18)

Consequently, the second basic assumption is that shamanism “is ubiquitous in the hunter-collector societies”. And this ever-presence is not “the result of a diffusion of ideas and beliefs in the world, but is partly the result of an unavoidable need within the hunter-collector societies, to rationalise a universal tendency of the human nervous system: to attain an altered states of mind.”<sup>63</sup>

From these premises the authors conclude that:

*Thus, we have every reason to postulate that certain persons, during the Upper Paleolithic period, passed through the three phases leading to deep hallucinatory states, and that these phases were ritualized and interpreted by groups of hunters-collectors in ways that were compatible with their modes of life.*<sup>64</sup>

So, according to Clottes and Lewis-Williams, the paintings, the signs, and the engravings in the caves are the interpretations, effectuated by the hunters-collectors, of the shamanistic experiences that they, or at least some of them, had passed through.

At first glance, this theory seems to combine several advantages: the use of contemporary neurobiology as a scientific anchorage; the capacity to explain both pictures and signs within one and the same framework; the explanation of different uses of different types of spaces within the cave (big rooms = collective rites; small spaces = individual quests); the forceful explanation of why there are no pictures of landscapes, of human dwellings and very few of the animals that were actually eaten: they were, and are, simply not part of the trance experience.

The reception of this awakening of the shamanist theory was not altogether positive. In the introduction to a recent publication entitled *Chamanes et arts préhistoriques – vision critique* (Shamans and Prehistoric arts – critical visions (2006), several leading researchers try to spell out their doubts, and at the same time give their version of the recent history of the field. In sum, this is what they say:

In the Anglophone world the debate started in 1988, when Lewis-Williams and Tom Dawson first presented the idea of a universal shamanistic explanation of rock art as well as mural cave, art in an article in *Current Anthropology* 29.2 called *The Signs of All Times. Entopic Phenomena in Upper Paleolithic Art*. But nothing happened in France – not even when Clottes and Lewis-Williams published the book just mentioned. They were surprised by the lack of interest shown by their French-speaking colleagues, which they interpreted as ‘deliberate ignorance’.<sup>65</sup> Commenting on this reaction, the group of researchers co-signing the introduction (Michel Lorblanchet, Jean-Loïc Le Quelle, Paul Bahn, Henri-Paul Francfort, Brigitte Delluc and Gilles Delluc) wrote:

*This absence of reaction in the country that has the largest number of ornamented caves was indeed surprising: The situation of the French research on Paleolithic art was then very special. After the withdrawal and subsequent disappearance of André Leroi-Gourhan, who had dominated our discipline for several decades, as had Abbé Breuil before him and for an even longer period, a new era had begun. It allowed everyone to express their views more freely at seminars (organized at Musée de L’Homme by Denis Vialou) or*

63. Ibid. (94)

64. Ibid. (94)

65. Ibid. (155)

*within the working of the Groupe de Réflexion sur les Méthodes d'Etude de l'Art Pariétal Paléolithique [The group for reflection on the methods of study of the Paleolithic mural art] (initiated by Michel Lorblanchet in Caberets).<sup>66</sup>*

But this state of bliss did not last very long:

*The discovery of the French caves Cosquer and Chauvet, recently completed by that of the Cussac cave – a site of extraordinary importance in our discipline – had, paradoxically, a negative effect: They put an end to the ephemeral opening of the research through stirring up antagonisms that made the French researchers withdraw to their ongoing research, especially as one of the defenders of the shamanistic hypothesis occupied important administrative functions and determining editorial responsibilities within the domain of French prehistory.<sup>67</sup>*

Commenting on the publication of Clottes's and Lewis-Williams's *Les Chamanes de la Préhistoire* (1996) they even say that “far from being a revelation, [this book] suggested a return to ethnographic comparatism, a procedure that had been largely criticised by contemporary authors, and to a totalising interpretation that had already, during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, been presented in vain by several prehistorians.”<sup>68</sup>

All in all, the group co-signing the preface rendered the theory presented by Clottes and Lewis-Williams a scientific disaster, one further supported by a general and widespread popularity of shamanism. They saw them “flattering the public taste for the mysterious and the marvellous” and they conclude that the theory “is bereft of scientific foundation.”<sup>69</sup>

This is of course only one side of the story. One finds quite a different description of the recent history of the field in Curtis (2006).<sup>70</sup> He concludes his very sympathetic presentation of Clottes, and his somewhat more restrained discussion of the shamanist theory, with these words:

*But, unfortunately perhaps, the shamanistic theory has not inspired either many converts or new and productive skills. Still, Shamans is a brave book and an important one. Despite occasional excesses, it confronted the meaning of the cave paintings head-on and argued for an interpretation that was consistent within itself and with the facts presented by the caves. Yes, that interpretation was suggested by ethnographic analogy, but that in itself does not mean it is wrong. Shamans arrived, it was vilified, and now it is generally ignored by academics. Perhaps its day will come.<sup>71</sup>*

With this, I have reached the end of my brief exposé and discussion of some of the different attempts at grasping and explaining the images in the Paleolithic caves. I have, without any ambition to tell the whole story, tried to reflect upon some features related to the shaping, and the structure, of the field of cave art studies such as: the formation of the doxa; of the field; and of its inherent conflicts. And, as I have already said, these features may inform us about some of the possibilities and dangers that every new academic field may encounter in

66. Lorblanchet et al. (2006: 5)

67. Ibid. (6)

68. Ibid. (6)

69. Ibid. (6, 7)

70. Curtis (2006: 217ff.)

71. Ibid. (227)

its formative period. Today the situation in cave art studies seems to be more or less like the one Curtis describes – after the shamanist theory, no new major attempts have been made at deciphering the cave art, nor has the old ones been completely surpassed. This is especially true of the structuralist approach, which still seems to generate fruitful research, even though the details of the theories presented by Leroi-Gourhan and others seem to have been disproved.

## What it could mean to validate an interpretation

The short history I have just presented revolves around one central question: How are we to assess the validity of these interpretations? And what does a doxological stance imply as to the answering of this question? In discussing these questions I will once again, and in a similar strategic move, address some issues that I believe to be of central importance for the formation of a new epistemic domain such as artistic research, while trying to avoid the pitfalls of a simple reproduction of the conceptual structures already at hand in the human and social sciences. In saying this, I want to stress that this domain in the making is not compelled to frame its epistemological concerns in any traditional way whatsoever, but that it has no choice but to relate to the always already present academic tradition when shaping its own criteria, practices and assumptions.

In the chapter on interpretations of cave art in his book *The Mind in the Cave* (2002), Lewis-Williams summons up some criteria “by which scientists judge and compare hypothesis” and that, according to him, have to be met for a scientific theory to be acceptable.<sup>72</sup> As a point of departure for a more doxological assessment, I will use these criteria, which I take to represent fairly well the common doxa within cave art studies, and no doubt also the common doxa within most of the contemporary human and social sciences in general. And, as I think that this debate has further scope more than just the demarcation of doxology in a narrow sense, I trust these reflections to prove to be useful in the domain of artistic research.

Let me start with a brief paraphrase of Lewis-William’s criteria, before I discuss them one by one, and in some detail:

1. Lewis-Williams’ first point is that an explanation of a phenomenon must accord with received, well-supported general work as well as with overall theory.
2. Secondly, he continues, a hypothesis must be internally consistent, that is, does not contradict itself.
3. His third criterion is that a hypothesis that covers a diverse field of evidence is more persuasive than one that pertains to only one, narrow type of evidence.
4. Fourthly, he continues, a hypothesis must be such that verifiable, empirical facts can be deduced from it: that a hypothesis must relate explicitly to observable features of data.
5. Fifthly, he concludes, a useful hypothesis have a heuristic potential, that is, they lead on to further questions and research.<sup>73</sup>

Up to a certain point I find these criteria to be both sensible and reasonable, to adopt them when trying to evaluate a suggested theory, hypothesis or interpretation (of cave art or of any other kind of phenomena within the

72. Lewis-Williams (2002: 48)

73. Ibid. (48-49) I have rendered Lewis-Williams’s wordings quite closely, but my paraphrase is not to be taken as a regular quote.

human sciences). But, from a doxological point of view, it is not all that clear how we are to understand them. For example, how are we to comprehend the implicit separation of interpretation from fact, of explanation from interpretation, or, for that matter, of evidence from illusion present in Lewis-Williams' thoughts? All these distinctions seem to be unproblematic for Lewis-Williams, at least on the programmatic level, whereas they all need to be qualified before they can be accepted as doxological tools.

The first part of the primary criterion seems to fit rather well with the notion that in science one has to depart from, and in that sense comply with, the pre-existing knowledge within the discipline or the field. In the words of Ludwick Fleck: "The existing fund of knowledge must be a third party in this relation [ie. cognition] as a basic factor of all new knowledge."<sup>74</sup> Hence the first part of this criterion is quite uncontroversial from a doxological point of view. But the second part (that the explanation must accord "with overall theory") is more problematic. Judging from the example presented by Lewis-Williams ("one cannot explain an aberration in a planet's orbit by invoking laser beams directed at it from living beings in the vicinity of Alpha Centauri")<sup>75</sup> this part of the criterion is heavily dependent on a specific version of what one may perhaps call the scientific common-sense of the beginning of the Twenty-first Century within the Anglo-Saxon world. That one 'cannot' invoke lasers used by beings living on Alfa Centauri is simply not true. Of course one can invoke such an explanation. We all (I presume) tend to agree with Lewis-Williams that it is a bad explanation, or even that it is evidently wrong. But from a doxological point of view, this is not, in itself, enough for us to dismiss it. We only need to recall Michel Foucault's statement about Mendel,<sup>76</sup> who evidently told the truth but who was not received within 'the true' of the biological discourse of his time, to realise how shaky and misleading such evidences may be. No, from a doxological standpoint, the evocation of Alfa Centauri activity cannot be dismissed simply by a reference to overall theory. One has to show why, in this specific case, this specific explanation is insufficient or unacceptable in relation to the knowledge claim made. Thus, the doxological stance does not necessarily imply a change in what is conceived as an acceptable explanation of a fact, or an acceptable solution to a problem, but it does imply a change in attitude towards what seems to be evidently wrong, or strange or just simply weird. The foundation of doxic knowledge can never be (the experience of) evidence, nor (a reference to) what is given. It has to be construed, each time, within the specific epistemic field, using the specific methods of the field, always keeping in mind that the construction might have been different, and may become so in a near or far future.

I find the second criteria – that a hypothesis must be internally consistent – to be completely acceptable also within a doxological notion of science (I do not really see what it could mean not to accept this criterion), with the important precaution that one cannot treat the notion of consistency as something given. What is, and what is not consistent depends upon, among other things, how narrow or how widely one needs to define one's terms (or, as the case may be, actions, practices, and notions). For a certain type of philosophy it is quite unacceptable to claim that Socrates is both immortal and man; for another it is quite acceptable, it all depends upon how one chooses to define immortality. The reasons for choosing are always dependent upon the doxa of the field, upon your position in the field, as well as upon your reasons for defining the notion,

74. Fleck (1981:38)

75. Lewis-Williams (2002: 49)

76. In *L'Ordre du discours*, Foucault's inaugural lecture at Collège de France, published by Seuil, Paris, in 1971.



action, or habit in question. (Choice is dependent upon what you want to do with the definition or the notion in question.) So no matter if consistency is a well and unequivocally defined concept within certain domains of the scientific field, it always needs to be put into relation with the ever-changing doxic conditions in the specific epistemic field, that conditions the knowledge of this field.

The third criterion is an interestingly rhetorical one: that a “hypothesis that covers diverse field of evidence is more persuasive than one that pertains only to one, narrow type of evidence”. It differs from the other two in making a claim about what is “more persuasive”, that is, it makes a general, I would even say universalistic, claim about the presumed effects of a certain kind of hypothesis on every kind of audience. Again, I am not quarrelling with Lewis-Williams concerning the content of the criterion, I think he is right, and I think that it may be shown both historically, and within contemporary science, that such hypotheses have in fact been, and are, more generally accepted than hypotheses with narrow scopes. But what does this mean? The example given by Lewis-Williams is telling: “For example, if the theory of gravity applied only to inanimate objects, such as tennis balls, and not to living creatures, such as people, its explanatory value would be so limited that scientists would reject it.”<sup>77</sup> The example states something that is no doubt true about a specific kind of audience (scientists), in relation to a specific explanation of why “what goes up must come down”. The force of the example – its persuading effect upon us, readers of Lewis-Williams – depends upon our preconceived notions about what kind of interests scientists have: We tend (or are supposed) to think that a scientist is someone who is interested in formulating general laws for everything, and that this is the reason why they would not content themselves with an explanation that only concerned ‘inanimate objects’. So the criterion, that seemed to be universally valid, is in fact only valid in relation to a certain notion of science and scientist, which, again, makes a case for promoting the doxological notions of situatedness, dependence upon historical and disciplinary conditions as well as upon specific interests of the actors involved.<sup>78</sup> To be plain: A narrow hypothesis may be just as persuasive as a broad one, it all depends on: the situation; the field; the doxa; the actors; the history of the field; the (personal) history of the actors; the pre-existing knowledge; on who (the orator) has announced the hypothesis; on who receives it (the audience); on the actual power-structure of the relationships between all these factors; and so forth.

The fourth criterion is a classical empirical one: One must be able to deduce “verifiable, empirical facts” from a hypothesis, it must “relate explicitly to observable features of data”. Perhaps this seems quite straightforward. The hypothesis is supposed to say something about the world that can be checked by looking at the world and seeing how it is. But there is no way the world is in and of itself, what we see is formed by our selves, our concepts, our presuppositions and our interests, and we have no way of knowing whether or when our hypothesis correspond to ‘the world as it is’. Therefore, from a doxological standpoint this criterion, which of course may be a valid one, must be understood as stating something about the requirements in force within the scientific field, discipline or doxa in question, but not something about science or research in general. (For instance, I completely agree with Lewis-Williams when he says the ‘art for art’s sake’ hypothesis fails to comply with this requirement, and therefore should be rejected.) It may very well be the case that

77. Lewis-Williams (2002: 48)

78. For all this, especially concerning the role of the audience in scientific argumentation, see the seminal work of Chaim Perelman, *Traité de l'argumentation – la nouvelle rhétorique*, Paris, 1958.

most so-called empirical sciences cherish some version of this criterion, nevertheless its application has to be determined and discussed specifically in each case. The doxological position does not endorse a laissez-faire relativism: we need to distinguish facts from guesses, truths from illusions, knowing from believing, but we have to make these distinctions in the full awareness that they are our own constructions. Fabrications made by ourselves in order to deal with the human world that is ours, and that their validity is, and has always been, confined within our human custom-made version of the world. So what a fact or a datum is, as well as the significance of 'verifiable' and 'observable', must, again, be decided within the specific scientific domain. Each field construes its own epistemology, in constant confrontation and cooperation with that which surrounds it. An urgent and delicate issue for artistic research.

Lewis-Williams' fifth criterion is of a slightly different kind. It tells us that useful hypothesis should have a 'heuristic potential', that is that they should be able to "lead on to further questions and research". In a way, this is a very doxological criterion, since what is useful and what is to be counted as further questions, has to be identified in relation to the already existing bodies of knowledge, and in recognition of specific interests and desires within and in between scientists, disciplines, epistemic fields, and cultures. What is, and what is not a fruitful hypothesis has to be determined anew, in each specific case, with hindsight as well as foresight. And with an as clear as possible a notion of the constraints and possibilities contained within the doxa. The yardstick for judging whether a certain hypothesis has a heuristic potential or not, is always to test it within a discipline or an epistemic field and see what kind of results it may yield. Its eventual usefulness may, in happy cases, be judged completely from within the discipline or the field, but more often than not will be the result of negotiation between scientific, personal, economic, political, and institutional interests. We have seen some traces of such negotiations in the history of cave art in the controversy around the Shamanistic hypothesis, but there are of course far worse, and more threatening examples in abundance.

### **To conclude – and open again**

Transformed according to the above qualifications, I think that the five criteria for evaluating different hypothesis may serve well within a doxological approach to knowing and knowledge. But if they are to be useful, they have to be complemented by profound understanding of the field's doxa, or the discipline in question. And here the domain of artistic research presents unique possibilities, since its doxa is still in formation. But how, according to what criteria, and answering what needs, should it be shaped? For reasons stated in the opening of this essay, I will not try to answer these questions in a direct way.

However, I would like to be explicit on one specific point: The traditional concept of knowledge (knowledge defined as true, justified belief, or certainty), still dominant within Anglo-Saxon epistemology, should be avoided in the domain of artistic research. It implies a notion of knowledge and knowing that is almost exclusively discursive, and would thus import a completely inadequate epistemic structure to the field. A doxological conception of knowing and knowledge, incorporating skills and practices as well as possible forms of representation in knowledge, seems to be more promising for this new field. But exactly how such a concept should be formed, expanded, applied, and used in

order to mark out the kind of knowledge produced within the field is a question of strategy, reformulation and careful implementation. Here, the work remains to be done.

I opened this text by invoking the rhetorical tradition, and the benefits of arguing through an example, in this case the formation, history, and content of cave art studies. Using the same strategy I would like to make some concluding remarks, relating to issues that have to be taken into account when trying to establish a yet unseen epistemic domain.

We have seen that the dominance of a few, or at times, a single perspective (Breuil or Leroi-Gourhan) in the field cave art studies has not always promoted a better understanding of the paintings in caves. Different trends of interpretation have succeeded one another, producing more and more knowledge of the caves, the techniques, the paintings, but no definite answers as to the signification of cave art as such. Looking at cave art studies from the outside (and especially in the context of strategic writing about artistic research that I am engaged in here), I do not think this is necessarily a bad thing. The different approaches appear, linger, disappear for a while, and then pop up again to form new constellations. Perhaps the advances in this domain is at least partly due to this kind of immanent connections, where present questions merge with historical concerns to form new positions of force within the field.

We have also seen the importance of field effects for the shaping of cave art studies. Works presenting the history of the field do not only report what has happened, they inevitably (sometimes unconsciously or unwillingly) shape the past according to specific preferences, positions and points of views. Scholars have to pay allegiance to their academic forbears in order to inscribe themselves in the field and acquire a position from which to speak and be heard, before they can distinguish themselves and present their own views. Fierce struggles about the correct methods of interpretation, structure the field.

In the discipline of cave art, the notion of 'art' has become a contested concept. The uncanny modernity of the paintings seem to evoke an aesthetic approach, whereas the archaeological necessities, central to cave art studies, almost exclusively allows for a natural science attitude towards the findings in the caves. This cohabitation has, as we have seen, not been altogether easy, demanding special skills of bricolage and multi-competency from the scholars in the field. They always run the risk of being accused of being either too arty, or too scientific. A danger that seems to surface in artistic research as soon as one makes the mistake of adding art to science, without allowing for a double transformation of the concepts. I hope that my discussion of the debate between Lorblanchet and Conkey has given some food for thought regarding this dilemma.

Accepting Bourdieu's tenet that different academic fields function in essentially similar ways, we may, I think, learn a lot from the development of cave art research. For instance, we may sensibly ask where we find, and how do we recognise the positions of the Max Raphael, the Annette Laming-Emperaire, the Abbé Breuil, the Jean Clottes and the André Leroi-Gourhan of artistic research? Are there such people at all, or will there be? (And what is, to remain within Bourdieu's vocabulary, the field-specific capital that make artistic researchers tick?)

In order to answer these questions, one has to identify and describe the doxa of the field. A task that is still more normative than descriptive when it

comes to artistic research. So, even if the factors influencing this young discipline are many and divergent, acting upon it from different sides, there is still a large amount of flexibility within the field. In a way it is up for grabs for each and every actor with an interest in artistic research.

Not wanting to participate in a premature closing and structuring of the field, I will not conclude this essay on a dogmatic note, trying to spell out my idea of what artistic research should and should not be. I would rather leave these doxological reflections as a possibility for whomever would like to make use of them, hoping that my reasoning, my choice of cave art as an example and my critiques and suggestions thus will prove their worth and become part of a new way of dealing with the art of knowledge.

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