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Cave of Forgotten Dreams

Jeremy Biles

The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, jebiles@gmail.com

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Cave of Forgotten Dreams

Abstract

This is a film review of *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (2010).

“All caves are sacred,” historian of religions Doris Heyden has written. Uncanny in their mingling of fascination and fear, caves exemplify the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* that Rudolf Otto famously identified as the experience of the sacred. And caves are symbols of birth and death, passages between worlds—at once wombs and tombs. Werner Herzog’s *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, filmed magnificently in 3D, explores and evokes the sacred dimensions of the Cave of Chauvet-Pont-d’Arc, located along the Ardèche River in southern France. Discovered in 1994 by a trio of speleologists headed by Jean-Marie Chauvet, this winding subterranean labyrinth spans the space of a football field. Long sealed off by a rockslide, the cave’s walls support scores of marvelous, pristine paintings of lions, rhinos, mammoths, and other powerful beasts. These images date back some 32,000 years to the Paleolithic age, making them the earliest known works of art, and marking, as Herzog puts it, “the birth of the modern soul.”

Herzog’s movies tend to be deeply strange and sometimes disturbingly quirky, but they are never gimmicky. That holds true with regard to his use of 3D in the present film. In fact, it is difficult to imagine a more apt subject for this cinematographic technology. Though no less transporting than *Avatar*’s depiction of the planet Pandora and its beautiful blue inhabitants, *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* is a far cry from the bombastic action of James Cameron’s fantasia. The images captured in the cave are cryptic—as much about lost origins as new revelations—

but spectacular in their own way: the paintings remain vivid and beautiful, and in the tens of thousands of years that have passed since Paleolithic humans painted the enigmatic figures, multitudinous stalactites and stalagmites have formed, while accretions of sparkling pink calcite have decorated the cave's interior. The floor of the cave glimmers with its crystalline carpet, the skulls of cave bears dazzlingly encrusted with diamond-like deposits.

Herzog's movie is meditative, evolving through evocations of silence, reverent speculation, and an experience of near-religious awe, all solicited along a rapt tour of the cave and its painted menagerie. Viewers are immersed in the cavernous tendrils of the grotto, as Herzog's narration provides both historical information and intriguing conjecture. The movie suggests that the birth of the human soul is coincident with the impulse to image-making, music, and a religious sensibility. When, for instance, the camera is trained upon a rocky outcropping crowned by an animal skull facing the cave's entrance, Herzog opines that this configuration may have served as an altar during some kind of religious rite.

But very little is known about Paleolithic religion, due to a dearth of extant artifacts of ceremonial significance. Some scholars theorize that Paleolithic paintings depicting animals punctured by spears were executed in the context of rites of sympathetic magic, elements in hunting rituals. In Walter Benjamin's terms, they would be about cult-value rather than exhibition-value. The paintings may also

evidence “animalism,” a religious system in which animals were taken to be alter egos of their human counterparts—a notion supported by paintings depicting the merging of human and animal forms. Eminent French prehistorian Jean Clottes, featured in the movie, speaks of the “fluidity and permeability” between human and animal spirits that likely characterized the Paleolithic imagination. A painted rock pendant protruding from the ceiling of the Chauvet cave would seem to confirm this idea; it pictures the zaftig lower portion of a female body (comparable in stature to the sculpted Hohle Fels Venus from the same period), her torso displaced by the amorous bull mounting her.

The spiritual fluidity suggested by such images of human-animal coitus has been commented upon by Georges Bataille (d. 1962). Remarking on the breaching of boundaries between early hominids and their animal others, he wrote that “as soon as human beings give rein to animal nature, in some way we enter the world of transgression forming the synthesis between animal nature and humanity...we enter a sacred world, a world of holy things.” Similarly, Clotte suggests that humans are best thought of as religious beings—*homo spiritualis*; for Paleolithic man, “no barrier [existed] between the world where we are and the world of the spirits.”

The painted images in Chauvet and similar caves usually begin where the light ends, and it would seem religion and art coincided at their birth in these darkened corridors. This is a union that Herzog wants to preserve (or rediscover?)

through the practice of movie-making. In *Cave*, the camera roves over the cavern's undulating walls and their nearly anamorphic figures, pausing on a concatenation of images that suggests animals in motion. Herzog wonders if these images might constitute "almost a form of proto-cinema"—and for him, they clearly do. The point here is that the creation and consumption of movies can be a kind of spiritual pursuit. In watching this movie, one is struck by the play of light and shadow, illumination and darkness, that defines both the conditions in which the cave paintings were created—in dark recesses lit by torches—and those of watching movies: the theater is a cave, a sacred space for participating in rituals of what Herzog calls "ecstatic truth."

P.S.—The "postscript" that concludes *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* is among its most intriguing and brilliant turns. Filmed near Chauvet, the postscript focuses on a crocodile population flourishing in the hothouse climate created by a nearby nuclear power plant. (For viewers at this historical moment, the images of the reactors will inevitably call to mind the disaster in Fukushima, Japan, now a symbol of the lethal dangers of nuclear power and its radioactive waste, which will not be depleted for 100,000 years—a time period far outstripping the millennia that have passed since the Paleolithic era.) The camera lingers on twin albino crocodiles, possibly mutated by radiation exposure. Nose to nose, these reptiles mirror each other even as their images are again doubled by the reflective waters in which they

float. For Herzog, the crocodiles, apparently so different from humans, are our strange doppelgangers—alter egos. As Freud has taught us, such uncanny doubles are “harbingers of death.” These reptiles thus speak not of the origins of the human soul, but of the obscure and uncertain ends of humanity, leaving us to ponder a question as compelling and fearful as the sacred itself.