افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نباشد تن من مبـــــاد بدین بوم و بر زنده یک تن مــــباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages	زبانهای اروپائی

By Yann Perreau

03.12.2023

The Cradle of Humanity

Teaser: What reading Georges Bataille could teach you about the birth of art—and of humanity.

Author Bio: Yann Perreau is a writer, educator, contemporary art curator, and writing fellow for the Human Bridges project of the Independent Media Institute. He has published several books with French publishers on climate, anonymity, and more. His articles have appeared in many publications, including Le Monde, the London Review of Books, and Art Press. He has served as a cultural attaché for both the French Embassy in London and the French Consulate in Los Angeles. He holds an MPhil in art history from Paris's EHESS.

Source: Human Bridges

Credit Line: *This article was produced by Human Bridges, a project of the Independent Media Institute.*

Tags: Social Science, Science, Art, Philosophy, Psychology, Religion/Spirituality, Europe/France, History, Book, Opinion, Evergreen

[Article Body:]

Why should we explore caves and excavate fossils? Why should we seek more information about our origins? And what can the first women and men tell us about the human condition? Reading Georges Bataille (1897-1962) answers these questions profoundly. The French writer considerably influenced authors such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, and Julia Kristeva, with provocative novels and essays exploring love, grief, economic theories, social structures, and systems of beliefs. He was

also fascinated by prehistoric art and culture, a topic he wrote about in many essays, reviews, and books, including his 1955 book *Prehistoric Painting: Lascaux or the Birth of Art*. Recent discoveries in paleontology, ethnoarchaeology, and anthropology confirm how relevant some of his ideas about our Neolithic ancestors were.

Bataille's writings on the topic resulted from much research and by following a scientific methodology. He studied the discoveries of Henri Breuil, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and other specialists in the 1940s and 1950s when social sciences flourished. Like his peers, he was very cautious toward a topic that, he understood, we can only partly apprehend. We lack most references to scientifically analyze what we are excavating, so prehistory remains, in many ways, an "abyss." He also knew how difficult it is to surpass our cultural perceptions and projections. In "A Meeting in Lascaux," a 1953 essay in the posthumously published collection of Bataille's works *The Cradle of Humanity: Prehistoric Art and Culture*, Bataille writes:

"After more than ten years, we are still far from having fully recognized the magnitude of the discovery of Lascaux… They are within the provinces of both science and desire. Would it be possible to discuss them the way Proust discussed Vermeer or Breton discussed Marcel Duchamp? Not only is it inappropriate to fall under their spell when near them, in the disorder of a visit, lacking the time to collect ourselves, but prehistorians also bid us to keep in mind what these apparitions meant to the men who animated them and who, unintentionally, bestowed them on us."

Bataille's approach to prehistory also comes from a very personal, almost intimate experience. He got permission to visit the Lascaux caves in southwestern France alone and would stay there indefinitely, amazed by the prehistoric wall paintings he saw.

The discovery of Lascaux is now part of its legend: on September 12, 1940, 18-year-old Marcel Ravidat and a few other teenagers were the first known to have ventured into the labyrinthine tunnels, pits, and caverns of Lascaux after rediscovering a cave entrance. Their lamp illuminated depictions of thousands of figures, including some heretofore unknown species of animals, humans, and mysterious abstract figures that were, until the discovery of the Lascaux paintings, not known to have even existed.

Bataille marvels at the moment of Lascaux's rediscovery, connecting the young human witnesses in 1940 to the art made circa 15,000 B.C. He also exclaims about the significance of prehistoric humanity's divergence from nonhuman animals through the means of art-making, while still being subject to compete against nonhuman animals for survival: "What we now conceive clearly is that the coming of humanity into the world

was a drama," he writes in "The Cradle of Humanity: The Vézère Valley," the eponymous 1959 essay in *The Cradle of Humanity*.

A Changing Understanding of the 'Pit' Scene

One scene in particular depicted on the walls of a pit in Lascaux appears to have fascinated and even obsessed Bataille. He brings it up repeatedly throughout the works collected in *The Cradle of Humanity*. The scene depicts, on its left-hand side, a wiry human, drawn faintly and in straight lines. This man's penis is erect, and he is wearing a bird mask. He appears to be drawn at an angle, as if he is falling to the ground ("It seems like this man is dead," writes Bataille), and we imagine that he has been knocked down by the bison that appears on the right-hand side. The bison appears wounded, gutted by a spear. Next to the man, a bird hangs on an elongated object—maybe a stick. Further out, in the distance, a rhinoceros is moving away.

This scene, also known as "the pit," "the well," or "the shaft," has been the object of endless interpretation by prehistorians, writers, and philosophers over the last 80 years. Those who have had the chance to observe it *in situ* have been fascinated by the mysterious protagonists it depicts but have also expressed their discomfort with its violence and sexuality. Who is this man? Has he really wounded the animal? Why does he have an erection? Why is he wearing a bird mask? Does it have anything to do with that other bird on the strange stick, turning his back to this scene?

Bataille initially refused to interpret the scene, preferring to express his "heavy indebtedness" to the analyses provided by the prehistorians of his day, such as Henri Breuil, Hans-Georg Bandi, and Johannes Maringer. Though they had different understandings of what was going on there, they shared a "utilitarian" or "functionalist" view that cave paintings were created to "facilitate the work of the hunt," as Stuart Kendall, one of the translators of Bataille's work, puts it in his editor's introduction to *The Cradle of Humanity*: "Prehistoric hunters attempted to provoke the actual appearance of their prey by painting apparitions of the animals on the cave walls. Painted arrows wounded the icons in anticipation of the actual hunt." Bataille added some observations made by Claude Lévi-Strauss and other anthropologists to this view while studying tribes of hunters in various parts of the world. "Expiation for the murder of animals killed in the hunt is a rule for many tribes of hunters," Bataille writes in his 1957 book *Erotism*. "The act of killing invested the killer, hunter, or warrior with a sacramental character. In order to take their place once more in profane society, they had to be cleansed and purified, and this was the object of expiatory rituals." So, the scene taking place is one of murder and

expiation for Bataille. The bird-man chimera is a "shaman… expiating, through his own death, the murder of the bison," Bataille writes in *Erotism*. His bird face is a mask, which forms part of this ritual.

Recent discoveries by archaeological researchers and chemists have analyzed the principal pigments in the Lascaux caves. This scientific progress partly discredits how we have understood the pit scene. The rhinoceros, for instance, is made from a different formula than the one used for the other protagonists. The rhinoceros might have nothing to do with the possible hunting and ritual expiation going on with the bird-man and the bison. On the other hand, pigments from this formula were discovered on the painting of a horse, which is situated on the opposite wall, and that was not previously interpreted as being part of the pit scene. "All the observers were fooled from the start," affirms Jean-Loïc Le Quellec, anthropologist and emeritus director of research at the French National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS). "We are looking at this wall with images and consider it a scene. We frame it as if we were in a museum. But what proves these images were created to compose a scene? It's not because they are juxtaposed that they were meant to be read together."

The Chauvet Cave and the Lascaux Cave

Prudence should always guide us when we look at these cave paintings and interpret them with our subjective, contemporary gaze. Our analyses of prehistoric discoveries are only relevant until contradicted by a new cave, a new fossil, and a new site being excavated. These discoveries often cause us to reevaluate and sometimes contradict a previously held notion, as scientific progress in all disciplines is made.

When Bataille was writing about Lascaux, the Chauvet cave hadn't been discovered yet. Found in 1994, the Chauvet cave is still considered one of the most significant prehistoric sites. Radiocarbon dating estimates some of the Chauvet cave's earliest samples to date back to around 32,000 years ago.

Are Bataille's prehistoric writings outdated then, and not worth reading? I don't think so. We can say that the people who made the paintings at Lascaux and those who made the ones at Chauvet, even though they are 20,000 years apart, "belong to the same world," as art historian Rémi Labrusse tells me over the phone. Paleoarchaeologists are discovering caves every year that reveal a full-bodied artistic tradition that goes as far as the Aurignacian. As much older artifacts are excavated, the similarities between the two caves become clearer. Although more colors are used in Lascaux, the styles, shapes, and executions of the Chauvet and Lascaux caves are relatively similar.

The Birth of Humanity Among Nonhuman Animals: Prehistoric Hunting and Modern Warfare

Bataille approached prehistory in a philosophical dimension. He never pretended to describe the factual truth of scientists. What interested him in Lascaux was what the cave represents: "The name Lascaux is the symbol of those ages which knew the passage from the human beast to the slender, sharp, and agile being that we are," he writes. For Kendall, "Bataille does not think that Lascaux records the birth of art, only that Lascaux participates in the moment of that birth, a phrase in which the word 'moment' may and almost certainly does refer to a period of tens of thousands of years. And this moment retains a preeminence among historical moments."

It is worth mentioning here that the French philosopher had studied with Alexandre Kojève, whose class on Hegel's aesthetics had a major influence on French thinkers of the time. In German ideology and "[f]or Hegel, [as explained by Kojève,] human history is the history of 'thought' as it attempts to understand itself and its relation to the world." Bataille also viewed prehistory as that moment of transition from animality to humanity, which announced the birth of the subject, the birth of the human community, the "we." But it's a tragic birth, as art historian Labrusse explains it:

"For Bataille, the singularity of the human being takes place in the mode of loss—loss of animality, loss of presence. As soon as you are not immersed in life like the animal was and look at it from the outside, you feel that your being is outside of you, and you create images. You superimpose a fictional world on a real world, and that's the birth of art. But it's a tragic birth."

Here is the "drama" to which Bataille was referring in *The Cradle of Humanity*. The emergence of man's awareness that he is no longer an animal is tragic. Lascaux, on the other hand, reveals for him traces of that precious time when men and animals were still alike in many ways and much more in tune than ever after. It "offers [the] earliest traces of nascent yet fully human consciousness—of consciousness not yet fully separated from natural flora and fauna, or from the energetic forces of the universe." Indeed, most of Lascaux's cave paintings represent animals, while almost no human appears on those walls. Many prehistorians interpret this by describing an "animal-man fusion," as Carole Fritz puts it. The researcher at CNRS reminds us of a time when the first individuals that women and men encountered in their immediate surroundings were none of their kind, but wild creatures running free.

That's what is at stake in the pit scene, according to Bataille. He cites rituals—"for the men of primitive times, as for men of the modern day whom we rightly or wrongly call primitives"—of asking for forgiveness before killing an animal to eat it. He sees the man in the pit scene "concealing his humanity behind an animal mask." "We cannot be sure that the men who lived in Lascaux… asked the bovine that they killed for forgiveness," he specifies later on. "[B]ut we don't have much reason to doubt a feeling on their part that corresponded to this behavior. In fact, what is certain is that the images they left us amply testify to a humanity that did not clearly and distinctly distinguish itself from animality, a humanity that had not transcended animality."

Still trying to understand this scene, Bataille refers to ethnologist Éveline Lot-Falck, who studied the Siberian hunting rites. According to the Yukaghir people, Lot-Falck writes, "like man, the beast possesses one or several souls and one language… The bear could speak if he wanted, but he prefers not to, and the Yukaghir [people] see this silence as proof of the bear's superiority over man." Bataille's meditations on the "silence of the beast" are hence related to what he sees as the greater respect for the animal shown by "the men of primitive times," compared to our modern way of industrially killing in slaughterhouses. He cites Jean de La Fontaine, whose fables "help remind us of former days, when animals spoke." Indeed, we know that nonhuman animals are creatures who often can't express pain in ways that humans can readily understand and thus suffer in silence.

The complex relationship between silence and violence is a constant motif in Bataille's work. It echoes his doubts about our ability to express our feelings with words. "Everything I've asserted, convictions I've expressed, it's all ridiculous and dead. I'm only silence, and the universe is silence." As Kendall puts it: "His writing aspires to the condition and experience of revelation: to capture in language that which cannot be expressed in words. His goal as a writer is the proliferation of silence." The French philosopher also liked to say that he was writing to silence others' voices in him. "But what would it be to forget, in the silence and isolation of the cave, one's solitude?" wonders Kendall. "Can there be, today, a community of the cave?"

What Makes Us Human?

Bataille's reflections on the possible origins of humanity also correspond with the intensified threat of its possible extinction. His pessimist views about humanity in the 1950s, when he wrote his major texts on prehistory, were partly due to the traumas caused by the Second World War. "It has become commonplace today to talk about the eventual

extinction of human life," he writes in a 1955 lecture on Lascaux. "The latest atomic experiments made tangible the notion of radiation invading the atmosphere and creating conditions in which life in general could no longer thrive… I am simply struck by the fact that light is being shed on our birth at the very moment when the notion of our death appears to us." As the description for *The Cradle of Humanity* explains, "the discovery of Lascaux in 1940 coincides with the bloodiest war in history—with new machines of death, Auschwitz, and Hiroshima." "To write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric," famously wrote Theodor Adorno, "and that corrodes also the knowledge which expresses why it has become impossible to write poetry today." Bataille struggled with a similar moral dilemma. Obsessed by the question of violence as an undeniable part of human nature, he was also very cautious about the dangers of ideology, hence his ethical gesture of retreating into silence.

But exploring these caves taught him something new. It became a unique possibility of reconnecting with the better part of our humanity. "At a very young age," he writes, "we learned to see *what is lacking* in the animal and to designate with the word 'beast' those among us whose lack of reason made us ashamed." He writes further, "Lascaux asks us to no longer deny *what we are*. We denigrate the animality that, through the men of these obscure caves, who hid their humanity beneath animal masks, we have not ceased to prolong." The horrors of the final solution and the atomic bombs were for him syndromes of our modern times, a humanity controlled by its hubris, reduced to its purely efficient, technical superiority over other species.

Could it be that the Neolithic women and men were more knowledgeable than we are today about animals' skills? Have we lost something that studying prehistory could remind us of? The ongoing quest to unearth the earliest art often overlooks our current understanding of human origins. It also fails to consider the substantial evidence showcasing artistic tendencies and skills among both primates and ancient humans. Many animal behaviors testify to this, the artistry that our primate ancestors had and still carry, starting with chimpanzees. They create rock piles under trees, routinely throwing stones at certain hollow trees, as an international team of researchers observed in Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, and Côte d'Ivoire. They make dolls out of sticks, according to a 2010 study published in the journal Current Biology. They also wear objects as a fashion statement.

"Anthropology abandoned the idea a long time ago that art was a useful social category," says paleoanthropologist at New York University Randall White during a conference.

Georges Bataille, for his part, rejected neither philosophical abstraction nor the specificities of anthropology or the history of art. Kendall describes the "general economic style of his [Bataille's] writing" by the word "drama" that he uses "to designate both the moment under consideration and the form of his complementary style of description."

Prehistory is universal history par excellence, understood Bataille. It is the history of a human community before it separated into nations and races. To look at prehistory is to seek to apprehend shared structures, functions, actions, and symbolic processes while constantly reinventing them, in the absence of sufficiently clear documents to interpret them. In *The Blind Spot*, the Spanish writer Javier Cercas writes: "Writing a novel consists of asking a complex question, and not in order to answer it… writing a novel consists of plunging into an enigma to render it insoluble, not to decipher it." This is also what Bataille achieved with his poignant, grasping, moving descriptions of prehistoric art, which belong to literature as well as to philosophy, and social science. Read him and you'll be transported into those caves, this eternal "abyss" that prehistory will always remain, at least partly, for us all.