

# Werner Herzog's Cave of Forgotten Dreams

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*Written and directed by Werner Herzog*

While the recent resurgence in use of 3D in films has, in most cases, simply been employed to ramp up the special-effects-driven adrenalin rush in mindless action movies, the value of being able to see things in three dimensions is made overwhelmingly obvious in *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, written and directed by veteran German filmmaker Werner Herzog. This documentary affords viewers the ability to experience the interior of Chauvet Cave in southern France, which contains the oldest known cave art anywhere in the world, almost as though they were there in person.

The cave's treasures, thought to date from roughly 32,000 years ago (although perhaps a bit more recent), were fortuitously preserved by a massive collapse of the original entrance, preventing any further access and creating a highly stable physical environment. In 1994, amateur spelunkers found a tiny opening that allowed them entrance to the cave's interior. The explorers soon discovered its wealth of Upper Paleolithic art in the form of many drawings, primarily of animals, on the cave walls.

Control of the cave was taken over by the French Ministry of Culture, and every effort has been made to protect its fragile artistic and archaeological contents from the kind of damage that has forced the closure of Lascaux, another well known Upper Paleolithic cave art site in southern France. Experience has shown that the visits by large numbers of people into such environments change the atmosphere, primarily by raising the humidity. This, in turn, promotes the growth of mold on the cave walls, which obscures and eventually destroys the art. Therefore, access to Chauvet has been severely restricted to small numbers of scientists for limited periods of time.

Werner Herzog and his team were granted exclusive access to the cave to film its contents. Very few people have had the opportunity to experience Upper Paleolithic cave art first hand. Two-dimensional images have certainly made this art available to many scientists and the

general public. However, it was soon appreciated that the ancient artists took advantage of the irregular surfaces of the cave walls to enhance their work, not only adding texture and contours to the images but also creating perspective and depth to the visual experience. These were not "primitive" artists. The three-dimensional cinematography of this documentary allows, for the first time, large numbers of people to visualize this art much more fully. In addition, one gets some of the sense of the difficulties the artists overcame in making the journey deep underground in order to reach their chosen "canvas."

One appreciates the long sequences in which the images are slowly presented from different perspectives and in different lighting. Some of the narration, and especially interviews with the scientists researching the cave, is informative. Unfortunately, however, at times Herzog wanders off on speculative tangents and tends to mystify the artwork (the "Epilog" about albino alligators is especially forgettable). Although, of course, one must pick and choose what to include and what to leave out in any presentation, the almost total absence of reference to the large body of research in Upper Paleolithic cave art already conducted leaves the art in Chauvet Cave lacking in scientific context.

Research at other sites strongly indicates that there is much more to cave art than simply the aesthetically sophisticated representation of animals. The physical positioning and associations of different kinds of animals in various portions of a cave, the superimposition of animal images with abstract symbols, the appearance of semi-human or human-like figures, and much more appear to represent patterns that had great meaning for the people who made this art and may, with study, provide insights into the culture and social organization of the Upper Paleolithic. Aside from the discussion in Herzog's film of what appears to be the only human representation at Chauvet, the juxtaposition of the lower part of a female body with a bull, there is virtually no attention paid to these important issues.

Another aspect of the mystification of Chauvet in

Herzog's film is the perpetuation of the misconception that Upper Paleolithic cave art appeared abruptly, representing an unexplainable "spiritual" awakening. While it is likely that creation of this art was bound up with the ways in which its creators conceptualized the world, the archaeological record is increasingly demonstrating that the capacity for abstraction and symbolic representation had long antecedents. The "abrupt" appearance of cave art during the Upper Paleolithic in Europe (roughly 40,000 to 10,000 years ago) is, at least in part, the result of the accidents of preservation.

The survival of these works of art was permitted by the relatively stable environments afforded in deep limestone caves, primarily in southern France and northern Spain. The highly perishable nature of much of the media on which most artistic works are likely to have been created means that a large proportion has been lost. Discoveries of works in bone, ivory, and other organic materials fortuitously preserved at archaeological sites due to unusually stable conditions (e.g., waterlogged or extremely dry) are the exception rather than the rule. Therefore, archaeologists are seeing only a fraction of the total range of humans' artistic expression. Consequently, it is difficult to gain a balanced view of what the relative proportion of cave art was in the overall artistic production of modern humans.

Neanderthals, who inhabited European caves for tens of thousands of years, produced no comparable artwork. By contrast, recent discoveries in southern Africa are beginning to reveal that early modern humans were already experimenting with abstract, symbolic representations at least 80,000 years ago, well before their descendants spread throughout the rest of the world.

The supposed "explosion" of artistic expression in Europe during the Upper Paleolithic must be viewed within a larger context, both of culture and of the vagaries of archaeological preservation. Cave art is not likely to be found in areas that lack caves. In some areas, such as Australia, native peoples produced paintings and drawings on exposed rock surfaces. The arid environment has resulted in a degree of preservation unknown in more humid, temperate climates. Humans may well have produced such rock art wherever they went, but most of that has likely been lost.

The preceding notwithstanding, the fact that humans ventured deep into caves, in total darkness, with only crude torches to light the way, and sometimes requiring travel along very difficult and dangerous routes to reach

the desired locations, strongly suggests that there was definite and very powerful meaning associated with creating art in such settings.

The Upper Paleolithic period in Europe coincided with the height of the last glacial. Masses of ice hundreds of meters thick covered a significant portion of the land surface. The climate was cold and harsh. Yet, at the same time, game animals were abundant and included a much wider variety of species than now exists in this region. Modern humans adapted to exploit this environment with new technology, not only sophisticated hunting weapons, but such things as sewn clothing, shelters constructed of mammoth ribs, etc., which permitted them to thrive. Although still an open question, it may well be that modern humans, who were relative newcomers to the glacial environment, out-competed the long-resident Neanderthal populations due to their greater intelligence and technological capabilities.

Indeed, the abundance of big game and the modern humans' sophisticated adaptation to that resource may have created a degree of economic stability that permitted some amount of leisure time (if you kill a mammoth or a group of bison and bury the meat in the permafrost you're set for some time). This, in turn, would have freed individuals to engage in artistically creative activities. In this light, the spectacular cave art of such places as Lascaux and Chauvet may indeed represent an unusually high level of achievement both in artistic expression and conceptualization of the world compared to anything previously achieved by humans.

The radical climate change and associated depletion of large game animal populations at the end of the Pleistocene put an end to this adaptation. While human populations suffered cultural decline as a consequence, this change also opened the way for the development of agriculture, permitting cultural advances exponentially greater than could be supported by even the most successful big game hunters.

Herzog's *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* is important in that it greatly enhances the ability of large numbers of people to appreciate an important element in the development of art and culture. It is well worth seeing, provided one keeps in mind its limitations.



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