

ENDLESS RESURRECTION:
ART AND RITUAL IN THE UPPER PALEOLITHIC

ARIELA STEIF



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ADVISOR: PROFESSOR MARGARET COOL ROOT
SECOND READER: ASSISTANT PROFESSOR KEVIN CARR

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Cover Image: Chauvet, Panel of the Horses, 32,000 – 29,000 years ago.

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Introduction

My thesis explores the driving forces that compelled the production of parietal art in the Upper Paleolithic caves of the Franco-Cantabrian region of Europe. This period, from about 40,000 to 10,000 years ago, spans the last cycle of the Ice Age in this region.

The overarching question this paper addresses asks why Upper Paleolithic peoples were compelled to produce art. The currently accepted interpretation of parietal art contends that the majority of the cave images are manifestations of shamanic ritual mediated through visionary experience in altered states of consciousness. Thus, to ask why this art was made is to also ask why ritual was enacted. There is no single answer to this double question. It is not even so straightforward as to say that there are multiple answers. Rather there are many layers of answers. As each layer is peeled back, new nuances and possibilities appear. This layering of issues and approaches responds to the relationship between art and ritual, as well as the biobehavioral, social, and cognitive causes behind these human behaviors in the context of the evolutionary environment.

Some of the social dynamics that come into play here include the interaction between ritual, collective memory, action, and anxiety; the importance of control within emotionally centered human behaviors; and the connections between ritual, group solidarity, social complexity, and ecological stress. I will argue that these dynamics relate to a tensional paradox of affect between social division and social cohesion. I will also argue for the relevance of ritual in this context within modes of religiosity, rites of terror, and the sacred-profane dichotomy.

My research, in its multifaceted and protean *modus operandi*, draws on multiple fields of study beyond art history, including archaeology, ethnographical and biological

anthropology, paleontology, and cognitive and evolutionary psychology. In addition to engaging this wide range of disciplines, I draw upon several earlier scholars of the history of religion whose work has been somewhat sidelined in contemporary discourse (particularly Jane Harrison and Mircea Eliade), in an attempt to revive and recontextualize their contributions.

This thesis is concerned almost exclusively with parietal art: the non-mobile works that include paintings, drawings, engravings, and reliefs on cave walls. Although the research is limited to a relatively small geographical area, the Franco-Cantabrian region contains 95 percent of all painted caves in the world, incorporating many thousands of images.¹ The physical and quantitative characterization of these thousands of images is complicated. Some images of individual figures appear to represent discrete phenomena. In other cases we see what are commonly referred to as ‘panels’: groups of animals appearing in compositions that deliberately depict them together. The so-called Panel of the Horses at Chauvet [Fig. 1] is a good example. Given the sheer number and diversity of images that exist and the nature of questions being investigated, I have chosen to explore the corpus as a whole rather than to focus on a small number of works or on a single cave. Nonetheless, there are a few key sites that will be emphasized and frequently cited as evidence: Lascaux, Chauvet, Altamira, Le Tuc D’Audoubert, Enlènes, Les Trois Frères, Pech Merle, El Castillo, and Covalanas [see Appendix B].

Determining secure relative dates for the parietal images is difficult, complicated, and often impossible. There were multiple interventions in the caves over periods of several thousand years, forming a huge potential time span in which the works could have originated. Even establishing the limits of this large and rough period is challenging.

¹ Clottes and Lewis-Williams, 1998, 37.

One method is carbon dating, which can be used to date passages incorporating charcoal as a drawing medium. Even here, measurements usually have a margin of error of hundreds, if not thousands, of years. Furthermore, carbon dating will only work for material later than approximately 40,000-50,000 years ago. Additionally, it tends to overestimate age – a tendency that increases as the age of the sample edges closer to this threshold. Not only could the dates given for older paintings conceivably be wildly inaccurate, but even our knowledge of when the Upper Paleolithic period began is tentative.² It is also worth noting that carbon dating does not yield the date that the painting was made, but rather the year that the tree (or other organism) died, that became the wood that was then fired into the charcoal, which ultimately made the painting. Finally, many of the pigments used in the Upper Paleolithic are mineral-based, such as manganese (blacks) and iron oxides (reds and yellows). These have no carbon composition and thus cannot be dated by radiocarbon technique.

One strategy for dating the episodes of human intervention in decorated caves is analysis of the associated archaeological record. Artifacts and other debris are often found in the earth just below the images rendered on cave walls. As the detritus built up over time it formed separate layers, known as ‘strata’, that represent successive periods of human activity. The most recent layer accumulated above those beneath it. Often artifacts and debris found within each stratum can be carbon-dated, yielding a rough absolute date for a given layer of deposition and a relative chronology for all the material discovered in the proximity of the cave’s parietal images. While crucial to the understanding of many features of cave function (and thus the social context in which the

² Lewis-Williams, 2002, 38.

parietal art was created and received over time), such analysis is of only limited use in determining the dating of the application of decoration to cave walls.

Furthermore, many of the caves were not excavated systematically in any sense. Some underwent more extensive exploration than others. Often caves were discovered serendipitously and treated cavalierly by any scientific standard. Lascaux,³ to cite one significant example, was famously found by four young boys who let an entire village of children walk through the cave before any archaeologist was even aware of its existence. Given the intermittent and haphazard manner in which many sites were examined, stratigraphic analysis of the depositions in the cave interiors is unevenly available. Remarkably, there is no master list or database of all archaeological evidence found in the caves, including parietal art, portable artifacts of all sorts, fossils, and other information-rich debris.

With this in mind, there is only so much information that we can glean from the physical evidence of the parietal art and its environment. Once the archaeological evidence has been collected, categorized, and analyzed, the question arises: how far can we go in constructing interpretative narratives with regard to the art and its makers? In prehistoric archaeology there is always a gap between evidence and interpretation, and thus we must ask, at what point do the interpretations exceed the reasonable bounds of the evidence? In this thesis I have tended to err on the side of caution, avoiding interpretative leaps that I believe might go too far, and qualifying statements that may be on the verge of over-assumption. This inclination, which seems to be prevalent in the field today, reacts against a long tradition of over-assumptions regarding the Upper Paleolithic era and its peoples. The prudence that currently pertains may compensate for

³ See Appendix B for information on the periods and locations of all caves cited in this thesis.

decades of supposition and misrepresentation. In recent years the field has slowly begun to reassemble and re-examine evidence in innovative ways, producing new hypotheses to explain the cave art while striving to construct an intellectually broad and objectively sound platform of analysis.

Part I: A Historiography of Interpretations

Despite the relatively recent discovery of some of the major Upper Paleolithic cave art of the Franco-Cantabrian region, the works have accumulated a rich history of competing interpretations and hypotheses regarding the reasons for their creation and possible social significance.⁴ Some examples of Upper Paleolithic parietal art had in fact been found as early as the mid-seventeenth century; but the remote antiquity of the artworks was not recognized.⁵ The first parietal art attributed to the Upper Paleolithic era was at Altamira, found by Don Marcelino Sanz de Sautuola and his daughter Maria on their land in 1879. Sautuola made the connection between the paintings on the ceiling that Maria found and the Upper Paleolithic artifacts he had seen at a Paris exhibition. For the remainder of his life he tirelessly argued that the paintings were as old as the portable art. Unfortunately, the prehistorians of the day rejected such claims; Sautuola died discredited and alone in his beliefs.⁶ Mainstream scholars did not credit the parietal art with being authentically Upper Paleolithic until approximately 1902. The earliest hypothesis on the meaning of cave art, called *l'art pour l'art*, 'art for the sake of art,' was put forth as early as 1861 by the French archaeologist Édouard Lartet and the prehistorian Édouard Piette. At that time, the interpretation was applied only to portable objects such as figurines, which had begun to emerge in the 1830s and were readily credited as works

⁴ While the bulk of this thesis incorporates scholars from a wide range of disciplines, the basic historiography of Upper Paleolithic parietal art is routinely covered in most contemporary texts concerned with cave art. In this section I have chosen to draw largely from the analyses of two scholars, David Lewis-Williams (a specialist in South African rock art) and Jean Clottes (one of the foremost scholars of Upper Paleolithic Franco-Cantabrian art). Their comprehensive and contemporary approaches offer a wide lens through which to view the historiography, and their extensive work in this field has transformed it enormously.

⁵ The images were treated cavalierly because their significance was not even guessed at. People who stumbled upon the paintings often signed their own names barely a foot away from them. Lewis-Williams, 2002, 26.

⁶ Lewis-Williams, 2002, 31.

created in the Paleolithic era.⁷ Once the correct age of the parietal art was accepted, these works were described in the context of the same ‘art for art’s sake’ hypothesis.

The proponents of this model asserted that the artwork was created for purely aesthetic purposes of pleasurable viewing and as an expression of personal urges to make images devoid of any symbolic meaning. They postulated further that since the work lacked symbolic value, then its creators could not possibly have held any religious beliefs.⁸ The authors of ‘art for art’s sake’ assumed that life was easy for the Upper Paleolithic peoples: that food was plentiful, and that abundant free time encouraged art production as a gratifying individual expression. This hypothesis was not popular for very long. It fell out of favor by the beginning of the twentieth century, following a period of harsh criticism. Besides its sweeping overgeneralization and mischaracterization of the prehistoric environment and lifestyle, the interpretation failed to account for the significant amount of art in the deepest parts of the caves – in areas that were exceedingly difficult to access, and certainly were not spaces for casual visual gratification. The people who made these works would not have gone to such considerable lengths for so simplistic and superficial a purpose as personal pleasure. Venturing into the dangerous, pitch-black, and labyrinth-like caves was not for the faint of heart: considerable courage and conviction was required.

Another hypothesis, dominant in the discourse only briefly, is related to concepts of totemism. This hypothesis was put forward largely by the French archaeologist Salomon Reinach around 1903,⁹ in the aftermath of *l’art pour l’art*. Totemism, which has been practiced by a number of societies throughout time, constitutes a special relationship

⁷ Lewis-Williams, 2002, 42.

⁸ Lewis-Williams, 2002, 42.

⁹ Lewis-Williams, 2002, 46.

between a human group or clan, and an animal species. The relationship includes both identification with and worship of the animal.¹⁰ The totemic interpretation quickly faded for several reasons. Some of the animals in the cave paintings appear to be wounded; others are shown pierced by objects that look like arrows, suggesting direct encounter with weapon-wielding humans. Such imagery is incompatible with totemism, although there are indeed historical examples of the killing of a totem animal as a form of honorific practice. A more compelling argument against the totemic interpretation is the great diversity of fauna represented in one cave or area; if the totem theory were correct, we would expect to see caves devoted to the portrayal of a single animal species. The one major exception to the widespread diversity of animal types depicted in individual caves across the Franco-Cantabrian region is the cave at Rouffignac. Here, an exceedingly large number of woolly mammoth depictions are found [Fig. 2]. Yet even at Rouffignac other animals do appear.¹¹ The multiple flaws in the totemic explanation made it increasingly problematic, inviting the rise to supremacy of a rival interpretation – one that would rule the field for nearly fifty years.

The sympathetic magic hypothesis emerged during the early twentieth century, partly due to the influence of Salomon Reinach, who favored it over the totemic hypothesis.¹² Abbé Henri Breuil, one of the foremost Paleolithic scholars of the last century, was also a fierce proponent of the sympathetic magic interpretation. At its most basic, sympathetic magic is based on a fundamental relationship between image and subject: to render an animal is to control it. ‘Killing’ the animal on the wall by depicting,

¹⁰ Clottes and Lewis-Williams, 1998, 66.

¹¹ Clottes and Lewis-Williams, 1998, 42-44.

¹² Lewis-Williams, 2002, 46.

for example, arrows in its flesh, is equivalent to killing the animal in real life.¹³ This hypothesis found some support in ethnographic parallels: a belief that possession of an image of a person or animal gives one power over that entity has been observed in a number of cultures.

Sympathetic magic posits three separate orders: hunting, destruction, and fertility. The goal of hunting magic is to ensure successful hunts. Evidence to support this theory within Upper Paleolithic parietal art has focused on paintings of animals that appeared to be wounded and the presence of marks that looked to be representations of weapons – primarily arrows and traps. Some animals are incompletely drawn; proponents of the sympathetic magic explanation believed that this might have been a deliberate strategy to lessen the animal's power. Destruction magic is built on the same premise and evidence as hunting magic, but it is directed towards dangerous, predatory animals. Among observable cultures, this category of magic is executed for protective purposes rather than sustenance. Fertility magic, by contrast, is closely related to hunting magic: it is meant to encourage or assist the procreation of animals that comprise the human diet.¹⁴

According to the sympathetic magic hypothesis, Upper Paleolithic parietal art aided survival, and on that level it was practical and utilitarian. But, at the same time, its practice was firmly anchored in magic, which would explain the location of some paintings in the depths of the caves. The concept of 'magic' is akin to ritual in that it involves action done to achieve some end beyond the action itself, or to influence events that affect daily life. However, it may not be codified in a prescribed, repetitive form as

¹³ Clottes and Lewis-Williams, 1998, 67-68.

¹⁴ Clottes and Lewis-Williams, 1998, 69.

ritual usually is.¹⁵

The demise of the sympathetic magic interpretation was surprisingly slow given the copious amount of evidence contradicting it. To begin with, only about 10% of all the parietal art in the Franco-Cantabrian region depicts imagery of either weapon marks or wounds. Scenes of copulation and pregnant female animals, which would substantiate the fertility magic aspect of the theory, are rare, as are images of fauna such as reindeer, an animal that constituted a major source of food for the Upper Paleolithic people. If one of the primary reasons for sympathetic magic was to ensure a food supply, then we would expect to see images of animals that were actually eaten. Finally, there was no explanation for other features of cave representations such as hand stencils, the depictions of humans, and the renderings of half-human, half-animal composite images called therianthropes. Despite these shortcomings, this interpretation, for the most part, did not fall out of favor until Henri Breuil's death in 1961.¹⁶

In 1945, the German art historian Max Raphael published a book entitled *Prehistoric Cave Paintings*, detailing his own understanding of the cave art. Although his ideas were largely ignored at the time, he made crucial observations that have since changed the face of the field. By and large his proposals cannot be either proven or disproven, but historians of Paleolithic art today are re-examining his work in the context of contemporary approaches and are finding new plausibility in what was once an obscure text.

Despite its age, Raphael observed, the parietal art seems peculiarly modern to us. He argued this apparent modernity was caused by what he referred to as the human's

¹⁵ Nor, we should add, is magic carried out through divine intervention; it is action done entirely on a human level.

¹⁶ Lewis-Williams, 2002, 33.

“emancipation from the animal state.”¹⁷ The works 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.”¹⁸

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. Today, mankind, amidst enormous sacrifices and suffering is, with imperfect awareness, striving for a future in the eyes of which all our history will sink to the level of ‘prehistory.’ Paleolithic man was carrying on a comparable struggle. Thus the art most distant from us becomes the nearest; the art most alien to us becomes the closest.¹⁹

Raphael is speaking of man’s attempt to liberate himself from the animal state; the paintings echo the continuous, extra-temporal struggle of humankind to rise above a present state of being, to aim for a future that today can only be imagined. He argues that these works are products of a moment of transition and transformation, and thus they themselves represent the concept of humankind as a dynamic, ever-moving body.

This significant cultural insight notwithstanding, Raphael’s tenets were based on some faulty data. For example, he suggested that the representation of humans in parietal art was forbidden.²⁰ The evidence of human depictions on cave walls contradicts this notion. He also insisted that some of the paintings were totemic,²¹ a hypothesis that had largely been discredited already by his time. Nevertheless, Raphael recognized crucial aspects of the paintings that archaeologists had previously missed, such as the fact that often the animals were not groups of individual images, but were clustered instead into

¹⁷ Raphael, 1945, 2.

¹⁸ Raphael, 1945, 1-2.

¹⁹ Raphael, 1945, 2.

²⁰ Raphael, 1945, 8; Raphael is speaking only of parietal art here; he acknowledges the human depictions in mobile art.

²¹ Raphael, 1945, 6.

compositions (“the herd and the horde”²²). Additionally, he perceived that the animals’ dimensions often conformed to the ratio of the Golden Section,²³ first articulated by Leonardo da Vinci, which posits a specific ratio of proportions that is said to be most aesthetically pleasing. Moreover, Raphael proposed that the Golden Section proportions could be achieved with the use of the human hand, which, on average, has the approximate measurements of 3:2 in length and width. The human hand, Raphael contended, was a critical tool in the context of this particular historical moment:

The hand was the organ by which erectly walking man could translate the superiority of his consciousness over the animal’s thinking capacity into practice. The hand enabled him to make instruments and weapons independent of his person...The hand was the organ that enabled man’s spiritual and physical forces to strive outward, that in the struggle for existence secured his life against animals and his power over other men.²⁴

Raphael’s hypothesis, perhaps more than any other before his time, took into account the unique socio-environmental phase within which the Upper Paleolithic parietal art was produced, and tried to make sense of it. Although much of his work was highly speculative, his ideas opened new paths for later researchers to explore by suggesting innovative modes of thinking about the art and the people who produced it.

The structuralist interpretation that followed largely emerged in the 1950s, and its philosophic methodology might be considered a backlash against earlier emphases on ethnographic parallels. Proposed primarily by two French scholars, Annette Laming-Emperaire and André Leroi-Gourhan, the model rejected ethnographic analogies and focused entirely on the content and context of the art itself. Their structuralist view held

²² Raphael, 1945, 1.

²³ Raphael, 1945, 28.

²⁴ Raphael, 1945, 31.

that the artists had a predetermined and ideal schema or structure that was superimposed on the caves. Additionally, Leroi-Gourhan postulated a binary system in which animals and signs had either male or female values; however, these values were independent of the depicted sex of the animal. This interpretive system was also applied to natural features of the cave interiors: cracks in the wall, for example, he considered to be female. Under the structuralist hypothesis the only thing that mattered was the subject of the work and to some degree (at least for Leroi-Gourhan) the comparative locations of images within a given cave. Everything else, including the number of animals, their sexing, positioning, stylistic attributes, etc., was unimportant. One of the major criticisms of the structuralist explanation challenged the plausibility that such differentiating features of the representations did not matter. Why did their creators go to the trouble of explicitly depicting them if they were meaningless? Also critiqued was the binary system of sexual values applied to the images. The attribution of male and female significance to specific renderings was entirely subjective, and there was no solid evidence for it. A final point made by critics of the structuralist approach was that it failed to explain why the work was created in the first place. Structuralism postulated an overall scheme for the organization of the caves and the placing of the parietal art within that framework, but failed to articulate why such a scheme would be significant.²⁵

Despite its failure as a plausible theory in its specifics, the structuralist approach moved the study of Upper Paleolithic art forward. Leroi-Gourhan approached the parietal art in a highly objective manner; he believed the research should be rooted in the evidence itself. Because of this desire for objectivity, he conducted thorough on-site investigations and left extensive documentation of subject matter, locations, and image-

²⁵ Clottes and Lewis-Williams, 1998, 73-75.

frequency in cave art throughout the Franco-Cantabrian region that would be of great aid to later scholars.²⁶

The current prevailing interpretation of the parietal art is informed by our understanding of shamanism, as this is manifest among hunter-gatherer societies of more recent times.²⁷ The lifeways of Upper Paleolithic hunter-gatherers are presumed to have been the most ancient prototypes for shamanic beliefs. The shamanic hypothesis of cave art is based on a fusion of direct evidence from the caves themselves with observations of more recent hunter-gatherer societies that still produce rock art. Since the early 1970s, various shamanic experts had suggested that prehistoric cave art may have had a shamanistic purpose,²⁸ but the idea was not explored in depth until the 1990s, primarily by David Lewis-Williams.²⁹

²⁶ Clottes and Lewis-Williams, 1998, 79.

²⁷ Lewis-Williams, April 1988, 213.

²⁸ Eliade, 1964, 503; Halifax, 1979, 3.

²⁹ David Lewis-Williams linked the rock paintings made by the San of South Africa and the altered states of consciousness they engaged in as a part of their religious beliefs and traditions. His findings were not, however, based on direct viewing of San painting practices, but rather on ethnolinguistic information collected by the German linguist Wilhelm Bleek in the nineteenth century.

Part II: Shamanic Interpretations

Shamanism is a religious “technique of ecstasy.”³⁰ Shamans enter altered states of consciousness – trances – at will, in order to achieve some socially-mandated end, such as healing the sick, changing the weather, predicting the future, or conversing with spirits. Healing is a particularly widespread province of the shaman. The shamanic scholar Joan Halifax describes the shaman as a “healed healer”: someone who has gone through a deep illness and has healed himself, thus giving him the power to heal others.³¹ Lewis-Williams comments that shamans “must suffer before they can heal, ‘die’ before they can bring life to their people.”³² The concept of symbolic death is a crucial element in the understanding of shamanic visionary experience, which will be elaborated upon later. Shamanism is ethnologically attested as ubiquitous among hunter-gatherer societies. Moreover, the ability to enter altered states of consciousness has not only been found in humans around the world, but also in some animals, suggesting that it is a capacity rooted in the mammalian nervous system.³³ The extension of this capacity to the sweep of mammalian life may be open to debate. But it is a proven capacity of the human nervous system, which presents to us, as Lewis-Williams puts it, a “neurological bridge” to the Upper Paleolithic.³⁴ Cultures, traditions, rituals, and religions can all change, particularly over a time span as large as that between today and the Upper Paleolithic. It is, however, irrefutable that Upper Paleolithic peoples were anatomically modern, behaviorally modern, and culturally modern humans; biologically speaking, they were no different from us. Thus, we can be sure that they had the same nervous systems as we,

³⁰ Eliade, 1964, 4.

³¹ Halifax, 1979, 18.

³² Lewis-Williams, 2002, 281.

³³ Lewis-Williams, April 1988, 202.

³⁴ Lewis-Williams, April 1988, 201.

and more importantly, because the human nervous system is universal and transcultural, the ability to enter altered states of consciousness existed for them as it does for us.³⁵

The thrust of the shamanic explanation of Paleolithic art holds that shamans entered altered states, hallucinated, and then recreated their trance-induced visions on cave interiors. Human consciousness lies on a spectrum, with alert and cogent states at one end, and so-called “altered” states of deep trance and hallucination at the other. In between is a wide variety of other states, including dreams, daydreams, and ‘lucid dreaming’. Lucid dreaming is a state in between waking and sleeping wherein the person can actually control, or learn to control, the direction of a dream or its imagery. This is a skill that is at the foundation of the shaman’s abilities.³⁶ The line between dreams and shamanic visions can sometimes blur: because a critical part of shamanism is out-of-body travel (which often occurs during dreams and sleep), dreams in shamanic societies can become an active way of harnessing power, as opposed to the ostensibly passive nature of dreaming.³⁷

Trance, manifested as ecstatic or frenzied states that include hallucinations, is sometimes caused by pathological conditions such as migraines or epilepsy; but it can also be induced in people without such pre-existing conditions, as lab-based studies have shown.³⁸ Clinical observations of people functioning in trance categorize three major stages of mental imagery-production within altered states of consciousness: entoptic phenomena, elaboration of entoptics, and hallucination. These stages are not necessarily present in everyone, nor are they always presented in this particular order. The grouping

³⁵ Clottes and Lewis-Williams, 1998, 12.

³⁶ Clottes and Lewis-Williams, 1998, 13-14.

³⁷ Lewis-Williams, October 1987, 168-70.

³⁸ Clottes and Lewis-Williams, 1998, 12.

of imagery that appears in altered states into these categories is done for the sake of analytical clarity. In actuality, given that consciousness lies on a spectrum, the development of mental imagery within altered states is gradual rather than rigidly compartmentalized; these stages are very rarely discrete.³⁹

Entoptic phenomena are visual sensations that stem from the optic system itself, and appear as dynamic geometric forms in front of the subject's eyes that can rotate, flicker, and morph into other forms. A variety of things can produce entoptic phenomena: electrical stimulation, flickering light, fatigue, sensory deprivation, extreme concentration, migraines, hyperventilation, prolonged rhythmic movement, and psychotropic drugs. Phosphenes, one subset of entoptics, are caused by physical pressure on the eyeball (such as that produced by pressing one's fingertips against the eyelids).⁴⁰

The entoptic images can then be 'fixed' upon a surface in front of the subject on which the images appear superimposed, as the circles and lines in red ochre are on the wall of Castillo Cave [Fig. 3]. Fixed entoptic phenomena such as these are replicated in other caves across the region, dispersed amid more iconic parietal art. In the second stage, entoptics are elaborated into iconic or recognizable forms, as the brain attempts to decode the abstract forms it is seeing.⁴¹ These forms are usually dependent on how the person is feeling at that specific time; it has been reported, for example, that if the subject is thirsty, a circle will begin to morph into a cup of water. The third stage, frequently initiated by the feeling of going through a vortex or tunnel, is characterized by particularly vivid hallucination of iconic imagery, accompanied by entoptic phenomena. The hallucinations appear to be projected onto the surfaces in front of the subject, and

³⁹ Lewis-Williams, April 1988, 204.

⁴⁰ Lewis-Williams, April 1988, 202.

⁴¹ Lewis-Williams, April 1988, 203.

these surfaces themselves seem to become alive and animated by the projection. In deep trance all of the senses hallucinate, not just one's vision. Thus not only can people *see* visions, but their bodies themselves feel like a part of the hallucination.⁴² A few Upper Paleolithic images, like the ones drawn directly with fingers on a wet wall [Fig. 4], might have been executed during the hallucination itself. Most, especially the technically complex ones, were probably done after the shaman emerged from the trance. Altered states are generally too ecstatic to allow for careful, detailed rendering of images.⁴³

Lewis-Williams's shamanic interpretation articulated above explains why entoptic phenomena (abstract imagery) and iconic images (representational imagery) often appear side by side, and sometimes directly on top of one another. Previously, some scholars have held that the Upper Paleolithic peoples used two different visual systems: abstract and representational, which seems somewhat unlikely. However, if these two ends of the graphic spectrum were produced together from the same nervous systems, then their material coexistence would be logical.⁴⁴ Lewis-Williams also suggests that this process might have been how the very first images began: people saw images in their minds that were projected onto the world in front of them – either as entoptic phenomena or as products of more advanced states of altered consciousness. Thus, drawing might not have had to be 'invented'. Rather drawing may have resulted from projected mental images that were 'fixed' on the surface before the person – in sand, dirt, or on the wall of a cave.⁴⁵

⁴² Clottes and Lewis-Williams, 1998, 14.

⁴³ Clottes and Lewis-Williams, 1998, 92.

⁴⁴ Lewis-Williams, 2002, 207.

⁴⁵ Lewis-Williams, April 1988, 215.

The famous scene in a tiny shaft deep in Lascaux⁴⁶ traditionally titled “Shaft of the Dead Man” [Fig. 5] is an excellent example of third-stage hallucinogenic expression. It has all the hallmarks of a shamanic vision. In the painting we can see the human figure with a bird’s head, a “staff” with a bird mounted on top, several arrow-like forms, and the wounded bison on the right, his intestines spilling out. Two elements in this scene are familiar to shamanic scholars. The “bird staff” is a common object associated with shamanic performance,⁴⁷ and the concept of a “bird-shaman” appears across many shamanic cultures.⁴⁸ While the figure in this scene appears to be a human body combined with a bird’s head, it is conceivable that it is a masked person. I will return to a discussion of the duality of ritual masking and visionary experience later. Lewis-Williams uses the term “behavioral symbolism” to refer to the relationship between animal vision and shaman. The behavior of the animal shown in shamanic rock art might not always be literal, but rather can be symbolic of the shaman’s actions. Thus an animal dying may operate as a metaphor for the entering of trance by the shaman, because a shaman said to ‘die’ when entering trance.⁴⁹ The appellation “Shaft of the Dead Man” in Lascaux is a misnomer leftover from older interpretations, based on a simplistic narrative reading of the scene. Paradoxically, the name is nonetheless still applicable, given that, on some level, the shaman is indeed ‘dead’.

In the Upper Paleolithic context, the mental imagery produced in trances is fixed on cave interiors. But the images produced are not mere visual records. They are a material and visual part of a process in which the images have been resurrected and re-

⁴⁶ Willemont, *et al.*, 1989.

⁴⁷ Halifax, 1979, 16.

⁴⁸ Halifax, 1979, 17.

⁴⁹ Lewis-Williams, Oct. 1987, 172-3.

lived on the walls. Far from being simple byproducts or documentations of visionary experience, these are “visions made manifest.”⁵⁰ They are not traces of rituals, but rather, rituals in and of themselves. Even after its maker is gone, the art retains its power as a perpetually charged ritual entity. The liveliness of images, as in the movement of one of the ‘Chinese’ horses in the Axial Gallery at Lascaux [Fig. 6], becomes all the more important in the context of shamanic altered-state ritual experience. Given that these are recreations of visions produced in trance, it is appropriate that they are just as striking and vivid as the hallucinations themselves would have been.

It is not, however, only the form of the artworks that is central to their shamanic elements; location is crucial as well. Many shamans experience a sensation of descending into the earth during trance, notably feelings of passing through a tunnel or vortex when the third stage of trance is entered. This experience carries feelings of claustrophobia, darkness, and difficulty breathing. Such symptoms physically and psychologically correspond to the experience of entering caves; the complete darkness, cold, isolation, and sensory deprivation can all induce trances.⁵¹ The vast majority of these caves are steep, winding passageways with enormous caverns, tiny crawl-tunnels, and long lines of chambers. The floors are slippery, usually composed of clay, and covered in sharp stalagmites, rocks, and other debris.

In this inhospitable environment the image of the Lascaux shaman and bison [Fig. 5] takes on new layers of analytical significance. As already noted, it is located deep within the cave in a vertical shaft about six meters deep. It can only be accessed by lowering oneself down on a rope, although there is some speculation that there was a

⁵⁰ Clottes and Lewis-Williams, 1998, 92.

⁵¹ Clottes and Lewis-Williams, 1998, 28.

second entrance in prehistoric times.⁵² In fact, the remains of braided plant fibers, forming a simple rope, were found preserved in clay at the bottom of the shaft.⁵³ When the Shaft was further excavated in 1959, numerous other objects were found, including several lamps, flint blades, ivory spears, seashells (one from the Atlantic, over 100 miles away), and quantities of charcoal and pigment.⁵⁴ The purposeful penetration of this remote and confined space must have been undertaken out of an urgent imperative, particularly given the sheer danger of entering any part of the cave's innermost recesses. This painting can be reinterpreted not as a mere narrative of shaman-hunter and bison-prey, but rather as an image materializing an elaborate hallucination that incorporates elements of death and resurrection.

For shamans, trances are extracorporeal journeys during which the soul is said to leave the body and either ascend to the sky or descend to the spirit world.⁵⁵ This ability is rooted in the shamanic initiation ceremony, sometimes known as a 'vision quest'.⁵⁶ Despite many differences between shamanic cultures throughout the world, the vast majority of initiation ceremonies follow a similar path of suffering, symbolic death, and resurrection. The initiation, being the first ecstatic experience, usually includes some combination of such themes as dismemberment and resurrection of internal organs, ascent to the sky to speak with the gods, descent to the underworld to speak with the spirits and dead, and other forms of revelatory experience.⁵⁷

The ritual ceremonies that accompanied or initiated the shaman's journeys may

⁵² Clottes, 2008, 121.

⁵³ White, 1986, 47.

⁵⁴ Lewis-Williams, 2002, 263.

⁵⁵ Eliade, 1964, 5.

⁵⁶ Clottes and Lewis-Williams, 1998, 20.

⁵⁷ Eliade, 1964, 33-35.

have been highly elaborate; music, dancing, singing, and other forms of performance might have formed another element of ritual in the caves. Flutes made from bird bones and dating to about 35,000 years ago have recently been discovered in, among others, the cave of the Hohle Fels in southwestern Germany [Fig. 7].⁵⁸ Another source of sound that could have been used in a ritual context is the stalactites that grow in nearly every cave. When stalactites are struck they produce a huge booming sound that echoes throughout the long passageways.⁵⁹ There is neurological evidence that auditory sensations (namely low-frequency, deep, steady, repetitive sounds, such as drum beats) can induce trance states. Primary ethnographic evidence documents that the San of the Kalahari Desert, who practiced shamanism until the early nineteenth century,⁶⁰ used this method to enter altered states of consciousness. Drums were used – and often still are in practicing societies – to “sustain” the shaman on his journey to the spirit world.⁶¹

Shamans are mediating figures that can navigate between the tiers of the cosmos. Inherent in the process of their extracorporeal journeys is a close association with spirit-animals. Many shamans identify with a single animal that is the source of his or her power, and that spirit brings a “supernatural potency” that enables the shaman to work his magic.⁶² Entering trance is often accompanied by nosebleeds, prickling of the skin, shivering or trembling of the limbs, and a painful “boiling” sensation in the stomach. This latter sensation is said to be the physical manifestation of the supernatural power boiling up inside of the shaman.⁶³ Morphing into an animal is a commonly reported

⁵⁸ Conard, August 2009.

⁵⁹ Lewis-Williams, 2002, 224.

⁶⁰ Solomon, 2005, 45.

⁶¹ Lewis-Williams, 2002, 225.

⁶² Clottes and Lewis-Williams, 1998, 23.

⁶³ Lewis-Williams, April 1988, 211.

hallucination, and such a connection with animals is essential to understanding Upper Paleolithic cave art. Some of the paintings that appear to represent real animals may instead be depictions of wholly transformed shamans. Moreover, the half-human, half-animal figures, called therianthropes (for example, the reindeer therianthrope of Les Trois Frères [Fig. 8]), may make manifest the shaman's vision of himself in a liminal state of half-transformation into an animal.⁶⁴

It is crucial to note that all three stages of mental image-production documented during altered consciousness are hard-wired into the human nervous system, but the subject matter of the last two stages is entirely dependent on culture, not biology. In trance-state, shamans tend to hallucinate exactly what they expect to hallucinate, so it is not surprising that animal-transformation might figure prominently in hallucination-driven cave art of this period. Shamans throughout time have performed rituals in which they don fabricated headdresses and other costumes that may be said, on some level, to “represent” their fusion with animal spirits. In this vein, Paleolithic images of therianthropes are sometimes characterized as straightforward representations of shamans wearing animal masks. But the duality of ritual costuming and deep-trance hallucination is apparent: it indicates the depth of cultural motivation feeding both trance-state visions and their materialization in Paleolithic caves.

Given the strong association of animals with shamanism, the paintings of human-animal faces at Altamira [Fig. 9] are likely to be conceptually related to this duality: a fusion of the realities both of shamanic animal mask and shamanic vision of oneself in a morphed animal-human state. The faces, not obviously animal or human, are painted onto pillar-type rock formations that jut out from the wall; the mouths effectively utilize

⁶⁴ Clottes and Lewis-Williams, 1998, 94.

fissures in the rock. The image, in this way, operates as both a painting that was outwardly added and, simultaneously, as a deeply embedded part of the structure of the cave itself.

Formal elements similar to these are an integral part of the cave art. Across the Franco-Cantabrian region, the most common attribute of parietal art is the way in which it exploits the natural features of the cave wall such as we have just noted with the faces of Altamira.⁶⁵ The often-illustrated bison on the ceiling at Altamira [Fig. 10] utilize bosses on the living rock as the outlines for their heads and abdomens. Some animals are even positioned vertically, as in the Castillo Cave [Fig. 11], in order to take advantage of the natural rock formations. At Pech Merle, the raised line of the rock wall forms the head and body of a horse, which is accompanied by entoptic phenomena [Fig. 12]. Almost every cave in the region reveals instances of the exploitation of rock contours in the applied parietal imagery. But it is likely that we are seeing something here that is motivated by urgencies beyond an artistic striving for formal and structural solutions between the image and the rock surface upon which it is being imposed.

Some images that use the natural rock contours can only be seen if the light source is at a specific angle relative to the art. Lewis-Williams argues that these works indicate a complex relationship between the viewing person and the image. On the one hand, the person has control over the image: by moving the light source around he or she can make the image appear and disappear at will. On the other hand, the image has its own kind of power over the person: anyone desiring to see the image is compelled to

⁶⁵ Clottes and Lewis-Williams, 1998, 86.

stand still with the light held in a precise position. If the light source is moved, the image is lost.⁶⁶

The context of the shamanic cosmos, which is nearly always tiered, sheds further light on the function and significance of the caves. The simplest version of the shamanic cosmos is one containing the sky above, often considered the home of the gods, the earth in the middle, as the domain of humans, and the world of the spirits and the dead below. Because caves extend so deep below ground, the experience of entering that darkness would have felt akin to entering the spirit world.⁶⁷ The does at Covalanas [Fig. 13] were painted in a perspective that makes them appear to be emerging out of the depths of the cave, or of a place of spirit-animals. In this way, they seem spiritually as well as physically wedded to the subterranean tier.

Across the entire Upper Paleolithic there are no depictions of natural landscape features such as ground lines, clouds, the sun, or trees. These representations were not intended to depict integrated observations of the natural world. Rather, they belong to another world, one in which the animals are free-floating – which is, in fact, exactly how they appear in trance-based hallucinations. On the cave wall the free-floating animal is at once unanchored by things of the normally observable world and also physically bonded to the interior regions of the earth. The vast majority of the images are also unrelated to each other: proximity rarely means anything at all. The importance of the exploitation of the cave wall is that the animals become a part of it; it is no longer simply a surface on which the painting rests. Instead image and wall are vitally linked.⁶⁸ Artistic techniques in many caves make it seem as if the animals are emerging out of the cracks of the wall

⁶⁶ Clottes and Lewis-Williams, 1998, 91.

⁶⁷ Clottes and Lewis-Williams, 1998, 29.

⁶⁸ Clottes and Lewis-Williams, 1998, 92.

itself or deep recesses, particularly the ones that are only half-painted. The frontal view of a reindeer head at El Castillo [Fig. 14] is one of the most ingenious uses of the rock.

Here, a hole in the wall forms the head itself, and the antlers are drawn in above it.

The techniques and treatment of the images suggest a critical importance of the living materiality of the cave wall. In some caves there are bone objects, including spearheads, bone fragments, and teeth, several of which have traces of paint on them, that are jammed into cracks in the rock surface or placed in small niches in the wall [Fig. 15]. These objects were surely not placed there idly or for no purpose at all. There are simply too many of them, and, in addition, a large number are located in the remotest depths of the caves. The bone objects, particularly the ones wedged into cracks and emerging out of the rock floor, make it seem as if the human agent was attempting to pierce the inner core as well as the surface membrane of the rock itself.⁶⁹

Bones are a fundamental material in the context of shamanism. Historically, the shamanic costume often includes long iron objects that give the appearance of a human skeleton. The costume is a symbol of the unique status of the shaman as a personage who has died and been resurrected. The bones symbolize and re-enact his initiation of death and resurrection, and connect to his role in the community and his ability to mediate between the worlds of the living and the dead. But bones, too, represent something even more elemental: “Among hunting peoples bones represent the final source of life, both human and animal, the source from which the species is reconstituted at will...the ‘soul’ is presumed to reside in the bones.”⁷⁰ Mircea Eliade, a historian of religion, suggests that

⁶⁹ Clottes and Lewis-Williams, 1998, 83.

⁷⁰ Eliade, 1964, 159.

the bone objects lodged into the rock might also be interpreted as ritual offerings.⁷¹

Regardless of their specific purpose, these acts of agency indicate the powerful significance of the cave interiors. With this perspective in mind we can begin to understand the spiritual importance of the caves and the rites and rituals that were conducted within them.

Using ethnographic comparisons of other hunter-gatherer shamanic groups that made rock art, Lewis-Williams argues that to the Upper Paleolithic peoples the cave was the spirit world itself. By recreating visions on the walls, shamans could draw out the spirits of the underworld. Within the scope of this framework, the rock surface was a ‘membrane’ or a ‘veil’ between the people and the underworld that existed just on the other side of the wall.⁷² Places in certain caves such as the Apse at Lascaux have drawings and marks piled up on top of each other [Fig. 16]; some are not drawings at all but simply scored lines made in the soft rock surface. These might have been attempts by ‘lay’ people to access the power residing beyond the wall membrane,⁷³ but the shaman also could have produced them while in low-level trance states.⁷⁴ The rock was more than just a surface – it was a living material infused with magic, power, and meaning. The significance of the cave itself would also provide an explanation for why some animal depictions, like the vertical bear in Chauvet [Fig. 17], appear to be emerging from cracks in the wall, or why bones were pushed into small openings, as if they were trying to reach into the spirit world.⁷⁵

⁷¹ Eliade, 1964, 503.

⁷² Clottes and Lewis-Williams, 1998, 85.

⁷³ Lewis-Williams, 2002, 256.

⁷⁴ Clottes and Lewis-Williams, 1998, 110.

⁷⁵ Clottes and Lewis-Williams, 1998, 85.

Viewing the caves in this context also sheds light on the handprints [Fig. 18] that appear that appear across the spatiotemporal breadth of the Upper Paleolithic. The handprints established a relationship between the person and the spirit world beyond the rock surface. The pigment was most likely ritually prepared to make it powerful, as it is in other shamanic societies that make rock art,⁷⁶ and would have created a bond or seal between the hand and the wall. Some prints are negative stencils, made by placing the hand on the wall, and then blowing pigment on top of it through the mouth, a hollow bone, or a reed. The coloring agent in these cases would have formed a seal between the hand and the wall. The paint may have also been seen as a ‘solvent’ that dissolved the rock, allowing brief tactile access to the world behind it.⁷⁷

While we will never be able to give a precise meaning for all of the parietal imagery, these interpretive frameworks provide an important entry point into the work, allowing us to conceptualize making, meaning, and purpose in a way that extends beyond mere formal analysis. Not all of the cave art may have been made for shamanic purposes, and there might have been various forms of shamanism that existed side-by-side. Different areas, from open-air sites to the deepest caves, were most likely used for diverse ritual purposes in a context of dynamic and evolving social complexity.⁷⁸ The shamanic hypothesis is simply that – a hypothesis. While the interpretations it opens up fit the evidence well, no hypothesis, science tells us, can actually be proven; one can only continue to show that there is nothing to falsify it and plenty to support it.

The shamanic explanation answers many interpretive questions that previous hypotheses could not. However, all of the interpretations introduced so far leap over a

⁷⁶ Solomon, 2005, 51.

⁷⁷ Clottes and Lewis-Williams, 1998, 95.

⁷⁸ Clottes and Lewis-Williams, 1998, 102.

more fundamental issue than the ones they are investigating. They raise questions concerned with the meaning of the art, or the context in which it was created, but fail to ask why the Upper Paleolithic peoples were compelled to make the art in the first place. The shamanic interpretation, for example, says that during ecstatic trance they would see images on the screen of their mind, projected onto surfaces in front of them, and would then 'fix' the images on the wall, either during or after trance. But why did Paleolithic shamans feel the need to fix mental images on the wall at all? There is nothing in known shamanic tradition that universally necessitates art production. Ultimately, some other force must have combined with shamanic practice to compel the production of Upper Paleolithic parietal art. This other force, I propose, is closely tied to ritual.

Part III: Art and Ritual: A Biobehavioral Perspective

I will argue below that the making and perceiving of Upper Paleolithic parietal art was intimately entwined with the making of ritual – that this art-making (and its resultant apparition over time) was itself a dynamic feature of ritual behavior. In order to make this case, I review and interpret the nature of ritual, as discourse on this complex subject, and its particular relevance to the Upper Paleolithic environment.

There are numerous reasons why humans are driven to construct and to perform ritual; but at the core of all such reasons is a biobehavioral feature of the human condition. We have evolved to engage in ritual practices because they are selectively advantageous – they have helped us survive. Historically, nearly all societies have distinguished the ordinary from the extra-ordinary – the mundane and explicit from the sacred and unseen. Rituals, being at once prescribed and symbolic actions, constitute a formalization and exaggeration of ordinary behaviors, enhancing their significance and meaning by extending them into dimensions of the unseen.⁷⁹ As a generalized concept across history, ritual acts are often elaborately set apart from the spaces and places of everyday life, just as the Upper Paleolithic caves were physically differentiated arenas set apart from habitation sites, and just as so much of the imagery applied to their walls was set within their most remote depths. When, instead, rituals take place within the bounds of mundane spaces and lifeways, they serve temporarily to take that ordinariness into a special space in meaning and time for the extent of the episode. In both scenarios, rituals are crystallizing expressions of the transformative valences of passage from the ordinary to the extra-ordinary dimension of life. Paradoxically perhaps, an essential feature of

⁷⁹ Dissanayake, 1992, 48-49.

ritual is its repeatability, indeed its essence as a perpetually re-performed act.

Ritual is an evolved and distinctly human capacity that became hard-wired into our neural circuitry because such behavior was beneficial within the evolutionary environment. This hard-wiring was an established element of the human condition already in the Upper Paleolithic.⁸⁰ Ritual comprises formalized, socially reinforcing ceremonies that use signs, symbols, and other abstract “repetitive systems of visual representations”⁸¹ to bring about a desired result. Particularly in hunter-gatherer societies, ritual behavior tends to arise around major life events and crucial cyclical transitions like birth, death, marriage, and coming of age. But it is also concerned with practices pertaining to survival and crisis-intervention and is thus charged with anxiety – e.g., through urgencies to obtain food, cure the sick, resolve conflict, and guard against natural disasters. This was especially true during the Pleistocene. Archaeological and paleontological evidence documents the dangerous animals with which Upper Paleolithic peoples had to contend, long periods of food shortage and starvation, and phases of intense cold when the glacial sheets advanced from the north.⁸²

The ethologist⁸³ Ellen Dissanayake contends that although the specific manifestations of rituals are by and large culturally-specific, they are based on an innate behavioral tendency.⁸⁴ In the face of anxiety, change, and times of uncertainty, humans

⁸⁰ Simple differentiating between the ordinary and the non-ordinary is a capacity far older and more instinctive than its human cultural context would seem to imply. All animals make the distinction between ordinary versus non-ordinary – or normal versus abnormal. But only humans codify these distinctions in consciously ritualized form. Nonetheless, all animal survival is dependent on defense mechanisms that filter out irregular events such as noises, movements, and signs of aggressors: they are constantly ready to perceive change and react to it via predictable, repeatable tactics. Dissanayake, 1992, 50.

⁸¹ Conkey, 1985, 299.

⁸² White, 1986, 77.

⁸³ Ethology is the study of animal behavior, specifically behavioral patterns in the context of the natural environment.

⁸⁴ Dissanayake, 1992, 68.

are not content to rely on the responses that the rest of the animal kingdom does, but are instead driven to *act*. The normal, instinctive responses of animals include flight, fight, or freeze. Action as embodied by ritual is none of these. Rather it is deliberative and purposeful: rituals are intended to change or impact a particular circumstance. During periods of drought, animals, as far as we can tell, do nothing but wait for rain to come if they cannot find another water source. Humans, conversely, invented the rain dance.⁸⁵ When all tangible and practical possibilities to rectify or alleviate anxiety-inducing crises have been exhausted, humans still *act*, in whatever manner possible.

Not only are rituals performed in the face of disasters, but they are also conducted in preparation for them. Ritual and oral tradition, as Leah Minc argues, are used to transmit information required to survive subsistence crises, particularly in pre-literate societies. It is these types of mechanisms that enable the retention of survival-related memory from one crisis to another, even if there is a temporal gap of several generations between crises.⁸⁶ When oral tradition is sanctified – that is, when it is codified within a ritual context – the encoded knowledge and information is strictly sacrosanct, thus ensuring near exact transmission with little room for deviation.⁸⁷

The concept of ritual or cultural memory is not limited to one particular aspect of culture or to one narrow human cognitive or physical capacity. Rather it exists simultaneously as a shared body of knowledge bonded to the totality of identity and behavior within a society. A ritual cannot simply and passively be passed on. It must become “part of the ongoing process of interpretation and re-interpretation of the

⁸⁵ Dissanayake, 1992, 68-71.

⁸⁶ Minc, 1986.

⁸⁷ Minc, 1986, 102.

world...[that] involves the sedimentation and inscription of habits into the body.”⁸⁸ The reading and transmission of ritual is a complicated practice subject to continual pressures of change. As we shall see, it requires complex cognitive processes.

Denis Dutton, a scholar of aesthetics and the philosophy of art, postulates the ways in which we can connect artistic behaviors to biobehavioral and evolutionary frameworks through the use of language. Like art and ritual, language is dependent on a certain degree of abstract, symbolic, and conceptual thinking. Additionally, language, like art and ritual, is a behavior that negotiates between two spheres. As Dutton articulates this interdependency of language, art, and ritual:

[It involves] on the one hand, deep, innate structures and mechanisms of intellectual and emotional life and, on the other hand, a vast ocean of historically contingent cultural material.⁸⁹

Languages, while differentiating, can still be translated from one to another because linguistic structures are transcultural and “tied to universal prelinguistic interests, desires, needs, and capacities.”⁹⁰ Moreover, there are other aspects of language that suggest a biological basis, such as the ubiquitous involvement of emotional expression, and children’s instinctive capacity to learn verbal communication without instruction.⁹¹

Dutton also examines the concept of ‘decoupled cognition’, a term that refers to the ability to separate out imagined worlds from the real one – a capacity that would have had survival value in the Upper Paleolithic. Two major and universal human behaviors, storytelling and the ‘pretend play’ of children, exhibit the use of this cognitive dexterity, which allows for the development of strategic and conditional thinking. Such abilities

⁸⁸ Porr, 2010, 88.

⁸⁹ Dutton, 2009, 31.

⁹⁰ Dutton, 2009, 30.

⁹¹ Dutton, 2009, 31.

would have had obvious selective value during the Upper Paleolithic, most notably in the areas of warfare, hunting, and other subsistence practices. Pretend play and the cognitive mechanisms it requires are capacities that, like language, develop spontaneously in young children and are considered to be an important part of normal childhood development.⁹² Play and its related activity, storytelling (which is often ritually-based, as in the recitation of mythological, cosmological, and origin-stories), can create an infinite number of flexible and interweaving scenarios for which humans may prepare. The conceptual ability to ask ‘what-if’ questions – and then to present a number of possible answers to them – is a unique product of *Homo sapiens*’s evolved higher consciousness. One writer describes humans as “conceptual hunters”: as soon as we solve a problem, we immediately begin to look for new problems to explore and new questions to answer.⁹³ To imagine what might be, to plan ahead for contingencies, and to devise complex hunting strategies that require forethought are all instances of the conditional thinking promoted in activities such as storytelling. Storytelling also becomes a mechanism for passing on knowledge and information to the next generation; likewise, it can be a tool used to convey and condition social behavioral norms.⁹⁴ Through the lens of language, storytelling, and play – all of which are connected to art and ritual – we can see the biobehavioral foundations that lie beneath art and ritual and the selectively advantageous traits that compel such behaviors.

In her influential book, *Ancient Art and Ritual*, the classical scholar Jane Harrison introduced a commentary on the core meaning of the ancient Greek word, *dromenon*, into the discourse surrounding ritual. *Dromenon* is the Greek word used for rite or ritual, but

⁹² Dutton, 2009, 107.

⁹³ Orland, 2006, 66.

⁹⁴ Dutton, 2009, 110.

literally translated it means ‘a thing done’.⁹⁵ Inherent in the literal foundation of the word is the implication that ritual necessitates action and compels choice. As Eliade has since argued, things only become sacred when they are *chosen* to be sacred.⁹⁶ The term *dromena*, ‘things done’, thus embraces the notion of rituals themselves and also the underlying human need for ritual action as a purposeful doing.⁹⁷

Archaeologist Colin Renfrew discusses at length the overwhelming challenges involved with finding evidence of ritual in the archaeological record. While sacred activities often occupy their own physical sphere, they are usually deeply connected in many ways to other aspects of the social and cultural life of the community.⁹⁸ The best place to look for physical traces of ritual, Renfrew argues, is in the context of iconographic representations.⁹⁹ But even this method is not always successful. At best it may be richly suggestive but incomplete and often ambiguous. Sifting out conceptions of ritual in the evidence, and finding the so-called ‘middle range’ between the static archaeological record and the dynamic way that the society used and thought about it, is an enormously complex undertaking. One of the few direct examples of ritual action from the Upper Paleolithic so far discovered, aside from the parietal art itself, is the group of children’s heel prints left in the soft clay floor of Le Tuc D’Audoubert [Fig. 19]. This is rare physical evidence of a ritual that may have involved dance. Near these footprints are two clay sculptures of bison, possibly copulating [Fig. 20], leading some to believe that the ritual was a sexual initiation of some sort. Anxiety and fear of the unknown often characterize times of transition: beginnings and endings, as well as periods of liminality –

⁹⁵ Harrison, 1913, 10.

⁹⁶ Eliade, 1974, 13.

⁹⁷ Dissanayake, 1992, 71.

⁹⁸ Renfrew, 1994, 47.

⁹⁹ Renfrew, 1994, 49.

states or situations that are betwixt and between, that are neither one thing nor another.¹⁰⁰

Rites and rituals are ceremonial acts that mark these times and address them in ways that are emotionally significant and transformative. They alleviate anxiety through action.

The reduction of anxiety is a critical survival tool, and both ritual and action are usually calming behaviors. They are repetitive on multiple levels. The physical movements that constitute action and ritual are typically rhythmic and cyclical. And in a larger sense, rituals as a whole are codified over time and marked as tradition. They are passed down and continually re-performed by subsequent generations. Certainly one of the most striking things about the body of Upper Paleolithic art is the way in which many aspects remained consistent over the 30,000-year period, implying a remarkably continuous ritual tradition.

The continuity of ritual practices is, indeed, dependent on the social need for them to be passed on. Early in the twentieth century, Harrison examined the similarities between art and ritual by beginning with Plato's definition of art, which holds that it is, essentially, an imitation of the natural world. While this is by any modern standard a limited and outdated characterization, it provides a vital conceptual framework within which to understand ritual. Ritual, Harrison argued, involves a form of imitation. But it is not imitation in the sense of rote copying or superficial reproduction. Rather, it embodies reverence and urgency in ceremonial form. Ritual becomes the need or desire to *recreate* an emotion. It is neither replica nor mimicry, but rather

an impulse shared by art with ritual, the desire, that is, to utter, to give out a strongly felt emotion or desire by representing, by making or doing or enriching the object or act desired. The common source...is the intense, world-wide desire that the life of

¹⁰⁰ Dissanayake, 1992, 69-70.

Nature which seemed dead should live again.¹⁰¹

In this sense Harrison concluded that art and ritual are based on the same fundamental premise, and, in addition, that they both require *action*. They are constituted by the need to recreate, revive, and re-enact emotion through action. Art and ritual emerge from a common and elemental emotional basis. The emotions being re-enacted are not, however, private, individual ones. Rather, they are public and collective emotions, experienced by an entire community.¹⁰² Beyond reflecting emotions, these activities can also unite contradictory feelings and allow humans to create order within their own worlds.¹⁰³ A fundamental component of ritual behavior is an active and emotional engagement with it.

A ritual only becomes dull or mundane when the emotion it was intended to explicate, placate, or reinforce through enlivening has become moribund. At that point, what remains is nothing more than procedural imitation. In other words, one must actually *believe* in the ritual, in its purposes and intentions, in order for it to serve with true effectiveness. This necessity is never more critical than in shamanism, which requires a wholehearted belief and need to enter the frenzied and ecstatic states of altered consciousness.

Ultimately, rituals are performed not merely in order to produce a singular intended 'result', but also to have a larger, more complex social and biological function. Anxiety and uncertainty are about a loss of control. The use of prescribed, codified, and traditional sets of ceremonies (which often acknowledge anxiety, thereby lessening it)

¹⁰¹ Harrison, 1913, 10.

¹⁰² Harrison, 1913, 23.

¹⁰³ Dissanayake, 1988, 65.

constitutes the means by which control can be re-asserted.¹⁰⁴ A rain-dance may be palliative even if it does not actually bring the rain. Control, in fact, seems to be at the heart of emotionally centered human behaviors, including both art and ritual, which in the Upper Paleolithic environment are often so closely tied as to be the same thing. Although mobile art is predominantly outside of the scope of this thesis, it is worth noting that one of the most compelling forms of portable art is found decorating spear-throwers of the Upper Paleolithic. Such careful and elegant embellishment is certainly not necessary to making the spear fly through the air, but it is evidence not only of care and importance, but also of the symbolic significance of the tool to its maker. It is an instance of attempting to exercise control over that which is difficult to control – the weapon and its guided trajectory toward animal quarry or human enemy.¹⁰⁵

Ritual is not invented for its own sake; it is invented because it speaks to critical life issues.¹⁰⁶ Community-based rituals typical of observable hunter-gather societies can cause self-transcendence: a merging of the individual into the group.¹⁰⁷ Collective activities of this sort, which might have taken place in large chambers of caves like the one at Lascaux [Fig. 21], are socially reinforcing: they foster group cohesion, increase empathy,¹⁰⁸ reinforce a sense of belonging,¹⁰⁹ and strengthen social ties.

Neurophysiologists have concluded that group rituals, and the rhythmic movement that often accompanies them, can cause the release of chemicals in the brain that are conducive to group cooperation and unity.¹¹⁰ These principles hold true on a

¹⁰⁴ Dissanayake, 1992, 80.

¹⁰⁵ Dissanayake, 1992, 93.

¹⁰⁶ Dissanayake, 1992, 67.

¹⁰⁷ Dissanayake, 1992, 80.

¹⁰⁸ Dutton, 2009, 223.

¹⁰⁹ Dissanayake, 2000, 61.

¹¹⁰ Dissanayake, 2000, 163.

practical level, as well as on a biological one. Societies, for example, that dance together to ensure food for the coming season are more likely to share the provisions among the group members, or to bring food when one person is unable to hunt. Group cohesion also promotes defense of the community and encourages care of the sick. Cooperation and coordination are essential social practices that increase survival. This would have been particularly evident in the unpredictable environment of the Upper Paleolithic. Shared group experiences and emotions needed to be made manifest through ritual in order to solidify social structure.¹¹¹

The archaeologist Michael Jochim argues that cave art functioned as an instrument of group cohesion in the face of difficult ecological and social conditions. One of the major glacial advances in Europe occurred approximately 20,000 – 25,000 years ago, pushing the human population out of northern and central regions and down into refugia in southwestern France. Increased population density would have put pressure on the local resources, an issue that was dealt with in a number of different ways, including changes in subsistence practices. Social arrangements would have also evolved, coinciding with accelerated complexity, logically resulting in new forms of ritual behavior. Thus it is not surprising that this phase of the Upper Paleolithic sees a dramatic intensity in cave art production. These issues demonstrate that times of transition, social change, and ecological pressure – times of anxiety – are accompanied by an intensification of ritual behavior (including image-making *as* ritual) in order to maintain social cohesion and to ensure group survival.¹¹² The need for such unity and organization within Upper Paleolithic communities is known to have been far more pressing than was

¹¹¹ Dissanayake, 1992, 52.

¹¹² Jochim, 1983, 212-219.

once recognized.

The evolution of *Homo sapiens* led to the rise of higher consciousness, enabling humans to enter the altered states of consciousness that form the cognitive and ritualistic foundation of the cave art. Archaeologist Steven Mithen contends that there are three cognitive processes critical to artmaking: “mental conception of an image, intentional communication and the attribution of meaning.”¹¹³ These three skills, he maintains, were all present in earlier humans, but not until the evolution of *Homo sapiens* were the three faculties able to work together in a way that yielded art. This trinity of mental capacities was necessary not just for the production of art, but also for the hallucination-driven ritual experiences that occurred in the deep caves.

Changing social diversity in the Upper Paleolithic communities may have come from, among other things, the differentiation between those who could access the hallucinatory states and the visionary experiences that accompanied them, and those who could not.¹¹⁴ While all humans have the neurological potential to enter deep trance states, it is evident that some people are more susceptible than others. Ultimately, the qualities that marked some portion of the population as having this particular capacity may have established new forms of hierarchy in the society. Some of the most compelling archaeological evidence for societal differentiation comes from variation in mortuary practices, even within a single community. A number of different characteristics of burial methods, from the position, treatment, and clothing of the corpse to the grave-goods buried beside it to the number of bodies within a single grave, all speak to differences in

¹¹³ Mithen, 1996, 162.

¹¹⁴ Lewis-Williams, 2002, 196.

status, rank, and respect within the society.¹¹⁵ Social hierarchy corresponds to informational hierarchy. A cave like Lascaux is an excellent case in point, with its combination of vast chambers and small, secretive places like the Shaft. John Pfeiffer believes that

this use of spaces is a message in itself – a message we may yet read. It implies a system of classification, bodies of information separated by increasing difficulty of access, degrees of concealment, a hierarchy of knowledge.¹¹⁶

Social diversity and status differentiation can take numerous forms; societies devise myriad different ways of marking and reinforcing hierarchy.

Art and ritual, Lewis-Williams argues, “were simultaneously born in a process of social stratification.” The social divisiveness of art and ritual would have split the community in numerous ways, but may also have allowed for increased social complexity and adaptations to new environments.¹¹⁷ Lewis-Williams is one of several scholars who are currently re-examining Max Raphael’s prescient claim that this was art concerned not with contentment or maintenance of the status quo, but rather with conflict and struggle.¹¹⁸ Margaret Conkey makes a similar point regarding art and ritual, noting that “ritual communication is one of the means by which social elaboration, social structure, and social reorganization takes on form and can take place.”¹¹⁹ A rise in social complexity and hierarchy coincides with an increase in ritual communication and activity.¹²⁰

Strong archaeological evidence supports the argument that Upper Paleolithic

¹¹⁵ White, 1986, 91.

¹¹⁶ Pfeiffer, 1982, 127.

¹¹⁷ Lewis-Williams, 2002, 196.

¹¹⁸ Lewis-Williams, 2002, 181.

¹¹⁹ Conkey, 1985, 307.

¹²⁰ Conkey, 1985, 304.

societies were continually growing in complexity. Long-distance trading and social contacts appear to have been a regular feature: seashells, precious stones, and other natural materials were discovered extraordinary distances from their places of origin. Upper Paleolithic Ukrainian sites have yielded seashells from the Mediterranean; Baltic amber has been found in Southern Europe; late Upper Paleolithic sites in Poland have obsidian and jasper of distant origins; and sites in France (e.g., Lascaux) and Spain that are situated far from any shoreline have revealed shells from the Mediterranean, the Atlantic, the English Channel, and other bodies of water hundreds of miles away.¹²¹ While it is possible to explain the presence of these objects through population migrations, the nature of the evidence suggests instead a vast, multi-staged trading network that wound throughout Europe in the Upper Paleolithic. Anthropologist Randall White discusses the underpinnings of trade transactions, bartering, gift-giving, and reciprocity, saying, “Obligations are social bonds capable of tying together different social groups.”¹²² Bonds formed by trading do more than merely create a web of exchange. Societies that trade with each other tend not to fight each other, thus economic arrangements such as these that existed in the Upper Paleolithic tap into social behaviors that supersede mere trade, indicating the presence of complex social structures.

A social economy is, however, only one aspect of social life that demonstrates complexity. The choice of habitation sites in Upper Paleolithic communities indicates an in-depth understanding of animal densities and migratory patterns as well as an advanced organization of hunting methods. Their domestic sites tended to be close to cliffs and valleys, which would have aided mass animal killings by facilitating the control of the

¹²¹ White, 1986, 89.

¹²² White, 1986, 91.

directional and movement patterns of herds.¹²³ The Upper Paleolithic habitation sites were also very large; small groups probably split off to move around during most of the year and then reunited together at such large sites, possibly for important seasonal events or rituals. The sites also evince elaborate systematic settlement organization, which tends to correspond with complex social organization.¹²⁴

Ritual, social complexity, and ecological change are intricately tied together: each drives the others in a variety of ways. The development of new social arrangements, hierarchies, and divisions might necessitate new forms of ritual. Ecological stress such as increased population density and competition for decreasing resources might be one of the compelling forces behind both innovative ritual forms and new social organization. In turn, ecological stress and changing group dynamics may have spurred the need for strong social cohesion and more advanced community defense.¹²⁵ Rising population tends to cause increased conflict; the group solidarity that emerges out of ritual helps to keep that conflict under control.¹²⁶ Finally, rituals themselves can change relationships, resulting in a reordering and recontextualizing of society.¹²⁷

There is an apparent paradox concerning ritual and its capacity for both social division and social cohesion. Even as rites and rituals formed the foundation for a unified society, the changes in hierarchy and community structure that rituals might have caused would have existed in tension with this tendency towards social integration. Struggle between these two ends would have inevitably put pressure on ritual – conceivably encouraging (or requiring) its cohesive nature to become stronger and more enduring.

¹²³ Lewis-Williams, 2002, 79; White, 1986, 66.

¹²⁴ Lewis-Williams, 2002, 79.

¹²⁵ Whitehouse, 2000, 3.

¹²⁶ Pfeiffer, 1982, 228.

¹²⁷ Lawson and McCauley, 2002, 50.

Division and unification most likely existed simultaneously; such a contradiction is one of the implications of increased social complexity. Ritual has the ability to resolve contradictory states,¹²⁸ and therein lies the crux of the Hegelian¹²⁹ nature of ritual behavior. In the midst of a chaotic and complicated transition to societies with greater complexity on every possible level, it is only an activity as dynamic and paradoxical as ritual that could have allowed Upper Paleolithic communities to evolve – to move forward without self-destructing.

¹²⁸ Dissanayake, 1988, 65.

¹²⁹ By this I am referring to the kernel of Hegelian philosophical thought: the thesis meeting the antithesis to form a new synthesis.

Part IV: Ritual, Religiosity, and the Sacred-Profane Dichotomy

Ritual, as we have seen, is critically linked to action. This connection is so deep that the cognitive framework involved with the representation of ritual is the same as that used for the representation of action. Psychologists concerned with the cognitive basis of ritual have argued that all rituals are actions, and moreover, that the cognitive structures associated with the making of ritual are virtually ubiquitous in humans.¹³⁰

The connection between rituals and actions is not, however, as straightforward as it might seem at first. There is a strange paradox inherent in ritual behavior: ritual is constituted by mundane, repetitive actions combined with awe-inspiring, emotional, novel ones, referred to as “sensory pageantry.”¹³¹ Rituals are easily remembered and passed on because of both stability (strict conformity to traditional sets of rites that compose them) and frequency. Both of these characteristics may, however, also lead to them becoming routinized, monotonous, and boring.¹³² The aspects of ritual involving sensory pageantry tend to be more exciting, and lead to heightened feelings and engagement because they are “emotionally provocative,” increasing the likelihood that the ritual will be remembered and passed on.¹³³ Rituals often embody these two seemingly opposite characteristics, both of which contain mechanisms to ensure retention of knowledge and information.

How does ritual relate to the concept of religion in the Upper Paleolithic? Echoing these contrasting attributes of ritual and their complex relationship are the two distinct modes of religiosity that most religions fall into, as discussed by Harvey Whitehouse: a

¹³⁰ Lawson and McCauley, 2002, 8-11.

¹³¹ Lawson and McCauley, 2002, 2.

¹³² Lawson and McCauley, 2002, 50.

¹³³ Lawson and McCauley, 2002, 103.

doctrinal mode and an imagistic mode.¹³⁴ The doctrinal mode of religiosity is the tendency for elements and “revelations” of the religion to be “codified as a body of doctrines, transmitted through routinized forms of worship,” producing “large, anonymous communities.”¹³⁵ The imagistic mode usually occurs within smaller-scale societies; revelations are passed on “through sporadic collective action, evoking multivocal iconic imagery, encoded in memory as distinct episodes, and producing highly cohesive and particularistic social ties.”¹³⁶ Imagistic experiences involve “extreme sensual and emotional stimulation,”¹³⁷ with an emphasis on activities like singing, dancing, and feasting, as well as the presence of ecstatic states or painful and terrifying experiences. Doctrinal and imagistic modes are not, however, strictly divided, nor are the lines between them clear-cut. Sometimes these two contrasting modes can even be found within a single religion.¹³⁸ While the relationship between ‘religion’ and ‘ritual’ is often fluid, religion is usually considered to be a social and cultural belief system that incorporates ritual action. The kernel of religion is, however, that it involves a “community of believers.”¹³⁹ Doctrinal and imagistic modes of religiosity both highlight this communal aspect of ritual experience.

The archaeological record suggests that the imagistic mode first came into being during the Upper Paleolithic by means of experimentation with ritual behaviors that were evidently highly advantageous in the demanding conditions of the era. Such behaviors

¹³⁴ These concepts are discussed at length in Whitehouse, 2000, however I first encountered them in Johnson, 2005, where the issues are admirably synthesized.

¹³⁵ Whitehouse, 2000, 1.

¹³⁶ Whitehouse, 2000, 1.

¹³⁷ Whitehouse, 2000, 112.

¹³⁸ Whitehouse, 2000, 1.

¹³⁹ Renfrew, 1994, 49.

formed more tightly-knit groups that facilitated hunting and community defense,¹⁴⁰ an argument consistent with Jochim's contention that art and ritual increased during periods of environmental and nutritional stress.

Related to Whitehouse's hypothesis on the two divergent modes of religiosity are the two major types of memory: semantic memory and episodic memory – both universal features of human cognitive processes. Semantic memory is generalized knowledge that is not anchored to a particular time, place, or experience. Episodic memory, by contrast, is memory or knowledge directly tied to an episode or experience; it is highly specific and individualized. Though imagistic and doctrinal modes both incorporate some degree of both of these cognitive processes, the highly routinized doctrinal modes depend heavily on semantic memory, while imagistic modes are more reliant on episodic memory.¹⁴¹

Both doctrinal and imagistic modes (and in conjunction with these, semantic and episodic memory, respectively) unite communities, albeit in different ways. Doctrinal modes produce cohesion within large groups of anonymous people who, because of the nature of semantic memory, have common thought and behavioral processes.¹⁴² In a doctrinal religion like Catholicism, for instance, participants who have never met may still congregate and have a common understanding of the performance and purpose of the Eucharist. Conversely, imagistic modes intimately tie together participants in a single ritual, a single episodic memory. Thus, this kind of memory is highly particular, but also produces intense cohesion of the group.¹⁴³ In small Upper Paleolithic communities,

¹⁴⁰ Whitehouse, 2000, 3.

¹⁴¹ Whitehouse, 2000, 10.

¹⁴² Whitehouse, 2000, 10.

¹⁴³ Whitehouse, 2000, 10.

imagistic modes of religiosity and shared episodic memories produced a powerful collective identity¹⁴⁴ – an identity that aided and incentivized critical survival strategies such as group defense, care of the sick, and other subsistence practices.

A common feature of these imagistic modes is the use of “rites of terror,” often occurring in initiation rites around the age of puberty. The goal of these rites is to inspire as much fear as possible: the more terror there is and the higher the level of emotional arousal, the more indelibly lasting the impressions will be. Rites are also used to transmit bodies of knowledge; the same concept of fear as a motivational force for remembrance applies to the preservation of this knowledge.¹⁴⁵ Additionally, fear-based rites are used to reinforce the structural foundation of the community: “Ritual affirms the transcendent authority of society, represented in the timeless order of the ancestral world.”¹⁴⁶ Rites of terror in the Upper Paleolithic may have taken place in the depths of the caves, whose dark and confining nature alone likely would have inspired fear. The heel prints of children in the clay floor of Le Tuc D’Audoubert [Fig. 19] might be evidence of such rites. The secretive, mysterious character of the caves is critical in the context of imagistic modes of religiosity and initiation rites. “Religious insights,” Whitehouse writes, “seem to be constructed through the *withholding* of explanation, and primarily through the cultivation of mystery.”¹⁴⁷ Mystery, secrecy, and taboo are often at the heart of imagistic modes and the sacred religious knowledge they involve, even as there is, as John Pfeiffer puts it, an “apparent paradox of using secrecy and darkness to impart

¹⁴⁴ Whitehouse, 2000, 12.

¹⁴⁵ Whitehouse, 2000, 22.

¹⁴⁶ Whitehouse, 2000, 23.

¹⁴⁷ Whitehouse, 2000, 63.

information.”¹⁴⁸

Initiation rites, particularly those incorporating terror, also produce extreme solidarity among the participating group, yet another way of ensuring the success of warfare, hunting, and so forth.¹⁴⁹ The collective identity and solidarity that is developed through imagistic modes of religiosity via ritual additionally serves to define the boundaries of the community. Differentiating between those who are a part of the group and those who are outside of it is often determined by participation in ritual experiences.¹⁵⁰

Mithen posits that there are three religious ideas that historically have appeared throughout many cultures, and are consistent with the ritual implications of Upper Paleolithic parietal art. He contends, first, that nonphysical elements of a person can remain after they have died, and can retain some human traits or desires.¹⁵¹ The conceptualization of the caves as the “entrails”¹⁵² of the spirit world, as hypothesized in the shamanic interpretation, demonstrates that the dead and their domain retain at least some degree of power.

Mithen’s second contention is that certain people within a society are more predisposed to receiving direction, information, or messages from a divine or supernatural agent.¹⁵³ As discussed previously, all humans have the capacity to enter altered states of consciousness, and nearly all do, in one form or another. However, entering third-stage states of vivid hallucination can be a difficult and complicated

¹⁴⁸ Pfeiffer, 1982, 131.

¹⁴⁹ Whitehouse, 2000, 31.

¹⁵⁰ Whitehouse, 2000, 183.

¹⁵¹ Mithen, 1996, 176.

¹⁵² Lewis-Williams, 2002, 210.

¹⁵³ Mithen, 1996, 176.

endeavor; some people are either more prone, or have been designated by the community to execute this action. Shamanic societies, of course, have shamans to enter those altered states and perform some predetermined function for their society.

The notion of communal selection of specific individuals to carry out ritual activities leads directly into Mithen's final point: the assertion that the performance of rituals can bring about desired change.¹⁵⁴ Such a concept constitutes the very crux of human ritual behavior: we believe we can impact our environment, our societies, and ourselves through the use of ritual action. The reasons why humans perform ritual are manifold and complicated, but they can be loosely divided into two categories: 'ultimate' causes and 'proximate' causes, to borrow terminology from evolutionary psychology.¹⁵⁵ Ultimate causes are those pertaining to areas that individuals do not generally have any control over. They are attributes or characteristics that evolved because they were selectively advantageous: for example, group cohesion and solidarity, or the alleviation of anxiety. But there are also 'proximate', culturally dependent reasons for making ritual: peoples and societies believe that they work, that they retain significance or meaning in some form.

Rituals are indeed often designated to be extra-ordinary, as discussed in Part III above; they are a part of the sacred dimension of cultural life. Yet, the dichotomy between ordinary and extra-ordinary, between sacred and profane,¹⁵⁶ is not as distinct as it might seem: these divisions often slide into ambiguity. Lawson and McCauley examine the ways in which ritual actions can be deeply woven into the fabric of everyday life, for

¹⁵⁴ Mithen, 1996, 176.

¹⁵⁵ Dutton, 2009, 88.

¹⁵⁶ The term 'profane' is not used in this thesis to mean 'irreverent', but rather 'secular' and 'unholy'.

example, always making the sign of the cross when one enters and exits buildings.¹⁵⁷

There is an absentminded quality to actions such as these, which – given their sacred origins – reflects the paradox of ritual behavior embodied in the simultaneous use of mundane, repetitive actions and emotional, awe-inspiring ones.

Mircea Eliade uses the term “hierophany” to refer to a manifestation or “modality” of the sacred.¹⁵⁸ He argues that within the sacred-profane dichotomy of societies, hierophanies are clearly expressions of the sacred, but they also contain a dialectical aspect: they are continually undermining that sacred component, pushing it, reducing it to the profane.¹⁵⁹ Frequently what occurs is “the *sacred* manifesting itself in something *profane*.”¹⁶⁰ There is an ambivalent attitude towards the sacred: man longs for it, and the significance it represents, but he also fears being too far submerged in it – being too removed from his everyday profane existence – for fear that he will lose his own reality and identity.¹⁶¹ At the same time, Eliade maintains, religious ‘truths’ (that is, theoretical religious elements such as symbols, ideograms, and myths) are inducted into the realm of hierophany “not only because they reveal modalities of the sacred, but because these ‘truths’ help man to protect himself against the meaningless, nothingness; to escape, in fact, from the profane sphere.”¹⁶²

It is this ambivalence, this contradictory notion of hierophanies – of ritual in general – that speaks to an ultimate paradox: they embody elements of both the sacred and the profane, a tension that sustains their coexistence.¹⁶³ Furthermore, Suzanne Blier

¹⁵⁷ Lawson and McCauley, 2002, 3.

¹⁵⁸ Eliade, 1974, 10.

¹⁵⁹ Eliade, 1974, 459.

¹⁶⁰ Eliade, 1974, 29.

¹⁶¹ Eliade, 1974, 17.

¹⁶² Eliade, 1974, 32.

¹⁶³ Eliade, 1974, 29.

writes that ritual

serves to some extent as a means of both heightening the differences between the 'ordinary' and the 'strange' and helping to resolve inherent contradictions between the two. Related contradictions serve as an important impetus for artistic expression with artists seeking to create a sense of order (rationally, logically) out of conditions characterized more generally by features of confusion and contradiction...Rituals help to make the irrational seem not only viable and operable, but also understandable.¹⁶⁴

Ritual is informed by structure, organization, and repetitive actions; but at the same time, "disorientation, disjuncture, and distinction"¹⁶⁵ are vital parts of ritual performance. This fusion of rationality and irrationality, ordinary and strange, sacred and profane, reality and unreality, underlines the Hegelian nature of ritual and its capacity not only to alleviate anxiety, promote community cohesion, and address critical moments of transition, but also to fundamentally reorder social relations through its ability to reconcile that which is seemingly irreconcilable.

¹⁶⁴ Blier, 2003, 304.

¹⁶⁵ Blier, 2003, 304.

Concluding Thoughts

To recreate visions in sacred spaces after emerging from altered states is an action, and it is that action itself that gathers importance. The creative process of parietal art in the Upper Paleolithic was a way of manifesting vision, and thus of giving it permanence; even after its execution, the work retained ritual significance. But behind the essence of this action, we find that the need to act ritually in the Upper Paleolithic was a behavior that we were born with, a behavior that evolved over millennia and became hard-wired into our neurological structures because it helped the species survive. Art as ritual in this context engaged with critical life issues and dealt with them in powerful ways, strengthening communities, and addressing periods of transition and transformation. It enabled the navigation of new and conflicting social arrangements, difficult ecological stresses, and adaptation to change while still maintaining lines of continuity.

In *The Gift*, Lewis Hyde speaks about the two kinds of life in ancient Greek culture: *bios* and *zoë*. *Bios* is life that culminates in death, “limited life, characterized life,” while *zoë* is “life that endures; it is the thread that runs through *bios*-life and is not broken when the particular perishes.”¹⁶⁶ *Zoë*-life is passed down from one generation to the next, and thus secures its existence beyond the passing of each generation; it is the gift that is “bestowed from the dead to the living and from the living to the unborn.”¹⁶⁷ The ultimate importance of group cohesion is to ensure the survival of the community, but inherent in the concept of ‘survival’ is not just physical procreation. Equally important is the perpetuation of the *zoë*-life of the group: the knowledge, myths,

¹⁶⁶ Hyde, 2007, 41.

¹⁶⁷ Hyde, 2007, 253.

memories, experiences, values, and traditions that comprise the true 'life' of a society.

Zoë-life is cultural continuity: the ongoing flow of all the elements that compose a society and hold it together. This concept is useful to us as we continue to find ways of articulating creative and liminal experience in a remote past. To understand why humans made art and ritual in the Upper Paleolithic requires grappling with processes of informational codification underlying the urgencies of expressive cultural flow, and appreciating why such codification was necessitated by the social and economic conditions present in this prehistoric era.

Art and ritual in Upper Paleolithic Franco-Cantabria were social behaviors of renewal and re-enactment, acts of marking importance; they recreated and resurrected emotions, memories, and shared experiences that might otherwise have died. Ritual is a process of endless resurrection, and it is thus altogether fitting that in the Upper Paleolithic art and ritual were tied together with shamanism, "the world in which everything seems possible, where the dead return to life and the living die only to live again."¹⁶⁸ It is this collective process of ceaseless remembrance that lies behind art and ritual, which operated as the insistent mechanism defining and re-defining society, and as the means by which humans constituted and re-constituted memory.

¹⁶⁸ Eliade, 1964, 511.

Appendix A: Images



Fig. 1. Chauvet, Panel of the Horses, 32,000 – 29,000 years ago. Source: Chauvet, *et al.*, 1996.



Fig. 2. Rouffignac, mammoth (“The Patriarch”), 15,000 – 13,000 years ago. Source: Clottes and Lewis-Williams, 1998.



Fig. 3. El Castillo, entoptic phenomena, c. 13,000 years ago. Source: Clottes, 2008.



Fig. 4. La Clotilde, auroch, date unknown (Upper Paleolithic, 40,000 – 10,000 years ago). Source: Clottes and Lewis-Williams, 1998.



Fig. 5. Lascaux, "Shaft of the Dead Man," 22,000 – 17,000 years ago. Source: Clottes, 2008.



Fig. 6. Lascaux, "Chinese Horse," 22,000-17,000 years ago. Source: Clottes, 2008.



Fig. 7. Hohle Fels Cave, southwest Germany, bird-bone flute.
Source: <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/25/science/25flute.html>



Fig. 8. Les Trois Frères, The 'Sorcerer', c. 15,000 years ago. Source: Clottes and Lewis-Williams, 1998.



Fig. 9. Altamira, human-animal faces, c. 14,000 years ago. Source: Clottes and Lewis-Williams, 1998.



Fig. 10. Altamira, bison, c. 14,000 years ago. Source: Clottes, 2008.



Fig. 11. El Castillo, vertical bison, c. 13,000 years ago. Source: Clottes and Lewis-Williams, 1998.



Fig. 12. Pech Merle, horse, handprint, and entoptic phenomena, c. 25,000 years ago.
Source: Clottes, 2008.



Fig. 13. Covalanas, does, 20,000 – 14,000 years ago. Source: Clottes and Lewis-Williams, 1998.



Fig. 14. El Castillo, reindeer head, c. 13,000 years ago. Source: Clottes and Lewis-Williams, 1998.



Fig. 15. Enlène, bones in the cracks of the wall, c. 15,000 years ago. Source: Clottes and Lewis-Williams, 1998.



Fig. 16. Lascaux, the Apse, 22,000 – 17,000 years ago.

Source: <http://lascaux.culture.fr>. Photo credit: N. Aujoulat © MCC-CNP.



Fig. 17. Chauvet, vertical bear, 32,000 – 29,000 years ago. Source: Chauvet, *et al.*, 1996.



Fig. 18. Chauvet, handprint, 32,000 – 29,000 years ago. Source: Chauvet, *et al.*, 1996.



Fig. 19. Le Tuc D'Audoubert, children's heel prints, c. 15,000 years ago. Source: Clottes and Lewis-Williams, 1998.



Fig. 20. Le Tuc D'Audoubert, clay bison, c. 15,000 years ago. Source: Stokstad, Marilyn. *Art History: Ancient Art*, 3rd ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, Inc., 2009.



Fig. 21. Lascaux, Hall of the Bulls, 22,000 – 17,000 years ago.
Source: <http://lascaux.culture.fr>. Photo credit: N. Aujoulat © MCC-CNP.



Fig. 22. Chauvet, the Lion Panel, 32,000 – 29,000 years ago. Source: Chauvet, *et al.*, 1996.



Fig. 23. Lascaux, Hall of the Bulls, 22,000 – 17,000 years ago. Source: Clottes, 2008.

Appendix B: Major Franco-Cantabrian Upper Paleolithic Caves

This compilation includes all Upper Paleolithic caves in Europe cited in this thesis (including one in Germany), as well as other major caves in the Franco-Cantabrian region. It should be noted that this list is not exhaustive: there are about 100 Upper Paleolithic sites in the Franco-Cantabrian region alone, and many more scattered across Eurasia.

The Upper Paleolithic is divided into four major periods:

Aurignacian: 28,000 – 35,000 BP

Gravettian: 22,000 – 28,000 BP

Solutrean: 17,000 – 22,000 BP

Magdalenian: 11,000 – 17,000 BP

Cave Name	Approximate Period	Location
Altamira	Magdalenian	Santillana del Mar, Cantabria, Spain
Chauvet	Aurignacian	Vallon-Pont-d'Arc, Ardèche, France
Cosquer	Gravettian/Solutrean	Calanque de Morgiou, France
Cognac	Gravettian	Lot, France
Covalanas	Solutrean/Magdalenian	Santander, Spain
El Castillo	Magdalenian	Puente Viesgo, Cantabria, Spain
Enlènes (Volp Caves)	Early Magdalenian	Ariège, France
Gargas	Gravettian	Aventignan, Hautes-Pyrénées, France
Hohle Fels	Aurignacian	Swabian Jura, Germany

La Clotilde	Unknown	Santa Isabel de Quijas, Cantabria, Spain
Laussel	Gravettian	Marquay, Dordogne, France
Lascaux	Solutrean/Early Magdalenian	Montignac, Dordogne, France
Les Trois Frères (Volp Caves)	Early Magdalenian	Ariège, France
Le Tuc D'Audoubert (Volp Caves)	Early Magdalenian	Ariège, France
Niaux	Magdalenian	Niaux, Ariège, France
Pech Merle	Gravettian	Lot, France
Rouffignac	Magdalenian	Dordogne, France

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