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Essay

Lessons from the Cave: On Aesthetic Experience

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I would like to begin here with a quote from one of my favourite aphoristic writers, Emile Cioran, which reads as follows: "A sudden silence in the middle of a conversation suddenly brings us back to essentials: it reveals how dearly we must pay for the invention of speech."[1]

Like Franz Kafka who was a stranger to the German language, Cioran was alien to French. Both writers, however, were able to produce masterpieces which arguably ripped apart the languages of their hosts, or so it seems. In truth these languages were only refashioned in the alien cartography of their own style, mapping out those unlit terrains of thought (*dianoia*) that these languages sealed off for a time from ever reaching the surface, above which hangs what might be the only way into the work of truth. Truth, as Ricoeur puts it, is a certain communicability [2]expressed in a manner or style by which something comes alive once again. The German and the French arguably breathed once again in the singular cases of Kafka and Cioran, each "breaking a path in the real." [3]In Kafka, it was a singular case that summoned a new rule for German writing; [4]in the case of Cioran, at least, how a dispossessed Romanian sought refuge in an alien work of truth, in a language that he confessed "is [an antipode] to his nature," not to

[1]Emile Cioran, *Anathemas and Admirations*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1991), 19.

[2]Paul Ricoeur, *Critique and Conviction: Conversations with Francois Azouvi and Marc de Launay*, trans. Kathreen Blamey (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 179.

[3]Ibid., 174.

[4]See Gilles Deleuze, *Desert Islands and Other Texts (1953-1974)*, ed. David Lapoujade, trans. Michael Taomina (New York: Semiotext(e), 2004), 254.

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http://www.filocracia.org/issue2/Rivas_Aug2014.pdf

mention "[his] true self," [5] but helped it come alive "when [French] was in full decline . . . [and] the French themselves do not seem to mind." [6]

In the idiom of Ricoeur, the singularities of these two great writers of our time attest to the complementarity of *question* and *response*, [7] altogether thrown in their midst by a *crisis*. [8] In both cases, the element of distance reveals a crisis is on their way, that is, from the very outset as a diasporic encounter. In a strange land they would have to suffer the banality of its speech and into whose syntax they were forced to breathe a new life, a new being; a new soul. But for any nomad, speech is one thing; legwork is another. Nomads are known in prehistory as capable of taking root wherever there is an exit to creation, [9] wanderers of uncharted lands, with only the climate to stop them on their tracks, perhaps, a melting glacier, an unexpected tsunami, a volcanic eruption. Sans the threat of climate, nomads were known for assimilating themselves in the speech of their foreign hosts, but also, in due time, transform that speech as their own, thereby a new people is born.

For a nomad, the island is like a poem or narrative that with her power to refigure would metamorphose into something else but not entirely new. It is arguable to consider here the island as a work of art, with nature as architect, demiurge, so to speak. And equally arguable is the thought that a nomad may be the only authentic model of aesthetic experience whose memory has now retreated into the unconscious of modern humanity. But while we are still alive with a new climate tale about to be told in the next few decades, let us hope, with surviving human witnesses, it may still be relevant to look back and rekindle the wonder, the awe that is now becoming extinct in our species. I would like first to quote Ricoeur before I drive home to my point:

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[5] Cioran, *Anathemas and Admirations*, 256.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ricoeur, "Aesthetic Experience," in *Critique and Conviction*, 179.

[8] Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 3, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1988), 162.

[9] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis and London: University of Minneapolis Press, 1987), 508.

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> Because, in the last analysis, a painter paints to be seen, a musician writes to be heard. Something of her experience, precisely because it has been carried by a work, is going to be able to be communicated. Her naked experience as such was incommunicable; but, as soon as it can be problematized in the form of a singular question which is adequately answered in the form of a response that is singular as well, then it acquires communicability, it becomes universalizable. [10]

Who would have ever thought that with his modern sensibility Ricoeur might be referring to a painter who lived and died in a cave, or a nomad whose bones now dwell among the fossils of a bygone age buried deep beneath the soil of France? In one of the greatest discoveries of human culture, a cave in Southern France astonished the world with its primitive gallery of one of the oldest known paintings, about 32,000 years ago, in the history of humankind. (The oldest in record is found in Spain in Cave Altamira which by far revealed more colourful charcoal paintings, though these works were attributed to Neanderthals, not yet human by anthropological standards. We can wonder here if aesthetic experience is still peculiar to humans. Other more recent cave paintings by our human ancestors are found in Argentina).

Another astonishing fact deserves full attention: in the same cave in France, known as the Chauvet Cave, a footprint of an eight-year old child was found; alongside it, a footprint of a wolf.

The cave bears testimony to what is by any measure incommunicable to us in the modern age, and with the child arguably one among the mystery painters, adding onto the strange, aesthetic experience, as this case may attest to, is not a singularity unique to a learned adult, but even to the young and prehistoric at that, not to mention here a life that was at the total mercy of nature. Alongside its anthropological purchase, the cave paintings might have also been inspired, albeit negatively, by the torments of survival and any sign of neurosis may be inferred as purely speculative. (Neurosis would have to be invented by the modern to give expression to a phenomenon unknown in medical science—pity Van Gogh that he had to endure this assault of calculation). But the paintings on the cave walls—what do they communicate to us in the here and now?

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[10] Ricoeur, "Aesthetic Experience," 179.

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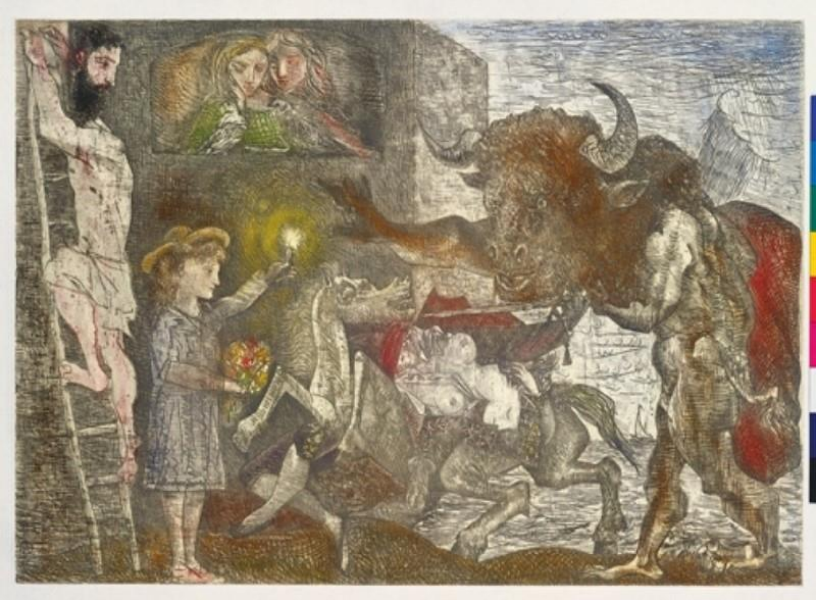

One of the many drawings of the Minotaur by Picasso, presumably inspired by the bull paintings in Cave Altamira. [11]

It is of interest to note that Picasso who was born in Spain (but fled to France where he died to escape the persecution of Franco) had seen Spain's Cave Altamira's paintings. After coming out of the cave, he was reported as saying—"After Altamira, all is decadence." Altamira's cave paintings formed a line of genealogical continuum with Chauvet's and those in Argentina (at least the first two belonged to the Upper Paleolithic Period). W hat interests us here is that Picasso may be referring to the modern experience of aesthetics that would pale in comparison to the singularity of those prehistoric artists. Living in unimaginably harsh conditions, these artists produced works of art that would make Adorno envious, real exemplars of artistic autonomy, its distance from the real

[11]Image copyright by the Estate of Pablo Picasso ©2015/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Taken from http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object_id=60110.

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without the necessity to indulge in hibernatory aesthetics peculiar to late modernity. [12]

In the essay by Roger Savage, there is a critical mention of hibernatory refuge linking the negative dialectics of Adorno and Horkheimer to a kind of aesthetic experience whose distance from the real identifies, albeit paradoxically, a likely source of human emancipation. [13] This so-called aesthetic distance reveals the autonomous essence of art vis-à-vis the world that is not destined for art, so to speak: "W hat is true in art is something nonexistent." [14] It goes to say that the world cannot tolerate the non-existent; hence, art stands in ceaseless contradiction with it, with no end in sight. Ricoeur, for his part, recovers something which Adorno buried under the shifting sands of modernity. As Savage puts it, "the retreat from the real . . . is the condition of a work's power to refigure the practical field of [experience]." [15] This leads me back to the cave painting which is made possible by a retreat from the real, from the rising sea level, from the tyranny of the elements.

The cave painting of a prehistoric people, unlike the negative dialectics of Adorno and Horkheimer, exemplified the world through art in order to make it liveable, instead of refracting the real in a hibernatory refuge in the darkness of an age. It is an inversion of referent, [16] in Ricoeur's idiom, from the incommunicability of the temporal horizon of the cave painting, or rather, the inexpressible of the lived-experience of the [cave] artist, [17] to the communicable singularity of survival, of a new consciousness of earth and ocean, likewise a new myth of creation. [18]

Make no mistake—the cave is no longer a habitat for us. But the singularity of the cave painting should live among us if only to rekindle the

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[12] Roger Savage, "Aesthetic Experience, *Mimesis* and Testimony," *Ricoeur Studies*, Vol. 3, 1 (2012): 177.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 131.

[15] Savage, "Aesthetic Experience, *Mimesis* and Testimony," 176.

[16] Ibid., 181.

[17] Ricoeur, "Aesthetic Experience," 179.

[18] Deleuze, *Desert Islands*, 13.

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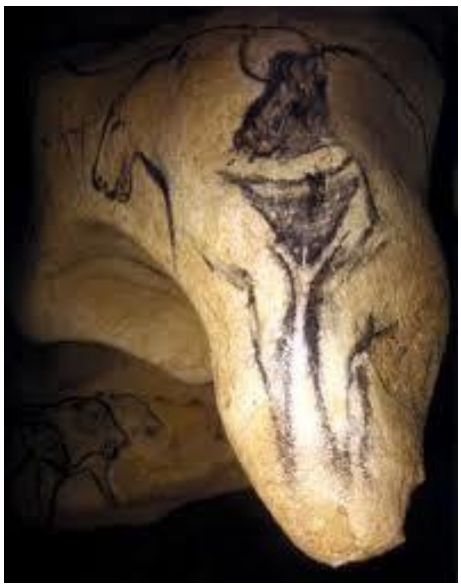
wonder and awe of a prehistoric people who knew ahead of us that distance from the real is not an end in itself. The exemplarity of the cave painting in many ways "makes a claim upon us in demanding a response."[19]

To conclude with Savage, the claim if any of the Chauvet cave "lies at the heart of the truth of the work. The claim that a work makes opens us to the world anew."[20] And to this, I should add, in the midst of a real threat to our survival, in the advent of a new cycle of mass extinction,[21] from whose claim upon us we cannot any longer afford to retreat.



A cave painting in Chauvet resembling a vulva: a female body and a bison head drawn on a protruding stone. [22]

[19] Savage, "Aesthetic Experience, *Mimesis* and Testimony,"182.

[20] Ibid.

[21] See Eliizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2014); also, Richard Leakey and Roger Lewin, *The Sixth Extinction: Patterns of Life and the Future of Humankind* (New York: Anchor Books, 1995).

[22] Image courtesy of http://www.ancient-wisdom.co.uk/francechauvet.htm.

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