

## **Painting the Prehuman: Bataille, Merleau-Ponty, and the Aesthetic Origins of Humanity**

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“Nothing must be concealed: what is involved, finally, is a failure of humanity.”

--Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share II*: 14-15

In a lecture that Georges Bataille delivered on January 18, 1955, the birth and death of humanity came together in an unexpected way. The lecture that Bataille was to deliver would eventually recount his visitation of the Lascaux caves in France and the prehistoric paintings found therein, but the manner by which he opens his talk is slightly unorthodox:

It has become commonplace today to talk about the eventual extinction of human life. The latest atomic experiments made tangible the notion of radiation invading the atmosphere and creating conditions in which life in general could no longer thrive. Even without war, the experiments alone, if pursued with a little persistence, might themselves begin to create these conditions. I do not intend to talk to you about our eventual demise today. I would like, on the contrary, to talk to you about our birth. I am simply struck by the fact that light is being shed on our birth at the very moment when the notion of our death appears to us. (2005: 85).<sup>2</sup>

The moment of which Bataille speaks—the present moment, January of 1955, a night on which he delivers a talk titled only by its date and in which he identifies the discovery of our collective birth as September 12<sup>th</sup>, 1940—splits the future and past,

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<sup>2</sup> Pagination in this essay will hereafter refer to this book, unless otherwise noted. Bataille's original book bore the title *Lascaux ou la naissance de l'art*. The English collection is a compilation of many essays and notes by Bataille on prehistoric art.

death and birth, through one long transition as the passage between animality and humanity. The birth occurs through the passage from animality to humanity, as discovered in art, whereas the death occurs, arguably and no doubt speculatively, through the passage from humanity to animality, as evinced by the sciences of experimentation and war. Through the transformation of humanity in its passion for destruction, self-effacement, and “the prospect of absolute death” (104), Bataille hints at a cataclysmic end already foretold within the cave paintings that are taken to be a trace of our beginning.

This presents an intriguing Bataillean dialectic between the birth and death of humanity wherein neither term is resolved but is left to waste in its indeterminacy. Rather than perceiving the birth of humanity in the Lascaux paintings, as many have done, I wish instead to play with the thesis that we see the impossibility of humanity. Inasmuch as a birth always foretells an eventual death, and that death is always already inherent within the birth, the sacrifices depicted in the Lascaux paintings may not be the sacrifices of animals, as is often thought, but the self-sacrifice of humanity in the erasure of its own image. The dawning consciousness of death—as these paintings of bison, reindeer, and horses are said to reveal—must have awakened the impossibility of being, which undoubtedly would have inspired a number of reactions, many of them suggested by Bataille himself: shame, laughter, religiosity, guilt, arousal. And what better way to express this impossibility than through the rendering visible of one’s own self-effacement? Is it not possible, then, that the passage from animality to humanity is either still underway, never to be completed, or, in what might be the same thing, was always doomed from the start to be a failed passage? Might not the transgression of the boundary separating humanity and animality be not against animality per se, but against the idea that animality had been left behind in the thought of our birth? If this is the case—and admittedly it is only a wild hypothesis—then the paintings in Lascaux depict the acknowledgement of being always already prehuman, or, put otherwise, that humanity is a condition that is never fully formed inasmuch as it is a process continually in the making. As a tentative conclusion, I will suggest that the impossibility of humanity rests on what Bataille calls the “formless”

in nature. The human never quite takes shape in these early self-referential depictions, always appearing deformed, altered, and/or disfigured.<sup>3</sup>

In order to better highlight this reading of Bataille and the prehuman (a term that I'll use as a placeholder for the animal-human passage), I'll turn to the writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty on art in which he emphasizes a passage of a different kind between the prehuman and the human, one that rests not on a speciesist transition between animality and humanity but instead on a phenomenological register wherein the painter strives to express the prehuman condition. Merleau-Ponty thus provides further depth to our reading inasmuch as he describes the *act* of painting as an inherent passage or transition. Painting in-and-of-itself seeks to capture the formation of humanity and yet, in doing so, it necessarily betrays its own end as it comes up unfinished. As we shall see, this passage holds interesting parallels for how we might think of the rendering visible of the invisible in what he calls the continuous rebirth of humanity. Becoming-human is a continuous accomplishment, but one wherein the prehuman is never left behind. This paper has four sections: the discovery of Lascaux (and how animality is at its centre), the readings of Lascaux, the notion of a deformed humanity, and lastly an animal ontology of art.

## **The Discovery**

Humanity, Bataille writes, "appeared on earth with art. And Lascaux is the first truly majestic sign of this appearance" (92). If it is the case that humanity and art are coincident, can art and the aesthetic ever truly be divorced from animality? Must not animality necessarily be implicated within this picture as art's archaic base and/or ground? That is, to confront art, one must always already address animality as its source and foundation. As it turns out, the confluence of Lascaux, art, and the birth of humanity has a rather curious injection of animality within it. As Bataille weaves his

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<sup>3</sup> Most commentators on the Lascaux paintings have appropriately emphasized the aesthetic and artistic qualities of the images, but it is also the case that the animals, as a question within the debates over the origin of art, have received attention as well. For further readings on this, see in particular: Steven Ungar (1990: 246-262); Howard Caygill (2002: 19-25); Akira Mizuta Lippit (2002: 18-29); Suzanne Guerlac (1996: 6-17); Suzanne Guerlac (2007: 97).

narratives, including his endeavour to retell the discovery of Lascaux, what emerges is a near literal enactment of the images contained within the cave, complete with an expulsion of animality and the transition from a childlike, prehuman wonder to the awareness of one's own maturity. In the case of the Lascaux cave in France, as well as the Altamira cave in Spain, we are informed that the discovery of each prehistoric landmark was made by a few curious children who, with their tiny little bodies, accessed the wealth of human origins by crawling into otherwise inaccessible spaces. Bataille stages a fairytale-like setting when he describes how a five-year-old girl innocently wandered into the Altamira cave in 1879 only to discover the marvelous frescos found therein. In a similar vein he describes how a few young boys discovered the Lascaux cave when they went searching for a lost dog that had fallen into a fissure in the earth's surface (59/95). In both cases, Bataille emphasizes the youth and childlike wonder that enabled the paintings to come to light, enacting a story of innocence that bore out the discovery of our own present-day humanity. The descriptions of these descents—"into a room of a thousand and one nights," as he puts it at one point—enact a dreamscape that will come to mirror the fantastical images contained within. The lost dog, as it turned out, was a journalistic extravagance in order to tell a better story. But, as told in an essay a few years later, even if Lascaux's discovery was not due to "the fall" of a dog (and what might begin to look like interesting biblical resonances), it was due to an animal nonetheless, namely a dead donkey.

Yes, a dead donkey lies at the origin of Bataille's story. And one hesitates to think that this is merely accidental. "I have been at pains," Bataille informs his audience on that night in 1955, "to get an intimate grasp of the truth of the discovery" (96). For some 15,000 years the Lascaux cave remained cut off from the world, free even, so we are told, from "the slugs themselves" (95). Its nearly perfect state, untouched, unseen, and therefore uncontaminated, was only unsettled in the mid 1920s when a storm uprooted a pine tree revealing a deep yet unexamined cavity. Shortly thereafter the hole was filled over with some sticks by a few local farmers in order to keep the sheep, who were grazing nearby, from falling in. Suffice it to say, these farmers were not curious enough to inquire within. The cave, by all appearances, had therefore been free from the presence of any live animal, be it a slug, dog, sheep, or prehistoric auroch. It was free from animality. If we are to imagine this space as the place of

humanity's birth, the presence of a live animal would presumably trespass upon the sanctity or sacredness of the cave. We enter the cave, therefore, as Suzanne Guerlac has well put, in search of a sacred moment.<sup>4</sup> This is what makes the character of a dead donkey, as we are about to see, all the more fascinating.

Lascaux was discovered by four boys—Bataille repeatedly calls them “children” despite the fact that their ages were somewhere between 15-18 years old—who were told about the cave by a local woman who discovered the cavity when she removed the sticks in order to “put her dead donkey in the hole” (95). Led by the eldest boy, Marcel Ravidat, the four of them dropped the 7 meters into the hole, where, “next to the remains of the dead donkey,” they soon encountered the treasure of animal images (96). Already prior to the discovery of the images themselves, and the stories hidden within, the revelation of the birth of humanity coincides with the literal expulsion of animality, in this case the dead donkey that, as waste and refuse, was better hidden away than buried. The donkey was not expelled from the cave, of course, but from the daylight of human perception, expelled from sight in being pushed back into the darkness from out of which humanity emerged. It would be tempting to see the donkey as a sacrifice given to the idols of prehistoric art, but such a fanciful reading would not accord with Bataille's understanding of sacrifice even if it might with the sacred.<sup>5</sup> In a passage from his *History of Eroticism*, the second volume of *The Accursed Share*, Bataille writes the following of the sacred animal:

In a basic sense, what is *sacred* is precisely what is *prohibited*. But if the *sacred*, the *prohibited*, is cast out of the sphere of profane life (inasmuch as it denotes a disruption of that life), it nevertheless has a greater value than this profane that excludes it. It is no longer the despised bestiality; often it has retained an animal form, but the latter has become *divine*. ... Thus, the *sacred* announces a new possibility: it is a leap into the unknown, with animality as its impetus (Bataille, 1994: 92-93).

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4 I am influenced here by Suzanne Guerlac's (1996) wonderful essay “Bataille in Theory: Afterimages (Lascaux)”.

5 “Sacrifice restores to the sacred world that which servile use has degraded, rendered profane. ... It is not necessary that the sacrifice actually destroy the animal or plant of which man had to make a thing for his use. They must at least be destroyed as things, that is, insofar as they have become things. Destruction is the best means of negating a utilitarian relation between man and the animal or plant” (Bataille, 1991: 56). It is clear that the donkey was not ‘used’ as a sacrifice, though one could interpret that the donkey no longer served a function or use, and was sacrificed as such.

If not a sacrifice, then, at the very least a push into the unknown, as the donkey transforms from despised bestiality, irreverently cast out of a profane and mundane life, and into the depths of a waiting prehistoric temple. A dead donkey, then, unintentionally and yet somehow appropriately, ushers in the discovery of humanity's birth.

## **Prehistoric Art**

Let us begin our look at the wonder of Lascaux with an equal bit of enchantment and excuses. Theodor Adorno, in his characteristically dour way, has said that attempts to derive an aesthetic from the origins of art "are inevitably disappointing" (Adorno, 1997: 325). Such disappointment, as recounted in his book *Aesthetic Theory*, is not a complete retraction from discourses on prehistoric art. One might instead say that there can only be disappointment if something is expected from the paintings and they subsequently fail to live up to them, in this case a thorough comprehension of the cave's purpose and uses. Against such standards, disappointments surely arise, and an indeterminacy of understanding would be perfectly legitimate. Adorno continues, "The earliest surviving manifestations of art are not the most authentic, nor do they in any way circumscribe art's range; and rather than best exemplifying what art is, they make it more obscure" (325). The question of the clarity of the paintings in Lascaux have never really been doubted, since in nearly every interpretative reading of them one finds apologetic clauses that suspend or distance the interpretations from the paintings themselves. Thus, along with Adorno, we find with Bataille that these paintings depict "an ungraspable reality" about which we will never know anything precise. Similarly, with Maurice Blanchot, who, in his review of Bataille's book on Lascaux, notes that the paintings disorient us in their "inescapable simplicity" and fill us with a "lacuna" despite being "images without enigma." Or again, with Merleau-Ponty, who describes these paintings as an "inarticulate cry" that is heard but poorly understood, like pure content without form, images without an ordering frame (Bataille, 1997: 64; Blanchot, 1997: 3; Merleau-Ponty, 1964b: 182). These cries resound for some 15,000 - 30,000 years, a temporal period that takes us back to an era often described as "prehistory" inasmuch as the continuity of time breaks, jags, and fragments with only brief and scattered images flashing here and there. And yet, in spite of such reservations, we nevertheless discover the attempts to understand these

artworks. One is almost compelled to engage with them. If they are inarticulate cries, they still call out for response. It is thus that Bataille can be found writing, that even though he “renounced the comprehension of this mystery” of the images, he still thinks it is “possible to shed some light” on them (171).

As shall become apparent, Bataille’s primary suggestion is that these paintings depict the dawning of humanity’s self-consciousness as both the same as *and* different from the rest of the animal world. However, tied in with this thesis is an older and more conventional interpretation, namely that the appearance of the animals along the cave walls can be attributed to a magical or religious dimension of prehistoric, prehuman peoples (I prefer to use the designation ‘prehuman’ to emphasize this idea of a transition or passage). With respect to Lascaux in particular, Abbé Henri Breuil, one of the first to see the paintings immediately following their discovery in the 1940s, reaffirmed a prevalent thesis that the images had a “magical character in relation to the hunt” (49). The images of the reindeer, bison, and aurochs, it is said, are suggestive of chases and killing. The animals are often seen running, fleeing, jumping, at some points over unseen cliffs, and in others impaled and dying. Let alone the quality of the movement depicted, what Adorno highlights as the great “indeterminacy” of these images (compare them, for instance, with the sometimes static images of Egyptian or Attic art), the presence of the animals have been read as indicative of magical conjurings. It seems clear, however, that the images were not intended to survive, either within their own time or down to our day. Bataille notes that the representations are not like the images found in a temple or church that seek a degree of permanence, and nor are they like “decorations” that one might use and keep for one’s own continued enjoyment. They are not, in other words, early signs of “art for art’s sake,” and the images themselves cannot be properly considered as “objects of art.” They were, as Walter Benjamin puts it in his celebrated essay on art, “first and foremost an instrument of magic which only later came to be recognized as a work of art” (Benjamin, 2002: 107).<sup>6</sup> They have not survived as works of art—

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<sup>6</sup> Benjamin continues: “Prehistoric art made use of certain fixed notations in the service of magical practice. In some cases, these notations probably comprised actual performing of magical acts...; in others, they gave instructions for such procedures....; and in still others, they provided objects for magical contemplation....The subjects for these notations were humans and their environment, which were depicted according to the requirements of a society whose technology existed only in fusion with ritual” (107).

despite how we view them today—but as traces of something far less permanent and known. The fact that the images have survived at all appears to be entirely accidental, as evidenced in the “indifference” the painters paid to pre-existing images; the paintings and drawings often overlap one another with no clear attempt to erase or separate the images, thus demonstrating little attention to their continued preservation “as is.”

This is far from suggesting a lack of care, however. Instead of emphasizing their permanence as objects of art, the importance of these images was in their execution, in the sudden *apparition* of the animal as part of the ritual (76). In line with this thesis of magical conjurings, the evocation of the animals had to be “*rendered present* in the ritual” (50) as a form of idolatry. The apparition of the animal, rather than enacting a past conquest, more often signaled the preparation for a future still to come. Bataille imagines the scene in the cave as nothing less than a prehuman session of adrenaline-induced delirium for the big hunt upon which life and death will depend. And why not? Let us imagine the ritual with him:

an attentively executed drawing, extraordinarily true to life, though seen in the flickering light of the lamps, completed in a short time, the ritual, the drawing that provokes the apparition of the bison. This sudden creation had to have produced in the impassioned minds of the hunters an intense feeling of proximity of the inaccessible monster, a feeling of proximity, of profound harmony (51).

Bataille imagines the prehuman’s fear in not making it back alive from the hunt, of not coming home with anything to eat, but also a sympathy for the hunted who so closely resembles the hunter that the hunter and hunted could very well be interchangeable. Indeed they often were. This feeling of proximity and harmony, however, is ill-defined and nearly ungraspable, for the apparition of the idol (i.e., the animal) signals an incomprehensible beyond *with which* the prehuman supposedly identifies. That is, the feeling of proximity with the apparition can only come about if the prehuman is him/herself but an apparition or poorly formed idea. In his essay on “Prehistoric Religion,” Bataille notes:

the apparition of the animal was not, to the man who astonished himself by making it appear, the apparition of a definable object, like the apparition in our



day of beef at the butcher that we cut up and weigh. That which appeared had at first a significance that was scarcely accessible, *beyond* what could have been defined. Precisely this equivocal, indefinable meaning was religious (135).

This begins to address the magical, ritualistic interpretation of the paintings. The treatment of the animals (ibrexes, aurochs, horses, etc.) testify to a care and wonder in the execution of what is beyond, indeterminate, just as much as it unsettles the difference between the prehuman and the animal. And it is this point that I wish to emphasize here. The prehuman sees him/herself in the apparition of the animal, but inasmuch as the animal was inaccessible and impermanent, so too then is the prehuman within his/her own eyes. The prehuman, as we are calling this indeterminate being (*Homo floresiensis*, *Homo neanderthlensis*, *Homo rhodesiensis*, or even early *Homo sapiens* would likely be more scientific names), would have been by definition literally between a past animality and our present humanity (assuming, of course, that we abide by these conceptual categories). This passage, it goes without saying, was far from a precise moment in time, but rather a “slow change, a change of infinite discretion” (145). As enacted through these paintings, however, we witness the figurative mirroring of this passage. On the one hand, Bataille will note that the prehumans left us images of the animality that they had escaped, whereby they stopped being animal-like by *giving* the animal in an act just short of a sacrifice (60), while on the other hand he will also state that the “images they left us amply testify to a humanity that did not clearly and distinctly distinguish itself from animality, a humanity that had not transcended animality” (55).

I believe, therefore, that the interpretation of the paintings as religious ritual – what has been called a functional or utilitarian interpretation – already carries within it the more celebrated interpretation of what Akira Mizuta Lippit calls the “arche-epistemology of a primal scene – humanity’s eruption onto the surface of the earth.”<sup>7</sup> All interpretations boil down to this ontological eruption.

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<sup>7</sup> Lippit, A. M. (2002), “Archetexts: Lascaux, Eros, and the Anamorphic Subject”, *Discourse* 24, 2, p. 19.

## Deformed humanity

The only thing that might rival the hyperbole surrounding the sudden appearance of humanity upon the scene of prehistory is the pictorial representation of this emergence. As already hinted at earlier, we have yet to view a naturalistic representation of the prehuman within these prehistoric caves. Despite the detail captured in the wealth of animal imagery (e.g., consider the movement captured in the “Falling Cow”), at no point does this realism translate into human figures. They are almost *a priori* disfigured. The erasure and defacement of the human therefore threatens to steal the thunder from the bold claims of *Ecce homo*. Rather than beholding the magnificence of the human, we are left to behold the almost human who appear to “flee their humanity” (65). “In fact,” Bataille writes, “when he was ‘born,’ he did not prefer what he would eventually become, *that which he is*: the creator of a world of durable things. On the contrary, he effaced the aspects of this world of which his face is the sign. He had not yet prevailed, but he apologized” (80). And perhaps even blushed or laughed at his own immodesty and indecency, indeed even at his own ugliness in comparison to the beauty found in the bulls, horses, and bison (79).

The retreat from his/her own image may in fact be in response to a transgression depicted within and by these paintings. The step from prehuman to human enacts the transgression of a law, even if it is only an implied law, as the gesture of a “sovereign infraction” on the part of the artist (Blanchot, 1997: 5). Blanchot, in his essay “The Birth of Art,” notes two essential moments of prehistoric transgression: the first is what we might call a “natural transgression” when the prehuman stands erect, defies the laws of nature, and rises up almost in awe of himself and the refutation of his biological predisposition. The infraction is less of a conscious willing than a biological determination. The second transgression noted by Blanchot is that of art itself, that, likely for the first time, demonstrates the prehumans’ capability to “become master of everything” via the imitation of nature (6). By comparison, the former transgression is deemed insufficient as a break from the natural order; a transgression, yes, but a relatively minor one, whereas the latter opens up an entirely new realm by breaking with the natural as such. Yet the most significant feature of this second transgression is not so much the art itself—which is admittedly

extraordinary—but the specific artistic depiction of humanity. The striking feature is that with the mastery of the natural world, as evinced in the birth of art, the human is both omnipresent and, at one and the same time, precisely nowhere to be found. The transgression effects an overcoming of animality but one wherein the self-mastery is sorely lacking. At one point Bataille describes this as a paradox, but calling it a paradox seems too innocent a description. “The paradox of the Upper Paleolithic world,” he writes in an essay on “The Lespugne Venus,” “is that it gave animals the expressive value of the real, whereas its representations of humans, much more rare, are occasionally formless, even caricatural, occasionally deformed, sometimes disfigured by an animal mask, which eliminates their humanity” (107). The transgression occurs when the prehuman foregoes further identification with the animals that have been so evocatively realized, and in doing so witnesses his/her own breaking of solidarity with the natural order (e.g., with the Montespan bear), leading to the extreme point of self-effacement (Guerlac, 2007: 34). The unease with one’s own image may just as well be a sense of shame rendered in the absence of a reciprocating gaze; an embarrassed blush of reason in the refusal of self-identification.

We are beginning to get to the point where we might question what is really at stake in the supposed birth of humanity. It is starting to look like a fraught adventure inasmuch as the indeterminacy of the prehuman threatens the positive determination of a certain way of being called ‘human.’ In an essay on “Primitive Art” published some 20-30 years earlier than his Lascaux writings (and thus 10 years before Lascaux’s “discovery”), Bataille had already put his finger on the issue when he contrasted traditional European art with the

shocking duality at the beginning of figurative representation. Reindeer, bison, and horses are shown with a meticulousness so perfect that if we had similarly scrupulous pictures of men themselves, the remotest period of human development would cease to be the most inaccessible. But the drawings and sculptures that represent the Aurignacians are nearly all formless and *much less human* than those that represent animals (40).

Why is it that there are no corresponding images of those who painted these images and carved these figures? That the represented animals might be *more* human than the images of the prehumans, as Bataille notes, likely says more about the artists

themselves than the accuracy of the images. One reading would be to suggest the autoerotic nature of the prehuman figures. Following Claude Lévi-Strauss, Bataille argues that though animals have a sense of sexuality they do not have the more developed, cerebral aspect implied by eroticism (e.g., taking a stone carving *as* a sexual object). Thus the blossoming of sexual organs is often accentuated in the folds and extensions of flesh. And yet this is still at the expense of human figuration, in which the expression of individuality has been suppressed in the featureless, anonymous, and exaggerated bodies (112). Even if it is possible that these images and figures had an erotic meaning, Bataille himself admits that it is highly debatable given the lack of corroborative evidence. We would also have to question Bataille's implicit acceptance of the more erotic nature of humanity.

Another reading would be to highlight the *formless* itself, be it erotic or otherwise. The concept of the "formless" (*informe*) had already been canonized in the untraditional encyclopaedia Bataille had been working on in the late 1920s, around the same time as this last passage. As it is a key concept within his writings, and it recurs frequently throughout the Lascaux writings, I quote at length:

A dictionary begins when it no longer gives the meaning of words, but their tasks. Thus *formless* is not only an adjective having a given meaning, but a term that serves to bring things down in the world, generally requiring that each thing have its form. What it designates has no rights in any sense and gets itself squashed everywhere, like a spider or an earthworm. In fact, for academic men to be happy, the universe would have to take shape. All of philosophy has no other goal: it is a matter of giving a frock coat to what is, a mathematical frock coat. On the other hand, affirming that the universe resembles nothing and is only *formless* amounts to saying that the universe is something like a spider or spit (31).

Bataille repeatedly refers to prehistoric depictions of humans as formless, whether with the bird-man in Lascaux (to which I'll return in a moment), or the Venus of Willendorf, or the Lespugne Venus. Often these images are called "grotesque," "featureless" (112), "unfinished" (79), the "stupefying negation of man" (46), or more consistently, simply "deformed" (which carries a more pejorative sense, as in "loss of form," than the slightly more neutral "formless"). Of the few images of deformed

humanity, there is one in particular that captures Bataille's attention, just as it has captured the attention of many both before and since. It is the image of a bird-man found in the "Shaft" section of Lascaux, the deepest and most inaccessible part, where, in child-like form, the bird-man lies (wounded? dead? resting? in a trance? erect?) beside an impaled bison and a small bird. Concerning this scene, which Bataille calls "the holiest of holies," we discover "a measure of this world; it is even *the* measure of this world" (137).

When the art critics Rosalind Krauss and Yves-Alain Bois looked to offer a substantially new interpretation of modernist art in the twentieth century, they found their guiding principle in Bataille's notion of the formless inasmuch as it provided an avenue to counteract the entrenched binary between content and form. Bois explains in the "Introduction" to *Formless: A User's Guide*, "It is not so much a stable motif to which we can refer, a symbolizable theme, a given quality, as it is a term allowing one to operate a declassification, in the double sense of lowering and of taxonomic disorder. Nothing in-and-of-itself, the formless has only an operational existence...The formless is an operation" (1997: 18). Just as the cave paintings have been interpreted as rendering the animal present in the *act* of painting (where the final product is secondary to the apparition itself), the images of the formless prehumans can be read as active operations of self-negation, albeit where the images themselves enact the declassification operative in the act of painting. It is in this sense that Adorno, for instance, views the paintings as "a protest against reification" (327), almost as if the prehuman wished to mark a trace before vanishing back into the universe. In the end, this is what Blanchot took to be the bird-man's simplicity: "it seems to me," he writes, "that the meaning of this obscure drawing is nonetheless clear: it is the first signature of the first painting" (11), as if pronouncing "here I am," even if the 'I' in question is more than indeterminate. A signature of whom, then? Might we not take this to be the sublimity of "the holiest of the holies," the transgression at the heart of humanity's birth? Consider, for instance, how Kant (2007) describes the sublime as, by definition, formless. Compared to the form of beauty, "the sublime is to be found in an object even devoid of form, so far as it immediately involves, or else by its presence provokes, a representation of *limitlessness*, yet with a

super-added thought of totality” (244).<sup>8</sup> Aren’t these formless prehumans, lacking the frockcoats of an ordering mind, just such a representation of limitlessness? Isn’t the sublimity of these prehuman images precisely to be found in the mind’s recognition of the impossibility of its own finished humanity?

### **A Vibration of Appearances**

The limitlessness entailed by the absence of form is, from another perspective, the perpetual rebirth of humanity as accomplished through the simple act of vision. To perceive is none other than to give birth to oneself in the reciprocity of the world. Perceptual experience, as Merleau-Ponty will often note, is the precondition of humanity as a “nascent *logos*,” as the birth of knowledge making the sensible sensible (Merleau-Ponty, 1964:25). This rebirth of the human condition is accomplished, in an extraordinary way, through the act of painting, which works to render the invisible visible. At roughly the same time, then, that Bataille was composing his thoughts on prehistoric art, Merleau-Ponty formulated some of his most influential writings on art and nature, and in which, perhaps unsurprisingly, Lascaux emerges. In his 1952 essay on “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence,” an essay dedicated to Jean-Paul Sartre but largely devoted to André Malraux (who had just published a large treatise on art entitled *The Voices of Silence*), Merleau-Ponty remarks that “The first sketches on the walls of caves set forth the world as ‘to be painted’ or ‘to be sketched’ and called for an indefinite future of painting, so that they speak to us and we answer them by metamorphoses in which they collaborate with us” (1964c: 60). Most intriguing in this passage is the reference to a “metamorphosis” through which we respond to the paintings. It is not entirely clear what Merleau-Ponty means here, other than that our relations with this archaic past calls for a continuous exchange wherein both past and present are hermeneutically revived and, through the exchange, ultimately transformed. But a metamorphosis also suggests something far more interesting and surreal. One imagines modern humanity emerging transformed from out of the atemporal cocoon of its prehuman larval stage, much like a butterfly that emerges

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<sup>8</sup> Kant precedes this passage by stating that “the beautiful in nature is a question of the form of the object” (75)

triumphant through its pupal transformation. In a later essay, “Eye and Mind,” Merleau-Ponty will similarly speak of the “metamorphosis of Being” by which objects (e.g., an animal, a mountain) *make* themselves visible to the eye. Either way, we have a reciprocal transition of form inaugurated by the primacy of perception.

Throughout his aesthetic writings, Merleau-Ponty will often indicate that artworks are evocative not only of metamorphoses, but also of magic, delirium, ghosts, strange possessions, hauntings, and oneiric universes, all in the name of the visible itself.<sup>9</sup> It is through the act of perception that the perceiving subject is continuously reborn, and inasmuch as the painter plays directly with the realm of the visible, she brings a world to life. But it is not any old world, since the painted world is, by all accounts, a spectral one, lending shadows, light, reflections, and the like, a ghostly presence. A visual existence that is neither real nor unreal, neither nature itself nor its imitation, it holds a strange possession all of its own. It is in this sense that painting can be said to give “visible existence to what profane vision believes to be invisible” (1964b: 166). Compared with the profanity of perception, the painted image is always already haunted with the sacred and magical such that, for Merleau-Ponty, the very act of painting is congruent with a passage back and forth between the prehuman and the human. The indefinite future of painting plays upon this very transition, for without this process the act of painting may be at its end.

This is a departure, then, from Bataille’s thesis concerning the birth of humanity as discovered *in* prehistoric art. By contrast, the birth of humanity is for Merleau-Ponty omnipresent in *every* painting, be it 40,000 years ago or just last week. It is in this way that he can contend “In whatever civilization it is born, from whatever beliefs, motives, or thoughts, no matter what ceremonies surround it—and even when it appears devoted to something else—from Lascaux to our time, pure or impure, figurative or not, painting celebrates no other enigma but that of visibility” (165-66). While the emergence of being human carries for Bataille a quasi-evolutionary index, as evidenced in the rupture of the Lascaux paintings that mark past from present,

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<sup>9</sup> Merleau-Ponty writes (1964b), in his essay “Eye and Mind”: “Light, lighting, shadows, reflections, color, all the objects of his quest are not altogether real objects; like ghosts, they have only visual existence” (166).

animal from human, with Merleau-Ponty there is an abrupt abandonment of any historical register, inasmuch as the very accomplishment of painting *itself* is the ontological metamorphosis. It *is* the testament to perception, the sacred act of witnessing the invisible, the continuous rebirth of the human.<sup>10</sup> “It can be said,” Merleau-Ponty writes in his essay “Eye and Mind,” “that a human is born at the instant when something that was only virtually visible...becomes at one and the same time visible for itself and for us. The painter’s vision is a continued birth. ...This prehuman way of seeing things is the painter’s way” (167-68).<sup>11</sup>

If we follow Merleau-Ponty here, this would suggest that the paintings in Lascaux—including but not solely the therianthropic humans—can only ever be prehuman visions that are actualized as human. The passage between prehuman and human is accomplished in the act of painting. This would accord with the formless self-depictions, wherein the invisible is rendered visible, the prehuman made human, and yet the act is always unfinished due to the indeterminacy of the originating perception. Whereas the prehistoric caves hold for Bataille the mysteries that he calls the cradle of humanity, for Merleau-Ponty any and all paintings address “the vibration of appearances which is the cradle of things” (1964a: 18). To express the vibration of appearance is perhaps the best way to account for how these prehistoric paintings foretell and question humanity’s place in the world. Though they may elude full comprehension, there is little doubt they do so necessarily, since the figure of the prehuman haunts our existence with every dogged perception we have.<sup>12</sup>

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10 We might think of this as analogous to the biological theory that maintains—we now know incorrectly—that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny. As analogy it holds a certain resonance within the aesthetic domain. In bringing to expression the “inarticulate cry,” the painter renders visible the prehuman world in a similar way that, if the analogy holds, the prehistoric prehumans graduated to humanity.

11 To push this analogy further, we might look to how this metamorphosis is enacted within the art of children, as written on by both Merleau-Ponty and Bataille. “Besides,” Bataille notes, “what are children if not animals becoming human” (1991: 65).

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