

Hunting the Mammoth, Pleistocene to Postmodern

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In the decades following the Second World War, Georges Bataille became fixated on that site of prehistoric becoming that his most prominent source, the Abbé Breuil, called “The Cradle of Humanity.” He devoted a number of essays and lectures to articulating the event of hominization that was increasingly being revealed by palaeo-archaeological evidence. In particular, he saw the cave art of Lascaux and other sites, with their sublime depictions of animals, as disclosing the advent of humanity. On a number of occasions he commented on the serendipity of these discoveries, on the weightiness of pondering *prehistory* in the period widely marked in Bataille’s philosophical milieu, following Kojève’s lectures on Hegel, as that of history’s *end*. In a 1955 lecture he remarked that:

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. ...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. In fact, only recently have we begun to discern with a kind of clarity the earthly event that was the birth of man. (Bataille, 2005: 87)

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In his essay “Unlivable Earth?”, Bataille returns to this thought, suggesting that “We might have a sublime idea of the animal now that we have ceased being certain that one day the nuclear bomb will not make the planet an unlivable place for man” (2005: 178). Thus Bataille ties together the possibility of the end of history in anthropogenic ecological apocalypse with the thought of the advent of “man,” and what is more makes clear that these beginnings and ends of man—with which his poststructuralist successors have been occupied in their own ways—are tightly tied to the question of the animal.

Indeed, much recent thought in Continental philosophy, critical theory and animal studies has interrogated the connection between posthumanism and the animal question. In *The Open*, Giorgio Agamben uses the concept of the “anthropological machine” to describe the interminable process—both conceptual and material, philosophical and political—by which the human is produced at the expense of the animal (2004: 37). Humanity’s idea of its own transcendence and uniqueness is articulated, from prehistoric cave art to modern science, via its fraught relationship to the nonhuman animal.

Today, our anticipation of the ecological end of humanity has both shifted and intensified. The nuclear threat that so troubled Bataille is but one part of that historical shift identified by Michel Foucault as the transformation to an age of biopolitics that strategically wagers the very life of the human species, as indeed—though Foucault did not say this—the lives of all those nonhuman species with which we share (or do not) the planet (Foucault, 1998: 139). While the Cold War might be behind us and the nuclear threat not quite so foregrounded, we are troubled today by other global ecological hazards that are constantly enumerated in reports of habitat destruction, pollution, extinctions of animal species, and escalating climate change that threatens to undo the human political and economic order. Bataille’s sense of the timely significance of our ideas of *prehistory* and of *the animal* ought to be undiminished, indeed heightened, by the ecological crises of today.

While ubiquitous and acute, these concerns seem often to be ciphered through one particular prehistoric animal: the mammoth. This extinct beast, whose demise coincides with our own ascent, is today a privileged figure in stories of environmental transgression, guilt and redemption. Through the analysis of a number of narratives of the mammoth hunt—fictional and philosophical, ethnographic and scientific—I will explore how prehistory is problematized and put to work as a primal scene for the anthropological machine and its production of man over against the animal and the natural world.

The extinct mammoth is prominent in contemporary stories of ecological domination and restoration. For W. J. T. Mitchell, “The dinosaur [was] the totem animal of modernity...a symbolic animal that comes into existence for the first time in the modern era” and that “epitomizes a modern time sense—both the geological ‘deep time’ of paleontology and the temporal cycles of innovation and obsolescence endemic to modern capitalism” (1998: 77). I want to argue that the mammoth is the totem animal of *post*modernity, a symbolic animal that, like the dinosaur, appeared relatively recently in our cultural awareness and soon became exemplary of the fears and hopes of our age. Unlike the dinosaur, however, the mammoth epitomizes not deep time and the perpetual change of capitalism but, rather, the liminal transition from deep time to historical time that we find at the Pleistocene/Holocene border (“near time”), and today’s ecological *crisis* of ever-changing capitalism pushing the earth’s natural limits.

In terms of their cultural meaning we can distinguish, provisionally, three types of extinctions: evolutionary (such as the dinosaurs), prehistorical (such as the Pleistocene mammalian megafauna), and historical (such as the thylacine, dodo, and passenger pigeon). These differ not only in their temporal location but also in their proximal cause. While the first (the evolutionary extinctions) are seen as natural, the result perhaps of climatic changes brought on by events such as the Chicxulub asteroid that ended the Mesozoic reign of the dinosaurs, and the last (the historical extinctions) are the result of European colonialism and the capitalist practice of extracting profits as if natural resources were infinite, it is the middle group—the Pleistocene

megafauna extinctions—that prove so meaningful and contested today. And we seem to have elected the mammoth to represent the sabre-tooth cat, the mastodon, the giant sloth and other, less well-known, now defunct large mammals. If for Mitchell the “terrible lizards” are both obsolete and literally dreadful in their evolutionary sublimity, the woolly mammoth, while robust, is, as a herbivore, hardly menacing; and despite its extinction, there is a powerful sense in which these frozen carcasses are not yet done with.

The notion that the mammoth is central to our self-definition is borne out in the reading of a number of contemporary mammoth tales. Jeanne Willis’s (2008) children’s story *Mammoth Pie* presents us with a prehistoric encounter between an emerging humanity and this forbidding and alluring species. The “fat mammoth” is the object of desire for the hungry “thin caveman,” Og, who “was fed up with eating seeds” and “weeds.”

“Meat is what a caveman needs!” said Og.

“I’ll catch the mammoth and put him in a pie!”

Hardly up to the task of bringing down a mammoth alone, Og uses the promise of meat to enlist the help of fellow cavemen, the specialized labour of each contributing to the attempt, whether spear, trap, cart, pot or fire. Each selfishly asks what they will get in return, to which the answer is always: “A bite of Mammoth Pie!” And since their need for meat is axiomatic, the cavemen agree, singing together, “No more weeds! No more seeds! Meat is what a caveman needs!” But when it comes time to bring down the mammoth, their tools are not enough. The mammoth is joined by his family who stomp in to comprise an intimidating herd, and instead of a successful hunt we witness a comedic debacle as the outnumbered and emasculated Og, Ug, Gog, Bog, Nog, and Mog run fearfully away, breaking their tools, deprived once more of the meat they “need,” left rather with weeds and seeds.

This is a familiar narrative of becoming-human through the joining of forces in a social contract that binds together the prehumans and sets them against the natural world—here exemplified in the mammoth—the domination of

which is necessary for their progress beyond a rather pathetic state of nature. *Mammoth Pie* exemplifies what Derrida (1991) calls in some of his late work “carnophallogocentrism,” that is, the production of the privileged carnivorous, male, speaking subject through the sacrifice of the animal other. This children’s story of course plays with and mocks this idea of the human, replaying as farce the once momentous primal drama of hominization. Sick of his enforced vegetarianism, Og attempts to kill the mammoth, but is defeated by the superiority of the mammoth herd. Yet it is precisely the *failed* humans that are laughed at; for all the inability of these cavemen to become carnophallogocentric subjects, with the accompanying misanthropic or at least misandric humour, the reader is always implicitly aware that, in the end, the specialization and ingenuity of meat-desiring cavemen will pay off. Eventually, man will get his mammoth pie and grow fat and powerful. Unlike the pathetic cavemen, *we* are not foiled in our domination of nature but have rather triumphed in our search for the meat that we need.

It is not only in western children’s books that the mammoth figures as the animal in relation to which the carnivory and dominance of humankind is articulated and questioned. In his wonderful ethnography of Siberian reindeer herders, Piers Vitebsky recounts an intriguing campfire conversation in which his hosts comment on the difficulty he is having in adapting to their eating style:

Granny directed Masha as she ladled out large pieces of meat from one pan and a mixture of intestines and other inner organs from another. The herders and I pulled out the wooden-handled sheath knives from our belts and laid them on the table for everyone to use. We took it in turns to use the knives to reach in and stab at the meat, biting on the edge of a large hunk and slicing upward to separate the piece gripped between our teeth from the rest. I have never been comfortable with this way of eating, but do it all the same.

Suddenly Tolya asked, “Did you know that archaeologists have discovered a tribe of long-nosed Europeans who used to live here?”

Many natives read a lot of archaeology and anthropology, and Tolya read more than most. I must have paused gratifyingly, for he went on, “They became extinct because they kept cutting off their noses every time they tried to eat. It’s obvious from Darwin or Lamarck—you’ve got to adapt your nose or your eating habits. Only the flat-nosed Asiatic tribes survived!”

Granny chuckled and Emmie gave a shriek.

“That’s no guarantee,” said Ivan soberly. “Mammoths had long noses. They didn’t cut meat because they were vegetarian. But they died out all the same.”

Granny chortled again. (Vitebsky, 2005: 89)

I quote the initial description of their vigorous, carnivorous meal at such length because it provides the material frame for the mention of the mammoth. Tolya’s initial joke is a charming just-so story that ties the short-nosed facial features of his people to their seemingly hazardous table manners, contrasting their successful adaptation to the implicitly inferior whitefolk. But Ivan’s supplementary remark upsets the simple contrast. The mammoths, like the fictional defunct European tribe, died out in the area. But their extinction cannot be put down to a failure to amend their eating habits—at least, not in the same way; unlike the different kinds of human, the mammoth tribe does not eat meat, let alone wield knives to do so. What, then, led to their demise? Ivan’s implicit answer suffuses the entire exchange, and its alimentary context, with its disquieting sobriety: it was, of course, the carnivorous “eating habits” of the humans.

The “cradle of humanity” has long been a favored ideological playground, and not only for bedtime or campfire storytellers. The dramatist Robert Ardrey, influential author of *African Genesis*, *The Territorial Imperative*, and *The Social Contract*, narrated the violent origins of man in his concluding “personal inquiry” into human evolution, *The Hunting Hypothesis*. Criticising the romantic fallacy of humanity’s originary innocence, he argued that *Homo sapiens* are essentially predators, descended from killer apes. Central to his portrayal of prehistory was the “overkill hypothesis” of Pleistocene megafauna extinction. Ardrey narrates how, at the end of the ice age, newly sophisticated human hunters entered North America via the Bering land bridge and “within a thousand years after our arrival...exterminated the mammoth” (1976: 10). Lacking the long familiarity with this marauding primate that enabled other proboscideans to survive:

The mighty mammoth of North America died of innocence. It and the mastodon supported on their monumental legs about 25 percent of the continent’s meat. As they must surely have been as intelligent as their African cousin, they must surely have been as formidable. But what good is might when you have never encountered the most dangerous of animals, the human being? (1976: 10)

This new predator’s extraordinary combination of sophistication and ferocity condemned the megafauna to dwindle and vanish, the unfortunate casualty of the emergence of man the hunter.

Of course, Ardrey is only one among many anthropologists and palaeontologists, professional and amateur, to have made their own erudite contributions to the chronicles of carnivorous cavemen. Wiktor Stoczkowski has described how the hominization scenarios of nineteenth- and twentieth-century scientific paleo-anthropology or what he calls “conjectural history,” from Lamarck, Darwin and Engels, through Washburn, Ardrey and Leroi-Gourhan, to the late 1970s and beyond, betray a constant tendency to make use (without empirical backing) of folk or naïve anthropology as articulated

through more than two millennia of Western philosophical and commonsensical thought. Stoczkowski provides a detailed analysis of the types of causal relationships imagined and repeated throughout this tradition, the recipes for hominization comprised of familiar ingredients such as ecological change, bipedalism, hunting, fire, tool-use, art and language. He argues that these narratives are only superficially related to empirical developments; rather, they draw strongly on the conceptual matrix of Western anthropology (construed broadly), and are given particular ideological inflections based on the historical context and desires of their authors. Thus he delineates how, according to the Soviets, it was labour and collectivization that transformed ape into man; while according to Americans in the midst of the Cold War, early man was a violent hunter whose predatory instincts, when combined with nuclear technology, put modern society at risk; whereas according to the archaeological “herstories” of countercultural feminists of the 1970s, it was cooperation and food-sharing, led by the first women, that were the agents of hominization (Stoczkowski, 2002: 182-4).

Mart Cartmill gives more detail to the post-war American obsession with man the hunter embodied so vividly in Ardrey’s dramas. In such stories of anthropogenesis, hunting is the central means of the becoming-man of man. Cartmill argues that:

During the 1960s, the central propositions of the hunting hypothesis—that hunting and its selection pressures had made men and women out of our apelike ancestors, instilled a taste for violence in them, estranged them from the animal kingdom, and excluded them from the order of nature—became familiar themes of the national culture, and the picture of *Homo sapiens* as a mentally unbalanced predator threatening an otherwise harmonious natural realm became so pervasive that it ceased to provoke comment. These themes were disseminated not only through popular-science books but also through novels, cartoons, films, and television. (1996: 14)

And as he goes on to argue, this picture was so widely accepted for reasons that had more to do with mythological self-understanding than scientific evidence. The hunting hypothesis is a rationalized version of the Christian Fall narrative, with original sin consisting in man's anti-natural predation, and the possibility of redemption thus lying in a more harmonious relationship to nature. Cartmill concludes by arguing that the hunting hypothesis is

a fable. Its abrupt acceptance by science in the years after World War II had more to do with new conceptions of the animal-human boundary than it did with the facts about *Australopithecus africanus*. We should recognize it as an origin myth, dreamt up to justify the dubious distinction we draw between the human domain and the wild kingdom of nature. (1996: 226)

While Cartmill does not explicitly discuss the trope of the mammoth hunt, the mammoth has always been central to our scientific reconstruction of prehistoric human origins. As A. Bowdoin Van Riper (1993) describes, the discovery of mammoth fossils led to a shakeup of accepted beliefs about the origins of man and the static and unbreakable scale of nature, transforming Victorian science and opening up the very possibility of the pre-historical. It is the contemporaneity of man and mammoth which lies at the heart of our picture of lengthy human evolution that replaced religious ideas of human recency. Thus ideas of human origins and of extinction have, from the beginning, been explored through the vehicle of the mammoth. Yet if evolution undermined a certain notion of transcendence, embedding our species within the natural history of the earth, human uniqueness was soon reaffirmed as our capacity to unbalance the nature from which we emerged. The extinction of the mammoth is a signal that humanity was not simply a product of evolution, but had itself become an evolutionary force.

Central to many narratives of the human-mammoth encounter is the overkill hypothesis of Pleistocene megafauna extinction, which maintains that not climate change but unrestrained human hunting was responsible for the

demise of mammoths and other species at the end of the ice age. Advanced by Paul Martin (1967; 2005) and others since the 1960s, yet often contested on empirical and political grounds, this influential theory has offered its own distinctive fable of origins, contributing to the image of man the hunter, as advocated by the likes of Ardrey, and to successor scientific stories told today (Flannery, 2001). Too often this image of humanity as a species universally destructive of the environment obscures the historical intensification of such damage in modern colonialism and capitalism. Yet just such intensification seems only to strengthen this underlying theory of human nature. When articulated within contemporary ecological consciousness, the overkill hypothesis stages not only the violence of an exceptional primate, but also its widespread destruction, the enormous scale of the extinction that resulted from the spread of *Homo sapiens* around the world. It is this perception of human culpability for the mammoth's extinction that provokes the desire to simulate or even resurrect them today, in projects such as the rewilding of Pleistocene Parks and the venture to clone the mammoth (Chrulew, 2011).

Such seemingly science fictional projects are often described or critiqued by reference to that familiar fable of human hubris and nature's revenge, *Jurassic Park*. Yet such comparisons overlook what is specific and unique to stories of prehistoric mammoths, which are located one twist further along the dialectic of humanity-in-nature than modern tales of the vengeance of terrible lizards against meddling scientists. While the "natural" extinction of Jurassic dinosaurs made possible the survival and evolution of Mammalia, the "man-made" extinction of Pleistocene mammoths did not unfurl but impoverished planetary life. Recreating this ice age giant and its habitat is not simply a perpetuation of our technological imperialism but rather an attempt to atone for it, a way of seeking redemption for our ecological sins, if once again through *techne*, the only way we know how. Postmodern mammoth tales recognize that we are already living through the vengeance of nature against human intervention; given that we can hardly keep ourselves from impacting on the natural world, the question instead becomes how best to intervene, and whether we might in fact act in ways that remediate previous, harmful ecological effects. Such is the burden of humanity in the Anthropocene.

For many, however, the further application of rationality and technology can only perpetuate human domination. For some thinkers of prehistory, man the hunter is not the original model of contemporary, destructive *Homo faber*, but rather stands opposed to our utilitarian universe in his primordial immersion in animal urges. The mammoth hunt is here not an original sin but the vital assertion of a lost aspect of humanity.

Jean M. Auel's popular Earth's Children series of alternate history novels follow Ayla, an orphaned Cro-Magnon raised by Neanderthals, and her partner Jondalar. This mix of romance and speculative fiction relies on detailed research on prehistoric lifeways. The third book in the series, *The Mammoth Hunters*, follows Ayla's encounter with the Mamutoi, a tribe of mammoth hunters based on the Aurignacian culture. Ayla spends much of the novel caught between Jondalar and another man, confused about her purpose in life. The climax of the novel is a mammoth hunt described by Auel in animated terms that meditate on the nature of these proto-human creatures, cooperative and violent, yet worshipful and respectful of nature:

[Ayla] had always wanted to hunt mammoth, and a chill of anticipation shot through her when she realised that she was actually about to participate in the first mammoth hunt of her life. Though there was something utterly ridiculous about it, when she stopped to consider it. How could creatures as small and weak as humans challenge the huge, shaggy, tusked beast, and hope to succeed? Yet here she was, ready to take on the largest animal that walked the land, with nothing more than a few mammoth spears. No, that wasn't entirely true. She also had the intelligence, experience, and cooperation of the other hunters. And Jondalar's spear-thrower. (Auel, 1980: 728-9)

As in other myths of human origins, cooperation and tool-use are the key to this weak species besting its obvious superior. The sacrifice of the powerful animal plays a central narrative, social and mythic role: in addition to

providing food it also helps resolve the existential and sexual crises of the characters. The fear of the mammoths, and killing them, provides Ayla a thrill, and the bloodlust of the massacre, an event both violent and sensual, ultimately results in bringing her and her love interest Jondalar back together.

They chase the mammoths with firesticks, spears and other phallic objects, setting them to stampede towards a trap, an enclosed canyon where they could kill them with impunity. Inside, “blaring screams of mammoths echoed off hard, icy walls, grating on the ears, and racking on the nerves. Ayla was filled with almost unbearable tension, part fear, part excitement” (Auel, 1980: 731). The kill scene depicts spears down throats and in bellies and an excess of red blood on white ice. Ayla takes on a bull by herself, and wounded, it charges and almost kills her. When Jondalar finally comes to her rescue, he is shaken at the thought of losing her:

his heart...pounding with fear for her. He'd almost lost her!
That mammoth nearly killed her! Her hood was thrown back
and her hair was in disarray. Her eyes were sparkling with
excitement. Her face was flushed and she was breathing hard.
She was beautiful in her excitement, and the effect was
immediate and overwhelming (Auel, 1980: 733)

He soon finds “the blood rush to his loins” at the hunt’s consummation: “He could have taken her that instant, right there on the cold, bloody floor of the ice canyon” (Auel, 1980: 734). Not only does the event of the mammoth hunt drive them together; it is in particular the sensual excitement of the closeness to death—killing and almost being killed by this honourable creature—that drives his desire.

The bloodlust of this primal scene, as well as its overall romanticization of the butchery, is in some ways reminiscent of Bataille’s primitivism. Bataille, in his opposition to the utilitarian horrors of industrialized modernity, offers a vision of prehistoric peoples (and, for that matter, of present-day Siberian “primitives”) who do not separate their godlike selves from animals, as we

moderns do, but rather efface the human image amid powerful figures of animals akin to divinity. Commenting on the cave art at Lascaux, he writes:

The reality that these paintings describe singularly exceeds the material search for food through the technical medium of magic. Prehistoric hunting has little to do with the rather innocuous modern pastime. It was the activity not of an individual or of a small number of individuals but of an entire population that sometimes confronted monsters. For the hunters using flimsy weapons, the pursuit of a mammoth undoubtedly had something prodigious in it, which had to have unleashed the passion, the frenzy of an entire group of men. (Bataille, 2005: 166)

Bataille's is a profound philosophical encounter with prehistoric art, a refined staging of the emergence of "man" through the representation of sacred animal images and the transgression of prohibitions tied to death, sexuality, and the overcoming of animality. The event of anthropogenesis is here not successful or resolved, but an act of erasure that effaces man as soon as he appears. The animal world, rather than the opaque sphere from which modern humans celebrate or mourn their difference, is here an open domain deserving of primeval solidarity.

For all their differences of genre and finesse, the primitivist fantasies of both Auel and Bataille portray mammoth bloodletting as an anti-modern communal ritual, a moment of sensual natural immersion that has been lost to civilization. Unlike many iterations of the hunting hypothesis, which posit a fundamental continuity between *Homo sapiens* as prehistoric predator and as capitalist consumer, between the extinctions of the mammoth and mastodon and those of the dodo and passenger pigeon, these prehistoric tales oppose our early vital continuity with the animal world to modern domination and transcendence and its attendant ecological crises, thereby linking the thought of prehistory and the prehuman with the end of history and its posthuman avatars.

For Ardrey, too, our prehistoric becoming is tied to the spectre of apocalypse. He paints the totality of agricultural civilizations as but the brief evolutionary interlude of “interglacial man,” imagining a near future of overpopulation and climate change triggering starvation and wholesale social collapse. And yet, as always, this dystopia contains within it a utopian kernel: “What I suspect is that the survivors of this glacial calamity that will befall us, decimate us, and through most appalling natural selection discard...[us]—will pool their collective genes into one more subspecies of *Homo sapiens* in a few tens of millennia, and take one more step away from the ape in the direction of the human being” (Ardrey, 1976: 219). Avoiding nostalgia and melancholy, Ardrey mourns the loss of the hunting life:

As an interglacial man, I feel no embarrassment, except for one thing—that we ended the hunting way. It had shaped us, given us—anatomically and socially—the way we are. But we killed off our fellow species in the natural world. The death of the hunter and the hunted must be the sin that interglacial man committed in the memories of his inheritors. How do you live when the tundra returns but not the reindeer, the aurochs, the extinct mammoth? (1976: 219)

In this science fictional scenario, when the ice encroaches once more and yet nature remains forever impoverished by our grasping hand, what remains for the mammoth and its extinct brethren is to inhabit our artworks, our science, our stories, as spectres, figures, fables—as the mortal creatures that they were. Ardrey writes, “I suspect that our Ice Age inheritors, whatever their literate capacities, will turn back to the villains and heroes of interglacial man for the lessons of what to do, and what not. It could be our greatest legacy” (1976: 219). There are certainly stories enough to fill this new ice age bestiary. Beyond those recounted here, our film and literature, philosophy and science, are filled with mammoths enduring, over and again, our predation and our projection (Chrulew, forthcoming). Mick Smith (2001) reminds us that ecological moralising about extinction events can compound the effacement

of the vanished animal itself. Indeed it is vital, in questioning and telling these stories, to do what we can to engage ethically with the parted, as other, precisely by moving on from the past. Yet within these mammoth stories, from the didactic to the transgressive, subsists precisely this desire to have the dead speak to us and to carry forth their wisdom, if not their life. As a legacy to our postapocalyptic successors, there is plenty in the archives of the mammoth that is worthy of the most refined posthuman moral reflection.

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