PAST PRESENCE: AESTHETICS AND THE CREATION OF ORIGIN

by

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In this essay, I propose a method by which humans may understand themselves in relation to our imagined origin. Many believe that humanity's origin offers great insight into our present condition, yet its historical distance renders it unknowable. I suggest, drawing on Martin Buber, that we engage our origin as a You; that is, we gain self-knowledge by confronting the otherness of our origin. This sort of encounter may be accomplished through engagement with works of art that embody or represent our origin. In two chapters I respectively discuss artistic representations of nature and interpretations of the Paleolithic cave paintings of Lascaux, France. Through my evaluation of these two examples, I conclude that human meaning comes from our ability to encounter others, and that every moment in which we are addressed by otherness is a moment of creation.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Most human endeavors are in some way justified or conditioned by a notion of their origin. Politicians, for example, tend to evaluate contemporary affairs on the basis of their adherence to values associated with a nation's founding moments. The astrophysicist's theory of celestial bodies is preconditioned by a belief concerning how the cosmos came into being. Sociobiologists attempt to make sense of contemporary human biology and behavior through speculation on the needs and hardships of our earliest ancestors. And the practices of nearly every religion relate in some way to a supposed creation story. The act of positing and referring to a primordial moment is, I suggest, pervasive in human life.

Michel Foucault, in his essay, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," examines the concept of origin as such, and gives an argument as to why our beliefs and actions gravitate toward the positing of origin, and what sort of insight or satisfaction we hope to derive therefrom:

> We tend to think that this is the moment of their greatest perfection, when they emerged dazzling from the hands of a creator or in the shadowless light of a first morning. The origin always precedes the Fall. It comes before the body, before the world and time; it is associated with the gods, and its story as always sung as a theogony.[1]

In the search for the origin of a phenomenon, Foucault argues that we implicitly hope to discover its objectively perfect, unambiguous essence. The origin, as "before the body," and

[1] Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," trans. Donald F. Brouchard and Sherry Simon, *Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954-1984*, vol. 2, *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, ed. James D. Faubion, (New York: The New Press, 1998), 372.

"associated with the gods" is also *transcendent*: Achieving a clear understanding of an origin is akin to a spiritual epiphany. Although the origin is crucial to our identity, it is also a moment characterized by elements that profoundly differ from our present condition as embodied, finite, and fallible beings.

As one might already be able to deduce, Foucault argues that the method for uncovering an origin of this sort devolves into absurdity. The seeker of origin must achieve a "vantage point of an absolute distance, free from the restraints of positive knowledge [*connaissance*]."[2] In this space of epistemic distance, we hope to remove ourselves from the imperfect, contingent biases characteristic of our present situation. In order to find this absolute distance, Foucault claims we develop a:

> field of knowledge [*savoir*] whose function is to recover it, but (it is) always in a false recognition due to the excesses of its own speech. The origin lies at a place of inevitable loss, the point where the truth of things is knotted to a truthful discourse, the site of a fleeting articulation that discourse has obscured and finally lost.[3]

According to Foucault, the discovery of absolute origin requires an intellectual distance which is impossible to achieve due to the inevitable limits of the discourses established in its pursuit. The finitude of our language, our perspective and our bodies prevents us from achieving the objectivity necessary to comprehend the essential truth that we seek in origin. As a result, theories of origin are likely to tell us more about the society that produced them than they do the origins themselves.

Foucault's critique of the search for origin is a preamble to his praise of genealogy, the Nietzschean approach to philosophical history. According to Nietzsche, we cannot understand a phenomenon by seeking its primal moment; we must look instead to the

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[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

"exteriority of accidents."[4] In other words, although we associate the origin with unambiguous and essential truth, our present conditions are more accurately explained as the repercussions of our historical failures, which we may deem as "exterior" due to the concrete, localizable interrelation of persons, objects, species, and communities that gave rise to these failures.

For example, according to this view an account of Christianity that begins and ends with the religion's supposed origins is neither informative nor acceptable. Instead of simply recounting the story that humans were created in God's image and that God sacrificed his son to redeem mankind, Foucault might say that we need to consider the ways in which Christianity has been practiced, which would include events such as the decimation of indigenous non-Western religious practices during periods of European colonization, recent sex abuse scandals among Catholic clergy, and the role of the American religious right in the perpetuation of the Iraq War. To be sure, some of these acts have been motivated by Christians' desire to act in accordance with the supposed original will of God, but they have also been informed by social, political and economic demands, such as, in the last example, the American need for oil, and a history of controversial and divisive intervention in the Middle East by Western nations. Therefore, actions and agendas pursued in the name of Christianity are not implicitly contained in its origin, but are also informed and/or reinforced by other events and ideologies. And if we choose to privilege the search for origin, we risk forgetting the plurality of historical interrelations in which we are implicated.

I appreciate Nietzsche and Foucault's genealogical approach to history, which recognizes moments of insight and truth in the banal, shameful, transitory, and "exterior"

[4] Ibid., 374

moments in human life. However, I also think that the concept of the primordial, as articulated and critiqued by Foucault, is too meaningful to human life for us to reject outright. As my aforementioned example of Christianity suggests, the positing of origin is not without its dangers, as it can allow us to forget the historical atrocities that have contributed to our present state. Yet I also believe that because of the extraordinary and irreconcilable tension between our identification with and our otherness from our supposed origin, a proper relation to our origin can aid us in the cultivation of ethical responsibility.

I should make clear from the very beginning that the measure by which I evaluate ethical behavior is not a set of positively defined virtues or values, nor is it a model of right or wrong action. Rather, drawing on the work of twentieth-century Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, I consider ethics from the standpoint of *relationality*. The attitude with which one engages another being will determine the capacity she will have to act responsibly toward the other, and is thus more informative of ethical behavior than the actions themselves or the virtues expressed therein. In his 1923 book *I and Thou*, Buber argues that human life in all its aspects cannot be explained without reference to our relations and interactions with each other, objects, non-human organisms, and (for Buber, at least) God. The ideal intersubjective attitude is for Buber the "I -You" relation, in which the subject finds herself addressed by another being, and responds in turn with her whole being.[5] This relation, with its mysteriously simple definition, is the precondition for the meaning that is possible to discover and create in our lives. When one responds to another with her whole being, she encounters that other as a unity of inexhaustibly rich significance. Moreover, this relation is reciprocal: by allowing ourselves to be addressed in like manner, we in turn are

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[5] Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1970), 54.

empowered, because for Buber, one becomes a subject, or "I" when one is engaged as such by another subject. Thus according to the logic of the I-You encounter, self-knowledge is dependent on our capacity to remain open and responsible to the others that address us.

I therefore consider it especially fruitful to bring the idea of an I-You relation to the problem of how humans should posit or refer to origins. By way of its radical otherness from our contemporary existence, while at the same time laying claim to our essential identity, I suggest that the relationship we cultivate with our origin should be akin to that of an I-You encounter. However, because an "origin" is an easily abstractable phenomenon, unlike a person, organism or object, I will focus my investigation on the lived experiences in which we believe ourselves to be gleaning insights into our primordial being. And these experiences, I suggest, fall under the domain of the aesthetic. While many philosophers have disagreed over the exact nature of the aesthetic experience, most would agree that it requires a subject to perceptually engage a phenomenon; that is, the experience is *embodied.* Moreover, the subject considers her engagement with an aesthetic phenomenon to be a disruption from her everyday world. Without speculating on the supposed meaning or content of the aesthetic experience, I'd like to suggest that this most basic definition reveals a tension between otherness and relation that we find in the I-You encounter. That is, one experiences a disruption, or something *other* from ordinary life that happens to be present, and thus in embodied, perceptual *relation* to oneself and her everyday world. The chapters that follow will examine two distinct yet interrelated experiential phenomena in which we believe to find insight into the origins of human life, and I will examine the art objects and aesthetic experiences that work to sediment the meanings associated with those experiences.

My next chapter deals specifically with the notion of the *extrahistorical* origin; that is, the idea that human identity is explained and affirmed by that which presupposes humanity but does not include it. This particular concept of origin is experientially revealed to us in the idea of *nature* as a pre-historic, pleasurable, righteous, and meaningful realm "pure" of human corruption and influence. I will examine the ways in which this experience of nature is informed by the capacity of works of art to express utopian values that resist, but are definitively born from particular cultural conditions with which aesthetically engaged social subjects are dissatisfied. I will examine the dangers of conflating the utopian desire for pre-historic nature with nature *as such*, and suggest that in order to relate to nature responsibly, we must be aware of the role that our lived experience of alienated labor plays in our aesthetic preferences, and that we must cultivate an aesthetic attitude that is vigilantly attuned to the false expressions of our utopian beliefs about nature.

The third chapter considers a different sort of origin: the *moment* of beginning or birth. When attempting to understand the moment in which humans developed the self-consciousness that sets us apart from other life forms, scholars from several fields have referred to Paleolithic art as key evidence of this transformative period. And because of the remarkable aesthetic effect it has on the contemporary viewer, the cave paintings of Lascaux, France are considered to be one of the more significant relics of early human consciousness. I suggest that the contemporary subject sees Lascaux as a remnant of our transition out of animality, a transition would thus imply a simultaneous otherness from and relation to the more-than-human world. However, I argue that in order to apprehend this relational tension evident in the paintings, we must similarly attempt to maintain a sort of distance in our own historical relation to Lascaux. I articulate what this engagement would look like through an

immanent critique of the conventional means by which Lascaux is studied and experienced today, which, I suggest, assimilate the cave into a network of contemporary meanings that dictate what we think an original artwork of this sort *should* mean for us.

In both discussions, I hope to show that the evaluation of an aesthetic experience requires us to look at the *encounter* between subject and object, and the significance of otherness and relation for this encounter. To keep both relation and otherness in play is more difficult than it may seem, but I suggest that when we succeed, a proper engagement with works relating to our origin will allow us to be addressed by the otherness of our past within the present. Moreover, I argue that the conditions for an aesthetic engagement of this sort allow us recreate *in our own lives* the insight we hope to glean from the aesthetic object itself. Recall that for Buber, an I-You encounter is the precondition for the creation of meaning. Therefore, I conclude that aesthetic objects offering insight into our origin do so precisely because our engagements with them allow us to realize our capacity to be *originators* of meaning and possibility, an insight that we can then bring to the problems of the present.

CHAPTER II

"UNCORRUPTED": NATURE, ART AND THE UTOPIAN LONGINGS OF AN ALIENATED WORLD

Introduction

In attempting to posit humanity's origin, some have chosen to articulate the conditions that gave rise to humanity rather than the moment of inception itself. If a supposed origin is believed to shed insight into human nature and to help us re-evaluate our actions and values, it follows that a search for the *pre*-historic conditions of our birth may promote a critical stance toward human *history*. This chapter will focus on one particular manifestation of this reverential regard for the pre-historic, namely, the idealization of nature as a space untrammeled by human historical influence, thereby offering redemption and/or rejuvenation. Drawing primarily on the work of philosophers Michel Foucault, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Martin Buber, and Theodor Adorno, as well as environmental historians William Cronon and Jennifer Price, I examine and then critique some factors that have contributed to our belief that nature is "pure" of or "uncorrupted" by human impact and is thus is capable of restoring or renewing those who experience alienation from their own society. I will discuss how the desirable, restorative experience with a supposedly "pure" nature is itself a cultural construction, and is the result of our attempts to give concrete vision to the values that we believe to resist intolerable social conditions.

This attempt to identify oneself with an imagined "other" to the society in which one is embedded is an example of *utopian* desire, and its expression, I suggest, can be found in works of art. I will thus undergo two interrelated analyses of aesthetic objects that give vision to the utopian desire to escape the corruption of history and the alienation we feel from our "true" or "original" selves. The ways in which these objects are produced, disseminated and consumed are revealed to actually perpetuate the same alienating, corruptive social forces they promise to resist. Although this realization threatens to discourage the reader from believing that there is any viable mode of resisting the alienation of social life, I conclude by articulating a particular sort of aesthetic attitude that may allow us to engage nature in a more responsible way.

Nature as Pre-Historical Heterotopia

In our day-to-day lives, we experience ourselves and the world against a backdrop of what we, on the surface, believe to be a uniform and predictable passage of time. This assumed temporal continuum, however, is brought to the forefront of our thoughts when that time it is somehow disrupted, when five minutes feels like eternity, or an afternoon passes us by in the blink of an eye. Often, these experiences occur within a specific context. When vacationing in a tropical resort, one may feel as though each day idyllically repeats itself, liberated from the ongoing deadlines of work and responsibilities of home. Or, after watching a film with a plot that spans weeks, months, or even years, and the action is set in various distant locales, one may exit the theater feeling disoriented, not knowing what time it is or where the car is parked.

Foucault, in a 1967 essay titled "Different Spaces," deals explicitly with this phenomenon, and argues that the experience of temporal and spatial rupture actually structures the perceived continuity of everyday life. He begins by distinguishing two types of "different spaces": utopias and heterotopias. For Foucault, a utopia, or ideal "no-place," is the imagined reversal or perfection of the society in which it is conceived.[6] Although a utopia by definition does not, and indeed *cannot* exist, Foucault describes spaces in which the experience of utopia can partially realized. He writes:

> There are also, and probably in every culture, in every civilization real places, actual places, places that are designed into the very institution of society, which are sorts of actually realized utopias in which the real emplacements, all the other real emplacements that can be found within the culture are, at the same time, represented, contested, and reversed, sorts of places that are outside all places, although they are actually localizable. Because they are utterly different from all the emplacements that they reflect or refer to, I shall call these places "heterotopias"...[7]

Foucault's examples of heterotopian spaces include not only the vacation resort and the cinema (to which I have already alluded), but sites such as the cemetery (a "quasi eternity in which [the deceased] perpetually dissolves and fades away"), the museum (a site for the indefinite accumulation of time), and the ship (a self-enclosed "placeless place" that promises access to any number of exotic locales).[8] In his discussion of these heterotopias, Foucault examines the effect each has on our experience of time and space on a general level, only superficially exploring the ways in which *history* is brought into relief by movement through different spaces. However, I believe that the model provided here can be easily applied to this question of history and experience. Are there places that markedly contrast

[6] Michel Foucault, "Different Spaces," trans. Robert Hurley, *Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954-1984*, vol. 2, *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, ed. James D. Faubion, (New York: The New Press, 1998), 178.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid., 182; 184-85.

with "ordinary" space in the sense that we feel ourselves to be *outside* history when we inhabit them? And what, by way of their contrast with the everyday, can these places tell us about our concept of history as it is experienced?

Indeed, we find that there is a type of space, both readily conceived and easily localizable (at least at first glance), conceived by more traditional philosophers of history as extra-historical, described most generally as *nature*. Theodore Schatzki, in his article "Nature and Technology in History," argues that nature is traditionally understood as anything that is neither human nor a product of intentional human activity, and as such, does not have history. Rather, nature is a backdrop for the unfolding of human history, providing only the space and raw materials for the development of culture, and only considered a participant in history when it is somehow transformed or changed by humans, or, in other words, when it is no longer nature.

This definition, according to Schatzki, has its roots in Aristotle's definition of a natural object as anything that obeys principles of motion deriving from its inner nature. Aristotle contrasts a natural object with a crafted object, the form of which is determined by human activity from without.[9] We can see this bias informing philosophers of history from various eras and traditions. Hegel, for example, argues in his *Philosophy of Nature*, that nature "exhibits no freedom in its existence, but only *necessity* and *contingency*."[10] This claim is significant when one considers the fact that history is for Hegel the dialectical realization of universal human freedom. Thus, if history is defined by human freedom, nature, as

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[9] Theodore R. Schatzki, "Nature and Technology in History," *History and Theory: Studies in the Philosophy of History* 42, no. 4 (December 2003): 85.

[10] G.W.F. Hegel, "Philosophy of Nature: Introduction," trans. A.V. Miller, *The Hegel Reader*, ed. Stephen Houlgate (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, Ltd., 1998), 260. (emphasis in original)

necessary, contingent and non-human, is not a participant. And R.G. Collingwood, in his 1946 book *The Idea of History*, echoes Hegel with his assertion that history is rightfully limited to the study of humans because human action is understood as emerging from the intentions of a thinking agent, whereas natural events are explainable as causal processes devoid of any *telos*.[11] This particular conception of nature, which we see is common in discourses on the philosophies of nature and history, is integral to the binary distinction between "nature" and "culture" that has gone relatively unquestioned in Western thought until this past century.[12]

While the notion of a sharp dichotomy between nature and culture has been influential to theoretical inquiry, widespread belief in this distinction undoubtedly affects individual lived experience as well. For this reason, I want to examine "nature" as a heterotopic space in which a sense of being "outside" history may be articulated. In line with the notion that nature only becomes historical when it is manipulated or altered by human activity, our exemplary "natural" spaces will be realms in which we experience a lack of human presence or influence. Thus while anything non-human or non-artifactual may be considered nature under the given criteria, most would agree that national parks, state forests, or wildlife preserves are some of the best places to find and experience nature. For here, non-human objects, organisms, and processes are intentionally protected from most forms of harmful human impact, and as such, are deemed by some to be "pure" or "uncorrupted."

That these protected spaces are imagined to have a certain kind of purity *because* they have not been transformed or manipulated by humans, is itself a further insight into the

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[11] R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1946), 215.

[12] Schatzki, 85-86.

supposed extra-historical character of nature. Namely, the idea that humanity corrupts nature through the enactment of history suggests that nature is not only outside history, but that it also necessarily exists *before* history's advent. Several of the West's most broad narratives of origin, whether scientific, religious or cultural, begin with the idea of humankind emerging out of nature. Evidence for the theory of evolution, for example, indicates that humans descended from "lower" primates who surely lived a life closer to that of a chimpanzee or monkey than our present, technology-dependent existence. Judeo-Christian traditions place the origin of humanity in the Garden of Eden, a lush paradise in which humans lived harmoniously with all other created species. And problematically, societies that have not developed or adopted technologies commonplace in industrialized Western nations are often deemed "backward," "undeveloped," and "primitive," which I interpret to be an expression of the belief that those with less or different technologies than our own are historically "closer" to their origin in nature.

If history is considered to be a *corruptive* influence on prehistorical nature, it may be that we perceive nature as bearing some sort of value that humans do not have, or a value that humans are capable of destroying. In regard to environmental crises today such as pollution, global warming, and species extinction, we know that the preservation of natural spaces helps to slow the progression of these dangerous trends. Yet even on an individual experiential level, one's entry into a natural space or an encounter with a truly wild phenomenon is recognized by us as beneficial. Upon encountering nature, we are reminded of the events, cycles, and intricate interspecies relations that occur in a context greater than those of civilization, and we are humbled by the richness of existence that lies beyond the

human world. We may feel as does Ralph Waldo Emerson's imagined "man of the world" in his second "Nature" essay, who:

> . . . at the gates of the forest . . . is forced to leave his city estimates of great and small, wise and foolish. The knapsack of custom falls off his back with the first step he makes into these precincts. Here is a sanctity which shames our religions, and reality which discredits our heroes. Here we find nature to be the circumstance which dwarfs every other circumstance, and judges like a god all men that come to her.[13]

In the presence of nature, Emerson suggests that we may experience ourselves and our values as arbitrary and comparatively insignificant. When we come to demote the relative import of our brief lives, nature then appears to have an enduring, eternal, and nearly divine authority from which our endeavors may be judged.

This notion is manifest in our language: actions or beliefs deemed to be morally reprehensible are often condemned as "unnatural," while on the other hand, actions or beliefs that are argued to be good or simply outside the scope of human judgment are claimed to be "natural." For example, many seventeenth- and eighteenth-century political philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and Jean Jacques Rousseau premised their political models in an imagined "state of nature." These philosophers suggest that if we try to reconstruct how humans would interact without the influence of existing social conventions, we would then know what type of political order is best suited to our "natural" inclinations and we would have a template for morally just human behavior. In other words, because nature is perceived as still "before" history and thus not subject to the differences and conflicts that have shaped the development of human societies over time, it may be understood as embodying standards of epistemic and moral authority.

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[13] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature," *Essays, First and Second Series*, ed. Ernest Rhys (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, Ltd., 1906), 294.

Leisure and the Refuge of the Alienated "I"

When we pause to consider our cultural relationship with nature as it is expressed in historical terms and lived in individual experience, we find that nature is conceived as a pre-historic "other" to historical human life, an absolute authority in relation to our inconstant values, while still vulnerable to our corruptive influence. Yet however much we value and wish to honor natural spaces uncorrupted by human presence, the fact remains that there are institutions and industries devoted to the facilitation of certain forms of human activity in "pure" nature. These activities, such as hiking, camping, skiing, boating, and recreational hunting, are usually defined as forms of *leisure*.

I define these kinds of activities as leisurely for two interrelated reasons. First, the concept of leisure contrasts markedly with *work*, be it economic, domestic or civic. When we are not undergoing activities that are directly in the service of our employers, our families or our local and federal governments, we say that we are enjoying the leisure time in which we may engage in activities of *our* choosing, activities that directly benefit us or bring us enjoyment. Second, because so much of our everyday lives are devoted to work, most are only able to undergo leisure activities on occasion. Thus I would like to clarify the experiential significance of protected natural spaces in relation to the leisure activities undergone therein: these places are available to us during the brief and irregular moments in which we are free from various social responsibilities, moments in which we are free to act for *ourselves*. Without reading too much into the significance of nature-based leisure activities, I want to suggest that a dichotomy between nature and culture plays itself out on this experiential level: we reward ourselves with the occasional flight from our social

responsibilities by heading toward nature which, by contrast to our homes and places of work, we perceive as providing a venue for self-gratification.

This sort of relational dichotomy between the attitude of responsibility in work and self-gratification in leisure is the subject of discussion in Buber's *I and Thou.* The book begins with the establishment of what is for Buber a key ontological distinction between the I-You relation, and the I-It relation. The I-You relation is a holistic encounter with another being which bestows meaning and subjectivity to the self, and in which the other is engaged for its own sake. The I-It relation, by contrast, is effected by the self's objectifying attitude toward another being in which only *aspects* of the other are engaged, and are done so under the auspices of a purpose articulated by the self. After establishing these key distinctions, Buber then argues that contemporary human life is dominated by I-It relations, and that a majority of our problems stem from our growing inability to relate to others with the fullness of our beings. His discussion of the dichotomy between work and leisure is part of a meditation on how the I-It attitude has become so pervasive that we even relate to aspects of our own *selves* as objects or functions circumscribed by purpose.

Our public working life has become, according to Buber, an "It-district" of institutions. He writes:

> Institutions are what is "out there" where for all kinds of purposes one spends time, where one works, negotiates, influences, undertakes, competes, organizes, administers, officiates, preaches; the halfway orderly and on the whole coherent structure where, with the manifold participation of human heads and human limbs, the round of affairs runs its course.[14]

In the public world of institutions, we work alongside others under the auspices of various purposes (to negotiate a business deal, to influence a vote, to undertake a project, etc). We

[14] Buber, 93.

may work to fulfill our responsibility for others, such as our employers, our colleagues and our government officials, but as Buber implies, the relational attitude we hold toward others in the institutional realm is by nature incomplete. In the "It-district," we and the others with whom we work with are simply part of a "manifold...of human heads and human limbs." We are defined only by work we provide (the ideas that come from our heads, and the actualization of those ideas with our limbs), and we define others in like manner. To engage others solely in terms of their productivity, and to be engaged by others solely in terms of one's own productivity, is Buber's way of defining the lived experience of alienated labor. This institutional attitude is for Buber intrinsically *objectifying*. And although we are complicit with the objectification that occurs in the institutional world, the predominance of It-relations here may leave us feeling unfulfilled, dissatisfied, and in some cases, dehumanized.

For this reason, Buber argues that when we are not working, we attempt to restore ourselves on our own time and in our own spaces. He writes of the "I-district" of feelings:

> Feelings are what is "in here" where one lives and recovers from the institutions. Here the spectrum of the emotions swings before the interested eye; here one enjoys one's inclination and one's hatred, pleasure and, if it is not too bad, pain. Here one is at home and relaxes in one's rocking chair.[15]

Our life outside institutions is thus one in which we indulge and restore our "inner" world of feelings that are unrecognized, and indeed, intentionally neglected within the It-district. During this personal time, we are "at home" with ourselves, literally or figuratively. If while at work, we feel ourselves to be in the service of the external purposes, here we act in accordance with our personal inclinations.

According to Buber, however, the way we relate to ourselves in this "I-district" has a ring of falsity. We willingly and deliberately alienate the aspects of ourselves that dominate

[15] Ibid.

our institutional activities in order to indulge and restore our inner world of feelings. Because of this, Buber argues that we sever our own personhood, and thus dramatically hinder our capacity to relate to the world. He writes, "...the severed It of institutions is a golem, and the severed I of feelings is a fluttering soul-bird. Neither knows the human being... Neither has access to actual life. Institutions yield no public life; feelings, no personal life."[16] In other words, because we engage the institutional world as a golem, which Buber defined in a later version of the text as "an animated clod without a soul,"[17] and because we experience our "true" selves in our personal time as "fluttering" souls detached from the world, we do not in either realm cultivate the unity of self that we need to engage the world with our whole being.

I bring Buber's observation of the schism between institutional and personal life to this discussion because I find that nature, by way of its association with leisure and dissociation from history, is implicated in this relational dilemma. If we, like Emerson's city dweller, experience "the knapsack of custom" fall away from us while in the presence of nature, then nature is an ideal space for us to recover from institutions and restore our inner lives. Yet if we do not bring the more socially entrenched aspects of our being to our experience of nature, we risk losing our access to nature's "actual life." In other words, if we relate to nature as a venue for our rejuvenation, we are not actually able to *encounter* nature as the radical other that we posit it to be. We may still experience the otherness of nature as having a profoundly uplifting and restorative effect on us, but in line with Buber's insights, I

[16] Ibid., 93-94.

[17] Ibid., 93n.

suggest that perhaps we have this experience because we are already looking to reject our institutional selves when in nature's presence.

Thus our engagement with nature more can be more readily characterized as a relation of an I to an It, since we bring only a part of ourselves to our experience, and furthermore, we do so with the purpose of indulging and restoring our inner life; that is, we engage nature on our own terms. Because of this, I suggest that we do not enter these natural spaces with an attitude of responsibility toward nature. This is not to say that those who choose to engage in nature-based leisure activities do not care about the precarious state of the environment. Rather, as William Cronon suggests, the framing of nature as a venue for extra-historical, leisurely escape blinds us to the areas of our lives in which we act irresponsibly toward the environment. He writes:

> We inhabit civilization while holding some part of ourselves—what we imagine to be the most precious part—aloof from its entanglements. We work our nine-to-five jobs in its institutions, we eat its food, we drive its cars (not least to reach the wilderness), we benefit from the intricate and all too invisible networks with which it shelters us, all the while pretending that these things are not essential to who we are. By imagining that our true home is in the wilderness, we forgive ourselves the homes we actually inhabit.[18]

In other words, although we attribute greater value to the aspects of ourselves that find satisfaction in nature, we are complicit with the damage done to nature in our more "ordinary" socially entrenched lives. Moreover, Cronon suggests that these leisurely moments of nature-worship allow us to condone our environmental irresponsibility: If our institutional lives do not authentically reflect our "true" selves, then the activities we undergo therein are likewise of less significance. By pointing out common discrepancies in the nature-lover's behavior, such as driving a pollutant-spewing automobile to a remote wilderness

[18] William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness, or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1996), 81.

preserve, Cronon illustrates how the relational schism between institutional and inner life can also alienate us from our own ability to act responsibly toward the more-than-human world.

As the reader may already be able to deduce, a primary reason for our problematic relation with nature is the ambiguity between identity and otherness in our conception of it. Nature is simultaneously conceived as a radical other to civilization "pure" of the historical corruptive influence of humanity, as well as a restorative "homeland" for the individual human, a place in which one can imaginably recover her "true" self. How is it possible that a space that we regard as intrinsically corrupted by human presence is at the same time conceived as our true and rightful home?

Aesthetics and the Utopian Mirror-Image

To answer this question, it may be helpful to return to Foucault's notion of the heterotopia. Recall that for Foucault, a heterotopia that offers a contestation or reversal of meanings produced in "ordinary" social time is situated in such a way that that it sediments, rather than undermines those ordinary meanings. Foucault's method owes much to structuralism, and we must note that a structuralist account of meaning depends on the coexistence of opposing signs, each bestowing value on the other through their difference. Moreover, as Stuart Elden notes in his book *Mapping the Present: Heidegger, Foucault, and the Project of a Spatial History*, Foucault's unique brand of structuralism heavily utilizes metaphors of space. Elden writes that Foucault continually describes structurally opposed concepts (such as sickness and health) or historical categories (such as antiquity and modernity) as "bounded areas, (and as a result) he is able to investigate the limits or thresholds, and trace

the potential of transgression, or egress."[19] Concepts, then, are defined as spaces through which the discursive subject moves. The distance she must traverse in order to "cross over" into another concept becomes the semantic difference that co-defines the meanings of the concept and its other. If his method is indeed, as Elden suggests, saturated with metaphors of spatiality, it follows that Foucault understands actual, lived space to function semantically in much the same way. Thus, nature, which we may experience as a site of prehistorical purity and a bearer of eternal, universal authority, may actually only appear to us in that way *because* of our dissatisfying experience in "ordinary" social space. The real physical isolation of protected wilderness spaces from human communities, and the leisure activities typically undertaken therein work to sediment the structurally opposed concepts of "nature" and "culture," by making their difference map-able and experienceable.

Emerson makes a similar claim in his aforementioned "Nature" essay, but significantly, he frames social production of the nature-culture dichotomy in terms of aesthetic-oriented desire. He writes:

> The critics who complain of the sickly separation of the beauty of nature from the thing to be done, must consider that our hunting of the picturesque is inseparable from our protest against false society. Man is fallen, nature is erect, and serves as a differential thermometer, detecting the presence or absence of the divine sentiment in man. By fault of our dulness and selfishness, we are looking up to nature, but when we are convalescent, nature will look up to us.[20]

Emerson's statement here echoes what I have just suggested about the cultural origin of the values we associate with nature. For him, we identify nature with goodness and truth *because* of the falsity and corruption we experience in human society. Yet the framing of this idea in

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[19] Stuart Elden, *Mapping the Present: Heidegger, Foucault, and the Project of a Spatial History* (London: Continuum, 2001), 94.

[20] Emerson, 299.

the language of aesthetics suggests to me a further, more intriguing insight. Although it is unclear if Emerson intended his passage to be read in this way, I still find this idea worthy of our attention. Namely, I think it significant that Emerson declares human interest in the *picturesque* to be a form of social protest. The picturesque, an aesthetic category popular in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, refers to natural scenes and vistas that exhibit a visual harmony akin to that of a painting. In other words, a picturesque scene naturally bears formal unity and compositional balance that landscape painters of that time would deliberately and artificially invoke in their works. Thus the picturesque articulates a delight in the appearance of human-made values in the more-than-human world: nature *is*, in this moment, how we would *like* it to be. One may argue, however, that the formal principles of the picturesque were first discovered in nature, and were not created by artists and critics *ex nihilo*. Yet the establishment of the picturesque as a canonical aesthetic value suggests that it has a discursive identity that is best understood through studying the history of aesthetic theory, rather than the study of nature itself. When considered in this way, we may read Emerson's passage as suggesting that this particular engagement with nature is a deliberate search for harmony and unity *as expressed and mediated* by the history of a cultural product (namely, painting) within a space considered to be outside society, and motivated by the apparent lack of harmony and unity within society itself.

The story of nature as a socially mediated concept can be (and has been) found in the history of politics, economics, language and gender, among others. Here, however, I would like to consider nature as it appears to us by way of the aesthetic experience and works of art. Through this consideration, I hope to expose something of how aesthetic experience reveals the deep interdependence of lived experience and cultural values. While I

do not intend to focus specifically on the *picturesque* and how it contributes to our experience of nature, I am interested in the idea that the expression of cultural values in aesthetic objects plays a significant role in the development of the concept of "nature" as a refuge from history. I discuss history of natural space itself, but as Emerson suggests, our experience of nature is informed by the values we fail to see in society and hope to find in its other. These sorts of values, which I argue are *utopian*, reveal themselves in an especially vivid way within art and the aesthetic experiences we collectively privilege and seek out.

Foucault spends the majority of his essay "Different Spaces" articulating the concept of the heterotopia, a lived, partially realized utopia that offers a reversal or contestation of meanings produced within "ordinary" social space. The utopia, he assumes, is already a familiar concept with his readers, and so here he only discusses it so as to develop a clear idea of the heterotopia. Yet perhaps due to his inclinations toward structuralism, Foucault's definition of utopia may differ a bit from our own. The utopia for him is still a "no-place," but he does not think that just *any* imaginable non-existent scenario is rightly called "utopian." Rather, if we take into account his notion of the heterotopia, we find that a utopia plays a similarly specific role in the production of cultural meaning. Foucault's best explication of utopia perhaps comes in his articulation of the experience of looking in a mirror:

> The mirror is a utopia after all, since it is a placeless place. In the mirror I see myself where I am not, in an unreal space that opens up virtually behind the surface; I am over there where I am not, a kind of shadow that gives me my own visibility, that enables me to look at myself there where I am absent—a mirror utopia.[21]

Like the mirror, Foucault's utopia offers a vision of reversal. A society troubled by overcrowding and unsanitary living conditions, for example, may respond by producing

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[21] Foucault, "Different Spaces," 179.

ideals of open space and cleanliness in their cultural discourse. The social subject, as a way of expressing her dissatisfaction, may then come to adopt these values as her own, and thus "see" herself in the utopian "mirror" where she is not. Reflection on these values, moreover, will allow the subject to view her ordinary reality with greater clarity, or to use Foucault's language, grant the subject her own visibility. Thus it appears for Foucault that the creation of utopian ideals and narratives has a significant social function: through the interplay of opposing signifiers, the utopia allows social subjects to both articulate their hardships and cultivate values that offer resistance to them.

I will now analyze a work of art that on a formal level exemplifies the concept of pure, pleasurable, pre-historical nature as I have described it thus far. Significantly, the history of this work's production and reception also illustrates the potential of a work of art to articulate utopian desires. That is, we will be able to see how the creation of a work was motivated by a desire to give vision to values that resisted social conditions in which the work was produced. Moreover, we can see how public reception of the work depended in large part in the perceived effectiveness of the artist's articulation of the utopian otherness with which his audience hoped to identify. In the story of this artwork, the tensions between culture and nature, its idealized other, will hopefully bring further insight into the problems that characterize our contemporary relationship with nature.

Bierstadt's *Looking Down Yosemite Valley, California*

Albert Bierstadt (1830-1902), a landscape painter whose career spanned the second half of the nineteenth century, is little known today outside the fields of art history and American studies. His work is generally not regarded as canonical to the history of American

art, but instead as an example of a passing fad, given that his popularity as painter of monumental scenes of the American West reached a nearly unprecedented peak in the 1860's, and shortly thereafter saw a sharp decline.[22] I believe a consideration of one of his paintings alongside the social and ideological forces that contributed to his dramatic success and near-sudden fall from popularity will be greatly informative of not only art's relation to utopia, but the problematic relational attitudes we hold toward more-than-human nature. The painting I would like to discuss, *Looking Down Yosemite Valley, California* (fig. 1), completed in 1865, was one of his more popular works from this period.

Figure 1. Albert Bierstadt, *Looking Down Yosemite Valley, California*, 1865. Oil on canvas, 64 ¼ x 96 ½", Birmingham Museum of Art, Birmingham, AL.

[22] For a brief biography of Bierstadt, as well as a detailed account of the rise and fall of his public and commercial viability, see Linda S. Ferber, "Albert Bierstadt: The History of a Reputation" in *Albert Bierstadt: Art and Enterprise*, ed. Nancy K. Anderson and Linda S. Ferber, 21-68 (Brooklyn: The Brooklyn Museum, 1990).

Depicted, as the title suggests, is Yosemite Valley, which at the time had not yet become a national park, but was already well known throughout the country as a site of extraordinary natural beauty and grandeur. While some photographs and prints of Yosemite had been available on the East coast, Bierstadt's painting was the first large- scale, full-color depiction of the valley.[23] And at 64 by 96 inches, the painting is certainly enormous; sure to visually dominate nearly any space in which it could be exhibited. The scene appears to take place at dawn, and the foreground, primarily flat grassland, is dramatically darkened in shadow. The eye is led down the valley, flanked by two severe cliff walls. Through the mid-ground runs a meandering river with golden sunlight reflecting off its calm waters. The far distance is obscured by both a bend in the valley and a fine mist illuminated by the sun's rays. These elements of mystery may have been intended to draw the viewer into the painting, beckoning her to enter the valley. The rising sun is blocked from view by the cliff on the right, and its rays throw both crags into dramatic contrast with the sky, illuminating the clouds in shades of purple and pink.

Here we find no humans depicted, nor are there even animals. Yet despite the lack of animate figures, the composition is plenty dynamic. An 1865 review in *Watson's Weekly Art Journal,* in its praise of the painting, personifies the landscape's features:

> We are brought face to face with Nature's living rocks. No composition work are they...Overhead in the clear air; free from the blue of the sky, float the clouds, a glad company, touched with the same golden glory. Between the lofty escarpments of rock flows the Yo Semite, its waters fondly repeating so much of the magnificence as they receive...The picture is full of fine enthusiasm, of a free exultation in the grander forms of nature.[24]

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[23] Ibid., 87.

[24] Anonymous, *Watson's Weekly Art Journal* (May 20, 1865): 52. Quoted in appendix, ed. Nancy K. Anderson and Linda S. Ferber, *Albert Bierstadt: Art and Enterprise,* (Brooklyn: The Brooklyn Museum, 1990), 200.

For this reviewer, the rocks are alive, the clouds keep company, and the waters express a fondness for the landscape they reflect. If we perceive the same sort of animate activity in the painting, we conclude that the viewer of *Looking Down Yosemite Valley*, and thus a vicarious traveler to the California wilderness, is invited to encounter a presence embodied not through human beings or their products, but rather through the most primal elements of the natural world: air, earth, water, and light. We might also conclude that Bierstadt intentionally invokes the sublime as it was understood and expressed within American art at the time. Unlike the Kantian "negative pleasure" that accompanies the phenomenal experience of magnitude and/or power that overwhelms the imagination, the transformed American sublime is decidedly more benign, and significantly, intersubjective. According to Cronon, this particular notion of the sublime was used to describe a felt *encounter* with God via an engagement with the natural world which, while having potential for terror, could also reassure the subject by granting her a sense of God's infinite grace.[25] And significantly, a sublime experience of this sort was regarded as extra-historical. Cronon writes of this particular experience of nature, "[s]een as the sacred sublime, it is the home of a God who transcends history by standing as the One who remains untouched and unchanged by time's arrow."[26]

The distinctly sublime character of the painting, I suggest, is particularly apparent in the formal interplay between the light and the cliffs. Because the valley walls are mostly darkened through the contrast of the sun shining directly behind it, one may interpret the most significant aspect of the painting as the rising sun; and conclude that the composition

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[25] Cronon, 75.

[26] Ibid, 79.

intended to draw the viewer's gaze *away* from the cliffs, as if they do nothing but obscure the dazzling sunrise that is surely occurring around the bend. However, I argue that the sunrise is so dazzling to us *because* of its relation the formidably dark cliff walls, and as such, we are encouraged to consider them in their formal interrelation. The light of the rising sun may appear more brilliant to us than it would were it not shining from behind these crags, and the sunlight in turn allows the viewer to better appreciate the size, form and contour of the cliffs themselves. Rather than barriers from the beauty of God's creation, we may see the cliff walls as gates leading into a sacred space, inviting us in while still evoking feelings of humility. The viewer may be left with a renewed respect for the authority of nature, but also a desire, or even entitlement, to enjoy this hallowed space.

My interpretation of this work, as offering a view of nature that authoritatively beckons the viewer into a sacred space, is also informed by the social conditions and cultural discourses prevalent at the time of its painting. We may confidently assume based on the written accounts of Bierstadt's traveling companion, author Fitz Hugh Ludlow, that this magnificent scene was intended to evoke the idea of Eden. Ludlow writes that before their visit, both he and Bierstadt had heard rumors that Yosemite Valley was stunning enough to be considered the "original site of the Garden of Eden."[27] And when the pair finally visited the valley in 1863, they did not seem to disagree. Ludlow writes of a particularly panoramic view of the valley from a peak called Inspiration Point:

> The name had appeared pedantic, but we found it only the spontaneous expression of our own feelings on the spot. We did not so much seem to be seeing from that crag of vision a new scene on the old familiar globe, as a new heaven and a new earth

[27] Fitz Hugh Ludlow, *The Heart of the Continent: A Record of Travel Across the Plains and in Oregon, with an Examination of the Mormon Principle* (New York: Hurd & Houghton, 1870), 412. Quoted in Nancy K. Anderson, "'Wonderously Full of Invention': The Western Landscapes of Albert Bierstadt," *Albert Bierstadt: Art and Enterprise*, ed. Nancy Anderson and Linda Ferber (Brooklyn: The Brooklyn Museum, 1990), 81.

> into which the creative spirit had just been breathed. I hesitate now, as I did then, at the attempt to give my vision utterance. Never were words so beggard for an abridged translation of any Scripture of Nature.[28]

For Ludlow, the view of Yosemite Valley inspired because it appeared to him as an utterly new world. The dramatic features of the valley walls were perhaps unlike any he had seen before, and yet it bore an aesthetic logic suggestive of creative intelligence. Ludlow attributes his loss for words to his lack of a "translation" of the "Scripture of Nature," a claim that reinforces the idea that the scene before him was of deep intentional significance, issued forth by a divine, authoritative creator. One could interpret this quotation as indicating that Yosemite Valley appeared to Ludlow as the first humans were imagined to have beheld the Garden of Eden: a brand-new space embodying the original, immediate visions of a divine creator, uncorrupted by human society or history.

The association of Yosemite with the Garden of Eden was exemplary of a fairly common trope during the Westward expansion of the nineteenth century. Given that a majority of white settlers in the United States from the seventeenth century onward were Christian, and thus had adopted a historicity which placed humanity's birth in the blissful Garden of Eden, movement westward into "unsettled"[29] territory held overtones for many of a return to the original paradise. And since political and economic independence from Europe was still a priority for the new nation, the stark geographical differences between the young American democracy and the old European monarchies were reframed in moral

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[28] Ludlow, 426. Quoted in Anderson, 81.

[29] When I refer to settlement in the West, I deliberately employ the definition of settlement as it was understood in the United States in the nineteenth century: namely, the establishment of white American communities. Despite the fact that Native American communities had existed for millennia in nearly every corner of the continent, the United States government, disturbingly, did not recognize these communities as legitimate settlements, but rather saw them as obstacles to the project of white settlement.

terms. Carolyn Merchant, in her book *Reinventing Eden: The Fate of Nature in Western Culture*, writes:

> As a place of moral purity, unblemished nature could restore humans who lived within its presence. This image of an untouched America contrasted sharply with that of a spoiled and corrupt Europe. The myth of America as an original, eternal Eden expressed the hope of returning to a past in which nature was pure and history unadulterated. Here the Edenic possibility of living within nature and outside of history thrived.[30]

The imagined "unspoiled" character of American wilderness, it was believed, could "restore" the young immigrant society to an order closer to that of nature, which was imagined to express the original will of the Judeo-Christian creator. By founding a home in this "unadulterated space," moreover, the pioneer or immigrant could make a life for himself and his family that better reflected his own beliefs and values. Thus nature, imagined as a modern-day Eden, was for the American settler a site in which society and the individual could both be restored to their original, rightful states. And significantly, this restoration was characterized as liberation from history, because it effected a return to a realm of righteousness and happiness that only existed before mankind's "fall" from God's good graces.

Actual life on the frontier, however, with its hostile encounters with Indians, disease, famine, and treacherous journeys across mountain ranges and deserts, was far from Edenic. Yet for those eastern city-dwellers who had not yet experienced the "Wild West" firsthand, the idea of the frontier was a source of great interest and hope. Bierstadt's gallery in New York City was an especially popular venue for Western enthusiasts in the 1860's and 70's. Not only were his massive, sensationalist paintings among the most well-known visual records of the West, but the gallery space itself, adorned with buffalo robes, feathers, arrows,

[30] Carolyn Merchant, *Reinventing Eden: The Fate of Nature in Western Culture* (London: Routledge, 2003), 102.

and other Indian artifacts, gave the illusion of a frontier trading post.[31] And while Bierstadt himself did not maintain his artistic reputation after the 1870's, the mythologizing of the West among East coast and Midwest urbanites continued to intensify as it became clear that the frontier days were rapidly coming to a close. Moreover, the divisive and bloody Civil War of the 1860's sharply called into question the possibility that the American people could escape social unrest and return to a steadfast and harmonious order. In other words, knowledge of the quick and thorough settlement of the West and the experience of the conflicts of the Civil War jeopardized the widespread belief that America could offer an Edenic restoration of human life.

The art world responded to this concern with a proliferation of peaceful natural scenes. Art historian Nancy K. Anderson writes, "When the Civil War broke out, blood spilled in Eden. The landscape Americans had used to define themselves was irretrievably changed. Many American landscape painters countered this sober reality with images of nature at peace."[32] Bierstadt was no exception to this trend; according to Anderson, the artist traveled through several battlegrounds on his way to Yosemite, and yet nothing indicative of war appears in his paintings.[33] Given the formal elements of this painting, combined with the Edenic implications of the American West and public distress over the Civil War, I would like to suggest that *Looking Down Yosemite Valley* is an example of a utopian mirror through which nineteenth century Americans could define themselves, their society and their values. By way of contrast, this sublime, spacious and inviting scene may have helped viewers give

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[31] Anderson, 73.

[32] Ibid., 81.

[33] Ibid., 80.

concrete vision to what they found to be wrong with their society; namely, human corruption through settlement and conflict. This utopian image helped to articulate the resistant values that its viewers likely identified with, such as purity, peace, and the authority of God.

The sharp decline of Bierstadt's career in the 1870's coincided with the rise in cross-country rail travel. The ease with which eastern urbanites could see the West for themselves largely obviated the need for costly larger-than-life landscape paintings. And as more people did visit places such as Yosemite, it became clear that Bierstadt manipulated the features of his landscape paintings for dramatic effect, and to such a degree that they bore little resemblance to the actual sites. Clarence King, head of the United States Geological Exploration of the Fortieth Parallel, publicly criticized Bierstadt's Yosemite paintings for their lack of accuracy in 1872:

> What has he done but twist and skew and distort and discolor and belittle and be-pretty this whole doggoned country? Why, his mountains are too high and too slim; they'd blow over in our of our fall winds. I've herded colts two summers in Yosemite, and honest now, when I stood right up in front of his picture, I didn't know it.[34]

I would like to suggest that the story of Bierstadt's astronomic rise and fall illustrates both a significant tension in the ways that many Americans related to more-than-human nature during the mid-to-late nineteenth century, as well as the role of art in facilitating the development of this tension. Bierstadt's paintings resonated with his audience because it expressed utopian values such as harmony and purity that were unrealized in a period characterized by war and extensive human settlement. These values, it is possible to infer, were imagined to be experienceable as expressions of the will of a divine creative authority

[34] Clarence King, *Mountaineering in the Sierra Nevada* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1970), 207. Quoted in Ferber, 48.

through the harmonious yet dramatic interplay among landscape features. We can thus view Bierstadt's *Looking Down Yosemite Valley* as reinforcing the injunction of the American sublime to encounter divinity by aesthetically appreciating nature. However, as it became increasingly clear that Bierstadt himself did not accurately depict the geological features of the Yosemite valley, those who had visited the site, such as Clarence King, could denounce his work as "distorting, discoloring, and belittling" American nature. In other words, Bierstadt's painting promotes the idea, common in nineteenth-century discourses on nature aesthetics, that there is a divine, authoritative "other" that addresses us in nature, but upon further examinations it appears that the representation of this other was distorted by his conformity to established artistic techniques and compositional strategies.

"New": A Utopian Vision for the Alienated I

This consideration of Bierstadt's work may be highly informative for the study of the aesthetic experience of nature in our own time. Not only do landscape images similar to that of *Looking Down Yosemite Valley* commonly appear in visual culture today, I believe that they are wrought with similar tensions. I would like to focus my discussion on a contemporary image so ubiquitous and so mundane, that it may not even seem to be worthy of consideration as an aesthetic object.

New (fig. 2) is an anonymous photograph that the reader may recognize as a default desktop background option for Vista, the most recent version of Microsoft Windows. The depicted scene bears many formal qualities similar to that of Bierstadt's painting. The calm waters of the lake, dominating the foreground of the scene, reflect nearly perfectly the cloud-dotted blue sky and the mountains in the background. Along the bank is a dense patch of

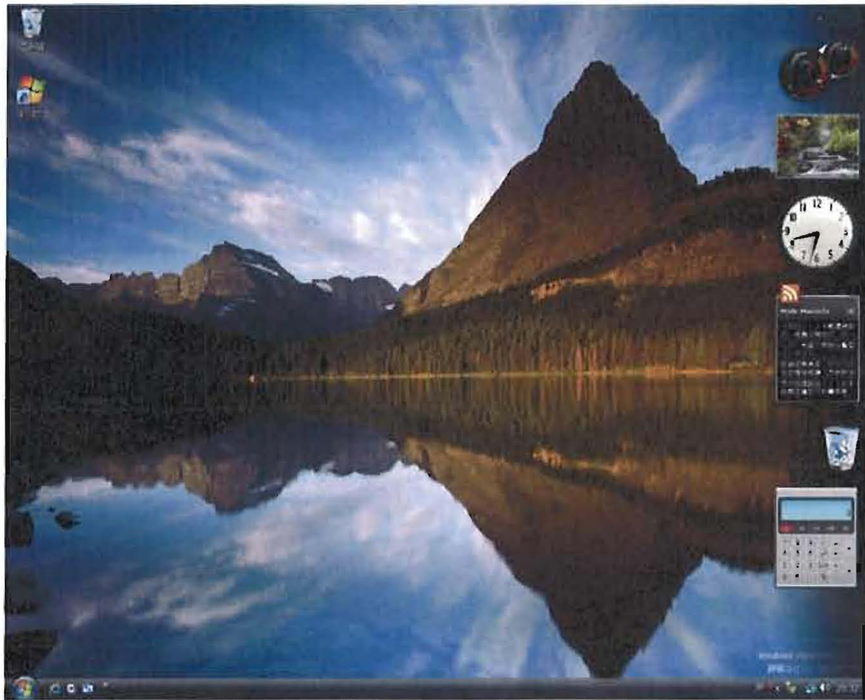

Figure 2. Anonymous, *New*, 2006. Photograph, background image for Microsoft Windows' Vista interface.

evergreen trees, and towering overhead stands a single mountain, partially illuminated by the sun, but with its peak dramatically darkened in shadow. In the far background we see the continuation of the mountain range, but the eye is led upward into the sky, where clouds appear to have directionality, seemingly moving toward (or away from) a bright spot on the horizon behind the mountain.

Not only do many of the natural features in Bierstadt's Yosemite appear in *New* (namely: mountains, reflective waters, lack of human presence, and dramatic sunlight), but the aesthetic effect is also similar. The stark sunlight and the central placement of the shadowed peak, two of the most dominant features of the image, are associated with the more standard iconography of the sublime. Yet like Bierstadt's painting, this sublime image

is not terrifyingly so: the placid waters and blue skies transform the scene into one of quiet grandeur, and the viewer may feel as though she is seduced into the photograph by the directionality of the clouds.

It may be argued that this image appears to us in too mundane of a context to merit discussion of its aesthetic effect, and as such, it is not appropriate to compare it with an epic landscape painting of the nineteenth century. However, the formal similarities between the two images, as I have already suggested, are unmistakable. It shows there to be some continuity in the way we choose to represent nature to ourselves. Dramatic land features, tranquil weather conditions and significantly, a lack of visible human presence all make for appealing nature scenes to us. Moreover, I suggest that these features evoke similar values for us as they did in Bierstadt's time. We may not think specifically of Eden when we consider *New*, yet given its name, it seems as though we associate these formal qualities with rejuvenation and renewal. The craggy landscape bears no evidence of human settlement, nor does it seem to be amenable to it. The remarkable stillness of the water also indicates a lack of activities such as boating or swimming. Yet it is precisely this which makes it so appealing: we *want* to enter those waters, explore that forest, hike that mountain; it evokes a sort of quietude and spaciousness that is not normally found in everyday human life. And while our desire for this sort of rejuvenating encounter with nature is not mediated by the Civil War and fascination with frontier settlement, I suggest the appeal of images such as these is informed by the alienation that many today experience in their working lives today.

New and other inspiring images of nature are not uncommon to computer desktop backgrounds. Often the background is chosen by a computer user either because of its pleasing, calming effect on the eye (making it a nice contrast to tedium and stress associated

with work-related documents), or because it gives a personal touch to the appearance of the computer itself. While I myself do not choose *New* as my own desktop background, I do have an image by the painter Friedensreich Hundertwasser which I chose both because of its bold and lively color scheme and, more significantly, because Hundertwasser is *my* favorite painter. The tasks that dominate my use of the computer, such as computing grades and paying bills, are necessary for my job and the maintenance of my home, but I do not *identify* with these tasks. Others find themselves tied to even more banal computational tasks such as accounting or data entry which are neither intrinsically enjoyable or for the immediate self-benefit. The desktop background is a minor and relatively mundane venue through which one may reap some personal enjoyment from of their workday and to reclaim some of their individuality.

If we return to Buber's discussion of the problematic relational schism between the outer "It-district" of institutions and the inner "I-district" of feelings, we may interpret the individualized desktop background as a small refuge for the inner "I" *within* the institutional realm. I have already cited Buber's argument that when the self severs her identity between an "outer" world of work and an "inner" world of feelings, in neither situation is she able to engage the world with her whole being. How, then does inclusion of the personalized desktop image of nature into the individual's workday affect her capacity for relation? Can it rejoin the two alienated aspects of herself?

I suggest that the inclusion of this desktop image in fact reinforces the division between the "I-district" and the "It-district," despite the fact that they exist in the same space. Although the drama of the sunlight, the severity of the mountain peak, calmness of the waters and overall spaciousness of the scene depicted in *New* are brought into the

individual's perceptual field during her workday, these elements only highlight the contrasting features of her lived experience, such as the glare of artificial lighting, the stuffiness of the indoor air, and the crowded, confined workspaces. Thus, in line with my discussion of the utopian character of aesthetic objects, the choice of *New* as a desktop background may be read as a protest, however slight, of the banal, confining and alienating aspects of working life.

False Utopia and the Hidden Production of Irresponsibility

Utopia aside, if the display of an uplifting image such as *New* were to help repair the schism between institutional and inner life, we would see, according to Buber, a radical transformation of the individual's relational attitude in her workday. Not only would she engage her work and her colleagues in a more enriching, holistic manner (a discussion of what this would look like is best left as the subject of another paper), but her relationship with nature would be likewise transformed. However if we recall Cronon's observation that our love of and identification with "pure" wilderness allows us to overlook the areas of our lives in which we act irresponsibly toward nature, we see that the aesthetic pleasure that an image like *New* brings to the workday similarly helps to condone environmental injustices accomplished on our watch. The image of a serene natural space free of human interference acts as a visual reassurance that there still are places uncorrupted by our presence, which in turn permits us ignore the toll that the material conditions of our working life are taking on our earth, such as the extraction of minerals, oil, and tree fiber to build our offices and supplies, and the expending of energy to heat and light them.

I would like to suggest, moreover, that our brief aesthetic "escapes" into and identification with these uplifting nature scenes not only allow us to condone our complicity with our irresponsible exploitation of natural resources, but they may even be the fuel for its perpetuation. To explain this point, I turn to Adorno and Max Horkheimer's essay "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" a powerful and oft-cited critique of twentieth-century consumer culture. In this essay, the two authors meditate on the idea that capitalism's influence on culture has reached a point whereby the ubiquity of advertising and commodity fetishism has all but obliterated the possibility of genuinely individual taste or critical thought. And as a result, they suggest that even our modes of resistance to the social, cultural, and economic status quo are mediated by the "culture industry" in a way that reproduces the very conditions deemed intolerable. They effectively summarize this particular idea with a metaphor of a foiled elopement:

> The flight from the everyday world, promised by the culture industry in all its branches, is much like the abduction of the daughter in the American cartoon: the father is holding the ladder in the dark. The culture industry presents that same everyday world as paradise. Escape, like elopement, is destined from the first to lead back to its starting point. Entertainment fosters the resignation which seeks to forget itself in entertainment.[35]

Adorno and Horkheimer use the metaphorical image of a father preventing his daughter from elopement: the ladder to the daughter's desired liberation is provided and held by her father, the very person she believes to be escaping. The means of her flight will lead her squarely back into the arms of he who she wishes to flee. Similarly, according to Adorno and Horkheimer, the products and activities that promise a flight from the everyday world are situated in such a way that they reinforce the perpetuation of the everyday.

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[35] Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments,* ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 113.

The enjoyment derived from the nature scene on the computer desktop may rejuvenate the individual worker to the point that her day is more productive, and her institutional contributions and commitments thus improve in quantity and quality. When she is finally granted a vacation, moreover, she may choose to spend her precious leisure time by visiting a natural space that she finds to be aesthetically inspiring. However, even in this actual, physical "escape" from her institutional commitments, she still finds herself contributing to their perpetuation. The purchase of the fuel which takes her to her destination, for example and the gear with which she engages nature (such as tents, maps, and shoes) reveal her hidden entrapment within institutional life even in her excursion "out" of society and into the more-than-human world. It is as Adorno and Horkheimer argue, "The standardized forms, it is claimed, were originally derived from the needs of the consumers: that is why they are accepted with so little resistance. In reality, a cycle of manipulation and retroactive need is unifying the system ever more tightly."[36] In other words, the production of a desire and its superficial, ultimately false fulfillment only strengthens the power and the reach of the culture industry.

Thus we can understand the desire to flee toward an extra-historical nature, as it is expressed in a contemporary commodity-driven society, to be something that is simultaneously encouraged and thwarted within the social and economic realm. Adorno and Horkheimer confirm as much when they directly address the status of nature within the culture industry:

> Nature, in being presented by society's control mechanism as the healing antithesis of society, is itself absorbed into that incurable society and sold off. The solemn pictorial affirmation that the trees are green, the sky is blue and the clouds are sailing overhead already makes them pictograms for factory chimneys and gasoline stations.

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[36] Ibid., 95.

> Conversely, wheels and machine parts are made to gleam expressively, debased as receptacles of that leafy, cloudy soul. In this way both nature and technology are mobilized against the alleged stuffiness, the faked recollection of liberal society...[37]

According to Adorno and Horkheimer, nature and our concepts of it are thoroughly entrenched in systems of commodification, and interestingly, this transformation is largely aesthetic. Visual elements of nature in its most pleasing expressions (such as a blue sky or a leafy, green tree) are reproduced on and within cultural products themselves. And on the other hand, commodities are advertised as embodying, or at least assisting in the attainment of nature's palliative qualities. There are countless examples of this phenomenon in contemporary advertising, such the near-ubiquitous television commercial for a brand new automobile with a car zipping down a lonely highway against the backdrop of a stunning coastline, forest, or mountain landscape. Thus the aesthetic motifs that we associate with nature not only secretly guide us into supporting the institutional life that we think we are resisting, they are also explicitly used to promote commodities. According to Adorno and Horkheimer, we are duped into believing that our utopian visions can and will be realized by our institutional life by invoking the imagery that we associate with its rejection.

We have come to a point in this essay where we find our utopian attraction to a prehistoric nature uncorrupted by human presence, and our heterotopian experience of nature as a restorative escape from the falsity of our society, actually strengthens and reinforces the conditions that we believe to be protesting. This thought is troubling, for although we know that a utopian vision is informed by the particular conditions of a society that we find to be intolerable, we also believe that alignment with these utopian values will guide us in the creation of a new and better order. The shock that comes with this

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[37] Ibid., 119.

realization, I suggest, is similar to that felt by the nineteenth-century American art world, when, after travel to the West was facilitated by railroads, it was revealed that Bierstadt had been unfaithful to the sacred sublimity of nature in his popular, sensationalist paintings. As they were increasingly able to visit the sites themselves, Bierstadt's adoring public denounced the false character of his particular articulation of utopia. We must now ask ourselves how we today can remain true to the utopian values that resist both the alienation of human labor within our institutions, and the exploitation and destruction of the earth facilitated by our unconscious complicity with institutional life.

Reclaiming Utopia through Aesthetics of Negation

Rather than finding fault in the utopian vision itself, I suggest that what we need is an attitudinal shift that would allow us to act more faithfully toward the realization of its values. Adorno, in his *Aesthetic Theory*, indicates what this might look like. In a chapter titled "Situation," he discusses the association of modern art with the promise of "newness." If an artist introduces a technique or motif that has not been seen before in the history of its medium, Adorno suggests that the subject's experience of this new element resonates with her desire for a change in her lived situation. Yet the most effective expression of a utopian desire in art for Adorno is the articulation of the *collapse* of the protested conditions. He elaborates:

> A cryptogram of the new is the image of collapse; only by virtue of the absolute negativity of collapse does art enunciate the unspeakable: utopia. In this image of collapse all the stigmata of the repulsive and loathsome in modern art gather. Through the irreconcilable renunciation of the semblance of reconciliation, art holds fast to the promise of reconciliation in the midst of the reconciled: This is the true consciousness of an age in which the real possibility of utopia—that given the level

> of productive forces the earth could here and now be paradise—converges with the possibility of total catastrophe.[38]

This passage can be read as an apology for the "repulsive and loathsome" characteristics of some avant-garde art that resist evaluation as beautiful, harmonious, pleasurable or otherwise unified by aesthetic logic. Through their adamant lack of aesthetic reconciliation, Adorno suggest that these uncomfortable works of art reflect back to its audience their own desire for a reconciled world. In this way, the works that negate or "collapse" the utopian expressions ordinarily found in art are in fact more faithful to the positive expressions of utopia found in more agreeable aesthetic objects. Echoing his concerns about the culture industry's production of false conditions for escape, Adorno suggests that the aesthetic attitude cultivated by these negating works of art allow us to see that the positive articulation of utopian values is concurrent with the catastrophic consequences of that utopia's failure. Using the concept of uncorrupted nature as an example, this last claim becomes clear when we recall the damage done to the environment that is simultaneously concealed and perpetuated by the production of this false utopian image of nature.

While Adorno addresses the capacity that different kinds of art have for expressing utopian values, I am more specifically concerned with the aesthetic *attitude* associated with the vision of negation or collapse. And so rather than suggest that we create or seek out aesthetic representations of nature that more closely express the negative moment favored by Adorno, I would like to immanently consider what sort of meanings a negatively utopian engagement with our desktop image would reveal for us. As a starting point for this

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[38] Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. and trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 32-33.

particular question, I find it helpful to refer to an essay by Jennifer Price in which she considers the representation of nature within a shopping mall.

Price's essay "Looking for Nature at the Mall: A Field Guide to the Nature Company" is a sustained study into a shopping experience that mimics the supposed transformative encounter with "pure" nature. A California-based chain store frequently found in shopping malls across the country in the 1990's, the Nature Company was an eclectic gift store that offered items as diverse as educational books, science project kits, clothing, music, toys, gardening supplies and home decor, all of which were intended to foster knowledge and appreciation of the natural world. Price argues that methodologically, a study of a space such as the Nature Company, rather than "nature" itself, enables us to see more clearly the cultural origin of values that shape our conception of nature. She writes,

> Ordinarily, if you buy pruning shears at the hardware store, or your bird guide at a bookstore, these convictions don't face any serious threat...But here, where the Nature Company has brought together thousands of nature-oriented products, the boundaries we've draw a around 'nature' begin to look visible. If you compile the complete pool of meanings, and stack and shelve them all together in one room in a mall, they begin to look like meanings.[39]

In other words, the production and display of a commodity require the producer and vendor, each in their own ways, to communicate as clearly and compellingly as possible what meanings the consumer should ideally associate with a product. Through this dissemination of meaning through advertising, packaging design, and arrangement alongside other, similarly marketed products, we are confronted by our values on a material, experiential level, and are thus better able to evaluate their contributions to our seemingly prereflective conceptions of the world.

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[39] Jennifer Price, "Looking for Nature at the Mall: A Field Guide to the Nature Company," *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature,* ed. William Cronon (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1996), 190.

Within the Nature Company storefront, Price argues that diverse natural spaces are experientially collapsed into the space of the shop itself, undergirding the vast conceptual and physical distance between actual spaces of "pure" nature, and ordinary social space. Price writes,

> We are globe-coasters all, and the natural world has remained near center stage during the late-twentieth-century postmodern collapse of space. The Nature Company invites us to touch every part of the globe. And you can browse the earth's wild things close to home, because the company has installed similar assemblages in malls (nationwide)...[40]

By offering picture books of the Amazon rainforest, field guides to North American birds, fossil casts from Mongolian deserts, and plush simulacra of African savannah wildlife, the Nature Company effectively truncates the particular aspects of diverse natural spaces into a more universal concept of "Nature" as remote spaces free of or protected from human impact. The commodified representations of said nature are appealing, for they supposedly allow the consumer to bring into her life something of the encounter of "Nature" without undergoing the difficulties that an actual journey into natural space may entail.

For the sake of brevity and for the benefit of specificity, I would like to focus on a particular example within Price's study that will be informative of our discussion thus: a CD titled *Glacier Bay,* featuring the calls of Arctic humpback whales. Given that whales are not human and are thus viewed as wholly outside the influence of culture, their "songs," when regarded as such, are marketed as having a sort of ontological authority over human music, and is thus framed as a primal Ur-music that all persons, regardless of cultural association, should be able to appreciate universally.

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[40] Ibid, 193.

Price, however, argues that the way in which whale songs are packaged and marketed reveals that the appeal of this music is far from universal, since it stems from a need to relax and restore oneself at the end of the tiring, alienating workday. "The call of the humpack whale," she writes, "promotes human peace of mind. The arctic landscape and its animals become shadowy realities, subordinate to those meanings."[41] The Arctic whale songs, reinterpreted and transformed into compact disc available for easy purchase within a shopping mall, can thus be revealed as primarily appealing to by consumers hoping to find "peace of mind;" the fact that the songs are by whales is of a secondary importance. We can see in the appeal of this CD a desire the escape the responsibilities and felt alienation of the social, institutional world by a sonic immersion in more-than-human nature. However, the CD itself, like the desire it promises to satiate, is wholly produced and marketed within the society the consumers want to flee. Like the girl, whose father is holding her escape ladder, the consumer is simultaneously seduced by and prevented from fulfillment of the promise of an a-cultural, pre-historic nature, all of which, significantly, within a decidedly aesthetic framework.

Price's analysis of the whale song CD brings us to the same dilemma that we faced in our consideration of Bierstadt's painting and the Microsoft Windows desktop background. Not only are our images and desired experiences of nature actually products of our cultural frustration with our social world, but they are also disseminated in such a way that perpetuates those self-same problems we would like to escape, and thus does not allow us to encounter the otherness of nature that we seek. This analysis seems to confirm that our growing intuition that a restorative pre-historic nature, "pure" of human influence, simply

[41] Ibid., 194.

does not exist. After reaching this point in her own essay, however, Price makes a move that I liken to Adorno's proposed aesthetic attitude of utopian negativity. In order to give vision to our utopian identification with a world free of alienation and human corruption, we must also look past the socially disseminated, positive utopian concept of pure nature. When we do this, we are not left with nothing, but rather, as Price suggests, we are newly confronted by the *materiality* of culturally-derived "natural" products, no longer concealed by the false concepts that went into their production. She writes:

> Every "nature-oriented" item, whether recycled or not, is literally manufactured from nature. When I "consume" an inflatable penguin, I'm literally consuming natural resources like oil, wood, minerals, and energy. Who thinks about that? Who thinks of the *Glacier Bay* whale calls as 'petroleum' more than 'freedom'? Looking for what nature means, we can lose track of nature itself—but doubly ironic, if the real arctic landscape recedes as we graft abstract meanings onto it, its oil might be right in our laps.[42]

Price's call to consider the physical composition of the compact disc itself encourages the reader to confront the material facticity of nature. For reasons already discussed, the CD may fail to fulfill the consumer's desire to escape society and be restored in nature, but it may literally, tangibly provide the consumer with a portion of the petroleum extracted from the same region in which these whales sang. The grim reports of global warming and the wars over oil which dominate news headlines today ought to reaffirm Price's acknowledgement of material nature within the cultural product. The nature that we set aside as "pure," pre-historical and restorative of human life bears the wounds of humanity's demand for (and misuse of) land and material resources, and as such, cannot be considered to be outside the confines of human life and responsibility.

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[42] Price, 199.

The negation of the false utopian promise within our concept of nature opens us to the possibility of being confronted by nature in the very materiality of our civilized world. Rather than allowing discrete, alienated aspects of ourselves to encounter specifically chosen natural spaces when we feel the need to be restored and renewed, we are now able to recognize that spaces and objects ordinarily considered "human" and cultural have a material existence and significance born from the more-than-human world. And because nature is confronting us in spaces in which we primarily engage the world with our institutional selves, our usually alienated "I-hood" is brought back into our more explicitly social spheres of relation. We are thus closer to recognizing nature in *its* whole being, and at the same time, we are closer to engaging nature with *our* whole being. If we bring this insight back to the discussion of the desktop background, an aesthetic attitude of utopian negativity would resist the impulse to see the scene of "pure" nature as a refuge from the institutional world within the workday. She would instead more readily perceive the materials that went into the construction of her computer as continuous with the trees, mountains and water depicted in *New*, and her own institutional activities as implicated in the fate of the depicted natural space.

Thus I would like to suggest that this shift in aesthetic attitude allows the social subject, who desires a restorative engagement with an a-cultural, extra-historical other, an opportunity to engage this other in a way that Buber would liken a genuine I-You encounter, which, in contrast to the I-It experience, fosters meaning and ethical responsibility. Instead of looking for an ultimately false, self-gratifying venue for escape within nature, we can strive to halt or transform our destructive behavior toward nature through our recognition of the altered and exploited materiality of nature in our midst. We may become more mindful of

the resources we consume, and we may find ways to reframe nature as having a history continuous with our own, a history to which we are responsible.

Conclusion: Nature's Otherness within Us

By collapsing the false distinction between our imagined pre-historic home in nature and our actually lived, historically situated home in culture, it may be said that we are reframing humanity as continuous with rather than opposed to nature. Yet interestingly, at the same time, we are also reaffirming the need to orient ourselves toward otherness in nature at all points in our lives. The simultaneous identification with and respect for the otherness in nature appears to be another expression of the tension between identity and difference that we found in our original, utopian image of pre-historic nature. However, rather than stemming from the actions and beliefs of an institutionally-embedded "I" alienated from its inner life, the encounter with nature described here is one in which the wholeness of both nature and the self are affirmed.

Near the end of his "Nature" essay, Emerson articulates something of how it might be still be possible to regard humanity as both continuous with and other than nature, after one is able to fundamentally and holistically reframe her relationship with nature. He writes, "Nature sends no creature, no man into the world without adding a small excess of his proper quality."[43] I take this to mean that in their struggles to survive and reproduce, creatures of the natural world exhibit an impulse toward a higher existence that can never be achieved, and that the human is no exception. However, because of this impulse to reach above and outside oneself, life persists, and the natural world as we know it continues to

[43] Emerson, 303.

grow and thrive. Our desire to better ourselves through our encounters with the natural world and the struggles we undergo to be worthy of its perceived authority, are itself indicative of our natural excess, and ultimately where we find our *own* worth. For Emerson, "We aim above the mark, to hit the mark,"[44] and along those lines, I suggest that the very act of articulating a utopian image through art is one of the ways in which we aim above the mark. He says as much about art when he claims, "Our music, our poetry, our language itself are not satisfactions, but suggestions."[45] If we regard art, as I have done in this essay, as a venue for the expression of and identification with utopian values that resist intolerable social conditions, we can read Emerson as calling on us to rigorously take up *in our own lives* the values suggested to us in aesthetic objects, rather than expect them to satisfy our desires in themselves.

I thus conclude that the only way for us to encounter the otherness we hope to find in nature is to embrace what Emerson would call our *natural* ability to attune ourselves to what is beyond ourselves. This desire for change by way of new, meaningful engagements with the world is not only what Emerson identifies with nature, but it is also that which inspires us to explore the limits of our meaningful world through art, and it is that which ensures our continued historical growth. Nature, as implicated in our own history, is thus not the site of pre-historic origin that we initially posited it to be. Yet we have seen that our desire to encounter nature as an origin has revealed significant obstacles to our cultivation of a genuinely responsible relationship with the more-than-human world, and it has also revealed how reframing our aesthetic engagement with nature can help us overcome these

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[44] Ibid.

[45] Ibid., 304.

obstacles and ultimately achieve a more responsible coexistence. Because the particular relationship with otherness articulated here was shown to be of central concern in this chapter, I would like to begin my next chapter by examining the supposed origins of this aspect of human consciousness. What do we know of the early human's engagement with more-than-human otherness, and what material evidence do we have to support our ideas? How should we relate to an origin that gives central importance to human relationality itself?

CHAPTER III

PRIMAL ENCOUNTERS: A MODERN HISTORY OF LASCAUX

Introduction

I have just examined experiences that inform the concept of a *pre-historic* origin in nature, and the aesthetic objects that affirm or sediment those experiences. As I suggested, the belief in nature as prior to and thus free from the historical corruption of humans is itself an expression of the subject's dissatisfaction with her social existence and her desire to identify with society's "other." Yet, while this particular notion of a pre-historic origin in nature probably reveals more about present social conditions than nature itself, we also found that reframing our problematic *relationship* with nature could address some of the key problems that motivate our desire to experience a particular kind of nature: namely, social alienation and environmental destruction. A more responsible engagement with nature would allow us recognize its otherness from us, but following Emerson, it would also acknowledge that our desire and ability to encounter otherness comes from our participation in nature's history.

Therefore, if we wish to continue to gain insight into our origins, I suggest that we reframe our search in order to critically examine our capacity for relation. In other words, perhaps we would better understand human nature if we knew how our earliest ancestors perceived themselves in relation to the more-than-human world. Unfortunately, scholars have very little evidence with which to support their speculations on early human

consciousness or culture. Drawings and paintings, however, do survive from the earliest days of our species *homo sapiens sapiens*, and are thus treated by some as a unique window into the life and mind of the ancient human. In this chapter, I intend to focus on one such example of prehistoric art, which also happens to be the best known and most revered in Western circles: the colored cave paintings at Lascaux in southern France.

I will begin by suggesting, drawing on Georges Bataille, that the lushly detailed, vividly colored paintings of animals covering Lascaux's walls simultaneously express the early human's otherness from and relation to the more-than-human world. Moreover, because the creation of Lascaux and other prehistoric art coincides with the emergence of our species, the tension between otherness and relation is understood by some scholars as signifying a key *moment* of transition away from animality and toward a distinctly human consciousness. In other words, this relational tension is reframed by some as evidence of our species' *birth*. Understanding Lascaux as visual evidence of humanity in its infancy, I suggest, predisposes some to consider the cave as offering insight into humankind's present condition.

However, as my discussion will show, attempts to establish a meaningful relation between ourselves and our earliest human ancestors are hindered both by the present-day scholar's ultimate ignorance of Paleolithic culture, as well as institutional forces that mediate our encounters with this kind of art. Thus the aim of my discussion will be to articulate through immanent critique the preconditions for an engagement with primal art in a way that bestows meaning and insight onto our lives today while still respecting our radical temporal and cultural distance from these works. The relational tension that I suggest we strive to maintain in our regard of Lascaux is, moreover, the same kind of tension between humanity and animality that is attributed to the paintings themselves. If we are able to

cultivate this particular epistemic and aesthetic comportment toward Lascaux, I conclude that we achieve a state of *wonder* that brings new and original meaning into our lives.

Lascaux: Away from Animality

Dated at approximately 15,000 B.C.E., otherwise known as the "Magdalenian" period of early European civilization, the painted cave of Lascaux, along the Vézère River in the Dordogne region of southern France, is considered to be one of the more significant art historical discoveries of the century. Unlike most other Paleolithic cave art in the region, the paintings at Lascaux, mostly depicting aurochs (prehistoric oxen), bison, stags and horses, were almost perfectly preserved at the time of their discovery due to unique geological conditions that essentially rendered the interior of the cave waterproof.[46] In September of 1940, as the popular story goes, four teenage boys stumbled into the small, hidden entrance to the cave while chasing a dog. Upon exploring this cave, the boys were shocked to find at least two large chambers covered in color paintings of prehistoric animals.[47] Although the cave was not officially opened to the public until 1948, its discovery was widely publicized as one of the more significant moments in the study of Paleolithic humans and art history.

The art of Lascaux is neither the oldest in the region, nor is it the first to be discovered by modern humans. Yet it holds a special place in European Paleolithic art history because of the remarkably pristine conditions in which its paintings were found, the use of colored pigments, and evidence of a deliberate and sophisticated compositional logic. Most other caves in the Dordogne region are textured with stalactites, stalagmites, and

[46] Brigitte Delluc and Gilles Delluc, *Discovering Lascaux*, trans. Angela Caldwell (Lucon, France: Editions SudOuest, 2006), 15.

[47] Ibid.

calcite flows, which limit the smooth surfaces available for drawing or painting. As a result, these other decorated caves contain predominantly monochromatic engravings. If ancient humans were to have drawn or painted in these other spaces, however, the aforementioned geological features would have caused the pigments to peel off or be covered over in time. By contrast, the main chambers of Lascaux are covered in an even layer of calcite, providing a white, smooth surface that allowed for the easy application of pigments and vivid display of color.[48] Moreover, scholars have noted that the cave walls are decorated in a way that suggest intentional composition; that is, certain animals are sized and arranged in proportion to the dimensions and structure of the cave itself. For example, different chambers within the cave predominantly depict different sets of animals. The largest of these areas, the "Bulls' Chamber," also contains some of the largest paintings, and the bulls depicted in this space are arranged somewhat symmetrically: similarly sized and shaped animals appear directly opposite one another on each wall.[49]

Thus, Lascaux, I suggest, is the best known and most significant of the decorated caves in southern France due to its remarkable alignment with artistic conventions similar to our own. Because of the unique atmospheric and geologic conditions that preserved the paintings for nearly 17,000 years, the depicted animals appear to us as discrete and coherent whole images. The whiteness of the painted surface mirrors the modern painter's preference for white canvas or paper. And the apparently deliberate employment of compositional logic allows scholars and visitors alike to view and interpret the space as a total design, springing from creative, conscious minds much like our own. As a result, scholars seem to point to

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[48] Ibid., 19.

[49] Ibid., 59.

Lascaux more than any other decorated cave as a source of insight into our own identity as self-conscious, cultural beings.

One such scholar, Georges Bataille argues that the practice of painting in Lascaux was itself the means by which humans emerged out of animality, but that doing so allowed them to establish a deeply respectful relationship with animals. However, this theory depends largely on an archaeological theory predominant at the time of its discovery. In a lecture titled "A Visit to Lascaux," Bataille draws on the work of archaeologist Raymond Lantier to argue that the painting was a sacred invocation of the animals that the Magdalenians hoped to successfully hunt.[50] The very act of representation, still new to humans, was likely to have had an intense and powerful effect on the early human psyche. Here, Bataille describes the hypothetical experience of these acts of painting:

> Now let's imagine before the hunt, on which life and death will depend, the ritual: an attentively executed drawing, extraordinarily true to life, though seen in the light of the lamps, completed in a short time, the ritual, the drawing that provokes the apparition of this bison. This sudden creation had to have produced in the impassioned minds of the hunters an intense feeling of the proximity of the inaccessible monster, a feeling of proximity, of profound harmony... As if men, obscurely and suddenly, had the power to make the animal, though essentially out of range, respond to the extreme intensity of their desire.[51]

The hunt of large game, which, if unsuccessful, could threaten the survival of the community, was sure to have been an emotionally charged, highly significant event. The success of the hunt depended in large part on animals that could easily evade, outrun or overpower the hunters. Thus for Bataille, the very fact that humans were able to render the bison present through the application of pigment to a cave wall was highly empowering, and

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[50] Georges Bataille, "A Visit to Lascaux," *The Cradle of Humanity: Prehistoric Art and Culture*, ed. Stuart Kendall, trans. Michelle and Stuart Kendall, (New York: Zone Books, 2005), 49-50.

[51] Ibid., 51.

granted an opportunity to *relate* to the "inaccessible monster" upon whom they depended for survival. In other words, the painting would render the animal less monstrous.

According to Bataille, the especially vivid and detailed representations of animals at Lascaux are testament to the early hunters' deep respect, or even love for their prey. Not simply insurance for a successful hunt, Bataille argues that the paintings were a means by which humans could ask their prey for forgiveness. As evidence, he points to recreational hunting today, and argues that its continued popularity stems from this same sort of respect for the sovereignty of the wild animal. Bataille directly addresses the hunters in his audience:

> First, I will ask you if the moment the animal is seen is not a capital moment in the game of the hunt, a passionate moment, a moment that even has—it goes without saying, insofar as it is not necessary to immediately respond with an action, with gunfire—something that constrains, that catches the breath. Next I will ask you an even stranger question. I will ask you if you have a slight hostility toward your prey. It seems that you don't. There is hostility in war, but I believe that in the hunt, the hunter never hates the animal he kills.[52]

For Bataille, the prehistoric humans loved the animals they had to kill for their survival; and suggests that the modern-day hunter's experience of something that "catches the breath" when in the presence of their game expresses the continued possibility of love for the animal.

Yet this love was not born from a sense of kinship. Bataille argues that humans were aware of a fundamental difference between themselves and other animals, and yet their desire to relate to them is apparent to those who study the paintings today. As evidence, he points to the acute differences between the scope and style of representations of animals and representation of humans in Lascaux. In the cave, there is only one human figure, presumably male. Unlike the lushly detailed bison, horse and antelope, this human is little

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[52] Ibid.

more than a schematic stick figure (fig. 3). The degree to which the artists could accurately depict animal forms is abundantly clear, and so it is all the more significant that they chose to represent the human in a way that renders him merely recognizable as human, and not a life-like depiction. In "A Visit to Lascaux," Bataille argues that the reason for this artistic choice is that humans were already present in their hunting ritual, and thus unlike the animals, did not need to be rendered present through painting.[53] However, in another essay titled "The Passage from Animal to Man and the Birth of Art," he argues that the difference in representation stemmed from the humans' belief in the sovereignty of the animals relative to themselves.

Figure 3. Human figure, Lascaux, France ca. 15,000 B.C.E. Mineral pigments on calcite.

[53] Ibid., 50.

To defend this claim, Bataille points to two curious features of the stick figure: the face resembles that of a long-beaked bird more than a human, and a small protuberance just above the legs suggests an erect penis. Bataille identifies in the depiction of the human a striking reversal of self-representation in contemporary Western culture. He suggests that today we customarily view the face as the expressive locus of our distinctly human subjectivity, and at the same time we strive to conceal the genitals due to its association with our more "animal" functions such as sex and excretion. For Bataille, the depiction of the human indicates a reversal of these values in Magdalenian society:

> The decisive step (from animal to man) took place when man saw himself for what he had become, accepted, far from feeling ashamed of, as we do, the share of the animal that remained within him, and disguised the humanity that distinguished him from the animals. He masked the face of which we are proud, and he flaunted that which our clothes conceal.[54]

In other words, Bataille suggests that humans had already begun to perceive themselves as distinct from other animals by this point, but that this perception was a source of shame. Thus the human depicted himself as hiding the face in which the distinction in consciousness from other animals could be perceived (through a mask of a bird) and displaying the genitalia that he shared with males of other species. However, in the very act of pictorial representation, the human performatively expressed the consciousness he was hoping to conceal in his self-representation before the depicted animals.

False Assumptions of Relation

While I find Bataille's reading of Lascaux to be compelling, certain facts have emerged since the time of his writing that discredit one of his most fundamental

[54] Georges Bataille, "The Passage from Animal to Man and the Birth of Art," *The Cradle of Humanity: Prehistoric Art and Culture*, ed. Stuart Kendall, trans. Michelle and Stuart Kendall (New York: Zone Books, 2005), 60-61.

presumptions: that the paintings were intended to assist in a hunting ritual. According to Brigitte and Gilles Delluc, researchers at the Museum of Prehistory in Paris and authors of *Discovering Lascaux*, an introductory level guidebook for sale at many French cave art tourist centers, the Magdalenians that painted Lascaux's bison, oxen, and horses did not hunt these animals. Rather their diet, clothing and tools largely came from reindeer.[55] Surprisingly, out of 600 painted animals in the cave, only one is of a reindeer.[56] If the animals of Lascaux were not intended to represent (or render present) desired prey, why then were they painted?

The Dellucs suggest that the paintings were in the service of a religion that more closely resembles mainstream Western religions today than that of a shamanic cult. They write:

> Lascaux is much more like a cathedral with its nave and side aisles, than the smoke-filled lair of a magician or shaman... (the cave), by its complexity and its graphic, symbolic and archaeological uniformity, is now considered to have been the work of a few professionals of the Faith, belonging to one or more Magdalenian families over one or more generations.[57]

The Dellucs seem to argue that the structure of the cave and the graphic uniformity of the paintings suggest the possibility that Lascaux functioned as a cathedral-like religious space. The means of production, they assert, were similar to those found in the history of cathedral art, as they appear to have been designed and executed by a select few, specially trained "professionals."

While there may be more evidence to defend this claim than appears in their introductory text on Lascaux, the Dellucs' assertion seems to me to be far-fetched. Only

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[55] Delluc and Delluc, 41.

[56] Ibid., 61.

[57] Ibid., 63-64.

reopened to the human world in 1940, cathedral artists and architects of the past millennium were certainly not inspired by visits to Lascaux. Moreover, Christian iconography and religious practices, while having a rich history in France, are far better explained as emerging out of Roman, Greek, Byzantine, and ultimately Middle Eastern cultural history. While the Dellucs are likely correct in denouncing the "hunting ritual" theory based on archaeological evidence of the early human's hunting preferences, their alternate "cathedral" theory is apparently evidenced by nothing more than the formal kinship between Lascaux and Christian religious structures.

In both Bataille's and the Dellucs' attempts to make sense of Lascaux, I suggest that we see a reappearance of the tension between otherness and relation that Bataille has attributed to the paintings themselves. Because of its aesthetic similarities to the art and architecture of our received traditions, the modern-day Western viewer may experience a resonance with the paintings, a feeling that the artists had a beliefs, desires, and consciousness similar to our own. Scholars such as Bataille and the Dellucs attempt to explain this resonance through their imagined origin stories. Bataille, if we recall, said that the ancient cave artists were hoping to communicate with their beloved, anticipated prey, citing the fact that we too respect and love the wild animals we hunt. And the Dellucs' cathedral theory appears to draw more on modern experiences of cathedral worship than it does positive evidence of an ancient religious doctrine similar to that of Christianity. I suggest that the modern scholar's desire and ultimate failure to assert an unambiguous relation between Lascaux and contemporary culture only brings into stronger relief the historical impasse between the Magdalenian era and our own.

In her essay "Beginning the History of Art" art historian Whitney Davis argues that when we assume a historical continuity between the paintings of Lascaux and those of recorded Western art history we impose, perhaps falsely, our own artistic values on an era that we know very little about. She writes of Lascaux, "What motivates its selection (as the origin of Western art)...is a prior commitment to a history of Greek or Michaelangelo's art and of Leonardo's creativity in which Lascaux is actually understood as a replication, admittedly retrochronologically."[58] In other words, Lascaux is posited as the origin of artistic values and motifs, and is deemed canonical well after the establishment of this historical canon. The retrochronological character of this positing is underscored by the fact that all painters in recorded history prior to 1940 worked with no awareness of Lascaux. If developments in the history of art are best understood through artist's responses to traditions in which they have been trained, then how can one rightfully claim that a prehistoric cave, concealed for the majority of recorded history, is the originator of this discourse? A similar criticism can be made of Bataille's "hunting ritual" theory: By identifying a kinship between the contemporary hunter's relationship with the wild animal, and the ancient artists' regard for their supposed prey, does Bataille retrochronologically posit a certain set of beliefs or attitudes that more rightfully belong to contemporary hunting culture? I suggest that any relation we identify on the basis of Lascaux's apparent formal similarities with Western painting is thus a false one, because the artistic and cultural concepts around which these supposed relations are theorized are too thoroughly entrenched in our own discourses.

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[58] Whitney Davis, "Beginning the History of Art," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 51, no. 3 (Summer 1993): 329.

In his *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno writes that it is ill-founded to believe that we can ever decipher the meaning behind the earliest surviving works of art. He argues that we only have a visual record of a particular moment in ancient human life, and that to derive its full meaning would require evidence of the larger cultural context in which it was situated. He writes:

> 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. It needs to be taken into account that the oldest surviving art, the cave paintings, belongs as a whole to the visual domain. Next to nothing is known of the music or poetry of the epoch; there are no indications of anything prehistoric that may have differed qualitatively from the optical works[59]

As Adorno points out, the Paleolithic paintings at Lascaux and other caves were part of a meaningful context that may have included other cultural activities, such as music or poetry, which could not have survived to the present day. Our visual record of Magdalenian culture is effectively a fragment, and from this fragment we cannot rightfully claim to understand the purpose behind these works. Moreover, we cannot make any conclusions from the cave paintings about the origin of art as such. Adorno also insists that we lack the *temporal* context that would illuminate the intended meaning of these works. "The cave drawings," he writes, "are stages of a process and in no way an early one."[60] How are we to interpret Lascaux if we do not know what practices, accidents, and discoveries led the Magdalenians to paint the animals the way they did, or for that matter, to paint at all? Moreover, how can we understand the paintings if we do not know what *further* practices, accidents or discoveries were prompted by the paintings in the history of Magdalenian culture? These insights into

[59] Adorno, 325.

[60] Ibid., 329.

the fragmentary character of Lascaux highlight exactly how ill-founded it is to assume that we can uncover a relation between Magdalenian culture and our own.

"More Clearly than All Clarity": The Possibility of Encounter at Lascaux

However, for those who have visited Lascaux (or its replica[61]) themselves, and for those who have read firsthand accounts of others' visits, the idea that one cannot rightfully posit a relation between the Magdalenian and the modern human may not sit well. I myself have not visited Lascaux or any prehistoric cave paintings for that matter, but I have read of others' experience in the space, and have been told stories by a friend who recently visited some of France's decorated caves. From these accounts, it is clear that many who encounter the actual cave are able to feel a profound, deeply visceral connection. Bataille, whose impassioned interpretations of Lascaux were informed by his own visits to the cave, argues that, "It goes without saying that these paintings are viewable, they enchant everyone who sees them, and they allow us to feel closer to the earliest men."[62] Is the aforementioned formal similarity between these ancient images and our received tradition of Western painting enough to merit the visceral connection felt when in the presence of Lascaux? Or is something else at play that has so far gone unacknowledged?

Although these firsthand accounts tell us that an encounter with Lascaux is powerful, they also indicate that something of this encounter exceeds our articulation. Bataille quotes Marcel Ravidat, one of the four boys who first discovered Lascaux, as saying about his initial

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[61] "Lascaux II," the life-sized reproduction of the cave, will be discussed at length later in this essay.

[62] Georges Bataille, "A Meeting in Lascaux: Civilized Man Rediscovers the Man of Desire," *The Cradle of Humanity: Prehistoric Art and Culture*, ed. Stuart Kendall, trans. Michelle and Stuart Kendall (New York: Zone Books, 2005), 81.

exploration: "Our joy was indescribable; a group of wild savages doing a war dance would not have done better." [63] Ravidat admits that he can not articulate the experience of encountering those paintings for the first time, but we also know that it was joyously exhilarating, as he likened his reaction to an unbridled, ecstatic dance. It is interesting, however, that when we attempt to *theorize* a connection between the Magdalenian people and modern humans we are ultimately forced to admit that we remain confounded by a historical and cultural distance that is in all likelihood unbridgeable.

The distinction between the powerful yet indescribable relation felt when in the presence of Lascaux, and the failed attempts to articulate a theoretically and historically sound connection between the Magdalenian era and our own, might be explained by Buber as indicative of the unique *temporal* character of art. In *I and Thou,* Buber briefly discusses how art exhibits a tension between the creative *process* as a holistic, I-You dialogue between the artist and the emergent form, and the *finished* work as a "thing among things"[64] in the It-world. The artistic process begins when an artist finds herself confronted by a form or an idea that "wants to be a work through (the artist)" and "demands the soul's creative power."[65] The actual creation of the work is the artist's attempt to respond to the demands of the form. This requires the artist to refrain from inquiring into the form's origin, meaning or purpose, as doing so would take her out of the relation. The artist, according to Buber, "sees (the form) radiant in the splendor of confrontation, far more clearly than all clarity of the experienced world. Not as a thing among the 'internal' things, not as a figment of the

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[63] Marcel Ravidat, personal communication with Leon Laval, date unknown. Quoted in Georges Bataille, "Lecture, January 18, 1955," *The Cradle of Humanity: Prehistoric Art and Culture,* ed. Stuart Kendall, trans. Michelle and Stuart Kendall (New York: Zone Books, 2005), 96.

[64] Buber, 61.

[65] Ibid., 60.

'imagination,' but as what is present."[66] In other words, the artist clearly recognizes the form precisely because it is fully *present* to her; her encounter is unhindered by past knowledge or memories, nor by anticipations of the future. The form does not yet have qualities that permit it to be described as a part of the "experienced" world such as mass, volume, or texture; if it did, it would not demand of the artist to be made into a work. Yet the form is also irreducible to the "inner" life of the artist, which means that it is not fully explainable as emerging out of the artist's feelings, ideas or will to create. If it were, the artist would not regard the form as a *confrontation* with something other than herself. Indeed, the only "quality" of the form that confronts the artist, if it can even be called such, is the fact that it is it fully engaged by the artist in the present moment.

Yet because the artist responds to the form's demand that it be made into a work, the dialogic encounter between the two concludes with the artist "lead(ing) the form across" from the realm of the holistic You "into the world of It."[67]As an object, the finished work of art, unlike the form encountered by the artist, *does* belong to the experienceable world. Viewers, listeners and otherwise perceiving subjects can evaluate the work in terms of its material qualities, such as mass, volume, or pitch, as well as by the works' formal relationship to its surroundings. Perceiving subjects may also recognize certain aspects of the work as derivative from moments in the artist's life, or as expressions of certain emotional struggles. The work of art, emerging from the "You" of the form, is now an "It," an object that can be classified, analyzed, and evaluated. Unlike the artistic process, a dialogic encounter fully

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[66] Ibid., 61.

[67] Ibid.

entrenched in the present moment, the perceivable and experienceable finished work has an enduring, continuous existence with a recordable past and predictable future.

We see in this description of the work of art a similar tension between that of distance and relation which we have already discussed. For the perceiving subject, the work may not have the same significance or power that the unrealized form once did for the artist. However, the work's very existence is conditioned by the I-You encounter between the artist and the form. The work of art is the literal objectification of a dialogic relation, yet it is not the relation itself. However, promisingly, Buber suggests that "the receptive beholder may be bodily confronted now and again."[68] That is, a finished art object may for whatever reason confront (or one might say "move") a perceiving subject if she is able to bring herself fully into the present moment with the work.

I suggest that the contrast between the indescribably moving encounter many have had with Lascaux, and the failed attempts to articulate our relationship with it in theoretical terms, can be explained by Buber's differentiation between the dialogic, process-based "encounter" with an aesthetic form, and the describable "experience" of a finished work. If a visitor to Lascaux is moved by her encounter of these extraordinary spaces, Buber would say that it is because she is *present* with it, and thus she "sees it radiant in the splendor of confrontation, far more clearly than all clarity of the experienced world." Those who attempt to establish a theoretical, historical relation between the Magdalenian art and modern human culture, by contrast, describe the paintings in terms of visible and tangible qualities, and place them in the context of our established cultural discourses.

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[68] Ibid.

The connections forged by theory, on this view, are less informative than those found in the encountering presence of the paintings themselves. Yet, as I have already hinted in my discussions of Bataille and the Dellucs, some of these theories appear to have been informed by powerful moments of encounter. Bataille's most compelling evidence for his "hunting ritual" theory seems to be the paintings' ability to evoke a hunter's breathtaking encounter with a wild animal. And the Delluc's "cathedral" theory is apparently evidenced by not much more than the formal similarities between the cave and a Catholic cathedral, another kind of space in which many people feel an awe-inspiring, sacred presence. If these two theories do at least partially derive from the scholars' powerfully visceral encounters with Lascaux itself, however, the connections between these encounters and other profound moments in human life can only be made, keeping with Buber, *after* the moment has ended. One cannot be fully present with the paintings if her thoughts are elsewhere, such as in cathedrals and on hunting trips.

Therefore, if we are to successfully identify a connection between modern humanity and Lascaux, a surviving expression of our supposed original ancestors, I suggest that we turn our attention to our relational comportment at the *moment* in which we are present in the cave. As a way into this problem I look to Benjamin's notion of aura, as explained in his 1939 essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility." Although I do not intend to explicitly address the main theme of the essay, namely, the diagnosis of revolutionary potential in the decay of aura in twentieth-century material culture, Benjamin's term is nonetheless indispensable for our purposes. In line with our discussion thus far, aura is defined as a particular tension between otherness and relation in a perceiving subject's engagement with a work of art, and, significantly, this tension is precisely what gives art its

aesthetic value. The character and intensity of an artwork's aura, moreover, emerges out of the historical life of the work itself, and it is this insight that will help us articulate what happens in the moment of encounter at Lascaux. By examining the history of the modern public's relationship with the cave since its discovery in 1940, we will find that that certain aspects of our supposedly immediate presence before the painting are in fact mediated, and are thus in need of analysis and critique.

Aura: "The Unique Apparition of a Distance"

"The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility" is a sustained inquiry into the possibilities that changes in artistic medium hold for the transformation of aesthetic discourse, as well as its revolutionary potential for the working class. In this essay, Benjamin focuses specifically on media through which the formal qualities of a work of art can be reproduced *en masse*, such as photography, radio, and film. He argues that works previously accessible to only an elite minority with the economic means to acquire or visit them and/or the proper education to appreciate them, could now be accessed and evaluated by nearly anyone. One need not own a Picasso painting in order to have a "Picasso" in her living room; she need only purchase a print worth far less than the original. Moreover, one does not need play tickets in order to take in a dramatic performance; she can go to a cinema. The film reel can repeat the same performance an infinite number of times to audiences in distant locations for a significantly lower cost.

For Benjamin, technologies of reproducibility and the development of works specifically designed and marketed for mass reproduction have revolutionary potential. Oppressed classes now had access to art through reproduction, and with this access came

new opportunities to evaluate and critique art. They could discuss the merits and shortcomings of works with many others who had access to same reproductions, and their patronage (or lack thereof) could determine the style and content of future works. Thus the advent of technological reproducibility grants these masses the authority to reinforce or transform cultural values. The value of art is no longer tied down to the uniqueness of the individual object or artist, but is instead associated with mass appeal. The difference between the outmoded "bourgeois" aesthetics and the revolutionary new aesthetics, made possible by technological reproducibility, hinge on what Benjamin calls "aura." The bourgeois art of yesteryear, of which we are still accustomed to define *as* art, gains its value from aura. The revolutionary, reproducible art of today, for which we do not yet have an established vocabulary, is transformative because it signals the *decay* of aura.

Aura is a difficult term, and its meaning is the source of a lively debate within the secondary literature. However, before I refer to others' thoughts on the term, I would like to take Benjamin's own definition as a starting point:

> We define the aura (of natural objects) as the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be. To follow with the eye—while resting on a summer afternoon—a mountain range on the horizon or a branch that casts its shadow on the beholder is to breathe the aura of those mountains, of that branch. In light of this description, we can readily grasp the social basis of the aura's present decay. It rests on two circumstances, both linked to the increasing significance of the masses in contemporary life. Namely: *the desire of the present-day masses to "get closer" to things spatially and humanly, and their equally passionate concern for overcoming each thing's uniqueness by assimilating it as a reproduction.*[69]

This passage, which begins by comparing the aura of art to that of natural objects, and ends by describing the social conditions of aura's decay, is the closest Benjamin comes to a direct

[69] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility" (Third Version), trans. Harry Zohn and Edmund Jephcott, *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, vol. 4, *1938-1940*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 255. (emphasis in original)

definition of the term in this essay. His choice of language in his discussion of nature, however, is illuminating. The aura of a mountain range or a branch is perceived by one who *follows* its form with the eye. It thus appears that the comprehension of an object's aura requires a particular sort of attention to on the part of the subject, an adherence to the formal demands of the object. In his example of the mountain, it seems as though Benjamin argues that the auratic object is somehow physically present to the subject, as he claims that the subject "breathes" the aura of the mountains, and the particularity of the context (a summer afternoon) appears to be important. Yet despite the apparent necessity of presence before the auratic object, this particular·description is preceded by Benjamin's claim that the aura is "the unique apparition of a *distance*, however near it may be." Therefore, I would like to suggest that the auratic object, as appearing distant, and as something to which the subject must perceptually attend or follow, is similar to the demanding form that confronts the artist in a Buberian I-You encounter.

This claim is reinforced when we critically examine what exactly Benjamin means when he speaks of the aura as an apparition of "distance." Near the end of the passage, Benjamin attributes aura's decay to the "desire of the present-day masses' desire to 'get closer' to things, spatially and humanly, and their equally passionate concern for overcoming each thing's uniqueness by assimilating it as a reproduction." In other words, the subject who does not establish and/or maintain perceptual distance from the work effectively damages that work's aura. Why does Benjamin emphasize that the desire to "get closer to things" is both "spatial" and "*human*?" And how is the desired closure of the auratic distance between subject and work related to the overcoming of the work's "uniqueness?"

First of all, the question of "spatial" distance seems intuitive enough: present-day masses, according to Benjamin, desire access to works of art that are physically remote, such as a famous painting hanging in a far-away museum. Yet what does it mean to get *humanly* closer to a work? This mysterious concept may become clear when we consider the tension between otherness and relation that we have already seen exemplified with Lascaux. The ancient cave art, I have suggested, resists any sort of complete explanation of its origin or purpose, and yet remains a highly meaningful cultural treasure in Western discourse. This impenetrability of meaning could be what Benjamin refers to as a *human*, rather than spatial distance. To become close to an auratic work of art on a human level, then, I suggest, would be to find a common plane upon which the subject can engage with the work, to somehow reduce its otherness to us. Yet because aura is also considered by Benjamin to be sort of an aesthetic value, we can see that the auratic work's distance, or otherness, may also be that which so profoundly affects those who encounter it.

This reading of the word *humanly* also sheds light on Benjamin's claim that the decay of aura is facilitated by a "concern for overcoming each thing's uniqueness." If a work's uniqueness is preconditioned by its distance from the perceiving subject, reproduction will bring the work into the same sphere as the subject. No longer part of a meaningful world independent of the subject's existence, the reproduced work can appear in the subject's immediately lived world, in places such as the home, or the newspapers, cinemas and radios to which the subject continually refers. Thus the unique, "distant" value of the work makes way for meanings predominately conditioned by the subject's life. This insight echoes the claim I have made earlier, regarding the retrochronological character of theories regarding Lascaux. When we attempt to assimilate the cave into our own historically and culturally

specific network of meanings, we reduce its otherness to us, and thus perhaps bring it "closer" to our lived world. As some Benjamin scholars have pointed out, these moves of assimilation can have profound social and ethical consequences. Jennifer Todd, in her essay "Production, Reception, Criticism: Walter Benjamin and the Problem of Meaning in Art," notes that the overcoming of art's uniqueness through media of reproducibility was of grave concern for Adorno, a sharp critic of Benjamin's essay. When the subject no longer regards the work as distant from or outside of her immediate life, she engages the work on her *own* terms, and thus does not respond to the perceptual or attitudinal demands of the auratic work. While Benjamin saw this as offering greater cultural authority to the working class, Adorno, by contrast, identified a hindrance to class consciousness. Todd writes:

> It is, after all, a commonplace of Marxist theory that the working class is not immediately aware of its real interests and of what is politically most useful for it. As Adorno has pointed out, when the relationship between audience and art-object is reversed so that the audience sees what it pleases in the work, the audience simply projects its own psychology, needs, and obsessions onto the work and sees a standardized echo of itself; thereby it learns nothing.[70]

I do not bring Adorno (via Todd) into the discussion in order to rehash the debate over the revolutionary potential of mass media. Rather, I use this to illustrate the *relational* implications of aura and its decay. In her summary of Adorno's position, Todd indicates that the decay of aura results in the subject projecting her own "psychology, needs, and obsessions," onto the work, rather than recognizing meaning in the work that's distant or other than herself.

My interpretation of aura as a fundamentally relational phenomenon work is very much in line with the argument put forth by Benjamin scholar Diarumuid Costello in his essay, "Aura, Face Photography: Re-Reading Benjamin today." Costello notes that much of

[70] Jennifer Todd, "Production, Reception, Criticism: Walter Benjamin and the Problem of Meaning in Art," *Benjamin: Philosophy, Aesthetics, History*, ed. Gary Smith, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 105.

the secondary literature on aura centers on the material and formal qualities of art *objects* to the exclusion of any consideration of the *subject's* role in the creation or maintenance of aura. If we examine aura as a phenomenon ultimately dependent on the perceiving subject, he argues that we will discover how aura defines a particular mode of perception itself:

> Aura is best understood as a predicate pertaining to the subject rather than the object of perception; it describes how that subject is capable of encountering its objects, whatever they may be—namely, auratically or otherwise. Once the *capacity* to perceive 'auratically' wanes then, evidently, nothing will exhibit an aura any longer; this is to say that aura is a quality that not only requires a subject for its perception, but a specific, historically circumscribed, mode of perception on the part of the subject.[71]

Thus according to Costello, the subject establishes aura through her capacity to perceive "auratically," which, from our analysis of Benjamin's own definition, we could redefine as *perception of a distance within proximity.* Moreover, the aura of a work of art decays when our ability for auratic perception likewise deteriorates; when we, to use Benjamin's language again, "get closer" to things.

When reading Benjamin's discussion of aura in this way, Costello argues that we discover "the ethical significance of aura, its relation to respect...or, more generally, as an ability to relate to others *as others*."[72] Costello's assertion here is an explicit statement of what's at stake in my particular reading of Benjamin and its relevance to our discussion of Lascaux thus far. In our examination of Lascaux as a possible site whereby we may identify the origin of our capacity both relate and posit otherness, we found that we ourselves must seek the proper conditions for maintaining both distance from and relation to Lascaux, and it was suggested that a moment of presence with the cave itself may be the way to this

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[71] Diarmuid Costello, "Aura, Face, Photography: Re-Reading Benjamin Today," *Walter Benjamin and Art*, ed. Andrew Benjamin (New York: Continuum, 2005) 167-68.

[72] Ibid., 177.

achieve this ideal comportment. Aura, as the apprehension of distance *within* presence, thus seems to describe the exact aesthetic attitude we wish to cultivate. And so, while I do not want my reading of aura to be interpreted as a rejection of Benjamin's main thesis in the "Work of Art" essay, I do argue along with Adorno and Costello that the decay of aura could be ethically dangerous, as indicates the subject's disregard for alterity.

However, I also suggest that the aura of an artwork can be cultivated and perceived in ways that inadequately respond to the work's otherness from us. In what follows, I will discuss how apprehension of Lascaux's aura is mediated by our history with the cave, which in turn is indicative of the values with which modern humans have approached it. In my retelling of Lascaux's history as an unprecedented discovery, a tourist attraction, a critically endangered historical landmark and the model for a painstakingly accurate life-sized replica, I will suggest that a particular idea of "auratic" encounter is reinforced for visitors, one that is dictated by what we believe an encounter with one's origin should be.

The Auratic History of an Endangered Origin

While we have an idea of the perceiving subject's role in maintaining or destroying a work's aura, we have not discussed what it is about certain works of art that compel us to treat it as worthy of auratic regard. For Benjamin, the existence of an aura in a work of art largely depends on its *authenticity*, which in turn can be defined as the unique, particular, and/or unprecedented character of the work's historical existence, "the here and now."[73] From this definition, we can already begin to articulate the factors contributing to Lascaux's aura as a site of origin. As I have already suggested, not only do many regard the paintings to

[73] Benjamin, 253.

be some of the earliest surviving evidence of a distinctly human consciousness, they are also widely regarded some of the most aesthetically captivating and artistically accomplished of these early works. However, Benjamin also writes that the historical uniqueness of an auratic work "includes change to the physical structure of the work over time, together with any changes of ownership."[74] Therefore, on this view, the auratic character of Lascaux can also be derived from our contemporary history with the cave, including its discovery, its international regard as a historical landmark and cultural treasure and the physical changes to the cave itself that have resulted from this regard. Therefore, in this section, I will focus specifically on the character of Lascaux's aura through the lens its *social* and *physical* history of the past sixty eight years following its discovery.

Lascaux, as the story goes, was discovered by accident by four boys searching for a dog who had run into the cave. However, this story is not entirely true. According to Bataille, the entrance of the cave was first discovered by a local woman searching for a place to dispose with the body of her dead donkey. She pushed the body into the hole, which had only recently appeared when a storm had uprooted a tree near her property, and saw that the body fell much farther than she had expected. When the woman brought this incident up in conversation with Marcel Ravidat, he then decided to round up three of his friends and explore this surprisingly deep fissure.[75] However, despite the fact that the exploration of Lascaux was premeditated rather than accidental, the discovery of several chambers worth of ancient cave paintings was expected by no one prior to the excursion. The embellishments that have come to be part of the more popular account are perhaps there to underscore the

[74] Ibid.

[75] Bataille, "Lecture, January 15, 1955," 95.

unexpected nature of their discovery. According to Davis, the appeal of this legendary story may in fact relate to the positing of Lascaux as a significant site for the study of human origin. She writes, "...the circumstances of its discovery are accidental and dramatic, confirming two of our longstanding intuitions about what an 'origin' should look like."[76] In other words, because the discovery of Lascaux was an unexpected yet pivotal moment in twentieth-century cultural history, we might also be predisposed to think of Lascaux itself as born from a similarly powerful, singular event in the early history of our species.

I thus want to suggest that the imagined moment of Lascaux's dramatic discovery is itself a key factor in the development of Lascaux's aura, particularly in relation to its public opening as a tourist attraction in 1948. The auratic significance of this moment is made clear in Bataille's account of his visit to the cave as a tourist. He laments that the tourist's experience of Lascaux was not, and indeed could not be as powerful as the one had by Ravidat and his friends. In an untitled lecture delivered on January 18, 1955, Bataille described the tourist's experience of Lascaux and contrasted it unfavorably with the imagined moment of discovery:

> First you enter a small room where, as in a subway station, admission tickets are sold and where...a number of people patiently await the departure of the preceding group. When this group leaves, one joins the succeeding group, which descends in turn into the cave, directed by a guide. In sum, I have to admit, these are not the best conditions to be introduced into the world of the first men...this is why I always think back to the time when the first of our contemporaries entered the cave, when they suddenly found themselves in the presence of these marvels that no one had laid eyes on for fifteen thousand years. In this moment, if I had found myself there, it seems to me that I could truly have entered this long-lost world, whereas now...the present world follows me, it descends into the cave with me.[77]

[76] Davis, 327.

[77] Bataille, "Lecture, January 15, 1955," 94.

Bataille notes how the measures taken to render Lascaux accessible to tourists—and the presence of the tourists themselves—makes it difficult to access the "vanished world" of which the paintings are a remnant. He longs to have seen the cave before its transformation into a tourist attraction, to have suddenly stumbled upon an unprecedented discovery. Thus part of the aura of the cave for Bataille is the moment of its discovery, and that this privileged experience of being the *first* to encounter the cave would be forever cut off from all visitors thereafter.

If Bataille visited the cave as if he were expecting to encounter a "vanished world," or to perceive a remnant of an ancient culture other than his own, we could say that his visit to the cave was motivated by a desire to perceive or participate in Lascaux's aura: namely, to attend to a work of art that maintains historical and cultural distance even within physical proximity. One might speculate, moreover, that the possibility of an auratic encounter of this sort is what motivated many other visitors' excursion to Lascaux. In privileging the moment of discovery, we see the particular way that distance is asserted in the historical establishment of Lascaux's aura. However, the daily presence of large groups of tourists, as well as the physical measures taken to increase the cave's accessibility (such as the addition of stairs and a ticket counter) made it difficult for Bataille to cultivate the auratic attention necessary to properly engage with the cave paintings. One might say, based on this account that, the opening of Lascaux to tourism worked to decay the paintings' aura.

However, I suggest that the auratic character of Lascaux was *heightened* with its designation as a tourist attraction, for two interrelated reasons. First, the opening of Lascaux to tourism *in itself* suggested to the public that a visit to the cave would be a historically insightful and personally rewarding experience. Second, the fact that the tourist's visit is

mediated by contemporary technologies underscores the temporal and circumstantial difference between their encounter with Lascaux and that of the dramatic discovery. And while Bataille was disappointed with his distance from the privileged moment of discovery, the fact that he recognized this distance may have given a whole new dimension to his auratic regard for Lascaux. For while Bataille was in the presence of the same ancient paintings that were so dramatically discovered in 1940, he was aware that he did not—and indeed could not—stumble upon a "vanished world" in the context of his guided tour. Through the very act of rendering Lascaux physically accessible to the public, the possibility of a privileged, dramatic first encounter with the cave became more distant. Thus, I suggest that this particular tension between distance and proximity reinforced the cave's auratic character.

While the opening of Lascaux to tourism contributed to its auratic character through the simultaneous act of rendering it accessible to the public and establishing a distance from the legendary moment of discovery, the events surrounding its *closure* would enhance its aura even more. Just fifteen years after its opening to tourism in 1948, Lascaux was barred from public view after it was deduced that the measures taken to increase public accessibility had damaged the paintings. In addition to widening the cave entrance and adding stairs so as to better accommodate large groups of visitors, lamps had also been installed above the paintings for improved visibility. These physical changes and additions, along with increased levels of carbon dioxide from the breath of the million-plus visitors who passed through during its period of tourism, disrupted the atmospheric balance that had maintained the paintings' integrity over time. In 1958 Ravidat, now a tour guide, noticed creeping plant growth over the paintings where before there had been none, likely made possible by the

lamplight and the carbon dioxide-rich atmosphere. An attempt to treat this plant growth with a solution of formaldehyde and antibiotics, however, led to calcite deposits that covered over even more of the paintings. In 1963, the French Ministry of Culture deemed it necessary to close the cave to the public. After its closure, machinery was installed to maintain a constant level of carbon dioxide, temperature and moisture in the cave. This machinery successfully prevented any further deterioration until 1999, when it had to be replaced. During this brief period without atmospheric stasis, mold and bacteria returned to the cave, and at a much faster rate than before.[78] Since then, conservationists have had to battle two particularly dangerous strains of mold, one of which has still not been successfully eradicated.[79]

Despite its physical deterioration and its closure to the public, however, tourists have been able to "experience" Lascaux by visiting an exact replica of two of the cave's main chambers: the Painted (or Axial) Gallery and the Bulls' Chamber. This site, called "Lascaux II" was completed in 1983 and is situated partially underground at a site near the original work. It is thus hoped that tourists will be able to have an experience similar to a visit to Lascaux without threatening the integrity of the original paintings. An educational website on Lascaux sponsored by the French Ministry of Culture details the amount of time, materials, and labor that went into the creation of an exact, life-sized replica of the cave. First, careful measurements were taken of the cave's dimensions, and a concrete mold of the

[78] Delluc and Delluc, 72.

[79] John Lichfield, "Race to Save Moulding Lascaux Paintings," *The Independent*, Jan. 1, 2008, http://www.independent.co.uk/news/science/race-to-save-moulding-lascaux-cave-paintings-767538.html.

walls was made to match these dimensions, supported by intricately arranged iron bars.[80] The texture of the caves, moreover, was recreated with the aid of stereoscopic photographs, and projected images of the paintings were used by artists to recreate the animals on the concrete walls, in accordance with the reproduced bumps and crannies.[81] The paintings, moreover, have been reproduced with the same mineral pigments that the ancient artists had used.

The decision to close Lascaux to the public, and the ongoing efforts to preserve the paintings from deterioration, clearly indicate that the cave is for us a unique and culturally significant space worthy of our protection; in other words, it is auratic. Moreover, the closure of the Lascaux to all but an elite group of archaeologists and conservationists is itself a contributor to the cave's aura, as the public is now physically distanced from an important and fragile work. However, what is one to make of "Lascaux II?" Does the exact replica of the original cave work to undermine its aura by demonstrating our ability to reproduce Lascaux, and thus render it unnecessary? Or does it contribute to its aura by acting as a physical reminder of the existence of an ancient painted cave that is too fragile to handle visitors?

Lascaux Today and the Aura of the First Modern Moment

As we already know, Benjamin argues in his "Work of Art" essay that the reproducibility of auratic works can lead to the empowerment of the subject, and a *dis*empowerment of the unique, historically authentic work. We can see how Lascaux II might effect a transformation of this sort. In order to reproduce Lascaux, painstakingly

[80] French Ministry of Culture, "The Closing of the Cave, 1963," *The Cave at Lascaux*, http://www.culture.gouv.fr/culture/arcnat/lascaux/en/.

[81] Ibid., 5.

careful measurements had to be made of the cave's structure, and hundreds of paintings were recreated to scale with the exact same pigments used by the original artists. The fact that Lascaux II was made at all thus indicates that we have accumulated a remarkable storehouse of knowledge about the cave. Even without a replica cave, it is clear that one does not need to refer to the original Lascaux in order to learn about it. For instance, my writing of this essay required me to learn some basic facts about the history of Lascaux, the Magdalenian era, the geology of the Dordogne region's cave system and the content and composition of the paintings. However, I have never been to Lascaux, much less Lascaux II. My research was conducted through books, journal articles, websites and newspaper articles on the subject, all of which included drawings or photographs of different cave paintings. It is thus possible to become an *authority* on Lascaux (although I am in no way claiming to be one) without ever having to obtain access to the cave itself. However, if one argues, as I have already suggested, that a more genuine understanding of Lascaux requires a moment of presence with the work itself, Lascaux II also seems to render the original cave unnecessary, as it attempts to recreate the conditions for an embodied encounter of this sort.

Yet can one's presence within a replicated cave, no matter how accurate, be identical to that of the original? The visitor's knowledge that she is visiting Lascaux *II*, and not Lascaux itself, indicates that she is prepared for a qualitatively different experience. She may be impressed, or even moved by the carefully rendered paintings, but unlike the tourists of the 1950's, much less Ravidat and his three fellow explorers, she knows that she is not in the presence of 17,000-year-old art. Perhaps part of the power of her experience is her admiration for the research, precision and labor that went into the construction of such an ambitious replica. But more importantly, the very existence of Lascaux II communicates the

auratic significance of the original cave to the visitor. On the one hand, Lascaux II was built so that the original cave will be protected from further deterioration, thus signifying that the site is worthy of our protection. And on the other hand, Lascaux II's very existence is due in part to a belief that the public *should* experience Lascaux; that is, many believe that an encounter with these ancient paintings is moving, edifying, or otherwise worthwhile, and thus should be facilitated in spite of the original site's deterioration.

I therefore argue that the life-sized reproduction of Lascaux is perhaps the most significant contributor to the cave's aura today. By reproducing the cave for the experiential benefit of visitors, Lascaux II reveals a multifaceted distance between the contemporary visitor and the imagined site of origin. Not only is the visitor physically distanced from the original cave, but her presence in Lascaux II signifies her historical distance from the brief period of time before the cave's deterioration. Yet Lascaux II, the space that reminds her of distance from the privileged time and space of Lascaux itself, also brings the cave into a sort of *proximity*. We know that the structure of Lascaux II is identical to that of the original cave. Moreover, given our knowledge of the deterioration of the original paintings, we can presume the reproduced images at Lascaux II are in better condition than, and thus closer to what could be called the paintings' "original state."

Earlier, I suggested that the way in which the aura of a work of art is cultivated could be worthy of critique. And in our dual consideration of both the preservation and replication of Lascaux, I believe we can begin to articulate a problem with our auratic regard. For the past forty six years, conservationists have been attempting to undo some of the damage done to Lascaux following its discovery. And the ambitious reproduction of Lascaux is an attempt to create conditions by which a more intact version of the cave can be safely viewed.

Both of these phenomena, I suggest, are an attempt to "return" Lascaux to a more original state. However, this desired state is not the one in which it was left 17,000 years ago; rather, I argue that it is the state in which it was *found* in 1940, the state that enabled Ravidat and his friends to encounter a "vanished world." I defend my claim by pointing to the fact that Lascaux is considered important enough to be witnessed or encountered by modern humans, rather than simply be left alone and studied through textbooks and images. If the moment of the first modern encounter was not of primary auratic significance, then why would there be so much effort taken to facilitate public encounters today? Recalling Bataille's lament that as a tourist in the 1950's, his encounter with Lascaux was definitively less powerful than that of the cave's first modern witnesses, it could be argued that the efforts to preserve and replicate Lascaux attempt to reinstate the conditions for that imagined initial encounter, while simultaneously acknowledging that it would be impossible to do so completely.

To recall Davis, the legendary moment of discovery may have become so central to Lascaux's aura because it resembles what we think an origin should be like: accidental and dramatic. Through its implicit focus on recreating the conditions for an originary encounter, it seems as though the simultaneous reproduction and preservation of Lascaux contribute to the reification of what was essentially an unexpected and transient moment in human history. Recall that for Buber, a genuine I-You encounter with a work of art necessarily occurs in a present moment. The fact that this original moment of discovery is implicitly privileged in our regard for Lascaux today is testament to the power of the first modern presence before the ancient paintings. Yet to try to recreate the conditions for that moment is to not respect the transient character of the encounter. Moreover, this attempt may

conform our expectations to a cultural standard of origin that may or may not apply to Lascaux's actual early history. I am not arguing that the efforts to preserve Lascaux from deterioration, and the attempt to facilitate a potentially valuable experience for would-be visitors, are wrong or misguided. Rather, I think that if we look at what has motivated the acts of preservation and replication that characterize the contemporary human's relationship with Lascaux, we find that we are exemplifying the conditions for an encountering moment that cannot be premeditated, reproduced or articulated, conditions that, moreover, are dictated by our own cultural expectations of what we think Lascaux should be for us. We must thus ask at this point: Is the contemporary human's encounter with Lascaux, be it as a concerned scientist applying fungicide to the original site, a tourist visiting its duplication, or even the student of Lascaux (such as myself) who has visited neither of these sites, to be evaluated on the basis of its resemblance to the first modern encounter? And if so, what is lost or overlooked in our *present* encounter when a long past, irreproducible and retrochronologically fetishized moment becomes the standard for our own experience?

Reframing the Possibility of Encounter

If we feel our own relation to Lascaux to be inadequate because we are too far removed to posit a theoretically sound connection between the Magdalenian era and our own, or we are unable to encounter Lascaux as if for the first time in modern history, I suggest that we are not allowing ourselves to be fully present with Lascaux. I cannot describe in any positive, definitive sense what should be accounted for when encountering Lascaux in the fullness of the present, because in order to bring oneself to the present moment, one must not be guided by any preconceptions as to the content of this encounter. However, I

can at least refer to my own experience of researching and writing about Lascaux in order to articulate what took for me to find a moment of presence with the ancient cave, despite the fact that I have never even been to Lascaux II.

As I was finishing my research on Lascaux, I came across several newspaper articles and websites detailing the most recent fungal infections that are currently threatening the paintings. While visiting one such website, the home page of the International Committee for Preservation of Lascaux.,[82] I came across an image that genuinely struck me: a painting of a black pony in the Axial Gallery that has been affected by a white fungus (fig. 4). At first glance, the small white spots in the bottom left region of the pony appear to be the texture of the white-walled cave peeking out from underneath the black paint, just as one can see the white surface of a piece of paper underneath a crayon mark. Yet after looking at a detailed view of the affected area, and then returning to the full image of the painting, I felt something akin to dread. As I now knew those white spots to be a rapidly growing fungus, I couldn't help but see the pony as now experiencing something like a slow death, disappearing into the whiteness of the wall before my eyes. This is not to say that I thought of the pony as an actual living animal, but rather I was able to see Lascaux as having a historically mutable and fragile existence subject to destruction.

The knowledge that this pony's slow death was caused by its exposure to millions of humans who simply wanted to behold and enjoy Lascaux filled me with a strange sort of remorse. And although I was just viewing one digital image of a cave thousands of miles away from me, I felt *present* with Lascaux. I realized that at this moment, in which I and my

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[82] http://savelascaux.org.

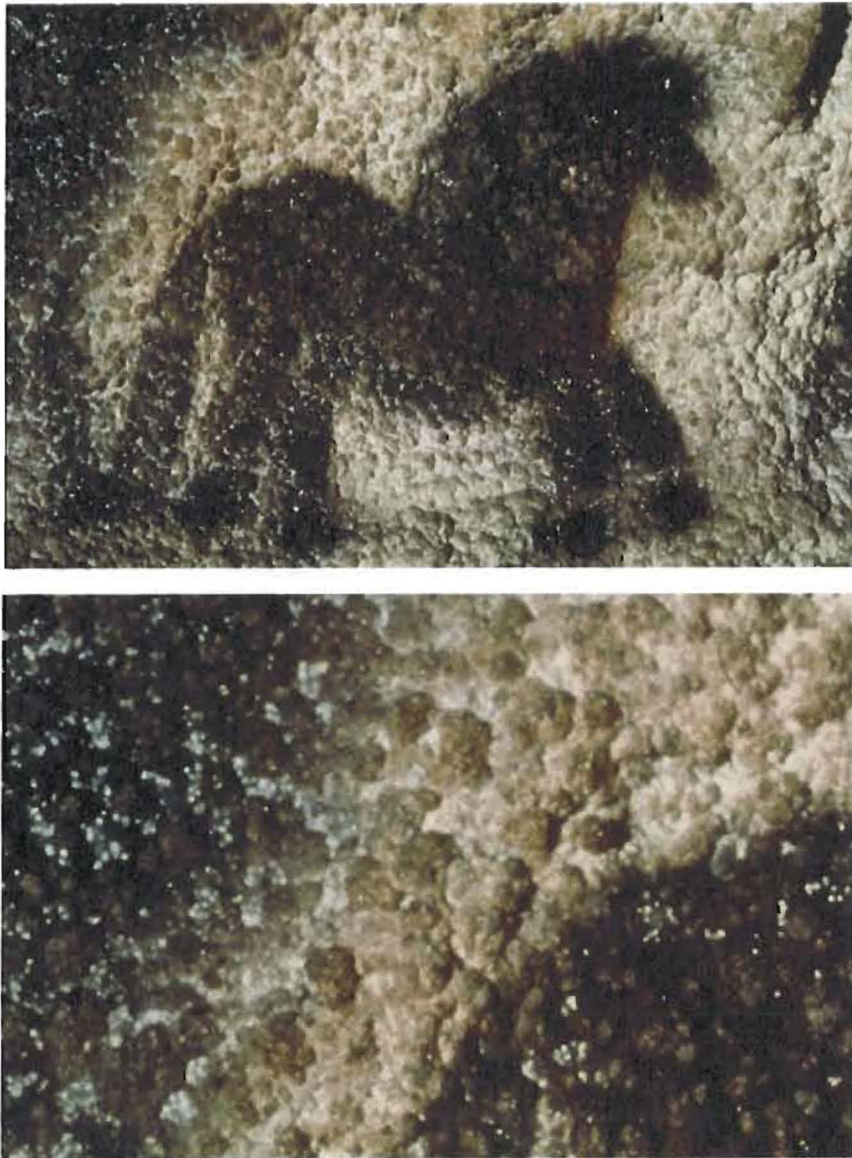

Figure 4. Above: Pony, Lascaux, ca. 15,000 B.C.E. Mineral pigment on limestone. Below: detail of white fungal deterioration on pony. From "Who Is Responsible?" on the official home page of the International Committee for Preservation of Lascaux: http://www.savelascaux.org/crisis_responsible.php.

world are constantly changing, one of the oldest paintings in the world is also changing, and that contemporary human activity is deeply implicated in its transformations. Thus while I realize that it is impossible to bridge the gap, either theoretically or experientially, between the Magdalenian era and our own through our regard for Lascaux, I was able to *relate* to the cave by recognizing it as a living participant in our history, and we as participants in its historical life.

I believe that this moment of engagement with Lascaux through the digital image of the decaying pony could be interpreted as perceiving the cave's aura, as I felt myself to be responding to the unique "demands" of the image through my regard. While I initially saw the form of the pony by looking past the white spots near the bottom of the figure, the context in which I viewed the image—a website dedicated to raising awareness of Lascaux's deterioration—demanded that I look at the white spots as fungus, insinuating itself into the form. By engaging the image in this way, I perceived it as a recorded moment in the gradual disappearance of a painting, a literal distancing from human perception. Yet because I saw the fragile, transitory character of this form, I was also able to recognize Lascaux as part of the present, changing world much more than I could when viewing photographs, tracings, or diagrams of Lascaux in the more impressive, formally whole state in which it was first discovered. Lascaux may no longer be the perfectly preserved, awe-inspiring "other" that we would like to engage in order to understand our origin, but for me, the image of the pony in its present state elicited a response, and allowed me to recognize my relation to the ancient space.

Conclusion: The Meaning of Lascaux

My described encounter with Lascaux is not intended to be a template for how I think the cave *should* be encountered. As I have already stated, to give a normative account of the modern human's relation to Lascaux would be to not respect the historical and semantic distance that the cave maintains from us, not to mention the singularity of the fully present moment necessary for the perceiving subject to relate across that distance. However, I feel that my encounter was insightful as to the *value* of a meeting with Lascaux, a subject we have left alone until now. In order to articulate what this value might be, I draw again on Bataille, who gives an account that is definitive enough to leave us satisfied, yet open-ended enough to avoid the fallacy of making a normative claim.

In his January 1955 lecture, Bataille speculates on how the creators of Lascaux may have regarded the images as valuable or meaningful to their lives. Even if his aforementioned theories on early human consciousness are not adequately grounded in historical fact, we have no reason to disagree with Bataille's claim that life for Magdalenian humans was harsh. The overall climate of Europe was much colder than it is today, and we can assume that early humans faced an ever-present threat of starvation and premature death. Bataille writes:

> ...they had no other resource than the hunt, to which gathering and fishing added only a meager variety...Add to this the danger of wild animals, probably already war, and frequent hunting accidents. It is has also been possible to study what could be, if not the average age, then the normal ages of adults...From this (research) we are led to conclude that [humans] rarely lived beyond their fiftieth birthday, and only just barely if they did.[83]

In other words, a quick consideration of some of the most obvious defining aspects of early human life allows us to see that with the ever-present threats of starvation, violence and possibly disease, there was little imaginable room for the Magdalenians to enjoy life.

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[83] Ibid., 100.

Compared to our own technologically enhanced, comfortable existence, theirs was surely one of great poverty.

Yet among the remnants from this apparently miserable society is *Lascaux*, a cave whose paintings hold an extraordinary aesthetic power for us today. If we are moved by our own encounters with the cave, Bataille suggests the effect that it had on the early human psyche was likely to have been earth-shattering. Cognizance of this commonality in experience across time reveals for Bataille something significant about human nature: our lives are enriched by that which dazzles us, enchants us or provokes wonder. And moreover, artistic production is a primary means by which humans from every culture throughout history have attempted to cultivate that sense of wonder. Bataille thus writes of all art as linked by its effect on us, a common meaning that can be apprehended outside of a work's particular cultural or historical context:

> Every civilization made works of art under a different *pretext*. But works of art all end up with the same result, with the result that endures after the pretext upon which they were made no longer has any meaning. We no more concern ourselves with the success of prehistoric man's hunt than we worry about the afterlife of the pharaohs, but the result never changes. The works constructed on these pretexts enchant us, and if every civilization created works that have this power to enchant in common, it is because they all had the same profound purpose in making them: man's fundamental desire, regardless of era or region, to be filled with wonder.[84]

In this passage, I do not believe that Bataille rejects the claim, as articulated by Adorno earlier in this essay, that the meaning of a work of art derives from its place in a larger cultural context (or pretext), such the Paleolithic human's dependence on successful hunts or the funerary practices of ancient Egyptians. Rather Bataille seems to suggest that with or without a historically sound knowledge of the work's origin, art is still capable of stopping us in our tracks, taking us out of the ordinary world, or in his language, filling us with wonder.

[84] Ibid., 100-01.

However, what is it about certain works of art that evoke wondrous responses from perceiving subjects? Can enchantment be described simply as the effect of the artist's skilled execution, a compelling choice of content, or knowledge of a historical people's reverence for the work? Each of these can play a role in the subject's enchantment with a work of art, but the degree to which they do so depends on the history and comportment of the subject, as well as the history and qualities of the art object. If something enchants us, I suggest that it does so precisely because we perceive something about it that exceeds our understanding, and that we recognize it as having significance that lies outside the spheres of meaning that shape our world. That is to say, works of art enchant us when we recognize their *otherness* from us.

Throughout the course of this chapter, I have discussed various ways in which scholars, tourists, and otherwise appreciators of Lascaux have attempted to understand ourselves by engaging with the cave in a way that conforms to our contemporary assumptions as to how we think the origin of humanity *should* appear to us. However, if we resist the urge to make sense of Lascaux and willingly remain open to its alterity, or as Buber would say, engage Lascaux as a You, we may gain unexpected insights into our own nature. To explain how this might happen, I return to my personal example of the fungus-infected pony. My encounter of this image had the curious effect of making me more aware of my own bodily interdependence with its environment. Ordinarily, I (like many others, presumably) tend to think that by simply observing someone or something, we do not have any impact on it. However, when Lascaux's million-plus visitors observed those ancient paintings, they initiated the paintings' deterioration merely by *exhaling*. Of course, before this encounter with the image of the pony I knew that humans exhale carbon dioxide and that

the presence of this gas is a necessary condition for the possibility of plant and fungal growth. However in the encounter, it seemed that this insight was conveyed to me with an urgency that I had never before felt. After the shock of this realization, I became much more mindful of the fact that as a living, embodied presence, I will always be implicated in some sort of interdependent relation with that which surrounds me, and that with this interdependence comes a constant responsibility to the others in my environment.

As I have just suggested, my own encounter with Lascaux led to a realization about myself that felt *new* to me. And if remaining open to an I-You encounter with another being, object or phenomenon results in realizations or insights that cannot be anticipated, I thus conclude that an encounter of this sort is in fact the *origin* of meaning and understanding in human life. My encounter, which shocked me into a new awareness of my body, could be likened to others' encounters that which inaugurated original insights. Ravidat's indescribable confrontation with Lascaux was surely so exhilarating because he and his friends were witnessing something that had not been seen by anybody for several millennia. Bataille, despite his laments that his visit to Lascaux was less than ideal compared to Ravidat's, nonetheless derived from his encounter enough philosophical insights to span the length of several essays and lectures. And although we do not know the intended purpose of the images, we can safely assume that the Magdalenian humans' depictions of animals on cave walls brought about a new understanding of the more-than-human others with which they shared a home in the Vézère River valley. Therefore, our ability to remain open to otherness before a space such as Lascaux will be the measure by which we participate in the cultivation of new meaning, which in turn allows us to immediately comprehend the nature of origin itself.

Moreover, if an encounter with otherness, by remaining outside the subject's ordinary network of meaning and offering new insight, is *wondrous* or *enchanting*, it follows that the discovery of origin within such an encounter is a decidedly *aesthetic* process. I thus reaffirm that we find the self-knowledge that we seek through a study of origins by remaining open to that which aesthetically captivates us, whatever that may be. In my concluding remarks, I will address the implications of this insight for our treatment of aesthetic objects that we explicitly associate with human origin, such as the ones discussed in this essay, as well as those typically regarded as outside the scope of this particular inquiry.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION: THE CREATION OF ORIGIN

The premise of my essay, that we should look to the realm of the aesthetic in order to understand ourselves and our origin, is admittedly an unusual one. However, in my critiques of the ways in which humans have historically engaged spaces and objects of "original" significance, I hope to have shown that our search for origin already has a fundamentally aesthetic dimension. In my first sustained discussion, I showed how a certain, pervasive concept of nature as "pure" of and "other" than human civilization is reinforced and mediated by artistic representations of nature both lofty and mundane. And in my second discussion, I argued that pre-historic images, such the cave paintings of Lascaux, are widely regarded as keys to understanding the earliest days of our species because the *artistry* of the images seems to signify that ancient humans had creative, self-conscious minds much like our own. So although there are other ways that we seek self-knowledge through a study of human origins, such as historical research, scientific inquiry and religious practice, I hope to have demonstrated that this sort of investigation can also take place in our regard for aesthetic objects.

That said, I hope to have offered a compelling critique of the ways in which aesthetic objects are commonly engaged, so as to help articulate the relational comportment that I believe we should instead cultivate. As I indicated from the very beginning, I use Buber's notion of the I-You encounter as the template for my proposed mode of engagement. However, as it became clear throughout the course of this essay, this encounter is almost

impossible to describe. Although an encounter with a You is profoundly meaningful, as it is a precondition for subjectivity itself, the precise content and impact of such an encounter is dependent on the particular situation in which the two beings find themselves. Moreover, the encounter is necessarily a fleeting one, lasting only as long as the subject is able to remain fully present with the other, and thus the full significance of the encounter cannot be articulated once the moment is past. As Buber notes, the I-You encounter gives rise to our capacity to meaningfully communicate with one another, but something about that encounter exceeds articulation. In *I and Thou*, he writes about a being after it has become a You for the subject:

> He is no longer He or She, limited by other Hes and Shes, a dot in the world grid of space and time, nor a condition that can be experienced and described, a loose bundle of named qualities. Neighborless and seamless, he is You and fills the firmament. Not as if there were nothing but he; but everything else lives in *his* light.[85]

For Buber, a being that becomes a You in a present moment cannot be compared to others ("no longer...limited by other Hes and Shes"), and cannot be described as an aggregate of its various features. As filling the "firmament" of the subject's world, the You is that which *illuminates*, or grants the world significance. In other words, the You gives way to signification, but its relation to the "I" prevents it from being subjected to the same sort of descriptive demarcation that it makes possible.

The elusive nature of the I-You encounter thus poses a difficulty for any author who wishes to articulate the need to enter into relations of these sort. And for this reason, I chose to describe the nature of the encounter through *negation*, that is, by critiquing modes of engagement that fall short of this ideal relational comportment. This is why the majority of my first major discussion focused on the problems surrounding the prevalent human desire

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[85] Buber, 59.

to engage nature as an uncorrupted, pre-historic "other" capable of restoring the socially alienated individual. And moreover, this is why the bulk of my second discussion centered on the various ways in which many scholars, tourists, and otherwise appreciators of Lascaux have failed to engage the ancient cave in such a way that accepts and respects its otherness from us. However, as I bring conclusion to this essay, I would like to discuss more directly the significance of the I-You encounter for human life, especially as it relates to aesthetics and the search for human origin.

My discussion of Lascaux ended with the suggestion that unconditioned encounters with beings or phenomena other than oneself mark the *origin* of new meaning and insight for the subject. Moreover, this conclusion resonates with Bataille's claim that human life is made meaningful in moments filled with wonder or enchantment. If enchantment is an experience that falls under the domain of the aesthetic, moreover, it follows that a wondrous or enchanting encounter with an aesthetic object may be the source of new or original meaning in the encountering subject's life. Although the examples discussed in this essay have been aesthetic objects and sites explicitly associated with human origin, my conclusion is that insight into our origin does not come from the objects of our attention. Rather, it comes from our *encounters* with these objects, the success of which is determined by our own willingness to remain open to the enchanting otherness that these objects offer us. If human origin cannot be understood through the object, but rather the encounter between subject and object, does this then mean that choice of object is unimportant? Can we understand primordiality by engaging artworks that, on the surface, have nothing to do with the question of origin?

Briefly put, my answer to this question is a conditional "yes." So long as a human subject gains new, *original* insight into herself and her life through her aesthetic engagement with a work, object or locale, she understands the nature of origin precisely because she is participating in it. However, to understand how this is possible requires us to think about the concept of "origin" in a different way than we have been thus far. It would not be quite correct to say that a subject, upon viewing a Monet or listening to Schoenberg for example, may gain from her experiences a new insight into what humans were like in the earliest days of the species. The origin that I speak of here is not an event that happened thousands of years ago, nor is it site whereby we may demarcate a precise set of preconditions for the birth of humanity. Rather, from this study, I conclude that human origin is an *ongoing* activity, one which is renewed with every individual, enchanting encounter between human subject and aesthetic object.

Yet while the encounter is reframed as the source of "original" source of insight, we must also acknowledge that the meaning and value of the encounter depends equally on the history and situation of both subject and object. Thus my choice of focal examples in this essay was far from arbitrary. Although I have critiqued the ways in which we engage and interpret certain artistic representations of nature and pre-historic image-work, I chose these examples precisely because something about them resonates with many humans today. And, as I hope to have shown, if we recognize our desire to relate to these works of primordial significance as stemming mostly from our own particular, historical situation, perhaps we will engage with them in a way that allows us to more closely attend to the unique, unprecedented, and indeed *original* insights they hold for our lives.

At the end of his paralipomena on the origin of art, Adorno compellingly summarizes this point, when he argues that aesthetic engagement is itself the birth of human subjectivity:

> Ultimately, aesthetic comportment is to be defined as the capacity to shudder, as if goosebumps were the first aesthetic image. What later came to be called subjectivity, freeing itself from the blind anxiety of the shudder, is at the same time the shudder's own development; life in the subject is nothing but what shudders, the reaction to the total spell that transcends the spell. Consciousness without shudder is reified consciousness.[86]

Adorno describes the aesthetic attitude as the "capacity to shudder," which I suggest would be our initial reaction before something that resonates with us, yet cannot be fully articulated within our ordinary spheres of meaning. He then argues that what we call "subjectivity" is in fact the development of this initial shudder, our continued response to the haunting otherness of the world that is somehow irreducible to its "spell" on us. In this sense, subjectivity is not a "given" quality of human consciousness. Rather it is (or should be) an ongoing process, constantly emerging out of an encounter with what lies just outside the individual's comprehension. The passage ends with a warning that we need to always retain this capacity to shudder before the world, for without it, we allow ourselves to become reified, literally *object*-ified. A person of reified consciousness, unable to openly and spontaneously respond to the others she encounters, is thus unable to act *responsibly* toward them.

I thus hope to have shown something of what it would take to reinvigorate a human subject's capacity for aesthetic shudder in the modern world. Although the desire to understand origin is pervasive in human life, I suggest that we may only find what we look for if we vigilantly attune ourselves to the rich, complex and mysterious happenings of the

[86] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* 331.

actual present, rather than allow our desire for agreeable solutions to our problems limit our perception of ourselves and others. I hope this discussion has shown that the aesthetic dimension of human life is key to understanding who were are and from whence we came, as it is the site of our ongoing self-creation.

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