

# Bataille on Lascaux and the Origins of Art

Richard White

Creighton University

*Bataille's book Lascaux has not received much scholarly attention. This essay attempts to fill in a gap in the literature by explicating Bataille's scholarship on Lascaux to his body of writing as a whole—an exercise that, arguably, demonstrates the significance of the book and, consequently, the shortsightedness of its neglect by critics who have not traditionally grasped the relevance of the text for illuminating Bataille's theory of art and transgression.*

Bataille's major work on the Lascaux cave paintings, *Prehistoric Painting: Lascaux or the Birth of Art*, was originally published as the first volume in a series called "The Great Centuries of Painting."<sup>1</sup> It is an impressive book with color photographs and supporting documents, and in his text, Bataille deals conscientiously with the existing state of prehistoric studies and scholarly accounts of Lascaux. But in spite of this—or rather because of it—*Lascaux* the book has received very little attention from prehistoric scholars, art historians or even Bataille enthusiasts.<sup>2</sup> For one thing, the format of this work seems to undermine the power of transgression which is the subject as well as the driving force behind most of Bataille's writings. The very context of a multi-volume series on great art and artists suggests an uncritical perception of art as a universal which remains the same from Lascaux to Manet.<sup>3</sup> In *Lascaux*, as opposed to most of his other writings, Bataille offers his own contribution to an existing historical controversy, and he is constrained in advance by the terms of this debate. Serious scholars of prehistory have also ignored the book because it is quite speculative in linking the origin of human beings to the birth of art: As the editors of *The Cave of Lascaux: The Final Photographs* put it: "[Bataille's] text is of debatable interest in the eyes of the prehistorian."<sup>4</sup> With the recent translation and publication of Bataille's other essays on prehistoric art, however, it is now clear that Bataille's interest in prehistory began early on and remained a constant theme from the early 1930s until the end of his life.<sup>5</sup> *Lascaux* became a focus for his own self-understanding, and it offers us a key to his intellectual project.

In this essay, I want to reevaluate Bataille's discussion of Lascaux as a significant work which has been unfairly neglected. To this end, I consider

three distinct but related lines of inquiry: First, I look at Bataille's account of art in the Lascaux book: does Bataille subscribe uncritically to a particular view of what art is; or does he offer a coherent argument concerning the nature of art which would be helpful to artists, philosophers or scholars of prehistory? Second, I examine Bataille's account of transgression, which is a central category in most of his writings: does Bataille show the significance of transgression in helping us to understand prehistoric people; or is his account more strained and theoretical than his own experience of Lascaux might warrant? Finally, I look at Bataille's account of the origin—in *Lascaux*, the origin of art and the origin of human beings: does he unfairly privilege the origin, as opposed to the end, as the moment at which everything is supposed to be clear and given? Or does his attempt to recover the origin help to illuminate the trajectory of human history which follows from this point? Bataille visited Lascaux many times and he was clearly amazed by what he saw: "Directly we enter the Lascaux cave, " he comments, "we are gripped by a strong feeling we never have when standing in a museum, before the glassed cases displaying the oldest petrified remains of men or neat rows of their stone instruments. In underground Lascaux, we are assailed by that same feeling of presence—of clear and burning presence—which works of art from no matter what period have always excited in us. Whatever it may seem, it is to tenderness, it is to the generous kindness which binds up souls in friendly brotherhood that the beauty in man-made things appeals. Is it not beauty we love? And is it not that high friendship the passion, the forever repeated question to which beauty alone is the only possible reply?" [12] Reading passages like this one, we may wonder whether Bataille's enthusiasm sometimes got the better of him; although it should be pointed out that even the soberest scholars describe Lascaux in equally rapturous terms.<sup>6</sup> Here we must ask whether Bataille's work on Lascaux really helps us to understand prehistory and what it means to be human. And in what respect does the Lascaux book help us to understand Bataille?

Before we begin this discussion, however, a brief account of Lascaux, its origins and its recent discovery is in order: The cave in Lascaux, France, contains the most well-preserved and many would say the most stunning examples of prehistoric art. These include the magnificent paintings in the Hall of the Bulls, where figures are over 15 ft. long, and other galleries including the Axial Gallery (often referred to as the Sistine Chapel of Prehistory), the Passage, the Nave, the Room of the Felines, the Apse and the Well. The paintings depict horses, bison, cows, deer and other creatures, over 900 ani-

mals and almost 2000 registered figures in all.<sup>7</sup> Many are painted with great skill, and they are typically depicted in motion. There is only one human figure. In some parts of the cave, the figures are carved into the rock and superimposed on top of each other in a disordered way. The paintings are hard to photograph because the artists made full use of the natural contours of the rock and the figures change their aspect relative to the spectator's position. They are around 18,000 years old according to current estimates and derive from the upper Paleolithic period, which Bataille also refers to as the Reindeer age. *Homo faber*, or Neanderthal man, first emerged about 500,000 years ago. *Homo faber* made stone tools and so he was the first to work; and we know that he was aware of death, since Neanderthal burial mounds have been discovered. *Homo sapiens* probably emerged about 50,000 years ago. At some point, the Lascaux cave was probably closed by a rock slide, but in 1940 the entrance was reopened by a storm and a group of schoolboys rediscovered the paintings. This historical context is important: in 1940, France was defeated and French national feeling was at a low ebb; but the discovery of Lascaux suggested to some that the real beginning of human civilization was not to be found in ancient Egypt or in ancient Greece, but in the Dordogne, with Lascaux as its focal point.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps Bataille unconsciously succumbs to this national enthusiasm when he writes, "When all is said and done, it is likely that Lascaux such as it is represents about the summit of what man attained in that period, and likely too that the valley of the Vezere was the place where intensified human life assumed a humane look in its own eyes and in the eyes of those who entered this pool of light. Lascaux's name thus symbolizes the ages when the human beast yielded to the subtler, keener, unfettered individual we are." [20] Other writers were similarly impressed. Blanchot, for example, wrote that: "what...strikes us...in the paintings of Lascaux is how natural they are, how joyful and, under cover of darkness, how prodigiously clear. With the exception of the scene hidden in a well...everything comes into a pleasing contact with our eyes, a contact that is immediately pleasing with the only surprise being caused by the familiarity of beautiful things. Images without enigma in a style that is refined, elaborate, and yet bursts forth, giving us a feeling of free spontaneity and of an art that is carefree and without ulterior motive, almost without pretext and joyfully open to itself."<sup>9</sup> The cave was closed in 1963 after it was discovered that the paintings were deteriorating because of all the carbon dioxide in the breath of thousands of visitors. In 1983, however, Lascaux II—a replica of the original—was opened close to

the original site, to give people the Lascaux experience without the experience of Lascaux.

Bataille published his book on Lascaux in 1955, but he had been writing on the general topic of prehistory and prehistoric painting since the early 1930s. It was clearly of great importance for Bataille to grasp the historical unfolding of his basic philosophical themes including the relationship between work and play, the antagonism between utility and the realm of sacrifice, and the relationship between eros and death. Later he developed some of his ideas on prehistory in volume two of *The Accursed Share*, in *Eroticism* and in *The Tears of Eros*.<sup>10</sup> I will focus my remarks on *Lascaux*, since it is obviously the most sustained discussion and it is a significant philosophical achievement which has been unfairly neglected. To clarify *Lascaux*, let us now consider the three lines of inquiry that were outlined above: First, Bataille's philosophical and historical discussion of art; second, his account of transgression insofar as it applies to prehistory; and third, his preoccupation with the origin as the threshold that illuminates everything else.

Bataille was transfixed by the images of Lascaux, and he talks of a sense of wonderment as the only possible response to such grandeur. "I insist upon the surprise we experience at Lascaux," he writes, "This extraordinary cave fairly staggers its visitors: it unceasingly rewards that expectation of the miraculous which is, in art and passion, the most profound aspiration of life." [15] In this respect, he argues, we can still commune with the ancient people who created these paintings; for we recognize them as beings like ourselves who sought to celebrate life and transfigured the world through their art. But why exactly did the people of Lascaux create these incredible paintings? At this point, can we really know anything about their ultimate purpose? There are at least two sorts of answers that could be given: First, one could say that the paintings are a form of sympathetic magic intended to make a hunting expedition more successful, or to ward off evil spirits or something else along these lines; while secondly, one could say that the paintings are purely decorative or an example of what we might term "art for art's sake." To some extent, Bataille accepts the first hypothesis: in many communities in the world today, people still depict the animals they want to hunt and kill in the belief that the representation will become the reality. But as Bataille is quick to point out, the sheer magnificence of the Lascaux paintings really surpasses any particular intention which might have been their more proximate cause. "Any given work of art's specific intention is thus of small account if one considers the constancy and universality of that

overriding purpose. Is it a true work of art where it is absent? That purpose is the major thing; whilst what in the work of art is isolated, petty, matters far less. The isolated element, the specific intention perishes in oblivion as soon as, to a later generation or a newcomer, it ceases to make sense; but the marvelous never loses its impact.” [34] This seems like a reasonable argument: a great writer like Shakespeare may have only written commissioned works, but that does not mean that we can grasp his plays by reducing them to the context of their original production. The point is, all great art is excessive. The Lascaux paintings are not just pictures made for a specific job, but magnificent depictions of animal grandeur; they have a meaning and an intentional significance which cannot be reduced to their original purpose.

In fact, Bataille argues that there is a link between these paintings and the themes of festival and sacrifice, for they share in the exuberance of life and they imply a desire to restore the sacred character of existence which is usually ignored. As he comments, “A work of art, a sacrifice contains something of an irrepressible festive exuberance that overflows the world of work, and clashes with, if not the letter, the spirit of the prohibitions indispensable to safeguarding this world.” And he adds, “Every work of art, in isolation, possesses a meaning independent of the desire for the prodigal, a desire each has in common with all the rest. But we may say in advance that a work of art in which this desire cannot be sensed, in which it is faint or barely present, is a mediocre work. Similarly, there is a specific motive behind every sacrifice: an abundant harvest, expiation, or any other logical objective; nonetheless, in one way or another, every sacrifice has its cause in the quest for a sacred instant that, for an instant, puts to rout the profane time in which prohibitions guarantee the possibility of life.” [39] In this way, Bataille speculates on the religious origins of art and the respect in which art remains a religious activity in so far as it is concerned with the sacred—not the sacred as the beyond, another realm of being that exists in opposition to this one—but the sacred as the deep reality of this life that we are typically alienated from. In Lascaux, the sacred is lovingly depicted in the forms of animal life: the bulls, horses, cows and deer are all portrayed with an obvious awe and reverence for their magical being. Of course, Bataille would say that *any* great painting or work of art involves a celebration of the sensuous which illumines and cherishes physical being for its own sake alone; and so he identifies art’s basic purpose, which is: “to create a sensible reality whereby the ordinary world is modified in response to the desire for

the extraordinary, for the marvelous, a desire implicit in the human being's very essence." [34]

The "art for art's sake" interpretation seems rather weak by comparison, and it is more than likely just a projection of contemporary thinking about the role of art works. Thus, towards the end of his essay, Bataille points out that once you leave the Hall of the Bulls, many of the paintings are superimposed on top of each other: "The overlapping of the figures indicates that, to the contrary, former decorations were considered of lesser importance when a new one was to be laid down: if the new one obliterated an older and perhaps more beautiful painting, that was of but secondary consequence." [129] From this he concludes that the paintings of Lascaux were themselves a part of the rites. Of course, we know next to nothing about the people of Lascaux, the nature of their rites and celebrations. But this much seems right, given the patterns of marking, the striations on the cave wall, and the superimposition of forms: for the most part, it was the actual creation of the pictures that was all-important and this was something that had to be repeated over and over again within a ritualistic context.<sup>11</sup> As Bataille puts it, "The actual doing embodied the entire intention"—which means that the ritual *process* is all important. Once again, however, this is to emphasize the religious origins of art and the way it is bound up with the power of the sacred both as its impetus and as its end. The finished work would be admired but it would be misleading to think that these people were involved in creating "works of art," decorating their cave, or practicing art for art's sake.

We can now deepen our understanding of Bataille's account of art by looking at his discussion of transgression, which is a focal point for his interpretation of Lascaux. The idea of transgression may well be Bataille's most significant contribution to philosophical understanding. Indeed, Suzanne Guerlac suggests that without the idea of transgression the whole post-structuralist enterprise would probably collapse, since transgression is itself the *undecidable* or the *supplement* which both completes and exceeds the system at the same time.<sup>12</sup> But Bataille's account of transgression was already established by the time he came to write Lascaux; and there may be something to be said for the claim that sometimes he imposes the logic of transgression on to Lascaux without allowing the experience of the cave to engender his response.

Bataille's basic claim is that human society is founded on prohibition. As he remarks more than once, "for an animal nothing is ever forbidden" [31]—and this itself is a source of our fascination for animals and leads to

a lingering regret that we are no longer the same as they are. Next, Bataille points out that prohibition is organized in terms of two major categories: prohibitions concerning death and prohibitions concerning sex. Regarding the first of these, as we have already mentioned, we know that Homo faber buried his dead since Neanderthal burial sites have been found. Bataille claims that this is a major advance, and he also claims that animals are basically indifferent to the dead of their own species, although *this* is a very disputable claim. What is true, however, is that human beings have numerous prohibitions concerning death and the handling of the dead, and Bataille speculates how death must have terrified our ancestors: “Man’s behavior with regard to death manifested his recognition of a new value: the dead, at least the faces of the dead, fascinated, overawed the living, who made haste to *forbid* that they be approached: these were not ordinary objects, to be eyed casually or heedlessly neglected. In raising this barrier of prohibition round what fills him with awe and fascinated terror, man enjoins all beings and all creatures to respect it: for it is the sacred.” [31] In the case of sexual prohibition, the physical evidence has not survived; but elsewhere, in *The Accursed Share*, for example, Bataille highlights Levi-Strauss’s claim that the transition from nature to culture is founded on the prohibition of incest; while Bataille’s own work on eroticism is based on the idea that the erotic dimension of experience involves a transgressive relationship to sex which is originally directed towards reproduction as its only goal.<sup>13</sup> In both cases—sex and death—it can therefore be argued that prohibition involves the denial of our animal nature.

Now all of this is supposed to be in place when Homo faber starts to make tools, for the creation of tools implies the beginning of work and long-term projects; it also means a falling away from animal immediacy. In this context, Bataille argues that the creation of painting involves the transgression of *work*—for art is a kind of play which is celebrated for its own sake, and not just as a means to an end; likewise he suggests that the creation of painting involves the transgression of *death*, since it expresses an outpouring of vitality or, as Bataille sometimes calls it, “virility” which neutralizes death by celebrating life; while at the same time, the creation of painting implies the transgression of *ordinary life* towards the sacred in the divine realm of animal being that we have fallen away from. In all of these different ways, then art is essentially transgressive. And in *Lascaux*, Bataille summarizes the dialectical logic of history that seems to subtend this view: “At its outset art was primarily a game. In a major sense it still is.

It is play; while tool-making is primarily work. To establish the meaning of Lascaux (by which I mean the epoch whereof Lascaux is the materialization) is to perceive the shift from the world of work to the world of play: or the transition from *Homo faber* to *Homo sapiens*: from the roughhewn to the finished individual being.” [27] On the one hand, this *is* a very powerful thought: Work involves our alienation from the realm of animal immediacy, and expresses self-assertion on the part of our remote ancestors; but according to Bataille we only become “fully human” once we relinquish work for play, and return to the oneness we have lost by deliberately affirming it in art. The artwork is therefore the first expression of human freedom which transcends original immediacy and the experience of alienation that orders the world of work: “This man bows before a force which surpasses him infinitely, which is sovereign, so very sovereign to work’s human attitude that the animal may be used to express it.” [127] This description attests to the undeniable “aura” of the Lascaux paintings, but it isn’t at all obvious that this is the source of their power over us. Indeed, so much of Bataille’s account here seems to derive from a fixed formulation that precedes the actual experience of Lascaux —such that Lascaux becomes the example that is used to justify Bataille’s account of the whole sweep of human history. There are other reasons for concern: Bataille describes the Neanderthals who seemingly invented work in unflattering terms: “*Homo faber*,” he writes, “was unpliant, sluggish, “beef-witted.” His vitality had never overcome the heavy dullness of quadruped forms; heavy, he lingered near the anthropoid.” There is, I think, a strong resemblance between this portrait of Neanderthal man and the solid bourgeois citizen that Bataille is so contemptuous of in many of his other writings: For in the modern age, the solid bourgeois citizen is the dreary, unimaginative champion of work; and according to Bataille, all his conventions of decency must be smashed (or transgressed) to recover the sacred character of life.<sup>14</sup> It’s not unlikely that something like “bourgeois self-hatred” may have shaped Bataille’s account of prehistoric man, and this leads to an overestimation of the earliest *Homo sapiens* by comparison.

Even though Bataille’s discussion of transgression may be problematic, it still helps him to come to grips with the most fundamental issues concerning Lascaux. In particular, he emphasizes the splendor of animal being that is conveyed by the paintings, and he points out how this is quite opposed to the typical way that we think about animals in the modern world: “But above all,” he writes, “we see that life’s impact moved them in humane directions: this vision of animality is humane. Why? Because the life it

incarnates is transfigured in the painting, made fair, made beautiful and for this reason made sovereign, exalted far above all imaginable poverty.” [24] For the people of Lascaux, the animal is a sacred being lovingly portrayed, while in comparison, the single human figure that is found in the Lascaux cave seems childishly drawn and almost a caricature. Today, human life is our complete focus and animal existence is at best peripheral; but at Lascaux and at other cave sites, the dearth of human figures suggests the very opposite of anthropocentrism: not self-affirmation but shame at our withdrawal from the fullness of animal being and the transgression of animal life.

In this regard, Bataille comments on the famous “scene in the Well,” which is located in the most secret part of the cave and includes the only human figure in the whole of Lascaux. At the centre of this tableau lies a bird-headed man, with a rhinoceros on one side and a bison on the other, and below him, a bird poised on an upright stick. “The infuriated bison’s hair literally stands straight on end, it lashes its tail, intestines spill in thick ropes from a gash in its belly. A spear is painted diagonally across the beast’s flank, passing over the place where the wound has been inflicted.” [110] The man is naked and shown with an erect penis, and it appears he has just been struck by the bison. The man’s arms are flung wide and his four-fingered hands are open. In this grouping, which may be the most frequently discussed of all prehistoric paintings, the animal is exalted and the man is diminished in being drawn without due attention or care. Bataille knows that this is not just the representation of a hunting accident. But while he senses the deep mystery that this painting evokes, especially given its location in the most inaccessible part of the cave, he hesitates to comment on the painting in *Lascaux*. Later, in *Eroticism*, Bataille is more forthcoming, for there he claims that the painting epitomizes our ancestors’ ambivalence towards animal life: They hunted and killed animals, but they also honored and venerated them, and they probably did feel a sense of loss for that plenitude of being that animals still possessed. They also felt a need to atone for this violence against divine beings with a sacrifice that would make amends. Hence, for Bataille the scene in the well depicts murder and atonement, with the death of the shamanic human figure with a bird’s head.<sup>15</sup> Given this perspective, though, we may have to reconsider what we have discussed so far: for now we see that prohibition is actually the first transgression—for an animal nothing is forbidden—and the transgression that is involved with art is therefore the transgression of transgression which does not restore us to our animal condition, but takes us beyond our habitual life towards the

sacred region of experience which for the most part we have lost. The mysterious “scene in the Well” conveys all of this and restores us to the sacred. Bataille returns to the scene in *The Tears of Eros*, published shortly before his death in 1962. In the end, he accepts it as an impenetrable mystery which nevertheless reveals the deepest truth about human life, eroticism and death: “Thus, in this barely accessible crevice stands revealed—but obscurely—a drama forgotten for so many millennia: it re-emerges, but it does not leave behind its obscurity. This essential and paradoxical accord is between death and eroticism.” And he adds, “Is it not heavy with that initial mystery, which is in itself the coming into the world, the advent, of man? Does it not at the same time link this mystery to eroticism and death?”<sup>16</sup> In his early review of Bataille’s work, Maurice Blanchot suggests another intriguing possibility, which is nevertheless in the spirit of Bataille’s own commentary: “It is striking,” he writes, “that with the figuration of man, an enigmatic element enters into this work, a work otherwise without secret; a scene also enters into it as a narrative, an impure historical dramatization. Yet it seems to me that the meaning of this obscure drawing is nonetheless clear: it is the first signature of the first painting, the mark left modestly in a corner, the furtive, fearful, indelible trace of man who is for the first time born of his work, but who also feels seriously threatened by this work and perhaps already struck with death.”<sup>17</sup> What Blanchot describes is the anxiety of transgression which the artist feels in fixing the present and suspending the power of death.

To complete this discussion let us now turn to Bataille’s account of the origin as the third significant aspect of his work on Lascaux. For Aristotle, Hegel and many other philosophers, the origin of something is largely indifferent, but the end towards which everything moves contains the key for understanding the being or the process in question. Bataille reverses this way of thinking insofar as he privileges the origin by making it the point at which everything is luminous and clear. He argues quite cogently that the origin is a threshold which requires a huge increase of power in order to move from one state of being to the next. And hence the origin is nothing indifferent, and certainly not the first childish step, but the fullest expression of a transforming power that begins to ebb from this point onwards. Two passages from *Lascaux* capture this idea especially well: First, “Resolutely, decisively, man wrenched himself out of the animal’s condition and into “manhood”; that abrupt, most important of transitions left an image of itself blazed upon the rock in this cave.” [7] And again, “There was an outburst.

There have been others since, yes; but none has had that aureate, daybreak light. I do not say those men had the clear, analytical awareness of it which, too often, is the limited definition we give to conscious awareness. But the surge of strength and the feeling of grandeur that bore them up may be reflected in the passionate vitality animating the giant bulls of the Lascaux frieze.” [26] This is why the paintings of Lascaux are so outstanding and full of vital power; and presumably this is why Picasso was able to comment that no one has ever done anything better.<sup>18</sup>

Now Bataille wants to associate humanity as we know it with the birth of art, and so he asks the guiding question throughout *Lascaux*: “Did Homo sapiens’ birth coincide with that of art?” [18] On the face of it, this seems to be a valid question; but closer inspection suggests that all is not as it seems. For this is not a question that requires a factual answer—whether at this point in history Homo sapiens finally emerged from his dormant state, and whether this is something that could also be confirmed by Paleolithic research. It is actually more of a philosophical proposal which concerns our own self-understanding as human beings: that in the end, what makes us distinctively human isn’t our ability to work but our ability to play and to create things—useless things like works of art—which transfigure the world with their beauty. And in this more speculative respect, *Lascaux* represents a new beginning for humankind.

In fact, there are a few important works in the history of philosophy which focus on the origin, not to recover an actual point in historical time, but in order to articulate all the different levels and layers that constitute the subject in question. Rousseau’s *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* is an obvious example, also Heidegger’s essay on “The Origin of the Work of Art” and Nietzsche’s book, *The Birth of Tragedy*. All of these works incorporate historical claims but their ultimate significance is for the most part unaffected by any factual errors that they may contain. As Rousseau puts it in the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*: “The researches which can be undertaken concerning this subject must not be taken for historical truths, but only for hypothetical and conditional reasonings better suited to clarify the nature of things than to show their true origin, like those our physicists make every day concerning the formation of the world.”<sup>19</sup> My own sense is that Bataille’s *Lascaux* is a book that should be read in a similar spirit, since it is primarily concerned with understanding what it means to be human; the difference between human nature and animal nature; and the scope of transgression as an organizing power in human life. And it is only concerned

to a lesser extent with setting the historical record straight. This may not be what Bataille himself intended. His close reading of contemporary works in prehistory suggests that he thought of *Lascaux* as a more “scholarly” contribution. Nevertheless, it is his speculative account which remains powerful and compelling—while scholarly interests have shifted in recent years and contemporary prehistorians seem to guard themselves against all attempts to go beyond the empirical data.<sup>20</sup>

In conclusion: In *Lascaux*, Bataille gives us a very compelling account of art and he shows how the clue to all art can be found at the origin, as play and festival and religious celebration. Bataille’s use of the logic of transgression is less convincing, however, and it may reflect a desire to view things through categories that have already been determined, rather than responding to the encounter in an immediate way. Perhaps Bataille’s real strength as a thinker is to show the profound connection between different regions of experience, including work, death, art and the sacred etc. which structure human life. Of course, to imply that there might be anything that is distinctly and uniquely “human” is an unfashionable position to hold at this point in time. Today there is much more talk of “posthumanism” and the extent to which computers can replicate most things about human beings, who are becoming like the machines they supposedly control. But Bataille’s book on Lascaux remains a powerful text. We might put it in the same line as works by Rousseau and Heidegger, and especially Nietzsche, who argued that the best philosophers, the true philosophers, are those who are capable of intellectual courage and daring leaps of thinking; for they are the ones who disturb us the most and make us uncomfortable with what we have become. In this respect, at least, *Lascaux* deserves to be much more widely known.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Georges Bataille, *Prehistoric Painting: Lascaux or the Birth of Art* translated by Austryn Wainhouse (Switzerland: Skira, 1955). This book appeared as the first volume in Albert Skira’s series, “The Great Centuries of Painting.” Henceforth all citations will refer to this edition.

<sup>2</sup> Among the few recent discussions of Bataille’s *Lascaux*: Steven Ungar, “Phantom Lascaux: Origin of the Work of Art,” *Yale French Studies*, No.78, On Bataille (1990), 246-262; Carrie Noland, “Bataille Looking,” *Modernism/Modernity*, volume 11 no.1, pp.125-160; Douglas Smith, “Beyond the Cave” in *French Studies*, Vol.58, no.2, pp.219-232; Suzanne Guerlac, “Bataille in Theory: Afterimages (Lascaux)” in *Diacritics* 26:2 (1996) pp.6-17.

<sup>3</sup> Bataille also wrote the book on Manet for another of Skira’s series, “The Taste of our Time”: See Bataille, *Manet*, (Switzerland: Skira, 1955).

<sup>4</sup> Mario Ruspoli, *The Cave of Lascaux: The Final Photographs* translated by Sebastien Wormell (New York: Abrams, 1987) p.205 The comment is cited in *Ungar*.

<sup>5</sup> See Georges Bataille, *The Cradle of Humanity: Prehistoric Art and Culture* translated and edited by Stuart Kendall (New York: Zone Books, 2005). This includes several essays, book reviews and even plans for a projected film which all relate to Bataille's interest in prehistoric art. The earliest piece is from 1930.

<sup>6</sup> See for example, Norbert Ajoulat, *Lascaux: Movement, Space and Time* (New York: Abrams, 2005). From 1989 to 1999, Ajoulat directed research at Lascaux. His work is always cautious and conscientious, but at the very end of his text, he is unguarded: "In the framework of this study I have had the privilege of visiting Lascaux many times, often alone. With the work accomplished, I would linger for a few moments, either at the foot of the great bulls in the Hall of the Bulls or on the stairs in front of the entrance to the Apse. This allowed me to adjust my vision. It was during these brief moments that contact with this special world was the most bewitching. Some days, imperceptibly at first and then overwhelmingly, I had to cut short this contemplation when it all became too emotional. Beyond the excellence of the works themselves, Lascaux draws its power of suggestion from the constant presence of an image: whatever your position, an animal is watching you, questioning you. Aurochs, horses, stags, bison and ibexes are omnipresent and, through them, the dominating impression of man." (p.265).

<sup>7</sup> These are Aujoulat's statistics: 1,963 representations counted, including 915 animal figures, 434 signs, 613 indeterminate figures and 1 human (p.257).

<sup>8</sup> For more on this aspect, see especially *Smith*.

<sup>9</sup> Maurice Blanchot, "The Birth of Art" in *Friendship* translated by Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), p3.

<sup>10</sup> See Georges Bataille, *Eroticism* translated by Mary Dalwood (London: Marion Boyars, 1962); *The Accursed Share* volume 2 and 3 translated by Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1993); *The Tears of Eros* translated by Peter Connor (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1990).

<sup>11</sup> Also in support of this hypothesis, see David Lewis-Williams, *The Mind in the Cave: Consciousness and the Origins of Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2002).

<sup>12</sup> *Guerlac*, p.6.

<sup>13</sup> See Bataille, *The Accursed Share* volume 2, pp.21-58.

<sup>14</sup> See for example, Bataille's essay "The Notion of Expenditure" in *Visions of Excess* translated by Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), which includes the following comment: "The bourgeois are incapable of concealing a sordid face, a face so rapacious and lacking in nobility, so frighteningly small, that all human life, upon seeing it, seems degraded." (p.125).

<sup>15</sup> Bataille, *Eroticism* p.75

<sup>16</sup> Bataille, *The Tears of Eros*, p.53

<sup>17</sup> *Blanchot*, p. 11.

<sup>18</sup> See *The Cradle of Humanity*, p.197.

<sup>19</sup> Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* in *The First and Second Discourses* translated by Roger D. Masters (New York: St. Martins, 1964), p.103.

<sup>20</sup> See Aujoulat for example. Stuart Kendall also emphasizes this point in his introduction to *The Cradle of Humanity* (p.28-29).