Wit’s End

Wit's End:
Making Sense of the Great Movies

By

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In loving memory
and anticipation of
three indispensable feline friends
Cosmo, Smith, and Babe
on the banks of Green Willow

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INTRODUCTION

WIT'S END

In the long history of human expression, a core image which persists in various forms is the venture into a cave. The mystery of cavernous orifices is deeply imbedded in the human psyche, since we all emerge from a bodily cavern, eat and evacuate through concavities, and generate offspring through penetration of and ejection from the feminine orifice. Long before the science of anatomy, humans were aware that their interior was a network of caves, which process food, move blood, expel waste, and emit sounds. With the body as a network of caverns, the discovery of earthly caves became an empirical extension of our own bodily experience, and an external curiosity to what we wondered about our bodies: what goes on in there? The entrance to a cave is sturdier and larger than our own entrances, but is equally dark and mysterious. As the light of human intelligence developed over the long prehistory of our forebears, the encounter of a cave entrance was both forbidding and inviting: Do I dare venture in? I wonder what's in there. If we get out alive, what can we tell the others? What can we learn in the dark recesses of this chthonian hole in the ground?

We may surmise that early man successfully ventured into caves after the discovery of fire. It is also a safe assumption that this adventure into the unknown required the skill and daring we associate with groups of humans—who we used to derogate as "early man" or "primitives"—whose sense of danger was honed by their necessary survival skills and awareness of injury or death made quite acute by the precariousness of existence. No enterprise, from hunting to gathering to migrating to mating to fighting, was undertaken lightly. Although it is thought that laughing and singing may have preceded the development of talking, these were not frivolous people. Beings who live at this level of constant insecurity lead purposeful lives. Which brings us to the question: given these conditions, why would they venture into and explore caves when they did not have to? Despite the "caveman" fiction, very few humanoids appear to have lived in caves, and certainly did not do so permanently. Their lives were largely out in the open, and until the introduction of agriculture were decidedly

transient. They moved in patterns, but initially they did not live in the same place or value some particular place. (Contra Rousseau and Marx, they did have possessions and they did have inequalities.) So when they encountered a cave in their migratory pattern, what moved them to let a few venturesome members of their group risk such an unnecessary and hazardous undertaking? They knew how to make fire, cook food, use weapons, hunt, and fish, pick berries, deliver and rear children, deal with illness, aging, and death, and maintain social order. What else could they possibility need to know?

Perhaps the clue to the answer to that question is not so much what they needed to know but rather in what they *wanted* to know. Aristotle's famous assertion that man by nature *wants to know* may apply here. At the level of intelligence that grew over roughly the last 200,000 years, the interplay of cautious fear and nagging curiosity became a feature of existence. It was clear what people needed to know—survival skills, social skills, and temporal skills, knowing how to make a living, get along with others, and adjust to the rhythms of change. Although we can only imagine the process, Marx's famous "realm of necessity" is momentarily transcended by something that does smack of a higher, or at least less mundane, realm: I'd like to know more, as for instance what the hell is in that cave. Humankind was engaged in the long and arduous process of acquiring knowledge of survivability and knowledge of sociability, but that was not enough. They wanted to acquire knowledge of the world they inhabited not only for utility in manipulating things and adaptability in arranging things, but they also wanted to know what things are. The world was something, but just what? They learned how to make things do (fire, food, clothing, shelters) and make things go (reproduce and nourish young, punish and reward, divide labor), but more out of reach was the very depths—the heart and guts—of things. Humankind was developing a sense of wonder.

Perhaps some answers were in the very depths of the earth on which they trod. The cavernous opening into the earth reminded one of the bodily cavity from which we emerge and the hole into which our corpse is buried. Thus, a cave was a place associated with both life and death, and might offer clues as to the mystery of existence. We know little of the "spiritual" life of these earlier humans, but it does seem to be the case that various forms of shamanism—holy or "medicine" persons (there is no reason to assume a gender) or ecstatic singers and dancers or some such—provided existential guidance or mythic explanations or medicinal cures and spells. It is difficult to say when our predecessors developed what we would recognize as a religion, but it does seem fair to say that long before that

they had developed a keen interest in the nature of things and indeed even things invisible. Paleoanthropologists are piecing together the various innovations which strike us as distinctly human behavior—mortuary rituals, carvings on stone tools, jewelry, cosmetics, and other forms of personal adornment, elaborate stone circles, and most of all, the cave paintings. Not only did some humans overcome fear and venture into caves, they used their access to the underground passages and rooms to express themselves with breathtaking art. After he visited the cave at Lascaux, the great artist Picasso said of these ancient painters, "They've invented everything." They left future generations with an eternal puzzle: how did these early folks develop the wherewithal—materials, techniques, scaffolding, perspective, animated images, colors, stenciling, and Pointillism—to create such magnificent forms of human expression? These cave paintings are now regarded by the modern world as works of art so precious that they must be treated as the art collected in the Louvre and Uffizi. The corollary question is irresistible also: why did they go to such trouble, often walking or crawling in cavernous spaces for miles to reach an ultimate inner space, in order to paint and draw on cave walls by the light of grease lamps? What were they trying to say, and to whom?

We will never know for sure, and certainly never be able to reduce the motives of these brave spelunkers to a single impulse. We do have many clues, and some intriguing surmises. At many sites, the more accessible parts of a cave near the entrance were visited by large numbers of a clan, including women and children. However, the inner core of a cave typically was accessible to only a few people, either because they were more adventurous or were selected for some sort of social purpose. It may well have been that the caves served a variety of purposes, like a community center or a medieval cathedral. Yet it is difficult to avoid the notion that the cave was in some sense a special or sacred space of symbolic interest, one the clan used for cultural satisfactions such as communal rites (marriages perhaps) and for a select few ceremonials in the deeper and more forbidding parts of the hollow of the earth. Who were selected and what for remains a mystery, but it is these inner sanctums which fascinate the most: for many researchers, the paintings and other relics are artifacts of entry into a shamanistic otherworld, the womb and tomb of the earth but also a sanctified space that was not of this earth. Certainly, these hidden places lent themselves to incantory powers and visionary experiences in a dark and mysterious place that suggested a return to and insight into the source of all things.

These cave "cathedrals" we study are perhaps the most spectacular early manifestation of what we will generally call *human wit*. The attempt

to reconstruct the experience of the human race over the eons reveals the development and adaptation of faculties which helped survival skills, such as tool making and hunting-gathering techniques, and social harmony, such as the division of labor and sexual regulation. The gradual accumulation of practical and social knowledge was facilitated by the growth of both individual and group memory capacity. Social arrangements of these mobile and unsettled humans were "protoinstitutional," and a place like a cave associated with communal and symbolic meaning an incipient institutional site. The appearance of crude and then elaborate tools was accompanied by decorative and stylistic embellishments, and habits like burial rites which have a repeatable pattern. These clans were becoming societies, with oral languages we could learn and cultural arrangements and conflicts we could recognize. There is a quite serious theory about the origin of language which maintains that language did not originate in hunting commands or communal rites but rather in gossip, that most venerable of all linguistic habits and perhaps even the origin of storytelling. The fireside may have been the first institution, but "the tell" at the fireside may not have been just mythic tales of tribal origins or heroic tales of great hunters but also immediate interest in some interpersonal tangle involving people they knew. Human wit early on likely displayed a variety of interests, including our insatiable delight in other people's folly.

Here we may explore what the cave paintings tell us about the development of human wit. The lure of the cave may originate in psychic and social interests, but it is also likely that the desire to enter a cave activated the very human sense of wonder. Other animals are curious about unknown things, but their highly evolved sense of caution usually inhibits too much curiosity (even in cats). Yet with these early humans, who had no compelling reason to explore caves, they ventured in. Whatever social and religious dimensions were in play, for the intrepid few who did brave the trip it was an adventure. These "prehistorical" peoples were moved by wonderment as to what's there, and with the caves, what's in there? A select few—perhaps members of a hunting cult led by a shaman—went into deep and dark caves, an underworld of unknown terrors, both natural (bears, for instance) and preternatural. When their journey was completed, the tale told became part of tribal or cult lore, and contributed mightily to that most ancient and persistent of human narratives, the adventure story. The adventure typically tells of bravery in journeys, searches, and conflicts which didn't have to be undertaken, but were anyway. The cave explorers were one of the oldest manifestations of people who would later leave home to fight wars, explore continents, and climb mountains because they were there.

Whatever else was going on with the cave searchers, for the individuals involved in was an experience. Life in these early bands was uncertain and short-lived, although not as brutal as in the Hobbesian vision; the diet of hunter-gatherers was quite superior to the peoples of agricultural civilizations. However, much effort was required to acquire the staples of life and perpetuate clan existence, so life was decidedly pragmatic. But wonder there was, so cave exploration offered the particularly wondrous the opportunity to have an extraordinary experience. The caves were a deep mystery, an underworld far from mundane life, and for whatever the risks, deemed worth the undertaking. Perhaps the dark cave would penetrate for them the nature of things, and might even reveal an enchanted otherworld which explained what things are. To get to the inner core of the cave, the explorers had to undertake a long and perilous journey in a damp and dark place. It is hypothesized, probably correctly, that these journeys to the inner core of the earth served a proto-religious purpose, were typically led by a shaman, and involved initiatory rites of passage and invocations of sympathetic magic. However, the first people who ventured into caves may have had no such exalted purpose: they may have just been so curious that they were willing to take the risk just for the chance to see what was in there. If so, they were exercising that most fundamental faculty of human wit, best expressed later by the ancient Greek question: *ti esti*? what is it? what's there? Such explorations were early acts of playful knowing, seeking knowledge because it would fun to find out what's in that cave. Human wit was being utilized in exploratory play, learning something for the sake of knowing something. There may initially have not been any great purpose to cave exploration other than the human desire to find out things. In that case, people were using their wits—figuring out how to light the cave, how to traverse the treacherous small spaces and avoid the many hazards, and get in and out safely—for the sheer fun of using their wits. If we assume that the explorers were largely young, or at least agile (and there is evidence they were both boys and girls), this suggests the foolhardiness of youths having fun by daring to do something dangerous. (Indeed, some observers of the cave art see a great deal of youthful and even puerile touches—erotic play and childish pranks, doodling and improvised drawings, what we would call "fooling around". For at least a few of the cave explorers, they were having fun, and given the daring and danger involved, having the time of their lives. Their interest in cave exploration and leaving their mark may at times been less than solemn, exploratory play in the dual sense of daring to go into a forbidding place and drawing graffiti such as line drawings and handprints.

They were using their wits—the faculties of their senses—for the sheer delight of living experience.

Some of this spirit of play continues throughout the long traverse of prehistory. People revisited the caves for many thousands of years (the dating of the art of Grotto Chauvet in France at 32,000 years ago suggested that the cave experience of revisiting and revising continued for twenty-five hundred millennia, four times as long as recorded history.) Such revisiting was unlikely just a bunch of kids playing around: the grottoes of cave art had enduring cultural significance of some sort of worshipful or holy nature, and the art imbued with symbolic meanings we can only surmise. If it is true that these remote caves were the "cathedrals" of prehistory, they were thought to be much more than a place for energetic juvenile physicality. These early peoples lived in social units with persistent problems and enduring habits, and they weren't entirely or randomly nomadic, by establishing habitual routes and "base camps." How much different bands shared the caves is unclear, but it is certain that they were "in use" one way or another for incredibly long times. By necessity, Stone Age groups were profoundly conservative in their pragmatic livelihood and social structure, which may have contributed to the stability of their beliefs and their cave art: Paleolithic art did not vary much over this entire lengthy period. But the conservatism in the cave art was intensely pragmatic, in that it dwelled on the animals with which these early peoples had to contend, as a major source of food and a constant source of danger.

The inner parts of these caves were apparently reserved for cultic leaders and initiates. The oldest form of religious expression is shamanistic, and there are images in the caves of shaman figures, such as the famous "Sorcerer" of Les Trois Frères. The shamans of prehistory may have been on a "vision quest" in their journey to the Otherworld, and the cave art an expression of those visions and spells. They were certainly a social experience for the cult selected to go there, and their destination—the inner "rooms"—have the atmosphere of a sort of cavernous holy of holies. Further, expression was not limited to painting, but also to singing and chanting and beating drums: there is evidence that the inner caves, with their high resonance, were selected as conducive to sonic emanations which made the chanting of incantations and singing of "death-songs" for the hunt even more dramatic. Indeed, it could even be that the cave art was created with music in mind. These were people who led lives of physicality, who made little distinction between being and nature, the useful and the symbolical, so language was a sensuous thing put to use for immediate and palpable purposes. In any case, at this level we are in the

realm of ritual play, wherein social expression occurs in a group setting with a defined social function in mind. This is not to say that the shamanistic event was not playful in the sense of being exciting and involving, but it did have a degree of solemnity and procedurality. Ritual play of this sort may have been similar to the celebratory adventure of a bunch of kids out on a lark. But in the case of these early peoples, we are in the presence of social dramatization with symbolic significance. Whatever spirits they were attempting to arouse and magic they were trying to invoke, the mimetic ceremony of the cultic rite was both a formal celebration of the tribe's existence and a dramatization of the group's aspirations—survival, health, and fertility. Perhaps these ceremonies included the rudiments of rituals which beseeched the invisible powers for blessings and even asked for explanations. The fact that these inner places were in some sense "sacred" may have inspired the artists' interest in the quality of their work. They cleaned their surfaces and carefully selected where everything went. The sacred aspect may also have contributed to the imaginative power these awesome images evoke. The animals seem alive, with horses rearing on their hind legs and rhinos charging. They created supernatural or "hybrid" *therianthropes*, dreamlike beings, who were the early ancestors of mythical humanoids such as vampires and werewolves, evoked in the shaman's trance or the group's fantasy, which today we envision at the movies. By creating a supernatural place, conjuring up supernatural beings, painting larger-than-life animals in dynamic motion, and making "earth-mother" figures of fecund rotundity, we are in the realm of enchanted experience. These acts formed the dramatization of the group's imagination in what may have been the world's first theater. Yet this otherworldly ritualization was firmly grounded in this world, in their tribal concern with social mastery—insuring the supply of food, safety from predators, and the propagation of the race. The enchantment evoked by the shamanistic cult may have blessed hunters, fertile females, the young, and the sick, and also became a source of authority with the claim of metaphysical powers, challenging the "alpha males" who might have dominated out of pure strength. It was not without insight that an earlier generation of anthropologists maintained that the first "kings" were magicians.

The sense of wonder sent these early explorers into the depths of the caves, and the desire for expression impelled them to dramatize things while in there, but they also wanted to come out. They may have known the delight of exploration and discovery, and the instruction of a rite that invoked spirits beneficial to the social group, but they finally had to return to the land of the living. In some way, they had to tell their fellow

tribesmen of their adventure and maybe something of what they did in there (the shamanistic cult may have insisted on secret knowledge), but they certainly had to inform the larger group that their actions in some mysterious sense assured tribal prosperity and continuity. Such a trek would have been regarded as very foolhardy if it did not serve some larger clan purpose, since sturdy people were important for the survival of such a marginal group. At some form of group "tell," the entire story had powerful resonance, since it possessed mythic adequacy. It was not only representational art that these early artists invented, for they also invented, or least gave great dramatic force to, human mythology.

The "tale told" to the clan gathered around the fire was a story about a few of the clan, perhaps the best and bravest, and maybe led by someone with special qualities or powers, who ventured into a dark and dangerous place, performed feats of magical power and artistic skill, made contact with the numinous world of "something more," and returned with the knowledge that their heroic trek had been beneficial in some significant sense for the well-being of the tribe. This tale was a rudimentary form of the hero's quest: the hero, or a team of brave souls, go forth into danger for the benefit of the community; they are on an adventure into a "region of supernatural wonder"; they are accompanied, and perhaps led by, a mentor or master in the form of a shaman who guides them on their mission. In this enchanted place they encounter mysterious powers (and perhaps occasionally cave bears); therein they make their mark in the form of magical art and mystic experience; they return from their quest into the darkness where they sought and found the source of things, in a place of death and rebirth between the earthly and otherworld. On their return, the knowledge acquired in their mysterious adventure gives them the power to "bestow boons on their fellow man"; shamanistic power imbues the mentor and perhaps the disciples with the gift of oracular prophecy and related insights into the higher nature of things. Moreover, it gives them social status based in symbolic rather than mundane abilities. They represented in the story they lived some basic human yearnings which required enactment: wonderment which impels a journey into the unknown to seek knowledge and perhaps wisdom; shaped imaginative expression which represents the world in which they must live and must cope with in all its puzzling mystery and awesome beauty; and intelligible narration, retelling the old story that subsequently became part of tribal lore and human mythology. Their successful journey had conquered space; their mimesis of animated life had conquered nature; and their return to inform and inspire society had conquered time. For the individuals on the quest, it was likely an experience of individuation, an entry into adulthood and

perhaps often an initiation rite into the cult or rite of passage into maturity. It was also an experience of affiliation, not only among the members of the expedition bonding in their shared wonder and expressive project but also among the social group enjoying the story. For the community, the story has meaning with the larger view of cultural continuation it articulates, linking together past, future, earthly, and unearthly provinces for a community whose existence is always in question. In retelling and embellishing the hero's quest in the cave over time, the group engaged in communal play, perhaps even witnessing a dramatic "reading" or shamanistic re-enactment of their encounter with the mysterious forces of nature they managed to best and returned to tell the tale. These rituals may have even had seasonal or occasional dimensions, at the time of mating or hunting or the initiation of the young. In any case, for people who made little distinction between themselves and nature, their experience with the caves introduces an appreciation of symbolic significance at a scope and depth that makes them recognizably human to us, their posterity.

More than any other extant artifacts from the Paleolithic period, the cave paintings offer us an integral vision of understandable and unifying human expression. Such a larger view reminds us that Lascaux and the Louvre are separated by a few miles in France, but are inseparable in the continuing effort to express a creative understanding of the world. For what happened in those caves long ago were acts of creation. If we abandon the distinctions between the "primitive" and the "civilized", and keep in mind that human life did not "progress" upward from the crude to the sophisticated, then we can see the identity of the human creative touch in Grotto Chauvet and the Louvre, as well as the use of fire and electricity, and the bow-and-arrow and the AK-47. That identity with kindred human beings allows us to see our Paleolithic ancestors as faced with the same existential anxieties about life and death, the same social tensions about cohesion and division, and similar questions about temporality, the changes in our bodies, in our social group, and the cycles of life—the cycle of birth, maturity, and death, the cycle of the day and the seasons, the wonder if we somehow live after death, and whether the values and habits our culture has forged will endure over time. This is not to say that they weren't different in some ways. They appear to have been closer to nature, and indeed saw themselves as inseparable from nature, with a naturalistic sense of the world of sensory objects with which they had to deal. The older anthropological theories about "animism"—that they saw the world as alive, or with gods in things, or some such—were perhaps overdrawn, but had an element of truth in them: from the cave paintings, we may abduce that they identified with the animals they sought to kill to

the extent they felt the necessary killing was somehow wrong, or at least something valuable was lost. Rituals of animal sacrifice, which celebrated and honored the magnificent animals slaughtered and consumed, were common in antiquity, so the rites in the caves might have included some honorific ceremonials. Certainly, the archetypical images of the animals which were central to their world accorded magnificent tribute to their fellow creatures. The Paleoliths seem have had a deep feeling for, perhaps even a love for, the objects of their environment, which suggests a sense of the harmony, if tragic necessity, of nature, and impelled them toward communion with the "eternal" animals of their imagination in the magical realm of cavernous rituals. If there was no separation between the world of sense and the world of spirit, the animals killed could be "revived" in the mythic world of sanctified play. By extension, the same questions and probes for answers was being extended to human life, in rite and story about "everywhen" or "dreamtime."

The immensely long cave experience of early humankind is of interest here because it is compelling evidence of the use of human wit for understanding the world and not only manipulating it. For by the time of the cave paintings, humans were exercising the faculties of sense not only for direct sensation but also for seeking criteria of knowledge about the sensory world. Vico spoke of *ingenium*, the "mother wit" which translates sensation into sense, whereby we create sounds, smells, etc. through the faculties of sensing, incorporating them into a larger view of things—the symmetry of things, recognition of what is apt, distinguishing what is beautiful and ugly, and so on. Knowledge in this sense is a creative act, translating sensory life into human ingenuity: humans create smells through the act of smelling, using our faculty of smell to make something aromatic, making a potential scent into a real one. The tacit human question—*ti esti*?, what is it?, what's there?—involves the play of wit in apprehending *natura*, the world of natural potentiality of which we attempt to *make sense*, making smells into the actuality of the smellable. A rose by any other name may smell just as sweet, but as a "rose" it is a name with associations attributed by human experience; and if something is rotten in the state of Denmark, the condition of rottenness may be drawn from overripe apples or whatever, but is applied to a odiferous human situation. Using and meaning are inseparable components of human action, people using their wits not only for survival and social skills, but also for the expression of the quality and value of those skills in the context of experience and the onrush of time.

The cave painters, then, were participants in what theologians call the *creatio continua*, the ongoing process of human creation. Whatever the

metaphysics of creation might be, the earthly physics of creativity is what separates us from our natural condition, the ingenuity to *make sense*. It has been suggested by some researchers who ponder "the origins of the modern mind" that there was a progression to the development of minded behavior, beginning in the "episodic" culture of direct sensory action through the "mimetic" culture of refined and repeatable actions such as dance, craft, and ritual, then the long period of "mythic" culture with complex symbols and stories down to the present "technological" culture of scientific rationality. This is certainly speculative, and could be another version of the myth of progress, with human society progressing from the simple and primitive to the complex and sophisticated. For looking at the cave painters suggests that all these cultural dimensions were present. Their hunter-gatherer culture certainly lived in an episodic world of hand-to-mouth existence; the shamanistic rituals in the cave were elaborate mimetic rituals repeated over long periods of time. It may well be that the paintings and other artifacts were representations of a mythic tale important to the beliefs of the tribe; and the quality of the artistic work in the caves were done with elaborate technology. They may have invented culture. Certainly, we can take a long look back at the origins of human wit making sense of the world through the play of creative experience. Over 30,000 years ago, humans were using their wits to *order things*, learning that the pragmatic and the ludenic are inseparable, and that the things of practical experience were interwoven with the somethings of play experience. Their creativity included both the mastery of the quotidian and the mystery of the ineffable. The ends of wit extended from wisdom of living in the world to wonder about the world they live.

Living by our Wits

Wit is a word with an astonishing ancient and widespread etymology, and can be traced back to the earliest origins of Old English. The usage of the term is considerably nuanced, but it conveys better than any other word the comprehensive and pluralistic nature of human understanding. Terms such as "intelligence," "mind," "thought," or "consciousness" don't quite grasp that nature. The fundamental fact of human existence is that we have to live by our wits. In the long "prehistory" of hominid life, the survival of the "naked ape" depended on the development of human faculties combined with a brain to use them wisely. By the time of Grotto Chauvet, human wit had gone beyond the "episodic" manipulatory to the inquisitive exploratory. Yet all these activities were of a piece: people survived and endured because they utilized their *interest* in the world.

Stereoscopic vision gave upright hominids the ability to see long distances and wide expanses, useful for spotting game and danger and objectifying reality. The larger brain facilitated the emergence of social organizations with not only individual but also group memory and habits, promoting both what works and what is valuable. In addition, both individual and group identity, communicated through language, underscored the continuity of the community through intergenerational time. Human society was never a casual thing, but rather a collaboration of human wit that promoted survival strategies and social felicity. These early societies found that the world displayed the quality of being interesting, since they were both in it and of it. Interest and activity conjoined in the effort to use both individual and collective wit to cope with the immediate and palpable and understand the context of worldly things. (One might even venture that "early man" was engaged in the interesting activity of forging a workable social contract, with a Hobbesian interest in staying alive, a Lockean interest in social peace, and a Rousseauian interest in community integration.) When we ask the ancient question, why do we attend to the things we attend to?, our answer is likely the same as it was for Paleolithic peoples: we have a physical interest in the minimal satisfaction of human needs, a social interest in the functionality of the human group, and a symbolic interest in things the community finds valuable and appreciable. Human interest ranges from the existential task of individual life to the social work of instrumental activity to the symbolic play of ludenical activity, united by the fact that all human activity is informed by the creative faculty of wit.

The ancient bands and tribes we deem human were using their capacity for wit for the purpose of ordering things. Through their creative ability to make sense of the world, they were able to use observation to interpret the world, conduct concerted action in order to achieve social goals, and wonder about the order of things of which they are a part. Human wit displays a primal interest in making sense of the world through transactions with it wherein our creative abilities are manifest. Earlier humans were well aware of the existence of fire through observation of lightning strikes, forest and grass fires, and volcanic activity. It began to occur to people that fire had human uses, and at some point fire was "carried" by someone who was charged with hauling embers in rock containers for use in cooking and warming; eventually some creative beings discovered how to start fires using flints. (The flint trade on England's Ridgeway during the Stone Age attracted peoples from faraway places in Europe.) The existential needs of food and shelter impelled humans to not only look at fire, but to take action to use it for social purposes, and by so doing creating one of the first human institutions, the

gathering by the fireside; looking into the fire they started and kindled made them wonder just what it was. The observation of fire may at first been a simple act of seeing, but at some point induced the *ti esti*? question. Human wit had developed enough that it occurred to them that fire had physical and social utility, and suggested that if they could learn how to use it would benefit human life. But another question occurred: fire was a wonderment, a mystery, a natural force of beauty and power. So apart from utilitarian concerns asking, what can we do with it, was another: what is it? How do we understand it? The complexity of human interests was at such times in play: the interest in physical nurture, the interest in social function, and the interest in the natural order. This inseparable complex of interests impelled people to venture into caves for ritual activities which would further the order of things. To do so, they used the technology and sociology of fire—fire to light their passage in and out, fire to heighten the power of magical ceremonies and perhaps animal sacrifices, fire to illuminate the art they created, and fireside light to tell of their big adventure into the enchanted Otherworld. The cave experience and the artifacts created there are overwhelming evidence of the exercise of human sentience in seeking to order the world in which they lived. Sentient beings use their wits to observe and utilize the reality of their lived experience. The primary end of human wit is the ability to make sense of that reality by ordering the world.

The process of making sense—using sensory "ceptivity" (receptivity, perceptivity, conceptivity, and proceptivity)—out of sense experience may be characterized as humans creating order out of chaos, or more precisely, ordering the rush and welter of ongoing and confusing sensory impressions for human interests. Sensing things includes the creative ability to make sense out of natural things, human things, and big things. The sensory immediacy of the natural world requires the manipulation of objects for human purposes, and relates the inseparability of making sense with making do. For sensing things suggests the rough logic of what people do with the things of sense: how to use fire, what to eat, how to stay warm and safe. Sensory knowledge is the source of social logic, discovering and attending to what is sensible to do. Gathering certain kinds of berries and cooking certain kinds of meats makes sense to keep doing, becoming a social habit deemed worth doing as part of the routines which enhance group survival and social order by aiding nutrition and the division of labor. Sensible habits underscore the retrospection of the past, the circumspection of the present, and the prospection of the future, creating individual and group memories, stable social relations, and imaginative temporal projections. It is the advent of imagination that

moves sensible knowledge beyond the natural and social things known through the senses towards activities such as planning and anticipation which assist in the mastery of nature (better weapons for the hunt, knowing when and where berries are ripe) and of society (understanding gestation and child care, resolving conflicts which threaten group cohesion and continuity). All of these developments augur the use of the logic of common sense, conducting inquiry for learning how to live.

If that were the sole end of wit, humans would have been a more limited species. For making sense includes not only the question, what do we make of things, but also, what do we make of all things? What can we know about big things?—why the world is the way it is, where things come from and go to, why things are different or the same, why there are rhythms and changes, what happens to beings when they die. Sensory knowledge derives from our sensorium in continual transaction with the natural and social world, but those worlds suggest creative wonderment about the human condition. By the time of the cave paintings, human wit dealt with not only the natural order and the social order, but in addition the significant order. People wondered what they were supposed to make of all things—birth and death, accident and illness, the plentitude or scarcity of game, the pleasure of sex and the pain of childbirth, peace and conflict. Most of all, they may have wondered about rhythms: the rhythms of the day and the seasons, the migrations of animals, the cycle of life whereby one changes from child to youth to maturity to aged and then dies, but life goes on in the next generation. From the earliest human period of existence, time may have already have been the ultimate mystery. Trying to make sense of all things means expressions of signification, which took human expression into symbolic representations and gave metaphorical magnification to questions of breadth and profundity beyond the palpability of quotidian life. By the time of the cave paintings, the "symbol-using animal" was using his and her wits to say things, and indeed to say things about all things.

Living by our wits involves not only understanding how to survive and how to associate but also how to signify, involving expressions not only of utilitarian tasking and social adjusting but also symbolic declaring. Indeed, the evidence suggests our earliest forebears entertained and utilized the spectrum of symbolic resources. For them, symbols were alive: the cave paintings display a sense that the animals, shaman, and fertile goddesses are living, animated by the magic of enchanted spirit which gives them life. But the symbolism of cave art was also true: the representations there flowed from, and back into, the conduct of their lives and the challenges to their wits, expressing the truth of how we live. The symbols were real: the

art was an expression of critical pragmatism, showing what they were up against and what they had to do to turn reality into opportunity. The symbols they created and expressed declared that they and their world was vitally alive, that the truth of their existence could be demonstrated, and that the *pragma* of artistic and ritual expression corresponded with the deeds of dynamic and successful action wherein humans live by their wits. The transactional unity of art and experience made the caves into places of aesthetic appreciation, where people came for symbolic and social and physical healing. (Recent excavations at Stonehenge indicate that it was among other things a center of prehistorical pilgrimage, including a kind of Lourdes where people came with hopes for physical cures.) If symbols are signs which infer things from experience and imbue things with meaning, then Paleolithic persons were full-fledged symbol-using animals much like us.

Living by our wits, then, involves much more than animal cunning and social perspicacity. The exercise of wit includes the repertoire of the play of wit, what we call expressive action—word play and rhetoric, dance and mime, song and chant, storytelling and gossip, games and contests, courting and joking, ceremony and ritual. The uses of wit are not complete until humans engage in forms of play, ludenic behavior which ranges from the serious to the frivolous but always involves creative expressions of symbolic interest in imaginative things derived from but not reducible to immediate experience. Expressive actions stem from sensate "animal spirits" which arouse bodily motives such as sexual desire or spectacular curiosities such as stargazing, but in any case involves not only action but also corresponding expression of the meaning of the action. Sexual action is accompanied by communications that express love or lust or (as in the case of rape) even hurt; gazing at the heavens invites expressions of wonder or structure (the arrangement or movement of the stars). If the senses are the source of thought, they are also the font of "referential media"—gestures, speech, writing, indeed all the forms of human mediation—which express what people want, and what they want to say. As members of that human species, we all know they—we—want a lot, and have a lot to say.

We may surmise that the ventures into the Paleolithic caves were an elaborate and complex form of expression at personal, social, and temporal levels. The cave evidence gives us a tantalizing glimpse of our very ancient forebears engaged in play. At some levels it was no doubt quite serious play, but for others—among the youths involved, for instance—it might have been great fun, an adventure that was exciting, challenging, dangerous, an expression of personal honor and bravery valued as cultural

heroism. For the shamanistic cult, this was earnest play culminating in solemn ritual in a holy place, ceremonial expression that was thought to have a magical effect on their lives in the earthly world. For the larger tribal group outside, it was a reassuring experience known only through accounts, but it was hoped that the cave expressions would insure the continuity over time of a people whose endurance was always precarious. Such cultural play was a proto-theatrical expression of group concerns, what we may term a *ritual of order*. A ritual of order is a set of symbolic actions which impose or impute order on the world of quotidian experience, an order which the group creates and the ritual affirms through creative ludenics in a sacral setting. At this stage of human history, we are envisioning the most striking initial example of complex human wit in play, wherein people engage in a collaborative effort to translate sensuality into sociality and symbolicity through ceremonial communication.

The cave paintings included all these higher concerns of group and culture, but something else was manifest here: human expressive creativity at a personal level. It is common to assume tribal cultures, especially at a subsistence level, subordinate or suppress individuality. But looking at the cave paintings, we might suggest that some of the wondrous art was the product of individual creativity. If Picasso was impressed by the quality of Lascaux, it may have been the case that one of the motives and interests of some of the individuals doing the painting was personal expression. They were part of an integrated tribe and probably a special cult, but part of the selection process could have been that some of them could paint well. Cave researchers note that there is much artistic sensitivity at work: they carefully selected and cleaned surfaces, used scaffolding, developed paints, and in general were much interested in the quality of their work. And, after all, such a chance for individual or small group expression was great fun to do. Which brings us to this question: what were they doing? What dimension, what deep reservoir, of human wit were they drawing upon? Are we in the realm of inspiration, or talent, or genius, or skill at a craft, or just what? Were the cave intruders the precursors of artistic traditions, Paleolithic Picassos who could paint and prehistoric Mozarts who could sing and ancient shaman who could narrate stories that presage mythology and eventually Homer? Perhaps not, but we can say that these ancestors of ours offer some of the earliest evidence of the ludenic capacity of wit, making sense of signs with which humans infer significant things in various media of symbolic representations relevant to the conduct of our lives.

Aesthesis

The Greeks had a word for it: the crucial dimension of human wit is not only acquiring the capacity to make enough sense of the world to do things in it, but learning how to use sense to make meaning through objective experience with, and sensible expression about, the significant things that interest us in our lives. The original, and vital, use of the ancient term *aesthesis* referred to those sensory objects of our natural environment, things perceptible by the senses. This kind of sensory knowledge was deemed inferior to the higher knowledge known through abstract things that were thinkable or immaterial, through philosophical discourse or theological reflection. Yet throughout Greek history, there was a strong current of transactional sensuality: a deep feeling for objects and identity with nature, and no idea of an artificial separation between human experience and the natural order. This light on sensory knowledge gave people a capacity for vivid enhancement of what they sensed and felt about their lives. The core of their "-ceptive" experience was not subjective separation but rather objective unification with nature. The objects of sense were not predetermined qualities but rather vivid things, occurring in objective space and time, which became memorable and expressible. They saw things lovingly and amazingly: the world of their senses was an interesting place that one would like to know more about, since it is there for us. The world was not only a place to be discovered, it was also a place to be created. The things material known through the senses invited the human capacity to use our wits, culminating with inquiry into the nature of things we encounter, and with the nature of all things.

As the Greek experience developed, the family of terms associated with aesthesis acquired connotations, moving from "things perceptible" and "apprehending through the senses" to more subjective and subtle uses, such as "pertaining to sense perception" and "sensitive perception", and by the time of St. Paul's letters, mature insight and understanding, as in "all discernment" and "wise insight" and "moral acumen". The term changes from an unelaborated and elementary awareness of sensory stimulation to complex human intellectual operations (such as thesia, hypothesia, and synesthesia).Yet throughout the classical period the term retained something of the original usage suggesting an affective interest in and emotive appreciation of the world we inhabit. The primal root of aesthesis, like so many Greek terms, comes from a physical reaction, the quick intake of breath, "taking in," or "breathing in," as with a gasp. The term denotes an action, breathing, which links the world with the soul. Aristotle

thought the heart the organ of aesthesis, since all sense organs run to it. In the heart, he wrote, the soul is "set on fire." The act of breathing, pneuma, was the agency of human spirit, and a metaphor for spiritual influences, as the human version of the pneumatic rhythms of nature, the heartsong of the beating heart and pulse, and the wind, both of the sky and of the mouth. We begin and end life gasping for breath, and when we sense something interesting, we gasp at the sight before us, whether threat or promise. When we sense something we like or dislike, we utter a gasp of approval or disapproval. The intake of breath through the mouth accompanies an impression, while the outtake of breath accompanies an expression—a sigh or laugh or grunt or other non-verbal communication, or using the vocal chords to express something through vocative utterances shaped into words. Human aesthesis is the moment of primary receptivity in the transaction of stimulus and response, wherein wit is activated through gestural or verbal expression which addresses the situation. Signs and symbols are used to identify signification, according creative shaping to moments which occasion the play of wit. The people who entered the caves and made (and later saw) the paintings and sculpture, conducted and participated in the rituals, and left with the knowledge of the experience used the entire range of human communication to express what the time and place meant. At this primal level of experience, the chlothian and earthy responses speak to the problem of the natural order: the play of wit concerns body-truths or survivability, in solving the Hobbesian imperative of how to extend your life. The gushes of wind we breathe out involve elementary expressions of natural life—feed me, protect me, guide me, associate with me, keep me and mine alive for a while longer. Although such expressions stem from primal needs and anxieties, they are quite pragmatic, using our wits to create the circumstances for our survival. The human languages of communication are here a sensuous thing, speaking to our existential condition in the elemental significance of satisfying basic needs. The things perceptible by the senses are there for us if we are creative enough in learning how to use and understand them.

The core of aesthesis is the unity of subject and object, of the ongoing transactional play of humans and their environments in the dynamics of time and circumstance. The term aesthesis eventually evolves into the restrictive academic term aesthetics, the study of art, rather than the inclusive idea of the universal study of human wit in creative action to learn the art of living. In schools, "art appreciation" focuses on museum art, and aesthetics text on the processes of making, judging, and classifying art. But the aesthetics of human wit involve us all in a universal process of appreciative interest of the world and expressive action in it.

Our interest in the world makes us aware that worldly encounter is appreciable, an environment that calls for keen insight and wise judgment in order to make do in it. If we do, we appreciate situations and value the objects and qualities of the world we inhabit. We appreciate the ability to keep on living and the creativity with which we master various tasks. We also appreciate the ability to express ourselves and enjoy the communal expressions with which we celebrate life. Our sensory awareness lets us appreciate that the world is vivid, lively and animated, constantly winding through us aureate and fulgent images that activate the memories and imaginings of our native wit and inspire our interest in the things we attend to and act upon. The "vividness heuristic" of which logicians and psychologists speak is often fallacious and misleading, but explains mightily human attention: vivid imagery attracts attention and inspires inquiry, the aesthesis of heuristic inquiry to find or discover things. Things brought to our attention and action require adequate expression, in order to convey defining characterization and suggest joint cooperation, and play with the meaning of the event. Wit is drawn to the vivid, in whatever form it takes—the challenge of herds of game, an absorbing story by firelight, the allure of a beautiful youth, the beauty of birds in flight, the repugnance of a corpse, the wonder of a cave opening.

Human wit expresses itself in the quest for and expression of sensory order, using creative ingenuity to make sense of the things that interest us. This is not only "adding art to nature" but rather conjoining the aesthetic sense to the natural world of space and time. The subjective fantasy of imagining a successful hunt or remembering a youthful idyll was, and is, a common experience, even if now the hunt is shopping for consumer items and a pleasant memory involves exploring bars rather than caves. We do not have to posit an identity of experience to speculate that Paleolithic people did not exercise some degree of individuality, by translating some fantasy—a thought, an image, an experience—into expression. At the Blombos cave in southern Africa, about seventy-seven thousand years ago, someone—apparently a craft person of unknown gender engaged in making simple tools—picked up a block of red ocher mudstone. Using a sharp stone point and some sort of straightedge, this person carved on a flat surface cross-hatchings in a frame of parallel lines with another line down the middle. This simple design may be the oldest known example of an intricate design made by a human. For what purpose is unknown. It might have had some religious or tribal significance, as an ornamental symbol or craft emblem. There is also another possibility: it could have been a doodle. In that case, it was an expression of pure individuality, somebody just having fun *for its own sake*. The discovery team thought

that this ability to create such an object was "an unambiguous marker" of a human being. That human marking must include the sense of order that informs aesthesis, giving us a glimpse of an early human making a design which he or she thought up, since there are no straight lines in nature. This person could remember lines she had seen that looked straight (beams of sunlight through clouds) or arranged sticks in rows or crosses, or perhaps she could simply imagine lines that were perfectly straight or crisscrossed in a pattern. So this individual (assuming it was one person) liked doing it. In a world of rough edges, such patterns have symmetry and beauty that people could appreciate: the marks on the rock were unambiguously something created by a fellow human, and they liked it (or didn't). It is a stretch to see in an 80,000 year old doodle the seeds of Euclidian geometry and Platonic forms, but perhaps not for people at the time to see that symmetrical design was appealingly neat and perhaps even useful as, say, design for a rude fence, or more deeply as expressing something profound, such as an artistic form that signified a notion of sensory order that could be socially shared and even pondered as something worthy or even holy. We may also suggest that an act of order—in this case abstract lines and patterns—demonstrates the emergence of a sense of order which can be expressed in external forms, ranging from speech to tool making to art, uniting the expression of the useful and the delightful and the continual.

Acts of order presage the ability to establish and further the patterns of social order. Since social order is a human creation, people see its creation and perpetuation as an expression of aesthesis. For the forms of society anthropologists and sociologists have long observed—the division of labor, the practice of sociation, class and status and caste, symbolic interaction, political economy, pathological maladies such as ennui and anomie, cultural change and historical passage—are artifices and practices of human wit. We can extrapolate that Paleolithic peoples created social orders with features we would recognize. The practice of cannibalism, for example, we likely would not approve of, especially if we were dinner, but we would know that this was a meaningful social act and ritual practice of significance to a tribal order drawing magical powers from consuming strangers. It made sense to them for symbolic rather than culinary reasons, expressing the need for coherence in the world no less than the Eucharist. Anthropologists such as Levi-Strauss make a distinction between static and dynamic cultures, with the former concerned with a coherent vision that conserves habit and cycles time, and the latter focused on innovative movement in progressive time. Yet the identity blurs the distinction: the socio-logic of symbolic coherence is crucial throughout, and the minds which conceived and constructed Grotto Chauvet and Stonehenge were