


How now Lascaux?

What actually happened with those paleolithic paintings on the walls at Lascaux, et al. 20,000 years ago? No-one knows for sure. But that isn't a reason for not trying to figure it out.

Julian Bell on a recent, indispensable contribution to the corpus of conjecture.



The Mind in the Cave
by David Lewis-Williams,
Thames & Hudson, London
2002, paperback 2004

One of science's great promises is what some American writer irreverently dubbed 'the bootstrap operation'. Science is going to give us the necessary leverage to pull ourselves aloft by our bootstraps, in whatever manner we think of ascending. Inhabitants of the cosmos will get a grip on the roots of cosmic existence; living beings will plumb the sources of life; conscious humans will manhandle the nature of consciousness. Big aspirations like these drive scientific efforts forward, and their power to yield substantial increases in knowledge is evident to everyone. The question remains – as implied by the sneer in that 'bootstrap' tag – whether any of these aims is ever actually secured. Are material existence, life and consciousness all conditions that we are intrinsically unable to grasp, as if from the outside? However spectacular the advances that thought makes towards, say, 'the Planck moment' that obsesses theorists of cosmic origin, isn't there always going to be the elusive, minuscule but crucial fraction of 10^{-47} of a second that separates us from the definitive moment of origin itself? Are we pushing at paradoxes that won't budge? It was the great hero of early twentieth-century science, Einstein, who in old age gave a judicious voice to this kind of scepticism: 'We fare no better in these speculations than a fish would who enquired after the nature of water.'

David Lewis-Williams, like many good popular advocates for science, is of a buoyantly hopeful temperament and won't make any such concessions. He stakes out the ground for his investigations with great care, but his aims are really quite large: he is looking for the bootstraps of culture, or at least of the artistic and religious components of it. And this search for the reasons why humans behave differently from other animals involves him in passing his hands over the whole boot, the entire caboodle of consciousness.

Lewis-Williams approaches these issues as a palaeo-anthropologist able to draw on recent work in neuroscience. That choice of terrain is in fact the great selling point of *The Mind in the Cave*. Ever since their rediscovery started to claim public attention a century ago, the cave art complexes of southern France and northern Spain have served as unparalleled stimuli for speculation. To enter those dark chill passages, if only virtually (since tourists have been excluded from them on account of their corrosive impact) and to come close to the beautiful handiwork of our ancestors 15 or even 30,000 years ago is occasion enough to bring out urges towards reverence, humility, mystery and awe in the blandest modern agnostic.

Mystery is marketable. We're keen to buy hints and clues as to what was really happening that will function as hired spotlights, flickering over the cavern wall. Nevertheless, we expect the prevailing darkness to remain. Prehistory is very big, very long, fabulously vague. By definition, the era before humans started writing is one of lost names and lost meanings. One of the most provocative of Lewis-Williams's precursors in the field of culture origination theorised in avowed acknowledgment of this. In 1995, in a book (presumably too academically contentious to be cited in Lewis-Williams's bibliography) called *Blood Relations*, the anthropologist Chris Knight set out what he explicitly declared to be 'a myth' to account for the formation of language, art and religion in evolutionary terms. His myth leans on two bits of evidence – that primates such as chimps are smart at sneaky behaviour, and that hominids in the Old Stone Age left traces of red ochre at their sites – and is rather gloriously lurid. A hominid band will get more food if its males practise hunting in a pack, but individual males won't join such forays if there's ready sex on offer. The females evolve a strategy of deceit. They bond together literally to paint themselves red, exchanging vocalizations that help foment a shared sense of communal purpose. Thus the visual and the vocal induce, for these sisters with their synchronized pseudo-menstruation, an internalised spirituality, and what's more this art-language-religion package gives the band the Darwinian edge: the frustrated brothers bring home more bacon.