Prehistoric Present: How and Why Has Prehistory Been Conjugated in the Present Tense?

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No sooner had prehistory been invented as a concept in the 19th century than it was presented as though the events under that label were taking place in the same period as that of our perception, namely the present, and not at a precisely measured chronological distance. What were, and still are, the reasons why and ways in which the extreme past has been projected into the extreme present, that is, into lived time, into actuality?[1]

The question, in this case, does not relate to representations that are communicated through the idea of prehistory. There definitely exist sundry examples of the ideological leveraging of prehistoric content to speak about the present. Since the 19th century, fascination for the prehistoric era, and a paucity of available information about it, have often been exploited to infuse contemporary ideas into a supposedly prehistoric context, thereby endowing them with an aura of original depth. Across this information gap, a fantasized prehistory has been built—to use an expression coined by Pascal Semonsut[2]—and has been used to bolster all kinds of racialist, nationalistic, religious, and other types of prejudices. But these aspects have already been studied extensively[3] and are now well established, even if they still require further development and refining. Rather than looking at content, this paper will examine the ways in which prehisto-

1 "Actuality" shares etymological roots with the French word actualité, which means "current events".

2 Pascal Semonsut, *Le Passé du fantasme. La représentation de la préhistoire en France dans la seconde moitié du XXe siècle*, Paris, Errance, 2013.

3 Claudine Cohen, *L'Homme des origines. Savoirs et fictions en préhistoire*, Paris, Le Seuil, 1999; *L'Homme préhistorique. Images et imaginaire*, ed. Albert and Jacqueline Ducros, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2000; Nathalie Richard, *Inventer la préhistoire. Les débuts de l'archéologie préhistorique en France,* Paris, Vuibert, 2008 ; *Imaginaires archéologiques*, ed. Claudie Voisenat, Paris, Maison des sciences de l'Homme, Ethno - logie de la France, 2008, cahier 22 ; Jean-Loïc Le Quellec, *La Dame blanche et l'Atlantide. Ophir et le Grand Zimbabwe. Enquête sur un mythe archéologique*, Paris, Errance, 2010 ; Sylvain Quertelet, *Mythique Préhistoire. Idées fausses et vrais clichés*, ed. Sylvain Quertelet, Solutré, Musée départemental de préhistoire, 2010 ; Marylène Patou-Mathis, *Le Sauvage et le préhistorique, miroir de l'homme occidental. De la malédiction de Cham à l'identité nationale*, Paris, Odile Jacob, 2011; Jean-Paul Demoule, *Mais où sont passés les Indo-Européens ? Le mythe d'origine de l'Occident*, Paris, Le Seuil, 2014 ; Daniel Fabre, *Bataille à Lascaux. Comment l'art préhistorique apparut aux enfants*, Paris, L'Echoppe, 2014 ; Bénédicte Savoy, *« Vom Faustkeil zur Handgranate ». Filmpropaganda für die Berliner Museen 1934-1939*, Cologne, Böhlau, 2014 etc.

1 Illustration in John Lubbock, *L' Homme préhistorique, étudié d'après les monuments et les costumes retrouvés dans différents pays de l' Europe, suivi d'une étude sur les mœurs et les coutumes des sauvages modernes*, Paris, Alcan, 1888 (original edn *Prehistoric Times, as Illustrated by Ancient Remains and the Manners and Customs of Modern Savages*, London and Edinburgh, 1865; 1st French edn *L' Homme avant l' histoire*..., Paris, 1867).

ry has been conveyed and exhibited, namely its *presentation*. In itself, presentation implies making decisions about the time relationships put forward for our consideration. Such decisions are fed by a desire to short-circuit the logical order of time so that a representation of the past and an experience of the present—an imagined past and a lived present—can coincide. This desire is specifically modern: it affects societies which see themselves as standing at an anthropological turning point. The aim of modern societies, in fact, is not only qualitative variation in the content of their representations and their specific values, but rather a structural reorientation of their relationship with the world. In its temporal dimension, this reorientation is driven by criticism of objective time, which, structured by the backward countdown of years, is the central component of the historical perspective. Instead, there is a shift toward subjective time, anchored in affectivity. Conjugated in the present tense immediately after its invention, the idea of prehistory has continued to be used precisely in this way.

From its very inception, research in prehistory sought to complete and interpret the archaeological traces of so-called prehistoric societies by using contemporary ethnographic data about existing populations of hunter-gatherers. The scientific justification for such ethnological comparatism lay in the hypothesis that similar conditions of development led to cultural, technical, and even biological resemblances, regardless of chronological gaps. This method of approaching the past through the present played a major role in shaping the young discipline of prehistory, which decisively contributed, in turn, to establishing its principles, under the name of comparative archaeology. John Lubbock, the person mainly responsible for the large-scale dissemination of the term prehistory, was one of its most celebrated defenders: "If we wish clearly to understand the antiquities of Europe, we must compare them with the rude implements and weapons still, or until lately, used by savage races in other parts of the world. In fact, the Van Diemaner and South American are to the antiquary what the opossum and the sloth are to the geologist" (fig. 1).[4] Along these lines, contemporary observations have systematically been used to describe the appearance of prehistoric humans, as illustrated by the famous series of busts illustrating the major phases of the biological and

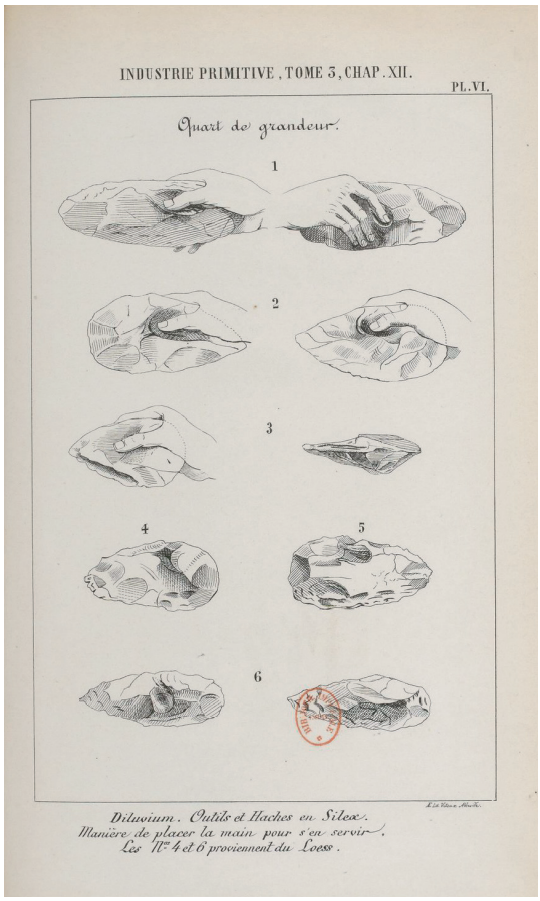
4 John Lubbock, *Pre-historic Times, as Illustrated by Ancient Remains and the Manners and Customs of Modern Savages*, London and Edinburgh, Williams and Norsac, 1865, 336-337.

2 Louis Mascré and Aimé Rutot, *Brachycéphale de Grenelle. Industrie moustérienne*, 1909-1914, painted plaster, 70 x 55 x 45 cm, Brussels, Institut royal des sciences naturelles de Belgique

cultural evolution of prehistoric humans, made by the Belgian sculptor Louis Mascré in collaboration with Aimé Louis Rutot, curator at the Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Sciences, between 1909 and 1914 (fig. 2).[5] In specifically artistic terms, the comparative approach was synthesized in 1906 by Henri Breuil and Emile Cartailhac in their seminal study on the Cave of Altamira: "Let us look for new insight from the most similar examples of artistic expression among uncivilized peoples who, still primitive in a certain sense, are more or less our contemporaries. The present will enlighten us about the past."[6] Accordingly, during its first 50 years of existence, the discipline of prehistory decided to move closer to physical and cultural anthropology and to distin-

5 Anne Hauzeur and François Mairesse, « Une collaboration exemplaire : Louis Mascré et Aimé Rutot », in *Vénus et Caïn. Figures de la préhistoire 1830-1930*, ed. Katia Bush, Philippe Dagen, Anne Hauzer, Paris, Réunion des musées nationaux, Bordeaux, Musée d'Aquitaine, 2003, 107-131.

6 Henri Breuil and Emile Cartailhac, *La Caverne d'Altamira à Santillane près Santander (Espagne)*, Monaco, Imprimerie de Monaco, 1906, 143 : [« Demandons quelques clartés nouvelles aux manifestations artistiques les plus analogues des peuplades non civilisées, encore primitives en un certain sens, dont nous sommes plus ou moins les contemporains. Le présent nous instruira sur le passé. »]. See also Gabriel de Mortillet, *Le préhistorique. Antiquité de l'homme*, Paris, Bibliothèques des Sciences contemporaines, 1883, 415, 421 : "Populations in geological times did not worship or have religious ideas. [...] Humans at that time were carefree, lacking reflection and forethought. This can still be observed in various primitive populations today." ["Les populations des temps géologiques n'avaient pas de culte, pas d'idées religieuses. [...] Les hommes de cette époque avaient l'esprit léger, manquaient de réflexion et de prévoyance. C'est ce qui s'observe encore dans diverses populations sauvages."].



3 Jacques Boucher de Perthes, *Antiquités celtiques et antédiluviennes*, Paris, Jung-Treuttel, 1864, vol. 3, ch. XII, pl. 6, «Diluvium. Outils et haches en silex. Manière de placer la main pour s'en servir. Les n°4 et 6 proviennent du Loess.»

guish itself, on the other hand, from archaeology and history in order to find its own identity. Externally, this choice was based in methodological reasoning, but it also stemmed from a deeper desire to transgress the boundaries of historical chronology.

At the same time, analysis of tools and their uses formed the foundational cornerstone of this scientific approach to prehistoric reality. Indeed, it was through the discovery of, and attempt to understand, carved flint tools unearthed from the deep layers of the earth that the idea of humankind's "great antiquity,"[7] as it was described in the scientific debates of the time, gradually emerged around 1860. Identifying tools therefore quickly led to analyzing gestures with the aim of exploring how these artefacts had been produced and used. Right from the early years of the discipline, physical experimentation—that is, making and using stone tools—was an integral part of the prehistorian's deduction process, as shown, for example, by the first works of Jacques Boucher de Perthes in Abbeville around 1860 (fig. 3) and by Breuil's experiments in cutting and carving flint at the turn of the 20th century.[8] Through these practices, the act of bringing prehistory into the present moved beyond conceptual aims and took root in the body: hands prevailed over eyes, body over mind, practical experience over theoretical intellection. In this way, a quest arose for an immediate physical experi-

7 Jacques Boucher de Perthes, *Antiquités celtiques et antédiluviennes. Mémoire sur l'industrie primitive et les arts à leur origine*, t. III, Paris, Jung-Treuttel, Derache, Dumoulin et Victor Didron, 1864, 143: "While the majority of scholars were convinced of the great antiquity of our species, not all were." ["Si la majorité des savants était convaincue de cette haute antiquité de notre espèce, tous ne l'étaient pas."].

8 See *Sur les chemins de la préhistoire. L'abbé Breuil, du Périgord à l'Afrique du Sud*, ed. Noël Coye, Paris, Somogy, L'Isle-Adam, Musée d'art et d'histoire Louis Senlecq, Nemours, Musée départemental de préhistoire, 2006, 164–165.

ence of presence on a pragmatic level, which may be described as actualism,[9] in addition to presentism, which conceptually took the form of comparative archaeology.

Following these presentist and actualist scientific approaches, the same desire to superimpose the present on to the prehistoric past shaped, from the outset, the methods used to present the idea of prehistory visually and literarily. Particularly significant examples include reconstitutions of prehistoric scenes in dioramas. For instance, at the Universal Exhibition of 1889 in Paris, an exhibit on flint cutting and uses (fig. 4) featured mannequins "doing" activities that prehistorians themselves practiced to understand better their objects of study.[10] Indeed, echoing what occurred in the research field, the presentation of prehistory initially followed in the footsteps of ethnographic museums in their emphasis on exhibiting the present, more than in the footsteps of traditional archaeological museums. Quickly, the use of photography and then film to illustrate prehistory further accentuated presentist effects in the popular imagination. Such imagery had its twin in literature. For instance, a topos in the "prehistoric novel," developed by the writer J. H. Rosny Aîné from the end of the 19th century onwards,[11] involves a contemporary character, usually an explorer in a far-off land, who discovers an unknown territory where fate would have it that prehistoric humans still live. This continuation leads to dramatic situations in which the suggestion of ex-

9 The term is used here in connection with a process of anchoring the experience of temporality in the body, as opposed to a perception of time mediated by concepts. This sense of "actualism" can be set apart from François Hartog's suggested definition of modern "presentism": "this contemporary experience of a perpetual present, elusive and practically static, which nevertheless tries to produce its own historical time" ["cette expérience contemporaine d'un présent perpétuel, insaisissable et quasiment immobile, cherchant malgré tout à produire pour lui-même son propre temps historique"]; "the gradual encroachment of an era by an increasingly enlarged, hypertrophied present" ["ce progressif envahissement de l'horizon par un présent de plus en plus gonflé, hypertrophié"] ; François Hartog, *Régimes d'historicité. Présentisme et expériences du temps*, Paris, Le Seuil, 2003, 28, 125.

10 Jean-François-Albert du Pouget de Nadaillac, « L'Exposition préhistorique de 1889 », *Matériaux pour l'histoire primitive et naturelle de l'Homme*, Paris, Renwald, December 1888, 588 : "This committee, which had to do things differently, if not better, than previous organizers of similar exhibitions, decided to reproduce, as much as possible, nature scenes likely to interest the general public so that people might understand with their own eyes, if I may put it that way, the pursued aim of those seeking to reconstruct a very ancient past. [...] The first scene represents a flint carver and his female partner; the man splits open a hunk of stone, and the woman finishes the work. [...] Time marches on; centuries, which no chronometer can measure, pass; and humans go on performing funeral and religious rites" [Cette commission, qui avait à faire, sinon mieux, du moins autrement que ceux qui avaient organisé avant elle des expositions analogues, a décidé de reproduire, dans la mesure du possible, des scènes de nature à intéresser le grand public et à lui faire comprendre par ses yeux, si je puis m'exprimer ainsi, le but poursuivi par ceux qui prétendent reconstituer un bien antique passé. [...] La première scène représente un tailleur de silex et sa femme ; l'homme éclate le bloc, la femme achève le travail. [...] Les temps marchent, des siècles, qu'aucun chronomètre ne permet de mesurer, s'écoulent, les hommes pratiquent des rites funéraires et religieux]. See also Nils Müller-Scheessel, « Fair Prehistory: Archaeological Exhibits at French Expositions Universelles », *Antiquity*, 2001, vol. 75, 391-401.

11 See Claudine Cohen, "Fictions et récits de la préhistoire," in *Ecrivains de la préhistoire*, ed. André Benhaïm and Michel Lantelme, Toulouse, Presses de l'université de Toulouse-Le Mirail, 2004, 11–31.

treme distance, both geographical and temporal, is juxtaposed with intense familiarity in terms of feelings and behavior. In *Le Félin géant*, published in 1920, the character Zhour, one of the last "Men-without-Shoulders," tames a cave lion and feels sentiments exactly like our own, the author suggests, for "everything that persists, does so through repetition."[12] That same year, Rosny Aîné also published a short story, *La grande énigme*, in which he laid, as it were, the intellectual and affective foundations of this approach, describing how, in the middle of a desert, two present-day explorers come across a cave opening on to a miraculously preserved prehistoric world and have a mystical human encounter with people from 200,000 years ago. This meeting fleetingly brings forth "this primitive life, an ardent memory of which is embedded in our instincts": "I tasted the joy of the rebirth of the world. This great love of the past, deep within humans, melded with an inconceivable resurrection … The whole past and the whole present were united in my chest."[13] In *Les Hommes Sangliers*, published in 1929, the young heroine, Suzanne, is abducted and raped by the chief of a prehistoric tribe living in the depths of a primeval forest. Paradoxically, sex gradually draws them together on a nearer level than moral conscience or cultural differences, leading Suzanne to feel that "she carried within her an eternity that was continually becoming the present time."[14] There is every reason to think that Marcel Proust's expressed admiration for this literature stemmed less from its disputable literary qualities than from the tension starkly manifested, in his eyes, between immemorial past and present life, an articulation of "'time regained' certainly more interesting than [his own],"[15] as he wrote to Rosny Aîné after enthusiastically reading *Le Félin géant*.

During the same period, shared fascination for "present" prehistory reached similar levels in avant-garde artistic circles. This modern aesthetics of prehistory, which did not involve mere imitation, was specifically driven by a desire to abolish temporality, more than by a rejection of the present. Far from a melancholy cult for a bygone past or an exotic society, as portrayed by historicism and primitivism, the expected result was a present electrified through the short-circuiting of entrenched time. The

12 J.-H. Rosny Aîné (Joseph Henri Honoré Boex), *Le Félin géant,* Paris, Plon-Nourrit, 1920, in *La Guerre du Feu et autres romans préhistoriques*, ed. Jean-Baptiste Baronian, Paris, Robert Laffont, 1985, 374. [« Tout ce qui persiste, persiste par répétition »].

13 J.-H. Rosny Aîné (Joseph Henri Honoré Boex), *La Grande Enigme*, Paris, « Lectures pour tous, » August 1920, in *La Guerre du Feu et autres romans préhistoriques*, *op. cit*., 656–658. [« … cette vie primitive dont nous gardons le souvenir passionné, au fond de notre instinct » ; « Je goûtais une joie de recommencement du monde. Ce grand amour du passé qui est au cœur des hommes se confondait ici avec une inconcevable résurrection. … J'unissais dans ma poitrine tout le présent et tout le passé »].

14 J.-H. Rosny Aîné (Joseph Henri Honoré Boex), *Les Hommes Sangliers*, Paris, Editions des Portiques, 1929, in *La Guerre du Feu et autres romans préhistoriques*, *op. cit*., 677. [« Elle portait en elle une éternité qui, sans cesse, devenait l'heure présente. »].

15 Letter dated 27 November 1920, cited in Benhaïm, "L'Âge de la madeleine: La préhistoire de Proust," in Benhaïm and Lantelme, *Ecrivains de la préhistoire*, *op. cit*., 73. [« … un 'Temps retrouvé' plus intéressant certes que le mien »].

4 « Un tailleur de silex et sa femme; l'homme éclate le bloc, la femme achève le travail,» Paris, Exposition universelle of 1889, Commission de l'histoire du travail, sous-commission de l'exposition anthropologique et préhistorique, *Histoire du travail et des sciences anthropologiques,* section I, *Anthropologie – Ethnographie – Archéologie* (Saint-Germain-en-Laye, Musée d'archéologie nationale).

critic Carl Einstein suggested as much in 1930 when he lauded the "prehistoric simplicity" of Joan Miró's collages in which, he said, "the end meets the beginning,"[16] and when he spoke of the "rites of a prehistoric childhood"[17] in reference to Jean Arp's work. Three years later, in *Minotaure* magazine, the photographer Brassaï published a series of photographs of Parisian graffiti under the title « Du mur des cavernes au mur d'usine » ("from cave wall to factory wall"). He stated that his undertaking was based on the "simple elimination of the time factor" so that "through the lens of ethnography, antiquity becomes early youth."[18] It was precisely this use of ethnography that

16 Carl Einstein, « Joan Miró (papiers collés à la galerie Pierre) », *Documents*, Paris, 1930, n° 4, 243. [« ... simplicité préhistorique » ; « ... la fin rejoint le commencement »].

17 Carl Einstein, « L'Enfance néolithique », *Documents*, Paris, 1930, n° 8, 483. [« ... rites d'une enfance préhistorique »].

18 Brassaï, « Du mur des cavernes au mur d'usine,» *Minotaure*, Paris, December 1933, n° 3-4, 6. [« ... simple élimination du facteur temps »; « ... à la lumière de l'ethnographie, l'antiquité devient prime jeunesse »].

enabled him to embark on an independent creative process of photographing contemporary graffiti, a process seemingly directly based on the methodological principles of presentism so dear to prehistory scholars. In addition, many major works from that period, whether by Miró, Arp, Alberto Giacometti,[19] Paul Klee,[20] or numerous other artists, reflect the same aesthetics of origins,[21]far removed from any superficial imitation of prehistoric images, in combining an intellectual presentism and an actualist practice of imagined prehistoric gestures: imprints of hands, dots, incisions, body traces, etc.

This desire for contemporaneity can still be observed today in the ways in which we understand and display prehistory, thus confirming its structural nature, specific to the relationship to time that characterizes modernity as a whole.

Criticism sparked by the principle of ethnological comparatism (for methodological as well as ethical reasons),[22] did not, for methodological and ethical reasons, put an end to this scientific practice, but rather prompted it to renew itself by taking into account structural differences and incorporating them into the comparative analysis. The character of the ethnologist-prehistorian endured in the second half of the 20th century, as can be observed in the works of Leroi-Gourhan,[23] Marshall Sahlins,[24] and, more recently still, Alain Testart.[25] As for the concrete practices of experimentation, they continue to be the building blocks of an archaeological approach that, unlike historical research, involves physical work in the field aimed at feeling the presence of the past directly. Hence, among other examples, the use of the term "mystical" (as in Rosny Aîné's *La grande énigme*) by Sonia Harmand is revealing when she - as a member of the Mission préhistorique au Kenya - describes her impression of "familiarity" (i.e. contemporaneity) as she stood before the fossil-rich Great Rift Valley[26].

At the same time as they experience the mysticality of fieldwork, physically upsetting the mental boundaries of temporality, most prehistorians also continue prehistoric practices such as cutting and carving flint stone, throwing weapons, cutting up

19 See essay by Thierry Dufrêne in this volume, « Alberto Giacometti: Prehistory as an Imagination ».

20 See Elke Seibert, « Klees 'Little Experimental Machine' und prähistorische Malereien im Museum of Modern Art in New York (1937) », in *Zwitscher-Maschine*, Summer 2016, n° 2, 17-27, online publication.

21 See Rémi Labrusse, « Prähistorie und Moderne, » in *Kunst der Vorzeit. Felsbilder aus der Sammlung Frobenius*, ed. Karl-Heinz Kohl, Richard Kuba, Hélène Ivanoff, Munich, London and New York, Prestel, 2016, 218-231.

22 See François Bon, François-Xavier Fauvelle-Aymar and Karim Sadr, « L'Ailleurs et l'avant : Éléments pour une critique du comparatisme ethnographique dans l'étude des sociétés préhistoriques, » *L'Homme*, n° 184, 2007, 25-45.

23 André Leroi-Gourhan, *Le Fil du temps. Ethnologie et préhistoire*, Paris, Arthème Fayard, 1983.

24 Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics*, London, Tavistock Publications, 1972.

25 Alain Testart, *Avant l'histoire. L'évolution des sociétés, de Lascaux à Carnac*, Paris, Gallimard, 2012.

26 "I had the impression that this landscape [the Grand Rift in Turkana, Kenya] was familiar to me. There was something mystical about what I felt that day [1994]." Cited in Bruno Meyerfeld, « Au Kenya, l'énigme des premiers outils,» *Le Monde. Science et technologie*, Paris, 4 January 2006. [« J'avais l'impression que ce paysage [le Grand Rift dans le Turkana, Kenya], m'était familier. Il y avait quelque chose de mystique dans ce que j'ai ressenti ce jour-là »].

5 Domingo Milella, Lascaux IV, exhibition space, 2016-18

animal skins, and even rock painting,[27] sometimes acquiring a high level of dexterity. Presentism has also been manifest in the museological presentation of prehistory, in which displays of gestures and uses generally prevail over the cult of ancient artefacts that is specific to archaeology museums. This emphasis on the anthropological illustration of everyday practices appears to legitimize the pronounced use of immersive museology, originating in 19th-century naturalistic ethnographical dioramas, including derma-plastic reconstitutions[28] of humans which, in terms of the spectacular effect of their presence and their approximate scientific value, are comparable with the wax figures of yesteryear. The frequent juxtaposition, in the same display case, of modern materials (facsimiles, raw materials like wood, pigments, etc) and true archaeological objects, which strict museological respect for

27 See Michel Lorblanchet, « Spitting Images. Replicating the Spotted Horses of Pech-Merle,» *Archaeology*, New York, November–December 1991, vol. 44, n° 6, 24-31, and Michel Lorblanchet, *Art pariétal. Grottes ornées du Quercy,* Rodez, Editions du Rouergue, 2010, 430–431.

28 See Sylvain Quertelet, « Reconstituer la Préhistoire?,» *La Lettre de l'OCIM*, Paris, January–February 2010, n° 127, 30-35.

authenticity should, however, disallow, is in the same vein. Indeed, sensitively evoking practices seems more important than admiring the great antiquity of artefacts. Likewise, the fad for reproductions (fig. 5) of decorated caves—neo-caves,[29] as they are sometimes called—partially stems from the emphasis placed on how the replicas are made: a combination of modern techniques, celebrated in themselves, and contemporary manual labor intended to update prehistoric artists' work. In this way, the past and the present find themselves concretely intertwined. This specific value of bringing prehistory into the present is also observable in interpretation activities that, at prehistoric sites much more than in any other archaeological environment, consist of encouraging visitors to practice emblematic prehistoric gestures for themselves, from carving flint stone to using spear-throwers and making handprints, as though such living practices were the veritable proof of prehistoric authenticity.

Critical identification of, and storytelling around, this presentist and actualist disposition, which exists in each of us and feeds our modern fascination for the idea of prehistory, doubtlessly reached a point of maximum intensity in the contemporary French novel *Dormance*. Its author, Jean-Loup Trassard, published the book after ten years of endeavoring to absorb the existential sentiments of a man from the Mesolithic period at the dawn of agricultural practices:

> I excavate time as though it is earth, deep in memories, perhaps in my memories. [...] The only reliable description depicts behavior that at all times combines agility and strength and attention: he would not have achieved anything without uniting these qualities. I should probably explain that my storytelling deliberately does not try to find a way to interest the listeners of my tales. The truth is that his presence has gradually become perceptible to me: at first uncertain, and later glimpsed in moving ways. I then had the impression of having been with him for a long time: someone waiting behind me, a furtive shadow among the trees, often present in the place where I live. By becoming aware of him, I liberated the signs. So he came closer, to the point of disturbing me.[30]

29 See Thierry Dufrêne, « Neo-caves: Becoming Art Through Reproduction,» in *Between East and West: Reproductions in Art*. Proceedings of the 2013 CIHA Colloquium in Naruto, Japan, 15-18 January 2013, Cracow, IRSA, 2014, 403-416.

30 Jean-Loup Trassard, *Dormance*, Paris, Gallimard, 2000, 71. [« Je fouille le temps comme une terre, loin dans la mémoire, peut-être dans ma mémoire. ... Seule description qui soit sûre, celle d'une manière d'agir qui joint à tout moment souplesse et force et attention : il n'aurait rien réussi sans les lier ensemble. Mieux vaut expliquer déjà que je n'ai pas choisi de raconter en cherchant le moyen d'intéresser ceux qui écoutent mes contes, la vérité est que sa présence m'est devenue peu à peu sensible, incertaine d'abord puis entr'aperçue d'émouvante façon. J'ai eu l'impression, alors, que je vivais depuis longtemps avec lui, une attente derrière mon être, une ombre entre les arbres, furtive, souvent présente dans le lieu où j'habite. En prenant conscience, j'ai libéré les signes. Alors il s'est approché au point de me troubler. »].

For the writer, the desire to bring the prehistoric past into the present entails abandoning the idea of a story—and therefore history, *stricto sensu*—and limiting himself to tangible empathy during everyday activities in a geographical area (in this case, Mayenne in western France). This desire also implies awareness, expressed as such, of a necessary failure; consequently, desire is perpetuated indefinitely.

All things considered, the persistence of a presentist imagination that, precisely because of its unfinished perpetuation, ends up critically questioning its own underpinnings is therefore apparent in different aspects of academic, literary, artistic, patrimonial, and memorial discourses from the very beginning of the idea of prehistory up to our own time.

The first condition for the possibility of this imaginary present lies in the very structure of the documentary sources providing content for the idea of prehistory. The scarcity of evidence excavated from the ground, its manifestly fragmentary nature, the absence of clearly interpretable sign systems, the difficulties of periodization (at first impossible, then approximate and expensive), and, last and above all, the excessive stretching of time which, even when it is accurately counted, appears irreducible to history on a human scale, all constitute insurmountable obstacles to a chronological approach to prehistory that would truly be interiorized and produce, in each of us, stable representations structured as stories. As a result, the door is left open to imaginary projections constructed from our present-day experiences.

More specifically, Palaeolithic cave art has reinforced this inclination to overthrow the temporal order, while imposing itself, beginning at the start of the 20th century, as one of the most active sources of the idea of prehistory in collective representations. On account of the intrinsic virtuosity of their figurative animal realism, cave paintings were immediately positioned on the same level as modern mimesis, challenging the reassuring cliché of an evolutionist temporal order. Moreover, the underground universe of caves, where this art is presented in the most spectacular manner, constitutes in itself a setting in which the normal conditions of spatial-temporal experience are short-circuited by darkness and silence. In the words of Georges Bataille, describing a visit to the cave of Lascaux in the early 1950s, the effect is a physical "feeling of presence—of clear and burning presence"[31] arising from sensations all the more intense because they have become rare. The result is a contradictory experience of extreme immediacy and extreme strangeness in which these two poles of perception are electrified through their very association. Lastly, human traces preserved in such a stable environment, whether paintings, engravings, clay mouldings, or imprints, have a characteristic freshness conveying a strong impression of closeness with the actions of which they are the product, even though their meaning remains impenetrable. Here too, familiarity and otherness overlap, as do proximity and inaccessibility, thus hampering our reflex for analytical distancing but enabling immediate sensations—through the body—to move to the foreground in a relationship of affinity, with

31 Georges Bataille, *La Peinture préhistorique. Lascaux ou la naissance de l'art*, Geneva, Skira, Les Grands Siècles de la peinture, 1955, 12. [« … sentiment de présence – de claire et brûlante présence »].

the creations in these naturally dark, labyrinthine, and chaotic environments. We know that this paradoxical impression of presence deeply disrupted the perception of cave art in the last third of the 19th century by stirring up most academic archaeologists' suspicion of modern « mystification »,[32] that would seek to deceive them by apeing a supposed prehistory. Even in 1952, as the poet André Breton stood before the Gravettian paintings in the cave of Pech Merle, he believed that "trickery"[33] might be afoot, again because of the incredible freshness of the pigments on the wall.

That said, if the collective imagination so powerfully positioned decorated caves at the heart of the modern vision of prehistory, if there is, in other words, a desire for caves in our desire for prehistory, it is precisely because we began by desiring, above all else, this concatenation of the present and the past, which caves embody better than any other environment. These holes in the ground respond to the foundations of time. Through these caves, we can experience an alternative spatiality (and not merely an exotic space) in a concrete translation of our desire to experience the transformation of temporality as such (and not simply to conquer a determined past). In other words, the recurrent bringing of prehistory into the present, as regards various aspects of modern culture, is not a consequence of objective data that might have a passive influence on representations. These data have been selected and interpreted through a continuous process of constructing the idea of prehistory as an echo chamber for the modern desire to transgress the barriers of quantified time.

Why does this desire for transgression exist? It is because an evolutionist conception of reality is likely to cause panic and calls for an antidote. The precondition for what we call progress is historicism, which seeks to immerse totally the meaning of human societies in the flow of time and hence in its structural relativity. Consequently, the convergence of historicism and progressism—in other words, structural relativism and the situational positivity of human destinies—itself constitutes a double constraint that simultaneously promises us improvement and loss, both a rosy future and an inevitable downfall. In short, this convergence puts us in the position of simultaneously achieving and being dispossessed of the meaning of the world. This aporia inevitably gives rise to the anxiety, specific to situations of double constraint, of being faced with the ambivalence of a future that takes the two-fold form of achievement and collapse, both of which are equally necessary.

The core idea of prehistory amplified this contradiction specific to the modern awareness of time. It inordinately extended the historicity of human cultures, incorporating it into the broader plan of biological evolutionism. As a result, humans as a species, as much as humans as producers of meaning, now found themselves im-

32 Letter from Gabriel de Mortillet to Emile Cartailhac, dated 19 March 1881, cited in Arnaud Hurel, *L'Abbé Breuil. Un préhistorien dans le siècle*, Paris, CNRS Editions, 2011, 94. [« mystification »]. See also Béatrice Fraenkel, « L'invention de l'art pariétal préhistorique. Histoire d'une expérience visuelle,» *Gradhiva,* Paris, 2007, vol. 6, 18-31 ; Marc Groenen, *Pour une histoire de la préhistoire. Le paléolithique*, Grenoble, Jérôme Millon, 1994, 318.

33 Bataille, *op. cit*., 137. [« supercherie »].

merged in an evolving global process moving beyond them. Biological and cultural aspects converged to bring apocalyptic anxiety to an unprecedented level of intensity. Indeed, given that the earth prospered without humankind for a long time, the hypothesis of life continuing on earth without people appeared more concrete than ever at a time when a broader vision of the constant improvement of the species was imposing itself. Through the same movement, however, the idea of prehistory somehow produced its own antidote. By inordinately enlarging the dimensions of the past, prehistorians hindered the quantified objectification and chronologically structured telling of prehistory, prioritizing instead an experience of the immemorial. In other words, what in the past and as the past, eluded objectifying distancing, was removed from the memorial narrative and transformed into physical proof of an unquantifiable temporal breadth. Temporality was transposed into an immediate and unitary subjective experience, felt affectively on a nearer level than any discourse, where the logical contradiction specific to modern temporality vanishes and where, in contrast, a primordial feeling of existence intensifies. The invention of prehistory in the middle of the 19th century can therefore be interpreted as the strongest expression of a desire to overcome the anxiety caused by the aporia of modern temporality, as though prehistoricist actualism and presentism might counter historicist melancholy. In this way, the idea of prehistory took the shape of a negating remedy: through it, hyper-history was turned into anti-history. As such, it is protected; its fundamental indeterminacy is cherished, as is proved by the generic value expressed by the word *prehistory* itself. Indeed, the popularity of this term can be explained by the difference that it represents with regard to history and by the fact that it does not really enable the identification of precise cultural or temporal realities.

Just as prehistory seen as hyper-history provides fodder for fatalistic and catastrophist visions of the future, prehistory seen as anti-history is the driving force for a creative relationship with the present, which can be described as *poetic*, in the etymological sense of the term. The past, instead of confining the mind within an already-completed narrative, becomes an active setting for the invention of a new kind of relationship with the world. The purpose is no longer to imitate or criticize a previous, precisely defined state of humanity, but rather to activate the immemorial temporal breadth of our existences, which the notion of prehistory can make present by upending the boundaries of temporality. In conclusion, prehistory has been conjugated in the present tense because, in this way, we are seeking to invent an ideal mental structure in which the anguish of our own historicity, by reaching its maximum point of tension and extension, can be expended and reversed into creative energy.