

Understanding Palaeolithic Figurative Manifestations as Art: an Hermeneutic Perspective

Abstract Palaeolithic manifestations constitute an extraordinary window to the lifeworld of people with whom we share many human-making traits even if the precise content of their experiences would have been considerably different from ours. Understanding Palaeolithic visual imagery constitutes a particular case of the more general hermeneutical problem of understanding cultural manifestations of peoples from other times and places. Following Hans-Georg Gadamer's approach to hermeneutics, Palaeolithic manifestations require taking into account the contexts in which they were produced as well as our contemporary contexts of interpretation. The objection that Gadamer's hermeneutics would require the elimination of the category art from archaeological research of Palaeolithic manifestations is considered and rejected. It is concluded that hermeneutics offers a valuable, fruitful avenue for deriving new insights regarding their makers' cultural grasp of the world.

Keywords Palaeolithic, hermeneutics, Gadamer, art, understanding, cave art


Introduction

The Symposium invited us to discuss the question "What can we learn from Palaeolithic Art?". This question opens up at least two issues. On the one hand, we may note that some in the archaeological community have contested the art status of prehistoric visual manifestations, in particular those that go under the labels 'rock art' and 'Pleistocene art'. On the other

Contact

Thomas Heyd

heydt@uvic.ca

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2928-804X>

hand, “learning from Palaeolithic art” raises the question whether it is even possible to understand Palaeolithic manifestations.

In some ways, one may see these two issues as connected, insofar as the art status of prehistoric manifestations has been contested by appeal to the supposition that the cultural difference between present and pre-historic societies makes meaningless and misleading the translation of concepts such as *art* to the Palaeolithic. In other words, the supposition is that we cannot properly *understand* Palaeolithic manifestations through the category *art* because the large gap in time and culture leads to something akin to a ‘category mistake’ when we apply *our* concepts to *their* manifestations. This leads to the larger question regarding *the conditions* in which we may be said to *understand any thing at all*, especially when confronting manifestations of people removed from us by large gaps of time, and living under significantly different environmental, social, economic and cultural conditions.

Recently, appeal has been made to Hans-Georg Gadamer’s hermeneutics in support of the view that reference to Pleistocene visual manifestations as art is the result of a prejudicial supposition arising in contemporary societies. In the following I argue that, on the contrary, Gadamer’s account precisely shows that to view at least some pre-historic, figurative visual manifestations as art generally may be *appropriate* and *productive* in generating adequate understanding of those manifestations.¹

This essay begins by introducing key points of Gadamer’s theory of hermeneutics. It is followed by discussion of the proposal that hermeneutics might support eliminating consideration of Palaeolithic manifestations as art. Finally, it makes some suggestions regarding how viewing figurative manifestations from the Palaeolithic period as art in fact may help us understand them.

Gadamer’s Hermeneutics: Key Points

In “Classical and Philosophical Hermeneutics” Gadamer traces hermeneutics to a long interpretive tradition that arises with concern for the correct understanding of allegorical theological texts going back to Augustine (354–430 CE) and continuing in the Mediaeval period (Gadamer 2007a, 46). While in pre-Modern times hermeneutics basically consists of technical advice (*Kunstlehre*) on how to avoid errors in interpretation of ambiguous passages, during the Reformation it develops as a method for “objective, object-centered” readings intended to be “free of subjective arbitrariness” (Gadamer 2007a, 46–47). Eventually, Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) transforms hermeneutics into a method for making theological tradition understandable by attempting to reconstitute the mindframe of authors (Gadamer 2007a, 47).

1 While our concern here primarily is with Palaeolithic art, my points regarding hermeneutics and art are intended as applicable to pre-historic as well as non-European manifestations generally. Furthermore, I use the term ‘figurative visual manifestations’ to refer to paintings, engravings (including dendroglyphs), as well as sculptures (portable or not), bas-reliefs, and rock arrangements (geoglyphs) that present more or less discernible figures to sight. In other words, by this term I intend to encompass physical items presenting both naturalistic and fictive (hybrid or fully invented) images that seem to constitute recognisable figures.

In interaction with the Romantic doctrine of creativity (Gadamer 2007a, 51–53), Schleiermacher’s approach based on “psychological interpretation” was adopted in the philosophical hermeneutics of Wilhelm Dilthey (Gadamer 2007a, 50–54). By his own account, the immediate antecedent to Gadamer’s exploration of hermeneutics is Martin Heidegger’s ontological understanding of hermeneutics (Gadamer 2007a, 56–57).² While their predecessors had sought to find an interpretive *methodology* for the sciences (*Wissenschaften*), in the hands of Heidegger and Gadamer hermeneutics becomes a fully general account of what it is *to understand anything*.³

In a 1992 paper Harald Johnsen and Bjornar Olsen note that there have only been a few explicit discussions of Gadamer’s hermeneutics in relation to Archaeology (Johnsen and Olsen 1992, 419), and, up to a point, it still is the case today.⁴ Generally, concerns regarding interpretation have been considered part of ‘post-processual’ methodology as introduced, among others, by Ian Hodder and Christopher Tilley (see, e.g., Thomas 2000). As Johnsen and Olsen suggest, Gadamer’s hermeneutics, however, should be seen as of significant relevance to Archaeology more generally (Johnsen and Olsen 1992, 423, *passim* and 433). This certainly makes sense inasmuch as it is a historical science that pursues understanding of human actions and artefacts.

More recently, Oscar Moro Abadía and Manuel R. González Morales (2012) have deployed Gadamer’s hermeneutics in the discussion of Pleistocene manifestations in order to argue for vigilance regarding prejudices, especially concerning the application of the category *art* in its context. In the following, I argue that, even if Gadamer’s theory indeed does urge critical approaches to unfounded suppositions, it does not support their eliminativist view regarding the category *art* in non-contemporary contexts.

Gadamer considers the conditions for the possibility of understanding and what distinguishes adequate understanding from mis-understanding. His account may be summarised in four points. First, pre-judgements, understood as interpretive judgements made in advance of the availability of full evidence, are *essential* in the achievement of understanding. Second, understanding is not realised by simply taking up information, in the manner supposed by positivistic approaches. Instead, it requires something like *a dialogic conversation* between the interpreter and the text.⁵ Third, grasping the point of a text is not only a matter of reconstructing the meaning that the text had when it was created. Rather, to be understood, it needs to be meaningful to us in our own circumstances. Fourth, there is no final, conclusive interpretation of a text. I develop these points a little more next.

2 Heidegger’s account is in terms of the emergence event (Ereignis) in processes of disclosure of truth that ground presence in time (Dasein) (for further details, see the reference).

3 Most interestingly for our purposes here, he explains that in order to highlight the necessity of presuppositions in understanding he chose to begin his book *Wahrheit und Methode* (1990, originally 1960; translated as *Truth and Method*, Gadamer 1989) with “the experience of art” (*Erfahrung der Kunst*; Gadamer 2007a, 61). More on this later.

4 But see Back Danielsson, Fahlander, and Sjöstrand (2012); Cole (2009); Corbey, Layton and Tanner (2004); David (2002); Tonner (2010).

5 Throughout this paper, we will proceed on the assumption that what goes for texts goes for other matters to be understood, including art, gestures, ‘body language’ and so on.

Pre-judgement or *Vorurteil* and Prejudice

In the hands of Moro Abadía and González Morales, Gadamer's key message is that we are always beholden to *prejudices* (Moro Abadía and González Morales 2012, 264 and *passim*). In their view, the consequence of this is that "our interpretations are necessarily *imprisoned* within our words and concepts" and "it is *impossible to try to escape* from one's own frameworks", even if they also assert that we do not "have to uncritically accept *the tyranny* of our preconceptions"; rather, we are to discriminate between "legitimate prejudices... and non-genuine prejudices" (emphases added; Moro Abadía and González Morales 2012, 267).

Even if they are correct in supposing that, according to Gadamer, some presuppositions are to be rejected while others accepted, the manner in which they discuss so-called "prejudices" itself turns out to be highly prejudicial. Certainly, to anyone who has read Gadamer's *Truth and Method*, especially if she did so in the original German, their way of understanding his account of hermeneutics may come as a great surprise since Gadamer explicitly endorses Heidegger's point that understanding *fully requires* those so-called "prejudices" (Gadamer 2007a, 62).

For those not acquainted with the original, the German term in *Wahrheit und Methode* that in English translations alternatively is rendered as "prejudice" and as "pre-judgement" is *Vorurteil*, which, when its constituents are read out, *vor-Urteil*, literally stands for *pre-judgement*. Gadamer quite intentionally brings up the deeper meaning of this term in the context of his discussion of other Heideggerian terms that involve the suffix 'pre-', *vor*, as in *Vorhabe*, *Vorsicht* and *Vorgriff* (pre-having or intention, pre-view or caution, and pre-grasp or anticipation), and himself adds some to this set by speaking of *Vorentwurf* (pre-projection or preliminary design), *Vorwegnahme* (pre-takings away or anticipation), and *Vormeinung* (pre-opinion or pre-meaning or prior opinion).

So, while Gadamer (1990, 274-275) indeed is concerned with misleading pre-judgements, which he describes as caught up in *Voreingenommenheit* (literally: pre-taken-inness), that is, *bias*, he concurs with Heidegger in *denouncing* the Enlightenment pre-judgement against pre-judgement. This is because understanding relies on the 'hermeneutic circle', and movement along this circular track precisely depends on making judgements *before* all of the evidence has come in. Notably, the 'hermeneutic circle' simply is to make (revisable) claims about *wholes* on the basis of acquaintance with their *parts*, and claims about *parts* in view of the evolving grasp of *the whole* (Gadamer 1990, 270-272). This is most easily seen in the sequential reading of texts, which, to be understood, necessitate the continuous projection of what the whole may mean if any one part is to be understood at all.

Taking as our example the first text of the European literary canon, the first sentence of the *Iliad* sets the stage for the rest of the text, which either confirms or falsifies the judgement that this first sentence calls up in the reader: "Sing, goddess, the anger of Peleus' son Achilleus and its devastation, which put pains thousandfold upon the Achaians..." (Homer 1961, 59).

Moreover, for the Greeks *the very first word* set the stage, so to say, which in the Greek text is *μήνιν* (*mēnin*), "of anger/wrath". So, on that account, one would think that the *Iliad* is about the consequences of anger for the Achaians. The second sentence,

however, says “What god was it then set them together in bitter collision?”, thereby modifying our initial projection, since it now lays out the prospect that the action is fated by the gods.

This process of revisions of the meaning of the whole based on the meaning of the parts goes on until reaching the end of the book when, with a view of the whole completed, we can now review whether our earlier interpretations of each part were justified or need to be viewed in a new light. Circumspect readers discover that, as a matter of fact, a single text allows for indefinite re-readings, each of which constitute new hermeneutic circles as our grasp of ‘the seat in life’ (*Sitz im Leben*) of the text is plumbed in new ways while one’s own experiential horizon shifts as well.

To come back to Gadamer’s view concerning *Vorurteile*, he explicitly says that the value of any pre-judgement remains open until there is a “grounding” (*Begründung*) in the text (Gadamer 1990, 275, 369),⁶ and accepts that this runs counter to the principle of Cartesian doubt, which gives no credence to anything that could be subject to the slightest uncertainty (1990, 275). Moreover, insofar as the matter to be understood is embedded in a tradition of interpretations, that tradition (*Überlieferung*) itself becomes a resource for understanding the text (Gadamer 1990, 274 and *passim*).

So, contrary to Moro Abadía and González Morales’ assumption (2012, 273), Gadamer’s view is *not* that we need to expunge the prejudices transmitted to us by tradition (see Gadamer 1990, 281–290). That indeed is the requirement set out by Enlightenment methodology, inspired by figures such as Francis Bacon. Gadamer’s view, rather, is *to take up* those ‘readings’ generated in tradition as interpretive options for our own readings. In this sense, Gadamer is a self-conscious heir to the Romantics who saw the rejection of tradition as an unjustified, biased prejudice of the Enlightenment.

Nonetheless, for the hermeneutic circle to be ‘virtuous’, pre-judgements have to be ‘worked out’ through confrontation with the things (or matters) themselves (“*den Sachen selbst*”). In other words, to avoid being stuck in possible mis-interpretations, what is required is an approach that opens up the interpreter to *what the text actually says* (Gadamer 1990, 270–271). On Gadamer’s view, this whole process, in any case, requires a grand initial presupposition, namely that the text or matter under view be seen as having “unity of sense” (Gadamer 1990, 271–272; 2007a, 68). Arbitrary pre-judgements are detected by the fact that they do *not*, in the end, permit unity of sense of the text. That is, *arbitrariness* (*Beliebigkeit*) and *bias* in pre-judgements are shown by the fact that, even if they may fit a particular part, they cannot give a coherent sense to the *whole* text.

So, in a way, if not confirmed by the text, pre-judgements are something like ladders to be thrown away once climbed. Though perhaps this would be stretching analogies, one may view Gadamer’s approach to understanding as running in parallel

6 Guided by the literal meaning of the German term *Vorurteil*, pre-judgement, Gadamer points out that in the justice system a judge begins assessing a case guided by antecedent facts and case precedents, which necessarily will colour her grasp of a case. While this may seem prejudicial, in the pejorative sense of biasing, Gadamer argues that it is inevitable and not necessarily harmful if accompanied by readiness to change as called for by the facts of the matter.

with Karl Popper's "falsificationist" approach in science (Popper 2002).⁷ According to Popper, all empirically testable proposals are valuable, since *any* falsifiable hypothesis investigated will increase our understanding – even if only in a negative sense (by showing us which are to be rejected).

Linguisticity or *Sprachlichkeit* and Dialogue

For Gadamer the process of discovery whether pre-judgements are justifiable by confrontation with the text is fundamentally mediated by language (Gadamer 1990, 385 and passim). With regard to actual texts, this entails that interpreters inquire not only regarding the meaning of the terms in relation to their immediate con-text but also regarding their use within the historical period in which the text originates. However, the linguisticity or *Sprachlichkeit* of understanding means more than this since, most importantly, language and linguisticity make possible the question-and-answer dialogue that Gadamer posits as essential for all understanding (Gadamer 1990, 373–384; 2007a, 63–70).⁸

Texts are only understood as meaning a particular thing when understood in relation to *what else* could have been asserted. But then, in order to understand what something means, it is necessary to ask what those other assertions are that were *not* made but *could* have been. That, however, means that we see the text at hand as *a chosen answer to a question*. So, to understand a text is to understand the question that it is answering (Gadamer 1990, 375–389). In other words, grasping the meaning of a text is a matter of entering into *a dialogue* with that text, insofar as adequate interpretation means asking a question of the text such that *the text may reveal what question it is answering!*

As a paradigmatic case we might think of Plato's figure Socrates who, surprised, asks what it is that the Delphic oracle means when, in the name of the god Apollo, she claims that Socrates is the wisest person in Greece (Plato 1978, 20e-23c).⁹ Socrates has to find the answer to the riddle by asking himself how to understand the oracle's claim through the alternatives that she does not choose. The way he decides to investigate this is not by asking the Pythia but by querying those who claim to have wisdom to learn in what way he might be counted as wise among them. At the end of his

7 As noted by a reviewer of this paper, "hermeneutical pre-judgments always rely on tradition (not the tradition of knowledge but the tradition of our understanding the world, i.e., our being-in-the-world) while this is not the case for Popper's falsifiable hypotheses" (Reviewer 2, 25 March 2021). Another reviewer suggested that the 'tradition' in which Gadamer writes precisely stems from Ancient Greek times, but that this fact should give us pause to wonder whether we may apply Gadamer's hermeneutics to traditions that have arisen in other 'epochs', such as the Palaeolithic. While I take this to be a fair challenge, I see no reason for supposing that the principles of understanding carved out by Gadamer are not universally relevant.

8 However, as noted by a reviewer, this does not fully describe the importance that language has in Gadamer's hermeneutics: "Language stands for the 'ontological turn' of hermeneutics because through language humans take part in the emergence/unfolding/appearance of truth (there is no truth besides its self-expression)." (Reviewer 2, 25 March 2021)

9 Regarding Plato's texts as exemplary of question-and-answer dialogues in the hermeneutic process, see Gadamer (1990, 368–379).

investigation, Socrates concludes that the oracle had attributed to him greater wisdom than others precisely because he had already realised the need to continue enquiring what it is to be wise, and not to take it as a given that he is.

With regard to non-linguistic, visual manifestations of the sort found in the Palaeolithic record, how the matter at hand may enter into language and dialogic conversation may seem more challenging than in the literal case of texts. The issue in this situation might be rephrased as a question regarding the point that the manifestation is making *by contrasting it* with its possible alternatives. For instance, if we have a painting of a lion at hand, the questions that we may want to ask are, why paint a lion and not a bear or a rhinoceros or a mammoth or something else?, why here and not somewhere else?, why near the other motifs that actually are near it, and not near *other* motifs?, why paint?, why make a lasting mark at all?¹⁰

In short, the way to find the question being addressed by the painting is by asking what point is being made by making an image here, making it in this way – when some other image could have been done in some other place in some other technique – or not at all. So, Gadamer's approach suggests that understanding something like the lion image is predicated upon understanding the choices available to someone such that, without this lion image painted in this way here, the point being made would not be made. In other words, the question is, what makes this lion image at this spot 'right'?¹¹

Horizons and Fusion of Horizons

Gadamer introduces the term 'horizon' in relation to all that an interpreter can 'see' from where she is at any one point in time, in relation to the object in question. It directly relates to the supposition just discussed that a text is to be understood as a response to a question that the author has. The term horizon designates *all the responses* that an author could have given in answer to the question that she faced when she chose to give the particular answer that she *actually* gave, and that the interpreter is now confronting as text (Gadamer 1990, 375 and *passim*).

The concept of horizon may be easily grasped in relation to those cases in which we are puzzled by certain actions or responses. For example, if we hear of someone of whom we know that she prefers vanilla that she in fact chose a chocolate ice cream, we may feel puzzled by the choice – until we find out, for example, that either chocolate was not available or that she didn't realize that it was available. If we find out that chocolate was available and she knew this, we will have a gap in understanding, which we generally try to fill in by bringing in new hypotheses (new pre-judgements) to broaden our horizon by supposing, for example, that sometimes she feels adventurous or curious or has other reasons to act out of character.

Gadamer uses the concept of horizon to draw attention to the role in understanding of one's historically shaped consciousness (*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein*),

10 Also see Davidson (2020) regarding enduring marks in relation to pre-historic art.

11 Regarding fittingness or rightness, also see Gadamer's (2007b, 197) description of encounters with art, be they in poetry or the pictorial arts: "the same affirmation ... that we often utter as we recognize a work of art is 'right,' namely, 'So ist es!' ['That's it!' or 'Yes, that's the way things are!']".

that is, to the fact that one's grasp of what makes sense is conditioned by our particular place in historical time, and by how that place shapes our ways of 'being aware' (*Bewusst-sein*). The consequence of this is that while some statement or other human manifestation may have made obvious sense to its author, we, at our place in time with our particular historically shaped consciousness, may struggle to understand what it may mean (see especially Gadamer 1990, 305–312). There are two errors in the grasp of what understanding is that Gadamer points out with the help of the concept of horizon.

On the one hand, along with the proponents of historicism (*Historismus*), Gadamer repudiates the idea that we can simply 'be objective' in the sense that the Enlightenment philosophers and the later positivists thought that we could. There is no 'god's eye' point of view for describing and grasping the meaning of human action or its products. Our attempts at achieving objectivity are always already pre-figured by our historically shaped consciousness when approaching the object.

On the other hand, Gadamer also repudiates the Romantic historicism according to which we understand when we can reconstruct or reconstitute the mindframe or consciousness of the author of a text. He sees two problems with this, first, that the text *says more than the author knows or is aware of*, and, second, that understanding is not achieved until the text or product can be located *within our own horizon*.

Regarding the first problem, it is now commonplace that poems, novels, speeches and artworks have *a voice of their own*, which may or may not coincide with the views of the author (Gadamer 1990, 377–378). Often artists and writers themselves point out that they only found out what their artwork or text means once they finished it. This leads to the practical conclusion that interpreters should take *the text* as their guide and *not* the generally inaccessible, and possibly irrelevant, mindframe or thought processes of its authors.¹²

Regarding the second problem, Gadamer makes the general point that *to really understand* any thing means that *we* can see the point of the statement or expression, not just its authors or contemporaries (Gadamer 1990, 379–381). This becomes clear as soon as we try to imagine a situation in which we don't. Generally, we are quick in giving sense to the thing to be understood by launching certain pre-judgements. If someone does something that seems odd we feel a certain urgency to find some way to accommodate the view within our own worldview, for which reason it is difficult to locate examples of things that are not understood at all. Nonetheless, we may find some cases that offer more 'resistance' to interpretation than others.

For instance, we may "feel stumped" by behaviour that falls squarely outside common norms of reasonableness or morality, such as acts of excessive recklessness or of excessive cruelty or strongly contrary to evident self-interest. All such acts call for special accounts. The apparently reckless behaviour of rock climbers and spelunkers, for example, can be understood once we become aware of their superior training and appropriate equipment and their unique motivations. The behaviour in question does not become any the less out of the norm but understanding it means that we can see how, if we were in their place, with their conditionings, we might see it as reasonable or acceptable.

12 Within a different context this point is also developed by Wimsatt and Beardsley (1954) with regard to "the intentional fallacy".

Highly morally deviant behaviours, such as parricide, infanticide, incest, cannibalism and idolatry all have occupied writers for a long time in their attempt to understand what may move those who are deemed to do such acts. Those acts may become more understandable, even if still morally abhorrent, if we find evidence that their motivation was of the sort that *we* might *also* envisage if our apparent options were radically narrowed as theirs were. For example, Medea's infanticide of her own children may perhaps be understood, if at all, as an act of desperation in a cloud of rage. In such ways, we attempt to accommodate actions inside our own horizons that would normally not find their place there.

In any case, it is to be noted that Gadamer *only analytically* speaks of two distinct horizons, of interpreter and text, just as Aristotle only analytically speaks of substances being matter and form while, in reality, they are inseparable. Actual understanding is merging or fusion of horizons (*Horizontverschmelzung*, literally, 'melting together of horizons') that are only kept apart in analytic discourse. So, Gadamer argues that if the horizon of the author were reconstituted *without* making sense to the interpreter, at most we would have a sort of antiquarian, meaningless, record. Genuine examples may be hard to come by, but perhaps the case of Ötzi, "the Iceman" found in a glacier at the Austrian-Italian border, is to the point. His presence in the inhospitable area is a mystery until, on the evidence of his fatal injury by arrowhead, we may conclude that he was perhaps fleeing aggressors (Fagan and Durrani 2016, 303).

Another candidate for manifestations that are hard to understand may include the pre-historic, abstract markings on cave walls, even if their meaningfulness as some sort of proto-writing has recently been mooted (George, 2016; von Petzinger, 2016). We can perhaps approximately establish when the marks were made, who the people were who made them, what they used to make the marks with, that they were not just accidental (i.e., that they were intentional), that the makers had other options (such as leaving no marks, or painting or engraving figuratively), and so on, but *still* fail to understand because the action does not clearly make sense *to us*.

No Final or Single Meaning

Gadamer emphasises that the so-called hermeneutic circle is a *virtuous* circle, but that this does not mean that it will lead to a single or final resolution. That is, though there are ways to arrive at more adequate understanding, our understanding will still continue to evolve (Gadamer 1990, 379).

As already pointed out, the hermeneutic circle is *a circle* insofar as understanding is achieved by repeated going through a text since, to understand, we need to project meanings for the whole based on the parts that we progressively read. At each stage of reading we apply pre-judgements. Adequate reading is achieved by attention to what the text actually says, so that the pre-judgements that fail to fit the content of the text are dismissed. For example, the first few words may suggest that a text is a thriller. As one reads on, one may encounter wording, however, that suggests a comedy instead. If this second supposition gets further confirmed, the way to understand the text may be to dismiss the earlier assumption or to somehow integrate the two. This process continues on until one has completed the reading, by which time each of the parts would have acquired a different meaning from what they had in the first reading.

The result is that this is a process that, if done with care, will continuously extend and correct understanding of the text. In literature we may think of the story of Theseus and Ariadne: when we read of Theseus slaying the Minotaur we may view it as an heroic epos, when he elopes with Ariadne it looks like a love story, and when he leaves her stranded on the island of Naxos it seems to be a tragedy, even if – as a consolation prize – she gets to marry the god Dionysus. In archaeological research the evolution of understanding over time is well documented, since each generation of researchers can use new techniques and theoretical frameworks not previously available. Moreover, and especially to the point, conclusions reached in earlier research can work as pre-judgements to be tested by re-analyses of the evidence, given updated techniques, auxiliary data, and more comprehensive theories.

For instance, and quite remarkably, after the confirmation of the very early dates for most of the paintings in the Chauvet Cave, conclusions about the supposed pinnacle in representational skill attributed to the painters of the earlier known Palaeolithic sites, such as Lascaux, had to be revised. For an example on a smaller scale, once there was an identification of a single author for most of the handprints located in the entry area of the Chauvet Cave, the presence of handprints deeper in the cave changed in meaning when it was discovered that at least some were of the same person.

Hermeneutics Against ‘Art’ in the Palaeolithic?

What concretely can Gadamer’s hermeneutics contribute to the understanding of Palaeolithic visual manifestations? Certainly, contra Moro Abadía and González Morales (2012), more than the recognition that we are subject to biased prejudices. Even Émile Cartailhac’s famous initial refusal to accept that the paintings in the cave of Altamira may have had pre-historic origins (Cartailhac 1902) may be seen to make a positive contribution to the understanding of those manifestations, since it shows the degree to which its standards of figurative, realistic, representation coincided with the prevailing artistic tastes of his own time.¹³

The Concept ‘Art’

Gadamer’s hermeneutics suggests that understanding means being attentive both to the horizon of the text, or matter under consideration, and to our own horizon. While Moro Abadía and González Morales (2012) suppose that Gadamer’s account vindicates their supposition that Palaeolithic visual manifestations should *not* be seen *as art*,¹⁴ hermeneutics invites us to reflect not only on the horizon of the paintings but also on *our own horizon*.

13 This surprising fact calls for explanation, of course. See Davidson (2020) for an attempt to explain this kind of convergent cultural evolution.

14 Ironically, Gadamer himself displays no reticence in speaking of “early cave paintings or other prehistoric plastic images” as pertaining to “the pictorial and plastic arts” (2007b, 197). Moro Abadía and González Morales themselves unapologetically refer to Pleistocene visual manifestations as “artworks” (2012, 270).

As I have argued elsewhere (Heyd 2019a; see also Heyd 2019b; Heyd 2012; Heyd 2001; Heyd and Clegg 2005), critics of the application of the term ‘art’ to visual manifestations from prehistoric and non-European contexts oddly tend to work with an outdated concept of art, shaped by the artworld and art theories of the 18th and 19th centuries. In other words, for whatever reasons, such critics *continue* assuming that the term ‘art’ makes reference to the production of objects of ‘transcendent’ character, made in aesthetic spheres separate from the rest of life and in an individualistic context under the influence of ‘genius’, to be recognized by ‘a universal faculty’ but also requiring art connoisseurs, and necessarily denuded of practical utility (see Moro Abadía and González-Morales 2008; Soffer and Conkey 1997; Tomášková 1997; White 2003). This view of art, however, has been *long superseded*, as even a furtive glance at 20th century art practice and products reveals.

Without going through my earlier arguments here again, be it noted that even by 1902, when Émile Cartailhac had finally recognized the paintings in the Cave of Altamira to be pre-historic, the 18th century concept of painterly art had *already* been thrown into disarray. We need only remember that the Impressionists, active 1876–1886, had by then turned painting into an ‘experimental’ visual exploration, aimed at uncovering how we actually see landscape (*Encyclopaedia Britannica* n.d.). Moreover, as is well known, the trend to turn art into a wide-ranging exploratory field for challenging all formerly secure givens of artistic practice, political assumptions and societal prejudices continued with increasing power from that time onward. This is evidenced by the work of the Fauves (from around 1905), Pablo Picasso’s *Demoiselles d’Avignon* (1907), Marcel Duchamp’s “anti-art” (from around 1913), dada (from about 1915), and all the subsequent avant-garde movements (e.g., see Bürger 1984).

Certainly, by the time that Marcel Duchamp proceeded to offer ready-mades, such as an upside down urinal titled *Fountain* (1917), as art, *any* pretense that art were to be defined through appeal to inspiration by genius, or delimited by exclusive production for an aesthete art market, had been blown apart.¹⁵ Only dyed-in-the-wool provincials could still believe in the old definition of art while art practice and theory went on their inexorable trajectory toward the mostly non-aesthetic modes of the present.¹⁶ Out of hand, it does a profound dis-service to the understanding of Palaeolithic manifestations to dismiss the hypothesis that these figurations may be viewed as art – simply by appeal to a conception of art that was *anachronistic already* when Palaeolithic manifestations were first discovered!

Moreover, to take refuge in terms such as “visual imaginaries” (Conkey 2010) in order to avoid the term ‘art’ does not necessarily make things clearer, because the term ‘imaginary’ really leaves unclear that art is not just a matter of a mental state but that it refers to actual physical traces on view. Some suggest to replace the term ‘art’ with “visual cultures” (e.g., Nowell 2006, 244) on the supposition that the term ‘art’ is “anachronistic”. Its advantage, however, is debatable since it would seem that the concept culture is no less anachronistic for, surely, no Altamiran hunter-painter

¹⁵ But see Humble (1984, 119–28), who argues that avant-gardiste pieces should not count as art.

¹⁶ See Binkley (1977) for an account of non-aesthetic art.

thought of ‘visual cultures’, and, while there may be debate regarding what art is, the concept ‘culture’ is not any the more transparent (see, e.g., Ingold 2002 329–349). Furthermore, when terms such as “visual language” are applied to pre-historic manifestations,¹⁷ they probably are not to be taken at face value since, surely, it would be difficult to show that each image on display has a univocal, conventional meaning in a system of symbols, as befits a language (see Young 2001, 38–44).

In any case, why we should not consider as art those sophisticated manifestations that in any other context *would* count as art calls for further argument. We do not have the same reticence to call highly skilled objects used as axes ‘axes’ or as scrapers ‘scrapers’, and so on. In short, to object calling something ‘art’ merely on the grounds it does not originate in the Modern European sphere of influence would itself seem to be biased and possibly ethnocentric. Attempts to implement a new vocabulary in Archaeology to avoid those terms that for whatever reasons have seemed problematic all run into the same hermeneutic fact, pointed out by Gadamer, that to understand anything we necessarily have to apply *our* categories and *our* terms to the text or matter at hand, since it has to make sense *to us*.

Gadamer on Art

Gadamer himself, on whom Moro Abadía and González Morales (2012) ground their argument, critiques the aesthetization of the art concept and the reference to genius that took place in the wake of Immanuel Kant’s discussion of art (Gadamer 1990, 98–99 and *passim*). In Gadamer’s view art is grounded in skillful generation of objects and events that allow for a kind of complementary cognition to conceptual cognition.¹⁸ That is, artworks ‘open up a world’ that, modulated by the capacities of the artist, more or less richly disclose insights that may help viewers to make sense of their own lived experiences. As James Young (2001, 26–38) points out, one way in which illustrative art does this is by offering *types* of events, characters, experiences, and so on, that resonate with our own particular experiences.

For instance, Homer’s poetry was a fictionalised image of the world of the Achaians, who the Greeks in the classical period, 700 years after the supposed events, considered their ancestors. By accessing the legendary ‘world’ of their ancient heroes opened up by Homer’s poetry, the Greeks thought of themselves as having access to models for how to understand, and lead, their own lives. How do we, today, understand Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*? Following Gadamer’s account, for us to understand those works means reconstructing the historical context in which these texts originally were meaningful – *as well as* finding those texts meaningful *for us today*.

Understanding Homer, in other words, is the *merging or fusion of the horizons* of these respective meanings. When we read of the anger of the fighter Achilles, of the frustration of the seer Cassandra, or of the homesickness of Odysseus, understanding

17 See, e.g., Chippindale and Nash (2004, 23), who speak of rock art as “a more complex and expressive visual language”, by which they apparently intend that the manifestations make up a meaningful array.

18 Today we may say that the contrast is with cognition based in propositional statements. For an elaboration, see Young (2001, in particular 38–43).

the text means that *we do not* merely see each one of the images offered by Homer as presenting feelings or intentions enclosed in a black box, in the way that the feelings and intentions of insane people or aliens might be. Rather, understanding those texts means that *we* can be caught up in what it would mean *for us* to be those people in that world, and to transpose the point of their experiences into *our own lives*.

Understanding non-textual visual manifestations, of course, entails its own complexities as well as advantages. While texts may elicit images, their operative mode of reaching us is through language, that is, through systems of symbols that have conventional interpretations. This linguistic mode of communicating at least partially fixates interpretation in ways that visual manifestations *do not*. Visual images, however, may import meanings that cannot easily be transmitted by words (see Langer 1953), as is captured by the saying that “an image is worth a thousand words”. Consequently, the import of such visual manifestations is much more dependent on the apprehension of their context and on the interpretive skills of the viewers. This is the more so, the further we are separated from the original experiences that motivated those manifestations.

Seeing Palaeolithic Visual Manifestations as Art

For whatever historical reasons, the science of Archaeology has mostly pursued modes of explanation modelled on the natural sciences, intent on determining the past in terms of cause-effect relations. As noted, it may be argued though that, insofar as Archaeology is a historical science engaged in uncovering human actions and experiences, hermeneutics as an account of how we attain *understanding* should rather be of central interest to the discipline (Johnsen and Olsen 1992, 423).¹⁹

The archaeological record may contain traces of human activity of diverse kinds related to the maintenance and reproduction of lives and communities, but also traces such as paintings and engravings that may puzzle us, insofar as they seem to have involved activities that were not merely instrumental in reaching easily understood goals, such as securing nutrition, shelter or mates. Many of the extant painted or engraved marks, sculptures and spatial arrangements of objects, display a degree of care in their execution that clearly exceeds the functional requirements of such objects. For instance, elegantly executed spear throwers, broaches and hand-held tools. As such, they very much fit the current most accepted concept of artworks as things, events or processes that are in some way *extracted from the natural world* and *offered for appreciation* to a potential or actual audience (Dickie 1974).²⁰

19 See Gadamer (2007a, 67) regarding the importance of hermeneutics in the social and natural sciences as well as in the humanities. The more general question concerning whether the social sciences, including Archaeology, ought to be directed toward explanation or toward understanding (*verstehen*) has a long history in itself, going back to the debate between Peter Winch (1958) and Alasdair MacIntyre (1977). In more recent times, the latter approach has been applied to art manifestations on rock surfaces by researchers such as Ingold (2013) and Morphy (2005).

20 For further discussion of arguments in favour of viewing manifestations on rock, including those originating in the Palaeolithic, as art, see Heyd (2019a). Regarding Dickie’s view,

If we adopt this minimal description as a working definition of art, what difference does it make to view Palaeolithic visual manifestations, such as paintings, as art? My proposal is that it would enrich our understanding of those manifestations with a number of productive working hypotheses. For example, if paintings are viewed as ‘works’ in which something particular is isolated from the remainder of the natural world and exhibited for appreciation, we are called upon to grasp *how* the required skills were developed, *why* these works were placed where they were, *in what ways* they were expected to be appreciated, and so on.

If, furthermore, we take on Gadamer’s view that an artwork discloses and encloses a world (Gadamer 2007b, 207 and *passim* 207–220), the supposition that we may be encountering artworks attains much more importance still. Among other things, we are challenged to determine *what* belongs to each work, thereby constituting the limits of the world disclosed. Most simply, we may ask whether there are *scenes* and what belongs to them, for it makes a difference whether, for example, a lion image is to be understood by itself or as part of a hunting or mating scene.²¹ We may also ask ourselves what difference *the location* should make when images are taken to open up ‘a world’. This is a point long explored by André Leroi-Gourhan’s (1965) structuralist approach, and can be further developed through micro- and meso-analyses of the relation of each image to any and all features surrounding it (including non-figurative marks, bones stuck in nearby cracks in the rock, pre-existing bear bones, rock arrangements on the cave floor, and so on).

It has been pointed out, for example, that the five female pubic triangle images in relative proximity to each other in the final sections of the Chauvet Cave may comprise a ‘network’: two are situated in the Megaloceros Gallery at the entrance to a side passage, one at the entry to a gallery (Belvedere), and one on a pendant in the End Chamber in front of the corridor leading to “the Sacristy” (Le Guillou 2003), which contains a very finely painted horse image. Yanik Le Guillou suggests that “All of the pubic triangles occupy a privileged and perhaps essential position in the construction of the parietal layout. They provide strong evidence for a real thematic structure that is closely associated with the cave’s topography” (Le Guillou 2003, 171).

Viewed as art, we could see these female pubic triangle images as playing a role in a sort of “site-specific installation” in which each of the elements plays a part in the meaning of the whole suggesting that whoever completed respective images transformed that whole environment into a unitary meaningful space. We may compare this to the way in which institutional spaces, such as temples, Moorish palaces, or Italian Renaissance squares function. While each part composing such constructions may have its own significance, there is a supervening significance characterizing the whole, which gives new meaning to each part. As Mircea Eliade has argued, for instance, the threshold of a temple door transforms the interior space into something separate, while that separation of the interior transforms the whole such that the threshold leading to the interior attains a new, liminal, meaning (Eliade 1963).

also see Gadamer (2007b, 201–204) who, in his semantic analysis of Ancient Greek terms, somewhat anticipates this view.

21 Regarding scenes, see Dobrez’ (2013) excellent analysis.

Someone may perhaps object that interest in factors such as location, participation in scenes or particular behaviours represented should be considered a given in archaeological work, independently of whether one supposes there to be art. It may indeed seem ‘natural’ to investigate such features, but we may wonder whether these pursuits are not driven by the concept of art – even while it is being repudiated or held in suspense. We may ask what we are to make of figurative paintings or engravings if they are *not* seen as artworks. Possibly, it may be suggested that such manifestations are part of some kind of signalling, so that the image of a lion is to be seen as a sort of announcement about the availability of lions in the area, or as providing instructions about their hunting behaviour, or as records of shamanic journeying, or as identity markers of the maker’s group.

Seeing paintings and engravings of the sort found in the Palaeolithic record merely as signalling systems, seems rather highly implausible, though, since *any* mark can function as a sign, and *any* sign can be utilised as a symbol. Viewing figurative manifestations merely as communicative symbols would, in other words, leave unexplained why at least some of them display very considerable painting and drawing skills, producing high degrees of verisimilitude with beings from the reality of the makers, and are placed in remote locations such as deep in caves. Certainly, some *non*-figurative marks might suffice to convey information, as long as there were suitable conventions shared among the people who are to view it. Viewing figurative manifestations as art, in contrast, works as a potentially enriching hypothesis, inviting us to enquire into the insights that they may have in store.

Conclusion

If we briefly shift our view to the perspective of philosophy of science, we may note that the denial of art status to Palaeolithic manifestations may *only be justifiable* if art is understood through 18th and early 19th century conceptions. However, from our present, 21st century, perspective, their candidacy as artworks has *not* as been falsified and moreover, to speak in Popper’s terms, is rather still proving *productive*. Furthermore, if we take note that with respect to human activities we are interested in *understanding*, letting ourselves be guided by Gadamer’s hermeneutics may lead to new ways of viewing the products and processes of human action from our deep past.

According to Gadamer’s hermeneutics all pre-judgments function as something like suppositions that are to be confronted with the text or other material under consideration. The suppositions that *cohere* with the material are to be retained, at least provisionally, while those that fail to cohere are to be discounted. As pointed out by Moro Abadía and González Morales (2012, 269), certain pre-judgements that were gender-biased and ethnocentric, for example, have been shown to be without support, and should rightfully be dismissed.

Coming back to the question “What can we learn from Palaeolithic art?”, posed to us at the Symposium, we need to ask two questions: are all Palaeolithic manifestations art, and is there something that we can learn from them? In response we can see that some substantial argument would be needed to suppose that all the countless non-figurative marks, including the ubiquitous cup marks distributed in various constellations in caves and on rocks on the open air, should count as art, even if some groupings of them

possibly might be. There are reasons however, to view figurative images as artworks, intended to incite viewers to appreciate these visual manifestations as expressions of ways of seeing and being in the world. Under that interpretation it fully makes sense to investigate whether their makers had applied judgement in making and correcting images, in creating scenes, and in finding particular locations for their creations.

In other words, seeing the images of lions in the Chauvet Cave *as art*, for example, explains their great verisimilitude with real lions, for then we can understand why their makers displayed a very considerable mastery of the medium to facilitate their appreciation. Alternatively, if those images were only intended as a shorthand to *symbolize* lions then it would be unclear why such considerable work would have been invested, since a few marks, with minimal or no similarity, could have sufficed for this purpose.

By drawing attention to the manner in which we understand, Gadamer's hermeneutics may help us get a sense why people, even while living through the extremely chaotic climatic conditions of the Pleistocene (see, e.g., Burroughs 2005), were engaged in creating richly meaningful figurations and places. Such insights may come to stand us in good stead for the new, climatically changed, geologic epoch of the Anthropocene that we are all now entering (Heyd and Lenssen-Erz 2015).

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