

Do You Ever Dream of the Animals at Lascaux?

Ian Maleney

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> searching for something to suspend the mind for a precious legitimise and extend the deluge of content, desperately room, connected only to the flows of online information which matter the form, is an exhausted individual, alone in their - are usurped. The ideal viewer for contemporary work, no - and between people and places, pasts, traditions, rituals transmission are flooded, the connections between people about, only what draws the exhausted eye. The networks of there is only what is being pushed, only what is being talked is no distinction to be made between one work and another; every corner of existence: in the era of the newsfeed, there This is the work the world now produces at such scale, and

ahistorical, antisocial wasteland of the culture industry today,

few hours before they have to go back to work. This is the

must be instantly recognisable and easily understood; the clearly stated; the visual language (and the actual language) industry which gives rise to it, and it reflects the ever more heavily and intentionally stereotypical, reflects the globalised The form of this work, which is so repetitious, so schematic, so



too clearly the seams and stresses hidden within the all-iswith such ruthless competency and efficiency, that it seeps into But I overdose quickly on this brand of new age guff. I can see summed up in one line, it's no good. gimmick, the set-up, the conceit must be obvious - if it can't be on it for content. The 'themes' of the work must be simple and rapid-paced and unreflective media environment that depends

> graph. And when numbers go up, everyone feels good. subscriber numbers, and bestseller lists are trivially plotted on a the success of this work is easily measured: box office returns, haven't had to think for an extended period of time. Of course and the audience is expected only to feel gratitude that they a recognisable face journeys toward some meaningless goal this or that oppression; or entertainment, in which a hero with told something it already knows about this or that injustice, through which the audience feels better about itself for being 'concerns' of the moment, and a clear purpose – education, world view: it has a clear message, fitting with the 'issues' and financially speaking, succeeds because of its fidelity to that for new markets. And much of the most successful art today, results and better profits, easily reproduced and reinvented reconstructed from first principles, easily tweaked for better reassembled, then the work of art, like social life itself, is easily elemental components, quickly commoditised and endlessly If the world, including works of art, can be broken down into



think to myself, we are doomed. beautiful young women muses in her mountainside cabin, and I sale. "Everything we need to be happy is within us," one of the being told to desperate people, a dream revivified and put on not of depth and meaning across time, but of a shallow story are moments when the mask comes off and the revelation is use his discount code for sustainable cotton underwear. There like cosplay, as if Thoreau was alive and trying to get you to escapist and isolationist and, once again, deeply asocial. It feels like nostalgia for something never truly experienced. It feels rejects - it sours the whole endeavour. It seems too much dependency between the lifestyle and that which it notionally well presentation. The dishonesty, the desperation, the co-

> begin to imagine what I absolutely do not have right now: an and non-human worlds are immediate and reciprocal. I can what is in my food, where my relationships with the human a real say in shaping my living environment, where I know I have a much greater sense of agency; where I can have this lifestyle, this milieu, I can imagine for myself a life in which not why. I think it because, given just a little interaction with I am drawn to it, though as always with algorithms, it knows

I don't want to pretend I'm above this - the algorithm knows life. (As the saying goes, in a gold-rush, sell shovels.) a time - there is money to be made selling visions of the simple supplies. At a time of great crisis - and I believe this to be such Etsy operations to chainstores selling witchcraft and sorcery end woo-woo Gwynth Paltrow is hawking today; from twee meditation apps funded by venture capital to whatever highand natural life. Variations on this theme are everywhere, from technological beneath the gloriously authentic natural world suppression of the digital, the relegation of the inauthentic and - to sustain and propagate a lifestyle which is all about the uses the means of digital sharing - primarily the social networks one highly visible aspect of a self-conscious movement that farms on remote mountainsides. These homesteaders are but with terrific beards buying cabins in the woods and starting recommendations are full of beautiful young women and men The system only knows me so well: my YouTube

witnessed its singular, brief existence. Yes, for nothing - there is work, burning in the flames, dissolving in the minds of whoever accumulation; no career advancement, no social capital. All that nothing. Yes, for nothing – for no monetary gain, for no asset that work would be for nothing? We savour the phrase: for The publisher responds, sounding concerned: but then all

sacrificial, awesome, dangerous. imagination. There is something pagan about it, something A single copy, read once and destroyed – the idea fires the picked up; to be sold or unsold; to be always being forgotten. the fate ordained for it - to be forever lying around, ready to be read once, aloud, and then burned. A book that would escape My friend, a poet, tells me she wants to write a book that is

miraculous and the revelatory, less open to the unmotivated It is hard to imagine an environment less hospitable for the from the solo YouTuber to the largest Hollywood conglomerate.

with all the time that has passed betweer discovery of these forms unfolded over some time – a process in which nothing is ever certain, in which any misstep may sever the tender, miraculous connection to something other – so our own rediscovery flowers in time, blooming see the bulls, the oxen, the aurochs, we feel the beauty and the power, but we see, too, the hands that rendered that beauty and power on the wall. We hear since eclipsed. And just as the artist's

ne by someone, for someone, the mind turns instantly to

thoughts of some eternal presence, some transient way we have of seeing and experiencing beauty, both in its creation and its unknowable afterlife. The ochre work's own immediate beauty, it has long one finds upon entering certain religious flank rises up like a cathedral wall. I think my most secular thoughts: someone saw this in their mind, and brought it about now. The air is suddenly the same as through both time's passing and the possibly for some purpose which - sguipling

the ingenuity of the individual are the driving forces of social and technologica

progress. We are living in an insanely world, where the logistics of

measurement we could plot

increase or decrease. There is simply

quality can not exactly be said to

on a graph to show, see, art is getting

and investment and

return, that risk

sees everything within it as a commodity

and treats everything and everyone

complex and unbending; a world whi

better, objectively. The novelist of today has no upper hand on Cervantes or

Shakespeare, the composer no special insight unavailable to Bach. The tools

as a widget in some unknowably large production line. Everything is a case of supply and demand, and the only thing that matters, in the end, is the margin.

may change but, humans being human, we learn the truths of life (which, I hope, is what we put into art) not as a set of of facts but as a series of revelations for

which we may or may not be prepared,

drives into the dark, towards what haunts and shocks and, we hope, what heals.

Maybe the primary lesson of Lascaux

is that art never progresses in any meaningful sense. It changes all the time in style, in aim, in value, but its

the pain of living knowing we will die. The desire is what burns through it, what

by what is natural and unthinking and nquestionably not us. The grief is all

caused the same esonant shock they

creation would have

for contemporary society, which bases its entire structuring mythology on the idea that hard work pays off, that you can chip away at any problem in a concerted fashion and receive a solution

come to me, this is

what I feel: grief, for the ancestors and what they learned that we have since forgotten; and desire – desire to feel the warmth of the fire against tired skin, to feel all the endless night beyond it, to

touch skin to stone and leave a vision in the dark for others to follow: the flank and the frame, the first evidence we have of being haunted by the animal,

ng ready and willing is no guarantee it

which we may or may not be open. And because the work of art itself is similarly revelatory, miraculous even, it cannot be engineered, or even really anticipated;

animal world – the otherness which, we cannot help but feel, they knew and felt

in a manner we have since left behind.

dream of the animal, the earthen, has

ome wonder has dissipated,

echo almost lost within ourselves, a

connection to the ancestors and their

o you ever dream of the animals at

seem to move as the shadows us all. In the warm flicker of firelight, the figures – drawn so directly, with such the cattle, the oxen, the aurochs. I see a gigantic ochre flank hanging off a bony black frame; the spine leading in one clear movement to the skull and the double-edged awareness; free on the dark stone wall, as never in the flesh, of move. Hidden beneath the burning surface of the earth, they are secretive, safe, almost eternal. In my mind I see there and painted with their hands, are not; all that is outside of us, free of our ns. This is not just an animal, but in this place become the animal – all that ie, out of the dark as they come to we whose long-past ghosts stood the certainty of death. ascaux?

as never changed – perhaps to have nbled upon them a day after their The mystery of these animals has not changed for the longest time. Perhaps

that we do not?

anything at all as seriously as that? What does it say about us the methods and the goals? What would it take for us to take seriously? To not laugh, to not cynically reject and dismiss nor is our own. What would it take for us to take Gregory ignore. Shawn's position by the end of the film is not so secure;

- but there is some truth in it which becomes impossible to looking for solace and redemption in the most clichéd places even - the desperate flailing of a rich and unsatisfied man may strike us at first as a little ridiculous, faintly embarrassing as the only viable vector for this imperative rejection. His stories of his efforts - the social, collective, ritualistic aspects of them professionalised world of industry, and to recognise the nature spiritual ambition. To see him as a necessary corrective to the him in some way, to be glad of such insane fervour, such wild After listening to this for two hours, it is difficult not to admire

that comes at the expense of career and reputation, what of it? meaningful connection with the world and the people in it. If is not seeking a better work-life balance here, but a more getting up from his own grave, reborn as a new man. Gregory attempting to 'find himself' again by destroying himself - by and into something larger, more transcendent. In short, he is structures through which one can slip out of self-consciousness collaborative work, in submission to imposed and impersonal He is attempting to find himself in others, in collective and without fail, social, anti-technological, and deeply ritualistic. in any one of us. And it is telling that Gregory's adventures are, expression of some yearning which may, at any time, well up is something attractive at the heart of what he is saying, an storytelling, which is so compelling and mysterious, but there him altogether - it may just be a virtue of Gregory's masterful feels about Gregory's exploits, but like him we cannot discredit Shawn, and we feel all the ambiguous unease and distaste he writing them off as illegitimate. We are invited to identify with The film ingeniously parodies Gregory's efforts without ever

found elsewhere, much closer to home. towards such audacious spiritual efforts; his rewards in life are but on the level of personality or character, he is not inclined material level, he has neither the time nor the money to care, and search for meaning that Gregory has gone through. On a even pay it in full), and uninspired by the existential anguish much the food will cost, should he have to split the bill or relatively comfortable life (he is worried throughout by how He is a domestic person, someone happy with a small and of himself, is Gregory's audience and he is horrified by all this. The writer Wallace Shawn, also playing a fictionalised version

and lying in his own grave. an elaborate process by which he winds up exhausted, naked, Orientalised mysticisms. The story that stands out, however, is theatre workshop in a Polish forest, interacting with vague building an eco-commune in Scotland, running a nocturnal of the film is taken up by his recounting of these attempts: seeker, trying in vain to - quote unquote - find himself. Much as his family and friends, to become something of a spiritual been living. We learn that he has largely left the theatre, as well rather lost his grip on the reality in which he had, until then, led to understand, has been somewhat unhinged recently, has plays a fictionalised version of himself. His character, we are dinner in a fancy restaurant, the theatre director André Gregory consists almost entirely of two men talking to each other over In My Dinner With André, a film directed by Louis Malle which

nothing, as it were. and received freely, without debt or credit, as an offering. For asynchronous; a conversation in which everything is given timeless (or rather time-full) experience, illogical, unbounded, nearness, of intimacy, is what I'm searching for. It is a kind of in an instant or unfold over a long time, but the feeling of of the world. And, within that, a connection. It can arrive presence, their skill and grace, their vision and interpretation is the instinctive perception of the other - their immediate exceeds my grasp. I am looking for that deep shock which I had not previously understood and which, even in revelation, recognition, a light in the dark, which reveals a beauty, a truth, I am looking, always, for a protound experience, a flash of myself, my taste, and my refined sensibility. Nostalgia is poison. entertained by art. I don't seek it out so I can feel better about specific meaning it conveys. I do not want to be educated or it addresses a global and undifferentiated audience, the less

surrounds and feeds on it, the more numbing it is; the more



greater the work's intertwinement with the industry that For my experience of art now is largely a numbed one – the

again, I believe this to be such a time - what choice is there? along? It feels so obvious, trite even, but in times of crisis - and ourselves and others, is developed? That Keats was right all ground upon which sensitivity toward the world, towards has not changed at all since Lascaux? That art was and is the Is it too abstract to say that art's role, as much as it has one,

or largely fantastical past? What role can art play in this? contemporary avoid being a reversion to an already discredited and such disparate pressures? How can that rejection of the in practice, and how could it be sustained against so many mystical authenticity? What would such a position look like end tarpit of nostalgia, romanticised folk culture, and driven societies of the world, without falling into the deadone finds in endless evidence across the tech-and-financesystematic atomisation, globalisation, and dehumanisation aesthetic, philosophical, ethical position - which rejects the fundamental question: is it possible to articulate a position – an Often I find myself asking some variation on a single