



## (PALEO)ART IS A SOCIAL SYSTEM. SEMIOTIC INSIGHTS FOR AN INDEPENDENT 'VISUAL LANGUAGE'

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**Abstract** - (Paleo)art is a social system. Semiotic insights for an independent 'visual language'  
My contribution starts with the semiotic acknowledgement that each work of art has to be considered as the support of an unlimited number of different "interpretations", i.e. as just one element of what Peirce called the infinite semiosis. Furthermore, each work of art is always a part of a system, which is commonly called Art. Art system can be interpreted as a communication system: its elements dispose themselves following some formal rules, the semiotic value of each contingent structuring can respond to many different functions, and its conformation tend to acquire an isomorphic structure with the society's one. About Paleoart, I defend the idea that there is no such thing as "primitive art" because, if it is a system, (primitive) art cannot works just a little bit: either it works, either it doesn't work. Talking more specifically about European Paleoart, I deepen the idea that, through a sacred - and semiotically structured - display of animal forms, humans of that ancient past tried to structure the world through the imaginary, and vice versa to structure the imaginary through salient forms belonging to the world: i.e. big herbivores. Finally, I suggest that this need of structuring their imaginary could correspond to an attempt of seeking human's place in the context of natural world.

**Riassunto** - La (Paleo)arte è un sistema sociale. Contributi semiotici per un indipendente "linguaggio visuale"  
Il mio intervento prende le mosse dal presupposto semiotico secondo cui ogni opera d'arte deve essere considerata come il supporto di un illimitato numero di differenti "interpretazioni"; ovvero come un elemento di quella che Peirce ha chiamato la semiosi infinita. Inoltre, ogni opera d'arte è sempre parte di un sistema, che è comunemente chiamato arte. Il sistema dell'arte può così essere interpretato come un sistema di comunicazione: i suoi elementi si dispongono seguendo regole formali, il valore semiotico di ogni strutturazione può rispondere a molte diverse funzioni, e la sua conformazione tende ad acquisire una struttura isomorfa con quella della società stessa di produzione di quest'arte.  
A proposito della Paleoarte, difendo l'idea secondo cui non esiste una cosa chiamata "arte primitiva" perché, se questa costituisce già un sistema, questo significa che la sua funzione è già pienamente assoluta. Trattando più in particolare della Paleoarte europea, approfondirò l'idea secondo cui, attraverso un dispiegamento semioticamente strutturato di forme animali, gli umani di quel lontano passato stessero tentando di strutturare il mondo attraverso l'immaginario, e viceversa di strutturare l'immaginario per mezzo di forme salienti appartenenti al mondo (ovvero i grandi erbivori). Infine, avanziò l'ipotesi secondo cui quest'esigenza di strutturazione dell'immaginario possa corrispondere ad un tentativo di ricercare una collocazione per l'umanità nel contesto del mondo naturale.

**Résumé** - Le (paléo)art est un système social. Aperçus sémiotiques d'un « langage visuel » indépendant  
Je commencerai par ce principe de sémiotique qui veut que chaque œuvre d'art soit considérée comme étant le support d'un nombre illimité d'« interprétations » différentes, c'est-à-dire comme un élément de ce que Peirce appelle la « sémiosis infinie ». En outre, chaque œuvre d'art fait toujours partie d'un système, que l'on appelle communément l'art. Le système artistique peut être interprété comme un système de communication : ses éléments se disposent selon des règles formelles, la valeur sémiotique de chaque structure possible peut répondre à de nombreuses fonctions, et sa composition a tendance à acquérir une structure isomorphe à celle de la société.  
En ce qui concerne le paléoart, je défends l'idée selon laquelle il n'y a pas d'« art primitif » parce que, si c'est un système, l'art (primitif) ne peut pas fonctionner « juste un peu » : soit il fonctionne, soit il ne fonctionne pas. Par rapport, en particulier, au paléoart européen, j'approfondis l'idée selon laquelle, à travers un arrangement de formes animales sacré (et sémiotiquement structuré), les hommes du passé essayaient de structurer le monde par l'imaginaire, et inversement de structurer l'imaginaire par des formes saillantes appartenant au monde, telles que les grands herbivores. Enfin, je pense que ce besoin de structurer l'imaginaire peut correspondre à une tentative, de la part de l'homme, de trouver sa place dans le monde naturel.

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### THE SEMIOTIC CHAIN

It is 1656. We are in the Alcazar of Madrid, at the court of King Philip IV. A palace chamberlain, whose name is Diego Velázquez, has just offered his latest painting to the royal family. Philip IV is greatly amused by the strange scene shown in the portrait: at the centre can be seen his daughter, known as the Infanta Margarita, surrounded by her entourage; but nobody is in a formal position, like in all other official royal portraits. On the left, it is possible to see a painter, that is, Velázquez

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himself, who is looking at us, the viewers, while he is painting possibly something positioned where we are. Finally, in the background of the scene you can see a mirror, in which we can recognise the king of Spain, Philip IV himself, and the queen, Mariana of Austria. The painting has been thought out so that when the king and his wife look at the painting, they are not looking at a 'frozen scene' of the past, but they are actually living inside the depicted scene, because the mirror positioned in the background is supposed to reflect their image in the present time, and meanwhile they are portrayed by the depicted Velázquez. It is as if the mirror shown in the scene transforms the painting into something live, in a time-space device capable of melting art and reality, object and subject, past and present. For this reason, the king prefers to keep the painting in the private area of the Alcazar, precisely because it has been explicitly painted for his (and his wife's) gaze, and not for the public. (Following the writer Jon Manchip White, who wrote a book about Velázquez,<sup>1</sup> this painting<sup>2</sup> would also sum up the entire work and life of the Spanish painter.)

In 1819, the painting was moved to the Museo del Prado, where it is still today. Obviously, in this museum the painting is shown to people who are not King Philip IV and his wife. Consequently, the semiosis connected to his fruition is drastically different, decontextualised by the previous net of personal familiarity with people and places that characterized the 17th-century interpretation of the work of art at the court of King Philip IV. Now, in the museum, the painting is seen as an aesthetic object, as an important work of art representing a style or a period, as an interesting experiment of *mise en abyme*. It represents many things, except the 'original' interpretation. In 1843, the painting received its present name, *Las Meninas*.

In the middle of the 20th century, in 1957, Picasso painted a series of 58 Cubist interpretations of *Las Meninas*, thus giving to the original subject the role of mirroring contemporary art. Nine years afterwards, the philosopher Michel Foucault published *Les mots et les choses*, whose first chapter is dedicated to a philosophical analysis of Velázquez's work of art, defending the thesis that *Las Meninas* would be a liminal work of art at the border between classical and modern art.

What does this brief history teach us? Mostly the fact that art is a quite complicated device that can convey a great quantity of information and knowledge; more precisely, it can be the medium of innumerable semioses. The described painting has supposedly been used for amusing the royal family, for representing an interesting *mise en abyme*, for summarising a painter's work; it has been taken as an aesthetic object, as a subject for further Cubist 'transpositions', as a symbol of the birth of modern art and so on. Does this mess of semiosis pose a problem for the definition of art? Not at all. Trying to define the art domain would be as meaningless as asking for the definition of (verbal) language. There is no definition because the specificity of (verbal) language is the fact that it has no specificity, but it permits a great number of behaviours; not least, it permits (but not demands) rational thought. Seemingly, art, as a system of signs, can assume a great quantity of forms.

#### ART AS A SYSTEM

Because of the fact that man is a social animal whose life and – more importantly – cognition is based upon communication, I do not think that we commit an error if we use this wide concept – communication – for understanding human behaviour in its complexity. The claim that paleo-art should be interpreted as a vast complex (and not as a collection of images) has been posited many times. I do not agree with the sceptics who try to eliminate the word 'art' from the archaeological domain, because of the – indubitable – fact that prehistoric art is merged with economy, religion, story-telling and so on. This is true. But who has ever seen a pure form for what concerns humankind? Is actual art not involved with philosophy, new media, economy and so on? Was not medieval art strongly influenced by the Church, by medieval imaginary, or by a nobleman's taste (and his wallet)? Does this fact prevent us talking about art? Not at all. As Bryson points it out:

If we consider painting as an art of the sign, which is to say an art of discourse, then painting is coextensive with the flow of signs through both itself and the rest of the social formation. There is no marginalization: painting is bathed in the same circulation of signs which permeates or ventilates the rest of the social structure.<sup>3</sup>

1 *Diego Velázquez, Painter and Courtier*, Hamilton, London, 1969.

2 Whose first official title was *Portrait of Madame the empress surrounded by her dames and one dwarf*. I retrieved most of the information from the article by Catherine Saouter, 'Les Ménines de Velázquez, de Palomino à Internet: étude sémiotique et sémiosique', *Protée* (1998), pp. 19–28.

3 Norman Bryson and Michael Holly, *Visual Theory: Painting and Interpretation*, HarperCollins, 1991, p. 66.

Following Arsenault and Gagnon,<sup>4</sup> we should then highlight the fact that every form of art 'constitutes a system, and therefore a model for the organisation of homogeneous elements possessing their own rules of formation and of internal transformation'<sup>5</sup>. Basically, this means that every visual sign we take from past or present cultures is intrinsically a part of a specific system. One of the ways of analysing semiotic systems is to consider their elements as crossed by two axes, that is, their paradigmatic and syntagmatic planes.<sup>6</sup> The paradigmatic plane regards the choice of one signifier among all the (finite) possibilities that the particular sign permits. As an example within the visual domain we should think of a token example from the archeological domain: Sauvet and Włodarczyk<sup>7</sup> tell us that, in European Paleolithic art, the motifs of the mammoth and the motif of the doe never coexist in the same panel (for them, in cave art the panel represents the semiotic unit, the analogue of the discourse). Their conclusion is that, for some reason, their semantic value should be considered as opposed, even if they share the same semantic field (for this same reason they are mutually exclusive).

Conversely, the syntagmatic plane refers to the fact that every sign receives its sense according to its place in the global configuration of signs. A classic example in the domain of archeological data is the fact that, for cave art, there is often evident dissymmetry within the animal species represented at the entrance, in the middle and at the end of the cave, as many analyses after the studies of Leroi-Gourhan pointed out. (This fact should also remind us of the general importance of the placement of rock art, which has to always to be analysed in its physical context<sup>8</sup>).

For Saussure, each system of signs is a 'system of differences'. I would like to make a comparison between this strict semiotic concept and a wide sociological view:<sup>9</sup> society is structured in a similar way. In society each person receives his 'sense', or his social role, by the fact of being opposed to other roles. For example, masculinity is conceived as opposed to femininity (the two attributes can coincide only in the androgenic divinity), childhood as opposed to adulthood (once again, only gods can be young and old at the same time, like the Greek and Indian ones; also the Christian trinity permits an analogous interpretation, and so on.

In the same way, there is also a strong syntagmatic sense of social life, mostly evident in the importance of kin relationships:<sup>10</sup> in traditional societies, the kinships<sup>11</sup> represent a holistic structure that informs any context of life. Within this structure, everyone receives his role only by being put in relation with others: a son is such because he has a mother. An uncle is an uncle because his sister or brother has a child. And so on. Marshal Sahlins makes a similar statement about poverty: 'Poverty is not a certain small amount of goods, nor is it just a relation between means and ends; above all it is a relation between people. Poverty is a social status. As such it is the invention of civilization.'<sup>12</sup>

#### ART AS A SOCIAL SYSTEM

The strong concept that I am trying to formalise is that, in some sense, when we consider art (be it paleo-art, modern art or pop art) the system always comes before the single visual sign, ontolo-

4 Daniel Arsenault and Louis Gagnon, 'Pour une approche sémiologique et contextuelle en archéologie rupestre du Bouclier canadien', *Paléo-Québec* 27 (1998), pp. 213-41.

5 Ibid., p. 221 (my translation).

6 Which for Saussure constitute the constellation around the linguistic sign (*Cours de linguistique générale*, [new edn], Payot, Paris, 1972, p. 174), and which I use in a far wider sense than the original. The notions of syntagma and paradigm are not banal, and still help in thinking adequately about the semiotic chain that underlies any social system. The most simple language system ever used by a human being is, without any doubt, the one that using Stephen Hawking is using for communicating and even for writing books: his left blinking eyelash. The paradigm is a digital code (up/down), while the syntagma is time: he can make just one blink at a time, so what comes first influence what comes after. DNA also uses the same criterion: the paradigmatic axis permits only two kinds of associations (A-T/C-G), and clearly the sense of their action depends upon their position with respect to the global configuration.

7 Georges Sauvet and André Włodarczyk, 'Éléments d'une grammaire formelle de l'art pariétal paléolithique', *L'anthropologie* 99 (1995), 2/3, pp. 193-211, 207.

8 Dagmara Zawadzka, 'Canadian Shield Rock Art and the Landscape Perspective', MA dissertation, Trent University, 2008; Dario Seglie, 'Rock Art and the Environment', *Cahiers de l'Aars* 8 (August 2003), pp. 1-3.

9 I owe to Niklas Luhmann and his theory of society the illuminating concept by which 'the functional systems emerging within the society conform to, and embody the principle of operative closure and, therefore, will exhibit comparable structures despite factual differences between them' (*Art as a social system*, Stanford University Press, 2000, p. 1).

10 Cf. Claude Lévi-Strauss's classic study *The elementary structures of kinship* (*Les structures élémentaires de la parenté*, PUF, Paris, 1949).

11 Following Lévi-Strauss, I think that kinship for traditional societies represents a deep structure that has isomorphic analogies with many other contexts of life. For example, from a structural point of view, kinship's traditional structure is isomorphic with the general nature of visual sign. Within kinship each one is at the same time 'son of...', 'father of...', 'cousin of...' and so on, at the centre of a complicate spatial net. In the same way visual signs have multiple relations with what is up, down, on the right, etc. On the contrary, in our modern mononuclear societies family structures have a quite linear aspect ('son of...', 'son of...', 'son of...'), exactly like the linear signs of alphabetic writing, symbol of the linearity of thought too.

12 *Stone Age Economics*, Aldine Atherton, 1974, p. 37.



gically and also chronologically.<sup>13</sup> Art is a social structure. It is not so trivial, because there are still eminent specialists who make predictions about the oldest 'symbolic competences' of humankind, starting from single 'engraved specimens, which provide ample evidence of non-iconic paleo-art tradition of the period from roughly 200,000 to 35,000 years ago'<sup>14</sup>. Bednarick (like many others) asserts that 'human cognition ... evidence consists of indicators of complex pre-meditated human behaviour ... the use of coloring materials; the use and making of beads and pendants',<sup>15</sup> etc. But human cognition basically is a space of relations, and not a factory. Drawing conclusions from single events or a single archeological datum would be as senseless as thinking that autistic children are more intelligent than others just because they often demonstrate better mathematical skills.<sup>16</sup>

Human cognition is composed of modules which are often one against the other (like society from a Marxist point of view). But the evolution of human cognition is not the evolution of one particular ability (the mysterious symbolic behaviour, which nobody can define with exactitude). On the contrary, it regards the socialisation of different cognitive components, which without this socialisation simply would not exist. Thus, the artistic device is not just an externalisation of an internal capacity or of an internal vision. On the contrary, the system of signs thus created is the medium through which a certain kind of cognition can start and can display itself. Art is a certain kind of thinking, and not its representation, its double (as the various theories of mimesis want us to think). Artistic (visual) signs create a meaningful net which permits humans to think the world, and at the same time to think themselves. This is the reason why, in general, communication systems are able to deeply influence the way of thinking of people.<sup>17</sup>

The epistemological confusion derives from the still largely shared view by which 'the ability of creating arbitrary relationships between referrer and referent is one of the most defining characters of humans'<sup>18</sup>. The question of arbitrariness is very delicate, and I will not treat it here. I personally do not like this concept if taken naively, as if it were possible to choose the sign by which to convey meanings that would be waiting elsewhere to be chosen.<sup>19</sup> For language, even Saussure stressed the fact that 'language is always inherited',<sup>20</sup> and as a consequence it is somehow naturalised. If the semiotic threshold that defines humans was the one that permits the establishment of arbitrary signs, what should we think about, for example, dogs, which easily learn a great number of arbitrary signs (like the one for sitting and so on)? And we can also think about the many experiments with chimpanzees and bonobos, which are even able to learn some linguistic rules.<sup>21</sup>

Terrence Deacon, in his book *The Symbolic Species*, has developed a masterful conceptualisation of the symbolic competences of humankind. For him, the central point of symbolic behaviour is not the possibility of establishing arbitrary relations between a sign and a meaning, but it is the symbolic system itself which has to work autonomously in order to be cognitively powerful:

Symbols cannot be understood as unstructured collection of tokens that map to a collection of referents because symbols don't just represent things in the world, they also represent each other. Because symbols do not directly refer to things in the world, but indirectly refer to them by virtue of referring to other symbols, they are implicitly combinatorial entities whose referential powers are derived by virtue of occupying determinate positions in an organized system of other symbols. Both their initial acquisition and their later use require a combinatorial analysis.<sup>22</sup>

13 Exactly in the same way, historically, the sense of society precedes by far the sense of the individual; the first known evidences of individualism come from Greece, but a complete individualisation did not happen before the bourgeois revolution.

14 Robert G. Bednarick, 'The Origins of Symboling', *Signs* 2 (2008), pp. 82-113, p. 100.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 84.

16 Cf. Hsu-Min Chiang and Yueh-Hsien Lin, 'Mathematical ability of students with Asperger syndrome and high-functioning autism', *Autism* 11(6) (1 November 2007), pp. 547-56.

17 As has clearly been demonstrated by the research of Walter Ong, Eric Havelock, Marshall McLuhan and Jack Goody.

18 Bednarick, *op. cit.*, p. 104.

19 On the contrary, the sign is the event of signification. Among the multitude of definitions of sign, my favourite is the following: 'Le signe n'est pas une simple *réception d'un stimulus* [...]; le signe serait plutôt le lieu logique même où un representamen devient signe. Le signe réside autant dans l'objet que dans l'esprit; il est défini comme l'*occasion* [je souligne] de leur rencontre'. (The sign is not a simple *reception of a stimulus* [...]; the sign is rather the logical place where a representamen becomes sign. The sign resides either in the object then in the mind; it is defined as the *occasion* [I stress] of their meeting'. (Jean Fissette, *Pour une pragmatique de la signification*, XYZ, Montréal, 1996, p. 80).

20 Cited in Roland Barthes, 'Éléments de sémiologie', *Communications* 4(1) (1964), pp. 91-135, 111.

21 Cf. David Premack, 'Language in Chimpanzee?', *Science* 172(3985), New Series (21 May 1971), pp. 808-22.

22 Terrence Deacon, *The Symbolic Species*, Norton, New York, 1997, p. 99.

So, to conclude this brief review, (visual) signs talk to each other more than they talk to us. 'The art system ... rests, one might say, on the ongoing dissolution of its elements, on the transitory nature of its communications, on an all-pervasive entropy against which anything that persists must organize itself.'<sup>23</sup> But 'without a model for the collective or social function of symbolic reference, we cannot understand the origin and evolution of human cognition'.<sup>24</sup> It is possible to see the strong relation that links art to society in the fact that, when society changes, rock art changes too. This fact has been explained by Anati,<sup>25</sup> who described four major social categories: archaic hunters, evolved hunters, pastoralists and complex economy. In his works, he has largely demonstrated that each one of these categories corresponds to a certain range of artistic patterns. (The history of writing systems reaches the same conclusion: each writing system – the Sumerian, the Egyptian, the Chinese, the Greek, etc – was born and has been used for different reasons and purposes.)

#### THE IMAGINARY'S PLAY

From an anthropological point of view, human beings always need to structure their imaginary. Nobody is ever born in a universe as such. The human world is a cultural one. Art, in its broader sense, is thus the way in which humans can accomplish the necessity of melting the different temporalities represented by the slow unconscious cycles of the imaginary and the immediate daily world, with its short-term activities and preoccupations. Art would thus also name the concrete realisations created in this process of co-structuring of the two universes between which human life takes form. Works of art find their place in the differential gap between actual events and the deep necessity of sense.

If there is an original word, it is unpronounceable, inaudible, unbearable (the secret name of the Only God, the one that each poet is seeking); if there is an original image, it is unwatchable (or it is a mirror; the ultimate image that each visual artist tries to depict, generation after generation); if there is an original work of art, it is an impossible object (the *lapis philosophorum* that nobody could yet create); if there is an original human being, (s)he is unapproachable (the Great Mother, protected by the relative taboo of incest<sup>26</sup>; she represents the figure that, as Freud states, we seek all our life). The taboo renders the One unattainable – or protects humans by its disproportionate energy. The anthropological literature reports the case of many cultures in which individuals keep their real name hidden, and give others a nickname; because if somebody knows the real name of something or of somebody else, he has power over this entity. And we should also consider the case of all the secret societies among traditional population that, seemingly, keep the secret of names.

The sign chain seems to be grounded in this original taboo. The sign's main job is thus to divert humans from any original reality, because nobody could bear it.<sup>27</sup> 'In the dim region where art, magic, and religion meet and overlap, human beings have evolved the 'metaphor that is meant',<sup>28</sup> because metaphors keep the world at a certain distance, while helping understand it at the same time. The multiplication of signs is thus the consequence for having tried to reach the One (what the Tower of Babel and the Fall of Man show in different ways). Gods and languages spread out, while rites try to enucleate the main semiotic knots of these chains. The only sole gods which resist (the Jewish and Islamic ones) are the ones which are still under a strong regime of the taboo. When Freud lifted the robe of the Great Mother, thus breaking an ancient taboo in some way, feminine identity was freed, and women could assume a great quantity of roles in society (exactly what happened with Christianity after Nietzsche 'lifted its robe'.)

#### EUROPEAN PALEO-ART

I would like to draw some conclusions in trying to apply these premises to European paleo-art taken as a global phenomenon. Sauvet<sup>29</sup> has statistically demonstrated the basic validity of Leroi-Gourhan's intuitions about the structural nature of European paleo-art. Paleo-art is a language. But what does it talk about? I basically agree with the interpretations that we see in European paleo-art a phenomenon linked to the sacred sphere. If we consider the difficulty of access to caves, the artistic quality of (many) paintings and the recurrence of themes, we should take this evidence as very clear

23 Luhmann, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

24 Richard Van Oort, *op. cit.*, p. 267.

25 'Archetypes, constants, and universal paradigms in prehistoric art', *Semiotica* 100(2-4) (1994)(20 ref.), pp. 125-40, 127-9.

26 Probably many cultures had to develop the religious concept of the 'Father God' as a compensation for this reality.

27 Even Nietzsche asks: 'How much truth can [...] a man bear?' (*Ecce Homo*, Adelphi, Milano, 1965 (2001), pp. 12-13, my translation).

28 Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an ecology of mind* (University of Chicago Press, 1972), p. 183.

29 For example, Georges Sauvet and Suzanne Sauvet, 'Fonction sémiologique de l'art pariétal animalier franco-cantabrique', *Bulletin de la Société préhistorique française* 76(10) (1979), pp. 340-54.



signs that something more than story telling or amusement was involved in this wide phenomenon. Without talking about specific religious forms (like totemism, animism, shamanism) I would like to stress the simple fact that caves had to be considered as places in contact with hidden forces, also because from a phenomenological point of view caves are places marked by a sense of immutability: always the same temperature, the same darkness, the same silence (and what is divinity if not immutability?). Mostly, caves carry a strong symbolism that refers to a sort of *uterus mundi*, in which possibly all living forms sprang up.<sup>30</sup> Surely, they represent a religiously powerful place (as are mountains, lakes, rivers, etc.).

The other basic evidence for what concerns European Paleolithic art is its precise subject: animals, that are a source of food and source of danger; source of skin and of fur; animals that are in connection with gods and with seasons; animals whose blood is synonymous with human life; animals that represent the big movement, the big score, the big breath of the world; animals that are so difficult to reach, vanishing like signs. Bateson, in *Steps to an ecology of mind*, says that original gods had to be thought of as animals rather than as humans because animals (still) have grace, they do not live out the separation and the guilty falsity associated with the human condition, that is essentially connected with the use of language: the (plurality of) word(s) represents the original separation from the world; if the power of the word is its capacity to name absent things, naming the entire world corresponds to the maximum separation from it. Furthermore, animals always seem to know much better than humans the rhythm of seasons, so that one could even wonder who follows who: animals move following seasons or vice versa? Animals can catch subtle odours and little noises, thus demonstrating that they know much better than humans what happens in the world, the secret laws of its functioning. Mostly, they never seem to suffer. The logical conclusion is that they know something that humans do not know, or have forgotten.

Probably, one of the most special events in the whole history of hominisation is the moment in which humans understood themselves to be different, separated entities in a world of natural correspondences. Humans belong to this world, but they seem a condemned species: any other living form seems to know very well what is its place in nature; only humans can choose which place to occupy. But the choice, as we know, is also a condemnation; and the path of knowledge is always a quest for the original place. Lévi-Strauss said that animals are 'good to think with' (*bons à penser*),<sup>31</sup> and Sauvet in some way continues on the same path.<sup>32</sup> If we can be certain of something about paleo-art – among a quantity of details that will always elude our analysis – it is the fact that it represents the first evidence of an effort to structure the world through the imaginary, and vice versa to structure the imaginary through the world, maybe also the first attempt of humanity to find its place in nature, in the animal kingdom, where the multiplication of (animal) signs should correspond to the 'lifting of the robe' of 'animality', in search of 'humanity'. But other finalities are to be supposed to be in connection with the ones enucleated.

## CONCLUSIONS

The main concept of my intervention is that the art system is not a 'hard-driven' one, but on the contrary is a kind of floating semiotic device, at the disposal of different social issues. For this reason the 'language of painting ... is to be continually created and recreated'.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, questioning the origin of art is like questioning the origin of the wing: you will never find a little wing, then half a wing and finally the entire wing. If the wing is not complete from the beginning it simply does not work. The same has to be said of the art system: there is not such a thing as proto-art or 'primitive' art. Either you have art, or you do not have it, *tertium non datur*. The question then is displaced from the origin to the function: art does not have to be considered as a human device that took millennia to develop. Art is always there, as a possibility of the thought. The question is rather how and for what reason some human beings under particular conditions found that the art system was useful in the context of their social structure. Following van Oort, we should thus ask ourselves: 'What indispensable anthropological function does [the art system] perform that has pushed it to its current status as a universal feature of our species?'<sup>34</sup>

30 On the ground at the very bottom of Gargas cave in the south of France it is possible to see little engravings representing animals that seem to be originating from the deeper point of the same cave, running toward the cave's entrance.

31 Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Totemism*, trans. R. Needham, London, Merlin, 1962, p. 89.

32 Georges Sauvet et al., 'Thinking with Animals in Upper Palaeolithic Rock Art', *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 19(03) (2009), pp. 319–36.

33 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *L'œil et l'esprit*, Gallimard, 1960 (Italian trans., *L'occhio e lo spirito*, SE, 1989, p. 37, my translation).