



Intuition and analysis in the recording, interpretation and public translation of Neolithic engraved signs in western France

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ABSTRACT

We must distinguish between two profoundly different ways of knowing a thing. The first implies that we go around that thing; the second, that we enter into it. The first depends on the observer's point of view and on the symbols that are used to express that point of view. The second does not adopt any point of view, nor does it rely on any symbol. One could say that the first knowledge stops at the relative, whereas the second, where possible, achieves the absolute. Consequently, the act of interpreting a prehistoric carving/painting on a standing stone or on a boulder demands the generous use of language: on the one hand, the language of science, which is dominated by the symbol of equality, and where each term can be replaced by others; and on the other hand, by the lyrical language, where each term is irreplaceable and can only be repeated.

But the language of science cannot be anchored within an archaeological reality that is distorted by a poorly-controlled process of information acquisition. We must adopt an approach, both in the field and in the laboratory, which allows one to reproduce an experience and which takes account of our choices and our initial interpretations in the graphic representation of the painted or engraved signs, through the implemented sensors. This contribution will showcase the use of an approach that integrates several digital methods and allows us to progress the archaeology of images. It both shares and accumulates our information base and our knowledge, proceeding as it does on a basis that is epistemologically renewed.

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The conference in which we were invited to take part centred on two main topics: “documenting art” and, in the subtitle, “recording techniques.” This duality is necessary: it focuses clearly both on a classical object of study and on the means which, we hope, can help us transform it into a subject of state-of-the-art research: digital technology. We would therefore like to build on the relationships between these two topics and propose a process of reflection which, rather than being limited to the means of recording and representation, should show why taking technology as a starting point, even as *the* starting point, is not expedient. Of course we all appreciate that, in a multi-disciplinary research programme, one phase should not take precedence over the others, but there is a need to re-think this epistemological requirement from time to time.

In this context, the “interpretation” of a support, an engraving or a painting, is not something that should take place only at the final stage of the archaeological study of a work of art: we must, rather, insist on the importance of the interpretative frame for approaching the object in question, even before we begin recording it with digital or geometrical tools.

We will start by describing in greater detail the challenge posed by the use of the two types of language which are indispensable for a proper understanding of parietal art and, indeed, of all symbolic productions originating in ancient times: lyrical language and scientific language.

1. The absolute and the relative

“...The relative is in science; the definitive is in art...”

“... You can turn back in time through the centuries, but not turn back in art. Masterpieces are on one level, all of them, that of the absolute...”

(Hugo, 1864: 14, 17).

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These few sentences from Victor Hugo's essay on William Shakespeare give us the essence of the distinction made by philosophers between two profoundly different ways of knowing a thing: The first one would be to circumscribe this thing; the second, to penetrate it. The first one depends on one's standpoint and on the symbols through which the thing may be described. The second one is not attached to any particular standpoint and does not rest on any symbols. The first type of knowledge could be said to be relative, whereas the second one, whenever it is given, would have attained the absolute (Bergson, 1903: 98).

Let us take as an example a duck gliding on the river Cam. The observer's perception of this object will be different depending on their standpoint – or whether they are themselves in movement – and will be expressed differently, according to the associated system of axes or points of reference, that is to say, according to the symbols we use to translate it. We would call this movement relative for two reasons: in the first case, as well as in the second one, the observer remains outside the object being observed.

The concept of absolute movement, on the other hand, would imply that we attribute to the moving object – the gliding duck, or maybe a silent boat – an inner, animate, sentient being. Further, that we can sympathise with its inner states and that our imagination allows us to experience them. Therefore, the absolute can only be attained through intuition, while every other approach is based on analysis.

- Intuition is the kind of sympathy giving us insight into the inner life of an object or a being and therefore knowledge of what it is that makes it unique and thus irreplaceable.
- Analysis, on the contrary, is a procedure relating the object to characteristics which are already known, that is to say, such characteristics as the object may have in common with other objects. To analyse is therefore to express a thing in terms of what it is not. Thus every analysis is a translation, an unfolding through symbols, a representation based on successive standpoints where connections have been found between the new object (the one under study) and others deemed to be already known. (Bergson, 1903: 100).

It is well-known that empiricism in archaeology, specifically in the field of the archaeology of images, all too often limits itself to seeking the original in the translation – where it can, of course, not be found; empiricism then goes on to deny that the original exists, on the basis that it cannot be found in the translation. This must result in negations which, if one looks at them closely, simply mean that analysis is not intuition. (Bergson, 1903: 107).

We may add that, however much abstract ideas may be useful for analysis – for a scientific study of the object as it relates to all other objects – they are nevertheless incapable of replacing intuition, that is to say, the metaphysical investigation of the object in its essence and uniqueness. Moreover, this is all the more important when the object of study is what we call parietal art or rock art: images without words from a distant past.

2. Lyrical language and scientific language

“...Let us point out a radical difference between Art and Science: Science is perfectible; Art is not...”

“...Pascal the savant is outrun; Pascal the writer is not...”
(Hugo, 1864: 14, 29).

Returning to Victor Hugo, who was a writer and a poet, it is clear that he was already aware of how, with regard to antiquity and even in his day, many scientific theories had been overturned and many others were likely to be eventually overturned. Taking the 17th century physician and mathematician Pascal as an

example, Hugo emphasises that Pascal's outstanding literary legacy is unaffected by the passing of time or the accumulation of knowledge.

To interpret a prehistoric painting or engraving is therefore an act which will not easily blend these two languages (Servien, 1935; Deleuze, 1968):

- on the one hand, scientific language, dominated by the symbol of equality, and where each term can be replaced by others;
- on the other hand, lyrical language, where each term is irreplaceable and can only be repeated.

It is always possible to “represent” the repetition as an extreme resemblance or a perfect equivalence. But the fact that one can gradually pass from one thing to the other does not mean that there is no difference in the nature of the two things.

Having established this duality and attuned our thinking to it, we should turn to the interpretative frame and emphasise how important it is. As archaeologists, we are meant to capture and record engraved or painted images bearing this frame in mind, while always questioning the legitimacy of our expert interpretation. This is therefore a matter we should dwell on before proceeding to discuss recording techniques.

3. The interpretative frame

The original meaning of “to interpret” was to translate a text from one language into another and, by extension, to clarify, to try to explain what might be complex or ambiguous. Now that we also refer to “interpreting” parietal art, it would be useful to remember that, in linguistics, interpretation is the attribution of meaning to deep structure – semantic interpretation, or to surface structure – phonetics, for example. In archaeology, however, the meaning of interpretation ranges between giving one's personal meaning to a fact which does not have a self-evident explanation, and “acting a part,” by translating in one's own personal way the thinking of an author from the distant past, similarly to a musician who plays – interprets – a chaconne by Couperin. The latter type of interpretation is by no means restricted to historical times: Leroi-Gourhan (1992) remarked in 1974 that the prehistoric artist, by translating into images the movement of living creatures, individually or in groups, was using the only means then available to represent the passing of time.

Generally speaking, whenever we identify an object by recognising some of its characteristics, this process is anchored in an interpretative frame which determines both what type of object we are looking for and what kind of characteristics we might recognise it by. This applies to any object, be it a boat represented on a megalith or the petrographic origin of the support on which it was carved.

In brief, interpretative frames condition the results of scientific research in two stages:

- firstly, they predispose the segmentation and categorisation work through which certain portions of reality become identifiable and classifiable and which we perceive as variations amidst an influx of sensory data;
- secondly, interpretative frames lead us to notice certain correlations between these segments of reality and pre-dispose us to formulate a hypothesis regarding causality, or confirm an existing one, rather than others.

Scientific activity is therefore an enormous interpreting operation, since it is by means of interpretative work that we try to transform observed correlations into explanations of causality.

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