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The gesture of sight☆

Renaud Ego

9, rue de Bellefond, 75009 Paris, France

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ABSTRACT

The origin of images (defined as figurative drawings and including paintings and engravings) constitutes a question that remains unresolved. Ernst H. Gombrich (1971) and Whitney Davis (1986) have formulated hypotheses that prioritize different fundamental factors in their appearance in the European Upper Paleolithic. The current article identifies some problematic assumptions and oversights of these models, and proposes an alternative model for the origins of drawing in the Paleolithic. For Gombrich, images were originally suggested by shapes in natural features, such as cracks and evocative rocks, upon which people imposed semantic values. People would have discovered horses and bulls in vaguely suggestive rock surfaces and would have highlighted them with colors to render them visible to other onlookers. Whitney Davis reverses this process: objects (as evocative rocks) are no longer perceived as marks; rather, marks (traced by hand) are seen as objects. "Once marks are perceived as things, the full analogical power of the line is logically derived and even detached from mere experience of perceptual ambiguity." Gombrich's hypothetis is paradoxal, as it requires the intellectual ability of "seeing as"- through the previous existence of "natural" images - to explain the emergence of such an ability as intentional drawing. But in David's view, the birth of images arises as a happenstance, even considered as a "logical" and necessary possibility inscribed in lines, that keeps drawing activities separated from any intentionality. If figurative tracings were only a technical development latent in the power of lines, they would have given form to all kinds of figures instead of being so strictly circumscribed to a limited range, namely animals and sexually-charged figures. In that sense, making images reveals an expectation, rooted in drawing activities, that emerges through the specific technical innovation of drawing: the outline. It encircles the dimension of time, internal to the line, in the spatial unity of a surface. It is an inherent and primary symbol of a living body. The visual threshold of resemblance arises from this significant shift. The outlined figures embody the limits of time (death and regeneration) through the sexual theme; and they embody spatial limits, through the animal/species theme. With these living ensembles of simultaneously shared and divided spaces, the question of identity (similar/dissimilar, unity/diversity) begins to be visually revealed.

"Drawing may be the most haunting temptation of the spirit."

Paul Valéry, Degas, Dance, Drawing

Figurative representation was a major step in the development of human conceptuality. Even so, there has never been a precise theoretical framework for its emergence, which has been framed simply as evidence for the fortuitous development that is often called "The Birth of Art." The origin of a capacity for graphic representation has only been examined in terms of the *functions* attributed to drawing: pleasure (Mortillet, Halverson, 1987), sympathetic magic (Reinach, 1903; Breuil, 1952), representation of a sexualized conceptualization of the world (Leroi-Gourhan, 1965), variations on the religious theme of shamanism (Clottes and Lewis-Williams, 2001). These functionalist and teleological approaches were also semantic, as their aim was to understand "the meaning of Paleolithic rock art" (Laming-Emperaire, 1962). Yet it should be noted that these supposed aims can only be secondary intentions derived from a preceding/primary impulse that drove the invention and mastery of drawing.

In recent decades, the conventional archaeological model of the evolution of figurative representation has been overturned; the discovery of Chauvet Cave shattered the tacitly-accepted chronology of its emergence. Moreover, the concomitant nature of

☆ Translated by Claire Heckel.

E-mail address: renaud.ego@orange.fr.

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anatomical and behavioral modernity—which attributed the requisite competencies for the emergence of imagery to *Homo sapiens*—has also been challenged (Bednarik, 1994; d'Errico et al., 1998; Henshilwood and Marean 2003; Vandermeersch, 2006). In the wake of these developments, my present aim is a reflection on the emergence of the *technical* and *cognitive* operation that is graphic representation, based on an alternative genealogy of drawing. I will make the distinction between what I call '*non-iconic drawings*,' most often referred to in the literature as "symbols" or "abstract symbols," and '*iconic drawings*,' often called "pictures" or "images." Inasmuch as they are intentional or demonstrate motivation, these categories of drawings are distinguished from '*markings*,' which are unintentional or at least lack apparent motivation. Even if the distinction between iconic and non-iconic images is inherently somewhat subjective, it is the uniqueness and originality of the latter for which I propose an alternative origin here.

1. The limitations of the theoretical framework

If a theoretical framework has been established for this issue, it can be defined in terms of the opposing hypotheses presented by Ernst Gombrich (1971) and Whitney Davis (1986). The first model is *psychological*, and the second, informed by analytical philosophy, is proposed as a *logic* of drawings. For Gombrich, images were born of the suggested figures discovered in constellations or the surfaces of cave walls, by virtue of the analogical capacity to recognize resemblances. It bears mentioning that this idea had already been evoked by Alberti during the Renaissance, and in a certain well-known account from Pliny. Gombrich (1971: 91) asked if in "the bizarre contours of stones, the fissures or the veins visible on the walls of caves, Man could not have discovered the apparition of horses and bulls before attempting to fix them and render them visible to the gazes of others, with the aid of colored clay?" These natural "furtive images" (forms that resemble other forms) would therefore have been recognized before artificial images had been conceived of, and would have preceded the idea of representation. The term 'image' [from the Latin, *to imitate*] itself suggests this attention to resemblances. Such attention to suggestive reliefs exists, but cannot explain the many drawings that present no basis in figures suggested by the surfaces on which they were realized. For the most part, this psychological projection only serves to bypass the question of origins: neither the analogical competence underlying the concept of images, nor the passion for imitative reproduction, to say nothing of drawing as a technical and gestural expression of this passion, is self-evident. Yet, from the perspective of Gombrich, drawing emerges in a single gesture that derives immediately from the synthesis of a manual technique (the act of drawing) and an intellectual end (that of figurative representation).

The question of the origin of the image remains unresolved. It is difficult, as Davis has remarked, to imagine that the mind knew what it wanted to represent even before it learned *to represent*. Davis therefore took an inverse approach to that of Gombrich: it is not objects (for example forms in the rocky surfaces) that are seen as markings, it is the marks (lines or dots made by human hands) that are perceived as things (Davis, 1986: 199). Taking informal markings as a starting point, Davis proposes an alternative explanation: the probability that a scribble took on a form endowed with an iconic effect had every chance of occurring. The representational image would have been a sort of inevitable happenstance. "Once marks were perceived as things, however, the full analogical, expressive power of the line could be quickly and logically derived and even detached from mere experiences of perceptual ambiguity" (Davis, 1986: 201). This hypothesis has the advantage of resituating the genesis of the image within the history of the act drawing. But the "logic" and the "rapidity" that Davis attributes to it are no less obscure, and he must also suppose that 'the image' itself preceded the concept of the image: not by existing latently in natural forms suggested by stones, but by leaping forth suddenly from a scribble and imposing its obvious form. This invocation of chance is unsatisfying. Not only does it require the concomitant repetition and revelation of 'images' in all cultures in which images have appeared, but in addition, this contingency disregards entirely the *intention* that must have driven the gesture of scribbling. This amounts to framing infantile babbling as an unmotivated activity and presuming that articulate language emerged from it, each time anew, as a coincidence.

Is it not more "logical" to attribute an inherent motivation to the act of drawing in its progression toward the symbol (non-iconic drawing) and the image (iconic drawing)? A desire, certainly fraught, to capture the real by taking in hand the ability to reach at a distance that is presented by the faculty of vision? Let us call this intention a "desire to see" (Ego, 2015). Let us suppose that the symbol and the image are already present in the drawing, and constitute a horizon of aspiration that is achieved when these two elements eventually germinate within themselves. Accordingly, instead of approaching them with regard to their potential utility and eventual functions, we should consider them in terms of a much deeper chronology: that of the development of a set of technical and cognitive competencies in which drawing is both a stage and a remarkable crowning achievement. I will do this by following two lines of argument: the first, that of the semiological understanding by humans of their environment, notably through the bias of visual activity, exemplified by the reading and production of natural signals (based on the referential value of natural phenomena, such as the cry of a bird that indicates its presence, or the footprint of an animal that denotes its passage); the second, that of the technical intentionality of the gestures involved in knapping, a realm in which lithic production has, in the long time, extracted a projected form from the relevant material in a manner that presupposes a likely abstract goal or vision of the final form. This visual semiology and this technical intentionality, along with the cognitive competencies that they demonstrate, are elements of an intellectual process that was necessary and prerequisite to the production of graphic renderings.

2. The reading of signals and the production of symbols

The deep historical basis for the invention of drawing is the identification of natural signals, in all their adaptive value. Before being a human ability, this is first and foremost a basic capacity of living beings. Life exists in relationship, and an organism's relationship to its surroundings is constantly mediated by adaptive reactions to the conditions of these surroundings (temperature, chemical composition, etc.), as exemplified by the seasonal cycles of plant leaves, for example. The reception and, to a lesser extent, the emission of 'signals' is an inherent and necessary function of living beings (von Uexküll, 2010). In the realm of higher animal life, a number of behaviors indicate the capacity to understand and react to signals that constitute a system of information, whether they be contingent, automatic, or intentional: the sounds of a predator moving (for example the snapping of twigs) is an auditory signal, in this case unintentional, to which the prey accords the significance of a warning of potential danger. The scent of a predator is also a signal, an olfactory one in this case, which is neither contingent nor arbitrary, but objective and inherently attached to its emitter. This de facto relationship between signal and emitter ensures the identification of the latter based on the former. Lastly, there are intentional signals like the glandular excretions commonly employed by mammals as territorial markers. In this case, the information is neither contingent nor arbitrary, and therefore

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