



Werner Herzog charts the emergence of a new human sensibility 35 millennia ago in his latest film.

Q&A Werner Herzog Illuminating the dark

As he releases a 3D documentary about the prehistoric paintings in Chauvet Cave in southern France, Werner Herzog — the German director of *Fitzcarraldo* and *Grizzly Man* — talks about cave art and the hostility of nature.

What drew you to cave art?

It dates back to my adolescence. I come from a remote mountain valley where we had no telephone, no radio, no running water. A book in a bookstore caught my attention. I was mesmerized by a prehistoric picture of a horse — perhaps from Lascaux Cave. I was always interested in archaeology because of my grandfather, an archaeologist who did his life's work on a Greek island close to the Turkish coast. He excavated a huge site that includes temples and a medical spa where ancient doctors would work. When the chance came to film in Chauvet Cave I was immediately on board.

Why is Chauvet special?

Some of the most wonderful caves with prehistoric art, such as Lascaux in the Dordogne in France and Altamira in the Spanish Pyrenees, have had to shut because of problems with mould. Chauvet, in the Ardèche in France, was preserved as the perfect time capsule. Owing to the collapse of the face of the gorge, the cave entrance was sealed for roughly 20,000 years. And when the cave was discovered in 1994, the explorers did everything right. They rolled out plastic sheets and crawled along them to avoid stepping on the floor. They found the tracks of cave bears,

which had been extinct for tens of thousands of years. And the charcoal remains of fires made to illuminate the paintings. One swipe mark of a torch on the wall was radiocarbon dated to nearly 30,000 years ago. The paintings themselves date from 30,000 to 35,000 years ago.

What do the paintings show?

The bestiary is limited and mysterious. The animals depicted range from reindeer to woolly mammoths, woolly rhino, lions, bison — huge, dangerous, powerful beasts, and not only animals that you would hunt. There is no sign of a fox, weasel or bird, except one scratched image of an owl. Painting never got any better through the ages, not in ancient Greek and Roman antiquity, nor during the Renaissance. It's not like the *Flintstones* — the work of crude men carrying clubs. This is the modern human soul emerging vigorously, almost in an explosive event. You sense the presence of the artists because it's so fresh: we felt that eyes were looking at us from the dark.

What do we know about the cave artists?

For the time, they were high-tech. An ice-free corridor would have connected Chauvet to the Swabian Alb, 400 kilometres away in southern Germany, where flint tools and

bone and ivory flutes have been found. The cave was never inhabited, although there were burials in the region. Strangely, Chauvet people only painted deep inside the cave, where it was completely dark. Some archaeologists claim the pictures have ritualistic or shamanistic meanings. But we simply do not know.

The Cave of Forgotten Dreams (3D)

DIRECTED BY
WERNER HERZOG
Now showing at
US/UK cinemas

What were the filming challenges?

We were allowed one week of shooting, but just four hours per day. We had to move along a metal walkway. No more than three camera people, sound or 3D specialists could assist me, and we had to use lightweight equipment that did not emit any heat. It was tough: 3D apparatus is large and clumsy, and must be reconfigured for each type of shot. When the camera moves closer to an object, the lenses have to move towards each other and 'squint'. We had to do these high-tech things in semi-darkness with only a few torches.

Was filming in 3D worth the trouble?

It was. The formation of the cave is very dramatic. There are bulges and niches and pendants, which the artists also utilized in their drama. For example, a huge bulge in the rock now is the bulging neck of a charging bison; a horse comes out shyly from the recesses of a niche. When you see the film you know immediately that it was the right thing to do. Otherwise, I'm sceptical of 3D.

You've said you see nature as hostile and chaotic. Why?

I've heard too many times that there's a cosmic harmony. This vapid new-age babble enrages me. The Universe is not harmonious and beautiful, it is dangerous and hostile. My opinion is evident in *Grizzly Man*, for example, which is about a man who went out to Alaska to protect grizzly bears by standing a couple of metres away from them. Even our supposedly benign Sun is a danger — hundreds of thousands of simultaneous atomic explosions. Imagine how destructive a black hole would be. Yet the more we know, the more fascinating it gets. There's an inherent curiosity in the human race to understand the Universe that's around us. That distinguishes us from the cow in the field. ■

INTERVIEW BY JASCHA HOFFMAN

CORRECTION

The Books in Brief summary of *The Sorcerer's Apprentices* by Lisa Abend (*Nature* 471, 577; 2011) wrongly suggested that she underwent training as a chef; in fact, she observed training.