

*Chapter 9*

**The Ecstasy of Time Travel in Werner  
Herzog's *Cave of Forgotten Dreams***

William Day

In Stanley Cavell's extensive oeuvre on films and film theory, very little is said about the documentary. Cavell's writings address mostly classical Hollywood cinema of the 1930s and 1940s, though there are also remarks ranging from single sentences to full-fledged readings of films stretching across the cinematic canon from the beginning to the end of the last century. But the absence of explicit writings by Cavell on nonfiction film (with one or two exceptions) turns out not to matter much for the present discussion on the documentary as considered through Cavell's writings. This is because, on his view, to weigh the meaning of "documentary film" is perhaps already to be weighing one word too many: "every movie has a documentary basis," as he says in remarking on the use of documentary footage in Dušan Makavejev's *Sweet Movie* (1974).<sup>1</sup> Cavell underscores this documentary basis by reminding us of "the camera's ineluctable interrogation of the natural endowment of the actors." But one can add more generally that film, whose material basis Cavell identifies as "a succession of automatic world projections,"<sup>2</sup> carries out its magic by reproducing the world automatically, and so invariably documents (some part of) the world and its inhabitants. I speak here only of films that are made in this way, and will not be considering alternative means of creating moving images—neither those means that date from early in movie history (such as animation) nor more recent alternative techniques (such as CGI).

Thus I begin with the thought that one can characterize, if not define, documentary film as that genre of filmmaking that lays bare the fact of all film. Cavell names this fact by saying that film presents "a world I know, and see, but to which I am nevertheless not present," that is, "a world past."<sup>3</sup> While Cavell's claim is not meant to be taken at face value, as we will see shortly,



the idea that the world we find in the movie theater is inevitably past already suggests why it is that the documentary, and film generally, seems to revel in the fragility of the momentary, in the intimation of a secret contained in the unrehearsed, the spontaneous, the aleatory. Watching a film with interest often means joining in the camera's delight in the chance happening, the "blink and you miss it" passing event. It is as if we take the measure of our lives from such transitory moments; they reveal our fate.

But what is it to "know, and see, . . . a world past"? What is our fascination with the cinematic world, whose "only difference from reality" is that it "does not exist (now)"?<sup>4</sup> Why be interested in reality only insofar as it *is* past? We might try to answer these questions by saying that our real interest in film lies in preserving a world past. That is no doubt part of the motivation behind certain archival uses of moving pictures—the ethnographic study, for example, or the home movie or iPhone video. If we say that film "preserves" a world past, we tie our interest in film—or, perhaps better: our interest in film's metaphysical basis—to our interest in artifacts like fossil records, mummies, death masks, relics, perhaps even DNA coding. André Bazin famously draws on such analogies to specify the nature of film's realism, which he describes as "the preservation of life by a representation of life."<sup>5</sup> If one were to take one's cue from this collection of analogies, then the interest of film, and *a fortiori* of the documentary, would be that it preserves aspects of the world for future contemplation or understanding, so as not to lose those aspects of the world to the ravages of time.

But while film may carry artifactual interest, the interest of artifacts is not everywhere preservationist. Consider Robert Gardner's documentary *Forest of Bliss* (1986) and its presentation of a ritual cremation in India. When Cavell, writing about this film, proposes cremation as one of this film's many allegories of the camera's life, he sees in it not a ritual of preservation but, in his words, "a ritual figured as transfiguration itself." The lesson Cavell draws from this implication of Gardner's *Forest of Bliss* is that "film is the medium of transfiguration . . . blessed or cursed with the fate, in the same gestures, to destroy and recreate everything it touches."<sup>6</sup> In "More of *The World Viewed*," Cavell is at pains to explain the nature of this transfigurative power of film; his struggle there is to avoid the misunderstanding that the significance of the filmed world is its *mere* pastness. The experience of watching a movie on a screen in an otherwise dark room is for Cavell not an experience of the world preserved so much as that of the world raised or transfigured (and not by being raised into the realm of fiction):

My intuition is that fictionality does not describe the narrative or dramatic mode of film. . . . I think the mode is more closely bound to the mythological than it is to the fictional. . . .

When I say that the audience in a movie house is present at something that has happened, I do not wish to imply that the events on the screen have taken place, as it were, in real life, nor that they are inevitably set in the past . . . : How can one be *present* at something that has happened, that is over? . . . To speak of being present at something that is over is not to state a falsehood but, at best, to utter a paradox. . . . My repeated emphasis on such notions as the projected world's not existing . . . are meant to correct, or explain (of course, mythologically to correct or explain), what is wrong and what is right in the idea of the pastness of the projected world. I relate that idea most immediately to my passiveness before the exhibition of the world, to the fascination, the uncanniness, in this chance to view the manifestation of the world as a whole.<sup>7</sup>

My aim in this chapter is to follow this collection of thoughts evoking the "paradox" in the experience of film generally—the paradox, namely, that it is an experience of being present at something that has happened, something that is over. But I will not be taking the path forged by Cavell's idea that "film is a moving image of skepticism."<sup>8</sup> I have no doubt of the importance of that claim for identifying a motivation behind our fascination with reality projected and screened. By saying that I will offer a different path, I do not mean that the sense of otherworldliness and uncanniness that skepticism trades in will be left very far behind. But I note that Cavell's words—his description of a paradox inherent in the experience of film—play on the sound of a paradox that, in the most straightforward sense, is a paradox not of skepticism but of time. It is true that when we speak of being present at something that is over—when we speak of being in the grip of a movie—the paradox this expresses is not captured by the traditional philosophical paradoxes of time dating back to Zeno and unraveled by Aristotle, Augustine, and others. The cinematic paradox arises not so much in our ways of talking about time as in our experience of it. And it is as experience that the cinematic paradox leads me to ask whether we would be better off, as film theorists, if we drew the comparison between film and artifacts the other way around. Instead of understanding film's peculiar transfigurations by analogy to practices of preserving the past—cremation, mummification, and so on—what might we learn if we tried to understand our interest in fossils records or mummies or DNA coding by analogy to our interest in film, or to our fascination with being present to "a world past" given to us in film? In the next section I examine three pre-cinematic descriptions of relations to time—in Emerson, Thoreau, and Weil—that anticipate the paradox of time inherent in film. What we learn from that examination will be put to use in the subsequent and final section, where the achievement of Werner Herzog's *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, ostensibly a film about prehistoric cave paintings, will be seen to lie not in its documentation of a time past but in its liberation of the present, locked-in-place moment.



## THE ECSTASY OF TIME TRAVEL

The textual passages we will be considering in this section are not explicitly about the peculiar paradox of time that arises in our experience of film. But they nonetheless describe similar experiences of time, or attitudes one might take toward time, that parallel our experience of cinematic time. They thereby cast light on the cinematic experience of a world past, revealing it as the experience of a particular kind of wonder—what I will want to call philosophic wonder.

The first textual passage is taken from Ralph Waldo Emerson's "History," the opening essay in his 1840 collection *Essays: First Series*. As in virtually every essay written by Emerson, in this one he attempts to alter or reroute our unexamined relation to our own experience. Emerson's topic in "History" is the experience we have in considering and reflecting on the past, specifically on the historical and prehistorical past—the past as we come to it preserved in books, in artifacts, in bones, in rocks. We are prone to think that in such physical forms the past is preserved simply, without cinematic or other paradoxes of time, since we and the record we examine are simply present to one another. I hold the book, I examine the geological outcrop, and my effort appears to be to understand, not something about the present that I and the record occupy, but something about the past. My wish is to *go there*: the distance between present and past is the barrier to the past; that distance must be overcome.

Yet it is precisely this understanding of "the past" that Emerson calls "wild, savage, and preposterous." To correct it, he draws our attention to the character of the time we experience when we are reflecting on the past (a time he designates "the Here and the Now"). He begins his recalibration of the meaning of the past by considering the archaeologist at work in the field:

[Giovanni] Belzoni digs and measures in the mummy-pits and pyramids of Thebes, until he can see the end of the difference between the monstrous work and himself. When he has satisfied himself, in general and in detail, that it was made by such a person as he, so armed and so motivated, and to ends to which he himself should also have worked, the problem is solved; his thought lives along the whole line of temples and sphinxes and catacombs, passes through them all with satisfaction, and they live again to the mind, or are *now*.<sup>9</sup>

Studying the past—contemplating the people who lived then—is not an experience of time travel as ordinarily imagined (e.g., my leaving "the Here and the Now" to go back to "There and Then"), but rather an experience of doubleness, of two registers of time. Our imagining of the past has significance not as a singularity but as a comparative: it involves experiencing *this*

moment transfigured in the wake of *that* (the past). The people who populate the past, as marked by their books or bones, are present to us in our way of conceiving their ways of being in the world. We do not travel back to them; they travel ahead to us. Our experience of this moment of identification and insight—"they live again in the mind, or are *now*"—is what gives "preserving the past" whatever sense it has if it is not to mean a shelving of the past, a way of putting the past in its place as "what was."

In "The American Scholar," Emerson provides us with a related account of the transformation that happens as we consider and reflect on our own, personal past. Here is Emerson's description of the process whereby our past actions become our present thought:

The actions and events of our childhood and youth, are now matters of calmest observation. They lie like fair pictures in the air. Not so with our recent actions,—with the business which we now have in hand. On this we are quite unable to speculate. Our affections as yet circulate through it. . . . The new deed is yet a part of life,—remains for a time immersed in our unconscious life. In some contemplative hour it detaches itself from the life like a ripe fruit, to become a thought of the mind. Instantly it is raised, transfigured; the corruptible has put on incorruption. Henceforth it is an object of beauty, however base its origin and neighborhood.<sup>10</sup>

Where the Empiricists describe the work of memory as a mere copying of original and more vivid sensory experiences, Emerson reverses their claim. To bring the past into the present by remembering it is not a diminishment of the original experience, a second-best. Rather, for Emerson, contemplating the past is a way of taking it in, or on, that the original experience in its liveliness could not (logically or grammatically) provide. Something like this transfigurative power of ruminative thought is known by many names across the mottled history of philosophy: as Plato's doctrine of recollection or *anamnesis*; for Hegel, as the achievement of *Weltgeist* in coming to know itself; for Freud, as the basis and presumption of the psychoanalytic method. But we should not allow the interjection of influential names and theories to distract us from Emerson's singular image, that what we are now doing will "put on incorruption" in becoming thought. His idea is not that *thoughts* are incorruptible; the nature of a thought is that it passes ("a passing thought"). His idea is that contemplating the past—say, thinking back to the moment we first read Emerson's very words, "the business" we then had literally "in hand"—is an experience that is neither in the time of the past deed nor locked in the present moment of the recollection, but sits bestride the two. On this account, to reflect on one's own past is to be lifted out of time altogether, into the realm of the incorruptible.



What a moment ago I characterized as an experience of doubleness—the human ability to infuse the present moment with the vitality of another moment so that they marry in an instant, somewhere beyond our ordinary, one-dimensional sense of time—is not far from the mood of a paragraph in Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, in the middle of his chapter titled "Solitude." It reads:

With thinking we may be beside ourselves in a sane sense. By a conscious effort of the mind we can stand aloof from actions and their consequences. . . . I only know myself as a human entity; the scene, so to speak, of thoughts and affections; and am sensible of a certain doubleness by which I can stand as remote from myself as from another. However intense my experience, I am conscious of the presence and criticism of a part of me, which, as it were, is not a part of me, but spectator, sharing no experience, but taking note of it, and that is no more I than it is you.<sup>11</sup>

If we take our cue from Cavell and read this remark as answering to a threat of skepticism—specifically, to the skeptic's doubting the possibility of human action *per se*—then what this double or spectator shows us is, according to Cavell, "a mode of what [Thoreau] calls 'being interested in.'"<sup>12</sup> Beyond your self, caught in the midst of your experience, Thoreau reminds you of the possibility of a spectator-self "beside" you, "taking note of" the experience like a spectator at a play. What you achieve by this conscious act of doubling yourself is a kind of unselfconscious self-awareness—your right, in Cavell's phrase, "to take an interest in your own experience."<sup>13</sup>

Cavell asserts that *Walden* sometimes calls this spectatorial double "the imagination," thereby casting this spectator in the role of specter.<sup>14</sup> But that may be a too hasty reading on Cavell's part, given the ambiguity in Thoreau's further description of this mindful achievement. In *Walden*, Thoreau continues: "When the play, it may be the tragedy, of life is over, the spectator goes his way. It was a kind of fiction, a work of the imagination only, so far as he was concerned."<sup>15</sup> Thoreau seems to be saying that it is *my life* that is imagined from the point of view of this dispassionate spectator-self. Then who is doing the imagining, and who is being imagined? Perhaps the sense is: when through a conscious effort you consider yourself from a remote standpoint, what you are considering is a shadow play of yourself: something that, like a shadow, is objective and perceivable but also insubstantial and ephemeral. That is one reading. But I understand Thoreau to be saying something else, and something not distant from Emerson's earlier thought. When one is simply *in* time, taking experience as it comes, animal-like, one is as yet unrealized, and so "a kind of fiction." In the competition for my attention—that is, between my absorption or subsumption in the scenes of my life and my finding interest in those scenes as spectator—the more necessary, the more

helpful and neighborly, standpoint is the reflective one, in which I stand next to time but not in it. Such a description fits the predominant mood of Thoreau's "Solitude," in which society is not to be found in "the depot, the post-office, the barroom, the meeting-house"—in the "outlying and transient circumstances" of a life as it is lived.<sup>16</sup> To see *these* as "essential to a serene and healthy life" is to suffer what Thoreau calls "a slight insanity."<sup>17</sup> The reflective or doubling standpoint, contrariwise, where one is beside oneself sanely, will find its society in what Thoreau calls "the perennial source of our life"; and the prospect of awakening to life, he says, "makes indifferent all times and places."<sup>18</sup> It follows that to consider one's existence from the standpoint that Thoreau characterized as being *next* to oneself, "where the grandest laws are continually being executed," is to neighbor time as well.<sup>19</sup> Thoreau is, one could say, giving the phenomenological evidence for a noumenal perspective on our intuition of time, and on our lives, suggesting that our time-bound perspective is unexamined, perhaps imagined, and certainly partial.

A third and final description of the doubling of time is sketched in Simone Weil's *Gravity and Grace*, particularly in the brief and remarkable chapter "Renunciation of Time." Despite the title of the chapter (which is not hers), Weil asks not that one renounce *all* of time but something just short of all. One is urged to renounce past and future: to abandon, more specifically, the self-deception of imagining time as a place and a possibility different from what the present can promise. The past and future of the imagination are shades or blinds to one's sensing reality: "The imagination, filler up of the void," she writes, "is essentially a liar."<sup>20</sup> For Weil, there is a ready cure for the habitual imagining of a better time past or to come, and that is to suffer with an intensity that can wipe out all thoughts of past or future compensation. Such intense suffering also, against all expectation, allows one to straddle the door that opens onto eternity:

The past and the future hinder the wholesome effect of affliction by providing an unlimited field for imaginary elevation. That is why the renunciation of past and future is the first of all renunciations.

The present does not attain finality. Nor does the future, for it is only what will be present. We do not know this, however. If we apply to the present the point of that desire within us which corresponds to finality, it pierces right through to the eternal.

When pain and weariness reach the point of causing a sense of perpetuity to be born in the soul, through contemplating this perpetuity with acceptance and love, we are snatched away into eternity.<sup>21</sup>

Weil describes an experience of time—clearly not an experience sought by all—in contrast to which, again, the thought of traveling *out of* the present moment's pain and *into* some future eternity, a compensating immortality, is



revealed as delusional. The sense of the eternal is not to be experienced in the future, or ever, if it is not discoverable through the dawning of an aspect of the present. The aim of Weil's devotional life is not to suffer for the sake of suffering. Rather, intense suffering allows the present moment to reveal to one's experience what the reality of the eternal waits upon: achieving the perspective of eternity requires simply that I renounce the thought that there is some (other) *time* when I will gain it.

Weil's "renunciation of time" can seem at odds with the attitude towards time that makes renunciation so much as possible—I mean the aspiration to abandon one's past and to *change*, the commitment to one's better or higher self, what Emerson at one place names one's "unattained but attainable self."<sup>22</sup> Being inspired by a vision of a different future self is at least half of the motivation in Cavell's narrative of moral perfectionism.<sup>23</sup> That vision of another self for one's self serves to balance the other, initiating half of that mood—the otherwise overwhelming sense of disappointment or disgust in one's present self. In *Cities of Words*, Cavell highlights the aspirational half of the movement to a next self when he says, "what [moral] perfectionism proposes [is] that no state of the self achieves its full expression, that the fate of finitude is to want, that human desire projects an idea of an unending beyond."<sup>24</sup> But that is, again, but half of the realization that can set the soul in motion. Elsewhere Cavell joins Weil by bringing into view the clarity of thought that the present instant presents: "Each state of the self is, so to speak, final: each state constitutes a world (a circle, Emerson says) and it is one each one also desires. . . . On such a picture of the self one could say both that significance is always deferred and *equally* that it is never deferred (there is no later circle until it is *drawn*)."<sup>25</sup> Taken together, these two passages from Cavell suggest that an ideal, or at least a helpful, conception of the Here-and-Now is that one is receptive both to one's attained self (its expression of one's self) and to one's unattained self (or how one's present self always falls short of expressing itself). The moral is that if you claim the right "to take an interest in your own experience," then when you are absorbed in your present experience (whether it afflicts you, as in Weil, or disgusts you, as in Nietzsche,<sup>26</sup> or enraptures you, as can happen in the cinema), you are to give up the idea that the redemption of your present (self) lies elsewhere, at some other time.

In each of the foregoing texts by Emerson, Thoreau, and Weil, we are given cause to distrust our ordinary understanding of the past. Emerson, for example, undermines our sense that the past harbors knowledge of itself that is both ideal and metaphysically inaccessible to us. We are given cause as well to distrust our sense of the present as fixed deterministically between past and future; Thoreau, for instance, undermines our sense that we are creatures inevitably or chronically situated in the unstoppable, silent slippage

of time. And we are given cause to distrust our reverence for the past and the future; Weil, for example, undermines our sense of fear over the present, as if it waits to ensnare us, so that we think the better alternative would be to escape it by means of the imagination. Taken together, these texts remind us of our cognitive possibility to consider ourselves, or transport ourselves, outside of time. They thereby illuminate how the popular fantasy of time travel (our wish to "travel through" time) not only misses in what way traveling through time is our ordinary mode of life (what we otherwise call "living") but amounts to a wish to kill time, or to abort the present. It is one of countless fantasies that humans devise to avoid the pregnancy of time itself—fantasies that allow us to overlook the possibilities, beyond science fiction, of occupying two times at once. Each of these writers (and the tradition they exemplify, stretching back to Plato) reconceives the human desire to step out of time. They accomplish this by revealing and nurturing through language an interest in experiencing facets of the present moment that differ from the ordinary, immersed, unreflective sense of time.

### HERZOG'S CAVE OF FORGOTTEN DREAMS

If, as I claim above, these descriptions of experiencing facets of the present moment are literary precursors or equivalents to the experience of "a world past" in film, then a part of our fascination with that world involves its power to place us outside our ordinary, immersed, unreflective relation to time. (I think of this claim, arising from the "paradox" in the experience of film, not as competing with but as standing alongside Cavell's discovery that film is "a moving image of skepticism," by which he means that film satisfies our interest to view the world in private and unseen, mechanically displaced from it.<sup>27</sup>) I do not mean to say that the experience of film *automatically* displaces us from our ordinary relation to time. It is a metaphysical fact that, when we watch a movie, we are present at something that has happened; but a given filmmaker may choose to bring out (draw on or exploit) this fact, or not.

In the light of the previous section's discoveries about literary antecedents to the way cinema displaces time, we might conclude that an escapist movie—if there is such a *kind* of movie—is *not* exploiting this metaphysical fact at the heart of film. What the texts examined above promise is not, as with escapist movies, a way to *escape the present*—to live in the imagination in another time, whether past or future—but a way to escape time, or say a certain fatalist view of the present, by inviting us to give ourselves over to other possibilities inherent in the present. We can think of these other possibilities collectively as mythological relations to time; and we will find, in considering Werner Herzog's 2010 documentary feature *Cave of Forgotten*



*Dreams*, that creating the conditions for placing or displacing the viewer in a mythological relation to time is a natural possibility for the medium of film. It is because the medium of film presents this possibility that the documentary nature of film can be understood not as a means of preservation but as a medium of transfiguration.

*Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, perhaps best known for its use of 3D technology to film prehistoric cave paintings found in 1994 in Chauvet Cave, in the Gorges de l'Ardèche region of southern France, seems to pose the question: What are we to do with a vision of our collective ancestors that is somehow both indubitable and unfathomable, evidence of the kind of fact that makes time itself spin? The cave paintings, as revealed by radiocarbon dating, were created as far back as 32,000 years ago. Painted on undulating cave walls, they register with us immediately for their striking verisimilitude, their depictions of mostly large (and for us, often extinct) animal species. But these paintings insist as well that we take up not only their beauty of depiction but the humanly or creaturely life that surrounded them and brought *them* to life. How might we do that? One answer—let us label it the scientific answer—is represented in the film by the charming circus-performer-turned-archaeologist, Julien Monney, who, prompted off-camera by Herzog, says: “Definitely, we will never know [their thoughts and dreams], because [the] past is definitely lost. We will never reconstruct the past. We can only create a representation of what exists now, today.”<sup>28</sup> Herzog’s film seems attracted at first to this humble assessment of the archaeologist’s project of building a bridge to the past; shortly after Monney’s remarks, Herzog as narrator asks, “Will we ever be able to understand the vision of the artists across such an abyss of time?”<sup>29</sup> But roughly an hour into the film, about the time we meet the mildly eccentric professional perfumer, Maurice Marin, the narrative changes. We see Marin, in the cave, conclude a lengthy speech by saying (and it may be, as in any Herzog documentary, that the author of these words is not the speaker but Herzog): “The presence of their lives, meaning burnt wood, resins, the odors of everything from the natural world that surrounds this cave—we can go back with our imagination.” Herzog in voice-over then endorses and supplements the thought these words express: “With his sense of wonder, the cave transforms into an enchanted world of the imaginary where time and space lose their meaning.”<sup>30</sup> This thought becomes the film’s touchstone in its response to the fact of the Chauvet Cave paintings. The scientific perspective is embraced throughout the film not despite but because of its conclusions, which are inconclusive<sup>31</sup>; the perspective from wonder—it matters little whether we label it philosophic or cinematic wonder—is at once the film’s perspective and its goal.

We see the inside of Chauvet Cave intermittently during the first twenty-three minutes of Herzog’s film. One memorable stretch of footage, lasting

almost four minutes, is inaugurated when Jean Clottes, the former director of research at Chauvet Cave, asks for silence from the scientists and crew so that they might listen to the cave interior. While they (and we) are taking in the silence that is broken only by the sound of water dripping, the sound track gives way to a human heartbeat.<sup>32</sup> As is not uncommon for the healthy human heart, it beats in sync with each passing second one by one, one for one; it measures the steady passage of time that we share with the living human figures on the screen before us, despite our metaphysical distance from them. We see their attentive looking and listening as we listen and look ourselves. The heartbeat also stands in for exactly how much, or how little, we have in common with those who stood and listened in that same cave some 32,000 years earlier. The human faces we see are posing a question to the walls of the cave; the film is offering us the experience of a mystery. But the heartbeat can feel foisted on us. Perhaps it is simply too early in the film for the sense of the uncanny, for the enchanted world of the imaginary, to take hold.

If the heartbeat—as an emblem of both the passing seconds and the distant millennia—comes too soon, then what about its reappearance near the end of *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*? In the intervening time, we have seen and heard multiple interviews, learned about the biomass in Paleolithic Europe, been shown figurine specimens and ancient flutes, witnessed a demonstration of Paleolithic hunting techniques, and been guided through multiple tours of the cave. But now there follows a singular stretch of time—lasting over seven minutes—when Herzog halts his narration and parade of experts, and we hear only the film’s ethereal musical score and, at one point when the music fades out, the return of the human heartbeat. What we see on screen is a sequence of handheld shots, either still or slowly panning shots, of the interior of Chauvet Cave. These shots return us to the same static, and now familiar, prehistoric cave images that were introduced at earlier intervals in the film. Almost invariably, each shot opens with an *in situ* fade-in, beginning in darkness as the handheld LED light-panels are turned slowly toward the cave wall being filmed, as if each painted surface is granted its own dawning, or allowed to pose its own riddle. The movement of the light panels provides the only animation, other than the camera’s occasional panning and (as it seems) its patient absorption.<sup>33</sup>

Given the quickening pace and increased optical change in popular films of recent decades,<sup>34</sup> Herzog’s film is burdened at once with recognizing and fending off the threat that audiences will laugh, or yawn, at the luxurious time devoted to these all-but-still shots of cave paintings. But laughter and its originating anxiety are familiar responses to the ruminations of philosophy as well. How is it so much as possible that such images hold our interest? And why, speaking for myself at least, do these mostly static images satisfy



a longing that *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* itself creates in us—an effect not unrelated to the thumping, throbbing climax of an action movie? My sense is that Herzog constructs this concluding segment of *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* to be experienced (if not as what he would call an “ecstatic truth,” then) as an interval of ecstatic contemplation.<sup>35</sup> There is something about the contemplation of the expansiveness of time and of our place in it, occasioned by roughly every other shot in Herzog’s film, that can strike the viewer as revealing the incongruousness and absurdity of human existence itself. A moment’s consideration of the hard facts—for instance, that my father’s life, just short of ninety-seven years, would be scarcely visible at the end of a three-meter timeline representing the years from Chauvet Cave to his death, an interval of time itself dwarfed by the billions of years that modern cosmology places on either side of that interval—and we see why a filmgoer’s nervous response to this mismatch of scale might be to laugh the absurdity away. And yet Herzog’s film, over the course of its preceding seventy-five minutes, has provided all the materials we need to experience a response other than nervous laughter. Like Freemasons prepared for initiation, we arrive at the end of the film well-equipped to meditate on mysteries.

If the specific narrative aim of *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* is to place us outside our ordinary, immersed, unreflective relation to time—to set up the conditions for imagining ourselves straddling time so as to contemplate other possibilities of our relation to it or placement in it—it is also the concern of the film to acknowledge this aspiration for the medium of film generally. One way to begin measuring the truth of this claim is to observe Herzog’s fascination with the cinematic possibilities of the cave paintings and the form of life that once surrounded them. He asks us to “note” that one of the cave artists painted a bison with eight legs, “suggesting movement—almost a form of proto-cinema”; and a rhino nearby “seems also to have the illusion of movement, like frames in an animated film.”<sup>36</sup> Herzog appears most delighted with speculation about what the evidence of a row of fires in Chauvet Cave tells us about the aboriginal experience of the cave and its paintings. As he explains in an interview:

And when you look at the cave, and there are certain panels, there’s evidence of some fires on the ground. They were not for cooking. They were—because there’s no evidence of any habitation in there—they were used for illumination. You have to step in front of these fires to look at the images. And, of course, when you move you must see your own shadow.<sup>37</sup>

When these speculations are introduced in Herzog’s film they immediately give way to the most extraordinary and delightfully incongruous sequence in the documentary: we are shown the image of Fred Astaire dancing with three

of his shadows, a scene from the 1936 musical comedy *Swing Time*. This dance sequence, Astaire’s tribute to the African-American dancer known as Bojangles (Bill Robinson) and performed by Astaire in muted black face, is often remembered by film critics (e.g., in Roger Ebert’s 1998 review article)<sup>38</sup> for the way it *ends*. The three shadow dancers eventually become exhausted and break out of sync with Astaire, unable to keep up with him, and Astaire dances a kind of victory lap by himself before he walks off coolly and triumphantly; we are not shown that conclusion in Herzog’s excerpt of the sequence.

The conclusion of this dance sequence in *Swing Time*, however, is so memorable that critics typically misremember who breaks out of sync with whom *first*, thinking that the shadows are the first to stop, to exhaust the impulse to dance. But Herzog’s film gives us exactly that portion of the sequence where things first break down, which he describes with both precision and admiration in the interview quoted earlier: “It is actually, arguably or for me, certainly the greatest single sequence in all of film history: Fred Astaire dancing with his own shadows, and all of a sudden *he* stops and the shadows become independent and dance without him and he has to catch up with *them*. I mean it’s just so quintessential movie. It can’t be, it can’t get more beautiful.”<sup>39</sup> Describing this Fred Astaire sequence as “certainly the greatest single sequence in all of film history” is, arguably or for me, something more than mere Herzogian hyperbole. Cavell, in “Fred Astaire Asserts the Right to Praise,” reminds us that “the origin of dancing” is “in ecstasy.”<sup>40</sup> And in “Something Out of the Ordinary” he characterizes film as “the art which replaces living human beings by photographic shadows of themselves.”<sup>41</sup> A shadow is not typically a shadow of something *past*—unlike a mummy, a death mask, or a shroud, metaphors with which, as noted at the outset, André Bazin described film’s lineage in realism. The dancing shadows sequence from *Swing Time* as recounted and as borrowed by Herzog earns his high praise in part by serving as an emblem of what becomes of things on film. To put it minimally, things on film have an existence not just independent of but extending in time *beyond* the time of the things filmed. Fred Astaire stops, but his shadows dance on, and rapturously: they know that the dance now belongs to them. And it matters that when Astaire stops, he is turned toward us (i.e., toward *our* screen and away from his), and so is unaware that the shadows continue on without him.<sup>42</sup> The sequence is thus no less an emblem of what becomes of things filmed: Fred Astaire is dead, long live his shadows.

So would it be simpler, as you might think, to read Herzog’s inclusion of the sequence from *Swing Time*, and the significance of *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* generally, as a straightforward meditation on human or creaturely mortality and the (or Herzog’s) wish to defeat it? Why do I describe Herzog’s



film as offering viewers the possibility of escaping a fatalist view not of the *future* but of the *present*? I conclude with two sorts of answer:

(1) Everyone, as I imagine, and as I imagine Herzog imagines, can feel the incongruity in the film's juxtaposition of a discussion of Paleolithic humans casting their shadows on the images of Chauvet Cave with the image of shadows dancing in sync with Fred Astaire. One might suppose, however, that the incongruity lies in the incongruity of the times juxtaposed—time periods that, as it were, lie in opposite regions of one's consciousness. It helps in that case to be reminded that the two times or epochs that are juxtaposed in Herzog's sequence are not 32,000 years ago and the year 1936. This is because (a) there is not some *event* of 32,000 years ago that the comparison to the sequence from *Swing Time* is asking us to acknowledge, and because (b) Fred Astaire's dancing with his shadows is not an *event* of the year 1936. Rather, each is a film event—that is, an episode whose relation to us is captured by nothing more nor less than its tense, an event indeterminately or mythically in the past. *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, notwithstanding The History Channel's role in its production, is not an attempt to *document* a time or a people of the determinate past. The film offers, rather, one set of conditions for the possibility of an experience, what I have been calling (following Emerson and Thoreau) an experience of doubleness and (following Cavell) a mythological relation to time.

(2) A final explanation for why one should read *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* as inviting, not an escape from the present, but an escape from our ordinary or fatalist view of it, can be gleaned from Herzog's title. We are not told over the course of the film who is dreaming in the cave or, consequently, whose dreams have been forgotten. But we can ask the director of *Fitzcarraldo*. At the end of Herzog's turn-of-the-millennium commentary to the DVD rerelease of *Fitzcarraldo* (1982), a film possibly best remembered for the demands of the film shoot (which included the pulling of an actual ship over a mountain—neither a model ship nor one created by animation or CGI), Herzog is asked whether he regrets the time and pain that the film exacted. While his answer is unsurprising—it is, in a word, No—Herzog recounts his telling others at the time, “If I abandon this I would be a man without dreams. And I just do not want to live as someone who has dropped and disconnected from his own dreams.”<sup>43</sup> As the human heartbeat fades from the sound track in *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, we hear the narrator intone, “These images are memories of long-forgotten dreams. Is this their heartbeat, or ours?”<sup>44</sup> We are invited to consider that the dreams that have been forgotten are not those that were dreamt in the Paleolithic past; and we are welcome to conclude that the dark but illuminated cave that contains forgotten dreams is not somewhere in southern France but surrounds us like a movie theater—is, in fact, a movie theater—that awaits, in Weil's lovely phrase, our applying to the present the point of that desire within us which corresponds to finality.

## NOTES

1. Stanley Cavell, “On Makavejev on Bergman,” in *Themes Out of School: Effects and Causes* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1984), 116; emphasis added.
2. Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, enl. ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 72.
3. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 23.
4. *Ibid.*, 24.
5. André Bazin, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” *Film Quarterly* 13, no. 4 (Summer 1960), 5.
6. Stanley Cavell, “Words of Welcome,” *Cavell on Film*, ed. William Rothman (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 219.
7. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 210–12.
8. *Ibid.*, 188.
9. Ralph Waldo Emerson, “History,” in *Essays and Lectures* (New York: Library of America, 1983), 241.
10. Emerson, “The American Scholar,” in *Essays and Lectures*, 60–61.
11. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, collected in *The Portable Thoreau*, revised edition, ed. Carl Bode (New York: Penguin, 1977), 385–86.
12. Stanley Cavell, *The Senses of Walden: An Expanded Edition* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1981), 102.
13. Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 12.
14. Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*, 103.
15. Thoreau, *Walden*, in *The Portable Thoreau*, 386.
16. *Ibid.*, 384–85.
17. *Ibid.*, 382–83.
18. *Ibid.*, 384–85.
19. *Ibid.*, 385.
20. Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, tr. Emma Crawford and Mario von der Ruhr (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 16.
21. Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 19–21.
22. Emerson, “History,” in *Essays and Lectures*, 239.
23. See “Introduction: Staying the Course,” in Stanley Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 1–32.
24. Stanley Cavell, *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 311.
25. Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, 3.
26. Friedrich Nietzsche, “Schopenhauer as Educator,” *Untimely Meditations*, tr. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 125–94; see especially 157–58.
27. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 40–41, 188, 213.
28. *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (New York: Creative Differences Productions, 2010), 00:17:00.



29. *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, 00:22:26.

30. *Ibid.*, 00:58:43.

31. Jean Clottes proposes or admits near the end of the film: “*Homo sapiens*—the man who knows. I don’t think it’s a good definition at all. We *don’t* know; we don’t know much. I would think *Homo spiritulis*.” *Ibid.*, 01:09:19.

32. Is this the same human heartbeat that opens Herzog’s 1979 remake of *Nosferatu*? There the heartbeat accompanies shots of mummified bodies, initially children’s faces. Next to the rock walls, the mummies have the look of a bas-relief, or a 3D cave painting.

33. Peter Zeitlinger, Herzog’s longtime cinematographer, is perhaps more properly credited for the patience.

34. See James E. Cutting, et al., “Quicker, Faster, Darker: Changes in Hollywood Film over 75 Years,” *i-Perception* 2, no. 6 (2011), 569–76, (nih.gov).

35. See Werner Herzog, “The Minnesota Declaration,” reprinted in Eric Ames, *Ferocious Reality: Documentary according to Werner Herzog*, Visible Evidence 27 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), ix–x, and in the present volume, 379–80. See also David LaRocca, “‘Profoundly Unreconciled to Nature’: Ecstatic Truth and the Humanistic Sublime in Werner Herzog’s War Films,” in *The Philosophy of War Films*, ed. David LaRocca (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2014), 437–82.

36. *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, 00:14:04.

37. *Fresh Air* interview with Werner Herzog, April 20, 2011, 24:41 (npr.org).

38. Ebert, review of *Swing Time*, February 15, 1998 (rogerebert.com).

39. *Fresh Air* interview with Werner Herzog, April 20, 2011, 24:11; emphasis added.

40. Stanley Cavell, “Fred Astaire Asserts the Right to Praise,” in *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 78; emphasis added.

41. Cavell, “Something Out of the Ordinary,” in *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow*, 15.

42. You may feel it is prejudicial for me to say that Astaire (and not his shadows) breaks out of sync: does not such a description depend on what the choreography prescribed, and who, or which, forgot it? But I assume we know that all of them—Astaire and his shadows—dance exactly what the choreography prescribes. That is why the moment is funny rather than tragic, and why we are shown Astaire suddenly realizing that he must catch up: the dance is going on without *him*.

43. Werner Herzog, commentary to the DVD *Fitzcarraldo* (Beverly Hills, CA: Anchor Bay, 2002), 02:35:25.

44. *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, 00:22:14.