

# The Birth of the Modern Human Soul

SPIEGEL ONLINE interview:  
conducted by David Gordon Smith

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Werner Herzog's new film "Cave of Forgotten Dreams" is a stunning 3D documentary about a cave in France that is home to the world's oldest known human art. The legendary German director talked to SPIEGEL ONLINE about his life-long fascination with Stone Age cave paintings, the birth of the human soul and why he will only stop making films when he is taken away in a straitjacket.

Werner Herzog has always had a fascination for extreme places. Whether it's the rainforests of 1972's "Aguirre, the Wrath of God" and 1982's "Fitzcarraldo," the ravaged oil fields of Kuwait in the 1992 film "Lessons of Darkness," or Antarctica as featured in the 2007 documentary "Encounters at the End of the World," the legendary German filmmaker seems happiest when he is in the kind of location that tests human endurance to the limits.

But seldom has Herzog filmed in a place as inaccessible as the location of his latest documentary. In "Cave of Forgotten Dreams," which features in the official program of the 2011 Berlin International Film Festival, Herzog visits the Chauvet Cave in southern France, which is home to unique examples of Paleolithic rock art. The cave was sealed off for dozens of millennia – and even today, no one is granted access apart from a handful of scientists.

The cave, discovered in 1994, is home to hundreds of pristine artworks. Over 30,000 years old, they are the oldest known pictures created by humans and show at least 13 different species of animals, including horses, cattle, lions and bears.

In the spring of 2010, Herzog was given a unique opportunity to film inside the cave. He and his team were only allowed access for a period of a few days, and were only able to use battery-powered equipment. High levels of radon gas and carbon dioxide in the cave meant they could only stay inside for a few hours at a time.

The director opted to make the film in 3D – the first time he has used the technology – to do justice to the cave paintings, which use the contours of the rock for dramatic effect. "I knew immediately that it was imperative to shoot in 3D," he says. The result is a visually stunning documentary that transports the viewer into the cavern and captures the artwork in all its glory.

SPIEGEL ONLINE spoke to Herzog in a telephone interview as the director prepared to visit a maximum security prison in Texas to shoot footage for a new film about inmates on death row.

**SPIEGEL ONLINE: While you have certainly covered a wide range of topics in your career, a film about static cave paintings does not seem obvious at first glance. How did the film come about?**

Werner Herzog: It was somehow in the air. The production company Creative Differences, with whom I had done "Grizzly Man" and "Encounters at the End of the World," approached me. They cautiously asked if I was interested, and I said: Yes, yes, yes. Paleolithic cave paintings were my first independent fascination as a child and as an adolescent. At the age of 12, I saw a book on cave paintings in the window of a bookstore. I wanted to have this book so badly that I worked as a ball boy on tennis courts to earn money, and four months later I finally bought it. I still have inside me the shudder of awe that I experienced when I saw these paintings, and I think this excitement even pervades the film.

**SPIEGEL ONLINE: Still, given the fragility of the paintings inside, you surely didn't think you'd ever get the opportunity to film inside the Chauvet Cave.**

Herzog: I never thought there would be a chance. Some of the most important caves, like Lascaux in the Dordogne region in France, have had to be closed down. There had been too many people allowed in, and they left a mold on the walls that is spreading and which can't really be stopped. Only a tiny handful of scientists have access to the Chauvet Cave.

**SPIEGEL ONLINE: What is the world missing?**

Herzog: You have to realize that, about 20,000 years ago, there was a cataclysmic event when an entire rock face collapsed and sealed off the cave. It's a completely preserved time capsule. You've got tracks of cave bears that look like they were left yesterday, and you've got the footprint of a boy who was probably eight years old next to the footprint of a wolf. Visitors can't step on anything, so you can only move around on a two foot wide metal walkway.

**SPIEGEL ONLINE: It sounds like an almost overwhelming experience.**

Herzog: It was always the same awe, an almost shocking experience. It's not only the paintings: You are in a place that has not been seen for tens of thousands of years, because it was so sealed off. There is such silence that when you hold your breath you can hear your own heartbeat. Everything is so fresh that you have the sensation that the painters have merely retreated deeper into the dark and that they are looking at you.

**SPIEGEL ONLINE: Some people might consider cave paintings to be primitive. How do you see the works?**

Herzog: This is the birth of the modern human soul. The artists are like us, not like the Neanderthals, who had no culture – and who incidentally were still roaming the landscape at the time the paintings were made. It is striking that there is a distant cultural echo that seems to reach all the way down to us, over dozens of millennia. In the Chauvet Cave, there is a painting of a bison embracing the lower part of a naked female body. Why does Pablo Picasso, who had no knowledge of the Chauvet Cave, use exactly the same motif in his series of drawings of the Minotaur and the woman? Very, very strange.

**SPIEGEL ONLINE: This is the first time you've used 3D in one of your films. Why the sudden departure?**

Herzog: In general, I'm skeptical about the use of 3D – it's not the perfect tool for cinema, at least for certain types of cinema. But in this case, I knew immediately that it was imperative to shoot in 3D. The paintings are not just on flat walls – you have these enormous niches, bulges and protrusions, as well as stalactites and stalagmites. The effect of the three-dimensionality is phenomenal. It's a real drama which the artists of the time understood, and they used it for the drama of their paintings.

**SPIEGEL ONLINE: Can you imagine using the technology in future films?**

Herzog: I am currently shooting a film about inmates on death row and obviously this is a film I am not going to do in 3D – it would only be distracting, a technical gimmick. Indeed, of the five or six projects I am currently working on, none of these films are suitable for 3D. And when you look back at the 60 or so films that I've made so far, there's not a single one which I should have done in 3D. Still, I would not completely rule it out in the future. It depends on the subject.



Replica of the painting from the Chauvet cave, in the Anthropos Pavilion, Brno, Czech Republic. Public domain image from Wikipedia.

**SPIEGEL ONLINE: Given the restricted access to the Chauvet Cave, it seems surprising that the privilege was granted to a filmmaker from Bavaria rather than one from France. Why did they choose you?**

Herzog: I was fortunate that Frédéric Mitterrand, the French minister of culture, has always been a great admirer of my films, as he told me during our first meeting. I proposed that I could work as an employee of the Ministry of Culture for a fee of €1 (\$1.35). So the French ministry got the film delivered for €1, and they can also use the film for free for non-commercial purposes, such as in classrooms across France.

**SPIEGEL ONLINE: Do you see your film as a kind of historical document?**

Herzog: The historical or scientific document will be created by the scientists. I entered the cave as a filmmaker, as somebody who creates images, with my perspectives, fascinations and my instincts as a narrator. You have to activate the audience's imagination. If you are just giving them scientific results, they would forget the film in five minutes flat. But it sticks to you, as if you had been in the cave itself.

**SPIEGEL ONLINE: You've been making films now for over four decades. Any plans to retire?**

Herzog: One day you'll have to take me out in a straitjacket. Only then I will give up making films.