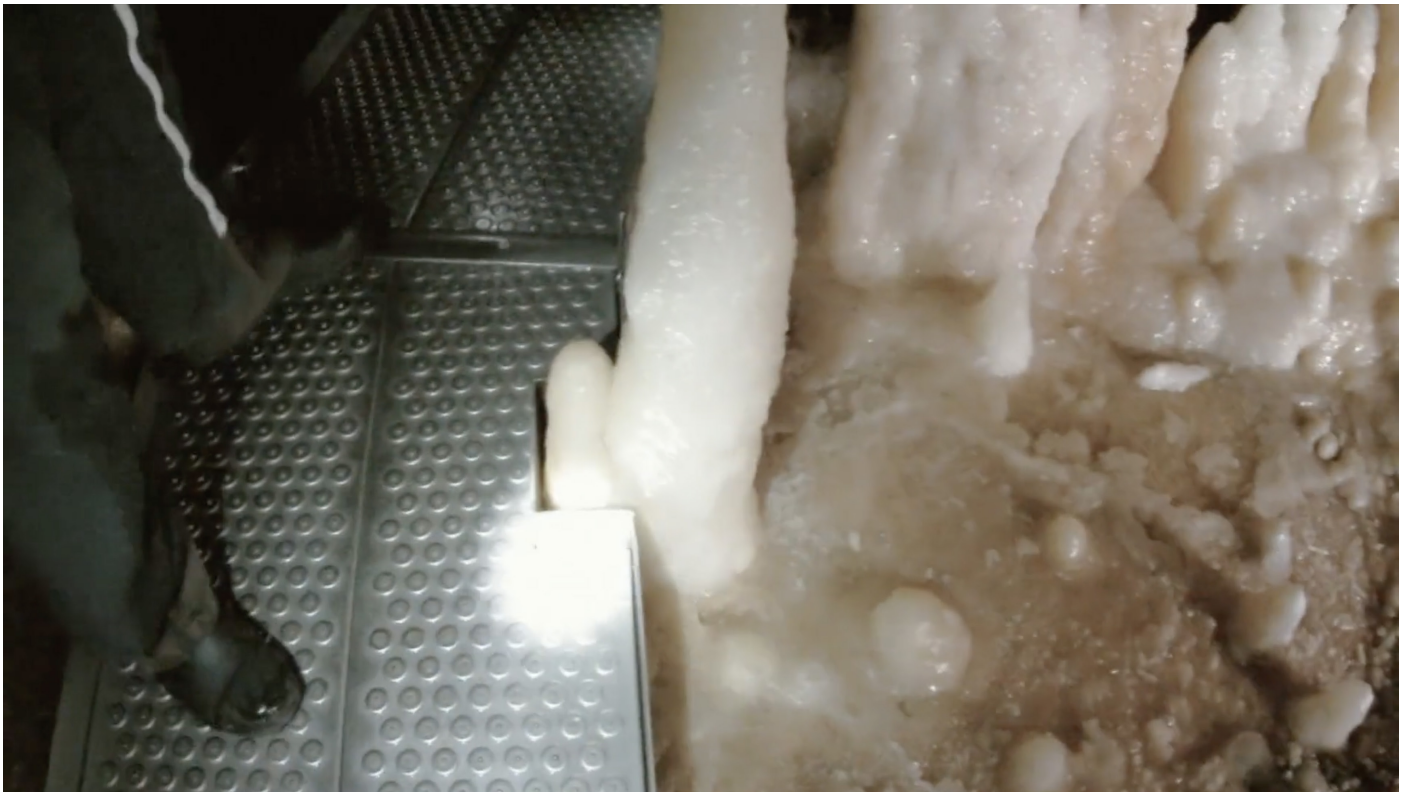
CAVE OF FORGOTTEN DREAM

WERNER HERZOG



You see how, when they made the passageways, they protected the stalagmites. It's a nice touch.

Over there, you‘ve got the dots, the red dots. Those are the red dots which I saw first when I came into the cave, big dots made with the palm of the hand.

This large panel that was covered with positive handprints. We‘ve been able to put forward, as evidence, the number of positions the individual assumed and his movements. He started by crouching, and then he stretched out to reach all the way to his highest palm prints. This panel is comprised of the prints of a single man who must have measured roughly six feet tall. A single human. 1 meter 80 tall, that‘s big.

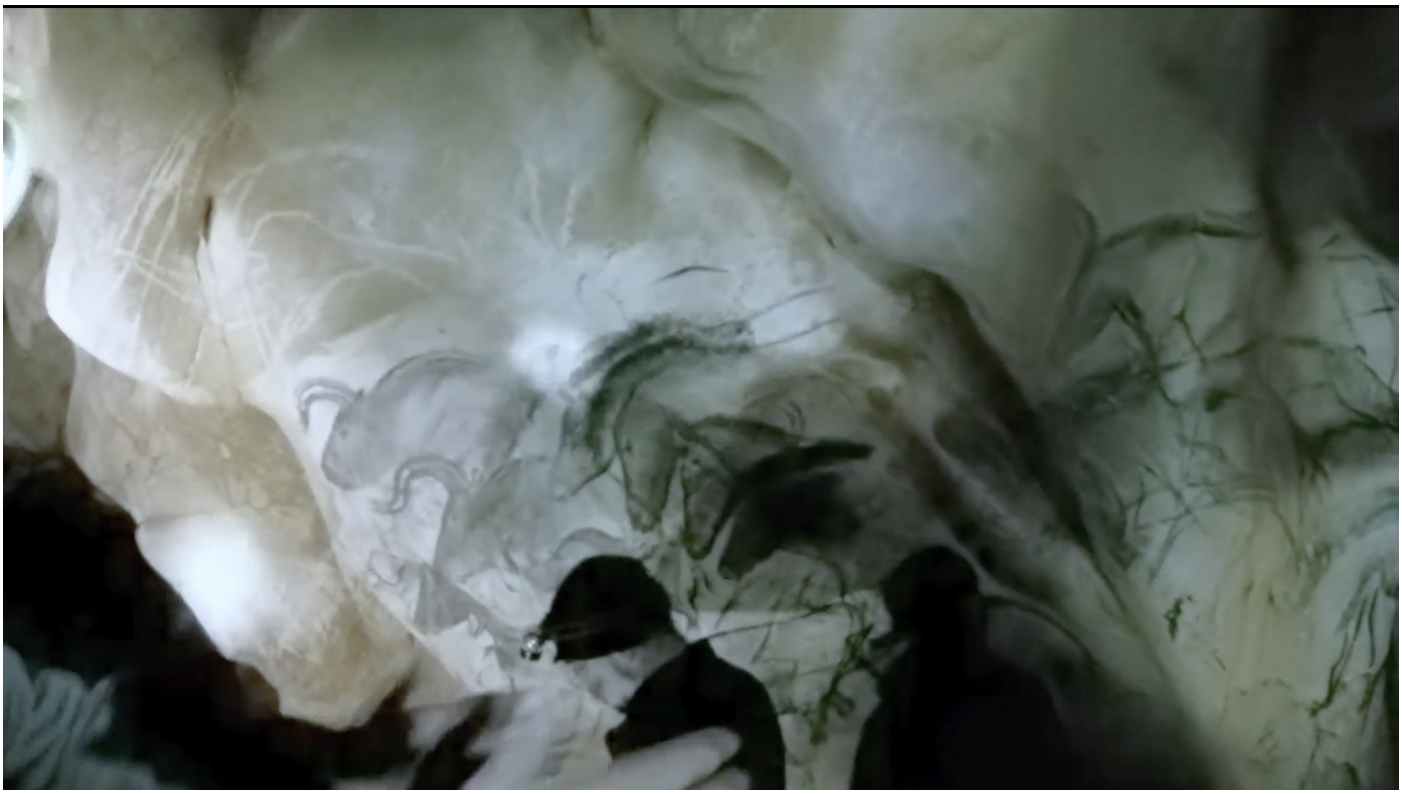
Was it only one person?

Une personne, une personne. One person, a person measuring six feet. And you‘ll notice on these prints that there is a very significant detail. He has a slightly crooked little finger. And that‘s extraordinary, because it gives a physical reality to a prehistoric individual who, 32,000 years or more ago, came to the cave before us. And what is even more surprising is that you‘ll find traces of him deeper in the cavern. We‘ll be able to recognize him by his crooked little finger, because he printed his hand farther in the cave. So we can follow this man‘s path.

Well, here we have – we have a big cave bear skull, right? Male, probably. And you'll see many others. You see, in this big chamber, which is a really huge – it's the biggest in the cave – there are no paintings except right at the end.

So this is probably relevant, because when the entrance was still open, there must have been some light here. So they put the paintings, really, in the complete dark.See here. This is a cave bear painted in black. The paintings looked so fresh that there were initial doubts about their authenticity, but this picture has a layer of calcite and concretions over it that take thousands of years to grow. This was the first proof that it was not a forgery.

A beautiful horse here, one of the most beautiful in the cave. And what is touching is that it looks as if it had been done yesterday. Look how fresh it looks with that technique. And here we have, behind the horse, there are two mammoths, big mammoths. And here you can see cave bear scratches, and the cave bear scratches are not the same color.



We are coming here to one of the great spots of the cave, which is the famous panel of the horses. It is one of the size of a small recess.

And this small hole there is where water comes out, gurgling, after there's been something like a week of rain. And that probably explains why all those animals were painted around that hole. It's one of the great works of art in the world.

For these Paleolithic painters, the play of light and shadows from their torches could possibly have looked something like this. For them, the animals perhaps appeared moving, living. We should note that the artists painted this bison with eight legs, suggesting movement, almost a form of proto-cinema.

The walls themselves are not flat but have their own three-dimensional dynamic, their own movement, which was utilized by the artists. In the upper left corner, another multilegged animal. And the rhino to the right seems also to have the illusion of movement, like frames in an animated film. The painters of the cave seem to speak to us from a familiar yet distant universe.

We will never know, because past is definitely lost. We will never reconstruct the past. We can only create a representation of what - what exists now, today. You are a human being. I am a human being. And here when you come to that cave, of course there are some things. I have my own background.

What is your background, if I may ask? Well, I used to be a circus man before, but I switched to archaeology.

Circus? Doing what? Lion tamer?

Well, mostly – not lion tamer, but mostly unicycle and juggling, yeah. The first time I entered the Chauvet Cave, I had a chance to get in during five days, and it was so powerful. Then every night, I was dreaming of lions. And every day was the same shock for me. It was an emotional shock. I mean, I'm a scientist but a human too. And after five days, I decided not to go back in the cave, because I needed time just to relax and take time to...

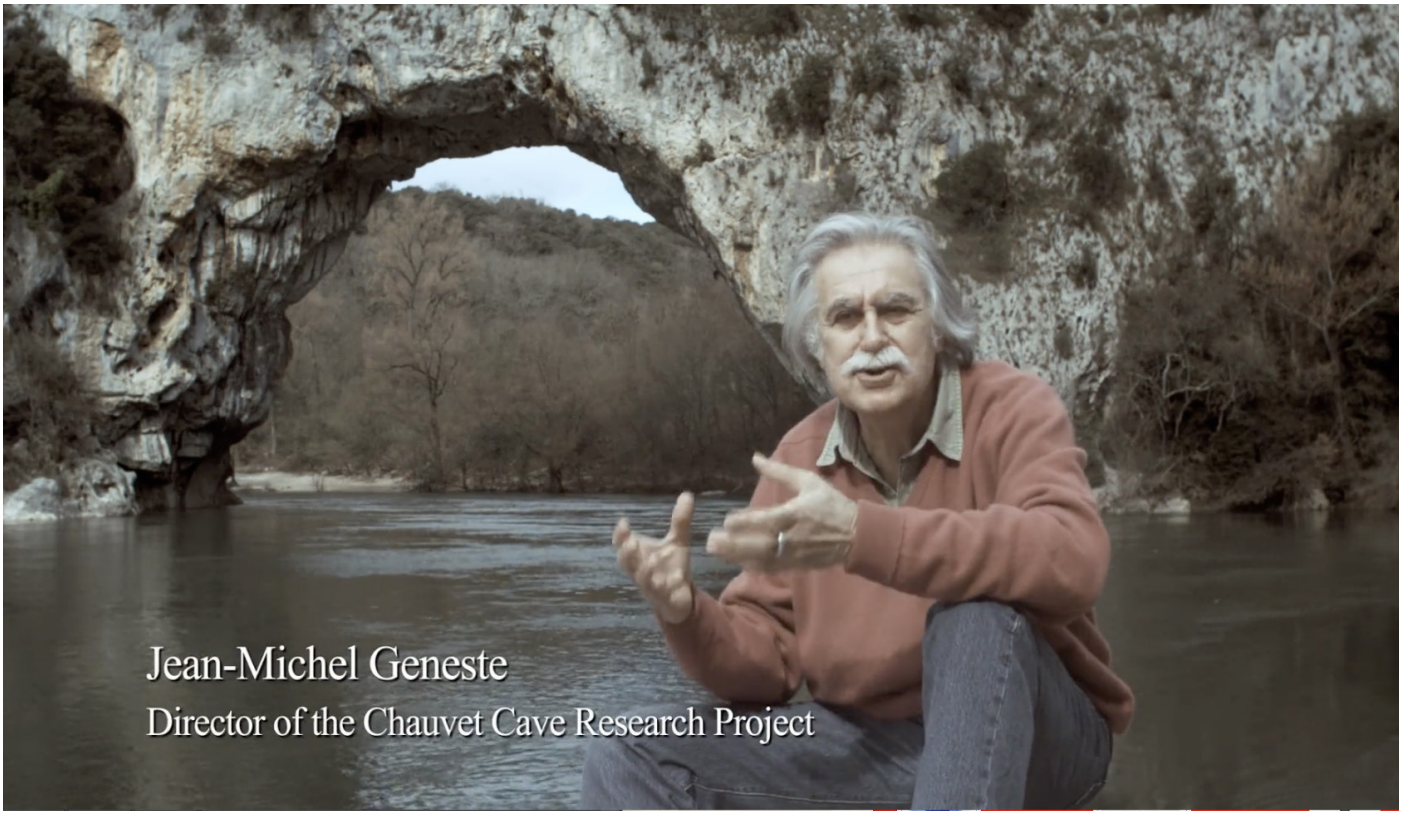
To absorb it? To absorb it, yeah. Yeah.

And you dreamt not of paintings of lions but of real lions. Of both, of both, definitely. Yeah.

And you were afraid in your dreams? I was not afraid, no. No, no, I was not afraid. It was more a feeling of powerful things and deep things, a way to understand things which is not a direct way. In that region, there is a tradition of touching up the paintings time after time, so he sat, and he started to touch up the paintings. So the ethnographer asked the question that every Western person would have asked. „Why are you painting?" And the man answered, and his answer is very troubling, because he answered, "I am not. „I am not painting. „That's the hand, only hand, spirit who is actually painting now."

These images are memories of long-forgotten dreams. Is this their heartbeat or ours? Will we ever be able to understand the vision of the artists across such an abyss of time?

There is an aura of melodrame in this landscape. It could be straight out of a Wagner opera or a painting of German Romanticists. Could this be our connection to them? This staging of a landscape as an operatic event does not belong to the Romanticists alone. Stone Age men might have had a similar sense of inner landscapes, and it seems natural that there's a whole cluster of Paleolithic caves right around here.



The Chauvet Cave is just here at the top of this cliff, but the Chauvet Cave is also associated to this natural feature, this beautiful arch called Pont d'Arc. Maybe this Pont d'Arc, in the mythology of the people, was not only a landmark but a mark also in the imagination, in the stories, in the mythology that was important for them to understand the world.

But what kind of world was it for Paleolithic people back then? 35,000 years ago, Europe was covered by glaciers, and in this glacial Europe, you have to imagine a climate dry, cold, but with sun also. That was important. In this place, for example, you have to imagine woolly rhinos, mammoths along the rivers. In the forest, you had Megaloceros deers, horses, reindeers, bisons, and also ibex or the antelopes moving. So it was very rich. The biomass in this part of Europe was very important for the development of human but also carnivores. So you have to imagine lions, bears, leopards, wolves, foxes in very large numbers. And among all these carnivores and predators, human.

Humanness is a very good adaptation with the – in the world. The human society needs to adapt to the landscape, to the other beings, the animals, to other human groups and to communicate something, to communicate it and to inscribe the memory on very specific and hard things, like walls, like pieces of wood, like bones, this is invention of Cro-Magnon.

And how about music? Yes, and also things, mythology, music. But with the invention of the figuration – figuration of animals, of men, of things – it's a way of communication between humans and with the future to evocate the past, to transmit information that is very better than language, than oral communication. And this invention is still the same in our world today.

The presence of humans in the cave was fleeting like shadows. Bear skulls everywhere, but these skulls belong to the cave bear, a species, like the mammoth and the woolly rhino, that vanished from the face of the Earth long ago.

Tens of thousands of years of patient water dripping has left a thick coating of calcite on this skull. It now has the appearance of a porcelain sculpture. In all this menagerie of bones, there‘s not a single human specimen. Scientists have determined that humans never lived in the cave. They used it only for painting and possibly ceremonies.

Michel Philipe has studied the bones of Chauvet Cave.

Caves constitute a favorable place for the preservation of bones. As the result, there are a lot of bear bones. Overall, this represents but there are also some wolves. We have two skulls and have several bones. We have a few ibexes. We have a magnificent skull on the wet sand with calcite, quite lovely. When you shine light on it, they are calcite crystals that glisten. It‘s truly quite lovely. There are some horses as well. There is a cave hyena.

What else is there? There‘s also an eagle skeleton, a golden eagle, practically whole, but it may be a little more recent, carried in by the run of water and wedged against the big rocks at the edge of the waterway. So you can see its bones spread out over ten feet in length.
Our goal is not only to say what bones there are, but we also try to understand if they lived there, if they were moved, how they were transported.

Did the bears bring the bones? There are several bones that have been chewed on a little. So it could have been the bears or the hyenas.

All the scientists are lodged in a nearby sports complex. Although they each have their special field, they compare and combine their findings. We were interested in the work of these two.

Carole, Gilles, can you explain about what you‘re doing here? Yeah, oui. In the cave, we are trying to reveal the contours of underlying designs that are hard to follow with the naked eye. Because we are not supposed to touch the wall, we take a series of photos that we put together in a mosaic. We are trying to achieve a maximum of detail. Then we take a transparency, and we put it on top of the photo. And then we trace the underlayers of engravings. Later, we return to the cave and check against the contours all the designs that we can see and all the markings of the bears as well so that we can understand each figure and event.

When you do a synthesis of the composition, there is a kind of dynamic circular movement going from the bottom to the right, towards the center, like a circle. It obviously creates a very strong dynamic that is reinforced here by the oblique movement of the horses. It's the force of the contrast, the fact that they've played with the contrast and with the shape of the wall. It's like an easel. They've used the surface, made use of the material, and mixed material to create this very strong impression.

By comparing all the paintings in the cave, it seems certain that the horses of this panel were created by one single individual. But in the immediate vicinity of the horses, there are figures of animals overlapping with each other. The striking point here is that in cases like this, after carbon dating, there are strong indications that some overlapping figures were drawn almost 5,000 years apart.

The sequence and duration of time is unimaginable for us today. We are locked in history, and they were not. Despite this blurring of time and the anonymity of the artists, there's one individual who can be singled out.

This is one of the most beautiful panels in the cave, along with the lion panel at the far end. And here we can see the technique of prehistoric man, but you can also see their keen knowledge of the animal world. They tell us stories. Here you have an ensemble of horses, but their open mouths suggest that the animals are whinnying. That is to say that these images become audible to us.

Dominique Baffier is a scholar of Paleolithic culture. Here on the right, she examines the cluster of palm prints with her colleague Valrie Feruglio.

Madame Baffier took us on a tour. She serves as the custodian of the cave, and her rules of engagement are strict but entirely reasonable given the precious and fragile nature of this unique place.

Madame Baffier takes us down to the farthest chamber of the cave, the mysterious chamber of the lions. There is a serious level of toxic CO2 gas emanating from the roots of trees, which seeps down into the cave through the porous limestone. Our time is even more constricted in this location, and there is no possibility to get close to the paintings.

Here at this junction, we have the panel of the panther. You can see the drawing of a panther, which is the only one known in Paleolithic wall painting to date.

And this is where you find extremely original images, like this insect-shaped one or this one shaped like a butterfly or a bird in flight, that you also find on this rock pendant hanging from the ceiling large and very small coupled with two vertical ocher stripes that follow the pendant‘s contours.

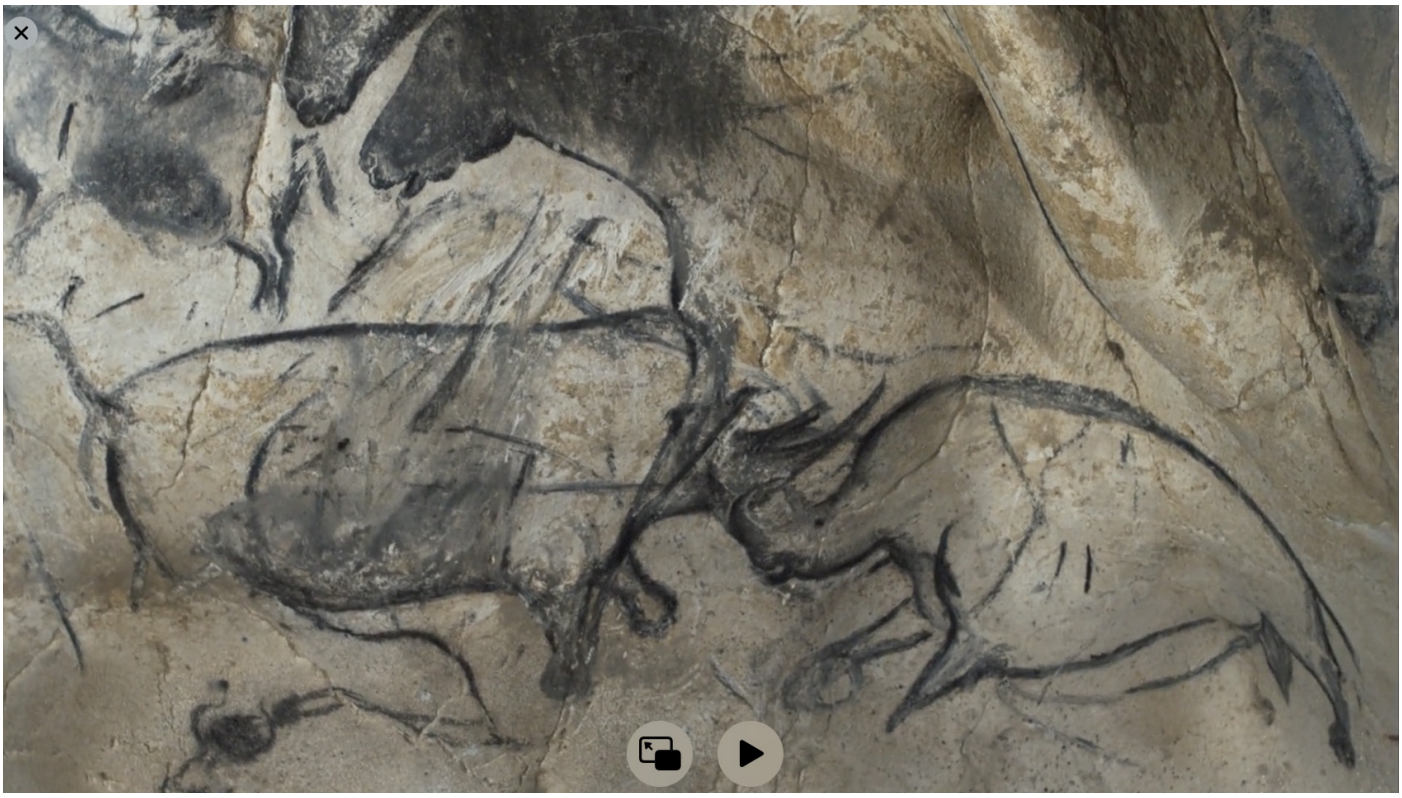
also an extremely intriguing item: this mound of stones. You can see that it didn't fall from the ceiling. It was prehistoric man who grouped the stones here, but we do not know why.

Also, you have a whole series underneath of positive handprints. And over there, you can see the hand of the man who printed his palms in the first room of the cave, because you can recognize his crooked little finger. In other words, we've followed him here.

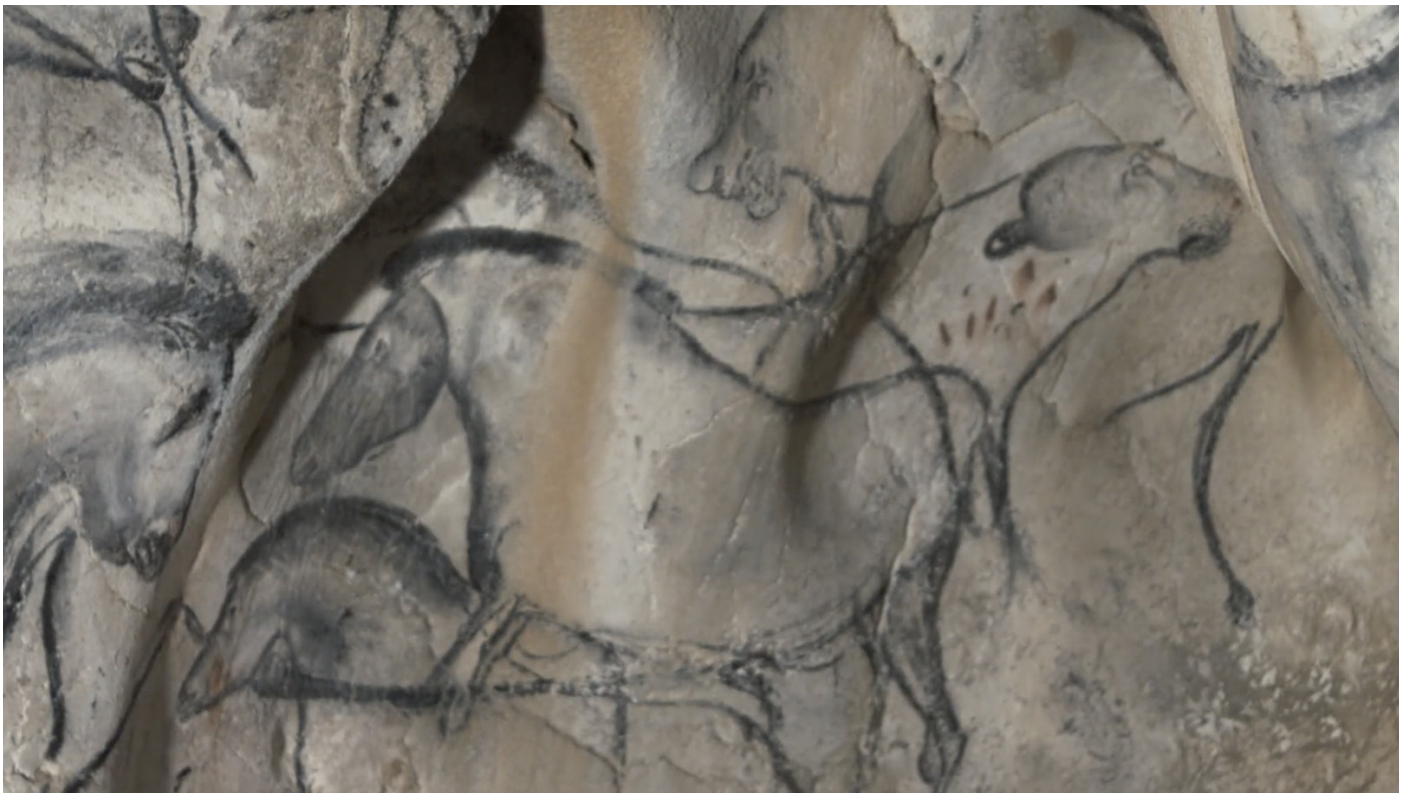
Here you have torch swipe marks. The men would light their way with a torch, and when the wood was too burnt down, they would scrape the torch against the wall to rekindle the flame. The traces are fresh, because you can see these small fragments of coal that have fallen.

One of these tiny fragments was tested by radiocarbon dating. This torch was swiped 28.000 Years ago.

And here we have a painting that is quite interesting, because it represents a couple of now-extinct cave lions. You have here the male. He's behind, the larger one. He's outlined in a single stroke more than six feet in length. And in front, you have the female. She is smaller and seems to rub her flank against the male. And this representation of the cave lion has allowed us to shed light on a mystery, because archaeozoologists didn't know whether the cave lion had a mane, like the lion today living in Africa. And this representation of a cave lion, more than 30,000 years old, shows us that they didn't have a mane. Look at the outline of his head, which is clearly delineated. And this is, without a doubt, a male, because we've got the scrotum right here under the tail.



You see that the two rhinos there are fighting. You can see all the signs of fury towards each other, the movement of their legs, which are thrown forward, and you can almost hear the sound of their horns colliding against each other in the movement of the fight.



Here you have another story, a story of lions, a male courting a female who is not ready for mating. She sits and growls. Look, you can hear the female growling. She‘s raising her lips. She‘s baring her teeth. She is not happy.

And here, to finish off, you have the flight of this bison. We hear the hooves. We can make out multiple legs indicating its movement. It is escaping from this alcove, following this auroch.

there are things you won't be able to show and you won't be able to see. You can't get closer.

That is the case with these absolutely marvelous paintings in the farthest chamber, this grouping of lions. It is especially the case with this rock pendant, where the lower portion of a woman's body has been painted. That is, you have her pubic triangle and her legs that separate, starting at the knee, which diverge and are reminiscent of the well-known small early Stone Age statuettes from archaeological digs in the Swabian Jura in Germany. We can only see part of this lower half of a female body, because we cannot access the other side of the pendant. And here we are, some 30,000 years later, with a myth that has endured until our days. We can also find this association of female and bull in Picasso's drawings of the Minotaur and the woman. This is the only partial representation of a human in the entire cave. For the time being, the other side of the rock pendant must remain unreachable for us. The people who created this are equally enigmatic. Of the few things they left behind, practical items like flint tools can be more easily read.

The mystery of the Minotaur and the female began to unfold when our guides allowed us to mount a small camera on a stick with which we reached out. The bison seems to embrace the sex of a naked woman.

Is it the spirit of the of a lion in a man? Is it a marriage? Is it a new being? That‘s a question we can ask to this reproduction.

What the people who lived in this valley left behind is their great art. It was not a primitive beginning or a slow evolution, it rather burst onto the scene like a sudden explosive event. It is as if the modern human soul had awakened here. Even more astonishing to consider is that at the time, Neanderthal man still roamed this valley. But there must have been other forms of artistic expression, like music, for example.

Southwestern Germany was connected to this valley through an ice-free corridor. It should also be noted that the Alp Mountains were covered by 9,000 feet of ice, binding so much water that the sea level was 300 feet lower than today. A hunter could have walked from Paris to London crossing the dry seabed of the English Channel. Walking 400 miles in this direction would lead you to the Swabian Alb of Germany. There, in the museum of Blaubeuren, we find replicas of the best-known Paleolithic Venuses.

But this one, the Venus of Hohle Fels, stands out.

Found in 2008, it is sensational for its age. The Venus from Hohle Fels is probably the oldest depiction of any kind of figurative object we know at all. It's the earliest representation of a human being, and it's the absolute root of figurative depiction as we know it. Later on, we see a range of animals being depicted. We can think of the animal depictions in ivory here or the fabulous depictions from Grotte Chauvet of mammoths, of lions, and we can see a very clear connection between the Swabian finds and the depictions in Chauvet.

What's also fascinating is that at this time, we see evidence for musical instruments, a range of personal ornaments, mythical depictions that clearly show that these people had a religious concept evolving the transformation between humans and animals.

If we look at the Venus of Hohle Fels a bit more closely, we can see very clearly, for instance, that the figurine has no head, right? Instead of a head, the figurine has a ring. It was perhaps worn at times, suspended on a string of some sort. Also, the sexual attributes are key, which clearly link this depiction to ideas of reproduction, fecundity, sexuality, ideas that are absolutely essential to all of humanity also today.

It's also important to realize that at this time, much of Europe was occupied by Neanderthals. So we're dealing with the critical phase in human evolution where two forms of human beings are testing their boundaries. And what we find over and over again is that Neanderthals, although they're very sophisticated, they never had this kind of symbolic artifact ever.

The ivory flute is really a remarkable artifact that Maria Malina discovered a few years back, and I think what's extremely important is that we realize that archeology today is not a heroic adventure with spades and picks but high-tech scientific work that's done with incredible detail. Really millimeter by millimeter, the sediments are removed in these deposits the age of Grotte Chauvet and our sites, between 30,000 and 40,000 years ago. And this detailed work allowed Maria to identify a whole range of finds that she was able to piece
together.

Some of the pieces came from the 1970s, from the first years of excavation, and these were really small pieces. You can see here in this picture. The tiny ivory pieces remained unexplained for a full three decades. And 31 pieces had a very significant look. We found pieces with a part of the finger holes and with notches on the side, and with these pieces, I thought already that it could be a part of an ivory flute. Of course, the question was very important how this flute was made. And you can see here on the long axis there is a split going all over the flute, and inside the two halves, they hollowed the flute out. And these little notches along this axis, along the split helped to refit these two halves together very precise.

This flute is only one of eight in all so far recovered from this area of southwestern Germany. The caves here have no paintings but yield many other objects of art.

In this cave, the Geissenkloesterle cave, many very important findings from the Ice Age were made. We found some little ivory statues of bear and mammoth, a very tiny mammoth, very lovely.
And in 1992, I was part of the excavation team. People lived here about 30,000, and in that time, it was very cold here, because the Alp Mountains were covered by a glacier about 2,500 meters thick. And in the valley down there, reindeer and mammoth were passing, and it was very cold. And that‘s the reason why I‘m dressed up like an Inuit. We presume that in this way, the people of the Ice Age were clothed by reindeer fur and boots made of reindeer fur and reindeer leather, because otherwise you couldn’t stand the cold.

One of the most important finds we made in this cave was a very tiny flute made out of the radius of a vulture. Astonishing on this flute is that is, that it is pentatonic, and this is the same tonality we are used to hear today. And if you like, I‘ll try to play some small tunes for you.

I'm trying to do things differently, as I have the habit of using my sense of smell in my profession. So I try to sniff the smells coming from the interior of a cave. Here, I didn't smell anything except the exterior landscape. Outside you can smell the earth, the wild thyme, the ivy. You can smell a range of things but nothing specific related to a cavern that's been closed for thousands of years. This is my personal technique, because I design perfumes. It's a matter of trying to experience it in a different manner.

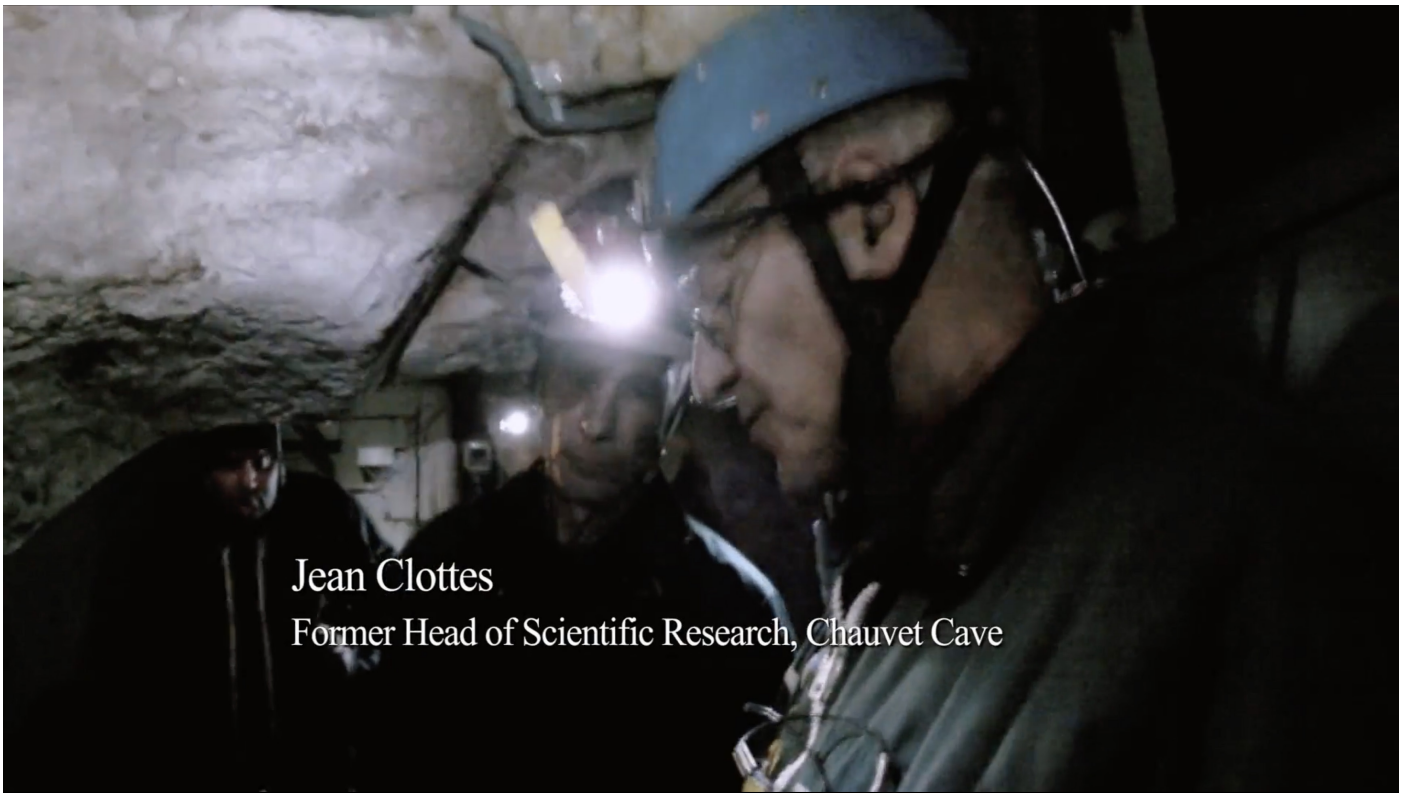
So I've been – I've always created perfumes, and most notably, I was president of the French Society of Perfumers for some years.

There are plans to build a theme park for tourists with a precise replica of the cave a few miles from here. This replica may even contain a re-creation of the odor of the prehistoric interior. Evidently, the odor you can smell right now is quite attenuated. It is very subtle.

There are not many emanations, but our imagination permits us to try and reconstruct the scene, the scene with its odors from 25,000 years ago, with all the animals that would have been found there – bears, wolves, perhaps even rhinoceroses, and man – 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

In a forbidden recess of the cave, there‘s a footprint of an eight-year-old boy next to the footprint of a wolf.

Did a hungry wolf stalk the boy? Or did they walk together as friends? Or were their tracks made thousands of years apart? We‘ll never know.



Traditional people and, I think, people of the Paleolithic had very probably some– two concepts which change our vision of the world. They're the concept of fluidity and the concept of permeability.

Fluidity means that the categories that we have – man, woman, horse, I don't know, tree, et cetera – can shift. A tree may speak. A man can get transformed into an animal and the other way around, given certain circumstances.

The concept of permeability is that there are no barriers, so to speak, between the world where we are and the world of the spirits. A wall can talk to us, or a wall can accept us or refuse us. A shaman, for example, can send his or her spirit to the world of the supernatural or can receive the visit, inside him or her, of supernatural spirits.

If you put those two concepts together, you realize how different life must have been for those people from the way we live now.
Humans have been described in many ways, right? And for a while, it was Homo sapiens and is still called 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 spiritualis.

The strongest hint of something spiritual, some religious ceremony in the cave, is this bear skull. It has been placed dead center on a rock resembling an altar. The staging seems deliberate.The skull faces the entrance of the cave, and around it, fragments of charcoal were found potentially used as incense.

What exactly took place here, only the paintings could tell us.

Crocodiles have been introduced into this brooding jungle, and warmed by water to cool the reactor, man, do they thrive. There are already hundreds of them. Not surprisingly, mutant albinos swim and breed in these waters.

A thought is born of this surreal environment. Not long ago, just a few ten thousands of years back, there were glaciers here And now a new climate is steaming and spreading. Fairly soon, these albinos might reach Chauvet Cave. Looking at the paintings, what will they make of them?
Nothing is real. Nothing is certain.

It is hard to decide whether or not these creatures here are dividing into their own doppelgaengers. And do they really meet, or is it just their own imaginary mirror reflection? Are we today possibly the crocodiles who look back into an abyss of time when we see the paintings of Chauvet Cave?