

## Prehistoric art: meta-language and landscape

*Dario Seglie\**

\* Ifrao/Unesco Liaison Officer, Icom/Unesco Liaison officer, Polytechnic of Torino, Dept. of Museography, ceSMAP - Centro Studi e Museo d'Arte Preistorica, Viale Giolitti 1, 10064 Pinerolo, Italy, e-mail: [dario.seglie@alice.it](mailto:dario.seglie@alice.it)

**Abstract:** In a particular moment of Man's history on our planet, the phenomenon of Prehistoric Art appeared, more or less 40,000 years ago. This huge coacervation of signs that men have impressed on the surrounding world is not the result of an immediate transformation of Homo Sapiens's intellectual activity, but is the effect of the maturation of a long cognitive process based on the psychic dimension and comporting stages leading to a more enlarged Self knowledge. To undertake the study of Prehistoric Art, some basic concepts from the science of signs are useful to navigate on the ocean of information that is presently disposable. Concerning Prehistoric Art, since we are confronted with situations that derive their peculiar characters in connection with space, with time and with different individuals that interact within a complex of signs, it is possible to utilize theoretic patterns deriving from the semiologic and meta-linguistic fields. In consideration of the territory and its ancient or actual anthropization, Prehistoric Art sites could be classified in three categories: "fossil" sites; "historic" sites; "living" sites. All these sites forming, today, the "residue" of prehistoric landscapes, theatre of the human adventures that have produced Prehistoric Art as one of the signs of communication and social externalization. "Powerful places" instanced by the presence of Prehistoric Art, considered as "genius loci" present us with data relating to a fundamental phenomenon of the human culture: landscaping. In the light of these considerations, landscape is not simply a portion of territory or a geographical notion, but assumes the valence of the highly spiritual building up of Humanity.

**Key Words:** Prehistoric Art , Semiotics, Meanings, Landscape, Relicts.

*"Metaphor: the transfer of the  
name of a thing to another thing"*  
Aristotle (384 – 322 BC)

### Introduction

In a particular moment of Man's history on our planet, the phenomenon of Prehistoric Art appeared, more or less 40,000 years ago, formed by signs projected on rocky surfaces, in caves, in shelters or in the open air. The typology is vast and varied: from signs of the figurative naturalistic and descriptive to abstract geometric and symbolic notations.

This huge coacervation of signs that men have impressed on the surrounding world is not

the result of an immediate transformation of Homo Sapiens's intellectual activity, but is the effect of the maturation of a long cognitive process based on the psychic dimension and comporting stages leading to a more enlarged Self knowledge, grounded in reflexive deepening thought associated with the knowledge of another world perceived as separated from or discontinuous with human personality.

A symptom of this abstract thinking could be located in stone artifacts, e.g. the amygdalae,

denoting a research of symmetry and aesthetics, far removed from mere functionality, already noticeable in Lower Paleolithic times.

There is an evolutionary momentum inclining Man to prove his worth over and against Nature, as arbiter and modifier of reality, despite his being from time to time overcome by the force of wild animals, by atmospheric and telluric events – this being the reason why he has always submitted to the numinous, to the sacred, to the extra-human, the super-human, or the divine.

So, prehistoric Art is the vehicle of intermediation and of communication between two worlds, one transcendent, oneiric, spiritual, the kingdom of the sacred and divine versus the kingdom of man, the effectual world, real, tangible and concrete, where the daily tragedy of life unfolds.

Prehistoric Art, for over a century now, is the object of scientific studies, decoding, discussions, disputes, sometimes passionate. The material produced could fill up the mythical Library of ancient Alexandria in Egypt, if it were still in existence and if –on this site- it were possible to concentrate all the books, all the writings, all the notes, all the sketches and copies, all the documentation produced by the scholars in this field. But this fact is not possible now and it will be very difficult also in the future: towards the goal of this utopian and virtual Global Library, IFRAO's action is only the first modest step albeit an exemplary one in conserving and preserving the memory of Prehistoric Art. For unfortunately every day sees the loss, as with animal species, of a considerable quantity of material data despite the fact that we are acquiring fresh evidence daily thanks to the specialized researches developed in four corners of the world. Our horizon is certainly today more vast than in the past: the discoveries are multiplied in every continent; some sites have disappeared or been destroyed (in some case, submerged by questionable hydroelectric schemes such as File island in Assuan, the Guadiana river with the Alqueva dam, the Dampier and the Toro Muerto projects. But an impressive number of new districts of Prehistoric Art are being discovered, the increase of documentation is exponential and would seem at times to follow a developing curb of a pandemic.

The aim of our past Masters was the magisterial management of all the disciplinary knowledge; this goal is now in crisis, owing to the flood of empirical evidence instanced by the

info-net. This situation provokes a fresh consciousness of our congenital inadequacy in coping with the sea of data stowed in the electronic bilges of websites all over the world.

### The science of signs

To undertake the study of Prehistoric Art, some basic concepts from the science of signs are useful to navigate on the ocean of information that is presently disposable. They are crucial in trying to answer at the first of the three fundamental questions confronting mankind: *from where do we come?* What were the mental maps that controlled the cognitive activities of man to pursue his course, more or less deliberately until arriving at his present provisional halt?

I omit intentionally the third question: *where are we going?* The present times are not particularly encouraging as to future of the human future race: the chimpanzee armed with a machine gun has once again jumped off the subway, according to the tragic metaphor coined by Edgard Morin; we are constantly on the edge of the abyss.

Semiotics is properly the science that studies the system of signs (from *semeion*, “sign” in Greek): languages, codes, signals, notations, etc. and in particular the non linguistic systems of signs. This understanding should not be confused with the medical semiotics examining the symptoms and the natural indexes manifesting illness.

The term “Semiotics” is used today by different but convergent schools in the field, to designate the discipline that surveys the phenomena of signification and of communication. The concern for the relationships existing between signs is traceable throughout the whole history of western philosophical thinking, from Aristotle to the Medieval Scholastics, from the *Ars Magna* or combinatory art of Raimondo Lullo to the *semeiotike* or *doctrine of signs* by Locke (1632-1704, an Anglo-Saxon scholar better known for his famous “*Epistula de tolerantia*”, one of the landmarks of the modern lay philosophy), the goal of which is: “*the necessity to consider the nature of the signs which the mind utilize to understand the things*”.

The link – ratio between signs is conserved till today as a constant of philosophic thought, understood as scientific language, in logics, as art of known, and in the human language, intended as tool by universal knowledge.

To the philosophic metaphysical tradition (from Descartes to Leibniz and Kant) responsible for having sustained the idea of *a priori* knowledge, losing touch with an eventual reality in itself, the *noumenon* and thus somewhat impervious to factual verification, answers the pragmatic modern conception of reality, consisting in the continuous confrontation of thinking with the real live world made up of the practices of locatable actors

Consequently, the universe represented by the whole complex of Prehistoric Art requires pragmatic research or empirical study of the origins, of the signs uses and of the effects in relation to the hypothetic or conjectured behaviour that they have provoked; our semantics is therefore the analysis of the rock signs taking into account the different manners of signifying; the syntactic is the combinatory study between signs, apart from their specific significance and apart from their relation to behaviours that cause the expressions and the gestures that are subtended.

According with Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), the Helvetic father of *Sémiologie*, the system of signs are many (e.g. writing, the deaf-mute alphabet, symbolic rites, military signals, etc.) with language being the most important. It is thus possible to conceive of "*une science qui étudie la vie de signes au sein de la vie sociale*".

In this sense Saussure conceive Semiology as a general science of signs, in the overarching frame the social psychology. The sign, according to Saussure, do not link a thing to a name, but a concept to an imagined; it is like a medal with two faces, *signifié-signifiant*, and the relationship is fixed on the base of an abstract system of rules, *la langue* that springs from the collective use. This fact presuppose that all the members of a particular society give an identical value to the various signs which become true "codes", rigid and conventional, namely a system of correspondence between significant and significations.

Actually, the various schools a common theoretical matrix share and there thus emerges a conception of semiotics as a global science or heuristic analytic paradigm seeking to conceive the world as a whole of systems of signs considered as communicative tools, as models of the world, as elements that regulate behavior. Semiotics, in this sense, is proposed as a general theory of culture and of social environment; the

communicative process is defined in turn – at the level of elementary structure – as an information model.

### Meta-language and metaphor for Prehistoric Art

Meta-language is a language in which it is possible to speak of other languages (as language-objects) by a process of formalization that give difficulties in forming the antinomies; in science, the meta-language assumes the maximum of accuracy, e. g. the H<sub>2</sub>SO<sub>4</sub> formula represent exactly the sulphuric acid.

The metaphor, that Aristotle define as "*the transfer of the name of a thing to another thing*" is today considered an operation that compares two contexts –the original one and the applied – with modifications of both, and transferring characters from one to another and vice-versa; in the metaphor "Richard Lion Heart", the king assumes typical connotations of the animal (courage, strength, etc.) but also the lion is "humanized" so that it could represent a noble family on a coat of arms.

Concerning Prehistoric Art, since we are confronted with situations that derive their peculiar characters in connection with space, with time and with different individuals that interact within a complex of signs, it is possible to utilize theoretic patterns deriving from the semiologic and meta-linguistic fields.

Sign production work can be assimilated to praxis, because the human subject is the actor of the semiotic practice, the central point lying in the pragmatic relationship between sender and addressee. The base of every quest as to the nature of the communicative acts, realized in a determined logistic situation (by actors placed in systems of socio-historic, biological, psychological, perceptive conditioning, and so on) is synthesized by the centrality of the human being.

### Prehistoric Art in the landscape as expression of semiotics

In consideration of the territory and its ancient or actual anthropization, Prehistoric Art sites could be classified in three categories:

1. "fossil" sites: those with no link to the history of their location, both oral or written; their memory was completely extinct since the moment of their discovering by occasional or scientific researchers;

2. "historic" sites: those which have conserved a memory in written or oral history; generally linked to legends, superstitions, popular cults and traditions, edicts of civil or religious authorities, acts of inquisitorial process;
3. "living" sites: those still actually frequented, without any apparent solution of continuity with the past, for purposes of cult and generally recognized as the property of the local community that is its usufruct and custodians;

All these sites forming, today, the "residue" of prehistoric landscapes, theatre of the human adventures that have produced Prehistoric Art as one of the signs of communication and social externalization.

The landscape of tomorrow is a consequence of the landscape of yesterday. The natural and cultural stratifications left over time in a specific area, from the far geological ages the signs and modeling that are referred to the actions of man, furnish aspects and peculiar features that consent classification, chronological alignments and the distinguishing of various types of landscape. They are territorial zones that have received modifications far more by consequential anthropic change than by natural factors.

The elements of geographic and topographic localization and specification are not neglected as logistic data of little relevance, but assume a central position, thanks also to the aid of powerful and flexible informatics systems as the GIS (Geographic Information System). The various landscape components and the macro-geomorphologies form an integrated part of Prehistoric Art phenomenon, on a part with other data of micro-analysis of the form of graphemes, the executive techniques, the medium utilized, the style, the composition, etc.

The new elements of the site localization are conferred by the parameter constituting the landscape, anthropized by the presence of Prehistoric Art, slight signs that modify the rocky surface or accomplish the larger transmutation from the natural to the constructive, from chaos to cosmos: *ordo ab chao*.

### **Landscape Archaeology: Prehistoric Art perception and cognitive capacity.**

Globalization, and the recent attention to the environment, conceived as a planetary ecosystem, have enhanced new approaches and aroused latent ferments also in the rock art dominion. Landscape archaeology has received

strong incentives and a significant enlargement of its horizon, as has also happened in other disciplinary fields.

Prehistoric Art is now conceived as an element strictly linked to the landscape, in fact it is so linked to the context that is impossible to consider it in an autonomous or discontinuous manner.

A former methodological error, linked to the prevailing classificatory and typological-comparative studies, that did not prioritize global contexts of reference, have -for a considerable time- removed Prehistoric Art from its *Sitz im Leben* reality.

The vision of the researcher has a subjective dimension: cultural, individual, and social. Immersed in this perceptive perception, the discernment of Prehistoric Art is the conglomerated end result associated with the general-global pattern of the area under investigation.

Prehistoric Art is one of the primordial signs of Territory, perhaps the most ancient signal and surely the first perceivable symptom, the material trace of man's outlook and the proof of his cognitively superior capacities, the echoing relict of activities not directly or functionally associated with for the daily struggle for life, but perhaps indispensable for the cohesive force required to perpetuate mankind's identifying project

Landscape is presented to men as a site recognizable by the emitted signals making for the daily life developed within its embrace; it is shelter, protection, the (res) source, and food; it is also and perhaps above all the land of the ancestors; and in last instance it is the territory of myth, of legend, of dream, and, thus a sacred place pointing to a beyond. Sacred and profane are two categories inextricably mixed and are ever co-present in the landscape, constituted both by presences and absences, by reality and virtuality, by consciousness and unconscious; the correspondence between the poles happens at a cultural level as it is man that charges with symbolic significations the layout of the land, making mental and psychic maps that overlay the vital projects by of individuals and their group developed over time.

This mental landscape forms the theatre in which Mankind realize his culture. At a certain level of analytic abstraction, the dichotomy between nature and culture finds in the concept of landscape the basis of the civilization, with the

evident signals of the transformations and anthropic interventions that re-designed the land.

Prehistoric Art is located at the top of this antinomian divide: by slight interventions, by little superficial modifications on the cave walls, shelter, open air rocks, man has transformed the territory creating the sacred panorama, an operation of enormous political, economic, and social import.

Today Prehistoric Art is a mere relict, the survived datum of a complex cultural construction from which time and memory have erased nearly all the vital component parts; rites, sounds, songs, mimed actions, do not leave traces; oral tradition and bodily gesture don't fossilize!

The iconographies traced on soils, on sands, on skins, on bark, wood, leaves, textiles, on *adobe* plaster, have often not resisted the passage of time, and most are definitively lost.

Only Rock Art, exactly because it is rock solid, has been conserved and gives us the data – for over 30,000 years- on one aspect of the cognitive activities and man as a symbolic thinker: there are sufficient few surviving signs on rock to connoted culturally the territory – even the most desolate and desert – and for the re-emersion of peculiar landscapes, the hearth and homeland of man, for us to read minimally today.

### **The hypostasis, reinvention and public presentation of Prehistoric Art**

In making Prehistoric Art, it was also possible to have mainly technical and practical motivation which convinced the authors to choose one surface rather than another to decorate; but were present too and simultaneously non technical motives, probably of symbolic nature, determining the choice of a particular site: the dominant position on the surrounding land, an astronomical orientation, or “special effects” e. g. the sparkling, the brilliant, the impressiveness, the color, the sonority, the acoustics, etc. of the rock, of the cave, and of the site. The site could be in relationship with particular elements of the landscape; e. g. springs, waters, shelters, grotto, paths, etc. Water seem to be an element that since the most ancient traces from the Upper Paleolithic to the historical eras, is always closely connected to Prehistoric and Rock Art, in a relatively material vein( the presence of water in the vicinity of the sites), or in more symbolic way, by signs that evoke this fundamental natural element in the frame of the rock storied complexes.

Water that flows from the depth of a cave, surfaced in pits, gushed out springs, ran in creeks and rivers, flooded into immense lakes, was perceived as primeval element, vital to the life of the world life, for vegetation, for animals and man, to drink so as to survive.

Water is the element that attracts all the animals and so it is the factor that characterize the sites where meeting takes place between the kingdom of the men and of the cattle, preys to capture, to slaughter, to sacrifice.

Frequently today the environment has changed around the sites that present pictograms and petroglyphs, and in the same territory where once flooding was frequent, now only exists the red-hot aridity of the desert.

There are special place associated with water where the numinous and the supernatural present their epiphanies and where often rock art still exists today as the surviving sign of sacredness and of rituals that have suffered the ruin of time.

The multiple valences, the relationships and the symbolic connections that were existing between imagination and surroundings have almost completely disappeared, but persist the specific characters of the rock phenomenon that enable us to insert it in the category of the religious taking the term at its etymological value namely the being bound together – rock art thus still echoes the social life of communities in the remote past.

In fixing a centre that organize the territory, and then orders the universe drawing out from the primordial chaos, the “internal” territory is established in all its reassuring familiarity, a reliable source of daily living in opposition to the “external” territory, unknown and untrustworthy, peopled with prevailingly hostile forces.

“Powerful places” instanced by the presence of Prehistoric Art, considered as *genius loci* present us with data relating to a fundamental phenomenon of the human culture: landscaping. In the light of these considerations, landscape is not simply a portion of territory or a geographical notion, but assumes the valence of the highly spiritual building up of Humanity.

And it is exactly in this natural theatre formed by rock art sites that is possible make a museum of the most ancient cognitive activity of Man.

The scholar of today creates the replica of these ancient realizations (Lascaux 2, Altamira



Fig. 1 - Alexandria, Egypt. The *Bibliotheca alexandrina*. A circular stone wall of the new Library, in Aswan granite, engraved with calligraphies, inscriptions and symbols from both past and present civilisations.

2, the XY museum gallery) for the visitors, for the usufruct of the past Cultural Heritage, reproducing the Prehistoric Art “relicts” and rebuilding the possible mental patterns that presided over the praxis of the signs.

But we must be fully conscious of the fact that we are working on hypothetic constructions, relying on meta-languages and metaphors that at least partly misinterpret prehistoric Man, attributing probabilistically uncertain and perhaps arbitrary significations to the meanings he had in mind.

The projection that we often risk to apply to Prehistoric Art, reminds us the masterly warning by André Leroi-Gourhan: “to avoid to put in the mouth of the prehistoric man Bantu words pronounced with European accent”

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alslebel K., 1962, *Asthetische Redundanz*, Quickborn.
- Arnheim R., 1974, *Il pensiero visivo*, Einaudi, Torino.
- Bailey R., Matejka L., 1980, *The Sign - Semiotics around the world*, Michigan, Ann Arbor.
- Barthes R., 1964, *Éléments de sémiologie*, Communications 4.
- Bouissac P., 1986, *Iconicity and Pertinence* in Bouissac, P., Herzfeld, M., Posner, R. (ed.), *Iconicity. Essays on the Nature of Culture* (Festschrift for T.A. Sebeok, on his 65th birthday), Tübingen, Stauffenburgverlag.
- Bouissac P., Herzfeld M., Posner R. (ed.), 1986, *Iconicity. Essays on the Nature of Culture* (Festschrift for T.A. Sebeok, on his 65th birthday), Tübingen, Stauffenburgverlag.
- Caruso P. (editor), *Conversazioni con Lévi-Strauss, Foucault e Lacan*, Milano, Mursia, 1969.
- Ceccato S., 1967, *A reasoning Perceptron*, Symposium NATO, Paris.
- Coquet J.-C., 1982, *Sémiotique - l'école de Paris*, Paris, Hachette.
- Cruz R. A., 2000, *Sentido estético e mitologia, A arte pré-histórica como escrita indescifrável*, Arkeos 10, Tomar.
- Denis M., 1991, *Imagery and thinking*, Springer, Verlag.
- Dufrene M., 1969, *Fenomenologia dell'esperienza estetica*, Lerici, Roma.
- Eco U., 1964, *Apocalittici e integrati*, Milano, Bompiani.
- Eco U., 1968, *La struttura assente*, Milano, Bompiani.
- Eco U., 1973, *Segno*, Milano, ISEDI.
- Eco U., 1975, *Trattato di semiotica generale*, Milano, Bompiani.
- Eco U., 1984, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*, Bloomington, Indiana U.P.
- Habermas J., 1970, *Logica delle scienze sociali*, Bologna, Il Mulino.
- Helbo A. (ed.), 1979, *Le champ sémiologique*, Bruxelles, Complexe.
- Kant I., 1781, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, Akademie-Ausgabe der Kön. Preuss. Ak. der Wiss.
- Kristeva J., 1968, *La sémiologie comme science critique*, in *TEL QUEL*, Théorie d'ensemble, Paris, Seuil.
- Kuhn T. S., 1970, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago, Chicago U.P.
- Leroi-Gourhan A., 1983, *Le fil du temps*, Paris, Fayard.
- Lotman J., e.a., 1975, *The Semiotic Study of Cultures*, in Sebeok, T.A. (ed.), *The Tell-Tale Sign*, Lisse, The Peter De Ridder Press.
- Metz Ch., 1977, *Essais sémiotiques*, Paris, Klincksieck.
- Morin, E., 1974, *Il paradigma perduto*, Milano, Bompiani.
- Oosterbeek L., 2000, *A past for the future and a past for the present*, Arkeos 9, Tomar.
- Oosterbeek L., 2000, *Art Préhistorique: la nature de la culture*. Arkeos 10, Tomar.
- Otte M., 2000, *Aspects sémiotiques dans l'art Paléolithique européen*, Arkeos 10, Tomar.
- Panofsky, E., 1924, *Idea, Ein Beitrag zur Begriffsgeschichte der alteren Kunsttheorie*, Tenbuer G. B., Leipzig-Berlin.
- Peirce C. S., 1931-1966, *Collected Papers*, Cambridge, Harvard U.P.,
- Read H., 1965, *Icon and Ide*, Harvard University Press.
- Saussure F. de, 1972, *Cours de linguistique générale*, Paris, Payot.
- Sebeok T. A., 1976, *Contributions to the Doctrine of Signs*, Bloomington, Indiana U.P.
- Sebeok T. A., 1977, *A Perfusion of Signs*, Bloomington, Indiana U.P.
- Seglie D, Ricchiardi P., Cinquetti M., 1988, *An Archaeo-anthropological pattern for*

*Rock Art*, AURA -Australian Rock Art Research Association, Darwin.

Seglie D., 1993, ***Biological aspects in Rock Art***, Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, IGNCA, New Delhi.

Seglie D., 1993, ***Nature and Culture in Rock Art phenomena***, University of Liege, Liege.

Seglie D., 1994, *Rock Art: Cultural and Noncultural Aspects*, ARAR American Rock Art Research Association, Northern Arizona University, Flagstaff, U.S.A.

Seglie D., 2000, *La science, la recherche et l'épistémologie de l'art rupestre. Eléments pour un déba*, Arkeos 10, Tomar.

Seglie D. (Ed.), 2001, *Prehistoric Art: Guide to Good Practice*, EuroPreArt, UE, Pinerolo.

Seglie D., 2002, *Arte Rupestre: de l'Arqueologia a la Museologia; un itinerario para la conservación*, Arkeos 12, Tomar.

Seglie D., 2002, *Art Rupestre: archeologie du paysage: parcours de Muséologie appliquée au territoire*, Arkeos 12, Tomar.

Seglie D., 2010, *Pleistocene Art in Italy*. IFRAO Proceedings, (Jean Clottes Ed.), Tarascon sur Ariège, (in press).

Segre C., 1979, *Du structuralisme à la sémiologie en Italie*, in HELBO, A. (ed.) ***Le champ sémiologique***, Bruxelles, Complexe.

Senechal M., 1991, ***Visualization and visual thinking***, MA, COMAP, Arlington.

Thom R., 1980, ***Modèles mathématiques de la morphogénèse***, Paris, Christian Bourgois.

Thom R., 1980, *L'espace et les signes*, Semiotica, 29-3/4.

Von Eckart, S., 1977, ***Theorie des Strukturalismus***, Bonn, Bouvier.

White L. L., 1977, ***Aspetti della forma***, Dedalo, Bari.