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CHALLENGES TO PETER LAMARQUE'S VIEW OF PREHISTORICAL CAVE PAINTINGS

Keywords: *work of art; prehistoric cave paintings; aesthetic objects; work-identity; work-survival; revelatory interpretation; creative interpretation; cultural wrappings; collective memory.*

Abstract: *This paper offers an account of Peter Lamarque's concept of a work of art and its impact on interpreting prehistoric cave paintings. Lamarque argues that works of art are cultural or institutional objects whose conditions of creation and survival are essential for determining their identity and appreciation. In the first part of the paper, I deal with Lamarque's ontological view of works of art, in particular the conditions for the creation and persistence of works of art. In the second part of the paper, I look at the example of prehistoric cave paintings and examine Lamarque's identification of a tension between appropriating the cave paintings as aesthetic objects and being mystified about their cultural meaning and purpose. In the third part of the paper I show that, although the Lamarquean view of the appreciation of works of art points to a problematic identification and appreciation of prehistoric cave paintings as works of art, the caves can be considered a repository of memories of culture and can be appreciated as such. Finally I will argue that the viewer can recreate these works' ontology by creative interpretation, adding new layers of 'cultural wrappings' and thus aspiring to attain a cultural connection with the original works.*

Peter Lamarque, in his book *Work and Object* (2010)¹ argues that works of art are cultural objects which possess their properties objectively² and that they are dependent for their conception and survival on human acts, attitudes and cultural and historical conditions. One important characteristic of the cultural embeddedness of works of arts is that there are certain conditions that “must obtain for a work to come into existence” and certain conditions “under which a work is sustained in existence,” in other words works of art can come into and go out of existence, they

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¹ In this paper I refer to this book as ‘W&O, 2010’ in order to distinguish it from Lamarque's paper with the same title published in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Vol. 102, in 2002.

² Lamarque says that works of art have objective properties. He supports his claim by arguing that works have relational and intentional properties as part of their nature; that works gain their identity from both the intentional human activity and the embeddedness in an art-historical context. I will return to this in Section 1 (W&O, 2010: 23-4).

are not eternal (W&O 66). Lamarque's ontological view of works of art (what kind of entities works of art are) rests upon his support for an institutional account of art where the established practices are essential for the individuation and appreciation of works. In this paper I present Lamarque's ontological view of works of art, focusing in particular on work-identity and work-survival conditions (section 1), next I assess the British philosopher's view that the prehistoric cave paintings should not be appreciated as prehistoric works of art (section 2) and then I argue that these paintings are a repository of cultural memory and that they can be appreciated as such (section 3). I conclude that prehistoric cave paintings can be identified and appreciated appropriately as works of art through creative interpretative processes by adding new layers of "cultural wrappings". However, before the analysis of Lamarque's arguments about the historical and cultural context of the creation and appreciation of works of art one needs to briefly clarify Lamarque's support for a particular form of aesthetic realism – property realism.

Lamarque is a realist, but not a full-blooded one: he argues for a certain kind of realism – property realism. One general understanding of aesthetic realism is that aesthetic properties are in the works. That means that aesthetic properties are instantiated in works of art independently of human judgments which ascribe the properties to the works. In his 'Introduction' of *Work and Object*, Lamarque discusses the two apparently irreconcilable positions regarding the existence of properties of works: the realist and the constructivist position. For realists the properties are *in* the works and they can be revealed by interpretation, while for constructivists the properties of the works are not in the work, they are *constituted* by interpretation. Lamarque argues both that, one has realist intuitions about properties of works as part of the works' identity (these properties are discovered through 'revelatory interpretation') and that, one also has anti-realist intuitions about properties of works, properties which are generated by responses of informed observers (these intuitions are rooted in artistic practices – this is 'creative interpretation').¹ One needs to point out here, that when Lamarque talks about an 'informed observer' he is subscribing to a tradition starting with the Humean critic and continuing with Wollheim's "suitably informed and sensitive spectator" (Wollheim 44). Lamarque believes that there are insights in both positions that ought not to be abandoned, and that one needs to retain a "robust realist notion of works while acknowledging their grounding in cultural conditions and intentional properties" (W&O 31). What Lamarque calls 'relational' or 'cultural' properties are properties that hold between works, artists and the responses of the audience (he endorses an analytic account of the institutional view of art)² and what he calls 'intentional properties' are properties of an aesthetic, artistic and representational kind (54).

¹ Lamarque remarks that similar such distinction (between what is revealed and what is constructed in interpretation) was pointed out by other aestheticians like Jerrold Levinson, Eddy Zemach and Peter Jones. (W&O 25, Note 33)

² See Lamarque's distinction between a sociological and an analytic interpretation of the institutional accounts of art in *Philosophy of Literature* 57-62.

However, there is still the puzzlement about the realism or anti-realism of aesthetic properties and Lamarque does not solve it only by recognising that we have strong intuitions for accepting both positions. Even if we accept that there are relational and intentional properties that are part of the nature of works of art it is still problematic how we can differentiate between the exact properties that are in particular works and the ones that are imputed to these works. Lamarque's view is based on the idea that acceptable interpretations of any kind are constrained by the properties that the object has in itself, the properties possessed by the object which identifies the object as an object of attention. Here is a trace of realism – there are acceptable interpretations of works of art because these works have properties that help an informed observer to identify the works *as* works of art. A simple example which Lamarque uses is that of *King Lear*; if the play belongs in the category of tragedies then the play has the aesthetic character of being tragic. Lamarque insists that this is not just an epistemic reading of the play, but the statement that *King Lear* is tragic is necessarily true. The most appropriate interpretation of the play is that it has tragic properties, thus one is constrained in this interpretation by at least this fact that the identity of the work is determined by one of its salient features, that it is a tragedy.

Lamarque suggests that if the revelatory interpretation¹ is supplemented by “the best, the most exciting, imaginative, or illuminating” interpretation of the work, it can establish a critical tradition and this means that what was originally “imputed to” the work becomes “part of the work” (*W&O* 31). This does not appear to be an elegant solution but if one wants to preserve the importance of the particularity of the intentional object (a particular expression of thought or embodiment of meaning) and a specific experience (a specific subjective experience), as Lamarque wants, then one needs to access the meaning of the work and to have the rewarding experience. Accessing the meaning of a work is not possible independently of the beliefs and attitudes of those engaged with the work:

Undoubtedly the character of a work, its salient features, its value, broadly conceived, indeed its very identity as a work, will be bound up, to a greater or lesser degree, with the historical cultural context of its creation (*W&O* 67).

What this discussion has shown is that Lamarque supports a kind of aesthetic realism, property realism, where the aesthetic properties of a work of art are a subclass of intentional properties and they are partially dependent on the responses of the informed observers.

Lamarque's ontological view of works of art

Ontological enquiries deal with what kind of things are in the world and in the case of the ontology of art one of the main questions is about the form and the mode in which works of art exist. In contemporary aesthetics literature the main

¹ Revelatory interpretation identifies certain art-historical facts about the work that makes it the work of art it is (for example, a painting can be representative, be part of a certain school or style, can contain well known symbols of a certain period of the artist who painted it etc.).

focus of the ontology of art is on different ways of classifying the arts, according to their media, their species or their style and content (Davies, 'The Ontology of Art' 155). However Lamarque concentrates his ontological investigation on the analysis of the main differences between artefacts (in particular, works of art) and mere objects and the conditions for creation and persistence of works. There are a number of important distinctions between ordinary objects and works of art related to their nature but here I am going to focus only on a small number.

Lamarque puts forth a very basic ontological distinction: natural objects are different from artefacts because natural objects are mind-independent objects while artefacts are not (natural objects do not depend for their existence on our perception or interpretation of them). There are different types of artefacts: cultural artefacts, what Lamarque calls 'works' and other artefacts which are defined by their function, like tools and machines.¹ Here is Lamarque's important ontological distinction:

Works *are* objects (broadly construed) but objects of a distinct kind, cultural or 'institutional' objects. The crucial distinction is between that which depends essentially on human thought and cultural activity and that which does not (*W&O* 4).

Lamarque also introduces a bigger class of entities –'ordinary' objects, posed against the class of 'works'. By 'ordinary' objects Lamarque means plants, animals, planets, mountains, and "even those constituting the materials of paintings and sculpture" (*W&O* 26). Lamarque is aware that the pigment of paints and many sculpture materials are manmade and thus 'products of human artifice and invention' but when interpreting a work those 'objects' can be analysed in physical or naturalistic terms, outside a cultural framework (*W&O* 5). One needs to reiterate the role of interpretation in identifying works of art. If one wonders why interpretation is such an important aspect of the ontological inquiry of works of art then the answer is that when interpreting works of art what we are trying to do is to understand and appreciate them as art:

What an illuminating interpretation reveals are the features which help to qualify the work as a work of art, its artistic features (*Philosophy of Literature* 171).

Lamarque emphasises that creative interpretation is rooted in art practice, thus practice-dependence and the intentionality of the works show that works are "crucially different from ordinary objects." Another way of saying this is that ordinary objects could be described in culture-independent terms, while works of art cannot. Works, Lamarque says:

...are inseparable from their cultural wrappings, such that features of these 'wrappings' can be thought to 'belong to' the works themselves (*W&O* 29).

¹ Of course one can dispute the view that tools and machines are not cultural artefacts, but this does not significantly impinge on the aim of this paper.

What is interesting in Lamarque's account of works of art is that some aspects of the cultural 'wrappings' of the works appear to belong to the works themselves. This is explained by the historical and cultural context of the creation of works of art ('what must obtain for a work to come into existence') and their reception (the conditions under which the work is 'sustained in existence'). This is a strong metaphysical characterization of artefacts (works of art in particular) which emphasise the importance of conditions of creation and persistence of works.

Lamarque discusses at length about the conditions of creation and persistence of works of art. About the creation of works he says that works are the product of human agency and intention, they emerge when work on them was completed¹, they possess intentional properties of aesthetic, artistic or representational kind, this possession is made possible in the appropriate cultural context. What he says about the conditions that must obtain for a work to be sustained in existence is captured in the following:

Nothing can be a work (of art) if it does not play a role, or be fit to play a role, in human practices where a sufficient number of informed practitioners recognize its status and respond appropriately (*W&O* 68).

Although there are important questions that Lamarque does not address at length, for example what is a sufficient number of informed practitioners, what if there are a number of competing appropriate responses to a work or how wide does one define human practices, what I would like to focus on is the conditions of persistence which are dependent on the very practice – critical, institutional – in which the individuation and appreciation of the works takes place. Lamarque claims that: "Works cannot survive as works if these practices are lost" (*W&O* 54). Then, according to him even informed observers would have trouble accurately interpreting (understanding and appreciating) works outside a recognisable cultural and temporal framework.

Lamarque's view about the interpretation of prehistoric cave paintings

In his paper 'The Aesthetic and the Universal' (1999), Lamarque discusses the 1994 discovery of the prehistoric paintings of *The Chauvet Cave* which is located along a bank of the river Ardèche near the Pont-d'Arc, southern France.² Lamarque argues that the discovery of these prehistoric paintings, thought to be 32,000 years old, makes art historians uncomfortable because: on the one hand, the perceptual qualities of the paintings invite aesthetic and art historical characterisations and, on the other hand, the paintings remain mysterious and uninterpretable. He considers that this kind of uncomfortable situation is also reflected, in contemporary aesthetics, by a tension between two significant motifs:

¹ Lamarque discusses in detail when a work is completed. He argues that the completed work involves the manipulation of a 'vehicular' medium constrained by an 'artistic' medium (this distinction was introduced by David Davies in *Art as Performance*).

² Since Lamarque's paper was published in 1999, there have been other discoveries of cave art. The most recent is from El Castillo, a cave in Northern Spain whose paintings are dated at more than 40,800 years old thus making them the oldest paintings in the world.

the essential embeddedness of cultural objects in cultural traditions that give them identity and make them intelligible and the easiness with which these cultural objects are appropriated by other cultural traditions and assimilated into different contexts (“The Aesthetic and the Universal” 2).

If one accepts that works of art are cultural artefacts inseparable from their cultural wrappings, then it is understandable why Lamarque is worried about the above mentioned tension. The main problem lies with the second motif described as the ‘easiness’ with which we appropriate cultural objects of other cultural traditions. The first culprits which come to mind are the rise of cultural relativism and postmodern tendencies which encourage a total permeability between cultures and an unrestricted appropriateness of works of art. However, even if one does not buy into this loose characterization and believes that an informed observer has some recognition of the established practices there is still the problematic interpretation of works of art from isolated cultures or distant historical periods. Here we come back to the observation made at the end of section one: works from outside our cultural and temporal frameworks are hard to interpret appropriately. Lamarque points out that if one considers that there are certain conditions that must obtain for a work of art to come into existence and be sustained in existence as a work with a specific identity then one should be wary of identifying and appreciating works like the prehistoric cave paintings *as* works of art. Did the artists of the Chauvet Cave paintings – paleontologists call the people who live there around 40,000 years ago Cro-Magnons, not create works of art? Lamarque says that we have no possibility of knowing: “The line and configurations are still there to see, but arguably the *works* are lost” (*W&O* 70).

However, a chorus of art lovers, nature enthusiasts, speologists, poets, artists, art critics, film makers, historians etc., would univocally praise the beauty and the expressive qualities of the paintings and the rewarding aesthetic experiences they had when encountering these works.¹

¹ Many people visited the Chauvet Cave between 1994 and 1997. However nowadays the cave is closed to tourists and only authorized persons are allowed in the cave. The French state tries to minimise all biological exchanges within the cave. Thus, at present, people only see reproductions of the cave walls’ paintings.



Lamarque does not deny that we do appreciate the prehistoric cave paintings for their beauty; he thinks that we enjoy the prehistoric depictions simply through their appearance. We do, indeed consider them worthy objects of attention. What he denies is that we can understand and appreciate them as prehistoric works of art:

Because we do not know what practices they were embedded in or what meanings, if any, they express, we are literally in the dark as to what intentional objects they are; this should make us wary of importing an artistic vocabulary in our attempts to understand or explain them (“The Aesthetic” 15)

His argument starts with his ontological view of works of art: works of art are distinct from ‘mere objects’, they are intentional objects with aesthetic, artistic and representational properties, they have no independent existence from the very practices that serve to discriminate them from other things. If the interpretative process means seeking to understand and appreciate these works, then according to Lamarque ‘reading’ them as works of art is misplaced. He points out that even if these works were works of art during the last Ice Age, they do not exist anymore *as* prehistoric works of art; we now, appreciate them as something else – perhaps, he says, “different works have arisen in their place” (*W&O* 70).

One way of dealing with this approach is to look at some of Lamarque’s claims about universalism which he characterizes as: “the appeal both to universal human experiences and to patterns of thought that transcend specific artistic and cultural traditions” (“The Aesthetic” 7). Are there universal features of human psychology and cultural life? Can we appeal to something like aesthetic responses, in particular the aesthetic pleasure, as a universal characteristic of human experience? Lamarque thinks that the only thing that one could say here, is that there are no intrinsic features of the aesthetic experience that presuppose specific cultural attitudes as opposed to general characteristics of human experience. However, he concedes that an object of attention can be described in Kantian terms: the experience of sensuous qualities is sometimes disinterested and this attention is universally accessible to human beings (*ibidem* 8). But here is his contention: there

can be a difference between something experienced as an aesthetic object and something experienced as art. The cave paintings although objects of attention, cannot be appropriately experienced as prehistoric works of art because we do not know anything about their conditions of creation and reception. For the British philosopher the tension between appreciating these works aesthetically ('the aesthetic experience per se') and understanding them as works of art ('the culturally embedded responses to art') cannot be resolved except in an aphoristic way.

Werner Herzog in his film *The Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (2011) describes the images from the Chauvet Cave very poetically:

The images are memories of long forgotten dreams. Is this their heart beat or ours?
Will we ever be able to understand the visions of the artist across such an abyss of time? (Herzog 2011)

How would one go about to argue that the prehistoric paintings are works of art even if one thinks Lamarque's view is a good general account of how we interpret works of art? The problem lies with Lamarque's suggestion that there is a strong dependency between understanding the strict conditions of existence and persistence of the works of art and interpreting a work. In the next section I will attempt to show that we are not totally in the dark about these paintings being intentional objects and that the informed perceiver can explore the different meanings of these works, although it is impossible to choose a particular one.

The prehistoric paintings as a repository of cultural memories

First I would like to argue that the Chauvet Cave paintings are intentional objects with aesthetic and representational properties. One can show that the representational properties of the paintings are one of the salient features of the work and define them for what they are. Let us assume for the moment that these representations were not created with an artistic aim in mind; for the Cro-Magnons the paintings could have been a learning blackboard for other younger members of the group, a map of animal migration, a totemic display, an homage to the animal kingdom, a shamanic tool, an early storyboard etc. But one does not have to think that these proposals impinge negatively on the fact that the paintings depict animals in a very skillful and aesthetic way. For example, Lamarque discusses conventional iconography in medieval paintings which depicts saints or other kinds of symbols and argues that these depictions are matters of objective fact even though they are accessible only through interpretation – the revelatory kind. Also the icons could be considered works of art in spite of having their conditions of reception clearly set. It can be argued that the medieval audience as well as subsequent ones supplemented the revelatory interpretation with creative interpretation; in order to feel the awe and the power of the message one needs imagination. Maybe immediately after their creation the icons did 'demand' from the viewers a strict revelatory interpretation. Nevertheless the painters imbued the work with aesthetic features that would provoke the imaginative and emotional life of their viewers for both reverential and aesthetic aims.

Thus one can argue that the representational properties of the Chauvet Cave paintings are: the skillful depictions of around 400 animals, the suggestion of movement, the pictorial articulation of perspective, the carefully observed studies of animal anatomy or the vivid colours of the paintings. These are the properties that can individuate these paintings as exceptional works and can contribute to the aesthetic appreciation of the works of art.

One should reject an excessively linear understanding of art history. When these paintings were discovered in 1994 one of the most shocking things was the Cro-Magnons' employment of a 'modern' perspective. There was a wave of disbelief about the perspective skills of the prehistoric artists. Already at the end of WWII Picasso is reported as saying about the Lascaux cave paintings: 'We have learned nothing in 12,000 years' (Gregory Curtis, *Washington Post* 2006). Why were we so amazed by the extraordinary articulation of space in these depictions? John Berger says:

Commentators remark with astonishment that the paleolithic painters knew the rudiments of perspective. When they say this, they are thinking of Renaissance perspective. The truth is that anyone at any time who draws or has drawn, knows very well that some things are nearer and others further away (*On Drawing* 94).

Berger beautifully describes his experience in the Chauvet Cave insisting on the skill, observance and gracefulness of the paintings. He also remarks that there is a freshness and an immediacy of these works which 'sabotage any linear sense of time.' (93) This is another point of contention with Lamarque's rejection of the individuation and appreciation of cave paintings as prehistoric works of art. Perhaps Lamarque has a too prescriptive cut off point beyond which a work cannot be interpreted as a work of art. For example, supporters of the Lamarquean persuasion could argue that Greek bas-reliefs from the 5th century BC, depicting scenes of war or mythological scenes are also too remote from our cultural and temporal connection. However this type of argument seems to rest upon a matter of degree.

The contemporary art critic could argue for the paramount importance of a specific type of creative interpretation in the understanding and appreciation of the cave paintings. Berger is raising the following question: 'What kind of imaginative space did the Cro-Magnons live in?' Lamarque is right to a certain extent to suggest that we do not know. Nevertheless, are not the cave paintings a forensic trace of an imaginative space? Should we not encourage exciting and illuminating creative interpretations of these works? It has to be said that in order to attempt an illuminating creative interpretation of these paintings one needs a strong foothold in a serious analysis of the objective properties of the works. These properties are things like the red oxide used as painting material, the age of the charcoal and other materials used by the artists, the way the images were drawn, the physical context of the cave – the objects found in the caves, the animal bones, the footprints – as well as the variety of representations of animals, the skill, the perspective and the anatomical accuracy. Only knowing about these 'objective' properties can one start

a creative interpretation which can envisage an appropriate understanding and appreciation of these works as prehistoric art.

Herzog and Berger give inspirational advice about the interpretative process: to attempt a metaphorical connection with the artists of the cave paintings. There is something interesting in Herzog evocative language in the above quotation from his documentary: the images are ‘memories of long forgotten dreams.’ The question here is indeed whose dreams? If these are our dreams, then the paintings can be a trigger for our collective memory. If they are the Cro-Magnons’ dreams, then we can perhaps feel the connection with those very remote lives. When Herzog says ‘whose heart beat are we hearing?’ the artists or ours, this suggests a possible imaginative opening into an appropriate interpretation: listening and imagining the artists’ intentions. Berger says in a similar vein:

‘As I draw, I ask myself, whether my hand, obeying the visible rhythm of the reindeer’s dance, may not be dancing with the hand that first drew them?’ (*On Drawing* 92)

Finally, questioning that these cave images are works of art in the first place must in itself indicate that there is continuity between our contemporary understanding and appreciation of art and the appreciation of remote works of art.

Conclusion

In this paper I have tried to suggest that Lamarque is perhaps overly prescriptive in denying that cave paintings can be appreciated as prehistoric works of art. My suggestion is that we need all the exciting, imaginative and illuminating interpretations of prehistoric paintings to (re)create the cultural wrappings that cocooned these paintings in order to try to find the meaning of these works.

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