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From Prehistoric to Ancient Theatricality

A. Prehistoric Cave, Figurine, and “Temple” Performances

1. The earliest theatrical spaces were probably created in caves during the Upper Paleolithic (Ice Age) Period. On the rock walls in dozens of French and Spanish caves, 36,000–11,000 years ago, figures were drawn with black charcoal. Some were also made with red or yellow ocher (a stone ground to a powder and mixed with saliva), along with etchings, painted handprints, and geometric designs. A few figures also appear in Indonesia from 40,000 years ago. There are designs and handprints in Spain made by Neanderthals, too, from 64,000 years ago.
2. Most figures are Ice Age animals, floating without landscapes. There are also a few with human bodies and animal heads. The walls with art are often very deep inside the caves, through narrow gaps and crawl spaces, indicating a rite of passage as painful ordeal, perhaps for shamanic apprentices to experience a secret, sacred space. But some are in larger chambers accessible to a group, maybe for theatrical storytelling. A few are high up on walls or ceilings, requiring scaffolding to create. Many of the images overlap, sometimes suggesting movement. Some overlapping images were created thousands of years apart. There is also evidence of musical performances with natural stalactites, giving various resonant tones when struck in the echoing chambers, plus carved bone flutes, found in other caves of the same period.

3. Paleolithic cave art demonstrates a new theoretic development of the brain's inner theatre, building on earlier, mimetic, and mythic developments: a *direct sharing* of mental imagery (Donald). Artists depicted large or dangerous animals on cave walls, seen at a distance in the environment outside: woolly mammoths, aurochs (wild cattle), giant elk with huge antlers, rhinoceroses, bison, horses, ibex, and sometimes lions, hyenas, and owls. Yet humans also distinguished themselves from those animals in making such art. Their inner staging of consciousness connected in new ways with other human brains through performances involving cave passageways and chambers, with layered stalagmite forms, pointed stalactites, and rock wall surfaces that humans changed.
4. Ice Age hunter-gatherers, drawn into the mysteries of the earth, went deep into dangerous caves that sometimes held bears and lions. They discovered what appeared naturally there, as frightening or attractive, and created artworks that communicated with others, evoking transcendent, shared ideals. In the darkness, early artists experienced sensory deprivation and probably "Altered States of Consciousness" (ASC) with inner-theatre visions as mental *projections* on the walls in flickering firelight—and recorded them with scratches, charcoal, and paint, to share with others (Lewis-Williams).
5. Such ASC can be produced in human brains today with darkness and flashing lights in the lab. In these experiments, inner-theatre images are evoked as typical hallucinations: (1) geometric shapes like the abstract signs in caves, (2) through a vortex experience like the narrow passageways that attracted prehistoric humans, (3) to floating icons of daily life today, like the Paleolithic images of wild animals, and then (4) fantastic hybrids like the animal-human figures on some cave walls (Lewis-Williams).
6. Paleolithic *handprints*, made by touching the cave wall with paint on the hand or by blowing paint over the hand while it was on the wall, also show a ritual merging of human flesh and rock, with the hand disappearing into the wall in the latter technique. Thus, the cave wall might have been perceived as a "membrane" to another, transcendent realm. Anthropologist David Lewis-Williams also relates Paleolithic cave art to the rock art of San Bushmen in southern Africa, depicting their continued practice of shamanic healing through dancing into trances and thus traveling in the spirit realm with animal guides.

[With photos that you find online or with the documentary film, *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, what do you see in prehistoric cave art and its spaces, in relation to today's stage and screen theatres?]

7. Small, carved objects have also been found across Eurasia, from the Upper Paleolithic period, including a “lion-person” (with lion head on a human body) and various female “Venus” figurines (usually faceless, often with exaggerated breasts, hips, belly, and buttocks). These show the inner theatres of Ice Age people producing external objects that hybridized and stylized their perceptions of animals and one another—as mobile dolls or idols depicting the Other.
8. About 11,000 years ago (9000 BCE), prior to the development of agriculture, early Neolithic (Pre-Pottery Age) “temples” were created at Göbekli Tepe, in what is now southern Turkey, near the border of Syria. Although most of the archeological site is not yet excavated, geophysical surveys show about 20 stone circles (like the later Stonehenge) with over 200 pillars. The excavated, T-shaped megaliths are as tall as 7 meters (23 feet). Some appear to be abstract human figures carved with arms, hands, fingers, a decorated belt, and loincloth (Dietrich et al. 679). Many also have spider, scorpion, snake, duck, lion, fox, boar, and vulture carvings. Each stone, weighing 10–20 tons, was quarried and transported from a hill 100–500 meters away (330–1640 feet), then raised into position at the site. This would have required at least 500 people, along with supportive food, shelter, and social networks.
9. There is no evidence of long-term settlement at the site. People traveled to it from semipermanent abodes 100–200 kilometers away (60–120 miles). They left burned bones of aurochs (wild cattle), gazelle, and wild ass, plus limestone barrels that held barley or wheat beer, suggesting cultic feasts (Dietrich et al. 690). A carved stone cup, found nearby, shows men dancing with a turtle-like figure between them, perhaps in an Altered State of Consciousness while communing with that animal spirit (Turchin 10). However, the “temples” were burned and buried about 10,000 years ago and only unearthed recently, starting in 1994.
10. Göbekli Tepe shows a crucial step from Paleolithic cave theatres to Neolithic custom-built performance spaces. It suggests some sense of a *cosmic theatre* with transcendent Others, involving forces of nature and life/death, for which a huge, collective, human effort was organized. This transition, from “horizontal shamanism” in natural environments to “vertical shamanism” in human-made places, probably involved hierarchical projections of the divine and a “priesthood” directing many people in coordinated theatrical rites (Lewis-Williams and Pearce).

11. In 2017, fragments of three human skulls with cut marks were found at Göbekli Tepe. These suggest, along with the vulture figures on the megaliths, excarnation (cutting flesh from bones) as a funeral rite, as in the “bird offerings” (or “sky burials”) still practiced today by Iranian Zoroastrians and Tibetan Buddhists. Secondary burial of bones after the body decays or skull decoration for revered ancestors might also be indicated—along with the global shamanic idea of psychic dismemberment and rebirth (Lewis-Williams and Pearce 118).
12. At Jericho, in the West Bank (Palestinian Territory within Israel), *decorated skulls* have been found from 9000 to 8000 years ago, after the development of agriculture in that area. Plaster was used to remodel the faces of the dead, with shells set into the eye sockets. These skulls may have come from revered ancestors and been used in ritual performances, representing shamanic “seers” between the realms of daily life, dreams, and death—involving inner theatre memories tied to collective beliefs in natural and supernatural frameworks.
13. Such decorated skulls have also been found at 'Ain Ghazal (in today's Amman, Jordan) from about the same time period. Full human figures were found, too, made of lime plaster and as tall as one meter (about half life-size), with wide-open eyes distinctly drawn on their faces, plus animal figurines, especially cattle. This evidence shows a developing theatrical awareness of “seeing” and “being seen,” in relation to the living and dead, the animal and human, with rites connecting such realms, through agricultural settlements and vertical shamanism.
14. At Çatalhöyük in southern Turkey, Neolithic buildings were created in 18 layers 9500–7600 years ago, suggesting ritual areas within domestic structures. Set into the walls where people lived are ram and bull skulls, including horns remolded with plaster, full female figures with molded breasts (some with vulture beaks, fox teeth, or a weasel skull inserted), and murals involving handprints with geometric designs. There is also a wall painting of a hunting dance with lines between humans and powerful animals, showing vultures with human legs next to legless and headless human torsos. All of these were replastered and repainted many times.
15. Such Neolithic (Old Stone Age) figures in domestic rooms, along with red-painted niches cut into walls, apparently to receive objects, reflect the caves where earlier, Paleolithic humans painted images and left objects. These cave and home theatres apparently involved visions and

offerings through the rock wall as a membrane to the spirit realm of animal guides and deceased ancestors. The molded breasts with animal beaks or teeth at Çatalhöyük also suggest life and death passions of nurturing and danger, eating or being eaten (Lewis-Williams and Pearce)—although some archeologists interpret them as animal heads (Meskell 60).

16. Under the floors and in some courtyards of Çatalhöyük and 'Ain Ghazal homes, like at the edges of rock shelters where Paleolithic people lived, skeletons have been found. This shows the significance of such spaces and their artworks for interactive performances between the living and the dead (Lewis-Williams and Pearce). A “cult building” at Çatalhöyük had 66 human skulls buried in the floor, plus the remains of over 400 skeletons. Thus, the inner theatres of Neolithic humans were expressed in the walls and floors where they lived—with collective performances engaging the Other in their brains, projected toward transcendent forces in nature and the afterlife.
17. On the Mediterranean island of Malta, near Italy, large stone “temples” were built, starting over 5000 years ago—in several periods, from 3600 to 2500 BCE—along with underground burial chambers (hypogea). The temples had several oval chambers with corbeled or timbered roofs, possibly covered with dirt, making them cave-like, but with doorways made of three large stones. These hut-shaped temples were built prior to Stonehenge in England and the pyramids of Egypt (Ching et al. 46). In one of them, at Hagar Qim, the rising sun of the summer solstice enters an inner chamber through a precise hole in the temple wall (Skeates 210).
18. Neolithic Maltese temples held small drum-shaped altars and clay, bone, or stone figures in human forms from 50 cm to 2 meters tall (20 inches to 6.5 feet). About half of the figures are female with wide hips and fleshy bodies, many wearing skirts and elaborate hair strands or headdresses. The repetition of similar images, along with altars, evidence of fire, and animal bones, suggests a ritual context (Malone), perhaps with sacrificial performances for the iconic maternal Other. **[Which elements of Göbekli Tepe, Çatalhöyük, and Maltese temples or domestic structures do you see as most akin to earlier cave art spaces—or to theatrical media today? How do the decorated skulls at 'Ain Ghazal, or the home burials there and at Çatalhöyük, relate to current images of and relations with the dead, as expressions of the brain's inner audience of memory traces?]**

B. African San (Bushman) Hunter-Gatherers

1. In southern Africa, the San people (or “Bushmen” as they prefer to be called) probably have the oldest continuous culture in the world, extending back tens of thousands of years. Indeed, it may extend back before the initial migration out of Africa, about 60,000 years ago, of other humans who eventually populated the globe: “the San were the first people in what became the family tree of humanity” (Davis 8, 20). Today, Bushman trance-dances cultivate the life force of love through shaking, touching, and sometimes carrying one another, while experiencing an inner “boiling” from the belly up the spine, with mystical visions and synesthesia experiences, such as hearing touch, tasting sights, or smelling disease (Keeney, *Bushman and Ropes*).
2. About once a week, for many hours around a nighttime fire, women sit in a tight choral circle, singing and clapping, while children play and men dance around them. Wearing cocoon rattles on their ankles and carrying an animal-tail whisk (to brush away mystical arrows), plus a staff to help them with stomach cramps, the men dance around the women’s circle, sometimes going inside toward the fire. Eventually, they fall into trances, related also to their dreams, connecting with departed ancestors. Women have their own dances with drums. Sometimes, the male and female dances are combined.
3. Bushmen travel mystically toward their ancestral spirits, through the songs and dances of specific animals. They *become animals* in their minds through *thuru* (shape-shifting), when returning to “First Creation,” prior to the names and stable forms in Second Creation. They experience “arrows” and “nails” (or thorns) of power in their bellies and “ropes” of light in vertical and horizontal colors, which they climb to the Big God or to other villages, also showing them where to find a specific animal to hunt.
4. Bushmen are sometimes in conflict with a *Trickster* aspect of god, which came into being through Second Creation and human language, or with bad spirits of the dead who have stolen their arrows. Thus, they heal others in the tribe through trance, by cleaning or pulling out dirty arrows, or retrieving them from evil spirits.

[How are San Bushman trance-dances like and unlike religious rituals or popular music events today? How are their goals of traveling mystically, dealing with Trickster, and cleaning spiritual arrows like/unlike the Western sense of theatre and catharsis?]

5. Such ecstatic experiences in Western culture, with prayer, “speaking in tongues,” reverie in a warm bath, or a runner’s high, are theorized by neuroscientists as involving a “spillover effect” between arousal and quiescent (sympathetic and parasympathetic) nervous systems in the body. These systems are usually in opposition, but can peak on either side and activate the other. Thus, arousal and calmness combine in a transcendent state of altered consciousness (Newberg et al.; Newberg and Waldman).
6. San Bushman rock and cave art (some of it dating back 20,000 years) depicts such transcendent experiences of shamanic performers, sometimes wearing ankle rattles like today’s trance-dancers. It also shows their visions, which may be akin to prehistoric cave rites with animal, human, and animal-human forms of *shape-shifters* (Lewis-Williams).
7. Bushmen perform other rituals, too, often involving their most powerful spirit animal, the eland. In a hunting ritual, men teach boys how to track and shoot an eland with arrows. In an Eland Bull Dance, men and women imitate the antelope’s mating behaviors for a girls’ puberty ritual. In a marriage ritual, a groom gives the fat from an eland’s heart to the parents of his new wife and she is anointed with eland fat.

[Which performers today become shape-shifting healers, like yet unlike Bushman shamans—and how? Do viewers also experience a mix of quiescence and arousal while watching them?]

C. Ancient Egypt with TIMELINE

- 3150 BCE, Upper and Lower Egypt were unified and then ruled by various dynasties
- 2649–2150, Old Kingdom (and then an intermediate period)
- 2030–1640, Middle Kingdom (and then an intermediate period)
- 1550–1070, New Kingdom (and then an intermediate period)
- 712–332, Late Period
- 332–30, Alexander the Great and the Ptolemaic Dynasty
- 30 BCE, Rome conquered Egypt after Queen Cleopatra’s alignment with Marcus Antonius failed to defeat other Roman forces and they each committed suicide

1. An account of the Wepwawet (or Wep-waut) procession, out of and returning to the Temple of Osiris in Abydos, Egypt, was left on a stone stele by Ikhnofret, the pharaoh's treasurer, who organized it in the 1800s BCE. It involved the dressing and carrying of a statue of the god Osiris and scenes of his death and rebirth—perhaps performed for a public audience, annually for about 2000 years, from circa 2500 to 550 BCE. It also involved scenes of Osiris's son, Horus, getting revenge against his evil uncle, Set, while Ikhnofret identified with the hero: "I masterminded the procession ...; I repulsed the attackers of the neshmet-barque and slew the enemies of Osiris" (Wilkinson).
2. The Ramesseum drama, written on papyrus, shows dialog, mythic narrative, and stage directions. Its 48 scenes, with repeated rituals and symbols, were possibly performed along the banks of the Nile for over 200 years (1900s–1700s BCE), with people at each site bringing offerings to the pharaoh—in a ceremony of his new or renewed rule, starting with the seasonal opening of the Nile River for navigation and trade (Kernodle 27). The pharaoh played the role of the falcon-headed god Horus. His father's mummy represented the death and fertility god Osiris, father of Horus. Other court members and priests played gods in the plot: Set (a god of desert sandstorms, raging seas, and civil chaos, rival to his brother Osiris and nephew Horus), Thoth (the scribe god with an ibis or baboon head), Isis (mother of Horus and wife/sister of Osiris), Nephthys (wife/sister of Set), and Geb (earth god and father of Osiris).
3. In many of the short, Ramesseum papyrus scenes, Horus conquers Set, who earlier in the myth had fought and dismembered Osiris—and then fought Horus also, taking one of his eyes. Horus vanquishes his enemy symbolically with the mummy, a fragrant tree bough, or a "djed" pillar placed on Set in various scenes. A ram, goat, and goose are also killed (decapitated) as offerings. In another scene, Geb referees a punching match, showing the battle of Horus and Set. Offerings are brought to the pharaoh as Horus in different scenes, such as bread loaves, red carnelian beads, a scepter, plumes, and black and green eye salve—all representing his lost "Eye of Power"—plus two maces, symbolizing Set's testicles, and a thighbone, taken from him in battle. But along with these demonstrations of the pharaoh's patriarchal (left-cortical) power over desert storms and potential rebellions, Horus pours milk, "the sweet influence of this mine Eye," as the nurturing (right-cortical) benefit of his hierarchical rule (Gaster 338).

[How do the mythic roles, props, and conflicts in the Ramesseum drama, expressing political elements and neural networks, relate to outer and inner theatricalities today?]

4. The “Triumph of Horus” was performed annually at Edfou with Horus battling Set-as-hippopotamus for the kingship of Egypt (1200s BCE). It was staged inside a temple, on and around a sacred lake, for a large public audience as well as the priests and gods (Nielsen).
5. A few, full-headed, jackal masks have survived from ancient Egypt, suggesting how actors (or priests) performed as Anubis, the funeral god, and other animal–human deities. Related images are also shown in the Hunefer papyrus as “Book of the Dead” (c. 1275). Jackal-headed Anubis leads the dead Hunefer to the scales of afterlife judgment. Ibis-headed Thoth records Hunefer’s heart being lighter than the feather of Truth, Maat, showing goodness for paradise. Falcon-headed Horus then leads Hunefer to Osiris on his throne, with the winged Eye of Power above. The animal heads on human forms are also akin to prehistoric cave images, created tens of thousands of years earlier.

[What does such evidence reveal about the identity needs and social values of ancient Egyptians, with good versus evil power struggles and afterlife judgments, like yet unlike ours?]

D. Middle Eastern Ritual Dramas

1. On the island of Cyprus from the late second millennium BCE, and in later Phoenician colonies around the Mediterranean, masks have been found. So have statuettes of human figures wearing animal or human masks (Nielsen).
2. In Anatolia (today’s Turkey), clay tablets from the 1400s to 1200s BCE offer evidence of temple festivals involving ritual dramas with Hittite officials and priests playing the roles of animals, human hunters, and gods. There were also mock battles between the Hittites carrying bronze weapons and their adversaries carrying reeds—plus acrobats, jugglers, and processions with cult images, journeying between sanctuaries (Nielsen).
3. Temple dramas were performed in ancient Sumer and Akkadia (today’s Iraq), around 1000 BCE, showing a sacred marriage (*hieros gamos*) of the king and fertility goddess at the New Year festival, with monologs, dialogs, and choral refrains. Such Mesopotamian ritual dramas also involved death and rebirth scenes of young gods or gods battling monsters, which influenced ancient Greek myths (Nielsen).

[How do ancient Middle Eastern ritual dramas relate to Paleolithic cave art, Neolithic performance spaces, Bushman trance dances, or ancient Egyptian dramas—as well as later developments of theatricality, including today’s?]

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