



Werner Herzog, *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (2010)

## The Future as Desire

### §1

When I saw Werner Herzog's *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (2010) for the first time a few years ago, I had the sensation of travelling back in time, not 30,000 years or more to the time when the paintings in the Chauvet Cave were made, but towards a time to come, a future to which those paintings also belong. Herzog's film is a documentary about this cave in the south of France, where some of the oldest known rupestrian paintings can be found. Only discovered in 1994, it has remained untouched for thousands and thousands of years, closed by a sudden landslide. To avoid previous mistakes, as in Lascaux, entrances to the cave are limited and the atmosphere is carefully controlled. There were many restrictions on filming and Herzog was only allowed in with a small team of four people, for six filming sessions of four hours each, with light material and reduced lighting. The result of the filming is surprising. As far as the paintings are concerned, the film, which was made to be shown in 3D, ends up being a technologically subtractive object that lets the images do the talking, only accompanied by W. Herzog's own voice narrating the stories of the paintings.

In each shot, with the paintings illuminated almost as if under the flickering fire of a torch, we discover the power of a revelation. This is in fact one of the most intense characteristics of any image, the power to reveal other worlds, to produce reality and offer new worlds to the imagination. Images often do this by opposing reason or any idea of homogeneity, which is also communicational. However, even though they appear as a revelation of another reality, inventing worlds, images also talk about themselves and their secret irreducibility that so often makes them timeless. Even so, rather than timelessness, perhaps it makes sense to speak of transtemporality, not of images that are immutable or outside of time, but of images that pass through it like arrows.

The film ends with a reverie in which Herzog links the story of Chauvet and its millenary paintings to the nearby Cruas Nuclear Power Plant, where the water heated by the reactors' cooling system feeds a tropical biome in which hundreds of crocodiles live, invoking distant times and places. Right at the end, Herzog insinuates that, *not surprisingly*, as a result of this artificial environment, *albino crocodiles swim and reproduce in these warm waters*. What would they think of Chauvet's paintings, Herzog asks and, in a complete turnaround that takes us back to the beginning of time, he finally asks: *are we today possibly the crocodiles who look back into an abyss of time when we look at the paintings at Chauvet Cave?*

*Nothing is real, nothing is certain*, you also hear at one point. The images are slippery and have a particular relationship with time. They are time travelers, arrows pointing to a future that has already been guessed, a future of which the images, like oracles, speak in anticipation. There is no past of images, but rather, so to speak, a future past of images, because images are always, or almost always, in the realm of revelation and speak of what is yet to come.

### §2

There is no future without desire. You have to desire in order to open up the possibility of a future, but the truth is that there is no desire without a future either. The future is what is desired and desire is the longing for what is to come.

The crisis of utopias that has opened up in recent decades is also a crisis of desire. First, after the Cold War, they tried to convince us that the *end of history* had arrived, that the future had been consummated in a kind of victory for a political and economic model. The harsh reality immediately imposed itself as a counterpoint to this idea, causing history to erupt again and again, always as a tragedy, even when it seemed to happen as

a farce. More recently, another, more apocalyptic idea has taken hold, that of the end of the world, this world as we know it. That's what it's all about when we realize the scorched earth policy that has brought us to the climate crisis, which some argue is irreversible or which others, the solutionists, believe can be remedied. At the same time, the current global political landscape, with the eruption of populism and the anarcho-capitalism advocated by a few, expressed in the re-election of Trump and the shadowy figures that accompany him, the ongoing genocide in Gaza or the war of friction carried out by Russia in Ukraine, seems to indicate that the fragile geo-political architecture that has been in place since the end of WWII is over. What's next? What lies ahead? What can we expect from this new order?

The dystopian threat of the end or the idea that the end has already come—one or the other, it doesn't matter—seem to deny us the possibility of a future, the possibility of even wishing for something to come. The only way out is to reclaim the power of utopia and desire, because without desire there is no future.

§ 3

This exhibition is entitled *What Lies Ahead*, just like that, without a question mark. It was a difficult choice and I think there was only a consensus—the possible consensus on an occasion like this—when a window was suddenly opened to the future and therefore to desire. As I write these words, I still don't know what will come of this installation. I only know that the space of the FBAUP Museum, spectral in the sense of the mourning that accompanies all museums—it was Adorno who equated the museum with the mausoleum—will become even darker and inhabited by specters. With the walls painted a dark grey that makes them nearly disappear into a velvety void, a museum without walls, the works will completely reject the natural order of things in that space. With the museum transformed into a semi-obscure cave, it is hoped that the specters that will inhabit the exhibition will be able to reveal what they have to tell us about a time that is not yet theirs, nor even ours. Perhaps all we can do is imagine what Caetano Veloso sang in 1991, and then wish together for the possibility of a common future, of a time to come, *out of order, out of the new world order*:

[...]

*Eu não espero pelo dia  
Em que todos  
Os homens concordem  
Apenas sei de diversas  
Harmonias bonitas  
Possíveis sem juízo final*

[...]

*Algo parece  
Estar fuera del ordem  
Out of new order  
Alguma coisa  
Está fora da ordem  
Out of new order  
Algo parece  
Estar fuera del ordem  
fora da nova ordem  
Mundial  
Alguma coisa  
Está fora da ordem  
Fora da nova ordem  
Mundial*

[...]

Caetano Veloso, *Fora da ordem*, 1991. [Fragment]