32,000 years of special effects

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Werner Herzog's new film, *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, tells the story of the ancient creation and modern discovery of the stunning rock-art of the Chauvet cave in the Ardèche Valley, south-east France. Shot in 3-D, the documentary takes the audience deep inside the huge caverns to marvel at the vivid, almost cinematic depictions of animals that date back some 32,000 years. The apparent freshness of these ancient images, and the technical ability they demonstrate, is staggering.

When the cave was discovered in 1994 the French government made its preservation a national priority. The art it contains is by far the oldest among the famous painted caves of Ice Age Europe. It was preserved by a rock-fall which blocked the cave entrance tens of thousands of years ago, holding it safe inside a sealed container. Now discovered, this environment is highly vulnerable to contamination from the outside world. Access is restricted to small groups of specialists dedicated to safeguarding and studying its treasures. Soon after its discovery, President Mitterand made a visit to the site but, as a sign of respect, did not go inside the cave.

Cambridge University academic Dr. Christopher Chippindale is the only British archaeologist (and likely to have been the only British individual) to have stepped through the heavy metal door sealing the entrance and clambered down the steep stairway that leads to the network of chambers decorated with imagery of bison, horses, woolly mammoth, lions and other beasts. Narrow metal walkways allow the caves to be viewed without the fragile floor surfaces being disturbed. He says: "It is

completely quiet in the cave, and of course utterly dark. If you turn your light off and stand still, there is the faintest sound of water dripping in the distance, and after a very long while – as Werner did in his film – you begin to hear your own heart beating."

Dr. Chippindale, a world-leading expert on rock-art, is part of a small community of international scholars, each with a different expertise and interest, whose work shines a light on some of the big questions that Chauvet and other rock-art sites pose. They include: who were the people who made this extraordinary art and why did they make it, how did their world work? As Dr. Chippindale says: "Remember these subjects are things people in that ancient time chose to paint, for whatever reason. This is direct autobiography, an account by themselves of their own world, as they understood and knew it to be."

In order to come up with some possible answers, Dr. Chippendale and colleagues have been working as part of an endeavour called Prehistoric Picture Project to explore the concept of prehistoric rock art as one element in a multi-sensory experience that used music and dance as well as imagery and site-specific acoustics. PPP brings together archaeologists, film-makers and digital media researchers from MAA Museum of Archaeology & Anthropology at the University of Cambridge, the Institute for Media Production at the University of Applied Sciences, in St Pölten, Austria, and the Media Faculty at the Bauhaus-Universität Weimar in Germany. The outcome of their collaboration is animated sequences of rock-art figures that literally breathe life into images created thousands of years ago.

What's striking about the Chauvet images, and what comes through vividly in Herzog's film, is their incredible power as depictions of living, moving beings. The bold strokes of charcoal on rock were made by hunter-gatherers living in an era when much of Europe was covered by glaciers. These early people relied for food on the herds of wild animals,

many of them fierce, who shared their landscape. Their art speaks of the close almost atavistic relationship between hunter and hunted, prey and predator. Dr. Chippindale says: “There is a striking choice of subjects. Some animals but not all. No plants. No landscapes. No made artefacts. Just one human figure.”

Dr. Chippindale, who has been studying rock art across the world since the 1980s, notices that nowhere in Chauvet, or in other Ice Age caves, is there any sign of many people having gone in there. These special places, we can might them sacred, were not for everyone. One idea, for which he draws on long experience of working on rock art in Aboriginal lands of north Australia, is that the supernatural world reached by going deep in the caves was a dangerous one. He says: “While the gods of modern western religion are benign, in other religions the spirits are malevolent, dangerous, nasty beings. If the caves are the places of the supernatural, so they are also the places of danger. Only those few who have the special knowledge can take the risk of penetrating into them.”

In the Chauvet documentary Werner Herzog suggests that the performances thought to have taken place in the cave could have been a form of ‘proto-cinema’, marking the birth of a collective narrative experience, and evidence of the emergence of mythology and spirituality. Over the past couple of years, Dr. Chippindale and his colleagues at PPP have been taking that notion of ancient art as cinema into the modern world by using tools such as digital animation to bring ancient images alive.

He says: “At PPP we have been focusing on the rock-art at Valcamonica in the Italian Alps. When you see the pictures, many of them look just like stills from a cartoon. There was no cinema, no animation in prehistoric times, so they had to stop when they had made the stills. Now, thousands of years later, we can complete their film-making by animating the paintings using digital cartoon technology. As they come

alive again, they offer a fresh narrative, an accessible narrative of the past. And in making our new old cartoons, our animation work teaches us about aspects of the ancient world we had not noticed before."

Provided by University of Cambridge

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