

Philology

An International Journal
on the Evolution of Languages, Cultures and Texts



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Contents

Volume 1 / 2015

Editorial

FRANCESCO BENOZZO

Philology Two Thousand Fifteen

Articles

RONALD HENDEL

The Untimeliness of Biblical Philology

MARKUS EBERL

The Cult of the Book. What Precolumbian
Writing Contributes to Philology

REBECCA GOULD

Philology's Contingent Genealogies

MATTHIAS EGELER

Reading Sacred Places: Geocriticism, the Icelandic
Book of Settlements, and the History of Religions

TEODOLINDA BAROLINI

Critical Philology and Dante's *Rime*

H. WAYNE STOREY

A Note on Boccaccio's Dantean Categories; or,
What's in a Book? libro, volume, pistole, *rime*

AUGUSTO PONZIO

Philology and Philosophy in Mikhail Bakhtin

XAVERIO BALLESTER

The Neolithic Discontinuity Paradigm for the Origin of European Languages

Discussions

WERNER HAMACHER

Diese Praxis – Lesen –

Crossings

MARCEL OTTE

"Paleolithic Philology": The Writing by Images and Gestures
during Prehistoric Times

Review Article

EPHRAIM NISSAN

The Lexicon, Philosophers, and the Challenge of Translation:
Between Language and the History of Ideas

Reviews

ERICH AUERBACH

Time, History and Literature (Andrés Amitai Wilson)

M. CAVAGNA AND C. MAEDER (eds.)

Philology and Performing Arts (Antonella Sciancalepore)

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M. SPERLING

Visionary Philology. Geoffrey Hill and the Study of Words
(Gino Scatasta)

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Editorial Address:

Francesco Benozzo
Università di Bologna
Dipartimento di Lingue e Culture Moderne
Via Cartoleria 5
I-40124 Bologna, Italy
francesco.benozzo@unibo.it

Subscriptions:

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Contents

First issue (2015)

Editorial

FRANCESCO BENOZZO

Philology Two Thousand Fifteen 7

Articles

RONALD HENDEL

The Untimeliness of Biblical Philology 9

MARKUS EBERL

The Cult of the Book. What Precolumbian
Writing Contributes to Philology 29

REBECCA GOULD

Philology's Contingent Genealogies 53

MATTHIAS EGELER

Reading Sacred Places: Geocriticism, the Icelandic
Book of Settlements, and the History of Religions..... 67

TEODOLINDA BAROLINI

Critical Philology and Dante's *Rime* 91

H. WAYNE STOREY

A Note on Boccaccio's Dantean Categories; or,
What's in a Book? *libro*, *volume*, *pistole*, *rime* 115

AUGUSTO PONZIO

Philology and Philosophy in Mikhail Bakhtin 121

XAVERIO BALLESTER

The Neolithic Discontinuity Paradigm for the
Origin of European Languages 151

Discussions

WERNER HAMACHER

Diese Praxis – Lesen – 175

Crossings

MARCEL OTTE

“Paleolithic Philology”: The Writing by Images and Gestures
during Prehistoric Times 201*Review Article*

EPHRAIM NISSAN

The Lexicon, Philosophers, and the Challenge of Translation:
Between Language and the History of Ideas 215*Reviews*

ERICH AUERBACH

Time, History and Literature (Andrés Amitai Wilson) 281

M. CAVAGNA AND C. MAEDER (eds.)

Philology and Performing Arts (Antonella Sciancalepore) 285

D. APOLLON (ed.)

Digital Critical Editions (Pau Cañigüeral) 291

V. CALZOLARI (ed.)

Armenian Philology in the Modern Era (Alessandro Orengo) 293

MARC VAN DER POEL (ed.)

Neo-Latin Philology: Old Tradition, New Approaches
(Antonella Sciancalepore) 297

MATTHEW SPERLING

Visionary Philology. Geoffrey Hill and the Study of Words
(Gino Scatasta) 301

Crossings

“Paleolithic Philology”: The Writing by Images and Gestures during Prehistoric Times

MARCEL OTTE

Université de Liège

Abstract Paleolithic signs include figures analogous to reality (icons such as animals), schemas and abstractions. Each category is presented according to multiple combinations, but never randomly. These structured connections form articulated and meaningful phrases in which the idea is blended with the emotion. Such graphic languages evoke myths, embodied by the organization of forms, but also in their turn are the creators of new messages. Intermediate between oral communication, which developed much earlier, and phonetic writing, much later, Palaeolithic messages open the door to dreams.

Keywords Paleolithic, Graphic language, Prehistoric signs, Visual imagination, Icons

In prehistory, graphic language does not use conventional codes, but real images (“icons”) to articulate them in accordance with unknown formulas in nature. It thus touches on both our affect and our intellect by offering them combinations that go beyond the real, always sensitive to ulterior human consciousness: this language goes towards eternity.

Thus separate from its verbal reference, the graphic message creates a perpetual narrative whose role is situated specifically in the elaboration of a story, thought or dream. In this way, for example, a myth becomes true, tangible, visual. In parallel, the simplified anecdote reduces the thought and image to a humble reproduction of reality (figure 1).

Different processes and components can be readily identified: icons, schemas, abstraction, spatial relationships, texture, color and topographic development, for example.

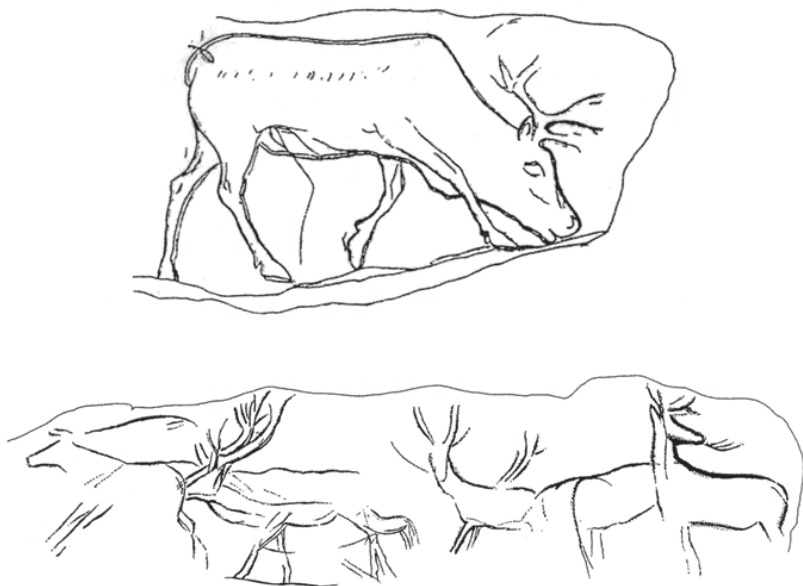


Figure 1: The relationship with real lived and observed situations destroys the semiotic function of images, reduced to servile reproductions. The language ambition is shifted elsewhere, to where the message is created from thought, myth and concept. (engraved plaquettes, Limeuil, Magdalenian, mobile supports, desacalized).

In prehistoric art, all of these articulations are far from being infinite and even less random. Manifestly, they are related to the contexts of tradition and history. But they also participate much more fundamentally in the relational modes between the most universal thought and nature. At this intersection we find the universe of symbols, that is, natural elements directly in relationship with human cognitive function.

For example, analogical magic acts on the real via its representation (figure 2). The remarkable constancy of its application (Eliade, 1976) demonstrates the same spiritual mechanism operating in different, entirely separate, situations in space and time: European Paleolithic bison, painted deer Puebla, Asian Neolithic figurines. Thus condenses, the image holds an identical ternary relationship between reproduction, intention and reality. This short intellectual sequence crystallizes a universal function, supported by analogy to the real like an interface between thinking and the world. It also evidences forms of privileged relationships instituted

between animals and humans, like an indicator of discharge of vital energy from one species to another. All of the hope dreamed by the mind is found reduced in the use of this play of images.

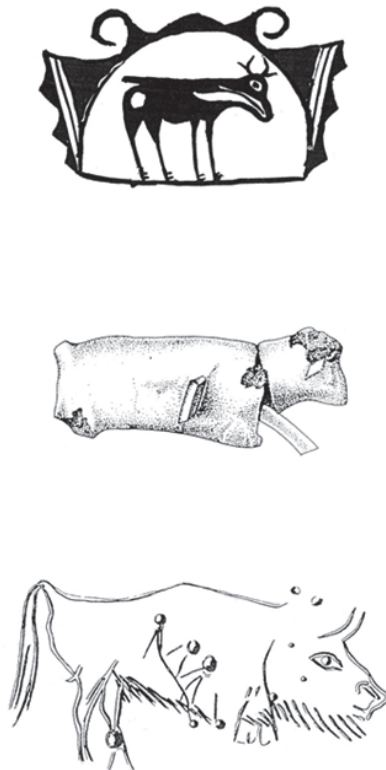


Figure 2: Magical hold of the image over the animal. The graphic discourse reconstructs the components, embodies an intention, a dream, a challenge launched by humans to the savage forces that they seek to ensure vitality via these representations. (1: Painted deer in an enclosure, on vase, Pueblo; 2: terra cotta modeled bovid, perforated with real lines by flint, Ain Ghazal, Early Neolithic, Jordan; 3: Bison traced on clay with flank pierced by symbolic “injuries”, Niaux, Ariège, Magdalenian).

So, certain formal referents are preferentially chosen as supports for plastic language: they resonate with a generally human emotion that is human thought itself.

Further, the choices of these referential themes take place in human history as frameworks from which its deployment is suspended. Globally, the range of formidable animals encountered by hunter-gatherers is succeeded by schemas for narrative situations in which human figures can be found, and then by that of idealism in the image, the regard of the individual portrayed.

An awareness of a world first conquered by the image that was then properly “domesticated” by humans and their own representation is reflected in this developmental sequence. But it remains to be determined if the symbolic image illustrates or precedes this process, or even triggers it by the series of successive embodiments that are more powerful than oral narratives.

Regardless of the feedback mechanisms, the graphic narrative perpetuates a conscious desire long after its elaboration that is, persisting to the present.

Some examples of such languages will be deconstructed here. Far from any mythical ambition, the descriptive message (figure 3) first operates by the play of the topographic situations. The message takes on meaning based on where it is located. This is as true for our intersections as for the angles of deep cave galleries (figure 3b). In parallel, the situation is ephemeral specifically because it is spatially united after a continual displacement.



Figure 3: Descriptive semiology. The essential of the message is based on its topographic situation that enters in combination with the signs with the rank of morphemes. The other elements must undergo schematic reduction so that the significant links can be rapidly understood. (Top: Composite sign at the angle of the galleries at Niaux, Magdalenian; Bottom: Composite sign at the intersection of our missions).

A single lived "moment" is thus associated with such spatial delimitation. This reduced space-time requires rapidly interpretable graphic procedures and condenses signs: the schemas amply provide an intermediary between representation and abstraction. The schema remains at the limits of identification within a real repertoire. Thus we can "read" the warnings of danger, its nature and situation via such graphic groups when we know the specific semiotic context at its emplacement. The engagement of such warnings can also correspond to a more consequent mythical announcement, through the

passage of a cave, but as vital for the individual thus prepared to receive the truths as fundamental as those linking life and death in a system of total communication, such as a mythographic fresco (figure 4).

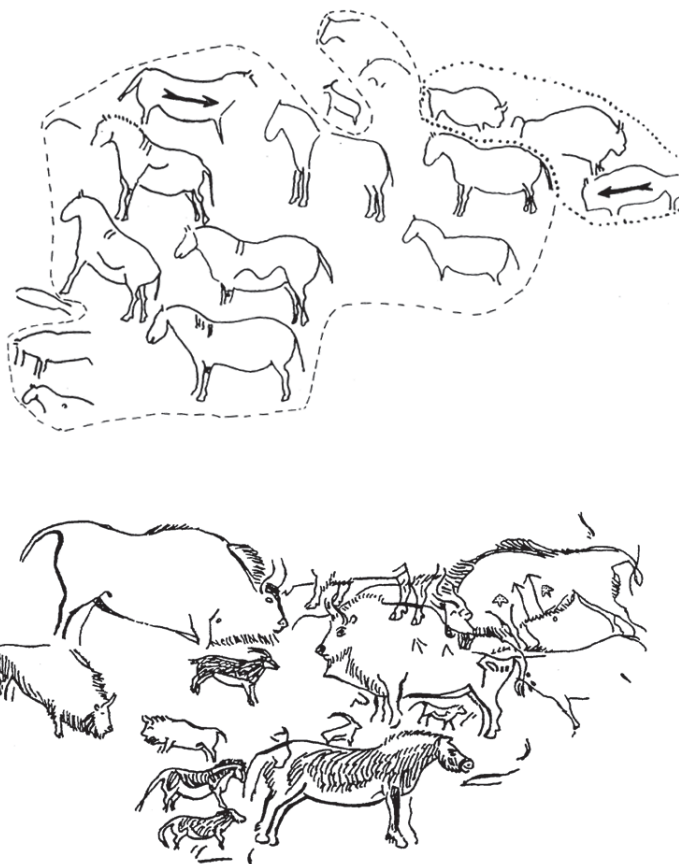


Figure 4: The central panels, vast and spectacular, require lingering and observation. They highlight the mythic narrative for which the construction here is rigorous, and the collective thought that produced it. Herds of horses and bison are opposed and the ibex plays the crucial role of intermediary. (Top: Ekain, Cantabria; Bottom: Niaux, Ariège).

These play on binary spatial combinations, far from the linearity imposed by phonetic writing. The icons are distributed in two-dimensional space, this time on the panels of vast walls where observation can linger, as the mind can be imbued with these fundamental certainties: the universe is

stabilized here. And the graphic procedures here have a strong and clear power, as if the mind imposed its own order on nature. In the case of Magdalenian art (ca. 14,000 years BP), the herds of bison and horses have structured dialogues between them with isolated ibex interspersed to form an intermediary symbolic flow (figure 4). Regardless of the meaning that such spectacular harmonies could have (these are huge panels), they are far from any observed reality to become part of pure mythological creation. From this disjunction between an identifiable icon and its place in a dreamed scene comes the imaginary universe in which these populations placed their reason for being (for ethnolinguistic evidence of dreams connected to Paleolithic caves, see Benozzo, 2010, pp. 81–91). No phonetic description can reach this allusive power with such a performance. Here everything is set within the play of monumental forms and assembled by evident rules, imposed on the world via figured myth.

Secondarily, “abstract” signs fill in these ensembles, referring to processes of plastic disaggregation of the icons, on the model of different modern alphabets (figure 5). The reference to the initial figure loses all meaning as only its schema survives, via custom or transfer towards aural support. At the end of this development, the final abstraction preserves a coded meaning that is too restrained, in opposition to its initial analogical representation. Very clearly and from the start, prehistoric art played on these amalgams of signs, either clearly representative (the animal) or highly coded (lines of points). We do not know the phases where one or the other of these plastic grammars was exclusively applied. A little like the model of Chinese writing, prehistoric messages are always mixed with the use of iconic symbols and abstract symbols. This is “writing” with a strong implicit grammatical component organized according to the different meanings for signs, combined conjointly in their different forms.



Figure 5: Loss of plastic substance in the signs of writing, as much as in those in prehistory. The value is preserved despite the analogical reduction. The dual roles are impoverished, founded on the icon, its sound or its concept. This graphic reduction favors linear presentation.

A very simple analogy can be presented by the association of identifiable schemas in Egyptian writing, operating in similar manner to that in prehistory, at least conceptually. Reduced to the graphic minimum, the door and boat designate the port (figure 6). This semantic relationship is given by their spatial association and by the code that designated the complementary necessity. In prehistory, the reduction to schemas as much as the strict spatial relationship creates a visual phrase without ambiguity: the horse associated with a barbed line does not require drawing the animal beyond its pertinent traits for it to be identifiable; the line of the back makes it clear. The loss of the Magdalenian language does not have an equivalent in the "pre-Champollion" period prior to the discovery of the Rosetta Stone. But writing is present in all its finesse, its elaboration and lexical particularities.

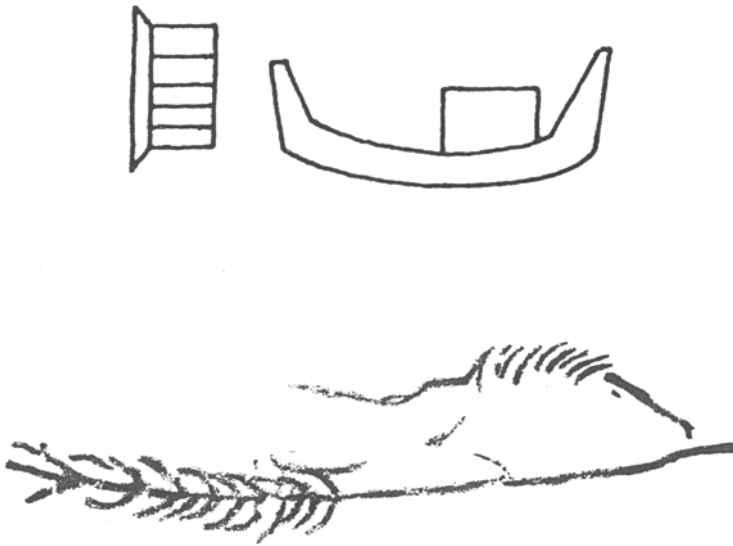


Figure 6: Organization of schema with a new meaning given by their association. The topographic proximity requires the elaboration of a composite and overall significance: the Egyptian port is designated by the combination of the door and the boat (Top). Such syntactical morphemes are common in prehistory, exemplified by the schematic outline of a horse associated with the sign of a barbed line arrow (Bottom: Niaux, Magdalenian).

Examples from this relational world are countless from the Paleolithic on: beyond the coherent syntax, they demonstrate the use of related languages, in order to make them interpretable both graphically and for their intellectual meaning (figure 7). For us, the most striking pattern is in the constant

aesthetic search that these messages show: horses and aurochs were not only selected in nature but also transformed by the laws of “style”, being the vision of a cultural tradition imposed on forms. Evidence of these stylistic variations is still reflected in our written characters, called “fonts”, where each seeks to best express its sensibility or its social function. Better still, if we compare Latin and Roman writing, or that of Gutenberg, the relationship to techniques is imposed (letters that are shaped, drawn or printed), but these themselves lead to subsequent transposed “styles” in all other forms of material expression. Retrospectively, we can then “read the style” of a people by comparison of its modes of transposition applied to originally highly different themes: from the horse to the aurochs, for example, these rigorously identified rules take into account the world view of this tradition, expressed in concepts, emotions and language.

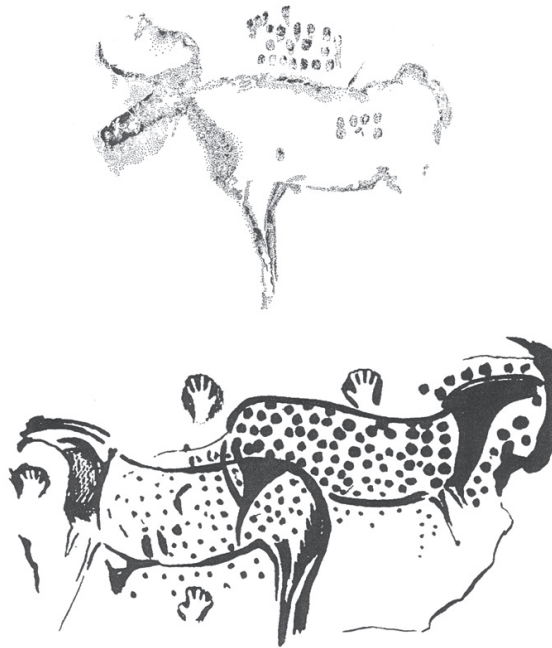


Figure 7: Combination of analogical signs (horses, aurochs), imprints (hands) and abstract punctiform signs (points). The syntactical composition is clear and repetitive, as if the grammar and the myth were superimposed. However, the analogical function of the image allows the stylistic piercing, profoundly different from one another: this seems to reflect a traditional sensitivity beyond the transmission of the mythical message. (Top: Grotte de Bidon, Ardèche, Magdalenian: Bottom: Grotte du Pêche-Merle, Lot, Gravettian)

When two distinct images are found associated spatially, their rules of transformation appear clearly because they are identical in both images (figure 8). The plastic grammar then plays its role because the use of morphemes follows an identical logic: the rules of perspective, modes of drawing, deformations and associated signs all grouped in a single total harmony. Specific graphic phrases are repeated during the shift from morphemes (elements of form) to mythemes (elements of myth). Such writing then takes on a sacred value because it embodies a powerful world that determines us, but in which the image offers a means of access. Somewhat as if these relationships between images did not only reproduce a thought, but also aimed to create, promote and perpetuate it. All sacred writing uses the concept in an abstract mode, but during the Paleolithic, the message remained plastic and also had the allusive force of an image borrowed from reality and then transposed to the imaginary.



Figure 8: The impact of the style crosses the constraints related to the choice of the model. Bison and horse both undergo the same distortions with respect to the real world: it is in this way that this world is seen by this society. But the grammatical structure remains rigorously constructed: bison, horse and arrow signs return to the fundamental theme illustrated in Figure 4 and identified by André Leroi-Gourhan (1965). (Le Gabillou, Dordogne).

From the sublime to the anecdote, prehistoric graphic language can degenerate, like any other language, into vulgarity when the image is separated from its created role and is subject, servile, to reality. Art is probably elsewhere and language leaves it because everything is read without relationship to concepts or myths. A form of academism without soul that affected certain forgotten painters at the end of the 19th century, long after all written texts and exactly when photography, that they challenged, was invented. This realist mode affecting Paleolithic art also disappeared from the sacredness of deep sanctuaries and became “decorated” while supports became mobile or even utilitarian. Writing here lost its soul because the images directly reproduce reality, like an amateur film does today. It is reduced to transmitting without creating. The more a work resembles the model, the less it exists: the authentic creation of images needs rather to combat and challenge reality.

In contrast and quite fortunately, the essential of the prehistoric messages are impregnated with the unreal and is available to the creators as much as to ourselves. Paleolithic art evokes mythical beings associated in a musical dance where the allusive rhythm provides a fourth dimensions, that os magical time where the image invites us. These texts carried by the image describe a relationship of equality with the embodied natural forces in a nature respected in its savagery, far before domesticated debasement (figure 9).

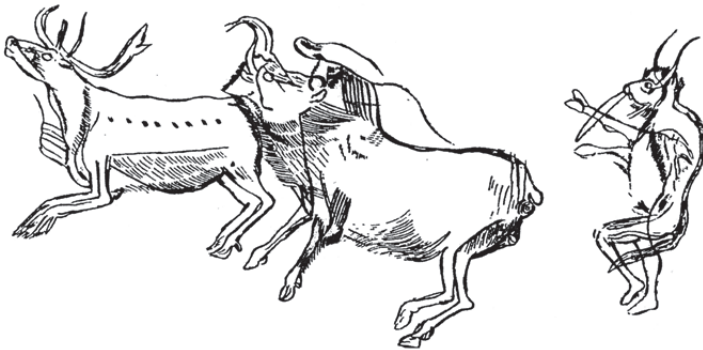


Figure 9: The plastic narrative takes all of its power from the allusion to the fundamental world of mysteries, myths and rituals. Movements, music and fantastic images are all combined to “write” and call the dream world, surrounded in the depths of these large obscure and disturbing galleries. Everything is set so that the image, the connection and the composition make real this imaginary space that seems to come out of the damp walls. The grammar of forms plays a role, but equally does the majestic displacement of the images. The two discourses are found combined. (Grotte des Trois Frères, Ariège, Magdalenian).

The study of texts is not limited to those transcribed by phonetic writing, but can also include oral tradition and messages transmitted by images structured by grammatical rules, analogous to those of Chinese or Egyptian writing, where the relationship with the real remains in part. In prehistory, analogical writing ("iconic") was used for dozens of millennia without being reduced to phonemes alone, because it was a matter less of relating an event than to creating a new one that is magical and generative. Paleolithic art is an art thus embodying a discourse that captures a fragment of eternity by making it visible and following it.

Textual philology has the same magnitude, the same ambitions and the same rules, but demands the intelligence of phonemes by an obligatory detour. Since in both cases we are confronted with graphic systems of operation established within social codes, it is natural that the same coherence governs them both, since it simply reflects that of all thought. Even the technical gestures, the choice of rocks, rules, butchery and distribution of prey respond everywhere to the influence of a logical and coherent system on the world, shown by linguists in oral expressions. The lack of such global coherence would reduce humanity to an intellectual chaos in which it would immediately be lost. Whether graphic or behavioral, the expressive rules of the human mind, alongside those of instinct, have always ensured its survival. Their permanence, maintained by graphics, has the dual function of recording and stimulating new phases of this adventure.

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