

On the Thresholds of Sense: Brazilian Rock Art as Liminal and Animate

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1. Introduction

In this paper I investigate how the concept of liminality can be illuminated by what I call 'emergent sense'. A sensibility for liminality is an awareness of the importance of transitions, relations and ambiguity. Due to their status as 'in-between', thresholds are places where liminality can arise. Emergent sense is a process of sense-making, focussed on relations, transitions and ambiguity in the ways we negotiate the ongoing development of sense, rather than on final conclusions.¹ Emergence is the initial precondition of anything that has sense. Not all sense remains in the mode of emergence, but failing to attend to sense-making as a process could lead us to arrive at incorrect conclusions. Some artworks are capable of exemplifying emergent sense by holding us in an ongoing process of sense-making. In this paper I explore how the idea of emergent sense is shown up in various liminal phenomena within the prehistoric rock art from Minas Gerais, Brazil and, at the same time, how that idea helps us better understand the power of that rock art.

The initial version of this paper started with something I knew fairly well — European prehistoric art, in particular, cave art — and progressed towards what I did not yet know but had the intention of coming to know—Brazilian prehistoric rock art. Then I visited sites in the state of Minas Gerais and found that I could not simply apply models with which I was already familiar. Faced with the Brazilian rock art I was privileged to experience due to the generosity of André Prous and his archaeological colleagues from the Federal University of Minas Gerais, I realised it was necessary to reverse my method. I needed to prioritise what I was coming to know over what I already knew.² Why did I have to do this? I was faced with an explosion of emerging sense that demanded a different response and in the face of which I came to realise that turning to it only in a cautious finale for my paper was inadequate. The 'old world' phenomena with which I was familiar would still play a role, but as interlocutors not as foundation.

Through my encounter with Minas Gerais rock art, I have become convinced it has a presence and demands a response adequate to it. This claim can be made, I believe, without falling into anthropomorphic projection or mystification. Artefacts have a presence in the world that goes beyond both the intentions of their makers and the interpretations of their audience, while not being wholly independent of either. On occasion, the affective power of an artwork is such that it is not excessive to say that we are face-to-face with something animate, something that takes on 'a life of its own'. Taking up ideas of the anthropologist Viveiros de Castro regarding agency and personhood in Amerindian Animism, I propose that an artwork qualifies as animate when it opens up possibilities of experience in distinctive ways.

In my exploration of how Minas Gerais rock art brings emergent expression to the fore I am undoubtedly going to get some things wrong. But I will also try to get as much as possible right. I owe this to the rock art, as well as to its experts. Indeed, I take this to be the demanding standard set by any research that recognises its own experimental status. In various ways, as you may have already gathered, this paper is not only about emergent sense but is an exercise in emergent sense.

2. Culture on the threshold of nature

In this section I discuss ways in which rock art from Minas Gerais is liminal in its relations with nature. Firstly, I discuss some ways in which it occupies a liminal position vis à vis the surrounding natural environment. I go on to examine ways in which it incorporates natural features of the rock face within the artwork's content. While the position of this rock art clearly had significance as a background condition, intentionally taking up natural features shows that it thrived on the emergence of sense at the threshold with nature.

Peruaçu is a vast natural park in the north-east of the state of Minas Gerais, near the border with the northern Brazilian coastal state of Bahia. It has an array of decorated prehistoric rock shelters, with artwork dating from 12,000 years ago (BP or Before Present) to 2,000 BP. The word abrigo in Portuguese--like abri in French and 'rock-shelter' in English—signals that these sites gave protection. The visitor can see for herself that the spatial context was significant for the rock art at the time of its creation.

Archaeologists have established that these rock shelters were not permanent resting places. The peoples who occupied these sites were nomadic hunter-gatherers who most probably moved in circuits, returning seasonally to the same places. Their sense of spatiality was almost certainly circuitous rather than linear. The shelters would have been inhabited at specific times of the year, for instance, when the waters of the rivers rose in the hot rainy season and the cooler air higher up would have been especially welcome.

The shelter would not have served as a complete retreat from the demands of the everyday world: it was necessary to continue with subsistence activities during extended periods of its occupation. However, the shelter offered a spatial parenthesis where something specific occurred. During periods spent at the shelter everyday life would have been temporarily expanded beyond its normal limits so as to include practices not otherwise possible, primarily painting on rock, but perhaps also other associated ceremonies. Such a combination of discontinuity and continuity—in this case with life patterns away from the shelter—is characteristic of a threshold, at which transitions can take place. Archaeologists consider that rock painting was part of a wider range of artistic activity, including body painting and decoration of everyday objects such as ceramics and tools. These, presumably, were ongoing at all times. Within this wider range, painting on rock would have stood out as indexed to a particular place and time: a place where time took on different rhythm and quality, laden with symbolic meaning.

The first way in which these shelters were liminal in relation to nature was through their relation to the surrounding environment. The exceptionalism of such places—their parenthetical significance—corresponds to their parenthetical position hanging out into the surrounding environment. High up on the rock face they always have a view over surrounding countryside, which is already impressive in its natural formations. The prehistoric vegetation would have been different from what we see now. The tree-trunks would probably have been broader, making views of the countryside differently spaced, but the geology remains the same. These hanging balconies were liminal spaces reaching out into and at the same time implicitly framing the surrounding country- side in unique ways. The rock-shelter also acted as a frame for the rock art inscribed on its surface. This was no minimalist 'white cube', as the art and its situation are intrinsically inter-related, just as the shelter is a continuation of the spatial configurations of the surrounding landscape.

A further liminal aspect of their relation to their environment arises when rock-shelters are positioned at the entrance to deep caves.³ Archaeologists have established that caves hidden deep in the rock at Peruaçu were neither occupied nor decorated with art.⁴ Artwork is

exclusively positioned on the rock face at the threshold of the caves. But this is not to say that such deep caves played no role in the significance of the shelter and its artwork. A view into the vestibules of deep caves would have been the *volte face* of the view onto the surrounding countryside. And these deep caves are often furnished with spectacular limestone formations – stalactites and stalagmites, some of which form huge pillars when an upward directed stalagmite meets a downward directed stalactite. It is difficult to think that such dramatic views of nature inside the rock—visible yet on the brink of being hidden within the rock-mass—would not have made an impression and played a role in the significance of the rock art and its mode of expression as an ongoing exchange with nature.⁵

The second way in which rock art stands in a liminal relation with nature is the way in which it incorporates features of the relief of the rock—for instance, textures, fissures, indentations and colours—as part of its expressive content. In doing so, rock art operates across thresholds between culture and nature. There is practically nowhere at Peruaçu where the relief of the rock does not contribute in some way to the paintings. It is often as if the art were a response to the potentialities of the rock, enhancing what could be considered proto-engraving or sculpture—complex natural fissures, ledges and overhangs—and proto-painting—the vibrant natural colours of the rock. It may be that certain surfaces were chosen because the ‘work’ was considered as having already been started in or by the rock. It is practically never the case that plane surfaces were chosen for decoration. In support of this general thesis, I offer two examples of widespread phenomena. The first is the use of features of the rock for framing art, while the second is the repetition of natural marks within the repertoire of art.

Janelão is one of the most visited rock shelters in Peruaçu. To the extreme left of a long expanse of rock painting a small natural overhang has been deployed for artistic effect. Underneath the canopy afforded by the overhang are two minimalist anthropomorphs painted in yellow. These figures are simple outlines but they are not rigid. One is curved around the other, in the position of ‘spooning’ i.e., the two figures are portrayed facing in the same direction with the front of one body pressing against the back of the other. Both bodies are gently curved with their arms bent, emphasising their embrace. The head of the embracing figure is a miniscule orb, while the head of the embraced figure is a slightly more extended oval. Although both heads are small and minimal in style, this difference in detail adds to the sense that they are distinct from one another and could also suggest movement. To the left of the figures, also painted in yellow, is a vegetal form, perhaps a tree or a fern. Across a short gap to the right—still within the arc of the overhang which now turns downwards—is an elongated shape made up of two ovular expanses connected by a narrow strip, all in red. On top of the upper red oval is a long stripe of yellow. A very similar red form made up of two interconnected ovals, without the stripe of yellow, is found beneath the ‘spooning’ figures. Further to the left of the figures and just beyond the platform, the natural rock provides a downward directed ledge, which with the horizontal overhang above and its downward curve to the right makes three sides of a frame. The natural rock of the lefthand side of the frame is bright in colour in contrast to the surrounding rock’s mixture of dark grey, red and mid-grey. The fairly smooth surface of the lefthand frame is decorated with lines of yellow dots. The natural frame continues downwards and widens out below the decorated smooth ledge through fissures of the rock. Within the lower part of the frame there is a circular shape and several cross-like forms perhaps vegetal or anthropomorphic, all painted in red. The next panel to the right—beyond the limit of the frame just described—combines striking non-figurative forms in yellow and red along with what could be vegetal forms.

Abrigo do Janelão, National Park of Peruaçu, Brazil. Exhibits liminality of nature and art.



What can be derived from the detailed description of this panel? If, as I have suggested, the panel with the embracing figures can be described as ‘framed’, it does not have a definitive fourth side. Nonetheless, the frame institutes a local community of shapes and figures set apart from the adjacent panel by features of the rock. It seems possible that the prominent horizontal overhang was seen as an invitation to place forms underneath it. The overhang causes a strong shadow and would have provided protection from extreme sunlight, while visually emphasising what lies beneath it. Viewing the overhang in relation to the paintings beneath leads us to focus more closely on relations within the rock face itself, between horizontal and vertical fissures in the rock. While features in the rock serve as a frame showing off the paintings, the paintings also show off the complexity of the features of the rock which can be seen as providing a micro-shelter within the rock-shelter. Of course, we cannot tell the precise significance of the incorporation of such overhangs—there are several at Janelão as well as elsewhere at Peruaçu—but it is indisputable that the artists took up opportunities afforded by features of the relief of the rock, making symbolic or cultural capital from natural features. The use of overhangs and ledges as frames is liminal not only in deploying natural thresholds but in showing off thresholds between nature and culture within the artwork.⁶

Another example of the incorporation of relief is found at Abrigo do Índio in Peruaçu.⁷ The horizontality of the arrangement of paintings, both figurative and abstract, is striking. Further examination reveals that the natural rock is already marked by horizontal lines along which the art is positioned almost like notes on musical staves. The paintings—whether intentionally or not— seem to decorate what was already there in the rock—its horizontal lines. The strong

correlation between artistic distribution and geological linearity makes it probable that the positioning of the art was influenced by the rock.

Looking more closely at natural markings—especially higher up on the rock face of the shelter—we can observe natural circular indentations along with many series of short vertical indentations. Nearby and throughout the panels are many painted short lines that look very similar in shape to these natural indentations, almost making one wonder if the latter could be engravings. (They are not.) There are also some painted dots. One series of short red lines immediately under a high overhang is surmounted by a row of red dots. Just to the right is a dense concentration of short vertical lines and dots, all natural features of the rock. The use of dots is frequent in Minas Gerais rock art, especially at Cocais, where André Prous considers it possible that they occupy a distinctive intermediary level between a first layer of deer and a third layer of jaguar. (Simões, Motta & Prous 1987)

Abriço do Índio, National Park of Peruaçu, Brazil. Exhibits liminality of nature and art.



Could linear and circular indentions in the rock, as exemplified at Índio, have inspired the production of painted lines and dots? Potential support for this speculative suggestion comes from some intriguing archaeological evidence. The most ancient rock marks established in Minas Gerais are engravings of incised lines and dots on a fallen block at Lapa do Boquete. These have been radio-carbon dated to between 10,000 and 11,000 years ago, corrected to 13,000 BP in calendar years.⁸ Given the pervasiveness of natural lines and circular marks in the local rock, it is at least possible that the earliest Minas Gerais rock art was inspired by decoration that appeared to be in the rock itself and that this imitation of nature was continued within ensuing traditions.

Dots and short lines—sometimes called ‘batons’—have a long history in global prehistoric rock art. Dots—some miniscule, others quite large—are found throughout European late Palaeolithic art, for instance, in the final chamber at El Castillo in Cantabria, Spain, as well as near the entrance to the Salon Noir at Niaux in the French Pyrenees and on the horses of Pêche-Merle in the Lot, to name but a few striking examples. As Prous has remarked, dots are one of the simplest artistic gestures. Indeed, one of the dots at El Castillo is considered to be a possible example of Neanderthal art, dating to at least 40,000 BP. Does this mean we should understand the making of circular marks in Minas Gerais as a continuation of a long-standing artistic tradition, rather than arising from a liminal relation between art and nature?

But the pervasiveness of dots in early prehistoric art need not rule out that liminal relations between art and nature played a role. Indeed, it seems likely the two were inter-connected and that this is characteristic of the prehistoric period, despite important geographic and temporal variations. One example is cup-marks—circular indentations almost like bowls—which are found in Europe from the Neanderthal era through to the Neolithic. These are often continuations of natural marks in the rock. It is not surprising that peoples standing in such close relationship for their survival ‘read’ natural phenomena closely and saw themselves as interacting with those phenomena. It is likely that their self-understanding entailed such close reading of—as well as a creative response to—nature.⁹

In this section I first examined how the choice of site for Minas Gerais painted rock shelters shows an implicit sensibility for spatial liminality in the selection of rock-shelters as balconies hanging out into the surrounding landscape. In the second part of this section, I have discussed how geological features—for instance, micro-ledges at Janelão, as well as natural lines and circles in the rock at Índio—were intentionally incorporated within the expressive content of rock art. This inclusion of aspects afforded by the rock, I have argued, shows that a potentiality for emergent sense was discovered on thresholds between nature and culture.

3. Thresholds of Perception

Perception plays an important role in modern Aesthetics as it has been constructed within western philosophy. Perception includes liminal phenomena operating across thresholds, such as contrasts between light and dark as well as relations between the visible and the invisible. (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 1968) In this section I examine to what extent liminal perceptual phenomena contribute to Minas Gerais rock art and its potentiality for emergent sense.

Minas Gerais rock art is perceived under shifting lighting effects on thresholds between light and dark. Bright light does not always make visible, for it can also be blinding with the result that paintings cannot be seen clearly because of strong light at certain times of the day. When we visited Serra do Cipó in central Minas Gerais we arrived rather later than was optimal for viewing conditions, while we had to return to Janelão in Peruaçu later in the day in order to be able to see paintings more distinctly. We cannot doubt that rock artists will have been aware of ways in which lighting effects contributed to the visibility of paintings. The survival of these peoples depended on close observation of changing lighting effects, for instance the visibility of prey and predators during hunting. It is unimaginable that they did not also closely observe lighting effects in relation to artworks in which they had invested so much time and effort. They would have been aware that paintings emerged and withdrew perceptually under different lighting conditions. However, while I am convinced that awareness of lighting was a background condition of Minas Gerais rock art, I do not know of paintings or engravings that were positioned so as only to be seen in particular lighting conditions, which would have made lighting a component part of the contents of the rock art.

In contrast, it seems highly likely that late Palaeolithic art in caves was constructed with an awareness of the way in which flickering lighting effects afforded by torches and oil lamps—the only lighting available in deep caves—contributed to how paintings and engravings were seen. Guides are often able to show how elements of cave art can only be seen when such lighting effects are simulated. Figures were designed to be seen in flickering light. For instance, animal figures seem to have been designed so as to simulate movement in flickering light, which, as I will discuss below, also produced missing elements in conjunction with shadow. [Groenen 2016; Pettit 2016]

Shadows are liminal insofar as they can appear to be objects even though they are nothing other than absences of light. Within Minas Gerais rock art only shadows cast by outcrops of rock could

qualify as evidence that shadows were incorporated within its content. There can be no doubt that rock artists were aware of shadows. Access to shade is essential for survival especially in hot climates. It is highly unlikely they were unaware of the ambiguity of shadows operating as presences that under different conditions become absent. However, we cannot know how they saw relations between shadows and rock art. It is possible that the shadow cast by the small overhang at Janelão discussed in the last section was crucial for its role as a framing device. If this were right, the casting of shadow would be part of the contents and not just the background conditions of that rock art panel. The shadow cast by the overhang is prominent, so this may be the case. However, we cannot tell whether they saw this or other shadows cast on rock art panels as anything other than background lighting effects.

Within late Palaeolithic cave art there is good evidence of frequent intentional use of shadows. An engraving of a bovine figure at Combarelles in the French Dordogne is headless, yet the shadow projected by a bump in the rock—when viewed with the flickering light of a torch or oil lamp—supplies the missing body-part. This is just one example among many. Perhaps the most striking example of the use of shadow in the late Palaeolithic is the ‘bison- man’ at El Castillo, Cantabria, Spain. A natural rock formation required only minimal sculpting to present the figure of a bison. The shadow cast by the adjusted rock-form completes the ‘work’ so that the bison is transformed into an anthropomorphic figure.¹⁰

An example of incorporation of perceptual phenomena—relations between the visible and the invisible as well as potentially between the seen and the hidden—is found at Newgrange passage tomb in Ireland, which dates to the Western Europe Neolithic around 5,000 BP. Passage tombs are defined by a long passage leading to a final chamber. Newgrange is famous for its decorated perimeter dominated by spiral forms, which are also found in many other Neolithic sites in Ireland, Scotland and, in particular, Orkney. Newgrange is a leading example of the positioning of passage tombs in relation to cosmological lighting events, most importantly the rising or setting of the sun, with its determining role in the ongoing procession of seasonal change. Newgrange is oriented to the rising sun at the Winter Solstice which in the northern hemisphere is 21st December. On this date the light of the sun falls on the back wall of the tomb at the end of the long passage, illuminating—if weather conditions allow—otherwise practically invisible spiral engravings that echo but also contrast with the constantly visible designs on the perimeter stones. The tomb is a celebration of the re-emergence of light on the shortest day of the year. The winter solstice is a crucial turning point when after months with progressively shorter days, the light begins to return and days get longer. The contrast between outer decoration that was always visible even from afar and an inner decoration that was almost invisible except at a crucial solar event cannot have been by chance. Newgrange is a monument that celebrates a threshold that was crucial both symbolically and practically, for it marked the possibility of regrowth and the anticipated end of winter.

Another feature is not so well known and establishes the importance of the threshold between the seen and the hidden at Newgrange. (O’Kelly 1973) The long passage of the tomb is to all intents and purposes undecorated. Above the ceiling of the passage, however, implanted into the surrounding mound of the tomb are decorations that cannot be seen. These decorations hidden in the ceiling of the passage are always invisible in contrast both to the highly visible decoration which surrounds the passage tomb and to the spirals seen only at Winter Solstice. While the decorations outside the tomb proclaim its presence and exhibit that it is there to be seen and the decoration at the end of the passage announces a special occasion when what is usually invisible is finally visible, the decoration hidden in the ceiling of the passage can never be seen and yet is present. Whether its presence was generally known beyond a select few is impossible—at least for now—to prove. We can, however, be confident that the presence of this hidden art was known by its makers and that it is probable that their actions were sanctioned by the community. It is highly improbable that this was an act of graffiti or the casual re-use of

an already marked stone at the whim of errant individuals, given it was implanted in such a prominent position and that the very building of the passage tomb was almost certainly considered a highly significant ceremonial act for the community. This hidden art operated on the borders of what was not seen, yet had been seen (by some) and could (in principle) be seen again. Given the thought and effort that must have gone into implanting this decoration into the mound, it seems likely that its ambiguous presence played a role—perhaps an important role—in the symbolic power of the tomb as a whole. A peculiar power could have arisen exactly because it hovered on a threshold between the seen and unseen, between the visible and the hidden. It is surely unlikely that the architect-builders did not find some significance in the convergence of a flamboyant exterior dominating the whole surrounding countryside with a hidden interior decoration. Their awareness of the liminal is evident as the tomb is set up so as to show off something that is almost never seen, the spiral designs in the chamber at the end of the passage. The design implanted in the mound is a liminality that, once it has been hidden, occupies a threshold only accessible in imagination and memory and yet it is present. In this way it is likely the hidden art adds another degree of liminality to the contrast between visible and invisible around which the construction of this monument is evidently organised.

In this section I have examined whether or not Minas Gerais rock art integrates perceptual liminality into its contents. In contrast to late Palaeolithic cave art and to passage tomb culture from the European Neolithic, I have not uncovered evidence for the active incorporation of perceptual liminality within rock art. The over-hang at Janelão discussed in the last section, could qualify as an exception if the casting of its shadow was considered an essential part of the way in which natural features of the rock provide a frame organising the arrangement of the painted figures. However, this is impossible to prove. Perhaps there are further examples comparable to those from the late Palaeolithic and the European Neolithic. I have no doubt that Minas Gerais rock artists had a sensibility for a number of perceptual liminal phenomena, such as how the rock shelter was seen from elsewhere as projecting out into the surrounding landscape, as well as how the shelter provided a very specific perceptual vantage point arising from its liminal position. I also have no doubt they were attuned to dramatic variations in visibility arising from differing intensities of light, to the contrast between bright days and nights contrasting profound darkness with spectacular skylscapes, as well as to how shadows could appear as objects. What I have not been able to prove is that such perceptual liminalities contributed to the contents of Minas Gerais rock art and its emergent sense.

4. Superimpositions as thresholds of emergent sense

Superimpositions have the function within archaeology of establishing chronological order and relative dating. Simply put, whatever is underneath came first in time. As one archaeologist put it: 'When I hear superimpositions, I hear chronology.' Superimpositions in art, like natural sedimentations, are crucial for archaeology as a discipline capable of establishing temporally distinguishable data. I will argue, however, that the superimposition of rock art paintings also reveals relationality within an ongoing emergence of sense. Insofar as earlier layers are left visible, superimpositions allow for recognition of thresholds between present and past. Even when the newer layer is not directly on top of what lies underneath, juxtapositions leaving space around earlier paintings and recapitulations of themes can uncover relations between layers of production. These too belong to 'superimposition' in the broad sense of relations between layers.

i. The relational significance of superimpositions

Superimpositions are very common in Minas Gerais rock art and are still used as the principal evidence for the relative chronology of cultures ('traditions') and subcultures ('styles').¹¹ When one form is on top of another, what went before was mostly not covered over to the extent it

could not be seen. One example is of a small deer hidden but still visible within a jaguar at Serra do Cipó.¹²

Successive choices among colours are very important for the identification of superimpositions in Minas Gerais. At Serra do Cipó paintings are attributed to the Plano Alto tradition and reliably dated to between 3.9 and 4.4 thousand years ago.¹³ Initial paintings are red and predominantly of deer and fish, while those from the second layer are yellow and comprise mostly signs, for instance, 'batons' (short sticks). Paintings in the third layer are black schematic figures, both anthropomorphic and animal. The fourth layer is made up of small schematic anthropomorphic figures as well as geometric signs. Prous uses Serra do Cipó as a pedagogic demonstration of chronological order through analyses of differentiation in patina and exfoliation in the rock surface.

The usefulness for chronology of superimpositions can distract from the obvious truth that superimpositions must have been significant for them: there was an importance in painting or engraving in places that were already decorated. The pervasiveness of superimpositions was certainly not motivated by a lack of space as vast expanses of easily accessible rock were left undecorated. Superimposition as a practice was clearly intentional. While it would be premature to interpret the meaning of specific superimpositions, it is possible to establish at least one element of their more general significance. A superimposition is a relation with something from the past—something 'already there'—however indeterminate its temporal distance.¹⁴

ii. Obliteration or transition?

André Prous has argued that superimpositions in Minas Gerais rock art sometimes operate as a form of respect insofar as later artists do not interfere with what is already there, choosing, for instance, adjacent positions not overlapping with previous art. This contrasts with what he calls a 'neutral' approach 'when they painted over them without suppressing them' and 'a "negative" way, when old figures are destroyed and replaced with new ones'. [Seda and Prous, 1987, 181] Independently of Prous, in Hughes 2021b I have argued with reference to Palaeolithic cave art that even superimpositions painted on top of what went before can operate as a form of respect insofar as both layers are at least partially visible. I do not deny that some superimpositions could operate as a rejection of what came before. However, in what follows, I argue that even they stand in some relation to what was 'already there'.

A cluster of potential counter-examples to my relational reading of superimpositions is to be found at Desenhos, Janelão and Boquete (all within Peruaçu). At each of these rock-shelters a group of painted animal figures is over-painted by red pigment, on top of which are engraved a new set of animal figures.¹⁵ (Prous 2002 and personal communication) The artists 'cleaned the surface by covering it with a red painted layer'. (Isnardis and Prous 2013, 334) This sounds like an outright rejection or obliteration of what went before, thus potentially undermining my relational reading of superimpositions. One consideration, however, is that the Desenhos tradition seems to have been distinctive from other Minas Gerais traditions which are the main focus of this paper. Isnardis and Prous 2013 argue that Desenhos culture rock-art does not enter into relations with previous rock-art cultures, in distinction from the most recent stage of earlier São Francisco rock-art culture where intercultural interactions are pervasive. Nonetheless, the Desenhos culture offers an example of how superimpositions could be resistant to relationality.

I believe, however, there may be a way of interpreting even the use of red paint within the Desenhos culture such that it need not be understood as an outright rejection of what went before. Two compositions at Boquete in Peruaçu are diagnostic for my alternative reading.¹⁶ The

first is in the upper part of the rock shelter, to the right of the area referred to as the 'salon'. A coat of red pigment covers an earlier group of painted animal figures and is sandwiched between them and some subsequent engravings, also of animals. In contrast, at the end of the 'salon', there is a group of similar engravings without either an underlying expanse of red or prior paintings. It is only where engravings are preceded by paintings that red layers occur.

Were the intention of the red pigment simply to obliterate what went before, we might have expected red pigment blocking out previous figures without anything engraved on top. While we cannot determine the exact intentions lying behind these red layers, the fact that they only arise when paintings precede and engravings succeed, may support an alternative view namely, that red was used as intermediary, that is, as a transition between what was already there and what came after. A degree of effacement may have been intended, but some relation to what went before may also have been operative. So even if the later engravings were the coup de grace following the red layer, this putative rejection operates through a dynamic between relating and not-relating.¹⁷

iii. Superimpositions as cultural memory

Regardless of whether my alternative interpretation of the red layers from the Desenhos tradition is tenable for these particular cases, understanding superimpositions more generally as transitional can be further developed as a form of cultural memory. The act of superimposition was intentional. This is clear from the pervasiveness of superimpositions in Minas Gerais rock-art. To superimpose something on top of something else while leaving it visible is to enter into a relation with it. The new layer and the old layer relate over a threshold because they are seen ambiguously at the same time. In this way the new layer not only is—but also makes visible—a transition between what was already there and what has now been added. This showing up of a transition is a relation between present and past as a form of cultural memory.

Comparable to the hidden art in the passage at Newgrange in Ireland, it is possible that the act of covering over at Desenhos, Janelão and Boquete can also be understood in this way. The use of red may have been a way of making a significant memorial mark. Red is a highly significant colour throughout prehistory, often associated with symbolic activities, for instance, burial which can be construed as a memorial act. The role of memory—perhaps in connection with belief in ancestors—will almost certainly have been of central importance for these people who, undoubtedly, had a strong oral culture alongside their vivid visual culture. Evidence for the importance of memory can be drawn, for example, from the patterns of returning to the same sites on a regular basis.

Superimposition is a technique that makes possible a strategy for forgetting at the same time as preservation as a form of remembering. Superimpositions allow the initiation of a new culture or style to connect across a threshold with an older era that is partially hidden.

The process would have been both cumulative and exponential. We can now return to my earlier discussion of Serra do Cipó where, I argued, the first superimposition must have already involved some awareness of a relation to what went before. Once there was a third or fourth layer the more recent painters must have been aware that they were relating not only to the immediately previous layer but indirectly to what preceded it. Thus, there would have been an awareness of something like a tradition of relating to what went before through successive superimpositions that were the visual embodiment of cultural memory.

5. São Francisco design as an explosion of emergent sense

The potential counter-examples I discussed in the previous section lie outside the tradition that is most important for my thesis of emergent sense. A profusion of what are usually referred to as 'geometric forms' or 'signs' are characteristic of the São Francisco culture, which dates back as far as 9,000 BP and was at its height around 6,000-7,000 BP. In this section I will argue that these 'designs' display emergent sense insofar as they are animate.



Abrigo do Janelão, National Park of Peruaçu, Brazil. Exhibits animism of designs in Brazilian rock art.

i. São Francisco designs as animate

I start by explaining why I use the term 'design' for non-figurative forms in Minas Gerais rock art.¹⁸ Labelling them 'geometric' could give the impression they comprise a restricted group of regular forms. Calling them 'abstract'—while potentially helpful in suggesting a parallel with modern abstract art—could be taken to imply they express or require intellectual detachment. While these forms certainly show a capacity for abstraction, they also give rise to immediate sensory affects. 'Design' has the advantage of drawing attention to the particularity and individuated patterns of non-figurative art.¹⁹ The complexity and diversity of Minas Gerais designs suggest that, even if they were precursors of writing, their messages were not communicated through an economy of expression reducible to a generalised code.

Designs from the São Francisco tradition stand out among others within Minas Gerais rock-art because of the rich variety of ways in which viewers are drawn into an ongoing process of expression and sense-making. Nearby figures are abbreviated i.e., generalised forms stand for individual animals or humans. In contrast, designs are individuated, by their vibrant colours, the huge variety of their shapes, their complex internal patterns and their disposition on the rock-face. I will take the Cabocio style predominant at the eponymous rock-shelter at Peruaçu as exemplary of these characteristics. Cabocio designs are predominantly yellow and red, this combination being used in many different combinations. Their shapes are diverse. Many are rectangular, but never strictly regular. Some are longer, some very narrow, others have wavy outlines. Some are curved, while yet others take on very complex forms that may or may not be representative, for instance, of a cactus. The intricacy of the designs painted within these shapes is also varied. They are often striped but each design has a distinctiveness comparable to oriental carpets.²⁰ The range of their disposition on the rock face is also remarkable. While they seem to be positioned in some relation to horizontal lines in the rock, the Cabocios sit at varying angles and heights in a dense distribution across the rock-face. All of these features taken together make for complex inter-relations that give the impression of animation, for it is almost as if they were in movement. Indeed, the individuality and dynamism of these designs is such

that it is as if they were not only animated but animate. They are alive in so far as, singularly and in combination, they seem to speak to us in distinctive ways. Being animate, I am suggesting, is their particularly heightened contribution to emergent sense.

I will now further investigate my hypothesis that rock art paintings are animate by turning to contemporary anthropological discussions of Amerindian Animism in the works of Viveiros de Castro.²¹ According to Amerindian cosmology, all animals were originally human in a broad sense of the term. Animals and humans share the status of spiritual beings and exercise agency: “humanity” is the name for the general form taken by the Subject’. (de Castro 1998, 477) For de Castro the defining characteristic of subjectivity or personhood is ‘reflexive selfhood’. (1998: 477, 479) Being ‘human’ follows from being a reflexive self, not the reverse. Thus, for the Amerindian, if an animal displays reflexive selfhood—by treating itself as a human endowed with dispositions characteristic of its species—then it is a subject characterised by personhood and qualifies as human.

Within de Castro’s account, objects considered ‘inanimate’ from a Western perspective are not necessarily lacking in agency, although they are ultimately indexed to human subjects. Under the right circumstances objects and artefacts can qualify as persons. (De Castro 2004, 466) The defining characteristic of persons is that they ‘apprehend reality from distinct points of view’. (ibid.) This is the crucial criterion for de Castro’s Perspectivism which is the complement to Animism in his account. Whereas Animism is the unifying principle defining all animals and humans as ultimately members of the same ‘human’ species, Perspectivism is the differentiating principle requiring that humans qua persons have distinctive perspectives.²² (de Castro 2004, 482) He cites the anthropologist Gell:

All that may be necessary for stocks and stones to become “social agents” ... is that there should be actual human persons/agents “in the neighbourhood” of these inert objects. (de Castro 2004, 470²³)

De Castro’s reference to Gell reveals his agreement that in order to acquire agency objects require the proximity of humans.²⁴ Artefacts are singled out as having an ‘interestingly ambiguous ontology’ in that they ‘necessarily point to a subject; as congealed actions, they are material embodiments of nonmaterial intentionality’. (de Castro 2004, 471) Unlike other objects, this implies, artefacts always already imply a relation to humans and thus have a heightened possibility of being persons.

I think we can take up de Castro’s account for our current discussion with the following hypothesis. At the time of its creation and throughout generations when it was experienced as, most likely, crucial for a series of cultural beliefs and practices, Minas Gerais rock art held agency and achieved personhood through the proximate presence of humans who participated in its emergent sense during ceremonies rooted in the symbolic significance of these decorated rock-shelter sites. The rock art was seen as alive and as an active participant that was ambiguously and productively intertwined within the lives of these peoples.

The proximity criterion may thus make sense of rock art as animate within its own era, but could we consider it as animate now for those of us who do not share the cosmologies of prehistoric Brazil or of contemporary Amerindians? Is there any way in which the emergent sense and liminality I have claimed can be discovered within Minas Gerais rock art—especially in respect of its being animate—makes sense from a Western perspective, even for those sceptical about being able to adopt insights from alternative cosmologies? Deprived of the proximate presence of humans who believed in it as an essential part of their natural and symbolic world, can rock art still qualify as animate? I do not see that it would be helpful to claim that Minas Gerais rock artworks possess ‘reflexive selfhood’ for those of us who are not Animist in our worldview. For most of us, that is, within our perspective, rock artworks are not

persons if that requires that we could say in any meaningful way that they apprehend reality from a distinctive point of view. (de Castro 2004 466) However, we may think that in visiting a rock-art site we encounter something distinctive in the presence of which we feel and see the world differently. Although we are not faced with a distinctive person who 'has' a distinct point of view, this rock-art can be seen as having a distinctive presence that opens up perspectives with which we engage. If this is right, then it is an example of how insights from within Animist cosmology can help us make sense of explanatory blind-spots within our own paradigms.

When we encounter prehistoric art such as São Francisco rock-art we are faced with a perspective that cannot be readily mapped onto human intentions, simply because we do not and cannot know the intentions of its creators. But, even without proximate human intentionality, São Francisco designs affect us through their individual identities and dynamic characters.²⁵ This rock art shows how artworks more generally can be animate insofar as they have distinctive affects in the world. São Francisco designs engage viewers through their sensory affects. At the same time, the viewer is drawn into their individual forms as immersive attention. They draw us in to them and do not simply stand for something else, not even the intentions of their creators. Once they exist, they give rise to affects in their own right.

The immersive attention called forth by São Francisco designs is a form of reflection, which operates in conjunction with perception rather than through an isolated intellect operating at a distance from the senses. Merleau-Ponty calls this 'radical' or 'hyper' reflection. (2002; 1968) Such reflection is experienced as immersion in an artwork such that sense emerges through a process of engagement, rather than as reconstruction or explanation.

In calling forth reflection of this immersive type, artworks open up worlds that are not simply indexed to the conditions of their production. An artwork can encourage me to connect with a sense of loss or of lightness and joy. It is not the artist that communicates with me in these instances, even though the artist certainly played an essential role in creating the artwork.²⁶ The identity of the artwork is its mode of communicating with those who experience it. This is how the artwork is animate. The artwork opens up possibilities of feeling and thought but is not an active agent. It is a catalytic situation within which affects can arise and without which a range and combination of affects would not arise in the way they do. Its affects are non-random, although the specificity of the affects will be contingent on the persons who experience them.

ii. São Francisco superimpositions: A cross-cultural palimpsest

Figures are quite rare within São Francisco tradition rock art but they are not entirely absent. Animals represented include fish, birds, snakes and lizards, but not deer.²⁷ The repertoire includes objects such as spears and baskets, but these are not presented within scenes. There are also some anthropomorphs, but 'complex geometric figures' predominate. (Kesterling 2015) São Francisco designs are divided into four chronological 'subsets' which share stylistic elements while each introduces specific characteristics. (Isnardis and Prous 2013)

Isnardis and Prous 2013 supply the evidence for the following detailed analysis of the four different periods of the São Francisco tradition and their relations to superimpositions. The earliest (SF1) paintings which are usually monochromatic (black, red or white) are mostly on rock surfaces that were not already decorated, even though, at a few sites they were superimposed on huge anthropomorphic figures from the preceding Agreste tradition. From SF1 onwards the superimpositions of later São Francisco styles on one another are intense. SF2 paintings which are red and yellow (often bichromatic) only occupied sites already used by SF1 paintings, using 'the same graphic spaces' although avoiding overlapping. Despite avoiding overlaps, SF2 figures were often very similar to the juxtaposed SF1 designs, which were also retouched and sometimes extended. The succeeding SF3 and SF4 paintings reoccupied the large

sites favoured by SF1 and SF2 as well as the thematic choices of SF2. SF3 is relatively sparse in instances and uses black and red. SF4 'promotes an explosion of colours' using red, yellow, black and white colours in every possible combination. Isnardis and Prous remark: 'The superimpositions' avoidance of compromising the visibility of the previous figures is remarkable'. They also comment on how SF4 're-painted several themes, retouched others and incorporated the pre-existing figures in new compositions'. SF4 painters incorporated not only SF1 and SF2 but also the intervening anthropomorphic Montalvania figures. (Isnardis and Prous 2013)

I have already argued that at Serra do Cipó there must have been awareness of entering into relations with former styles in the very act of painting on top of earlier figures while leaving them visible. Comparably, a further dimension of São Francisco rock painting's contribution to emergent sense is found in the many ways in which later styles interacted with previous styles. Moreover, this not the end of the story for São Francisco tradition paintings are superimposed by white paintings which at Peruaçu are referred to as belonging to the 'Nordeste' tradition.²⁸ These fine, semi-transparent figures allow São Francisco designs to be seen such that later paintings resemble ornamentations of what went before. All of this adds up to a palimpsest through which sense emerges both within and between traditions and styles. The cohabitation of layers would have belonged to their impact from the time of the first superimpositions. Later São Francisco designs were no doubt intended to be distinctive, but they were also positioned so as to be seen alongside and on top of other figures that were also visible.²⁹

There are various reasons why it seems unlikely that São Francisco designs were intended to be indifferent to what came before. As I have already argued, even the earliest rock artists would have been aware of features of the natural rock that were often incorporated into their artwork, while later artists would additionally have been aware of the rock's artistic decoration. These artists were not, it seems, looking for blank canvases. Many surfaces— often smooth—were left undecorated and this must have been an intentional choice given the proliferation of superimpositions. As we have seen, surfaces selected as sites for rock art are often overdetermined in respect of natural features and pre-existing artworks. Pre-existing features—natural and artistic—must have attracted the next interventions rather than acting as a disincentive. It is as if each wave of artistic intervention was a contribution to a giant collaboration, even though one in which it may have been important to express one's own cultural—and perhaps individual—distinctiveness. Each intervention contributed to an emergence of sense within and between cultures.

We need not conclude that there was no sense of rank between different layers of artistic production. We simply do not know the relations of power between different styles and traditions. Perhaps the most recent designs were considered as 'outdoing' the figures that came before. Indeed, it may have been felt their power was such that they did not need to obliterate the competition. Alternatively, the new layer may have been intended as a form of respect for what went before. But we can know—because it is evident in the phenomena—that later styles and traditions almost always allowed earlier art to continue in existence and consequently stood in some relation to that 'other' art.

The individuality of designs within São Francisco period rock art contrasts with broadly contemporary European Neolithic rock art where design is even more predominant over figuration than it is in Brazil. Although there is great intricacy and significant variation within European rock art, there are striking continuities and repetitions not only within and between rock art sites, but also between rock art sites such as at Kilmartin in the West of Scotland and the Irish passage tomb tradition, for instance, Newgrange. European Neolithic designs appear to have been focussed on constructing complex integrated wholes recognisable across geographical and cultural distance, rather than outbursts of individuality. If Kilmartin is animate, as Andrew Meirion Jones (2011) has convincingly argued, the rock art of Peruaçu is hyper-

animated because of its incredible variation and the dynamic inter-relations between designs. Moreover, there is nothing in the Euro- pean corpus comparable to the interplay between different periods or styles and between design and figuration as there is in Minas Gerais. Through these distinctive characteristics Minas Gerais rock art shows sense emerging as a process in very specific and intensive ways.



Ormaig, Kilmartin Glen, Scotland.
Exhibits rich monochromatic design of European rock art.

6. Conclusion: Minas Gerais rock art as an exhibition of liminality within emergent sense

I have argued throughout this paper that emergent sense is discoverable within Minas Gerais rock art insofar as it exhibits a sensibility for liminality in its negotiation of thresholds between art and nature, between art and perception, among superimpositions, as animate and across styles and traditions. Part of the distinctive presence of this rock art—particularly its São Francisco designs—is that it shows sense as coming-into being through relations, transitions and ambiguity. I claimed at the outset that any sense stands in some relation to coming-to-sense at least at its inception but that not everything stands in the same proximity or intensity to emergence. What is rare is for emergent sense to be exhibited as such. The exhibition—or making-apparent— of emergent sense requires that its emergence shows up within experience, not just that it is presupposed as the necessary condition of sense coming into being.

I have suggested various ways in which a sensibility for liminality almost certainly operated as background conditions for Minas Gerais rock art. Its makers were undoubtedly aware of the marginal position of these natural galleries hanging out into spectacular landscapes. They would also have been aware of the added intensity arising when their paintings were positioned on the threshold of rock formations almost hidden inside the rock. Lighting effects, including shadows, are further liminal phenomena contributing to the distinctiveness of this rock art. I have not, however, been able to establish that these factors were incorporated within the artwork itself.

I have additionally argued for various ways in which intentional relations to liminality explicitly does show up within the contents of this rock art. Incorporation of geological features such as micro-ledges, as well as dots and lines show how thresholds between nature and art were incorporated into the artwork. In doing so the sense-making this art presents explicitly emerges through negotiations of borders with nature. I have also shown how superimpositions are liminal within art insofar as they are relational and do not obliterate what came before.

Superimposition is adopted as an internal dynamic, generating new content and sense within artworks. Both in relation to nature and in relation to previous art, I have shown how liminality is incorporated in this rock art such that sense-making is exhibited in its emergence.

In this paper I have offered a picture of liminality, rather than entering into a detailed analysis as I will do in later work. I believe this order of presentation is required because of the characteristic 'in-betweenness' of liminality. Definitions are always going to be insufficient for uncovering something that hovers on the border between indeterminacy and determination. Analysis must follow the phenomena if we are not to lose sight of the very thing we are trying to understand. Minas Gerais rock art allows us to see liminality within an ongoing process of emergent sense.

I would like to thank André Prous for his invaluable support for this project. Much of what I have learnt about Brazilian rock art is due to him. Clearly, though, any errors are my own! Thank you also to Sylvania Nascimento and John Walshe for photographs used in this article and for rich discussions during our visit to the sites.

Endnotes

1 My use of the word 'sense' follows Merleau-Ponty (2002/1945) for whom 'sens' is a way of making sense that starts in perception. For Merleau-Ponty all sensory perception is already oriented towards making sense and for this reason has meaning.

2 See Merleau-Ponty (2010, 177-190) These notes from his course at the Collège de France on Passivity (1954-5) reveal his fascination with Freud's Dora as a case study in being 'ready-to-know', by which he means being on the threshold between knowing and not knowing. See Hughes 2013.

3 The most dramatic example is at Janelão.

4 Rock art from different periods have been found in caves elsewhere in Brazil.

5 Certainly, the shelters had a practical role as protection and would have been chosen in part for that reason. But we can be confident that the everyday lives of these people did not separate off functionality from symbolic significance. This is evident from the shelters' intertwining of the practical and the symbolic: they are sheltered places and they are intensively painted.

6 Prous discusses a comparable way in which Minas Gerais rock art deploys features of the rock to frame paintings. At Desenhos and Lapa do Elias relatively flat expanses of rock surrounded by rougher surfaces are densely decorated with designs and schematic anthropomorphic figures. Prous calls these 'windows'. (Prous 2007, 40)

7 It is likely this rock shelter has the oldest habitation dates at Peruaçu. Datings for its paintings are anticipated soon.

8 Personal communication from André Prous.

9 For discussion of similar cooperation between nature and art in late Palaeolithic cave art, See Hughes 2021a.

10 This is often referred to as a 'shaman'. However, despite widespread popular interest, very few figures of potential Shamans are to be found in the European Late Palaeolithic.

11 This is despite the development of many modern high-tech procedures such as thermoluminescence, in addition to radiocarbon dating which can only be used when sufficient carbon isotopes are available.

12 The temporal order has not yet been established. (Prous personal communication.)

13 This is one of the first detailed datings for Brazilian rock art. The earlier date is based on a block that fell off the rockface into a datable sediment before 4.4 thousand years ago. The more recent date comes from the carbon dating for a fireplace beneath this block, carbon-dated to after 3.9 thousand years ago. (Prous personal communication.)

14 I have argued elsewhere that late Palaeolithic superimpositions reveal an awareness of temporal relations between present and past. (Hughes 2021b)

15 These compositions belong to the Desenhos tradition which came late in the succession of rock art traditions at Peruaçu and follow the São Francisco tradition which I discuss in the next section.

16 I am grateful to André Prous for the information on which my proposal is based.

17 While I cannot develop the idea here, my relational approach is one that includes negative relating.

18 For a discussion of design in relation to Kant, see Hughes 2023.

19 The use of 'sign' is more defensible in discussions of old-world late Palaeolithic cave art where a fairly small range of non-representative marks are repeated with a high degree of similarity.

20 See Prous 2007, 60-61. Cabocio style is a later development within the São Francisco tradition.

21 In the following discussion I develop some leads from anthropological studies of contemporary Amerindian cosmology to open up possibilities in my investigation of prehistoric Brazilian rock art. Using contemporary Ethnology—even analogically—to explain prehistoric phenomena has been widely criticised. However, evidence for continuity in cultural practices over many millennia is much more evident in South America than it would be, for instance, if we were drawing parallels between late Palaeolithic European hunter gatherers and nineteenth century Shamanistic practices in Siberia or southern Africa.

22 De Castro 2004, 482 calls this 'pluralism'.

23 Gell 1998, 123

24 I will not attempt to enter into a discussion of Gell's complex position here.

25 I think it may be possible to take this further in claiming a form of middle-voiced agency not reducible to an opposition between the active and the passive, but it is not possible to do so here. It is also worth noting that not all human agency requires 'reflective agency' of an active sort. See Hughes 2013.

26 The artwork has an identity that, if the artist is successful, comes to be independent of the artist in a similar way to successful parenting.

27 Deer are represented within later Desenhos petroglyphs. (Isnardis and Prous 2013, 334)

28 'Nordeste' is a designation used in a variety of different ways. For instance, in Bahia it is used to describe very ancient rock art considered older than the São Francisco tradition. Pessis 2003

29 I believe that these superimpositions also have an affective resonance in us and that this amounts to a recognition of liminality and emergent sense. However, I will not enter into that here. Elsewhere I have argued that superimpositions open up an alternative experience of temporality. (Hughes 2021b) As a development of my discussion of Animism in the previous section, it would be arguable that prehistoric superimpositions, including those at Minas Gerais, open up for us a circular and multiply layered experience of time that tends to get suppressed within the linear and instrumentally-biased Western worldview.

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