

MATEUSZ
SADOWSKI

So does the past still exist?
For all we currently know, yes¹.

A Cave Carved in the Shape of a Waking Person

Text: Mateusz Sadowski
Marcin Czerkasow

In the morning, just after waking up, for a while I don't remember who I am. I get up and walk around the house, doing my morning chores, the most important of which is drinking coffee necessary to fully wake up.

My wife wakes up differently, immediately ready to address the issues of the previous day. She asks questions and demands a decision. Annoyed, I rather coarsely

reply that before coffee, it's not possible. My point is that before fully waking up, there is basically no one to talk to – I have yet to be reminded of life, the people I love, and myself. I look around the house involuntarily. I see its form and how the light is arranged in its interiors.

I recall a sentence from the beginning of Jacob Bronowski's popular science series on the history of humanity:

Man is a peculiar creature. He possesses a set of gifts that make him

unique among animals, so that unlike them he is not a figure in the landscape, he is the shaper of the landscape.²



Jacob Bronowski, *Ascent of Man Part 1: Lower than Angels* (1973)

I think of the caves of our ancestors contradicting this claim for thousands of years. Appealing to fantasies of those bygone times triggers the contradictory notion of freedom from the technologies and civilizations that now control us – portraying a *golden age* of humanity in some time frame – while knowledge of the world must have at least as closely adhered to the repetition of the same, in principle, ways of life, cultivated by all people of that time, again and again, without end.

I imagine believing in things, constructs of knowledge about the

¹ See: *Existential Physics: Answering Life's Biggest Questions – with Sabine Hossenfelder*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f19oDJzfg58>

² See: J. Bronowski, *Ascent of Man Part 1: Lower than Angels*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CH7SJf8BnBI>

world that had to be combined with one's way of life – daily activities that had to be taken care of, tools that had to be used. Different from the current ones. I fantasize about what the general sense of being in the world might have been – was everyday life magical and mysterious from beginning to the end of an individual's life? Was everyday life familiar and intimate, perhaps even boring? Perhaps the knowledge and beliefs held at the time had an unquestionable nature that, from the present perspective, appears as an infinite continuation of compulsion stretched back and forth in time – a nature mixed with the now somewhat faded aura of romantic mystery that accompanied it all?

Mateusz Sadowski, still from production of a film: *A Cave Carved in the Shape of a Waking Person*, 2022, 3D (made with the cooperation of Andrzej Szwabe)



Probably no one could doubt certain necessities, certain indisputable rules of survival, which on the timeline of the people of that time seem to extend from the most distant ancestors and - at the same time dictating the necessity for successive generations to take similar actions – draw an infinite horizon of appropriate actions stretching into the future.

In static societies, changes in worldview must have occurred imperceptibly, or not at all from the perspective of their participants.³ The imagined moments of prehistoric “dynamic” breakthroughs seem to have a form different from the modern one: the extremely slow nature of “happening,” especially in the context of the rather short lives of individuals at the time. I suppose it would have seemed impossible for me to imagine such a thing as a void after my own death at the time. Today it is easy for me to imagine it, although I am inclined to say that it would be as false an image as those of the past. And the image of everyday affairs from distant times seems to me different at least in proportion to the number of years that have passed since then.

A cave at that time, which was simply a dwelling, seems to symbolize the archaic principle according to which man was not yet *the shape of the landscape*, but was still, like animals – *a part of it*.

The cave I present in the form of a film has some contradictory features: it is monumentally individualized to a minimum – to a certain individual whose shape it takes – and at the same time also objectified – as the activity of waking up and getting up is the binder of basic, common and shared experiences.

I wish that the video would refer to the moment of gaining consciousness right after waking up. Such an experience is familiar in the sense that

³ See: David Deutsch, *The Beginning of Infinity: Explanations that Transform the World*, rozdział 17: *Unsustainable*, wyd. Viking Press 2011

consciousness operates in a way “as if it has always been here,” regardless of who one is, one’s personality traits and individual history. Consciousness – which is an inherent constitutive impression that I experienced, being a child, as well as now – being someone else:

[...] whoever wakes up feels as if they’ve always been here, that there has been no subjective blank or emptiness “in front” of their current experience. [...] it seems that awareness – for itself, in its generic aspect of “always having been present” – is immune to interruption.⁴

Interruption. The shape of the getting-up figure, which is present in the animation, was recorded and then processed – thanks to CGI, it turned into the interior of a cave. The eye of the camera changes the shape of this interior, it also changes itself – it sees what will happen in a moment, it also sees its frame – it becomes a sensation that obscures all other experiences. The object is dead unless a process is taking place during which it is transformed to the eye watching the shape it is about to take, itself still in a state preceding the one yet to come.



Mateusz Sadowski, still from production of a film: *A Cave Carved in the Shape of a Waking Person*, 2022

All of these personal things are merely appearances in consciousness. Consciousness itself is utterly undefined. It’s the impersonal condition in which everything else arises. So, recognizing this, Clark suggests, quote: „Instead of anticipating nothingness in death I propose that we should anticipate the subjective state of always having been present, experienced within a different context. The context provided by those subjectivities which exist or come into being.” [...] Imagine being put to sleep and then being awakened many years or even centuries later.⁵

Returning to the morning’s activities, I semi-consciously conclude that after waking up I basically feel like a prehistoric man who, for some unclear reason, ended up here, where he is inevitably completely lost. Instead of being in a familiar imaginary space, filled with people wrapped in furs and the stench of a dying campfire, he finds himself in a strange,

4 Thomas W. Clark, *Death, Nothingness and Subjectivity*, source: <https://www.naturalism.org/philosophy/death/death-nothingness-and-subjectivity>

5 See: Sam Harris, *Making Sense podcast, episode #263 - The Paradox of Death*, <https://www.samharris.org/podcasts/making-sense-episodes/263-the-paradox-of-death>

incomprehensible space. Perhaps some completely familiar space never existed. Instead, there was only the familiar feeling of awakening, persistently present for a moment before the knowledge of his own identity, largely shaped by the circumstances around him, the environment, his own tribe, arrived. I think that such morning notions are simply common and independent of who one is; they take on a universal character. If someone wanted to explain it to me in a simplified way, they could show me a cave that has a shape identical to my figure when it wakes up, stands up, stands, and a moment later leaves that shape – which is what the video ends up with.

Immediately after drinking my coffee, I seem to finally make a decision and – explaining to my wife the coarse tone of my previous statement – I gently urge my son to get his shoes on, then, still waking up – I grab my car keys.

Still somewhat mechanically, I leave the apartment and only there, outside, does the day begin, filled with more or less complex activities that I would describe as ‘automatic’.

In this space, not many things occupy my mind for long. I move as if on the margins of a day that began with some clearer vision, which, in the casual light of greetings, opening and closing doors, moving and putting away documents, uttering sentences, retreats and fades, yielding as if almost obliterated, visible now only in something like a passe-partout of the general frame of the self.

Yet the idea works in the background: underneath the wide, random array of various activities there is a continuous process of its crystallization. I feel a pleasant form of definition, of stability, knowing that all my activities are now wrapped around this invisible core of the idea preoccupying me, like a spiral staircase inside some living, ever-expanding structure, which, at the end of the day, is what each individual life is.

In any case, I now roam the city in search of a place to park. I head to the building where I will spend most of the day discussing other people’s ideas, observing the performance of their concepts, completely external to me and my own interests, so that I feel I am able to look more closely at their architecture. I carefully follow the arguments accompanying the images they present. I propose, make suggestions, as if the fruit on a palm leaf extended beyond its shade, understood as an invitation to joint reflection. I leave space for their consideration of any possibilities to develop their own ideas. It’s quite a pleasant exercise, not obliging me to make any specific decisions. I act only as a guide in the land of more or less interesting forms, ways of presenting thoughts.

From time to time, however, I notice a detail, a ricochet of light outlining the wall of the building we are in from the outside, probably due to the opening or closing of a window. A silent signal coming from outside the

institution, an interruption – a cut – but here, inside, thoughts roll smoothly on, so in a situation of general agreement I close further threads, directing their attention to historical or contemporary examples from other people's already more developed, mature practices. We discuss.

So the hours pass, and during a brief pause for a second breakfast I look out the window at the snowy inner courtyard of the university. There's a reason we used to talk about "snowy" screens. Snow as a lack of signal, cancelling shapes, blurring the image of reality. There is more and more of it, so naturally I begin to think about the nature of the way back home.

I drive onto an unwritten page. Aside from the muffled sound of the engine, I'm surrounded by almost complete silence. I am meditating on the theme of thinking: as a path through total underdetermination, an area of pure possibility. I am focused, and despite the snow patches growing in my vehicle's headlights, I am prudently changing gears and entering the next curves without a hitch.

After returning home, I do another part of the necessary wage work. Then I am reminded of my current work, that is, this particular thing that I came up with and imposed on myself in the form of a task. It has actually been many months since I started doing this, maybe almost a year. Although I have already completed a significant portion of it, there is still a lot left to do.

It seems that now is the moment to define what I actually do. This takes place in the following way: first the work, then a reflection on what it concerns. Finally, it gets its name: *carving a cave in the shape of a waking person*.