In Europe, there is a very interesting Pleistocene artistic tradition of representing composite figures as though in the place of human figures, which are curiously rare in parietal art. Much less frequent than animal representations, human representations in European Pleistocene parietal art are also those that are most often treated in a strange manner, never being represented as realistically as their animal counterparts. They are all very schematic, caricatural, or even amorphous or supernatural. A large majority are subject to animalistic distortions, with human and animal features being combined. Animal features, which are more or less obvious or subdued, are nearly always included in the representations of humans. Far beyond distortion, human
representations are truly metamorphosed into hybrid beings, or therianthropes, which do not exist in the natural world. This same deviance is seen in the representation of sexual parts, with many ithyphallic figures having proportions that are greater than the anatomic reality of men, and sometimes even of animals, resulting in strange looking creatures. And there is yet another particularity that afflicts the human figure; not only are they deprived of their true human nature, some figures appear to be dead or sometimes mortally wounded by weapons or other non identifiable marks. In addition, these figures are often marginalized within hidden niches or in deep cavities in the cave. The intention seems to have been to place them in a particular location that evokes a tangible dialog between the cave and these figures. This significant dialog is also found in the use of the configurations of the cavern to represent other human figures. This clear dialog in fact concerns the entire parietal structure.

Is this treatment of the human figure specific to European Pleistocene art? According to our current knowledge, this is not a geographically isolated phenomenon, but rather a truly global artistic tradition that is not exclusive to the Pleistocene period. This same predilection for animal images and their assimilation with human figures is present in the art of archaic hunter-gatherers around the world. The recurrence of this phenomenon arises from a conceptual matrix that is common to all populations sharing the same type of economy and very likely the same beliefs and thought systems. In this context, animals are understood through metaphorical and analogical systems that recognize a true kinship relationship between humans and animals. Through therianthropic images, humans are thus allowed to coincide with their true animal nature, which is kept out of reach in their profane life. As a tangible interface between the profane world and the supernatural and sacred world, these images are there to recall and render perceptible the interdependence of these two universes, that of the living and the dead, and that of humans and animals.

All of these figures represent that which humans are, and yet are not: animal at the same time as human and human at the same time as animal. Through these images, humans thus expressed the remaining elements of their animality, which could nonetheless be seen only at the expense of their humanity. Why, indeed, such an absence, or self-effacement, in face of animal vitality, and why therefore such a diversion of the human figure and its marginalization within the depths of the earth if not to represent this un-representable human animality? For humans, art is an opportunity to experiment, enabling us to look into ourselves and at the same time to reflect upon the impossibility of representing our own past, our own animality. It is only because humans are forbidden to express their animality that we seek at all costs to represent it, as is attested by Paleolithic art and its therianthropic figures and all of the animal and hybrid figures that we encounter in the artistic practices of hunter-gatherer populations. By representing themselves with animal traits, humans found a positive and heightened manner, Nietzsche would say, to look into themselves and to coincide with their own animal nature. Paleolithic parietal art, from which the origins of art and all arts emerged, followed the advent of this initial desire, which, since the time when man became human, has driven him to represent the strangeness of his own humanity. And whether we are considering the plethora of animal figures themselves or the stranger and rarer therianthropic figures, all are the evaded or liberated image of their own animal humanity. In this sense, the animal is the anamorphism of man, through which he is able not only to liberate himself from his point of view, but also to embrace that of the other, who, in his otherness, is none other than he who dwells in the depths of himself.