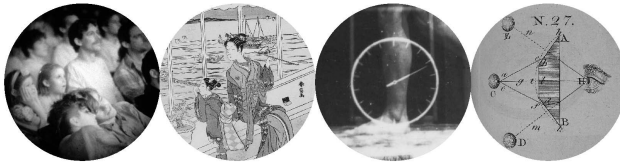


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Obscure imaginings: visual culture and the anatomy of caves

Mark A. Cheetham and Elizabeth D. Harvey

Abstract

This article speculates about the theory and practice of visual culture by examining the potent **linkages between the figure of the cave and the making of images**. Because the cave functions as a signifier for the artistic imperative, an endorsement of art history's place in cultural representation and also as a mythic beginning point in the Western hegemony of the visual, its figuration carries within it a set of suppositions on which the visual depends but which are rendered subservient or effaced in the genealogy of visualization. We focus in particular on the **creation of Alexander Pope's grotto and on a comparison between Robert Smithson's and Ana Mendieta's evocations of the cave**.

Key words

caves • Ana Mendieta • Alexander Pope • Robert Smithson • visual culture

Representations of animals on the walls of caves at Altamira, Lascaux, or other paleolithic sites are conventionally taken as the collective signs of disciplinary origin for art history, signifiers that represent the beginning of cultural consciousness. Compressed into a presumed moment of primal visuality,¹ such likenesses are often used to register how ancient and transcultural the impulse to make art is; they are imagined as a record of an originary moment in human creativity. Philosophers can also trace the beginning of their speculations to the cave, Plato's vivid allegory of image, shadow, and light in the *Republic* (1941 [c. 400 BC]).² Yet the significance of the cave as source, whether disciplinary or representational, is not limited to the fields of study it defines but permeates culture generally. In contemporary literature and film, for example, we continue to witness this preoccupation. **In Michael Ondaatje's (1992) novel *The English Patient* and in the 1996 film based on it, finding the desert cave becomes central to the romantic narrative.**³ Indeed, there is a crucial detail from the novel that the film omits: not only is the cave a burial site, but when Almásy makes love to the corpse, it becomes

a scene of necrophilic exchange. This moment evokes a tradition of the cave as passage to the underworld, the place where ghosts are encountered, and this commerce between the living and the spectral shadow becomes, as we shall see, crucial not only to the history of the cave as image but also to the problematic of visual representation it figures.⁴ Our juxtaposition of cinematic cave art with its paleolithic prototype is not designed to contrast the ‘real’ with the contrivances of Hollywood, however, since Almásy – who discovered these cave pictures in 1933 – was an historical person.⁵ What this comparison underlines is both the highly provisional and constructed nature of the cave as origin and its frequently contentious political existence. We will not be looking at the cave as an archetype, an element of iconography, or as a natural origin. Rather, we will investigate it as a trope – both visual and discursive – that is embedded in a series of discrete historical and cultural discourses, including archaeology, literature, art history, medicine, geology and mining. This figure points, on the one hand, to a set of material practices and their epistemological assumptions, and on the other, to a series of theoretical ideas concerning the making of images.

The power of image-making encoded in the figure of the cave and its recurrence as a site makes it an ideal place through which to speculate about the theory and practice of visual culture. Because the cave functions as a signifier for the artistic imperative, an endorsement of art history’s place in cultural representation, and also as a mythic beginning point in the Western hegemony of the visual, its figuration carries within it a set of suppositions on which the visual depends but which are rendered subservient or effaced in the genealogy of visualization.⁶ Visual culture is not exclusively visual or even always visible. We argue that the cave as a figure has buried within it a material history and an augmented corporeal or sensory legacy, which mitigate against the ocularcentric tendency to transcend historical specificity and geological and somatic materiality. Luce Irigaray (1985) offers a powerful critique of Western culture’s visual bias which relies, she asserts, on Plato’s myth of the cave. She reconsiders the cave, claiming that its occluded material and feminine aspects are the subterranean undergirding of a patriarchal metaphysics. Julia Kristeva (1996) hypothesizes the existence of what she calls a sensory cave which, although inaccessible to cognition, seems to form a deep layer within the human psyche and is associated with the production of art and literature. As natural formations, human constructions and images, caves are necessarily interior, hidden, obscure and, paradoxically, also the sites where visibility is created. As we argue with reference to Robert Smithson’s (1996) deconstruction of Platonic hierarchies, artists and theorists struggle with this paradoxical legacy, reproducing caves as projections of inspiration or of the mind itself and constantly interrogating the dialectic it encapsulates between interior and exterior, between materiality and transcendence, between the seen and the unseen.

Why does the cave powerfully embody the notion of beginning and interrogate the nature of the image? Its liminal position, its placement between inside and outside, makes it both a dangerous and privileged passageway between worlds or systems of representation. The cave was, for example, often a space for the reception of prophetic utterances (think, for instance, of the many representations of the Ear of Dionysus in Syracuse, Sicily). In early modern medicine, the anatomist opened the interior cavities of the body, rendering its secrets accessible to the eye (vividly

presented in Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Joan Deijman* [1656], which is itself a reflection on the hollowed-out torso in Mantegna's *Dead Christ* of c. 1480).⁷ Sleep, dreams and memory have frequently been imaged as caves, a kind of mythological prefiguration of psychoanalysis, which tries to understand the human subject through recourse to an always fugitive and incompletely accessible prehistory. The physical and psychic are thus simultaneously points of exploratory delving and sites of eruption and discharge, manifested in the body's reproductive processes and in the various expressions of the imaginary. This paradigmatic double perspective, gazing into the interior and looking outward from the inside, functions again in the practices of mining and geology. Caves are the initial entrances through which we extract wealth from the earth as well as the passageways to its mysteries.⁸

Explorations of what we will call 'interiority' in the West, whether psychic, anatomical, or geological, frequently take place in a real or projected interior space and recurrently in caves. A central example is the theorization and ubiquitous use of the camera obscura in Europe from the 16th to the 19th centuries.⁹ Descartes, Locke – with his 'dark room' of understanding', which he describes further as a 'closet, wholly shut from light, with only some little openings left, to let in external visible resemblances, or some idea of things without' (*Essay on Human Understanding*, II xi 17, cited in Crary, 1990: 42) – and others repeatedly likened the camera obscura to the mind and therefore saw this technology as a model of human perception. If the mind is imaged as a cave, then it would follow that the camera obscura was in fact nothing less than a frequently portable version of Plato's cavern. The reconstruction of the cave as a privileged site of display allows *The English Patient* to participate in a long tradition of fabricating caves or grottoes as 'natural' sites of wonder and exhibition (the synthetic grottoes of Duke Francesco I de Medici and Isabella D'Este's Palazzo Ducale were used for this purpose). **Pliny, for example, in his *Natural History*, calls the 'museum' 'an artificial imitation of a cave' (cited in Miller, 1982: 18); we can surmise that the cave and grotto are part of the pre-history of the museum** as we've known it since the late 18th century. In multiplying examples of the cave, however, there is the danger of producing a transhistorical taxonomy. To avoid such an elision of the specifics of time, place and culture, we now turn to the theoretical and corporeal anatomy of the embodied cave.

The cave of sensory memory

Feminist philosopher and psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray (1985) troubles Plato's formulation of metaphysical order in her reinterpretation of the myth of the cave in *Speculum of the Other Woman*. She would have us revisit the metaphorical space of origin both to resist the primacy of vision Plato endorses and to explore the maternal imaginary, the repressed underside of Western philosophy that is represented by Plato's cave. For her and for us, implicit in this linkage of cavern and art-making are buried assumptions about human interiority, gender, the autonomy of art and the psychic primacy of image making. Luce Irigaray contends that the exit from Plato's cave is a repudiation of the maternal body and of materiality in general, a foundational metaphor that becomes as she puts it 'a silent

prescription for Western metaphysics' (p. 243).¹⁰ Her description of the metaphor of the 'inner space, of the den, of the womb or *hystera*, sometimes of the earth' (p. 243) invokes a heritage that joins the dissection of the body, the exploration of its cavities and the investigation into the aetiology of disease or death, with the examination of the earth's interior. This tradition is evident in classical medicine (Hippocrates and Galen, for instance), and the analogy is pervasive in early modern anatomical treatises and literature, which speak repeatedly of cranial caves, the caverns of the ears (Francis Bacon's description of the ear as a 'sinuous cave' [*Sylva Sect.* 282]), and especially of the female pelvis as a grotto or cave. The famous allegory of the female body as garden in Edmund Spenser's epic-romance, *The Faerie Queene* (1981[1596]), for instance, draws on this legacy in its depiction of the Mount of Venus at the center of the garden. The mount is covered with shrubs and bushes that exude aromatic resins, and underneath lies the aperture to a rocky cave, an obvious allusion to the female genitals.¹¹ The figure of mining as a rape or violation of the earth's maternal body is a frequent one, apparent in literature from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* to Milton's fallen angels in *Paradise Lost* mining the earth in order to build Pandemonium. The analogy helps explain the illustrations in such early modern anatomy texts as Vesalius's *De Fabrica* (1543) and Gérard de Lairesse's *Skeleton Emerges from the Grave* (1685), which typically situate the corpse in a landscape, often near ruins, and at times emerging from a grave or crypt. The settings of these anatomical illustrations provide an analogy for understanding the **human body as an architectural or telluric microcosm**, alluding in the process to an epistemological investigation of the body's interior that is simultaneously threatening because of its intimate familiarity and also distanced by virtue of the analogical linkage, which renders it universal and 'other'. The poignant sense of this anatomical exploration of interiority is apparent in a series of 18th-century wax models of dissected bodies from La Specola in Florence (Poggesi, 1999). These models at once expose the interior 'secrets' hidden by the coverings of flesh and paradoxically suggest in the languid, almost rapturous poses, the continued presence of a seemingly conscious being in the corpse from whom all awareness must necessarily be extinguished. The linkage between the exposed bodily cavity and consciousness thus seems to be expressed by the emotion the flayed figures, the *écorchés*, evince, as if exploring the interior of the body could lead to the center of the mind.¹²

The idea of an anatomical locus or deep-seated psychic mechanism for primordial impulses is one that has been theorized by Julia Kristeva, the Bulgarian born linguist and psychoanalyst. In *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984), Kristeva uses a term that becomes crucial to her theories of language and meaning: the *chora*, which she derives from Plato's *Timaeus*. Plato uses the *chora* in his description of cosmic generation as a way of explaining how the Forms are incorporated into the material world (p. 48A). Whereas for Plato, the *chora* is only incidentally gendered, however, Kristeva's use of the term is closely allied with her definition of the semiotic realm, which is in turn linked to the maternal body and to a temporal moment in the life of the child that precedes entrance into the Symbolic, the realm of language. In *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Kristeva sets out to define the semiotic, which she does initially through recourse to its etymological senses of mark, trace and precursory sign (p. 25). The *chora* is the process by which

significance is constituted (p. 26), and Kristeva's explication of it thus, as she puts it, 'opens up within the subject' the 'scene of pre-symbolic functions' (p. 27). This scene is, in temporal terms, an early stage in the child's development, and it is, as Kristeva reminds us, governed by the maternal body, which is 'the ordering principle of the semiotic *chora*' (p. 27). The semiotic irrupts continually, manifesting itself in gaps and discontinuities in language, in gesture, in laughter, rhythm and music, and in color (pp. 26–8).¹³

The ideas of the semiotic and its cognate term, the *chora*, remain important throughout Kristeva's career, evolving to its most explicit articulation in Kristeva's (1996) study of Proust, *Time and Sense*. She turns there to a discussion of the relationship between language and sensation, and more specifically still, to the question put by philosophers as to the status of sensation: is a sensation a thought (p. 234)? She answers this query through a critique of Plato's parable of the cave. She suggests that the shadows that the prisoners see dancing on the wall of the cave are the '*symbols of sensory experience*', and yet if the captives leave the cave, they will be blinded by the sun. They must learn to create an intermediate reality that is 'neither sensory illusion' nor an inaccessible truth, but 'a mathematical construction of forms providing a path toward true knowledge' (p. 234). What the prisoners learn, then, is that the senses provide false information, and we have all since Plato therefore 'found ourselves in an *aporia of sensation*' (p. 234). Kristeva turns from this Platonic dismissal of sensation to the case of autism, a psychological enigma that allows her to posit the existence of another cave, one that is, as she puts it, 'more profound and inexpressible than Plato's' (p. 234). This anterior chamber, what Kristeva calls the sensory cavern, is without symbols; it exists prior to language and is constituted by 'lived experience' that has not been given a form through signification (pp. 234–5). This cave is, she suggests, both 'ubiquitous' and 'irreducible to language' (p. 235), for, far from being specific to autism, it is 'an essential part of the psychic apparatus' (p. 235). The sensory cavern is, put in the simplest terms, an archaic substratum within the human psyche that lies beneath and behind language and that can be rendered accessible through 'perversion, art, or psychoanalysis' (p. 235). Indeed, this cavern is prior even to memory; it is what Kristeva in another moment calls 'this camera obscura', an archaic trace of a moment before the 'I', was differentiated, when it was still fused with 'a not-yet *other*' (p. 238).

What would it mean for a female artist to confront rather more directly the conjunction between the cave, sensation–signification, and the maternal body? We want to try to answer that question in specific terms by turning to a group of works by **Ana Mendieta**, a Cuban-American artist, who died in controversially violent circumstances in 1985. Mendieta was both a figurative and literal exile, because she was sent from the country of her birth, Cuba, to the US in 1961 after Castro's declaration of Cuba as a socialist country (Blocker, 1999: 50). She and her sister were put in various foster homes and orphanages, and their mother did not join them in Iowa until five years later. Mendieta's work has been analyzed in terms of this exile and her eventual return in 1981 to the maternal/national body from which she had been separated when she was 12, and there is strong logic to seeing the sculptural works that she created in 1981 in those terms. These works, entitled the *Rupestrian Sculptures* (from the Latin 'inscribed in rock'), are a series of 10 female

figures that she carved into the walls of two remote caves in Jaruco State Park near Havana (Clearwater, 1993: 11). That the interior of one of the caves is red reinforces the association with the interior of the maternal body, as does Mendieta's own statement that the carvings represent a 'return to the maternal breasts' (p. 130). The figures are Taino creation goddesses, and there has been a tendency to read the carvings as essentialist, as references to a universal maternal presence. In contradistinction to this interpretation, we now consider Mendieta's *Rupestrian Sculptures* and her *Silueta* series in relation to the Kristevan anterior cave, which figures irrecuperable origin, and to Irigaray's call to represent the unsymbolizable mother–daughter relationship. Mendieta's art uses caves in ways that rewrite the Platonic myth. She simultaneously invokes the materiality of the earth and the female body, which are anchored in the specificity of a particular political and historical matrix, and underscores the fragility of matter, which is subject to erosion by weather and time and conveyed to us in the spectral form of photographs.

Mendieta draws on the legacy of the Taino, the pre-hispanic native people of the Antilles (Clearwater, 1993: 12) as a kind of double gesture, both as return to the deep, almost obliterated history of her own homeland and as a recognition that this cultural 'point of origin' is a reconstructed past. Little knowledge remains about the Taino people; what there is was collected in the journals of Ramon Pané, a friar who sailed with Christopher Columbus in 1493, on his second journey to the Antilles (Clearwater, 1993: 12). But the journals were lost and are known only through an Italian translation, so that rather than representing some kind of recoverable originary moment, this body of myth and the identity of the people who created it are ghostly vestiges, available through intermediaries and as a record of an absence. The caves themselves are palimpsested with the history of colonization and political strife: they were the refuges for the Indians who hid from the Creoles, for the black slaves who escaped from plantation owners, for the Creoles who sought to elude the Spanish, and for the communists who were pursued by the capitalists (Blocker, 1999: 102). The caves are hollowed into the side of a cliff, and their purposeful inaccessibility as works of art is a crucial feature of their meaning. As Charles Merewether (1996) has astutely argued, Robert Smithson's work, which was known to her through her teachers at Iowa, was an important source of inspiration for Mendieta. Smithson's early fascination with Mexico in 1966 and his use of art to present a critique of society shaped her own artistic practice, but the influence that may be even more important to our understanding of her work is his theory of the 'non-site', a place once occupied by something but which is emptied in the wake of its excavation or quarrying. This entropic landscape is marked by loss, exile, eviction (Merewether, 1996: 114), and it is this sense of vestige and loss, rather than a sense of reunion with the national or maternal body, that distinguishes both the *Silueta* series and the *Rupestrian Sculptures*. The *Silueta* series, performance pieces that are also recorded on film, register the trace of a body on the earth, so that Mendieta's form is imprinted in the landscape in the empty outline of hollowed space or ashes, a shadow of a disappearance, a burial without a body (p. 114). One of the *Silueta* series, which Mendieta performed in Mexico in 1980, inscribes a silhouette of Guabancex, the Taino goddess of the wind, in the earth and burns it, leaving the outline etched in ash residue (Figure 1).

This is the same figure that Mendieta carved into the rock of a Cuban cave in 1981

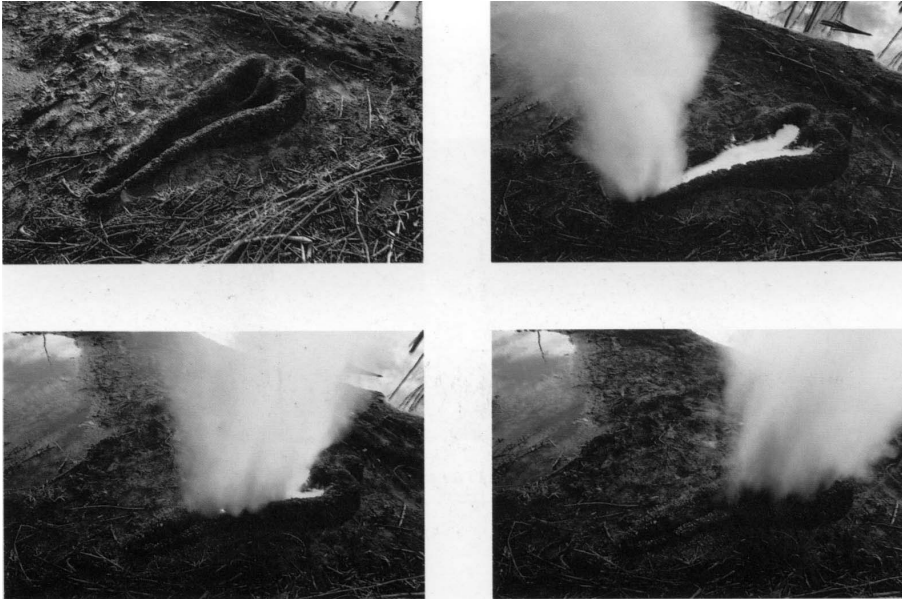


Figure 1 Ana Mendieta, *Untitled* (from the *Silueta* series), 1980. Earth and gunpowder *silueta*, Iowa. Courtesy of the Estate of Ana Mendieta and Galerie Lelong, New York.



Figure 2 Ana Mendieta, *Rupestrian Sculptures: Guabancex (Goddess of the Wind) and Itiba Cahubaba (Old Mother Blood)*, 1981. Carved cave walls executed at Escaleros de Jaruco, Jaaruco State Park, Havana, Cuba. Courtesy of the Estate of Ana Mendieta and Galerie Lelong, New York.

(Figure 2), and the repetition of the figure, first as a mutable silhouette and then as a barely accessible form cut into rock, seems to underscore its evanescence. The *Rupestrian Sculptures* are given to us both as photographs of the cave sites and as a series of 10 photographic etchings Mendieta made of the cave sculptures, and for most viewers, they exist only in these images, shadow versions – like the images from Plato’s cave – of a reality that eludes us, that has disappeared. Roland Barthes reminds us of the ghostly nature of the photograph (Merewether, 1996: 115), and these images, then, are phantom vehicles for a history of a disappeared people, both the political refugees and the native culture whose narratives of origin are set in these caves. Just as Irigaray suggests that women’s fundamental condition is dereliction, an exile from an ontological dwelling place, so too do these caves become places of exile and abandonment rather than sites of metaphysical habitation and identity. Mendieta’s photos are assembled in a black cloth box, and the beige tonality of the etchings evokes archaeological illustrations in early texts of lost civilizations (Clearwater, 1993: 18, 20). They are a symptom of what Mendieta calls the ‘deculturation’ of indigenous peoples, a process that was for the Taino Indians genocide and what is for the so-called ‘under-developed’ peoples of the 20th century a deracination, an uprooting of a national culture for the purposes of exploitation (Blocker, 1999: 40). The sense of exile, the preoccupation with burial and birth, and the powerful use of ashes or other residues that characterize Mendieta’s works are not only political and national, of course, but profoundly feminist. The bodies that populate her pieces are female, and the *Rupestrian Sculptures* feature such mythical figures as Guabancex (the goddess of the wind) or Itiba Cahubaba (Old Mother Blood) or Mother Earth, who died giving birth by Caesarean section to quadruplets who went on to populate the world (Clearwater, 1993: 13–4). If, as Kristeva suggests, the anterior cave is a psychic phenomenon that underlies both culture and the psyche, that has disappeared from memory and exists only in traces, ghostly vestiges, that is associated with a powerful, consuming and often abjected maternal body, then we may begin to understand the photographic traces of Mendieta’s cave sculptures in these ways, as a choral remnant, a remnant from a forgotten past that is only incompletely accessible.

Mining images

If, as we’ve claimed, caves of various sorts frequently and paradigmatically generate images through their articulation of interiority, it seems important to consider in some detail the long tradition of creating artificial grottoes (see Miller, 1982). The term ‘grotto’ – from the Latin ‘crypta’, with its associations of veneration and antiquity – is tied to the function of caves as burial sites.¹⁴ For the ancient Greek and Latin poets, caves were magical passageways between worlds, transitional meeting places of the divine and quotidian planes of existence. They were transformative microcosms of the metamorphic essence of the world order. The construction of grottoes arose from this ancient speleolotry; we see examples as early as that at Hadrian’s Villa, built outside Rome in the second century. As we noted earlier, Renaissance practice made explicit a combination of Pliny’s description of a cave-like place for the muses – a museum – with the later sense of the museum as a site in which to display curiosities and works of art. The very

construction of artificial grottoes appears to be an act of replication analogous to image making. In the 1720s, inspired particularly by the classical literary evocations of caves and grottoes, Alexander Pope – poet, landscape architect and translator of Homer – extended this tradition by forging his elaborate grotto at Twickenham, upstream from London, into nothing less than an organism for the creation of images. The greatest earth-artist of recent times, Robert Smithson, envisioned a project that both inherited and offered a critical revision of the grotto conventions elaborated by Pope. In his 1971 ‘Cinema Cavern’ project, Smithson proposed to build an underground movie theatre in an excavated cave or mine, a space that would reveal for its captive audience the Platonic assumptions governing the creation of the image.

Pope’s grotto forms part of a large garden project at his estate just west of London. Designed as a subterranean passage, in the overall scheme, the grotto served to link the garden of Pope’s country home with its river front along the Thames, a considerable challenge topographically, given that a roadway intervened. In a drawing of c. 1725–30, most likely by William Kent, we can discern the entrance to the grotto and even see the Thames beyond, marked by a passing boat. Pope’s first version of the grotto was in part a *Wunderkammer* – containing various rare rocks and shells, as we know from a contemporary inventory – and in part an inspirational if nostalgic escape to a supposed *nymphaeum*.¹⁵ Rugged though it must have been, it was a decidedly textual place, a poet’s refuge.¹⁶ We see its outlines in a sketch by Pope himself, dated January 1740 (Figure 3). This diagram is as much evidence of Pope’s ongoing plans for his creation as it is a record of its extant properties. While we see that it contains a spring, for example (top right), we also see Pope’s questions about its evolution. ‘What proper for a natural roof?’ he asks (top left). Pope put these and many other queries to his friend and physician, Dr William Oliver of Bath. Almost a year after this plan, Pope produced another illustration. It shows the results of visits and discussions with Oliver: a much enlarged grotto that moved away from – or at least added layers on top of – the earlier product of his literary imagination.

A sense of Pope’s new claims for the experience of his grotto can be felt when we relate his own written account to the second plan and to a diagram from 1785 by Samuel Lewis (Figure 4). Clearly Pope drew inspiration from these surroundings. Two contemporary sketches (attributed to Kent, but perhaps by Dorothy Boyle, Countess of Burlington), show him writing in his grotto. Pope relates that he liked to use the lamp seen in these images in order to enjoy the unusual effects its light made as it glanced off shells and minerals. Related effects, even the image of the Thames, were produced by the mirrors he placed in the ceiling of the main corridor. Most extraordinarily in our context of caves, interiority, and the fabrication of images, however, is Pope’s vivid likening of his grotto to a camera obscura: ‘When you shut the Doors of this Grotto’, he wrote in 1725, ‘it becomes on the instant, from a luminous Room, a *Camera obscura*; on the Walls of which all the objects of the River, Hills, Woods, and Boats, are forming a moving Picture in their visible Radiations ...’ (Brownell, 1978: 255).

What Pope orchestrated and could control for his own pleasure and revelation, inside his cave, was the reduplication of the picturesque effects of his garden, its

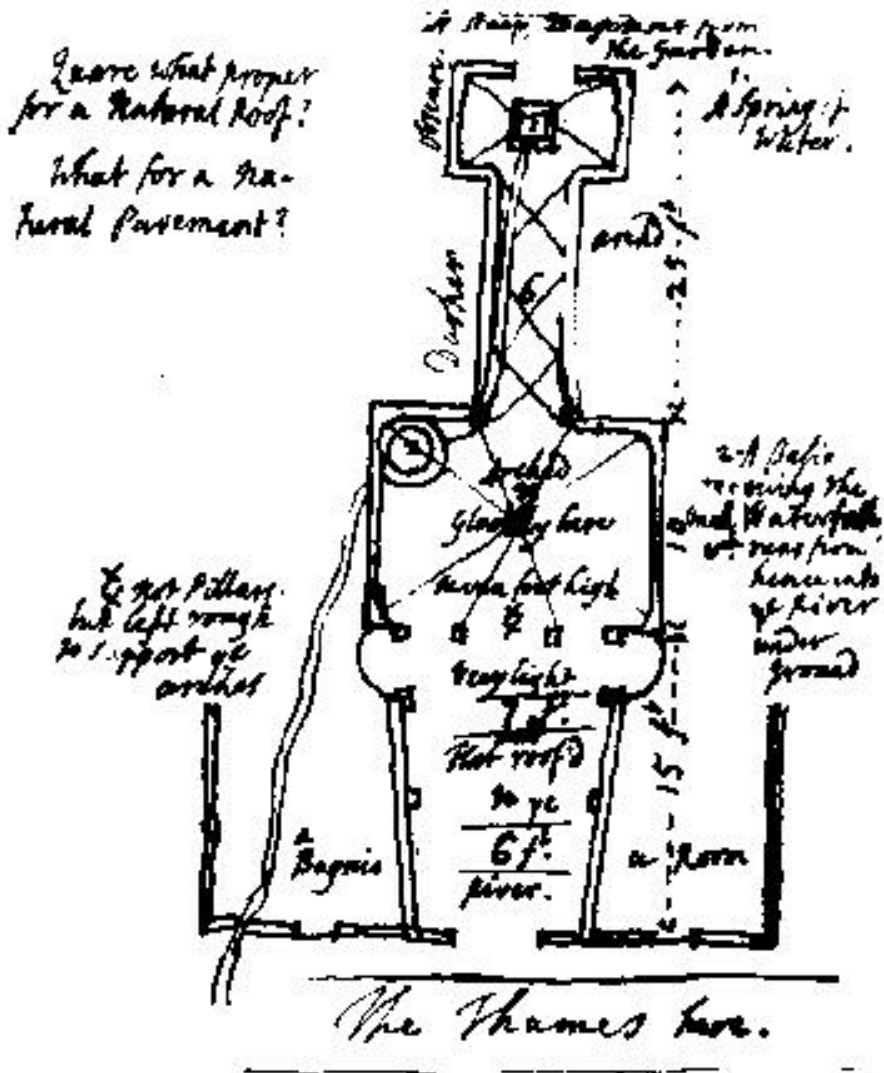


Figure 3 Plan of the Grotto and Cellars, drawn by Pope, January 1740. Courtesy of the Morrab Library, Penzance, Cornwall.

views, variety and myriad associations. A visitor related the overwhelming effect of Pope's use of mirrors and the image-making abilities of this camera obscura:

... every Object is multiplied, and its Position represented in a surprising Diversity. Cast your Eyes upwards, and you half shudder to see Cataracts of Water precipitating over your head, from impending Stones and Rocks.... By a fine Taste and happy Management of Nature, you are presented with an indistinguishable Mixture of Realities and Imagery. (Brownell, 1978: 259)

Just what other images may have been imprinted on viewers in this fashion? This

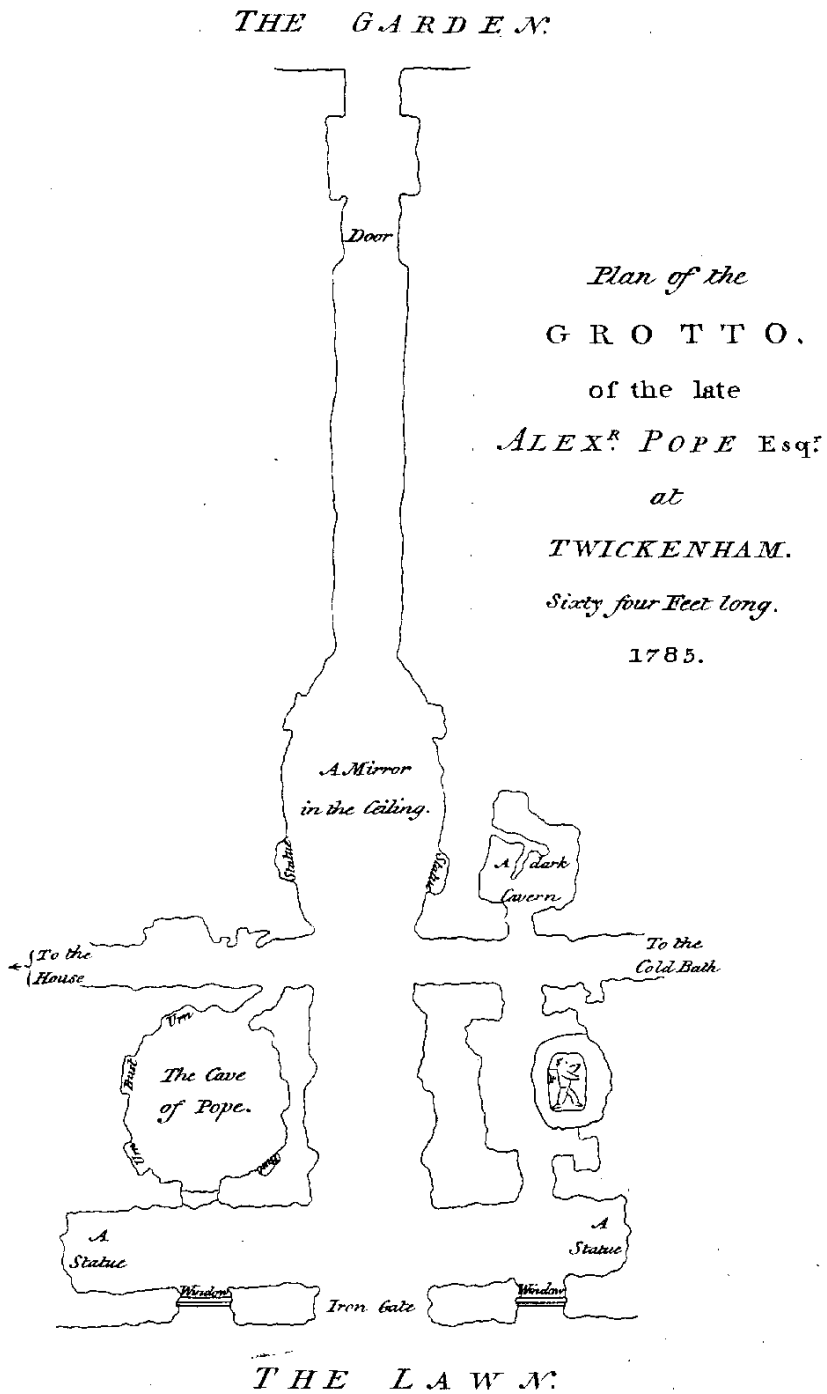
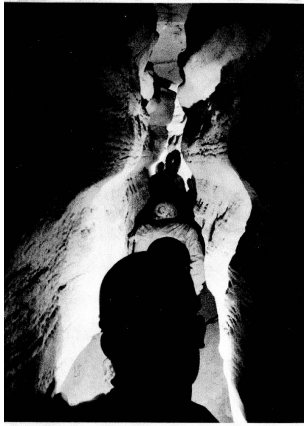


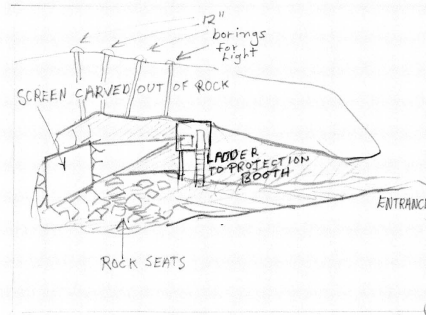
Figure 4 Pope's Grotto by Samuel Lewis, 1785. Courtesy of the London Borough of Richmond upon Thames Local Studies Collection.

Towards the Development of a Cinema Cavern
 or the movie goer as spelunker R. Smithson 1971



11. Many spelologists believe that the total length of passages in the cave system in Flat Ridge, Kentucky, is the greatest in this country. COURTESY: SPORTS ILLUSTRATED, PHOTO BY ROBERT HALLM

← Movie goer
 as
 spelunker



Natural Cave or Abandoned Mine
 (hypothetical) Truly "Underground"

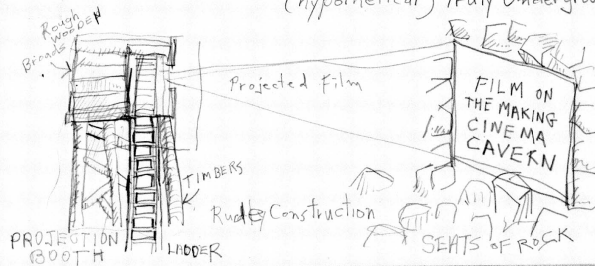


Figure 5 Robert Smithson, *Towards the Development of a 'Cinema Cavern'*, 1971. Pencil, photograph, tape. Collection of the Estate of Robert Smithson. Courtesy of the James Cohan Gallery, New York.

question takes us back to Pope's rebuilding of his caverns in 1740. Simply put, he renovated his classical nymphaeum to resemble a mine. In 1739 and 1740, Pope visited quarries near Bath. At this time he began to discuss the redesign of his grotto with Oliver. Oliver in turn enlisted the help of his relative, the reverend William Borlase of Cornwall, a geologist and natural philosopher.

Borlase and Pope corresponded and Pope eventually ordered all sorts of materials from Borlase – many tonnes of Cornish rock, as would be found in local tin mines. These supplies Pope arranged, as Borlase directed, to 'make the Place resemble Nature in all her workings' (Pope in Brownell, 1978: 262). Of course this sentiment alludes to **Ovid's famous dictum that a grotto should seem to be 'wrought by no artist's hand'** (*Metamorphoses* III: 157–6; Mack, 1969: 58). Nonetheless, by October of 1740, Pope's Twickenham grotto very much mirrored mines described in Borlase's later *Natural History of Cornwall* (1748). Instead of the curiosities he displayed earlier, Pope was now clear that he wanted to see and appreciate authentic minerals, not those foreign to the area or merely impressive to the eye. He made this explicit in orders for materials and in his famous verse description of his earth work, the *Verses on the Grotto* (1741), where he lauded the golden-age possibility that one could 'eye the Mine without a Wish for Gold' (Mack, 1969: 69). Classical allusion and nostalgia had, to some extent, been supplemented by scientific truth and the understanding afforded by contemporary viewing – an understanding, we would suggest, of how both images and the earth itself are created within a grotto where the contrived 'mixture of realities and imagery' was manifestly visible.

Is there an unbridgeable span of time and cultural difference separating Pope's grotto and Robert Smithson's vision of a cinema cavern in 1971? Pope and his Augustan world of classical allusions and mining technology were unconcerned with the ecological implications of their environmental meddling, but like Smithson, Pope did dwell purposefully on how images come to be made with light ... in the dark. He was concerned with the movement of images in his grotto and the effects he created mixed reality and appearance in a thoroughly Platonic manner. Here is his description of his sketch for this project (Figure 5):

What I would like to do is build a cinema in a cave or an abandoned mine, and film the process of its construction. That film would be the only film shown in the cave. The projection booth would be made out of crude timbers, the screen carved out of a rock wall and painted white, the seats could be boulders. It would be a truly 'underground cinema'.

Smithson was an inveterate researcher, always scouting new sites for his planned alterations to and installations in the landscape. For the underground cinema, he visited many mines. His remarks about a descent into a copper mine in British Columbia add detail to our understanding of his cavern cinema and to its comparison with Pope's grotto.

I remember a horizontal tunnel that bored into the side of a mountain. When one was at the end of the tunnel inside the mine, and looked back at the entrance, only a pinpoint of light was visible. One shot I had in mind was to



Figure 6 WITASALO, Shirley, Canadian, b. 1949. Black and White, 1986. Oil on canvas, 167.9 x 213.5 cm. Gift of Alison and Alan Schwartz, 1997. Courtesy of the artist and the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. Photo credit: Carlo Catenazzi.

move slowly from the interior of the tunnel towards the entrance and end outside. (Smithson, in Hobbs, 1981:185)

The interior space described here is understandable as a lateral camera obscura or perhaps a pinhole camera. If Smithson had completed his film of the construction of his cinema, he might have included in it this shot towards the light. One can imagine beginning in near darkness and seeing the light fill more and more of the frame, in effect, loosening one's chains, turning around, and walking right out of Plato's cave (Plato, of course, would never have had an artist lead one out of the metaphysical shadows). He would have inverted the slow zoom in Michael Snow's famous film *Wavelength*, which was first shown in early 1967 in New York. Whether or not Smithson had this film in mind, like Snow, he seemed intent on filming his own most fundamental sense perceptions and aesthetic predilections.

Smithson (1996) goes on to say that 'in the Cayuga Rock Salt Mine under Lake Cayuga in New York State', site of a project he realized in 1968, 'I did manage to get some still shots of mirrors stuck in salt piles' (p. 185). Gary Shapiro (1995) has written that 'Smithson's entire Cayuga project can be seen as a parody of the Platonic myth of the cave as well as of Plato's conception of art as a mirror' (p. 95). These Cayuga mirrors constituted one of Smithson's signature 'non-sites', his brilliant invention for pointing towards the complex and never exactly corresponding mirror relation between nature and art, a dialogue at once profoundly abstract and irrefragably material. In this project, mirrors that were normally blind because of the mine's darkness were balanced by Smithson's installation of other mirrors on piles of salt in the Cornell gallery space. He liked the fact that mirrors produce images without human control, but of course he also intervened by placing these image machines in nature. Mirrors and non-sites are productive of what Smithson (1996) called 'refuse', that unmanageable Derridean 'remainder' between mind and matter. 'My work is impure', he wrote, 'it is clogged with matter ... it is a quiet catastrophe of mind and matter' (p. 194). Mirrors for Smithson explicitly 'reconstruct one's inability to see' (p. 130) and cannot, therefore, be false and subject to Socratic correction, as Plato intended with his parable of the cave. For Smithson, too, the artist is unable to lead us out of the shadows.¹⁷

Endings: mirror caves

Pope's placement of a mirror in his grotto returns us to the conjunction of vision and the cave that Luce Irigaray (1985) makes central to *Speculum of the Other Woman*. Some critics have suggested that the structure of her book – which begins with Irigaray reading Freud, engages in the central sections with such Western philosophers as Plotinus, Descartes, Kant and Hegel, and concludes with Irigaray's extended consideration of Plato's parable of the cave – is itself a reversed temporal vision, a mirror image. When we recall that *speculum* is both the Latin word for mirror and also the instrument used to examine the interior cavities of the female body, we can see how cave and mirror may converge in her analysis. She is explicit in her cave imagery, for in 'Plato's *Hystera*', as she entitles this section, she employs the Greek word for womb, a body cavity, a disavowed source in and of the

maternal body. She makes much of the perspective of sight, and the privileging of sight over other sensory data, especially tactility, a tendency that subtends the ocularcentrism of Western metaphysics. Irigaray offers a critique of Plato's myth, which, she argues, is based on a metaphor that converts female body into cave, a metaphorization that is itself a replication, a copy (p. 279). Mirrors are like eyes, for they break up and refract vision. Multiplication of the image substitutes for human generation and obscures the material base of maternal reproduction. Irigaray understands Plato's cave as a metaphorization of this movement, a replacement of cave by the visual, or, as she puts it: 'Thus a bony cavernous socket encloses the eye' (p. 254). For her, the eye and thus vision are always in the cave. What Irigaray would have us do is to re-enter Plato's cavern and see it not through the speculum or Pope's mirror, but rather with Mendieta's and Smithson's sense of disappearance, as imbued with the loss upon which Western metaphysics – with its imperative to exit from the cave, which in turn guarantees the illusion of representation as a truth – is built. We may want to repress or stop up the return to the cave as source, but Irigaray instructs us in a different kind of looking, to the silver behind the mirror, to a view of the cave's interior.

The contemporary painter Shirley Wiitasalo gives us an image that crystallizes this reversal. Her laconically and ironically entitled painting *Black and White* (Figure 6) from 1986 has us look out from the interior of one cave, across a space, and into two others, which in their binocularly evoke Irigaray's bony eye socket. We gaze, in other words, from the mouth of a cave into the hollow eye-sockets of a skull, as if we are inhabiting the trope of the cranium as cave, as if we are looking into a face of death that is simultaneously an allegory of vision. The painting is peopled with three figures: one looks, as we do, into the double-eyed caves; a second is positioned at the entrance to the right-hand 'socket', with body turned, as if gazing back at the first figure (a kind of mirror image); and the third is crouched in the space between the caves. Although exposed in the white glare at the centre of the painting, the third figure is not allowed the vision such light should make possible, for Wiitasalo has masked the eyes. A figure of blindness that casts a shadow that it cannot itself see is thus situated at the intersection of these gazes. By representing seeing simultaneously from multiple perspectives, *Black and White* interrogates the metaphysics of vision inherited from Plato's myth of the cave. The anthropocentricity of Wiitasalo's image insists, like Irigaray and Mendieta, on visibility's embodiment, on implicating us in the inevitable mortality of our own gaze. The painting pulls against the stark dichotomy of its title, the words moving beyond the strict formalism they would seem to connote to gather colloquial or social associations such as distinctions of judgment or racial division. The entrance to the cave in the immediate foreground is composed of intricate shades of grey, and the velvety texture of the pigment provides a sense of tactility that mitigates against the hegemony of the scopic. The liminal staging of all three figures, as well as our own position of looking, which is poised at the cavern entrance, situates this allegory of vision in a 'grey area', a metaphysics of liminality and mutability that refuses simple binaries or transcendence.¹⁸ For Smithson, too, art in the cinematic cavern serves to remind us of our *inability* to see. Or, as Wiitasalo suggests, all vision takes place in an intermediate zone, the space between sight and consciousness (looking from the outside in) and the darkness of origin (from the inside out).

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Notes

1. Whitney Davis (1996) provides a detailed reading of **art history's investments in the prehistoric**. Conkey (1995) has written about the problems with the term 'Paleolithic art'.
2. Plato's attempt in Book VII of the *Republic* to liberate the prisoners from their metaphysical servitude by leading them out of the cave questions the status and source of all imagery. The impulse to escape from the cavern establishes an almost hegemonic hierarchy of the mental (the Forms) over the visual and material (the shadows or Appearances). The cave thus operates at once as a source for, and as a reflexive interrogation of, this process of imagining in general. Of the many important readings of Plato's allegory of the cave, one of the most challenging is Kaja Silverman's in *World Spectators* (2000).
3. The search for the cave is the occasion of Katharine Clifton and Lazslo Almásy's meeting; the discovery of the delicate swimming figures painted on its subterranean desert wall prompts Katharine to reproduce these images. It is the site where Almásy leaves the injured Katharine when he goes for help in 1939 after their plane crashes, and the place to which he returns to retrieve her dead body three years later.
4. Michael Ondaatje's most recent novel, *Anil's Ghost* (2000) examines the connections between caves, representation and interiority in even greater detail. Caves – and their corollary associations of origin and interiority – are the central structuring image or metaphor in *Anil's Ghost*, which is set in Sri Lanka from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, a period of violent political upheaval. The novel's central character is a young forensic anthropologist named Anil Tissera who, like Ondaatje himself, was born in Sri Lanka but was educated and lives in the West. At the behest of the Centre of Human Rights in Geneva, she returns to her birthplace to investigate the political killings that are ravaging the country. The epigraph to the novel is a fragment of a Sri Lankan miner's song, and the book is prefaced with a memory of Anil's work with a forensic team in Guatemala, which involved both the excavation of a mass grave and the forensic examination of those buried within it. This kind of investigation, adjudicating political atrocity and/or genocide by searching for hidden burial sites, is an increasingly frequent feature of global politics; we need think only of the recent excavations in Kosovo and the political interpretations of them to realize the frequency with which this image of mass disinterment occurs. A feature of the systematic political killings of the 20th century is the concomitant impulse to erase the memory of the dead, to excise any trace of their existence. The causalities of these circumstances are rarely accorded the finality of death; they are, rather, the 'disappeared', who haunt, by their very absence, the survivors. Ondaatje's novel is densely peopled with these ghosts, family members and friends, who are buried in the memories of those who outlive them. The bits of information that are collected in the Civil Rights Movement office in Sri Lanka record snippets of reminiscence: a name, a date, the moment of disappearance. These fragments are then juxtaposed with the discovery of various mass graves, which no sooner uncovered lead to more killings. As Ondaatje says:

There had been continual emergency from 1983 onwards, racial attacks and political killings. The terrorism of the separatist guerilla groups, who were

fighting for a homeland in the north. The insurrection of the insurgents in the south, against the government. The counterterrorism of the special forces against both of them. The disposal of bodies by fire. The disposal of bodies in rivers or in the sea. The hiding and then reburial of corpses. (pp. 42–3)

The ghosts of these dead are buried but refuse to stay buried, as if the earth cannot contain the secrecy of their death.

5. Lazslo Almásy's expedition to North Africa is documented in a book still available in German (Almásy, 1997). The Cave of Swimmers does exist, though its exact position is contested by archaeologists and the site was inaccessible for political reasons when the film was made.
6. See Martin Jay (1993), who provides an important study of the discourses of visibility and the denigration of vision in French 20th-century theory and culture, and Jonathan Crary's (1990) provocative book, which examines the relationship between vision and the observer in 19th-century culture. Both Jay and Crary employ an encompassing sense of the visual that includes the discursive and both interrogate the historical hegemony of visibility. In his forthcoming book, *Philosophical Phantasms*, Gary Shapiro challenges Jay's notion of the ocularcentric.
7. For discussions of visibility and early modern anatomy, see Sawday (1995) and Hillman (1997).
8. The extraction of the earth's riches from mines and psychological investigations of the human subject take place conspicuously in caves, for example, Louis-Léopold Boilly, *Portrait of a Woman*, 1805–06. In images such as Giovanni Battista Piranesi's *Di Due Spelonche* (1764), the classical references to the ancient world and the economic priorities of mining are overlaid visually. Geological exploration and anatomical investigations converge in illustrations that frequently position corpses in natural landscapes, sometimes near caves or grottoes, as in Jan Wandelaar's, *Outermost Order of Muscles, Back View*, c. 1747. Burial scenes such as Caspar David Friedrich's *Grave of Arminius*, 1813, or the exploitation of the cave as site of religious meditation, as in Giovanni Bellini, *St Francis in the Desert*, c. 1480, also engage the reciprocal double perspective, the entrance into the earth and the trope of inspiration from an inner realm.
9. See Jonathan Crary's (1990) discussion of the camera obscura. He says that the camera obscura is 'inseparable from a certain logic of interiority; it is a figure for both the observer who is nominally a free sovereign individual and a privatized subject confined in a quasi-domestic space' (p. 39). At the same time, the camera obscura functions 'to sunder the act of seeing from the physical body of the observer, to decorporealize vision' (p. 39).
10. For a discussion of the many comparisons between Irigaray and Kristeva, see Lynne Huffer (1998: 160, n. 8). There is an obvious similarity between Irigaray's 're-vision' of Plato's cave and the Kristevan *chora*. However, Judith Butler (1993) strenuously argues for the distinction between them. She asserts that whereas Irigaray resists the identification between the *chora* and the feminine – for Irigaray the very impossibility of figuring the feminine constitutes it 'as the impossible yet necessary foundation of what can be thematized and figured' – Kristeva accepts the collapse of the *chora* into the maternal (pp. 41–3). Huffer follows Butler's lead, going so far as to script a parodic dialogue about caves between Irigaray and Kristeva. Huffer contends that Kristeva makes the *chora* a maternal space and that furthermore, it is constructed according to psychoanalytic structures of the individual psyche. According to Huffer, the political dimension of Plato's *chora* is transformed by Kristeva into the solipsistic psychic space of the individual subject, translating the movement of choral space into stasis, and producing a freedom without ethics (pp. 89–95). Both Butler and Huffer object to Kristeva's putative nostalgia for the maternal, her apparent homophobia, and her

‘imperialist’ impulses. Neither consider the ‘sensory cave’, as we do here. We argue that the sensory cave is an extension of Kristeva’s original theorizing of the *chora*, and its interest lies less in its linkage to the maternal body than to a sensorium that underpins the scopic regime. As we suggest in our juxtaposition of Kristeva with Ondaatje and Mendieta, the sensory and emotional realm to which Kristeva alludes does not preclude a strong linkage with politics and ethics, as her comments on autism in *Time and Sense* or such works as *Powers of Horror* demonstrate.

11. Spenser (1981[1596]: 3.6, 43–8). Ondaatje (2000) also uses this analogy in an erotic reminiscence in *Anil’s Ghost*: ‘He would move down the bed, kissing her brown hip, her hair, to the cave within her’ (p. 169).
12. The tension between death and consciousness that is represented by the anatomical wax models seems to figure in an important way both the process of forensic dissection in *Anil’s Ghost* and the workings of political and personal memory. The first corpses that Anil examines in Sri Lanka are recently dead, fresh enough, we’re told, still to be someone (p. 13), to have an identity, a history. Anil’s job is to determine the cause of death; she is paired with Sarath, a Sri Lankan archaeologist, whose passion is the distant past he customarily studies, but this work is literally displaced by the political forensic investigation he undertakes with Anil. In the process of moving the results of a recent dig, sixth-century findings from a sacred grave for monks near Bandarawela, Anil sees a piece of bone that is obviously more recent. Her curiosity incites Sarath to get a permit to explore the Bandarawela caves, and in the back of one of those recesses, they unearth a skeleton that was clearly ‘not prehistoric’ (p. 50), but rather, a murder victim who had been buried, exhumed and then buried again inside the sacred cave. The investigation into the identity of the skeleton, whom they name Sailor, occupies Sarath and Anil for the rest of the novel, and it is an exploration that leads them into Sri Lankan history, into their own memories, and into Sailor’s past. The clues to his identity turn out to be hidden in the bones, buried in the habits of standing or squatting that ultimately reveal his most recent occupation to have been a miner, a worker in the gem pits (pp. 179–80). He would have crouched in the four-foot high dark tunnels with his arms stretched above him, seeking in the mud and silt walls the jewels deposited there, and this posture is then imprinted on his skeleton, a permanent memory of the hazardous misery endured by those who extract gems from the earth. Cave, mine, burial and autopsy all hold the clues to his identity, and to the government’s attempt to obliterate the memory of his existence.
13. The cave is thus closely associated throughout *Anil’s Ghost* with the function and nature of recollection, for they are the repository of Sri Lanka’s own cultural and national memory. The central section of the novel narrates Anil and Sarath’s journey to visit Palipana, the blind archaeologist and epigrapher who had helped reclaim Sri Lankan archaeology from the Europeans. Palipana lives in the Grove of Ascetics, a ruined sixth-century monastery that is part forest and part cave, a sanctuary where history is embedded in and inscribed on the rock around him. The novel is obsessed with memory of other sorts as well: the characters are all burdened, at times driven mad, by their memories. Anil’s friend Leaf is diagnosed in the course of the novel with Alzheimer’s disease, an affliction that erases personality as it destroys memory, and memories of the past – Anil in Arizona, Anil’s failed marriage, her lover – intrude themselves throughout the narrative, as if past and present were superimposed, the present drawing continually on this hidden archive of past experience. Anil remembers a moment in her medical training in England when, cutting tissue away near the base of the brain, she sees a small knot of fibers composed of nerve cells (p. 134). Her professor calls it ‘*Amygdala*’, the dark part of the brain, a place that houses ‘pure emotion’, anger and fear in particular. The nature of these emotions seem complexly linked both to the body and also to memory, but whether these memories are ancestral, familial, or personal can only be speculated on by medical science.

14. To a remarkable extent, *Anil's Ghost* figures a series of connections among caves, the making of images and politics. A long passage suggests the complexity of these associations:

There are images carved into or painted on rock – a perspective of a village seen from the height of a nearby hill, a single line depicting a woman's back bent over a child – that have altered Sarath's perceptions of his world. Years ago he and Palipana entered unknown rock darkensses, lit a match and saw hints of colour. They went outside and cut branches off a rhododendron, and returned and set them on fire to illuminate the cave, smoke from the green wood acrid and filling the burning light.

These were discoveries made during the worst political times, alongside a thousand dirty little acts of race and politics, gang madness and financial gain. War having come this far like a poison into the bloodstream could not get out.

Those images in caves through the smoke and firelight. The night interrogations, the vans in daylight picking up citizens at random. That man he had seen taken away on a bicycle. Mass disappearances at Suriyakanda, reports of mass graves at Ankumbura, mass graves at Akmeemana. Half the world, it felt, was being buried, the truth hidden by fear, while the past revealed itself in the light of a burning rhododendron bush. (pp. 156–7)

Sarath's most revered teacher was Palipana, who, late in his career, retired to the seclusion of a cave region in the countryside because of a scandal surrounding the veracity of his purported discovery and translation of certain ancient national texts. In the passage just quoted, Ondaatje moves us rapidly from the wonder of an archaeological discovery in the first paragraph, through what seems to be a starkly contrasting contemporary period of political wrongdoing, and then to what becomes characteristic of the novel, a frightening and disorienting concatenation of ancient images and the recent atrocities that share in the caves' remoteness. What this section offers, midway in the novel, is a reflection on the theme of the interpenetration of past and present in versions of truth and in images. Sarath's recollection of his findings in the caves with Palipana thus forms part of his struggle with the main event of the narrative: Anil's discovery deep within a cave of the body of a casualty of the political turmoil, a murder victim disguised by being buried with much older human remains. Anil and Sarath must not only unearth who the deceased is, but more significantly, each must decide what the forensic and political 'truth' of their revelation means, to themselves and to the Sri Lankan authorities.

15. While Pope's grotto is not unique in its display of geological findings, it does, more than any other site from this time, explicitly combine the literary and philosophical interest in caves with the new science of geology. A good comparison is the artificial grotto at Hawkstone Park, Shropshire, where, in the 1790s, sandstone cliffs apparently mined for copper during Roman times were further excavated and then decorated with shells and minerals.
16. For a discussion of the connections between Pope's grotto at Twickenham and his literary caves, see Miller (1982) and Mack (1969).
17. In *Anil's Ghost* (Ondaatje, 2000), caves are sites where time is expanded through memory and where it is also potentially compressed by the physical propinquity of otherwise disparate entities, for example, of Sailor's skeleton and those of much older individuals.
18. *Anil's Ghost* (Ondaatje, 2000) is, finally, also preoccupied with this sense of vision, registered in Palipana's blindness, and even more strikingly in the ancient ritual of painting eyes on the statue of the Buddha. The eyes must be painted at dawn by an artisan whose back is to the statue, and he must thus work with his arms over his head

(like the gem miner) and look into a mirror, an acknowledgement perhaps that human vision, unlike the Buddhist gaze, is always only a reflection.

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