

Ever since Plato, in the epoch-defining seventh chapter of his *Republic*, has drawn up his Allegory of the Cave as the premier site of his essentialist, that is not to say *fundamentalist* philosophy of knowledge, the cave has become a widely reviled symbol of both ignorance and icon worship, of ideology as false consciousness and short-sighted fetishism as superstition. ■■ According to Plato, life in our joint, earthly netherworld closely resembles life in a cave in that we are denied, *by its very definition*, any direct access to the idealist realm of universal, eternal and immutable Reality – sheltering, among others, the fixed ideas of the eternally Good, True and Beautiful – through our habitual imprisonment in a culture of embodiment based on the primacy of *images* (not ideas). Plato thereby not only relegated human existence to a perennially frustrating quest to gain knowledge of an otherworldly realm of ideas that would forever evade the grasp of our understanding, but also laid the foundations for a deeply ingrained cultural sensibility of iconoclasm and iconophobia that has fuelled twenty-five centuries of intellectual distrust towards the production and consumption of imagery. Long before his harsh indictment of poetry as language's false consciousness, then, Plato's Allegory of the Cave put an even cruder ban on art per se. ■■ Was he in any way aware of art's glorious beginnings in the remote subterranean twilight worlds of Altamira and Lascaux? Hath not civilization, and culture itself, begun in the protective perimeters of nature's very own cavities? ■■ Arguably the world's greatest piece of art, Michelangelo's pictorial rendering of the opening chapters of the book of Genesis amounted to no more than a 'caving in' of the epic of Creation – what else is his Sistine Chapel but the world's most photographed and sought after cave? ■■ Caves continue to intrigue us as an uneasy crossroads of both the despicably wild and untamed in human nature – the longing for a life of Kaspar Hauser that every now and then resurfaces in all of us – and the sanctifying promise of cathartic retreat and self-analysis (not surprisingly, the metaphor of the cave figures prominently in the language of psycho-analysis): a masterful rereading of the complex semiotics of cave-life, Thomas Hirschhorn's *Caveman* installation at Barbara Gladstone (November-December 2002) was allegedly inspired by 'an article in the New York Post reporting on an Ecuadorian immigrant man recently discovered living in a cave in Manhattan. The archetypal birthplace of human civilization (...) the cave signifies political resistance, a place where alternative world views and political systems, such as the caveman's existential equation "1 Man = 1 Man," may germinate.' ■■ In an ironic twist of historical fate that doubtlessly would have baffled Plato the most, the cave has become an altogether different place – an asylum of the visual, or a place where the culture of the image can be *feted* – and preserved for an afterlife of eternity that initially would only have been granted the realm of ideas of which the realm of the image was nothing but a feebly cast shadow. ■■ Corbis, the world's single biggest image database, containing over some 25 million images – most of which come from the 1995 purchase of the legendary Bettmann archive – that most of us would believe to be on the UNESCO list of world heritage, is currently owned by Bill Gates (who, through the groundbreaking Windows technology of his Microsoft empire, famously taught us think technology *visually* in the first place). Corbis' high-security underground Film Preservation Facility is housed in a cave in an unspecified western Pennsylvania location; with environmental conditions designed to preserve the collection for thousands of years, the new facility operates at minus 4 degrees F (minus 20 degrees C) and 35% RH. Some of the newsreels that appeared shortly after Corbis' sub-zero facility was first introduced to the general public were unequivocal in their assessment of the Cave's dramatic revaluation in this decidedly post-Platonic age of corporate image control: 'Cool Storage: Preserving Art in Underground Vault' ■■ 'Famous Photos Frozen Forever' ■■ 'World's Photo Album Goes Underground' ■■ 'A Century's Photo History Destined for Life in a Mine' ■■ 'Burying the Past'. Dieter Roelstraete, 2003