How Are We to Imagine Them?: Shamanism, Structuralism and The Zoomorphic Series in Dorset Carving

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Abstract: Dorset people, particularly the Late Dorset, c. AD 700–1300, have produced an art of significant quality, potency, and power. Dorset art constitutes one of the premiere museum collections in Canada, in any mode, genre or form. This paper examines the widely accepted view of Dorset carving as inextricably bound with shamanistic practice. Focusing on "naturalistic miniatures," works of zoomorphic realism, it suggests these works may have been vernacular objects, common and part of everyday life, giving expression to the more mundane experiences of people in the past. This makes them no less emblematic of Dorset social mores, habits, customs, and relations.

Keywords: Dorset, archaeological art, shamanism, naturalism, realism

Résumé : Les populations dorsétiennes, et en particulier les Dorsétiens tardifs, entre 700 et 1300 apr. J.-C., ont produit un art significatif au plan de la qualité, du pouvoir et de la puissance. L'art dorsétien constitue une des principales collections muséologiques au Canada, dans tous les genres, formes ou modes. Cet article examine l'opinion largement acceptée qui veut que l'art dorsétien soit inextricablement lié aux pratiques chamaniques. En s'intéressant particulièrement aux « miniatures naturalistes », des objets au zoomorphisme réaliste, l'article suggère que ces artefacts pourraient avoir été des objets vernaculaires, courants et intégrés à la vie quotidienne, ce qui exprimerait une dimension plus terre-à-terre de l'expérience des populations passées. Cela n'enlève rien à leur caractère emblématique des moeurs, habitudes, coutumes et relations sociales des Dorsétiens.

Mots-clés : Dorsétiens, art archéologique, chamanisme, naturalisme, réalisme

Silent Echoes of Culture

More than 40 years have passed since William E. Taylor and George Swinton's twinned, seminal articles on Dorset carving, published in *The Beaver* in 1967. Taylor and Swinton engaged in a lively debate for the period of a year before committing their thoughts, impressions and analyses of Dorset art objects to paper. Their combined program, under the shared title "Prehistoric Dorset Art," continues to form the basis of our current understanding of the tradition. A painter and professor of art at the University of Manitoba, Swinton adopted an artist and art historian's perspective, and studied the artifacts "as art, as experience, as expression" (Taylor 1967:32). In championing "The Magico-Religious Basis" of Dorset art, Swinton (1967:39) stated quite clearly: "I am reasonably convinced that most, if not all, Dorset art is not only magical, but probably highly specialized (and 'professional') shaman's art." He further developed his thesis that only a highly skilled artisanal class of "shaman-artists," or "artist-shamans"—art workers well-versed in the forms and contents of Dorset traditions, and "who applied them in a carefully handed down traditional manner"—could have been responsible for the production of a corpus of such coherency, consistency, "intensity and power" (1967:39). Speaking for Taylor as well, Swinton wrote:

> we should also like to suggest that the highly developed and exquisitely shaped objects are not the work of occasional carvers, far less mere whittlings, but the carefully planned and considered work of specialists (either the shamans or their helpers) ... It is by no means unreasonable to conceive of a Dorset artist-shaman (or shaman-artist) as the main producer of such art. [1967:39]

Taylor, then Director of the Human History Branch at the Canadian National Museum, played a crucial role in defining the concept of a Dorset culture in Canada (1959; 1962; 1965; 1968). In "Silent Echoes of Culture,"

his contribution to the dialogue, he adopted a more rational, quantitative approach, as his training and experience would suggest. Taylor began by reviewing current understanding of the timelines and trajectories of Palaeo-Eskimo occupations in Arctic North America, the first peoples to live in northern Canada, Labrador and Greenland. They appear in the archaeological record around 4000 BP, having moved eastward almost certainly from the Bering Sea region of Alaska, and before this Siberia. They expressed a range of regional cultural variants of the Arctic Small Tool tradition (ASTt)—the Denbigh Flint Complex of coastal Alaska, the Independence I and II peoples of High Arctic Canada and Greenland, the Saqqaq occupation of West Greenland, the Pre-Dorset of central and eastern Arctic Canada, and the Groswater Dorset of Labrador. Around 1000-500 BC the occupational record in Arctic Canada thins, and a new archaeological tradition—that of the Dorset—appears to emerge. It is generally believed that the Dorset developed *in situ* in the Canadian Arctic from Pre-Dorset traditions, possibly with elements of Alaskan cultures moving in from the west. These people had small stone lamps to burn sea mammal oil, few if any dogs, no drill or bow and arrow, and probably hauled small sleds across the frozen sea ice by hand. Generally accepted dates for the Dorset occupation in Canada are BC 800-AD 1000/1500. The Dorset can be seen as a successful adaptation that spanned some two thousand years in Arctic Canada, and regional variations of the culture have been identified. By means of comparison, European settler contact with these territories appears decidedly thin, and even the Thule Inuit are relative newcomers.

Taylor proceeded to quantify the "raw data" he and Swinton had under consideration: 56 objects from the National Museum of Canada, 33 on loan from the Oblate (now Eskimo) Museum in Churchill, Manitoba, a number of photographs from archaeologists Harp, Maxwell and Meldgaard, as well as illustrations from the literature (Collins, Holtved, Mathiasson)—for a total of 125 objects, 89 in hand. Taylor tended to be less gregarious, more balanced and conservative, yet no less perceptive in his interpretations. Although the two wrote separate pieces, so that, as Swinton (1967:32) reports, "my ethnological and archaeological speculations would not harm Taylor's professional reputation," still they came to similar if not convergent (non-coincidentally parallel) conclusions on a number of important matters. As Taylor explains: "Although I cannot document it, I expect they, and most if not all Dorset art, were concerned with supernatural matters—with shamanism, burial practices, sympathetic magic" (1967:44).

Taylor went on to reaffirm this fundamental, comprehensive conclusion on a number of occasions (1971, 1972, 1975). Commenting, for example, on the meaning and function of a singular collection of life-size human masks and mask fragments made of wood and excavated at Button Point on Bylot Island by Father Guy Mary-Rousselière, he reasoned: "Nor can anyone yet say much about the place of these masks in Dorset life. Nevertheless, I think they, and all Dorset art, are a religious art relating to shamanism and probably to burial art" (1971:35).

With these conclusions Swinton and Taylor gave depth, meaning, institutional weight, and interpretive authority to a brief argument put forward by the Danish archaeologist Jørgen Meldgaard in his short, pioneering monograph on the subject, *Eskimo Sculpture* (1960). Taylor (1967:42) called this "an attractive book," and indeed it is. Meldgaard had excavated in the Igloolik district at Alarnerk (Melville Peninsula) and Kapuivik (Jens Munk Island) beginning in 1954 and continuing in 1957 and 1965. In Igloolik he was able as at few sites prior to study Dorset culture in intact archaeological contexts. This work, though never published in full, has long circulated in short papers and personal communication, and has come to serve as a foundational text in the field. In the scant three pages of text Meldgaard devoted to Dorset carving, he recognized senses of humour, "creative joy," and entertainment in the work. It is his conclusion, however, regarding animal carvings, that "The objects have a definite function in which magic is involved" (1960:26), that has been elaborated, codified, even canonized by downstream interpreters.

This has, in fact, remained the dominant perspective in commentaries on Dorset carving ever since. Elmer Harp (1969/70:122), for instance, at Port au Choix in northwestern Newfoundland, was also able to study Dorset carving in intact archaeological contexts, including grave associations, and concluded after a nuanced discussion: "we can also see that the Newfoundland art consists almost exclusively of amulets which relate to the practice of hunting magic." The art historian Jean Blodgett (1979:181), considering "face clusters" in Dorset carving, found multiple factors to "suggest that these items, like so much—if not all—of Dorset culture art, were of a magico-religious nature." In constructing a context for the interpretation of an early Pre-Dorset maskette from Truelove Lowlands, Devon Island, Helmer (1986:180) reviewed the literature and concluded: "It is generally conceded that Dorset art pieces are imbued with shamanistic themes." For their part, LeMoine, Helmer and Hanna (1995:39) unequivocally state: "We will demonstrate that Dorset art is unambiguously part of a shamanistic art tradition,

with both *shamanic* and *shamanistic* elements...and with striking similarities to ethnographic Inuit shamanism."[1] As Robert McGhee (1975:136) summarizes conventional knowledge: "Most commentators on Dorset art have interpreted it as an art which is primarily concerned with magical concepts and shamanistic practices." In another formulation, McGhee noted that, "most scholars interpret Dorset art objects as intimately connected to shamanistic religious practices similar to those described by anthropologists for many people around the northern world" (1981:25). As Patricia D. Sutherland (2001:135) observes, "an association between Palaeo-Eskimo art and shamanic thought has long been recognized." This widely shared, synoptic conclusion has been capably summarized (even as it is characteristically qualified) by McGhee:

> Although any attempt to determine the function of a prehistoric art must be highly speculative, archaeologists and art historians generally agree that the art of the Dorset people was not primarily decorative, but was intimately involved with magic, and in particular, with the magical rituals of shamans. [1980:22]

Indeed, no reasonably coherent, generally accepted, alternative view has been put forward. I would like to call this the "shamanistic principle" with respect to Dorset carving. It is an accepted wisdom that has been ruminated, turned over, diversified but inevitably returned to as the mainline of our understanding of an accomplished, subtle, radically imaginative art. This is an art that amounts to a tradition—perhaps even a series of related traditions—that extends across millions of square kilometres and some 4000 years.[2] This paper suggests that such an interpretive paradigm—in which Dorset art is understood with respect to shamanistic *religious* practices, shamanic thought, and the magical rituals of shamans—may well work to reduce, simplify and overdetermine, what is in fact a marvelously complex field. As I argue here, this way of thinking about Dorset art, religion and culture provides an instructive case of a structuralist way of thinking. Working from Alison Assiter's (1984) generally accepted definition of "structuralism" as commonly deployed in the social sciences, the shamanistic principle is a means of looking at elements of a diverse ensemble primarily as they relate to an (abstract) whole; of trying to tease out an underlying, coherent system (the "true" meaning of the artifacts) from the visible surface of disparate things; of a search for unities, commonalities, and morphological "laws" (of symmetries and synchronies) at the expense of atomization, heterogeneity, and discrete and disjunctive elements (of diachronies and difference).

Given the skill and accomplishment these carvers clearly demonstrate, and given the range and variety of Dorset art objects that have now been uncovered, it is possible to say that these art workers were capable of innovation, improvisation and inspiration within a legacy of inherited and familiar forms. To consider Dorset art not so much as a unitary and singular corpus, but one that can be meaningfully approached through lenses of diversity and difference, is part of the cultural work of this paper.

Dorset Carving: An Art in "Perfect Balance"?

Artists, archaeologists and art historians have come to a consensus that Dorset people, and particularly the Late Dorset, c. AD 700–1300, have produced an art of significant quality, potency and power (see Maxwell 1984:366, Hessel 1998:14). As Helmer (1986:179) explains, "Dorset art has long been acknowledged as one of the great artistic traditions of the New World." For Taylor (1971:27), Dorset carvings "are by far the most lucid and living objects to come into the warming hands of an archaeologist groping through the tundra's millennia." Swinton extols "the great devotion, skill and knowledge with which these carvings have been produced," and concludes that, "in Dorset art, content and form appear in perfect balance: the significance of context is convincingly expressed through very dynamic form" (1967:45, 37). This would appear to be his highest evaluative criteria.

Dorset art objects may constitute the premiere Canadian museum collection in any mode, genre, or form. These are priceless, irreplaceable artifacts that deserve to be better known, taught, appreciated and understood. They provide a source of vitality and meaning, a keen and mysterious articulation of profound philosophical questions, a direct and immediate response to materials, as to life. They remind us that art-making has a long history in this province, as they enrich the history of local and global forms. In their own day, as in ours these mobiliary representations in three dimensions would have signified beyond their maker, and may have been passed between peoples and across generations. Whatever their original functions and whomever made them, these small, portable carvings in bone, antler, ivory, wood, tooth and (more rarely) stone carry on a "secular afterlife" in our institutions, our cultural histories, and in our historical imaginations (Pogue Harrison 2003). Given their importance to the art-making discourse in this country and others, it is a fair claim that the interpretation of Dorset art suffers from a lack of viewpoints, a dearth of discourse. These pieces deserve a wider arena of interpretation and

critique, exposure extending well beyond contemporary archaeological analysis.

The Dorset carvers are with us no longer, of course, and we are unable to broach their point of view except at a distance and by historical imagination, archaeological interpretation, and ethnographic analogy. As Robert Bringhurst (1999) reminds us, however, when the individual artist disappears, generalizations and stereotypes have a way of coming to replace the thinking, creative subject. Dorset art has not in the end been made by linguistic groups, tribes, or even archaeological culture occupations. These artifacts have been carved by individual, active members of a society with as rich a history and as genuine a complexity as any European tradition (McGhee 1996). Antler, ivory and bone provide the Dorset with the basis of a material culture that is different from southern contexts. These materials offer their own characteristics, and serve in some senses as sculptural "preforms"—pre-existent shapes to which the final sculptural subject matter must be integrated, or at least cohere. And yet the tools the artists will have used to carve the hard organic material, and the "visual grammar," the images and themes she has chosen to represent, have doubtless been inherited as part of an "ecosystem" of Dorset ideas, perceptions, and ways of thinking that can be said to constitute Dorset culture (Bringhurst 1999:17). Such at least is the context for interpretation put forward here, which is how we tend to read the art today—to find form in meaning and meaning in form, in bringing together art and society to narrate a social history of the Dorset.[3]

Given the stylistic continuities inherent in much (though not all) of this work, it seems clear that these objects are expressive of narrative and philosophical traditions at which we can only "guess" (McGhee 1996:170). Representations of humans and bears predominate, though seal, walrus, caribou, raptors and an assortment of other animals and subjects are also present. The carvings seem to indicate a preoccupation with animals, in both naturalistic (realistic, quotidian) and abstracted (symbolic) shapes, coupled to a sense that humans are a vital though not all-powerful element of the living world. There are also mixed, hybrid, therianthropic (human-animal composite) creatures, liminal beings which cross recognizable species barriers, and the normative dimensions of earth, sea and sky. It is not at all clear that these extra-empirical creatures were to be worshipped, even as they may allude to spirits that live on land or in animals. Perhaps human lives were bound up with these beings as necessary helpers and hindrances, dangerous allies and capricious, even malevolent forces. Perhaps their powers were to be feared, respected, sought, evaded, productively or vengefully deployed, but never trusted.

For the purposes of this discussion, Dorset carvings can be said to address shared forms of cultural expression across a wide range of geographies and time-depths. This is a grouping of objects that coheres at a higher level of structural units, with strong internal elements of allusion, and complex echoing effects among a range of pieces or types. It is a set of objects in restless dialogue with one another, what Edward Said (1993) might call a "contrapuntal ensemble." Insofar as these objects articulate significantly shared cultural attitudes and compose patterns integral to the culture's imaginative expression, so too do they condition our own modes of historical imagining. The interpretive structures that result should themselves be seen as historicizing frameworks: not "essentializations of the formation of cultural identity," but models or modes of organizing the past (Parkinson Zamora 1997: xii). What these twinned archives, which of course can never quite converge—the artifacts themselves, thousands of years old; and the record of their analysis, barely fifty in—can be made to say of Arctic prehistory, and of the primarily Western ways of figuring that history, provide much thick description of the Arctic historical imagination.

Dorset carved objects are lightweight and portable, as befitting a mobile, seasonally sedentary, hunting culture. Meldgaard (1960:17) observes that these pieces "are meant to be handled and turned over; rarely do they have a base, and usually there is no 'front,' no viewing angle. That is why it is sometimes difficult to do justice to them in photographs; delicious details are lost because the object cannot be seen from all angles." Dorset carving, says Swinton (1967:32), is a "small, almost intimate" art "which exudes intensity and power (*not* monumentality!) despite its remarkable subtlety and delicacy." Maxwell (1985:160) observes that these "three-dimensional carvings may be naturalistic, with minute detail, or highly stylized in an impressionistic manner." The emphasis in each case is on detail in the round; on the necessities of handling the object for meaningful interpretation; and on subtleties in size and scale that photographs may distort.

Dorset carvings have no armature or assembly, and no need to fix or fire a piece. They anticipate neither a museum podium nor a foreign audience. There is simply the subtractive process of carving, a cutting away to reveal contained form. Some may have been made to be "performed" in context with dancing, storytelling, theatre, music and mime—in concert with the time-bound and embodied verbal and visual arts. Shorn of such animating contexts, however, still they remain potent. Holding one object, "an antler tine, well-polished by the wear of human hands, with at least 60 carved human faces reflecting both portraiture and mystical fantasy," Maxwell

(1985:230) writes: "I must confess that when I held this in my hand I imagined I could feel a slight surge of power."

For Swinton, such close contact, some concrete, direct exposure to the physical objects themselves, is the kernel of interpretive insight. Swinton's theory of sculptural reception (1978:76-7) posits "the aesthetic experience derived from immediate, that is, sensuous rather than rational experience," and calls for aesthetic analysis "supported ... most of all, by the intimate, tactile presence of the works" themselves.

> I wish to emphasize the experience and the sense components of aesthetics which far surpass all others in importance and accent and which gives aesthetics its humanistic content. This content, since it is simultaneously universal yet highly individualistic, is capable of transcending most cultural or ethnic boundaries. [1999:142]

There are two principal ways to approach this carving today: in museum collections in Canada, England, Denmark, the United States, Greenland and elsewhere; and through the work of interpreters who have commented upon the art. This paper resolves from an examination of Dorset carved objects at the Canadian Museum of Civilization (CMC), the Eskimo Museum in Churchill, Manitoba, The Rooms Provincial Museum in St. John's, Newfoundland, and, briefly, in Harp's collections held at Memorial University. It is also informed by study in Inuit collections at the Museum of Natural History, New York, the CMC, the McMichael Gallery, The Rooms and elsewhere; consideration of Okvik and Old Bering Sea carvings at the Princeton University Art Museum and the Smithsonian Institution; and by time in the field at Skraeling Island, Bache Peninsula, the Igloolik region, Port au Choix, Truelove Lowlands, Point Barrow AK, and elsewhere. With regard to Dorset carvings, many of these are canonical pieces that have been carefully photographed and anthologized. These works found, institute and organize our knowledge of Dorset art and culture.

As philosopher and archaeologist R.G. Collingwood observed: "no archaeological problem should be studied without studying...the history of historical thought about it" (Trigger 2006:1). In other words, we cannot consider Dorset carving today without taking up the mediating object of prior explications. The work of a group of exemplary interpreters, mainly disciplinary archaeologists, but also art historians—Meldgaard, Swinton, Taylor, Maxwell, McGhee, Sutherland, Blodgett, and others—forms the primary context for this paper, which is concerned with the ways in which the minds and thought of now anonymous Dorset artisans linger still in their works and what this might mean to Canadian history, Arctic anthropology and archaeology, and to concepts of indigeneity and "aboriginal art" in Canada and abroad.

The present analysis having briefly sketched the history of Dorset reception, will discuss general problems in art historical criticism, and take up well-established strands in the interpretation of Dorset carving. It then moves to identify a specific sub-class of Dorset art objects, what McGhee (1996) and others have identified as "naturalistic miniatures," or works of "zoomorphic realism," before offering possible alternative interpretations of this specific kind or type of Dorset carving. The article works from a series of academic discourses in art history, anthropology, archaeology, philosophy, cultural theory and aesthetics, and pursues the interpretive tradition of Dorset art in a limited number of directions, with a focus on the widely accepted view of Dorset carving as inextricably bound with shamanistic practice, the "shamanistic principle," with respect to Dorset art.

By focusing on the articulation and criticism of one strand or series in Dorset carving, this study aims to address a small part of the whole. It is not intended to be all-inclusive, nor exhaustive; no overarching theory that would account for all possibilities is put forward. In brief, this article takes up Dorset naturalistic pieces as possibly quotidian or "vernacular" objects, elements of a material culture that might bear non-shamanic signification. In so doing, this essay follows Sutherland (1997, 2001) in suggesting a more variegated interpretation of Dorset artifacts is today not only possible, but also useful and necessary. Even as we think *through* the interpretations of those who have made our own language and vision possible, we need to take a slant view of the corpus, to consider its contradictions and occlusions, those marginal works perhaps not fully accounted for. One aims to be attached and respectful, but also distanced and critical, in seeking to trouble the foundations of the interpretive tradition and to disturb its structures. The distances in time and space articulated by the extant corpus of Dorset carving are vast. By which assumptions, and through which occlusions, do we render coherent such a disparate field?

Archaeological Art and Interpretation: A Note on Method

Swinton (1967:35) identified Dorset carving as an "archaeological art," by which he meant an art without living practitioners, but also a non-Western art, one whose core imaginary and social significations do not extend in an unbroken line to Western languages, institutions and cultural practices. In any contemporary effort to interpret

objects produced by Dorset artisans, "our essential source of factual information is archaeology" (Blodgett 1979a:161). It is clear we owe disciplinary archaeologists a great debt for the excavation, curation, and the vital animating contexts for the interpretation of Dorset carving. Perhaps for this reason, it seems troubling to see Taylor's own analysis reveal the limits of a rational, quantitative, empirical approach when confronted with the task of uncovering the meaning and values of Dorset carving. In noting parallels between Dorset representation and that of the Bering Sea cultures Okvik and Ipiutak (1967:42), we can almost overhear him sigh: "sadly, it is easier to note these parallels than to comprehend their archaeological significance. Yet, the question taunts one, perhaps most of all in the art objects."[4] For Taylor (1967:42), "in short, a lack of pertinent data chases us up a tree. The discomforts of such a perch provoke speculation. Mine follows."

It is only from this uncomfortable perch, which is precarious precisely because it is speculative, that Taylor may proceed to consider the function and meaning of the art; to extend himself to the supernatural hypothesis, which he is, of course, unable to document; and to take up, for example, the wooden objects, masks and "little 'killed' figures of animals and people" unearthed by erosion and by Mary-Rousselière on Bylot Island. I read this as a crucial disciplinary moment, one that underlies and irrigates the shamanistic principle as interpretive paradigm. We might notice here the *petite mort* of an epistemological crisis, which leads to a moment of necessary methodological transition in Taylor's work. As art historian Whitney Davis (1994) explains, it is a move from the "positive" sciences (rational, reasoned, objective, quantitative, located in the past, and on solid ground—call this *a history of Dorset art*), into informed speculation and interpretation (subjective, imaginative, located in the present, discovered through close, sustained observation of particular works, and constituted in language: *Dorset art history*).

As Shanks and Hodder (1995:4) have observed, "to move beyond controlled observation is to speculate and to invite bias and subjectivity, contamination of the past by the present." This is Taylor's fear, the contamination of his analysis by subjectivity. It is also a condition that his writing makes clear is inevitable in the interpretation of *any* archeological art. For Davis (1994:153-55), our understanding of these archaeological objects of interest cannot be severed from our own subjectivities, in that the objective loss of the Dorset peoples becomes subjective in our analysis and interpretation. This condition constitutes a basic and enabling condition of any art history, which endeavours to make prior objects "speak in," or become legible to, our own history, to bring the "objective subject" (the artifact, the relic) into contemporary language and subjectivity as a "subjective object" (art historical discourse, interpretation). Our interest in these objects is neither neutral nor innocent, as Davis (1994) makes clear, but involves a subtle hermeneutical and psychological interplay; even as we seek to restore these objects to their own histories, we are made aware that they perpetually depart from our own.[5] As art historian Moshe Barasch (1985:98) explains, such is, in fact, the never-ending project both of art history and archaeology, as J. J. Winckelmann, symbolic founder of both disciplines, demonstrated in *The History of Ancient Art* (1764).

On a number of other occasions in his work, Taylor was clear to underscore "the limitations on our knowledge of Dorset art and religion," that much of research in these areas is "indeed speculative" (1972:480), and is "on rather thin ice" (1967:38). These relations, of art to religion to history to the formation of culture, coupled to the problem of transforming the "sign" of the world (the archaeological site) into a sign that *resembles* this world (archaeological discourse), are among the more general questions with respect to the social and imaginary institutions of humankind. The recalcitrance of these problems to a positive, comprehensive knowledge is another theme echoed within the interpretive tradition. In examining a Dorset assemblage, Taylor (1962:59) observes "a frustrating host of implements, the functions of which cannot be deduced." For Blodgett (1979a:161), "face multiples" in Dorset carving "had some particular significance for the Dorsets. What that significance was, we can only hypothesize." In Maxwell's experience (1985:127), "there is the frustrating feeling of being almost but not quite capable of understanding the totality of the cultural material. Every artifact is precisely made, a point that increases our embarrassment in being unable to determine function." As Sutherland (2001:136) reasons, "one must acknowledge that archaeological evidence is clearly inadequate as a means of reconstructing the totality of a past belief system." What Swinton (1978:77) calls "the humanistic experience of immediacy and sense experience" provoked by Dorset material culture proves powerfully resistant to ratiocination.

Part of the problem is that sculpture is often said to be the most difficult and least understood of the arts (Moore 2002), in that it involves complex perceptions in three dimensions. We are generally unversed in the spatial judgments required to assess a work's "controlled progress of forms," juxtaposition of axes and spatial displacements—those effects that help "create forms of visual strength as well as structural power" (Mills 1989). The essence of the experience of sculpture is to move around the work, or to move the work in hand, in which case

weight, touch, and texture play a role; these kinaesthetic effects are difficult to account for. The medium in which we most often encounter Dorset carving, two-dimensional representations in books, is essentially inadequate to the task. Another part of the problem lies in the category *religion*, as Steven Mithen explains:

> The pervasiveness and peculiarity of religious ideas within human societies offer immense challenges to archaeologists of all persuasions. We cannot fail to recognize that any adequate understanding of past societies must encompass reference to their religious ideologies. Equally we must accept the immense difficulties, which perhaps cannot be overcome, of reconstructing those ideologies. [2001:108]

It is merely a beginning to say that religion and art are difficult for social scientists to define; these are immensely complicated phenomena. The interpretation of Dorset art has most often linked these two realms, however, with the art seen as expressing a religious point of view. Like the sacred objects of other religious traditions, Dorset sculptures become objects suitable for secular interpretation (McGhee 1996).

Taylor, confronted as we all are by an inalienable "lack of pertinent data," when it comes to Dorset carving—to problems "which perhaps cannot be overcome"—was given to reflect upon the value, to his own critical practice, of "the panache and provocative questioning of an art colleague," one George Swinton:

> That association with an artist and art historian along with other experience convince me that prehistoric art and religion are too complex and too enlightening a field of study to be left to prehistorians—even ones more experienced in art. May I propose that such matters require, for adequate analyses, practising artists, students of the ethnology of primitive religions, psychologists and psychiatrists specialized in art. [Taylor 1975:474]

It seems clear that the "ratio-logico" ordering of any archaeological site is best left in the hands of disciplinary archaeologists. The interpretation of lithic assemblages is different in *kind* to the interpretation of archaeological art, in part because "functional attributes of archaeological artifacts are more easily recognized than are symbolic attributes" (McGhee 1977:141). Following Taylor, so too is it reasonably clear that the study of Dorset art is too complex, important, and enlightening "a field of study to be left to prehistorians" (1975: 474). Taylor's is a still timely call for collaborative work in the interpretation of archaeological art—a field that with respect to Dorset carving remains largely in the hands of disciplinary specialists. As Bruce Trigger (2003) suggests, such disciplinary boundaries have long contributed to stereotypes of Native Americans in the social sciences, and to a lack of understanding of Indian and Inuit art. There is something curious in this, in the way that the interpretation of Mayan art, for example, has been left largely to anthropologists (White 2003:61), as if different criteria, standards and taxonomies were made to apply. In this way, questions of function and cultural-historical significance have come to override more general humanistic and aesthetic concerns in our appreciation of archaeological and Aboriginal art.

Diversity and Difference in an Expanded Archive

It remains a foundational principle in Dorset archaeology that the culture displays a startling consistency, shifting slowly but without major innovation over long periods and across vast distances, at least in those traces archaeologically visible to us. As Maxwell notes, "anthropological terms such as 'tightly constrained behavior' and 'compulsive standardization' have been applied to Dorset people" (1985:127). They had no bow and arrow or bow-drill, which earlier Arctic people possessed; and in this Maxwell (1985:128) and McGhee (1996:144) discern "ideational reasons" or "constraints," not accidents of cultural diffusion and loss, but rather magico-religious stricture imposed uniformly across a widespread culture.[6] The classic formulation of this argument is put forward by Meldgaard:

> When working in the Igloolik area the archaeologist cannot help developing into an evolutionist. Throughout the 1,200 years of the pre-Dorset, or Sarqaq, and through the following 2,000 years of the Dorset people the course of evolution appears so logical and consistent that given only a few introductory steps in a typological series it seems possible to foretell, except when climate or neighbors interfere, the subsequent form and perhaps even the end-product. [1962:92]

This principle of uniformity, continuity, and conservatism has been extended with great consistency to the interpretation of Dorset carving. For Taylor (1967:10), "geographic continuity or cultural consistency over the vast area involved is reflected in the occurrence of closely similar specimens at places hundreds of miles apart." In Swinton's view: "I am convinced that the art expressions of the earlier cultures indicates a greater coherence than do the various tools and weapons industries" (1967:7). Harp (1974-75:44) speaks of "the inherent conservatism" of Dorset culture, and notes that in "southeastern Hudson

Bay the unchanging Dorset way of life seems unadaptive." For LeMoine, Helmer and Hanna (1995:40): "Indeed, Late Dorset art, wherever it is found, appears to exhibit an exceptionally high degree of uniformity in design, subject, and execution." Schledermann (1990:332) takes this conservatism as evidence of extensive travel and trade: "The extraordinary 'sameness' of the Late Dorset material culture, including carvings, harpoon heads and lithic artifacts could be maintained only through fairly rapid, continuing and long-range diffusion and contact."[7]

Much *has* changed in the last 40 years, however. Whereas Swinton and Taylor had 125 objects at their disposal, Diane Lyons (1982) was able to access and categorize 585 Dorset art objects, while Paul Taçon (1983) examined 865 Dorset carvings. In a more recent study (Sutherland 1997:289), "approximately 800 carvings and decorated objects in the Palaeo-Eskimo collections of the Canadian Museum of Civilization" were examined. Still later, Sutherland (2001:137) reports "close to one thousand such carvings" in museum collections. As more becomes known of the Dorset, as more sites are excavated and more pieces which we identify as "art" have been recovered, Dorset carving has proven to be less constrained by widespread cultural codes, less uniform and homogeneous, than has previously been accepted.

With regard to the timing of the production of these 40 pieces, Taylor (1967:40) could only say that "temporal variation is another sizable question." It is now well understood that the Late Dorset period was responsible for a significant proportion of Dorset carving. Meldgaard (1960:24) identified this increase in the frequency and variability in Late Dorset art production, while McGhee (1987:7) observes that, "around 1000 A.D., there was a great explosion of artistic production." Taçon was able to quantify this phenomenon: some 512 of 865 specimens, or 59 per cent of the pieces he examined, were made by Late Dorset people. Sutherland (2001:137) identifies "the 'Late Dorset' period, in the centuries between approximately AD 700 and 1300...which saw a major florescence in Palaeo-Eskimo carvings in museum collections."

There may be a number of factors at work in this observed peak in production, such as the later date making preservation more likely, the favourable conditions of preservation, as the Arctic entered a period of climatic cooling, the possible convergence of Late Dorset habitations with sites of archaeological fieldwork in Foxe Basin and Hudson Strait, and so on. In any case, as Sutherland (1997) has demonstrated, the temporal variability in Dorset art exhibits no clear linear development, even as it tends toward a greater diversity. Certain forms disappear as others emerge, and naturalistic carvings occur in the same assemblages as heavily abstracted forms. Although further understanding "must await more precise control of the temporal positions of most Dorset cultural assemblages" (Sutherland 1997:291), it is now generally understood that Dorset art is a much more differentiated phenomenon, both temporally and spatially, than Swinton and Taylor had been aware.

This diversity in cultural production in the Arctic at large had in fact already been noted by Meldgaard (1960:11): "A striking feature of Eskimo culture when studied as a whole is the quite amazing variety of artistic expression." Charles A. Martijn (1964:546) also made this fundamental point quite early in the interpretive tradition, that "Eskimo art, extending back over thousands of years, has never been stylistically homogeneous entity. ... Societies do not remain static." With Meldgaard's "quite amazing variety" in mind, we return to the "shamanistic principle." This is a well-established, well documented mainline in Dorset archaeology. It is put forward by Meldgaard, supported by Taylor, Swinton, and Maxwell, and circulated in informed and convincing commentaries by McGhee, Sutherland, Blodgett, Helmer, Harp, Holtved, Larsen, LeMoine, Taçon, Thomson, Jordan and others. The thesis has been developed in studies of Dorset petroglyphs (Saladin d'Anglure 1962; Plumet 1997; Arsenault et al. 1998), and Inuit art (Hessel 1998; Blodgett 1979b).

The purpose of this paper is not to take a naïvely contrarian position, to argue, for example, that the majority of Dorset artworks do *not* reflect a "magico-spiritual" world view, or that they might *not* have been used as personal (shamanistic) amulets, or in shamanic (healing, divinatory) ritual. As Jordan summarizes (1979/80:415), Dorset "objects generally attributed to such activities" include "sucking tubes," staked or "killed" figures, "shaman's teeth," carved bears with belly slits and ochre traces, numerous pieces with joint "X" markings and incised "skeletal" patterns, and therianthropic figures. There is no quarrel with this here. My question, rather, is to ask if there are any possible exceptions to what is only apparently a rule? And if so, what do they come to teach us? How are we to imagine them?

As mentioned, my focus is on one particular variety of Dorset expression, the many extant examples of small, carved animal representations, often of walrus ivory, but also antler and bear tooth, *without* incised line adornment (see Meldgaard 1960: plate 24; Harp 1969/70:113, Fig. 3; Rowley 1971/72:116; Schledermann 1990: Plate 44.d; McGhee 1996: ill. 165, 169; McGhee 1985, esp. Figs. 1, 3, 10; Sutherland 1997:290, Fig. 4). These figures are well shaped, skillfully carved, anatomically correct, and often astonishingly small: one-half inch for a muskoxen, three-quarters of an inch for a small owl and a bear head. As Taylor observes, "The figures rarely exceed two inches in

length; some are no more than a half-inch long" (1962:59). McGhee (1996: 159) identifies this type of Dorset sculpture as "naturalistic miniatures: tiny seals or walrus or bears, which, if they could be expanded perhaps fifty or a hundred times, would be almost perfect replicas of the particular animals portrayed." Meldgaard's observation (1960:26), that these small figures contain "no unnecessary details, and no ornamental lines," is important.[8] For Maxwell (1985:127), these "tiny ivory animals are so naturalistic and perfectly proportioned that they can appear monumental when photographically enlarged." Extant pieces include small if realistic bowhead whales, beluga whales (Fig. 1), a plump ptarmigan, a small muskoxen (Fig. 2), small seals, walrus, and bears. A sculpin (rock cod, somewhat stylized) is present, as are weasels (Fig. 3), geese, ducks, owls (Fig. 4), falcons, caribou, and an artic hare. There is even a common periwinkle shell (a whelk, Fig. 5) a bird's egg (Fig. 6), what looks like a lobster, and a series of sitting bears from Shuldham Island, Labrador (Fig. 7). A family of anatomically correct bear heads has been derived (Meldgard 1960: plate 24; Fig. 8). Many of these pieces are bilaterally symmetrical, and some "stand" foursquare, as with the muskoxen and a series of standing bears (Fig. 9). Small, carefully scaled caribou hooves and heads (Fig. 10) are present, some with line engravings, but not always; as are walrus heads with tusks, and a scale model of a bear cranium, miniaturized but without teeth, some 1.1 inches long. The interpretative tradition has figured metonymic sculpture as an associated convention, in which the part is taken for the whole, with a function of totemism and hunting magic generally implied (Maxwell 1985:127, 160).

One does not necessarily derive Maxwell's "slight surge of power" from these objects. This is not an art which "leaves the observer with a distinctly uneasy impression," nor does it offer "a variety of images ranging from unsettling to bizarre," as McGhee (1996:161) characterized Late Dorset anthropomorphic and therianthropic figures. Such sensuous and subjective experiences of the work are important, as Swinton liked to stress. My argument is that these pieces do not necessarily conjure the occult, mystic world of vast, unfathomable powers, or the restricted, hierarchical, elite and highly codified comings and goings of the shaman. They can be made to speak instead to a careful, detailed knowledge of non-human beings, of long hours spent observing these animals, and of widespread carving abilities among a people. Light yet strong, simple yet expressive, they might serve in the hand as a comfort, a touchstone, a worry bead.

Dorset naturalistic miniatures can be logically explained, do not distort empirical reality, and offer no abstract elements. These pieces are finite, not visionary; they are in a real sense "copies" of the visible world. They offer, and adhere to, a firm and faithfully rendered template in quotidian, empirically verifiable reality. Works of zoomorphic realism have a firm and fixed goal, a preconceived idea as to what the work "wants" to be. Certain features of the carving are not fully negotiable; reality itself provides a "preconception of some specificity" (Levinson 2007:81).

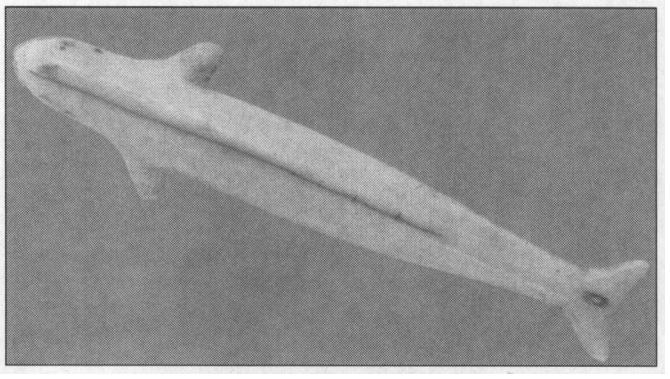

Figure 1: Beluga whale. Middle Dorset, Igloolik region. Walrus ivory. By permission of the Canadian Museum of Civilization (Collection no. NhHd-1:2414).

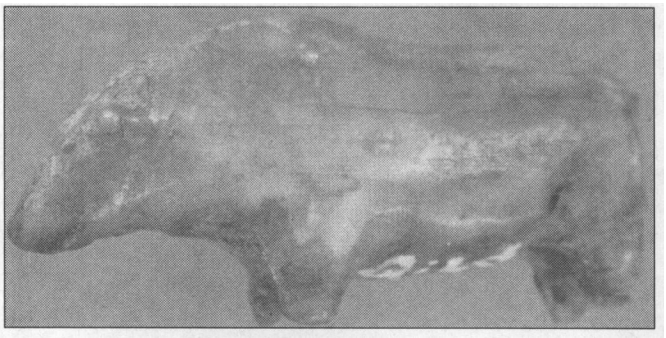

Figure 2: Muskoxen. Late Dorset, Bathurst Island. Walrus ivory. 2.2 cm. By permission of the Canadian Museum of Civilization (Collection no. QiLd-1:2304).

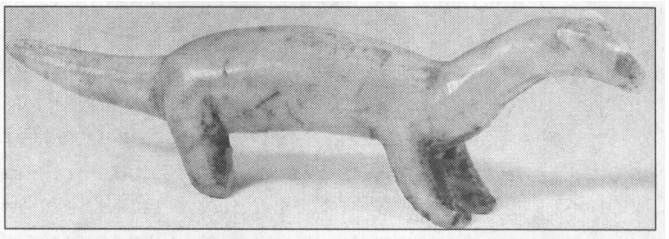

Figure 3: Weasel. Dorset. Pingirqalik (Igloolik region). Walrus ivory. 5.7 cm. By permission of the Canadian Museum of Civilization (Collection no. IX-C:5219).

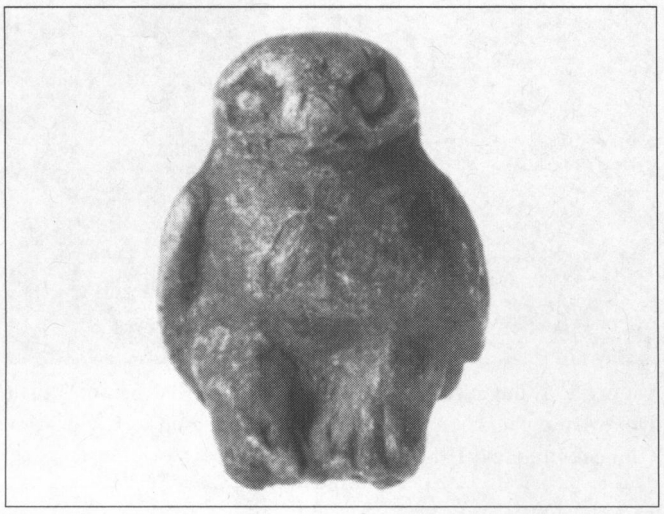

Figure 4: Owl. Shuldham Island 9, Labrador. Soapstone. 3.8 cm. Courtesy of The Rooms Provincial Museum Newfoundland (Collection no. IdCq-22-406).

In sculptural terms and along formalistic lines, in these works of "zoomorphic realism" there is little sense of a contrast between various elements of the work. There is no play with proportions, and no meaningful differences in size (as there, for example, is in the small head and long neck characteristic of Dorset "flying bear" figures). In the sculptural arts, as Henry Moore has observed, "if a work is just as it is in nature, one part is not more important than another" (2002:109). In Moore's aesthetics, such naturalistic pieces are unexpressive, inartistic, and lack the imaginative interplay of the creative subject. Many Dorset zoomorphs are what Swinton (1967:39) would call "highly developed and exquisitely shaped objects," certainly; and yet in them we see no sign of a "leap" between incompatible elements, no play of unlike terms, no "place" where the work's expression is particularly concentrated, and thus where the viewer's gaze—the sculpture's lines of tension or force—tend to focus or converge. The overall effect is that the viewer is not compelled to discern "unfamiliar" relationships between different parts of the work.

In short, this is not an art which appears designed to "shock" its audience, to convey a "disturbing" element, or to bear the signs of a struggle. The shaping power, vision or inspiration of the individual artist-subject does not dominate the material; there is no sense of a religious admixture or of the "subconscious" at work. It would seem then that there are no overt traditions of Dorset culture (philosophy, religion, metaphysics) that intervene to supersede or modify the naturalistic design of these pieces. My thesis—necessarily a product of informed speculation and interpretation; subjective, imaginative, located in the present, discovered through close, sustained observation of particular works, and constituted in language: Dorset art history—is that there is little in these pieces that speaks to forces beyond the audience's power to understand, confront, directly experience, or perceive. As such, one might reasonably conclude that in the zoomorphic series there is little that speaks to shamanic ritual or to shamanistic magic.

We can look more closely at two prominent themes in this type of carving, representations of bears and seals. Bears, after humans, appear to be the most represented subject in Dorset art, with seals following bears. Taçon (1983) found that human representations accounted for 18.73 per cent of the sample (162 of 865 pieces), bears 17.11 per cent (148 pieces), and seals 12.95 per cent (112

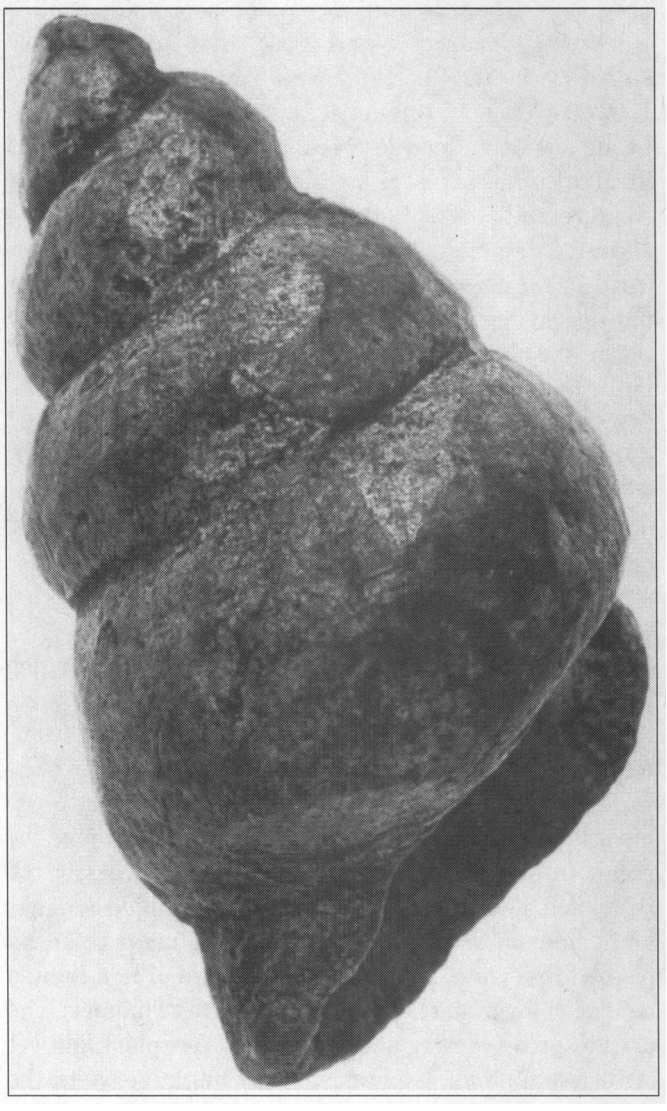

Figure 5: Whelk. Shuldham Island 9, Labrador. Soapstone. 3.8 cm. Courtesy of The Rooms Provincial Museum Newfoundland (Collection no. IdCq-22-406).

pieces), followed at some distance by birds at 6.13 per cent Bears and humans are apex predators on land-fast and moving ice, where they would compete for access to the same prey—seal, primarily, but also walrus. In addition, the Dorset would prey on *Ursus maritimus* itself; on occasion the reverse would also be true.

A polar bear, to a Dorset person without dogs or the bow and arrow, would be a formidable opponent. Bears were also almost certainly figured by the Dorset as potent spirit helpers, and numerous bear sculptures, often with a skeletal motif on their backs and a ventral belly slit, sometimes with traces of red ochre, may indicate the existence of a pan-Arctic bear cult (Larsen 1969-1970). In addition, however—and such is my focus here—McGhee reports on:

> occasional carvings of what appear to be individual bears standing, swimming, or sitting like dogs. These rare portraits, elegantly proportioned and with finely detailed faces, have the charm so conspicuously lacking in the images of humans. There is *no hint that these objects had any other use* other than to delight artists and their audience in the miniature portrayal of an element of the natural world. [1996:164; emphasis added]

This experience of *charm* (subjective, sensual, the product of a collaboration between viewer and artifact) is worth considering, as is McGhee's (embodied, present-tense) perception of *delight*. With "no hint ... [of] any other use," the shamanistic principle appears to have little role to play in the interpretation of these pieces.

Seal carvings provide another interesting case. There are a number of small, finely made carvings of seal that are so detailed that even the species can be identified. Maxwell notes that these:

> pieces are usually small but accurately proportioned and often have great anatomical detail. For example, the head of an ivory seal barely 5 cm long recovered from the Tanfield site was cocked, as if, while lying on a floating ice pan, it has heard an approaching hunter. Its tiny eyes, its whiskers, and even its small anus are faithfully depicted. [1985:160]

McGhee's outstanding, accessible text, *Ancient People of the Arctic* is again helpful here:

> Most seal carvings are naturalistic in form, perfect miniatures that look as if they are either swimming or sleeping on the ice. Heads and flippers are so perfectly sculpted that one can often recognize the species of seal portrayed, while on the smallest carvings the eyes, nostrils, ears, mouth, and even nipples are delineated by tiny lines or dots. [1996:167]

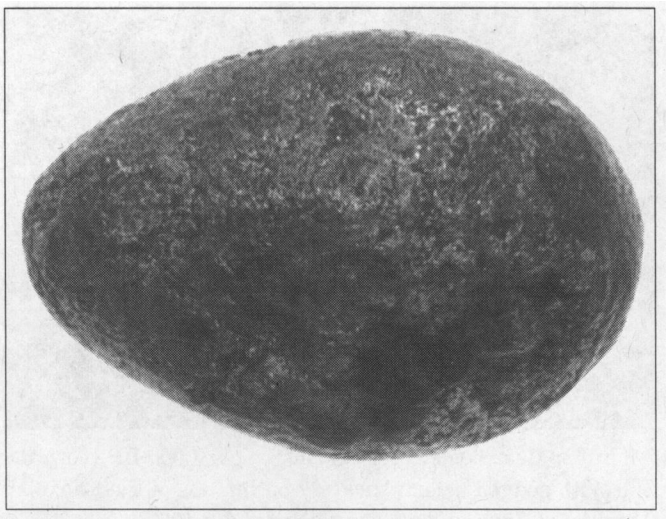

Figure 6: Egg. Shuldham Island 9, Labrador. Soapstone. 2.5 cm. By permission of The Rooms Provincial Museum, Newfoundland (Collection No. IdCq-22:396).

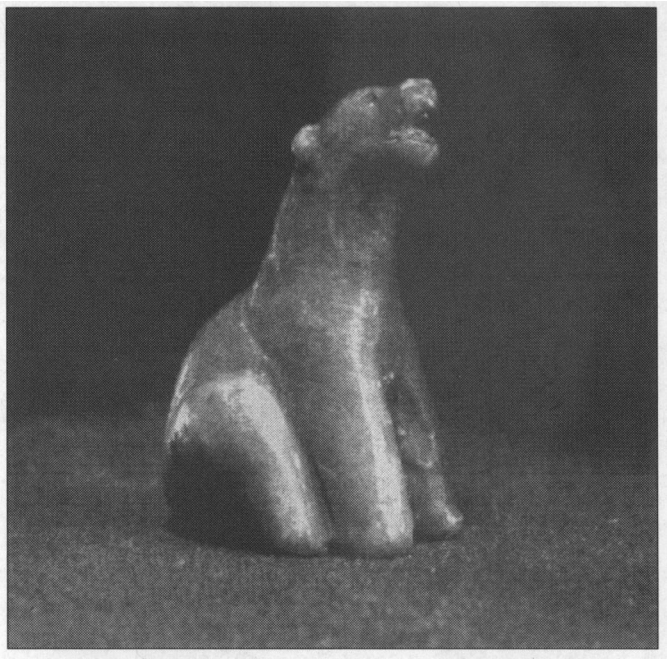

Figure 7: Dorset, Sitting Bear. Shuldham Island 9, Labrador. Soapstone. 4.4 cm. By permission of The Rooms Provincial Museum, Newfoundland (Collection No. IdCq-22:407).

Recalling that Dorset art is itself an archaeologically rare phenomenon,[9] these "naturalistic miniatures," though less frequently photographed and anthologized, are not at all uncommon within the museum collections. I think they can be said to constitute a specific class of Dorset sculpture, a kind, type or category of artistic work, what we can call the "zoomorphic series" in Dorset carving.[10]

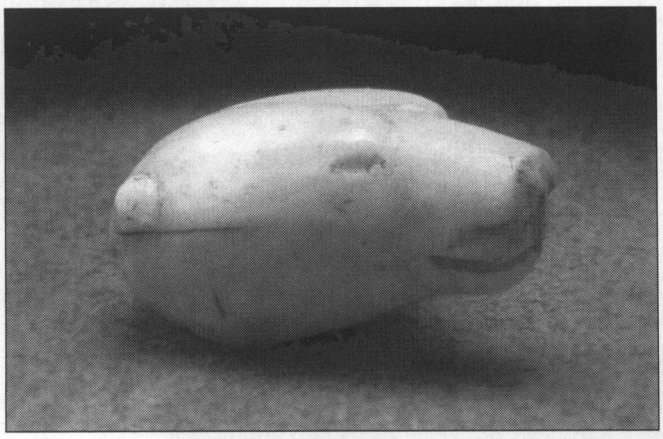

Figure 8: Bear head. Near Igloolik, about 1,000 BP. Ivory. 3.4 cm. With gouged hole at back. By permission of the Canadian Museum of Civilization (Collection no. IX-B:106).

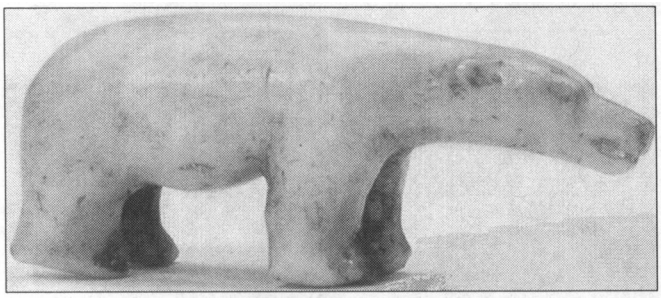

Figure 9: Standing bear. Late Dorset, Bathurst Island. Walrus ivory. 4.0 cm. By permission of the Canadian Museum of Civilization (Collection no. QiLd-1:2299).

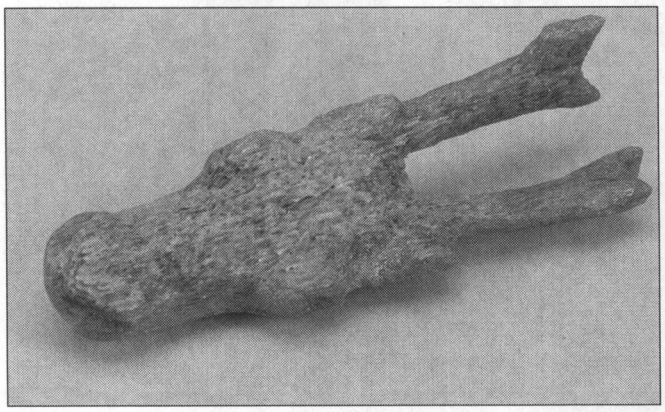

Figure 10: Caribou head, with antlers. Late Dorset, Bathurst Island. Caribou antler. Width 1.4 cm. By permission of the Canadian Museum of Civilization (Collection no. QiLd-1:528).

Taken together, these zoomorphic pieces appear to articulate the elements, conditions, terms, and inter-relations of a specific cultural formation, a series of "family resemblances" (recurring situations, organizing principles, recognizable forms) that are commonly if variously held, and that would be well-known to artist and audience alike across a wide geographic range. We might think of this series of forms as expressing an "imaginative structure" that creates, elaborates and even houses a "conceptual framework"—certain structures of knowing and feeling, "of attitude and reference" (Said 1993). This class of objects may represent or exemplify a "contract" or understanding between object, artist and audience, and can be said to constitute a genre, at the very least a subgenre, within Dorset carving. We might think about the way in which this subject matter is treated, and what this treatment *means*. As Miller (1994) explains, if an artistic genre creates, embodies, and reflects specific effects and particular knowledges, then artistic form can be linked to social situation (motive, exigency, history), as well as to social action. Which sorts of social action, and what ways of thinking and feeling, what magico-religious or quotidian views, might we associate with Dorset zoomorphic sculpture?

Interpretation and Meaning: Orthodoxy and Ethnographic Analogy

Interpretation (see McGhee 1981:26; Helmer 1995:40), has generally taken this type of Dorset art to be a species of amulet, a personal ligature to the spirit world, "a small portable charm worn on the person" (Read 1957). From this perspective, zoomorphic sculpture would properly belong to the *shamanistic* (not shamanic) worldview—not to the sacred sphere of shamanic ritualism, but to individual, non-ceremonial, shamanistic relationships between people, animals and spirits. In this sense they would constitute a fairly common Dorset social phenomenon (see Harp 1969/70; Jordan 1979/80; McGhee 1974/75).[11]

The ethnographic analogy often cited in support of this argument is Rasmussen's writings on the Netsilik and Iglulik of the Central Arctic, Inuit peoples whom he visited in 1923 on the Fifth Thule Expedition (see Harp 1969, 1974/75:40; Swinton 1967; LeMoine et al. 1995). Swinton, for example (1967:39), notes that, "Rasmussen continuously refers to such shamanic practices, as do Thalbitzer, Hawkes, Turner and, more recently, Holtved." In this spirit, Harp reasoned that,

> we may surmise that the world view of prehistoric Eskimos was approximately like that of their descendants in the historic period. Most of the Dorset art objects described here have been identified as amulets because they have manifest counterparts in modern ethnographic literature, particularly in accounts which tell of the magical practices of recent-day Eskimos. [1969/70:120]

One young man often encountered in the literature is Arssautilik Tertâq, whom Rasmussen dubbed "amulet boy." This Netsilik boy had some 80 amulets tied to his vest to provide luck, strength, long life, stealth in hunting, protection from malevolent forces, and physical qualities such as hearing, speed, endurance and vision (Rasmussen 1931:267-277). These amulets consisted of human hair, raven skin, gull and tern feet, drag lines for seal and dog harness, seven seal snouts, caribou skin, bear head skin, twelve caribou ears, a model kayak, and so on. As Rasmussen was careful to point out, these objects symbolized "the power that lives in the spirit of the particular animal" (1931:269), and did not of themselves contain this power. Rasmussen located himself outside the regional spiritual economy of the Netsilik and was able to purchase a large number of these specimens, which were worn by men, women, shamans, and especially children, who were vulnerable to pernicious forces and particularly in need of shaping influences.

Not unrelated is a Netsilik parka, a boy's coat with "charms" collected by George Comer for Franz Boas in 1902-03, some twenty years before Rasmussen's visit to the region, and now in storage at the American Museum of Natural History in New York (Catalogue No. 60.4660), where it has been examined by this author. In this case, the bone fragments lashed to the coat are roughly carved, still bloody, and crudely made. Far from works of artful adornment at least when compared to Dorset zoomorphs, these pieces are sculpturally unfinished, if not incompetent, whatever their claims to spiritual agency. Note that the Netsilik amulets described by Rasmussen are in most cases made of biological tissue, which would preserve poorly in the archaeological record, and are unlike anything we know of the Dorset. The ethnographic analogy in this case simply does not hold: the finely worked Dorset zoomorphic pieces have nothing to do with early 20th century Inuit amulets. Here we have elements of different and almost certainly unrelated material cultures that do not belong to the same class of objects.

It is worth emphasizing in this context that at the very least some three thousand years of divergent traditions separate Dorset and Thule/Inuit peoples from any possible common ancestral culture. The long-standing tendency to interpret Dorset art in the more well-known ethnographic contexts of the historic Inuit should by now be considered an uncritical application of ethnographic analogy. In fairness, such assumptions depend upon ancestor-descendant relationships which are no longer thought to hold. This is simple enough to explain, but it is upon such assumptions that the shamanistic principle in Dorset art has long rested—and still rests. It is in one sense unfortunate that such neat relationships between Dorset and Thule art and religion no longer apply. One should not work to oversimplify or reduce such complex questions, of course; although surely it is worth the effort to decouple the strong, over-determined links between Dorset art and Thule/Inuit culture and, thus, to sever the bond between Dorset representation and Inuit spiritual-shamanic practice. As Sutherland (2001:136) summarizes current understanding: "the Siberian Neolithic origin of the Palaeo-Eskimos has become a widely accepted view among prehistorians working in Arctic North America. If the Palaeo-Eskimo peoples of central and northern Alaska played a significant role in the development of Inuit culture, this role is not clearly apparent in the archaeological record."

I hope we can agree that the generally accepted end-dates for the culture (AD 1000-1450) are relatively recent, and that most Dorset art—more specifically, the art identified with the "Late Dorset"—is not all that old, by any measure. In terms of human nature, cognitive development, basic needs and cultural expression (abstraction, conceptualism, naturalism), the Dorset are as intelligent, innovative, curious and capable as any other people, including ourselves (McGhee 1996:154). They are as close to or as distant from us as the contemporary Inuit, Australian Aboriginals, the Frenchwoman of the fourth *arrondisement*, your neighbour. Dorset people may have had some contact with Norse, Thule and Indian peoples, and may not have been as isolated, or as old, as is commonly thought (see Sutherland 2000; Maschner and McGhee 2009; Appelt and Gulløv 2009).

Nor can we any longer assume the Dorset were a static, timeless people. For Trigger (2003:45), "the most important single factor that has shaped the long-term development of American archaeology has been the traditional Euro-American stereotype which portrayed America's native peoples as being inherently unprogressive." The shamanistic principle is informed by just this stereotype of the Dorset as primitive, alien, static, homogeneous, "magical." Surely some two thousand years is time enough for their own beliefs, and their own arts, to change. We need to treat Dorset art objects today "as a category defined and redefined in specific historical contexts and relations of power" (Clifford 2006:156). And we need to recognize the word *primitive*—as in "primitive art"—as an archaic term that is reductive, simplifying and mythic. It is an empty signifier, drained of all significance. And yet it remains an unhelpful specter that continues to shadow Western interpretations of Aboriginal representation. It is one of those vague, mythical constructs by which Western audiences foolishly gauge

and unconsciously celebrate their own progress and modernity. It clearly informs our concept of Dorset carving as shaman's art.

That Dorset zoomorphic sculptures are of small size has helped interpreters link them to the Inuit amulet tradition. This quality of miniaturization in fact accords with many of the values of Dorset technological regimes, which privilege small, expertly made assemblages, a portable toolkit of "elegant economy" (Dumond 1976:213) that McGhee (1996) likens to a Swiss army knife. By itself, the size and material of the zoomorphic series speaks to cultural continuity and coherence, but says much less, if anything, to the ritualistic function of these objects. It is obvious that the size and shape of the original organic material plays a constraining role in many zoomorphic pieces: walrus and bear teeth are not uncommon materials, and at Port au Choix, even beaver incisor has been used. Part of the accomplishment of Dorset carving is in deriving a range of expression from such highly determined, even restrictive shapes. Here again the relationship between social and formal history is important. Art historian Doris Shadbolt (1986:94) draws our attention to "the magic of miniaturization," and notes "the intense psychological presence granted to miniature objects which compress qualities and meanings, including that of craftsmanship, into a small scale." For Shadbolt, carved miniature objects "possess an irresistible cunning and a privileged secrecy, and they may also harbour messages of great import" (94). The Dorset were masters of well-crafted, small, intimate carvings, certainly; partially because of their compact and cunning form, these have great "psychological presence." And yet size alone cannot be correlated to their use as amulets, in that all of the art (and all Dorset tools) are small. Shadbolt's "magic of miniaturization"—a relative commonplace in the three-dimensional plastic arts, from Joseph Cornell's boxes to Fabergé eggs—may have misled positivist critics not well versed in the intricacies of sculptural form.

In the expanded cache of Dorset art objects, as certain subgenres, kinds or classes of objects become visible, so too has a range in the quality of works become apparent. By now it is clear that not all Dorset sculptures were finely made, nor do they all bear the marks of great artistic inspiration. Works abound that indicate less familiarity with prevailing traditions, and less care taken with the piece, as at Port au Choix (Harp 1969/70). On Dundas Island, McGhee (1974/75:144) found a "crude human face decorating an adze socket [that] appears to be the casual work of an untalented hand," and concludes that some of these works "may have been produced occasionally by all craftsmen in the community." In this way the record indicates that not only shamans—Swinton and Taylor's "shaman carvers," an art-making class well-versed and highly skilled in the forms and contents of Dorset traditions—would have creatively shaped hard organic materials.

We might assume most adult Dorset would have been technically skilled with an array of stone tools in order to fashion bone, ivory and antler weapons and tools; most everyone would have been a "carver" experienced with a range of tools and materials. There appears to be no clear reason why all extant pieces need to have been shaped by men. Dorset women would have been highly skilled with microlithic tools, we can be fairly certain, or may at least hypothesize.[12] To sew tailored clothing requires a creative and critical imagination well-versed in making spatial judgments, perceiving volume, resolving complex perceptions in three dimensions, and imagining the body's movement or progress of forms through space. A number of commentators have found that certain Dorset carvings "were made primarily for use within the context of village life" (McGhee 1974/75:144), "must have functioned in their daily life" (Jordan 1979/80:415), and that their "broad distribution...bespeaks their common usage" (Harp 1969/70:121). These findings cast further doubt on the limited interpretation of Dorset art as specifically ritualized, ceremonial and shamanic. Some Dorset pieces might be products of a form of "whittling"—keepsakes, little charms, personal adornments. One can imagine carving as a pastime when the weather is bad, or when it is good, when singing to a baby or as a gift to a child, when courting a lover, or waiting for caribou at a river crossing, and so on.

As we have seen, Taylor articulated an interpretively significant connection between Dorset art and burial practice. This thesis accords with shamanic practice as generally understood, and takes as ethnographic analogy the prolific Ipiutak burial arts at Point Hope, Alaska. Button Point had a one metre square cache of what Taylor (1975:480) calls "holy material," which to him seemed possibly to indicate a shaman's trove or grave. This too can be read as an overdetermined position, one that Mary-Rousselière felt compelled to discount directly, stating that at Button Point, "there was nothing to suggest a burial place" (1976:51).

Manifold Meanings in a Polysemic Archive

Dorset zoomorphic sculptures are objects, not words made material, and yet in them nevertheless we encounter a nexus of ideas. As they are literally the tangible remains of the past, we are inclined to suggest they reveal the processes and values of prior peoples. Perhaps they

embody a series of tropes, of ideologies and social relations, and present certain elements of the culture in relatively high relief. There is no explicit reason to see these as the tools or accessories of a "shamanic cult;" we need not assign some of them any particular spiritual agency whatsoever. As Lynn Meskell observes, "when we objectify a god or the contours of a deity we usually need to materialize the immaterial, to give it form and visual presence" (2005:5). There is *no direct evidence* of the Dorset having done so in the zoomorphic series. And yet, it is not enough to clear the interpretive ground and leave nothing in place. I would like to suggest these naturalistic miniatures may have been vernacular objects, common and part of everyday life, which give expression to the more mundane experiences of people in the past. This makes them no less emblematic of Dorset social mores, habits, customs and relations. As Helmer might say, these pieces "are less clearly symbolic (though not necessarily less symbolic)" (1986:197).

With respect to the dominant, authoritative, well-established shamanistic principle, this paper posits the zoomorphic series as outliers or exceptions. These pieces are significant, in that they provide a division of and a supplement to disciplinary hegemony. They constitute a digression and a loss—because they cannot be explained by prevailing logic—but also an addition, because meaning and association accrete. They can be viewed as positive, meaningful and even liberating with respect to orthodoxy.

It is not that these exceptions have gone unremarked in the literature; they certainly did not escape Swinton's keen eye. To revisit and extend an earlier citation: "I am reasonably convinced that most, if not all, Dorset art is highly specialized (and 'professional') shaman's art. There are of course exceptions, but I am not sure that, eventually, these could not be explained (or hypothesized) as part of shamanic cult art as well" (1967:39). Swinton's circuitous logic alerts us here to the artifice, and to arbitrary elements, in our models and modes of organizing the past. Through a circular thinking that borders in this case on tautology, and which cannot in the end be disproved, the interpreter enlists what become only apparent anomalies in support of his larger, overarching thesis. Where evidence runs thin, we find a turn to the subjunctive mode, and to the hypothetical realm. This is interpretation ruled as much by empirical evidence as it is by the desire for synthetic, coherent, systemic interpretive *structures*. In the subjunctive mood meaning can be identical with its various applications, and ideology can be freely encoded. A centripetal, homogenizing, unifying search for unities, commonalities, and morphological laws—a structural imperative—dominates the discourse. As archeologist Owen K. Mason (2000:245) emphasizes, "assemblage diversity is tedious and difficult to quantify, of course; thus, archaeologists prefer to qualify by intuitive description. The results are subjective definitions; perhaps more akin to Rorschach blot tests than to reality."

The shamanistic principle is a generalization about cultures and peoples that has not been "discovered" or uncovered; it is not something natural or unequivocal that has occurred in the past. It depends on a reading of a group of objects as distinct and stable, and operates within a highly delimited set of meanings. It is grounded in the interpretation of a culture that, however successful in a challenging land over several millennia, is constructed as ponderous, unadaptive and tightly constrained. It is far from a neutral discourse, and is not at all independent of the contexts of interpretation. It is not "free" from its own culture-values but is quintessentially a Western discourse, one that cannot be uncoupled from the histories of colonialism, from those specifically Western processes of legitimation and domination that have long produced and reproduced anthropological and archaeological writing, particularly in the Americas. It depends upon and legitimates what Trigger (2006:1) would call, "a seemingly complacent culture-historical orthodoxy," and suffers from what I.M. Lewis (1981: 28) describes as a "basic fault" in our understanding of shamanism in general: the "*reification of cultural categories and religious and emotional phenomena.*" Reifications, such as the shamanistic principle, work to obfuscate the diversity of the material record by positing a single explanatory model with significant authority, elegance, interpretive purchase, and persuasive power. It is a good story, which conceals the fact that it is only one of many possible stories. Such streamlined, reductive, encompassing narratives may make for effective rhetorical persuasion, but not necessarily good science.

At issue in this analysis, as James Clifford explains, is a "systematic ideological coding" through which "an incoherent cluster of qualities [that] at different times have been used to construct a source, origin, or alter ego within the territory of the Western self" (2006:163). A matrix of concepts that Westerners have long ascribed to so-called primitive arts continues to frame our thinking of Dorset carving. As Clifford reasons, these qualities—of magic, shamanism, the artist as shaman, irrationalism, ritualism, proximity to nature, mythic and cosmological aims, rough or "natural" materials, and so on—are "the product of a historically specific milieu;" their scope and underling logic "reproduces Western assumptions rooted in the colonial and neo-colonial epoch" (2006:160, 154).

This essay emphasizes that the interpretation of Dorset carving is an art-historical discourse that is completely political *and* completely historical. If "the aesthetic-anthropological object systems of the West are currently under challenge," as Clifford (2006:166) attests, these cultural politics become visible in our understanding of Dorset art, which has "its home in the institutional systems of the modern West." The call here is simply for greater variance within an artifact kind.

This line of inquiry leads one to wonder whether the shamanistic principle in Dorset carving, as McGhee (1983:21) has asked in a different context, may be "based not so much on scientific analysis of the pertinent facts, as it is on our belief in prior authority, our inherent wish not to offend orthodox opinion and our natural liking of simple and elegant explanations of what may have been much more complex phenomena?" In a rarely-cited article, McGhee is hypothesizing a propensity for belief, wish, desire and respect for authority—and not for scientific method—in archaeological analysis.[13] To illustrate this provocative thesis, he takes as example the generally accepted idea that Palaeo-Eskimo peoples entered the Canadian Arctic from the Bering Sea region, and before this Siberia. He posits eastern sources as an alternative hypothesis—that the Pre-Dorset descended from Samoyedic groups of north central and northwestern Siberia, who moved westward through Greenland into Arctic Canada, as indicated by the "mid-passage" hearths found in Independence I and Pre-Dorset dwellings, which bear some resemblance to dwellings found in northwestern Siberia. The crucial element in this argument, as McGhee (1983:23) acknowledges, is that the example "may not be very important in itself, but it may indicate that we have been, and remain, blind to other and more important interpretations of eastern Arctic prehistory which are tainted with orthodoxy."

For Mithen (2007), to take another tack, "it is normal for the artifacts of modern humans to have multiple roles and meanings" (290); in fact, all artifacts of modern humans function in "multiple domains of behaviour." This is of "immense value to archaeologists," and the means through which a single projectile point may be "found to have symbolic, social, and utilitarian functions layered upon each other" (290). This enabling condition of archaeology is also characteristic of the "cognitive fluidity" of the modern human mind—of our symbol systems, and our ability to produce and read signs. In that the Dorset are "cognitively fluid" modern humans, their artifacts would also take on multiple roles and meanings. Here I offer my own ethnographic analogy, as a means to open up possible "domains of behaviour" in which Dorset carving might function. The text is drawn from Rasmussen's discussion of meaning in Netsilik song, and importantly is concerned with the interpretation of cultural texts.

> The songs have a twofold mission: they express the thoughts and moods of people journeying or hunting in solitude, or they are hummed at home in the snow hut or tent in the evenings, within the cozy family circle, without any great preparation or extraordinary arrangement. But, in company with the drum, they are also the central point in the qagsgé; this is a festival house built when there are so many at a village that all cannot gather in an ordinary dwelling house...In times of adversity and bad hunting these 'public' gatherings could not be thought of, and in such times the songs fulfill merely their intimate mission as the consolation of the depressed and fearful. [Rasmussen 1931:324]

Again the example is of no particular import. What is crucial is the underlying argument, that certain forms of cultural production may be manifold in meaning, can take on different tones and modes of meaning when deployed in different contexts. Surely a writer with Rasmussen's gifts could elucidate similarly pluriform contexts for the zoomorphic series in Dorset carving: children playing in a snow house, going to sleep or waiting out a storm, using the animals to enact their games; a young girl watching her mother sew or cook, playing with a little owl; a boy (or girl) using carvings to simulate the hunt, to practice (or envision) the harvest; a family going to sleep, telling stories and talking gently, using the carvings as props in a narrative, or to cast shadows on a tent wall; a gift to a lover, signifying a happy time; a splash of beauty, of the exquisitely human-shaped, with the "intimate mission," for a man walking for days alone in a vast and monochromatic world, of serving as counter-weight and resource against solitude. They could be children's toys. They could be "dolls" (some could have been dressed in furs), particularly in an animal-centric culture. Again I return to Swinton's evocation of the power, the intimacy, the humanistic and humanizing necessity of touch—"the aesthetic experience derived from immediate, that is, sensuous rather than rational experience," (1978:76-77) that these objects would provide.

These meanings, functions, and uses need not be mutually exclusive, of course. But they do go some way in acknowledging the multiplicity of possible meanings in the zoomorphic series (we need not say art). Perhaps some of these lightweight, portable carvings are hand-worn because they were frequently carried, held, used as a comfort, in both personal (reflexive, relaxed, solitary) as well as ceremonial (gregarious, communal) contexts.

Finally then, what does the zoomorphic series come to teach us? I would suggest that, as in the Rabbinic interpretive principle, "the exception comes to teach us about the rule" (Alter 1992:31), to straddle the bounds and hence reveal the limits of an authoritative, exclusionary system. The zoomorphic series, if it is indeed exceptional, serves to loosen up the finely made and carefully closed order of Dorset prehistory, to shrug off and "dis-identify" the logic of the interpretative canon from its own overdetermined (read: magico-religious) formulation. As supplements to the canon, these pieces counteract the authority of prevailing tradition, and serve to activate an epistemological uncertainty already embedded within the archaeological record. They reveal some its possibilities, a record of the variety of modes of expression that Dorset material culture already contains. The presence of the exception reveals the orientation—the structuralist imperative—that underlies dominant interpretive voices. This is to suggest that small, naturalistic Dorset animal carvings constitute another, alternative, possibly non-shamanistic tradition or trope which runs through the cultural ensemble.

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Acknowledgments

Thank you to Patricia D. Sutherland for enabling my visit to the Canadian Museum of Civilization (CMC); and to Norman Vorano, Curator of Contemporary Inuit Art at the CMC, for discussing Northern arts with me. CMC Librarian Brigitte Lafond, and liaison Nathalie Guénette, were helpful. Lorraine Brandson, Curator at the Churchill Eskimo Museum, facilitated my research; as did Laila Williamson at the American Museum of Natural History, New York. Elaine Anton and Lori Parks were a pleasure to work with at The Rooms Museum in Newfoundland, where Kevin McAleese was generous with time and materials. I visited briefly in the Port au Choix collections with Patricia Wells and Priscillia Renouf at Memorial University in St. John's; and enjoyed research visits at The Princeton University Art Museum, with Bryan R. Just, and at the Smithsonian Institution, with James Krakker. Thank you to all.

This research has been funded by a series of Research Grants from Wilfrid Laurier University, as well as a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) Insight Development Grant. Three anonymous reviewers have strengthened the text in many ways. Errors and omissions are my own.

Notes

1 Taçon (1983: 56), following Esther Pasztory (1982), has usefully defined group (*shamanic*) rituals and practices, and those objects used during ceremonies and social ritual, as "shamanic art"—that which pertains particularly to the shaman (specific); and more general, individualized (*shamanistic*) practices, beliefs, and those art objects made by anyone working within "the cosmology or world-view of shamanism (general)." I too will take up these definitions in what follows.

2 "Most archaeologists believe that the ultimate roots of the Dorset artistic tradition lay in the Pre-Dorset Substage of the Arctic Small Tool tradition which dates *circa* 4200 and 2800 B.P." (Helmer 1986:181).

3 Please note that this paper does not directly address the categorization of Dorset art as such. Rather, I draw upon accepted, established, and relatively stable taxonomies, as represented in museum exhibitions and catalogues, academic work, and popular publications, in using "sculpture," "art," and "carving" more or less interchangeably here.

4 This ethnographic parallel is necessarily imprecise, but is now thought to be inconsistent as well.

5 As Davis explains, "Such losses constitute the discipline of art history just because they are the objects for its subjectivity—not the artefacts in themselves, fossils with no intrinsic status, but rather the ways of their departings from art historians" (1994:153).

6 Maxwell is referring at least in part to Ronald J. Nash's work (1976), in which Nash categorizes Dorset, Pre-Dorset, and Thule cultures as Tightly Constrained Systems, which are "have a limited potential for adaptation to new variety and constraints ... the evolution of Tightly Constrained Systems is extremely slow and involves changes in forms more often than fundamental changes in structure" (Nash 1976: 150-51).

7 While not every practicing archaeologist thinks precisely this today, the view remains foundational, I think, in the interpretive tradition.

8 These pieces do not contain "the skeleton motif" (Meldgaard 1960:24), an incised "X," lines or chevrons—what Swinton (1967:43) called recurring "crosses"—that are often taken to symbolize the bones and joints of the figure represented, and which is a recurring motif in Dorset art (Meldgaard 1960:15-16; Taçon 1983:50; McGhee 1996). This "common symbolic theme in the circumpolar world" (Helmer 1986:197) is generally linked to shamanic beliefs and travel, but is absent from the zoomorphic series.

9 Taçon (1983: 60) notes that, "the number of late Dorset art objects, although relatively great, is absolutely small." Harp, for example (1970:109), excavated 20 Late Dorset house pits at Port au Choix, yielding almost 23,000 specimens, of which less than one per cent (189 specimens) were classified as art objects.

10 This taxonomization of Dorset carving is an interpretive strategy, at least in part an arbitrary distinction, as much as it is a characterization of the actual artifactual record. This need not negate the possible historical accuracy of this construction. Without such interpretive leaps we are bound to plough the same sea.

11 Note that this would already constitute an evolutionary model, in that in Herbert Read's influential *The Art of Sculpture* (1956:24) the amulet is taken to be "from the beginning another form of art that was to merge with sculpture," and that "the limitations and qualities" of the contemporary art of sculpture "are determined by the manageable dimensions and direct tactility of the amulet."

12 Among the Tungus of Siberia, often cited as a possible common or ancestral source of Dorset shamanism, female shamans are apparently as common as men. Women certainly could have been shamans, carvers, even shaman-carvers.

13 We cannot propose experiments to test our hypotheses of Dorset art. There is no scientific account of art, and we cannot specify general criteria for judging what is art.

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