

## Editorial: Registers of Play

When thinking about registers of play and their embeddedness in the tradition of Western philosophy for the sake of this editorial, Simona Levescu's synopsis "From Plato to Derrida and Theories of Play"<sup>1</sup> is useful as she briefly lists the main issues, the key figures and their ideas about play. She commences her piece by pointing out that the idea of play occupies a central role "within the activity of discovering or encountering knowledge" and she argues that the idea seems to be as central in its importance within the history of philosophy as truth, knowledge, meaning and value.<sup>2</sup> Her survey of theories of play over time points out its deployment in Greek thought: Socrates addresses serious issues in a playful manner and does not consider work and play to be opposites; Plato admits the importance of motivated, structured play; and the Greek word for education and culture (*paideia*) shares the same etymology as the word for play, game, pastime, and sport (*paidia*).

To theorise play during medieval times, Levescu refers to Mikhail Bakhtin who defines "the carnivalesque, which promoted the profane, the vulgar, and the grotesque, the celebration of wine, dance, and the obscene as an expression of resistance to the official high culture of the [medieval] nobility, the Church and the State."<sup>3</sup> The carnivalesque deployed structured forms of ludic (or ordered) play to create communities of resistance even if their duration was fleeting and had to become subservient to control again.<sup>4</sup>

Levescu points out that play and art become connected in Western philosophy in the late eighteenth century. She presents Kant's belief that "free art [as contrasted to craft] could only turn out purposive if it is play, in other words, an occupation that is agreeable on its own account."<sup>5</sup> With Plato, Kant argues for structured play and mentions prosody and metre in poetry as examples of structuring mechanisms: "Without this the spirit which in art must be free and which alone animates the work, would have no body at all and would evaporate completely."<sup>6</sup> Within the same timeframe, the philosopher Friedrich Schiller argues that play can bridge the gap between the realms of ideas and materials.<sup>7</sup>

Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* (1938) then becomes the focus in Levescu's survey. He defines human beings as playful and argues that play is a fundamental fact of every human expression. He writes: "The spirit of playful competition is, as a social impulse, older than culture itself and pervades all life like a veritable ferment. Ritual grew up in sacred play;

poetry was born in play and nourished on play; music and dancing were pure play...We have to conclude, therefore, that civilization is, in its earliest phases, played. It does not come from play...It arises in and as play, and never leaves it.”<sup>8</sup>

She also returns to Bakhtin who, in the decades between the two world wars, argues for dialogic play, that is to say, for interplay amongst “social dialects, characteristic group behaviour, professional jargons, generic languages, languages of generations and age groups...of various circles and passing fashions.”<sup>9</sup> Thus he inserts social and political dimensions into the theorisation of play.

Levescu continues and focuses briefly on the contribution of Hans Georg Gadamer with his notion that playfulness takes place within the work of art itself, which led the way for other later twentieth-century theorists to analyse this phenomenon in greater detail. One of these is Roland Barthes, whose now famous 1977 essay translated as “From Work to Text” positions his notion of the infinite playfulness of the signifier within a text.<sup>10</sup> For Michel Foucault the activity of writing is the “interplay of signs” and it has a political dimension involving the play of power.<sup>11</sup>

The survey includes mention of feminist theorists like Maria Lugones who, during the later part of the twentieth century, built on these notions when arguing that “play facilitates feminist philosophy.”<sup>12</sup> Feminist writers Toni King and Eloise Buker identify five levels of play: critical play, creative play, healing play, transcendent play and oppositional play.<sup>13</sup> While they take play at face value, Jacques Derrida questions the very ontology of play where he argues that it negates itself in the very moment of its definition. He states that it is either nothing and then cannot be theorised as it is *alogos* or without discourse; or it becomes something and then its very essence is under erasure.<sup>14</sup>

And finally, Levescu concludes her survey by countering Derrida’s ideas as follows: “An important aspect that surrounds play is that it needs a shape, a contour, a structure: it must have some set of arbitrarily chosen and assumed rules at a given time...[otherwise] it would be impossible to say that it has evaporated; there would be nobody left to call it *alogos*, under erasure, or totally erased, for Huizinga’s *homo ludens* would probably have disappeared, or never existed at all.”<sup>15</sup>

The contributions to this issue of *Junctures: The Journal for Thematic Dialogue* engage in different registers with the notion of ‘play’ and these can be read in relation to Levescu’s brief historical survey. Tony Schirato, for example, refers to Huizinga, while critiquing his approach to play as mythical through an alignment with the writing of Bakhtin and the sociologists Marcel Mauss, Georges Bataille and Roger Caillois. He analyses a recent Nike television commercial that portrays the relation between the notion of play and the contemporary cultural field of sport, demonstrating how play resists and emerges, despite institutional attempts to banish it.

Leena Laine’s contribution also speaks of play as resistance in the women’s play movement in Finland during the early twentieth century. She explores the tensions between sport as a competitive activity and play as a terrain which resisted its strategies in Finland and Sweden during that era. She reviews “the notion of ‘play’ as a political strategy and [gives] examples of adapting play as counter-strategy to competitive sport.”

Competitive sport, however, features in Matani's Schaaf's exploration of élite male Pacific rugby players' perceptions and experiences of professional rugby in Aotearoa/New Zealand. He points out that "...sport participation research has been dominated by Western theories and models" and counter-strategises by beginning "to identify the specific cultural factors that motivate a disproportionate number of Pacific Island men, in New Zealand at least, to play sports." As play and adult art – like play and sport – may sometimes be antithetical to each other, Josephine Regan responds by emphasising art's playful aspects as a continuous and processual occupation framed through the notion of 'flow' as theorised by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. She explores notions of 'art' and 'play' as overlapping concepts, and she suggests that "creative activity or creative occupation is an innate need for human homeostasis and self-actualisation."

"Playing with the Image: In Conversation with Margaret Roberts" is the result of a flowing collaborative interview between the artist Margaret Roberts, and the writer, Leoni Schmidt. Again, the processual nature of art is emphasised through an exploration of how it comes into being. With reference to Henri Lefebvre's Marxist notions of the social production of space, Schmidt theorises this activity as critical – and serious – play.

Hans van Ditmarsch provides insights into the world of games such as Cluedo and Sudoku. He argues that play is serious, however much we may think of it and experience it as fun, and however much we should do so. He points out that there are "important insights to be gained by applying various scientific disciplines to the analysis of frivolous pastimes."

This issue also includes poetry, autobiographical writing, artists' pages and reviews of books and an exhibition. Judith Arcana contributes a poem entitled *Eight* through which we are reminded that the imaginative constructs of children's dreams and daydreams involve play and that the Greek *paideia* (for education and culture) and *paidia* (for play, game, pastime and sport) are closely linked to *paides* for children.

Jim Cooper incorporates the 'child-like' through excessive play in his translation of the album cover for the Beatles' "Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band", created in the radical left climate of the late 1960s. Here one can counter Roger Caillois (as referenced by Schirato) – where he declares that art does not count as play as it produces material goods – through attention to the artist's voluntary labour without capital gain as constituting play in today's postconceptual art context.

Madeleine Child's *Pop-pop* produces large numbers of play-like objects in order to suggest our children's over-consumption of fast food 'cheezels' and popcorn. But, however much we want to criticise the kinds of food referenced, we cannot help but be seduced by the colours and glazes used and thus Child's work does not merely state, but also performs the very dilemma each parent faces when it comes to their children's food choices.

Annemarie Jutel's autobiographical writing conjures a poignant picture of the uneven power relationships within a children's physical education class. The 'clumsy' child has to compete in such a context, whether willingly or not. Endurance and a drive to succeed help her to overcome the problems inherent in such a location for 'play'. In contrast, Jane Venis embraces the a-rhythmic and discordant aspects of life in her sound-sculpture-performance practice. She revels in things that may fall apart and has made the clumsy and 'wrong' strong elements of her playful work.

Ali Bramwell's curatorial review of an exhibition entitled "Play" – which recently featured the work of five emerging artists in Dunedin, New Zealand – explores how the works "set up a series of *play-ful* relations between histories, modes of practice and content." Macabre toys, game spaces, conjurer tricks, mounted trophies of sportswomen, and crocheted pieces referencing royalty play in various ways.

Where Annemarie Jutel earlier provides us with a particular instance of a child's experience of play in the context of physical education; her book review of Julie Myerson's *Not a Games Person* contextualises her personal experience within the larger frame of competitive sport and its effects in the playground and further afield. She writes: "Games are a normalising force – one which structures the playground, but also the corporate board room with its language of playing fields, goals, targets and fair play."

Bridie Lonie reviews three texts in conjunction for this issue: Karen Armstrong's *A Short History of Myth*; Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad: The Myth of Penelope and Odysseus*; and Jeannette Winterson's *The Weight*. She explores how templates for play in successful films, reality television and games are based on Greek myths; and how advertising uses these to play with our need for identification with mythic figures. Lonie also points out how the re-telling of myths can be a way of making a form of play of the hard details of life – another context for another register of play.

- 1 Simona Levescu, "From Plato to Derrida and Theories of Play", *Comparative Literature and Culture: A WWWeb Journal*, 5 (4), December 2003, as last visited at <http://clwebjournal.lib.purdue.edu/clweb03-4/livescu03.html> on 12 November 2006.
- 2 Ibid., 1.
- 3 Lauren Langman, "The 'Carnival Character' of the Present Age", *The Sociology Shop*, 2003, as last visited at <http://www.angelfire.com/or/sociologyshop/langfr2.html> on 12 November 2006. MM Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel", in Michael Holquist (ed.), *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas, 2001), 21-25.
- 4 See Lauren Langman, "The 'Carnival Character' of the Present Age", *The Sociology Shop*, 2003, as last visited at <http://www.angelfire.com/or/sociologyshop/langfr2.html> on 12 November 2006.
- 5 I Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. Werner S Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 171.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 See endnote 1, 2.
- 8 J Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1938/1964), 173.
- 9 MM Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel", in Michael Holquist (ed.), *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas, 2001), 262-63.
- 10 Roland Barthes, "From Work to Text", in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1997), 161. Also see as last visited on 12 November 2006: <http://www.georgetown.edu/faculty/irvinem/theory/Barthes-FromWorktoText.html>.
- 11 Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?", in Vincent B Leitch (ed.), *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (New York: Norton, 2001), 1622-36.
- 12 See endnote 13, 105.
- 13 Toni C King and Eloise A Buker, " 'To and Fro': Deepening the Soul Life of Women's Studies Through Play", *National Women's Studies Association Journal*, 13 (1), 2001: 105-25.
- 14 Vincent B Leitch (ed.), *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (New York: Norton, 2001), 1866.
- 15 See endnote 1, 4. Acknowledgements to Simona Levescu whose article informs this editorial.