

To Double Business Bound: Play and the Contemporary Field of Sport

INTRODUCTION

There's a recent Nike television commercial that neatly encapsulates the relation between the notion of play and the contemporary cultural field of sport. The scene is a football game (in former British colonies such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the USA, a soccer game) between the national teams of Brazil and Portugal. As the players walk, side-by-side, through the concrete subterranean passage that lead onto the field, the scene is clearly recognisable as early 21st-century sport, characterised by overt organisational, capitalist and media markers. The teams (selected by a manager appointed by the respective national federations) are wearing national colours, with the shirts supplied by multinational sports companies (Brazil, for instance, have signed a long-term contract, and are closely associated, with Nike). Many of the players – Roberto Carlos, Ronaldo, Figo, Ronaldino – are instantly recognisable worldwide because of their appearances in the global media, both as players in international and national competitions and as media stars. They are frequently the subject of news stories about transfer rumours or failed romances, or they appear in advertisements for football boots or upcoming games. At the same time the choice of teams hints at the continuing presence, even with professional global sport, of a lingering ludic disposition: Brazil and Portugal share a tradition of playing and valuing what we might call skilful, non-ends-directed football, in contrast to national teams such as Germany, England and even Italy and Argentina, which have usually adopted a more instrumental approach to the game. One of the criticisms made of the many highly talented teams emanating from Portugal, for instance, is that they were/are more taken with playing with the ball than scoring goals; similarly, it was often said of Brazil (until repeated failures at the World Cup in the seventies and eighties caused something of a change of heart and tactics) that they would rather 'play beautifully and lose' than resort to 'ugly' football (playing defensively, systematic fouling, resorting to long balls, etc.).

There is nothing obviously playful about this occasion, however. It is quite clearly an important competition match organised and sanctioned by FIFA: the players' faces and bodies show signs of seriousness and tension, and they process slowly and deliberately, stare intently ahead, and are too focused to acknowledge the other team that shares the space. They eventually emerge from the tunnel and take the field in a modern stadium (perhaps with a retractable roof) filled with as many as one hundred thousand (the capacity of the stadium having been determined, among other things, by safety regulations and requirements) seated fans who have paid something in the region of hundreds (legally) and thousands (to scalpers) of US dollars a seat, depending on the importance of the match and the location of the seats. Some of the more desirable seating will be located in corporate boxes owned or rented by large corporations, who have invited important business clients to be their guests at the game, and have provided them with restaurant-quality meals and drinks. The game, and all the actions constituting it, will be strictly circumscribed regarding its temporal, spatial and material characteristics and dimensions. Action will begin, cease and recommence only when the referee blows the whistle, and takes place within a marked space commensurate with FIFA rules regarding the length and breadth of the field and its various components (such as the penalty area). The game will usually be of ninety minutes duration (including time added on for stoppages), even if the result is a foregone conclusion after thirty minutes and the spectators are leaving in droves. Players must wear appropriate gear: to wear the wrong coloured shorts, or only one sock, or a shirt with one sleeve ripped off, or with writing or other marks on the gear other than those of the official or recognised sponsors or makers, would result in a player being removed (temporarily or otherwise) from the field. And this applies to bodies as well, in the case of, say, an injury that causes bleeding, or of the exposure, however brief, of a player's buttocks to the crowd in order to display a (presumably very brief) political message.

There will be a strict demarcation between officials and players, and players and spectators. The media may purport to 'take viewers into the middle of the action', but if a spectator somehow climbed over the partition that separated them from the players and evaded the numerous trained security staff and police and ran onto the field they'd be chased, apprehended, ejected from the ground and heavily fined. The crowd at the venue will be joined by hundreds of millions of viewers around the world watching and listening to the game on live and delayed telecasts, through both terrestrial and satellite media, on television, radio and through the internet. A pre-game show will analyse past results, injuries and the possible influence of the referee on the outcome. Highlights of previous games will be accompanied by a plethora of statistics (team and individual) about passes-per-shot-at-goal, goals-per-game, time-in-possession, tackles, fouls, goals and assists (although this will be paltry in comparison to the statistical information provided by networks covering, say, a World Series baseball game). Every significant action (offside decisions, fouls, goals) will be replayed, in slow motion and at ordinary speed and from numerous angles, both on a large screen within the stadium (broken only by sponsorship messages), and to media viewers. At halftime a panel of experts (made up of past and current players and managers, as well as journalists and media commentators) will analyse incidents, provide opinions about what is happening and why, and predict the outcome. The match receipts will be in the tens of millions of US dollars, but this will be dwarfed by the television and internet rights, and the advertising revenue generated by board

space around the ground, or the right to exclusively kit out one or both teams. The players will be paid out of this revenue, as will the federations, managers, coaches, physio's, doctors, publicists, agents, halftime entertainers, the singer of the respective national anthems, and the referee and linespersons (who will almost certainly be men). Once the game has finished, it will continue to be textualised and analysed and to generate intertextual references – as well as income. Television networks around the world will show highlights during the sports segment of the evening news; newspapers and magazines will write stories about the game and its dramas, heroes and villains; videos and DVDs of the game will be produced, packaged, advertised and sold. Reputations will be made and lost (with important consequences for salaries, contract extensions and sponsorship revenue), players will be induced to change clubs, and millions of fans will celebrate or drink away or violently manifest their sorrow, depending on the outcome. Politicians will line up to be photographed with the winners, and questions will be asked in the political institutions of the losing country. A government might even fall as a consequence of the result.

None of this is actually shown in the commercial – rather, it's implied by what we see in those opening shots. Sporting advertisements usually mirror or reproduce, in miniature, the field and its practices, values, rules, agents and institutions, with the stars, drama, excitement, crowd and skill of the game condensed into a few visuals. A typical football commercial would show a star like Ronaldo or Beckham on the ball, a scything tackle being skilfully avoided, the winning goal blasted into the back of the net, the celebrations of the players, the fans shouting and screaming with joy. And the name of the sponsor would be associated with the action, the players and the gear, but also with the passion, excitement and beauty of football.

But this isn't a typical sporting commercial. Let's go back to the scene we were describing: Brazil and Portugal are on their way to take part in an institutionally authorised, important and very serious sporting contest, when the players start behaving as if they were children or teenagers having a kickabout on a Brazilian beach. One player takes possession of the ball and starts playing with it – juggling it, bouncing it off walls, flicking it up into the air. The rest join in, trying to get the ball away from the first player in order to outdo his tricks. The intensity, pace and skill increases as each person ups the ante, until the action resembles a pinball game with the ball flying in all directions. Then suddenly the referee appears. He's clearly horrified by what's going on, tackles (actually fouls) the player in possession (Ronaldo) and retrieves the ball. The final scene shows that the order of things has been restored: the dignified looking referee holds the ball; a national anthem plays, the crowd sings, the cameras pan across the players now literally back in line, hands behind their backs. They are blackened, dirty, dishevelled and chastened, but focused and in possession of themselves: the final message of the commercial is that playtime is over, and sport takes its place.

One of the points that the commercial is making is that sport isn't just reducible to the institutionally authorised practices associated with and organised by the field of sport. The meta-narrative of the commercial – the narrative that explains the narrative, if you like – is that the strong influence the media and corporate values, logics and interests (including, of course, Nike's) exert over sport has started to kill off everything that is supposedly interesting and valuable about it – whether it's spontaneity, flair, individuality or fun. The commercial

reproduces this perspective (the spontaneity and fun manifest in the players at play gives way to sport-as-business and media spectacle) but simultaneously qualifies or even denies it by showing that no matter how much the field and its institutions attempt to banish play, it always returns when you least expect it. In other words, the commercial effectively says the opposite of what it purports to say: sport is alive and well, spontaneous and fun, because the disposition to play never leaves it. Even when the field of sport is at its most business-like, doing its best to banish or exclude the spontaneity and wastefulness associated with play (represented by the figure of the referee rescuing sport from play); it simultaneously has to cover itself by producing performances of its commitment to the idea that, at heart, sport is still just play (hence the Nike commercial). In the remainder of this article we'll identify and describe what we mean by play, mainly through reference to the work and ideas put forward by various theorists of play such as the Dutch cultural historian Johan Huizinga (author of *Homo Ludens*) and the French sociologist Roger Caillois (*Men, Play and Games*), and consider why the concept continues to function as a form of cultural capital even within contexts and cultural fields that are antithetical to it.

THE ORIGINS AND FUNCTIONS OF PLAY

We'll approach play from two perspectives, the first corresponding to questions about its origin and nature, the second to its socio-cultural forms and functions. With regard to the first set of questions, there are no theoretical accounts or explanation which we can accept without some reservations. However, there are bodies of work which, although they only deal with the origins of play indirectly or tangentially, provide useful departure points for the move to our second, and more explicable, task – which is to describe, understand and contextualise play as a socio-cultural activity. The theorist we turn to for this purpose is the French Sociologist George Bataille, a colleague of the aforementioned Roger Caillois.

A child building a sandcastle on the beach, someone doodling on a notepad in a long meeting, or an NFL player performing a celebratory dance after scoring a touchdown: all these activities can be contextualised in terms of what George Bataille refers to as a 'general economy'¹, which he defines as “a play of energy with no end limits.”² Bataille differentiates general economy from specific economic systems, which are understood as “particular operations with limited ends.”³ All three of the activities referred to above come under the category of a general economy because the energy expended appears to have no systematic or rational utility – or at the very least, the potential gains associated with such acts of play (as a form of training or learning, or drawing attention to oneself) seem inadequate or incommensurate with regard to most economic regimes. The necessary articulation that is presumed, within a closed economy, between expenditure and growth (understood here as an advantage – for instance as learning a useful skill, or acquiring some form of cultural or financial capital) has only a tenuous relationship with the activities of building a sandcastle, doodling or the impromptu performance of a dance. General economy, on the other hand, offers an entirely different narrative with regard to this question of expenditure, one that is predicated not on gain but on loss:

As soon as we act reasonably we want to consider the utility of our actions; utility implies...a maintenance of growth. Now if it is necessary to respond to exuberance, it is no doubt possible to use it for growth. But...supposing there is no longer any growth possible, what is to be done with the seething energy that remains? To waste it is obviously not to use it. And yet, what we have is a draining-away, a pure and simple loss, which occurs in any case: from the first, the excess energy, if it cannot be used for growth, is lost.⁴

Bataille doesn't completely abstract these issues: he provides them with various historical contexts and trajectories, for instance characterising the differentiation between the two forms of economy as becoming particularly marked after the Reformation.⁵ But for our purposes the notion of a more or less universal, necessary and wasted expenditure of energy fits in neatly with, and offers a convenient point of origin for, the disposition to play. Moreover, the sense of pleasure and/or desire that animates processes of waste and loss, and which is implied in Bataille's statement that "life starts only with the deficit of...systems... [and] order and reserve has meaning only from the moment the ordered and reserved forces liberate and lose themselves for ends that cannot be subordinated to anything one can account for"⁶, is clearly commensurate with the notion of play as pleasure-in-escape (from the everyday, from boredom, from social restrictions and routines).

The second aspect of Bataille's work on the general economy of energy that is particularly relevant to our understanding of the origins of the disposition to play is bound up with his interest (following Marcel Mauss⁷, Huizinga and Caillois) in the curious phenomenon of 'potlatch'. Bataille's reading of 'potlatch' (which is perhaps best described as a systematic and apparently pointless destruction or gifting of wealth) is that it is a loss (goods are destroyed) that appears to be a disguised utility (it is not done in isolation, but in front of others, which means that the one suffering the loss acquires capital) that is in fact a disguised loss (nothing is really produced and energy is wasted, but the imperatives of the closed economy appear to be adhered to). But the real theoretical or exemplary value of potlatch, for Bataille and theorists of play such as Huizinga and Caillois, is that it is an obvious instance of the community being played (by a very powerful disposition), rather than the other way round. In other words, although the community may produce all kinds of explanations, rationales and narratives about potlatch and similar processes which appear to place agency in their hands ('it really does have a utility'; 'we're only doing this to garner prestige and capital'), in fact it is the community which is being played (along).

Play, from this perspective, is a disposition that inhabits or passes through sites, in different forms and intensities at different times, but which is often narrativised as, and recuperated in terms of, individual or even communal agency. This is important because the great theorists of play (such as Huizinga and Caillois) specifically and resolutely define it as a non-productive activity, even while allowing that the question of what constitutes utility is highly problematical.⁸ So if we return to the Nike commercial we can say that Ronaldo, Roberto Carlos, Figo and the others indulge themselves in footballing tricks, acts of display and an expenditure of energy that clearly stand outside the order of a closed economy (they are about to play an important,

competitive game of football with national and individual prestige at stake, not to mention the financial rewards that go to the winner). And while the commercial implies that each over-the-top performance of skill is in fact part of an ongoing agonistics between elite professionals that will have its winners and losers, this is hardly comparable to the significance of an authorised, international sporting contest. Put simply, the concepts of agency and/or utility can't account for the moment of madness when professional footballers turn into children.

HOMO LUDENS

The notion that play inhabits and animates individuals and communities, and continues to exert a strong socio-cultural presence even in its apparent absence, is one of a number of important insights derived from the work of Johan Huizinga. In *Homo Ludens* (1966) Huizinga represents the notion of play as both a universal abstraction (he posits that it is not only prior to culture – it effectively animates it) and a historically situated disposition-as-practice. Play, for Huizinga:

is more than a mere physiological phenomenon or a psychological reflex...It is a significant function...that is to say, there is some sense to it. In play there is something 'at play' which transcends the immediate needs of life and imparts meaning to the action. All play means something. If we call the active principle that makes up the essence of play 'instinct', we explain nothing.⁹

This quote identifies two fundamental characteristics of play. Firstly, it "is a thing of its own"¹⁰: it has no biological purpose, doesn't "serve something which is not play"¹¹, and is possessed of its own generic qualities. It gives rise to an infinite number of socio-cultural manifestations and transformations, but always within a strictly limited regime of characteristics, imperatives and qualities. Secondly, although play has no moral or ethical function, it is both a catalyst for imaginative activity and stands in opposition to a mood or culture of seriousness (interestingly enough, in this characterisation play replicates the roles Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) ascribes to laughter in *Rabelais and His World*.¹² That play is opposed to seriousness does not mean, however, that play can't be a very serious and even intense activity – after all, and as we've seen with the Nike commercial, the disposition to play has the capacity to possess people and move them out of or away from their everyday duties and responsibilities. In order to deal with this and other apparent contradictions that arise from Huizinga's account of play (on the one hand play is opposed to seriousness/play can be serious; on the other play is free/we are played) we need to consider his contextual analysis, located at the end of *Homo Ludens*, of what he calls the "play element in contemporary civilization."¹³

As well as being self-serving and opposed to seriousness, play has, for Huizinga, six generic aspects: it is voluntary or freely adopted; disinterested and irreducible to any utility; distinct or sequestered from ordinary life; creates and demands adherence to order (through the adoption of rules or patterns of behaviour); operates under temporal and spatial limits; and is either representational or agonistic (that is, competitive in some respect). Huizinga provides elaborate descriptions, definitions and examples of what he means by these terms, but the key to reading, explicating and grounding play-as-practice is his argument that, from

the 19th century on, play atrophies.¹⁴ In other words, it is easier to recognise more precisely what Huizinga means by play, and to reconcile the apparent contradictions in his accounts of it, once we know what kinds of socio-historical forces and tendencies 'send it away'. When Huizinga uses the term 'contemporary civilization', he is in effect referring to 19th-century industrial Britain and its legacies. One of the most significant of those legacies is modern sport, and it is here that the differentiation between play and its other is, for Huizinga, most pronounced:

Now, with the increasing systematisation and regimentation of sport, something of the pure play-quality is inevitably lost...In modern social life sport occupies a place alongside and apart from the cultural process...The ability of modern social techniques to stage mass demonstrations with the maximum of outward show in the field of athletics does not alter the fact that neither the Olympiads nor the organized sports of American Universities nor the loudly trumpeted international contests have, in the smallest degree, raised sport to the level of a culture-creating activity. However important it may be for players or spectators, it remains sterile. The old play-factor has undergone almost complete atrophy.¹⁵

There are three factors in Huizinga's account of modern sport that differentiate it from play, and the first and by far the most important of these is that it is derived from a world-view that is essentially utilitarian and rationalist. In Huizinga's account of play and its generic characteristics, play is of and for itself, rather than a means to an end; and while play may take itself seriously, it doesn't extend that privilege – a rejection that is reciprocated by a utilitarian mindset. Everything follows from this, and cleaves a path between play and sport. So the ambiguities or apparent contradictions found in Huizinga's use of terms such as free and voluntary, ordered, temporal and spatial limitations and representations or agonistics become clear once we contextualise them within one order of discourse or another. Within an instrumentalist order of discourse freedom, order, spatial limitations and competition have very specific inflections. Football players may take the field voluntarily, but if the dominant motivation behind their play is financial gain or to improve their fitness, then they aren't playing. Similarly, although there is order in, and spatial and temporal limitations to, a kick-about amongst players in a park (they may tacitly agree to take turns in kicking, one may act as goalkeeper while the others take shots, shots at goal should be from about the edge of the penalty area, etc.) that is a very different situation from the necessary adherence, on the part of professional footballers, to the exact iterations and regularities articulated in a FIFA rulebook.

For Huizinga, two additional factors – capitalism, and what we can refer to, after Foucault ¹⁶, as the reason of state – contribute to this differentiation of play from sport. Although both are clearly derived from a utilitarian/rationalist worldview, they take different socio-cultural forms. The economies of time and effort that go into the creation and maintenance of the play-civilisation nexus – Huizinga writes that "civilization is, in its earliest phases, played...it arises in and as play, and never leaves it"¹⁷ – are theoretically untenable within a capitalist order: if time is money, there is no place for the unproductive use of time. With the reason of state we are in different territory. When Huizinga writes about "the ability of modern social

techniques to stage mass demonstrations with the maximum of outward show in the field of athletics”¹⁸ he is clearly referring to state-managed spectacles such as the 1936 Berlin Olympics: here the investment of time and effort in rituals is paramount, but the point or ends of such an investment is the maintenance and/or accumulation of prestige, or the training, disciplining and pacification of the state’s bodies and minds. Although the account of play that Huizinga produces in *Homo Ludens* situates it within a socio-historical narrative, it is difficult not to read that narrative as more mythical than historical, with the prototype being that of a fall from some kind of golden age. The problem with this account, in which play more or less succumbs to, and is atrophied by, historical forces and developments, is that it contradicts Huizinga’s thesis that “civilisation is...played...it arises in and as play, and never leaves it.”¹⁹ What is implied here is that play is a disposition that inhabits not just people and places but, as Huizinga admits, worldviews and institutions that are entirely antithetical to it. He devotes a small section of *Homo Ludens* to a discussion of business as play, but never seriously pursues the line of enquiry, which logically follows from his own premises, that capitalism (and for that matter the workings of the reason of state) arises from, and is characterised by, a strong sense of play.

MEN, PLAY AND GAMES

This aporia in Huizinga’s account of play is picked up and addressed by Roger Caillois in his book *Men, Play and Games* (2001), which provides a systematic categorisation of play-as-genre, divided into different forms (agon, alea, ilinx, mimicry, which correspond roughly to the institutions of sport, gambling, festivals/carnival and shows) and poles (at one extreme we have *ludus*, where rules and conventions are fetishised, and at the other *paidia*, which is improvised and even anarchic). We don’t have time to rehearse or evaluate his system: what is more useful for our purposes is the way Caillois demonstrates how play, which he defines, following Huizinga, as being in opposition to and of a different order from institutionalised socio-cultural activities, comes to be ‘two things at once’ – simultaneously official culture and its antithesis. Caillois’ account of the play function in human society is strongly influenced by the insights and arguments found in *Homo Ludens*. Although he finds most of its premises “debatable”²⁰, he acknowledges Huizinga’s two main achievements – providing an exact definition of play, and clarifying its socio-cultural function.²¹ At the same time he takes him to task for both defining play in terms which are “too broad and too narrow”²²; and secondly and concomitantly for cleaving play off from “all material interests.”²³

Caillois’ insistence that play is “an occasion of pure waste”²⁴ within a wider setting or context where financial and other capital can be exchanged (such as sport and gambling) is consistent with regard to Huizinga’s insistence on the necessary imbrication of play and its ‘other’ – in a sense more consistently and faithfully than Huizinga himself. For Caillois, the salient features of play are close to those provided by Huizinga, but with some important differences and qualifications:

Play...creates no wealth or goods, thus differing from work or art...play is an occasion of pure waste: waste of time, energy, ingenuity, skill, and often of money...Play must be defined as a free and voluntary activity, a source of joy and amusement. A game which one would be forced to play...would become constraint...from which one would strive to be free. As an obligation or simply an order, it would lose one of its basic characteristics: the fact that the player devotes himself spontaneously to the game, of his free will and for his own pleasure, each time completely free to choose retreat, silence, meditation, idle solitude, or creative activity...[play occurs] only when the players have a desire to play...in order to find diversion, escape from responsibility and routine...In effect play is essentially a separate occupation, carefully isolated from the rest of life.²⁵

Caillois insists, following Huizinga, that authentic play is separated off from much of ordinary life because of its non-productive (art does not count as play because it produces material goods) and volitional (professional sportspersons are working, not playing) nature. But he recognises that those material and historical contexts of ordinary life (the workplace, post-industrial society) are both what is being escaped from, and the sites of escape. So while the casino as an institution is part of the wider field of capitalism, not all the activities that take place within it, nor the motivations of the players, are explicable in terms of a capitalist regime or logic. Gambling, for instance:

remains completely unproductive. The sum of the winnings at best would only equal the losses of other players. Nearly always the winnings are less, because of large overheads, taxes, and other profits of the entrepreneur. He alone does not play, or if he plays he is protected against loss by the law of averages. In effect, he is the only one who cannot take pleasure in gambling.²⁶

We find much the same situation when we consider the Nike commercial and the situation it represents. We noted that the narrative seems to be suggesting that play and sport are necessarily differentiated: the chaotic activity that erupts before the game starts is quintessential play (it's volitional, wasteful, separated from ordinary life, creative and clearly escapist), but what happens (or will happen) afterwards – the referee taking charge and forcing the players to adhere to the demands of the real, institutionalised game – clearly belongs in the category of work (at least for Caillois). But let's give closer consideration to this apparently neat differentiation. Firstly, what is to stop the same players from 'losing it' again once they're on the field; in other words, why can't play break out, not just in the tunnel prior to the game when and where hardly anybody is watching (play, from this perspective, requires a physical and temporal separation from institutional scrutiny), but during the game, even as the referee, managers, media and fans look on? We couldn't expect to see a similar kind of group frenzy: if players started performing, repeatedly and openly, in a non-utilitarian and wasteful manner, they'd probably be substituted, ridiculed by the media and fans, and perhaps even find themselves subject to legal action (they could be accused, for instance, of throwing the game). Certainly the field and its institutions would ensure that what was perceived as consistently wasteful and self-indulgent play would have serious consequences, regardless of the status of the players.

However, there are a number of examples of this phenomenon (wasteful play inhabiting professional sport) in English and world football in the last forty years: Rodney Marsh of Queens Park Rangers and Matt Le Tissier of Southampton were favourites with the fans, although often berated by managers and sports analysts, because of their penchant for 'playing' to a different logic than that of the team. Both were highly skilful – but idiosyncratic and self-indulgent – players who found it difficult to fit into game plans and rarely did the 'workmanlike' tasks their managers expected of them (tackling back or helping out the defence when the team was under pressure, not taking risks in tight situations, etc.). They could score spectacular goals, and were capable, on their day, of winning a game on their own; but they are often remembered for their non-utilitarian contributions (juggling the ball in the middle of an intensely competitive game; making an opponent look stupid by beating him more than once, etc.). Non-English examples include the Columbian goalkeeper Rene Higuita, who once let a shot sail over his head so he could mule-kick it from behind his back, and the Bulgarian international Dimitar Yakimov who, in the middle of a 1966 World Cup game against Brazil, went off on a mazy dribble that took him past player after player (sometimes twice) to absolutely no effect – save for the obvious pleasure of doing it.

If we follow this line of thinking a little further we can find numerous other examples of the field of professional sport and its spaces, ostensibly defined, delineated and ruled by the logic of utility, being used for the purposes of play – and not just by the players. The crowds that attend games do so for a number of reasons: most will have a passionate attachment to a club or national team, some go to be entertained, while others simply want to socialise with friends. And then there is the more recent phenomenon of fans dressing up in extravagant, eccentric or colourful costumes and so adding to the spectacle of the occasion (the "Barmy Army" that follows the English cricket team to Australia being one example). All of these activities and motives are recuperable within the logic of sport-as-capitalism. In other words, following a team or wanting to be part of a sporting spectacle requires people to become consumers both in direct (buying tickets to the game, hiring costumes) and tangential (transport costs, meals and drinks) ways. This is apparent if we go back to Caillois' non-sporting example of the casino, which is set up and institutionalised in order to take advantage of, and turn a profit from, the desire and propensity of gamblers to play/dissipate. But just as professional footballers aren't always necessarily workers, so spectators aren't simply consumers: they usually go to games of their own volition, gain no advantage, are separated off and escape from the ordinary world, and engage intensely and creatively with the material at hand (players, officials, other members of the crowd). And although they are situated within a context and institutional space that is animated by an economy of pure utility, and concomitantly are complicit with regard to its dominant logic (as consumers they help somebody to make a profit), their own activities and motives are very much in keeping with what the French anthropologist Rene Girard calls "to double business bound."²⁷

PLAY AS SOCIO-CULTURAL PRACTICE

We have accepted the definitions and imperatives that Huizinga and Caillois apply to the concept of play without many reservations or qualifications, but we clearly need to find other ways to make sense of the relationship between the disposition to play and the socio-cultural fields and institutions (such as professional sport) in which this disposition is manifested as a socio-cultural practice. There are two theoretical perspectives we can call upon to address this problem: the first is to be found in Michel de Certeau's book *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1988), and the second is variously articulated in a collection of essays in *The Social Life of Things*, edited by the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (1988).

We made the point that play has to be considered as being “on double business bound”, and De Certeau argues that this is (necessarily) the case with many cultural practices. He posits a series of binaries, such as place/space and strategies/tactics, as a means of characterising the relationship between valorised and authoritative institutions and their agents, and those who are, precisely because of power differentials, obliged to perform compliance with regard to those official regimes. So a factory, bureaucracy, church or, say, a professional sport are simultaneously places (maintained and guaranteed by networks of power and capital, and able to dictate or negotiate the rules of practice to those who deal with and inhabit them) and spaces (which is what a place becomes when it is put to unofficial uses, such as a worker using company property for personal ends, or a fan following and identifying with a team which is run as a business). Places make use of strategies, which De Certeau describes as “the calculus of force-relationship” which becomes possible when an institution attains relative autonomy within and “can be isolated from an environment.”²⁸ Spaces, on the other hand, are inhabited by tactics or calculations “which cannot count on a spatial or institutional location.”²⁹ The disposition to play necessarily manifests itself within the world and its cultural fields, most of which are distinctly disinclined to take or tolerate it on its own terms. There are some places (the family, child-care centres) where play of-and-for-itself is not just allowed but even encouraged, but these institutions and contexts are mainly associated with children or the terminally befuddled, who are partly exempt from incorporation into the logic of a closed economy.

There are times and places that are set aside for play (weekends and holidays; sports fields and resorts) but this regimentation of the times and sites of play is antithetical to the notion of play as spontaneous and volitional. And institutions of play (for example, professional sport and its contests) host play on their own terms, both overtly (witness the rules and regulations concerning, say, what sport's spectators may or may not do in different places at different times) and otherwise (hence the organization of ‘spontaneous’ activity on the part of crowds). In this regulated environment, play is very much like De Certeau's tactic that “insinuates itself into the other's place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance.”³⁰ If play is forced to operate in another place, that is to say within institutions that endeavour to colonise it, then two things become apparent. First, play necessarily takes on forms that would seem, from the perspectives offered by Huizinga and Caillois, to constitute its antithesis (work, capitalism, regimentation). Second

and concomitantly, the places supposedly operating within the logic of a closed economy are not what they seem – they are sites and spaces of waste and dissipation. The American sports historian Allen Guttman points out that:

Moments of play appear unpredictably in the most unlikely places, even upon the gallows...In the film *Cool Hand Luke*, a group of convicts bewilders the guards by increasing the tempo of their road-work, by running back and forth in eager performance of their imposed tasks, by laughing, by turning punishment into play...Had the convicts begun the game purely for their own amusement...the activity would have been...phenomenologically indistinguishable from the utilitarian work that was done.³¹

CONCLUSION

This imbrication of play with its other leads to the question of whether it is possible to distinguish play at all. Some forms of play remove themselves, materially, temporally and psychologically, from contexts that intrude upon play's volitional nature (Caillois' notion of play-as-ilinx, for instance, is predicated on an attempt to escape from or "destroy reality with sovereign brusqueness."³² But rather than follow Huizinga (and to a lesser extent Caillois) and distinguish between the generic features of play and certain contexts (work, professionalism, institutionalism), it is more useful to analyse the relationship between play as a disposition and genre, and the different socio-cultural uses to which it is continually being put. In this we are following Appadurai, who makes the point that it is impossible to state that things and practices definitively 'belong to' one particular economic category (gift or commodity), precisely because they continue to circulate, and are appropriated and reinterpreted, within different socio-cultural contexts. Commodities, for instance, have no definitive status, but can be understood as:

things in a certain situation, a situation that can characterise many different kinds of thing, at different points in their social lives. This means looking at the commodity potential of all things rather than searching fruitlessly for the magic distinction between commodities and other sorts of things ... But how are we to define the commodity situation? I propose that the commodity situation in the social life of any 'thing' be defined as the situation in which its exchangeability (past, present, or future) for some other thing is its socially relevant feature.³³

We can do much the same with play and suggest that something is in a play situation or phase when its socially relevant features are commensurate with the imperatives and generic characteristics outlined by Huizinga and Caillois (it must be separated from ordinary life in some way; non-productive; volitional; adhere to its own rules or logic; and constitute a form of escape from everyday routines), rather than with those of antithetical regimes (such as capitalism, in which case exchangeability would be its socially relevant feature). But while we can accept that play has its own generic features, this is not the same as saying that it has (had) a stable meaning. If the manifestations of and the disposition to play move in and out of the commodity situation, for instance, then one person's escape will become another person's

profit, and vice versa. Moreover, in a cultural field such as sport where play has a significant discursive status (for example, play is clearly central to sport's foundation narrative) but is at odds with dominant forms of capital (those of capitalism), its meanings and functions are likely to be relatively contingent and the subject of (non-playful) agonistics. So rather than understanding sport as having been animated, at some historical point, by a now atrophied ludic disposition, we can think of it as a set of sites which, despite the influence exerted upon it by governments, media and capitalism, continues (necessarily) to value, provoke, and provide occasions for, the disposition to play.

- 1 G Bataille, *The Accursed Share: Volumes 11 & 111* (New York: Zone Books, 1991).
- 2 Ibid., 23.
- 3 Ibid., 22.
- 4 Ibid., 30-31.
- 5 G Bataille, *Visions of Excess* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 118.
- 6 Ibid., 128.
- 7 M Mauss, *The Gift* (London: Routledge, 1988).
- 8 G Bataille, *The Accursed Share: Volumes 11 & 111* (New York: Zone Books).
- 9 J Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), 1.
- 10 Ibid., 3.
- 11 Ibid., 2.
- 12 M Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).
- 13 J Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), 195.
- 14 Ibid., 198.
- 15 Ibid., 197-98.
- 16 M Foucault, *Ethics: the Essential Works Volume 1* (London: Allen Lane, 1997).
- 17 J Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), 173.
- 18 Ibid., 198.
- 19 Ibid., 173.
- 20 R Cailliois, *Men, Play and Games* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 3.
- 21 Ibid., 3.
- 22 Ibid., 4.
- 23 Ibid., 5.
- 24 Ibid., 5.
- 25 Ibid., 5-6.
- 26 Ibid., 5.
- 27 R Girard, *To Double Business Bound* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988).
- 28 M de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), xix.
- 29 Ibid.
- 30 Ibid.
- 31 A Guttman, *From Ritual to Record* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), 13-4.
- 32 R Cailliois, *Men, Play and Games* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 23.
- 33 A Appadurai, "Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value", in A Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 13.

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