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Play!

For to declare it once and for all,
man plays only when he is in the full sense of the word a man,
and he is only wholly man when he is playing.
This proposition...will assume great and deep significance,
it will, I promise you, support the whole fabric of aesthetic art,
and the still more difficult art of living.
J.C. F. Schiller

My intent in this paper is to discuss the word “play”. For that, I will make a short tour through philosophy since this word has been long discussed by so many great figures such as Plato, Aristotle, also, Kant, Schiller, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Huinziga, Durand, Deleuze, Derrida, Wittgenstein, and more recently, Kuchler and Mihai Spariosu just to mention some. Besides that, we also have the psychology area followed by Freud, Jung, Piaget, Lacan, James Hillman, Guggenbuhl-Craig, David Miller and others. To discuss all of them here would be impossible, and so, I would like to start this fascinating journey along play with another interesting word – “deconstruction”, which is a school of philosophy originated in France in the late 1960s.

The term deconstruction is not synonymous with “destruction”, but it is more related to “undo” – a virtual synonym for “to de-construct”. Jacques Derrida is one of the proponents in this metaphysical tradition, which could be described as a theory of a particular kind of practice in reading. In this way, it is linked to undermine the logic of

opposition within texts. It seems it is the ability to deform, different from forming images. By contraction, Derrida himself says it is impossible to define deconstructionism, but it is something which just happen. For him, everything is text, but not only linguistic (text or books), but also gesture and choreography. It is the questioning of the “self-evidence”, such as dichotomies we live by like rational/irrational, fact/fiction, observation/imagination.

In *Writing and Difference*, Derrida sees the future as a monster which can surprise us. He doesn't only play with the difference between play and history, but also between play and presence. For him, “play is the disruption of presence. The presence of an element is always a signifying and substitutive reference inscribed in a system of differences and the movement of a chain.” (292)

On the other hand, Gilles Deleuze, sees Derrida as nasty and destructive! For him, the “school” is a regression, a philosophical catastrophe and an assassination of philosophy (it reminds me that the Greek word for having nothing to do (*schole*) also meant “school”). Deleuze, in an interview entitled “Gilles Deleuze's ABC Primer”, with Claire Parnet, tells us about his fascination for spiders, ticks and fleas, making a link with territory, signs and writing: “they are all connected by living an existence ‘aux aguets’, ‘etre aux aguets’, always being on the lookout, like an animal, like a writer, a philosopher, never tranquil, always looking back over one's shoulder” (2). For him, writing is like becoming an animal, pushing the language to a limit. Like Derrida, there is no literature without fabulation and he doesn't limit language only as literature, but it can be a language of silence or a language of music, for example.

Another interesting figure I would like to discuss is Ludwig Wittgenstein. He studied mechanical engineering in Berlin and aeronautics and mathematics in England. To encourage us, he says: “My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands *me* eventually recognizes *them* as nonsensical” (Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus 4). And to help us a little bit more, he says: “nonsense is nonsense.” And: “deal with it.” For him, philosophy only reminds us of what we already know; the deepest problems are not problems at all, and we don’t *solve* anything by producing theories, but only, maybe, we can *dissolve* confusion. Wittgenstein wants us not to think (too much), but to look at the “language games”. As he says:

Language sets everyone the same traps; it is an immense network of easily accessible wrong turnings. And so we watch one man after another walking down the same paths and we know in advance where he will branch off, where walk straight on without noticing the side turning, etc, etc. What I have to do then is erect signposts at all the junctions where there are wrong turnings so as to help people past the danger points.(42)

This is a Hillman’s *notitia* and for Wittgenstein, knowing the meaning of a word can involve many things, even psychological perspectives. Following this play, let’s come back to the roots of our word “play”. And since we already have another word, “game”, it is already time to bring a very good joke between David Miller and Hans-Georg Gadamer, in the occasion of David Miller’s book *Gods and Games*. Gadamer said:

Professor Miller, you almost got the point! [...] English has a doublet for the idea: play, the verb, and game, the noun, are different words in English, whereas German says it with one and the same word, *ein Spiel spielen*, as does French, *jour un jeu* [...] You had wrongly thought that play has something to do with fun and games. Very American! [...] Do you ride a bicycle? I said that I did. Then he asked me about the front wheel, the axle, and the nuts. He remarked that I probably knew that it was important not to tighten the nuts too tightly, else the wheel could not turn. It has to have some play! [...] and not too much play, or the wheel will fall off. You know, he said, *Spielraum*.
(The Bricoleur in the Tennis Court: Pedagogy in Postmodern Context 9)

David Miller in the *1996 Conference on Values in Higher Education*, concludes in his paper that we need *topos*, some space to let education happens:

Perhaps such a perspective could release us from the fantasy that the play of bricoleur is in the ability to be clever, to figure pedagogical things out, things like values. Rather than thinkers, we could be tinkers: being loose, loosed, spaced out. Play is out, as in fishing, give the students enough line. We don't hook them. We don't even let them hook themselves. We show them how they have hooked themselves already. How they are always already hooked. And us, too, to be sure.[...]Above all, we could sense the play in everyone's words about everything, in language, in image, in the imagery of words and language. This noticing can help the wheel turn. And this turning is a revolution. (9-10)

In this level, we should already be guessing that we are all talking in metaphors. That play is a metaphor of contemporary meaning, therefore, *mythos*; or as David Miller says: "Play is our *mythos*." But maybe I am going too fast now. Let's first go back to Plato. For that, I would like to call attention to the polemic and not homogeneous subjects around sophistic and rhetoric.

Sophistic and rhetoric can be confused. When Plato positively characterized the rhetoric, it was the dialectics, meaning dialogue in general. It is important to notice that in *Phaedro*, a second element, the "divine *mania*," is independent. According to Plebe, "...to Plato, the dialectics are dialogue, the interrogation art and their answers [...], social activity, relationship; the divine "mania," however, is an experience completely individual, not social, which brings man to an unreal world. We can say, therefore, that in *Phaedro*, although with diverse objectives, we reencounter the gorgian distinction between the rhetoric *peitho* and the poetic *apate*." (Breve Historia da Retorica Antiga 32)

We cannot confuse, however, of what Plato calls in *Sophist*, of "rhetoric of noble birth" with the sophistic rhetoric; as well, we cannot be confused about the reflection of

daimon (mania), which gives a positive view to arts – and it is what justifies Plato’s idea in relation to myth, with the poetic *apate* of *Gorgias* (487-380 ac). The play of those concepts are winding. In the first part of *Phaedro*, Plato develops a metaphysics of Beauty in a totally different base of the anterior reflection about art. In the second part, Plato tries to “purify” the rhetoric giving an approach to dialectics. Therefore, it is a social activity- his commitment is with Truth and not with the convenient. In relation to “mania,” it has a secondary play compared with the notion of Beauty which has a definition with metaphysics, love and ethics categories. The perspective that I see is a fusion between rhetoric and poetics in an activity “psychogogic,” for example, “based in the irrational seduction that the word [...] has to the listener’s soul.” (Plebe 3)

The importance in those debates of platonism with the sophistic is that Plato’s concept of metaphysical Beauty, being a pure ethics-contemplation, shows a way to a true philosophy. This is replaced to a discursive search, logical-dialectical, of the truth, a concept of which the philosophy built its identity.

Another perspective, is the theory of Sophist. In this dialogue, the empirical world has a place of not-being in relation to Being – it is no longer the pure Not-Being, but the negative of Being. The “Truth” is not anymore a concept between Being and Not-Being, which would exclude the Not-Being of the Real (the most real reality...). Plato arrives at the conclusion that the only way to go beyond the Sophist, to which every speech is truthful, was to prove that falsity exists. It is not the case anymore of showing the ideal world of Truth, of Beauty and of Good which would be the “world of ideas,” because it doesn’t explain the possibility of the false statements – by contrary, every statement like “the man is man,” or “the beautiful is beautiful,” etc., would be nonsense. We could say,

in a grotesque way, that it is because of that, Plato develops his theory in levels of truth, which correspond to the many levels of Being: many times the Being is not-being; to each being corresponds also the not-being; the not-being is the Other of Being, etc. – it is more clear if we think that the empirical world doesn't correspond anymore to Not-Being, but it becomes an obstacle, a receptacle, a copy of the Being operated by a demiurgus, in the Timaeus's language. But what is more crucial, in the platonic perspective, is that the Sophist, refusing that falsity exists, are not going through the relative sphere of Being, but to the mistake, to the illegitimate copy: copy of the copy, illusionism, artifact, I could say in one word: imagination. For them, anything spoken is truthful. The "Being" would be *like it is* since it could not correspond to (participate to) itself, Being, and also, it could not be possible to have any relation of not-being with which it participates, therefore, being itself is not-being!

As to Plato, Costa Lima says: "...the *mimesis* (imitation) is synonymous with the *phantasm's* realm, it is the other of the shadow, it is not even the shadow, since it is a body that is projected" (1980, 47). In other words, a model of which would be the copy. As for sophistic and the art, the result of this would be towards the conjuring of the mistake. But if there is a sphere of the "mistake," which Plato disagrees, it would have a possibility, pointed by Costa Lima, to a valorization of art in the reflection developed in the Sophist: "...if we suspend the idea of that, the not-being is the bearer of the false, that with relation to not-being, while the Other of being, it doesn't fit the reserved judgment about the truthful/falsity – we could meet the *mimesis*, fed by the not-being, the principal way to recognize *mimesis* as fiction." (44)

It is also interesting to see Plato through the lens of Mihai Spariosu. For him, literature is also primarily a matter of “play.” As Joel D. Black explains in his article about Spariosu’s essay *Literature, Mimesis and Play: Essays in Literary Theory*,

Literature:

In the Mihai Spariosu’s view, philosophy’s encroachment on literary theory is by no means a recent development, but rather it is a long-standing condition inaugurated by Plato in his reductive conception of poetry as imitation, consolidated by Aristotle, and perpetuated ever since by philosophers like Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida. [...] What seems most distinctive and promising about Spariosu’s project is his determination to present a theory of literature no *in terms of* but *in opposition to* what he reveals to be a controlling philosophical-scientific discourse.[...] The six essays [...] point the way toward a daring re-interpretation of literature, apart from the mimetic categories of presence and representation, of fiction and non-fiction.
(The Literature of Play and the Literature of Power 1)

Spariosu liberates the concept of play from traditional theories of art as imitation, and I am thankful for that. Sometimes I even think that life imitates art. Returning to Joel Black’s article:

Spariosu accuses Plato of marking the decisive moment when “poetry as irrational play” which had formerly “enjoyed the authority of knowledge and truth [...] came to be challenged by philosophy” (46, n.29). Platonic philosophy, in other words, subordinated irrational poetry as “literature” to the legitimized, rational power-principle of philosophical and scientific discourse. Or in Spariosu’s words, Plato “deliberately relegates fictions (lies or bad mimesis) to literature, thus using diversionist tactics to insure the installation of truth in non-literary language” (63). Poetry *qua* literature thus was stigmatized as a pack of lies that threatened the ethical and civic order articulated by the “true” discourse of philosophy. (3)

Poetry does not tell us the truth, but speaks like the truth, and Spariosu points out that speaking *like* and being playful is necessary to a larger context and reinterpretation of Western culture; he affirms that the presence of play is behind *mimesis*. Here we are all making a loop and we can ask: is it the American way of fun? can it be taken seriously?

To answer that I go again to the origins, with David Miller’s help:

Originally play was not thought of as being the opposite of seriousness. A passage from 2 Samuel (11:14) clearly demonstrates this. The sons of Abner are called on to “play” (*sahaq*), which in the scriptural context connotes a call to the quite serious activity of fighting a war. Serious activity may be viewed as play; play is serious. There is no necessary dichotomy.

One need not search long for evidence of an original unity of seriousness and nonseriousness in the concept of play. Among certain Greek biographers, for example, there is an interesting bit of evidence in the use of the word composed by joining the word for “serious” (*spoude* also means “haste” and “zeal”) with the word for “mirth-provoking” (*geloios*). Diogenes Laertius uses the term in reference to Heraclitus. Strabo attributes this term to the comic poet Menippus. The finest compliment these biographers could pay to the men about whom they wrote was to call them “grave-merry” (*spoudogeloios*). It is this same high quality that must have been in the mind of Xenophon, whose ideal type was Socrates, when he recommended the life of *paidzein spoude*, “playing serious” and “seriously playing.” Seriousness and unseriousness were combined in the ideal life of some ancient Greeks. (Gods and Games 104)

David Miller goes also to the origins of the word in English, German, Hebrew, Sanskrit, and Buddha says: “All life is suffering.” Very ironic (and another interesting word to play with). But we do need to find that space for the wheel turn...otherwise life doesn't have life. Let's celebrate Homo Ludens! And let Joseph Campbell return in this positive perspective of the basis of the meaning-function of myth: “myth is play”. The “logic” of “as if”. Or, as in Zarathustra, where he was born laughing. And we all play, because we like to play! It is joy – serious and playful! Reality is a play and forget it – it is already there, I mean, here, in life, going on. All this reminds me of the clowns, and it really goes together, since they are always characterized as infringement and subversive. Especially because it seems they have the capacity of fully enacting the basic, but with unwritten rules, besides the fact that clowns are seen as the true giver of joys and they are the children's hero.

I started this paper with a Schiller's quotation where he points out the aesthetic art. Joseph Campbell argues that there are four functions of man's mythology, and for a

truly comprehensive meaning-system, it involves first the spiritual (*aisthesis*), then, a natural-cosmic (*poiesis*), followed by a social (*metamorphosis*), and finally, a psychological function (*therapeia*). Following Campbell's perspective, I would like to discuss those four functions followed by the interpretation of David Miller in *Gods and Games*.

(1) *Aisthesis*: Nonseriousness Is the Highest Seriousness [...] *Aisthesis* comes from the Greek verb *aisthanomai*, which is the past-tense form of the verb *aisthesthai*, which means "to sense" or "to know", for the senses truly give knowledge.[...] Seeing is knowing; it is revelation. Seeing is believing; believing, seeing. This may have been Plato's meaning when he used the phrase *aistheseis ton theon*, the knowing of the gods. Plato's knowledge of the gods [...] is the knowing that comes from "turned-on" senses. It is the knowing of "Oh, I see!" or "Aha!" In fact, Xenophon and Euripedes and other ancient Greeks used the term *aisthesis* not only to mean "to know" but also "to see" and "to hear." (140)

In theater, I have experienced that, and I remember telling my students in Brazil to hear with the eyes and to see with the ears. It was a strange request and I used to give the example of dogs. Usually, dogs don't move their heads to see what is behind, so they see with their ears. In theater-dance, we must have all our senses turned-on, and our bodies should know more than our mere mind knowledge; it is with the wholeness of the body that we truly play. I think that is the meaning of *aisthesis*, or with David Miller's words: "the primary significance of play-consciousness." (142)

(2) *Poiesis*: Fiction is the Highest Truth. *Poiesis* is the second mark of the meaning of the concept of play. This term has come to be associated with the words "poetics" and "poesy" and "poetry". Originally it was the noun formed on the simple Greek verb meaning "to make" or "to do". Its formation implies that every making is a doing; every doing a making. Creation is an action; every action is a creation. Both making and doing, creating and acting, are fabrications. They are the creative expressions of the self. Hence, one form of the Greek verb *prospoieomai* means "to pretend", that is, to make-believe. (143)

Here we could go back to Spariosu when he says that the presence of play is behind *mimesis*. It could be right since play is more poetic than mimetic. As David Miller

well says: “*Poiesis* is creation: the fabrication of shapes and forms which correspond to something in one’s own self. A child plays before he is able to imitate. Play and *poiesis* are the single expression of the freedom of the self to make and to do anything at all” (143). This is the world of *as if*. In truth, the poets are metaphor-makers and we could live poetically.

(3) *Metamorphosis*: Change Is the Highest Stability. The key term for understanding the coherence of society is *metamorphosis*. The social order is in continual metamorphosis. It is continually transforming itself, transfiguring itself, disguising itself, and revealing itself. The only thing that does not change is the appearance that all things seem to change. To try to conceive of the coherence of the social order by using a static category would be to reduce change to a nonchanging idea. Therefore the clue to understanding the coherence of the social order is to see it as not-cohering; that is the only coherent view. Yet how does all this relate to play?[...] The player participates in metamorphosis by the very action of his way of seeing the world as play. But unlike the person who stops the flow of life or who attempts to rush the flow of life, the player does not experience change as instability. His stability is precisely in his ability to change. (148)

Everything changes and it is a continuous creation- everything is in a flux. If we were able to be less depressive we would see the poetry of the ephemeral, of the transitory, because everything is in between in an endless space and time. Mythology, itself, doesn’t explain anything, but gives expression. Myths cannot be right or wrong.

(4) *Therapeia*: Purposelessness In the Highest Purpose. [...] The Greek noun *therapeia* is based upon the verb *therapeuo*, which means “to wait upon”. The condition of “waiting upon” may be understood in relation to its cognate English phrase “waiting for”.[...]The meaning which comes to us when we “wait for” it is an old meaning; it is something that we ourselves have projected out of our past. But if we were able to “wait upon” meaning rather than to “wait for” it, then new meaning could dawn upon us. The new meaning would then not be something bound to our ego-desires and needs, but it would be something which truly participates in the wonder and awe, in the creativity and change, of all being. (150)

The elements of meaning, as we have said, are *aisthesis*, *poiesis* and *metamorphosis*. The total experience is *therapeia*- it is when all those elements work together, at the same time, that we experience this fourth element, which involves self-understanding since the therapeutic functions are to turn-on the senses, to experience imagination in a broader reality and to be able to live in action together with a community of change.

The Swiss Jungian analyst and former President of the Curatorium of the Jung Institute in Zurich, Adolf Guggenbuhl-Craig says that:

The paradoxical approach to psychology offers still more. It help us to play in the most profound sense of the word.[...] Psychology is play for the glory of the soul. We psychologists try to playfully comprehend the soul with images and fables. The paradox of the images reminds us continually that we are playing as if with a kaleidoscope. We shake or turn the images lightly, revealing ever new configurations.[...] Recovering our delight in play helps us to rearrange the images and figures of the past, present, and future into new and interesting dramas and novels, tragedies and comedies. (From the Wrong Side 130)

It was in 1997, reading James Hillman that I changed all my view upon the world:

...psychology is the most important of fields because it speaks for psyche – and, at the same time, that it cannot speak for psyche; that its first concern to therapy, and that a therapeutic psychology defeats itself; that psychological ideas are essential to the eye of the soul, and that they block its vision. In short, I have been saying that psychology is its own worst enemy. The cause of these internal oppositions is literalism. Literalism prevents psychologizing by making psychology of it.[...] And Norman Brown says: “The thing to be abolished is literalism;...the worship of false images; idolatry... Truth is always in poetic form; not literal but symbolic; hiding, or veiled; light in darkness...the alternative to literalism is mystery.” (Re-Visioning Psychology 149)

And it was in 1987, studying International Relations, that I first read Giambattista Vico:

All the first tropes are corollaries of this poetic logic. The most luminous and therefore the most necessary and frequent is metaphor. It is most praised when it gives sense and passion to insensate things, in accordance with the metaphysics

above discussed [402], by which the first poets attributed to bodies the being of animate substances, with capacities measured by their own, namely sense and passion, and in this way made fables of them. Thus every metaphor so formed is a fable in brief. (The New Science 129)

Well...just seriously laughing even when not laughing! All this weave along play seems to be very ironic, and irony starts with reflection since fables cannot feign the false. Like children, fables are true narratives. Fiction? Yes. Non-Fiction? There is no non-fiction! And see it aesthetically, poetically, metamorphosically, and therapeutically! In philosophy there are no winners!

As David Miller says: “Irony is a way of not-saying, i.e., of not-I speaking...or rather, irony is a way of understanding the not-saying, of understanding the not-I speaking...it is a depth psychological trope in which, as Nietzsche and Deleuze have said, the depth is on the surface.” (Irony’s Arrows/Eros: A Poetics of Culture16)

A serious “*cheers!*” to humor! ...just Play!

I’ll finish this paper with an untitled poem:

Agora nao se fala nada
 Toda palavra guarda uma cilada
 E qualquer gesto eh o fim no seu inicio.
 Agora nao se fala nada
 E tudo eh transparente em cada forma
 Qualquer palavra eh um gesto
 E em sua orla
 Os passaros sempre cantam nos hospicios.
 (Torquato Neto, O Dia, January 19, 1972)

Now nothing is said/Every word keeps a trick/And any gesture is the end of its beginning./Now nothing is said/And everything is transparent in each form/Any word is a gesture/And in its border/The birds always sing in the sylums.



Metamorphoses

Ever-changing characters

More than two hundred combinations



Originally published in
Germany c.1890



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