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PLAY

By Tiziana Pangrazi

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It. *gioco, esecuzione, opera*; Fr. *jeu, pièce*; Germ. *Spiel*; Span. *juego, ejecución, opera*. The term *play* strictly, yet simultaneously and interactively, encompasses a sense of playing both a game and an instrument. In other words, the term brings together the idea of the pleasure of play and a conscious, organised, guided and targeted gesture or movement involving the body. This movement particularly involves the hands and fingers, which are unique to humans and associated with many species-specific skills (cf. the *homunculus*). Recently, the term *digit* has emphasised and introduced another dimension of the term *play*, that of calculation and number skills done with the fingers (for example, now less common activities like using an abacus, throwing dice or traditional counting games) while also referring to the digital world, a new and unique logical-semantic field.

HISTORY OF THE CONCEPT

Play comprises a prefix or suffix in many commonly used terms. These include terms capturing a sense of friendliness (*playmate*), a decidedly recreational significance (*playtime, playland, playroom*) or communicative (*playbill*) or "fictional" meanings (*play acting*). The term is also used to refer to language games (*wordplay*), a reciprocity of action and reaction (*interplay*), electronic information (*display*) and the idea of repetition-replica (*replay*). Additional uses relate to other aspects of communication, art or gaming of some sort (including sports and gambling). In this context, the subject is commonly referred to as the *player* or *performer*, who may be a sportsman, a musical virtuoso, an artist and often someone highly adept at what he/she does. The terms *player* and *performer*, as well as *play* and *performance*, share some common aspects, but are certainly not complete synonymous.

A divine *fiat* can be symbolically considered a primordial gesture, command or order aimed at realising something. The established philosophical and historical origin of the notion of *play* can be traced back to Aristotelian thought. In this line of thinking, *téchne* is seen, among other things, as guided by human

knowledge and already inseparably fused and marked by the critical influence of action. It is only in the modern age that artists start seeing themselves, their action and their products as the outcome of an explicitly expressed position or a pragmatic mental attitude, making the artists responsible for “their” gesture before the world.

The Kantian expression “free play [*Spiel*] of faculties” is relevant to the concept of ingenious subjectivity. Still, *play* has become above all a matter of science and technique during the twentieth century. The notion of the machine may have been part of ordinary human consciousness from the start, but the “question” of technique historically arose only in the 1930s, as exemplified in W. Benjamin’s 1936 essay on the mass character of the era. In identifying film as a technological “play-form” (Hansen 2004: 393), he openly considered the idea of *replaying* and the way the re-production-replication process removes “the re-production from the sphere of tradition” (Benjamin 1980: 477). In 1928, T.W. Adorno was able to write that a “phonographic technique demands a natural object” (Adorno 1928). By 1969, the electronics age was fully apparent (as “technical existence” [Bense 1949]; “a symbol of life present and future” [Prieborg 1960]). Yet, there was still scope to affirm that “the Long play appears as a *deus ex machina*,” capable of reproducing “complete executions that claim to be living things” (Adorno 1969). The “fate” of electronic mediums is, however, that they lead rather to a progressive “denaturation” of performance, the creative act and *play*. The gestures of the *player* become “simplified” because it is (apparently) simple to take a photograph, operate a camera or place a record player needle on a vinyl record. These elementary and yet complex gestures are only initial examples of the process of progressive “simplification” of human action which occurred alongside and in direct proportion to that of scientific advancement. The more the gesture of *play* becomes simplified and intuitive – and theoretically within anyone’s reach – the more it is the result of sophisticated research. With this transformation, the *affordances*, or the qualities of an object or a device that allow us to interact with it, are becoming more and more relevant. The theme of reproducibility currently affects every aspect of life and culture. Often *play* has to do with imitation and simulation, such as the phenomenon of *playback*. Finally, it is also related to a multiplicity of “musical utterances via digital actions and analogical gestures” (Moseley 2016, 237).

THE CONTEMPORARY DEBATE

A purely philosophical-anthropological context provides us an opportunity to think broadly about the notion of the game and the repercussions it has on different areas of thought. In this regard, examples include: Heidegger’s concept of *Zeit-Spiel-Raum*; Wittgenstein’s “language games” and *Spiel* principle; Simmel’s relationship between *Spiel*, *Kunst* and *Leben*; Gadamer’s *Hermeneutik des Spiels*; Derrida’s contrasting notion of *jeu* as interpretation-deconstruction; Lévi-Strauss’s concept of *bricolage*; and Sartre’s idea of the game as a principle of subjectivity. All these imply reflecting on the very nature of aesthetics and its autonomy.

While masters such as Breton, Picasso, Ernst, and Satie initiated a “method” of aesthetic construction based on the concept of the game, the notion of play returned after the war in the form of Duchamp’s *ready-made* objects and puns and Calder’s *mobiles*, which were truly games playing out in the air. From the

1950s to 1970s, the occurrence of *happenings* was explicitly connected to using “undetermined” procedures that created autonomous aesthetic value out of the “experiment-experience”. Cage’s “suspension of time” is emblematic of this. “Anything could happen”, or rather, “precisely something that he did not have in mind” could happen (Cage 1987: 118-119). The most radical example of this concurrently phenomenological and objective attitude is Cage’s silent piece *4’33”* (1952) in which the traditional *playing* by the player is completely negated. As with the *dirt* of Rauschenberg’s *White Paintings* (Cage 1961: 100), one’s action frees unintentional sounds resulting in the casual play between the environment and the listeners.

The post-war period saw the development and definitive affirmation of electronics. This has led today to the birth of *medial Spielwelten* idea based on the binary “differential” principles of letter/sound, light/darkness, white/black (photography), image/cut (film), one/zero (code) and the dictates that govern so-called virtual reality. In this regard, it is increasingly difficult to distinguish the “player” from the “programmer” since the difference involves the “programming of creativity”. Moreover, these topics also raise issues of a more strictly ethical nature regarding cyber-identity in cyber-space. This is especially the case regarding so-called interactive web games such as MUD (Multi User Domains) and the MOO (Muds Object Oriented) (Barck 2003: 614-615). In addition, the use of technology shifts the *player’s* attention and his *play* from products to processes. Processes that are highly abstract, formal, parametrical, axiomatic, mechanised, denatured and purely electronic (Nyman 1974) are now considered as an extension of, or as interacting with, the human body. As such, *play* is about “any kind of control”, a “cyber performance” or “hyperinstruments” (Garnett 2001).

Finally, something must be said about *post-digital music*, which relies on a creative usage of the devices employed by technical reproduction or digital choreography, which are instances of an overcoming – successful or not – of past genres, knowledge, and expressive forms. This music is often disseminated on the internet, far from academia and experts, even though it was initially made possible through the use of university-developed software (e.g. Max, SMS, AudioSculpt, PD). Based on DSP (Digital Signal Processing), post-digital music emerged out of the “failure” of digital technologies themselves. Concepts and terms such as “detritus”, “by-product”, “snap”, “crackle”, “glitch”, “mangling” and “crunching” are essential to understanding this kind of music. Some electronic composers and DJs helped generate the “glitch movement” (Cascone 2000). New current approaches to thinking about aesthetic experience focus on issues such as Remediation of the work, Mediatisation of performance, Algorithmic Listening, Listening and Neo-Auratic Encoding, Semiconducting and music, Sonic Imprinting and themes related to the increasing performative nature of both listening and *playing* (Borio 2015). The ability to capture, store, manipulate and transform body movements and translate them into numerical sequences has set off previously unknown creative processes. The relationship between choreography and numbers has become evident in the digital works done by Merce Cunningham before the term was even coined. He became the inventor of whole-body *play* and has inspired so-called *computation* defined as “a computational/compositional (or a compu/sitional) process, a way to creatively think the dance with numbers” or by creating a *Compu-sition* (Portanova 2013: 131). These are all forms of human action

implying the idea of the inexhaustibility of play as well as of its guiding principle, that is, imagination. As such "imagination animates play and may be the essence of play" (Reichling 1997: 43).

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