

Man the Player

Huizinga's 'Homo Ludens' Revisited

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In 1972, in a lecture at the big Huizinga congress in Groningen, Ernest Gombrich made the suggestion that Huizinga's biography of Erasmus was a form of self-criticism. 'Somehow the great humanist aroused in him all the ambivalent feelings that sprang from a life-long fight against the temptations of cultured aestheticism.' Gombrich's polite suggestion was to compare *The Praise of Folly* with *Homo ludens*, because one could discover a lot about Huizinga from the similarity between the two books.

Huizinga himself denied any possible identification with Erasmus. In 'My path to History', the autobiographical notes that he put down on paper at the start of the Second World War, he wrote: 'With regard to my biography of Erasmus, some people have thought: the writer has indeed put himself into this. Personally I have always rejected that opinion as completely incorrect. Great as is my admiration for Erasmus, my fellow-feeling is just as limited.' That does not prevent Erasmus playing the role of a witness in *Homo ludens*. 'Erasmus, how he radiates the spirit of play from his whole being!'

In his 1933 rectoral oration, 'On the limits of play and seriousness in culture', in which he reflected on the theme for the first time, Huizinga calls play 'a category that devours everything, just as Folly, once she had taken shape in Erasmus's mind, had to become the queen of the whole world.' And he returns to this comparison in *Homo ludens*. Here, too, he associates play with folly, in this case to specify that the concept is separate from the antithesis wisdom – folly. 'Nonetheless, the concept folly also had to serve to express a great divergence of sentiments. In the linguistic usage of the late Middle Ages the collocation *folie et sens* more or less covered the distinction between play and seriousness', 'until,' he added in the English translation, 'Erasmus in his *Laus Stultitiae* showed the inadequacy of the contrast.'

In his biography of Erasmus, too, Huizinga emphasises that *The Praise of Folly* embodies the passion for play to perfection. 'Anyone who tears off the masks from the game of life is thrown out. [...] Those who do not conform to what currently exists and demand that the game should no longer be a game do wrong.' Huizinga particularly admires the virtuosity with which Erasmus intertwined his two themes, 'that of salutary folly, which is the true wisdom, and that of deluded wisdom, which is pure folly. As both are proclaimed by Folly, one

Chess game on the roof of the
Groothandelsgebouw next to
Rotterdam Central Station, 2007.
Photo by Vincent Mentzel.



would have to invert them both to get to the truth, if Folly ... were not wisdom. It is clear that the first is the main theme. That is Erasmus's starting point and that is what he comes back to. Only in the middle section, the review of human skills and values in their general foolishness, does the second theme take the upper hand, and the work becomes an ordinary satire, like so many others, although few are as fine as this one. In the other sections *The Praise* is something much more profound than such a satire.'

Virtually the same can be said of *Homo ludens*. Here, too, there is the same dichotomy. As Huizinga sees it, Play has its antithesis at its core. It is even defined as a contrast, as non-seriousness. At the same time there is mention



Girl with games computer,
2001. Photo by Vincent
Mentzel.

of 'far-reaching contamination of the spiritual values' of play and seriousness. Play and seriousness constantly turn into each other. Play loses its quality of independence and lack of inhibition and wants to pass for seriousness. At the same time one finds serious technical and economic activities involved in the realm of play. 'Play,' says Huizinga, 'is a category that devours everything, just as Folly, once she had taken shape in Erasmus's mind, had to become the queen of the whole world.'

Children, animals, primitive people and visionaries

It is this element of devouring that makes the two books, *The Praise of Folly* and *Homo ludens*, so comparable. Not only are the main principles of both books constructed around the paradoxical dichotomies of folly-wisdom and playfulness-seriousness, but in both books this leads to a division into three parts. Erasmus divides his book into description, criticism and wisdom; in other words, first the fact of the everyday practice that turns folly into wisdom and vice versa, then the satire on intellectuals and especially the church, and finally the higher folly that links religion and philosophy. In Huizinga's book it is the explanation of play as the border between seriousness and non-seriousness and the ability of archaic cultures to formalise it in sacred acts and festive contests. Then come

the increasing complexity and seriousness of culture and the submersion of play in forms like the administration of justice, war, poetry, philosophy and art. And finally the total victory of seriousness, personified by Huizinga in the figure of the political philosopher Carl Schmitt. His redefinition of war as 'der Ernstfall' (Emergency) is, for Huizinga, the most horrifying example of what he now calls 'the demonic, enchanted shackles of play'.

Another, at least equally important, similarity is the fact that in both books the argument is not rational but associative, not historical but literary, that it rests not on causality or development but on metamorphosis. Folly refers to the transformation of foolishness into wisdom and back again literally as metamorphosis. 'Compare now, if you please, this generosity of mine with the metamorphoses that other gods bestow.' 'That is why I can never praise that one cockerel, Pythagoras, enough,' she says. 'After he had been everything all by himself: philosopher, man, woman, king, citizen, fish, horse, frog and I believe even sponge, he decided no creature was more disastrous than man, because all the rest are content with the limits nature sets, only man wants to exceed the limits of his lot.'

In *Homo ludens* we see the same metamorphoses occurring. In this book, and indeed elsewhere in Huizinga's work too, sensitivity to the ludic is reserved for a specific capacity that is peculiar to children and primitive peoples, poets and visionaries. Only those who can project themselves into play can understand what it is. In *Homo ludens*, for example, play goes hand in hand with poetry. 'If one interprets seriousness as that which can be reasonably expressed in terms of waking life, then poetry will never be completely serious. It stands on the far side of seriousness, on that original side where children, animals, primitive people and visionaries belong, in the realm of dreams, of ecstasy, intoxication and laughter.' The whole of *Homo ludens* seems aimed at eradicating the difference between children and adults. The child becomes one with its play, just as primitive man in his magic dance *is* the kangaroo. 'It is a mystical identity. The one has become the other.' It is the realm of the sacred game, where children and poets are at home, along with the primitive folk.'

A third similarity is the particular importance attached to Plato in both books. Not only does Erasmus model his differentiation of the two sorts of folly on Plato's differentiation between the two sorts of love but, more importantly, in several places he uses the myth of the cave, the difference between the changeable world on the one hand and the enduring realm of the true and the beautiful on the other. Eventually this leads to the identification of Platonism with Christianity, to a rejection of material reality and a 'soaring upwards to the eternal, the invisible, the spiritual reality.'

Plato fulfils the same function in *Homo ludens*. With Plato's help Huizinga elevates play to a sacred act, reversing the economy of play and seriousness in exactly the same way Erasmus does. It is not war that is serious – that is more of a folly – but ordinary everyday life, and one should take it seriously through playing because that is what God wanted. God has created man as a toy, his play is our seriousness, our seriousness his play. 'If play, then, is the most serious thing,' says Huizinga at the end of his book, and he quotes Plato, "then people must spend their lives playing certain games, making sacrifices, singing and dancing, to gain the favour of the gods and win the battle." In this way "they will live life according to their nature, because in most respects they are puppets, but share a small part of the truth".

Rules of the game

Perhaps the most important overlap between *The Praise of Folly* and *Homo ludens* concerns the function of the rules of the game. Both Erasmus and Huizinga want to make it clear that those who break the rules spoil more than a game. Either you join in the game or you politely allow yourself to be deceived. 'Is that then not proof of folly?' Stultitia asks herself. 'I shall not deny that,' is her answer. Provided that one acknowledges 'that that happens to be the way the comedy of life is played.' In Huizinga's notion of play, too, the difference between belief and pretence is lost. He even goes as far as to distinguish between

Amusement park De Efteling,
Kaatsheuvel, 2007.
Photo by Vincent Mentzel.



cheating and being a spoilsport. The cheat still pretends to play the game. 'He maintains the pretence of recognising the magic circle of the game. Those involved in the game forgive his sin more easily than they do the spoilsport, because the latter shatters their very world.'

There is a difference between cheating and spoiling the game. And we can only see that difference if we reverse the relationship between play and seriousness. Again, the chief witness is Carl Schmitt, who was for a while Hitler's court theoretician. Schmitt based his political theory on the fundamental difference between friend and foe. War was just the ultimate consequence of that difference. Huizinga turned this reasoning around. It was not war that was serious – that was more like folly – but ordinary everyday life, and one should take it seriously by playing along, that is, by abiding by the rules of the game. Only in this way could one free oneself from the 'enchanted shackles' of play. It is not war that is the 'emergency situation' but peace; the point is not the game as such but the rules of the game, or rather the ethics of it.

It is with this particular point that modern criticism of the book has problems. Three of the best reactions to the *Homo ludens*, Gombrich's lecture, mentioned above, and essays written by George Steiner and Umberto Eco as prefaces to the English (1970) and Italian (1973) translations of the book respectively, agreed on one crucial point: Huizinga simply did not understand the concept of 'the rules of the game'. Whether one looks at it from the point of view of ethology like Gombrich, or the mathematics of play behaviour like Steiner, or structuralism like Eco did, their criticism came down to the same thing: that by seeking to use ethics to get away from play Huizinga remained even more in its thrall. They reproach Huizinga for having written about play but not about the rules of the game.

If he had done that, his critics believe, then he would have realised that what he, Huizinga, saw as spoiling the game, was clearly a subordinate part of the game's structure. The sensitive aesthete, says Eco – and here we hear an echo of Gombrich and many other Dutch critics – who was capable of grasping the moment of play in the cruelty of the Sphinx who sent those who failed the test to their deaths, was unable to see it also in the cruelty of the contemporary dictatorship that puts its dissidents to death. That means, writes Eco, that Huizinga has not really accepted the idea he puts forward: that as well as being serious play can also be terrible and tragic.

Order and keeping faith

It is striking that this criticism is clearly about morality. According to his critics, Huizinga invokes morality to say that the game is over. His critics look for the morality within the game itself. For it is exactly in those rules, exactly by freeing them of any specific content, that the moment lies in which culture keeps its forms in shape. It is exactly when one is free of the content that one can recognise, play and finish the game as a game. 'And therefore it is play,' concludes Eco, 'that is the moment of social wellbeing, the moment of greatest functionality, when society, if we may put it like that, lets the engine idle so as to clean the spark plugs, avoid flooding, let the cylinders warm up, allow the oil to circulate and to check everything. Play, then, is the moment of greatest and most responsible seriousness.'



Hula-Hoop, 2003.
Photo by Vincent Mentzel.

That is nicely put, and it is relevant in general terms, too. Huizinga often came surprisingly close to a number of structuralist notions, but in the end it was not the structure that interested him but man's behaviour. He did not write a book about play, but about man the player. However, Huizinga clearly tried to look for the moral criteria he was after in play itself. He begins, it is true, with what he calls 'the deep aesthetic quality of play', but he transforms it into an ethical one. Aesthetic qualities are rhythm and repetition, cadence and refrain, closed form and harmony, 'all of which are attributes of play,' he says, 'and they are also all constituents of style.' And then it comes, one of those wonderful associations on which Huizinga had the patent: 'What is called style in the aesthetic is called order and loyalty in the ethical.' When he evokes these criteria to characterise certain phenomena, such as spoiling the game, he stays within the limits of play, or at least of what he defines as play, which had chiefly formal characteristics.

With Huizinga, as with Eco, the difference lies not between playing and not playing but between playing and being played with. With Huizinga, however, it is not the 'matrix' that plays with us but God, not an anonymous structure but a last judgement, an ethical instance, whether we project it outside ourselves or carry it within us. God made toys of man, his game is our seriousness, our

seriousness his game. That is how Huizinga tries to free himself from the 'enchanted shackles' of play. Huizinga clearly has a theory of play, i.e. a theory of decision. Just as he said to the ethologists that man could choose not to be a flesh-devouring animal, so he said to the structuralists that man could choose not to be a puppet with no will of its own.

But man must adapt. The balance that Huizinga sought between art and science and between aesthetics and ethics had to do with this, with the conviction that man must subordinate himself, must conform to the rules of a higher game. He did not turn his back on his time, he criticized his contemporaries. He thought they took themselves too seriously. 'Liberation lies not in the renunciation of culture but in the renunciation of the ego,' he said in 1915 when he accepted his professorship at Leiden. Culture is about rules, not about our own particular case, about keeping loyalty, not our own self-interest. ■

Translated by Lindsay Edwards