

## **Another globality of sport: Towards a differential phenomenology of play and laughter**

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### **Abstract<sup>1</sup>**

Traditional games have reappeared in Denmark since the 1980s. As “Inuit games”, the popular body cultures of the Eskimo play an important role for the rising nations of Greenland and of Nunavut (Canada). And UNESCO has turned international attention to traditional games as well. Another globality of body culture – different from Olympic sport of achievement – appears at the horizon.

The reappearance of old games as new games in Denmark raises questions about the place of play in modern body culture. And it questions the established ways of studying play and game – the phenomenology of play. Phenomenology of play has so far mainly been organized around two assumptions.

Thesis: All is play. Play serves as a comprehensive term for all that is creative and full of pleasure – a *monistic phenomenology* of play. This tends to romanticism and idealization.

Antithesis: Play is the other. Play contrasts the boredom of everyday-life. The history of play is a history of disappearance. Nowadays, only children and exotic “nature peoples” are still playing. Play versus non-play – this constitutes a *dichotomic phenomenology*. It has undertones of backward cultural criticism.

However, there are many different ways of play. Languages discern between *play* and *game*, in Danish between *leg* and *spil*, and the philosopher Roger Caillois pointed to the difference between *paidia* and *ludus*. Further typologies and classifications show the wealth of human play cultures. What is put up for discussion is among others the relation between process and result in play, games and sports. Play and games include often competitive elements, but renounce from the sportive production of results. In play, it is the process that matters. And laughter. This leads to deeper, trialectical reflections about the relations between sport, gymnastics and games.

Without trying the vain effort of defining play, we can, thus, compare and discover the differences of play – a *differential phenomenology*.

Differential phenomenology of play challenges, among others, the established antagonism between play and production. The Danish market produces Lego bricks, computer games, and Rasmus Klump (Bruin, Petzi) for the world. How are play and production connected? Maybe, the philosophy of play can even contribute in an original way to the theory of production, i.e. to materialistic philosophy.

The existential, humanistic point of play and game is that play is not only a tool, which is utilized by the playing subject. Just as language is not merely a tool, but speaks through the speaker, the game plays through the body of the player. We play the game, indeed – but the game plays us, too. By dissolving the dualism between object and subject, play and games undo the imagination of ‘the individual’ who is handling the world of his own will. By play and games, we experience bodily that the human is not alone in the world.

### An Inuit game

Two human beings stand shoulder by shoulder. They put their arms around the partner's neck, mutually, symmetrically, like good friends. Opening their lips, they grab with their forefinger into the other's mouth. On a signal, they start pulling. The mouths and cheeks are distorted, the eyes are rolling, the sight gets grotesque features. The competitors keep tugging. Intensifying their draught, they turn their heads outward, trying both to relieve the pain and resist effectively at the same time. Finally, one of them gives up, at first slowly following the pull by turning his head, and then overtly surrendering by turning the rest of his body. He is overcome.



**Figure 1:** Inuit mouth pull. From: Keewatin 1989, p.38. With friendly permission of the Government of the North West Territories.

Our intellectual inquiry may start by the question whether the Inuit game of mouth pull is a sport or could become globalized as a sport in modern understanding.

Other similar Inuit games and activities, e.g. Eskimo boxing, or pull-and-tug competitions in other non-Western cultures, have by sport anthropologists typically been categorized as 'sport'. Similarly, sport historians have presented old European popular pastimes like *Fingerhakeln*, finger pull, as early forms of 'sport'. In fact, at first glance, mouth pull might appear as a bodily action, which is competitive and oriented towards performance. With these elements, mouth tug fulfils the criteria of sport, which have been proposed by erudite cultural analyses which define sport by bodily action, competition, and performance (Suits 1973).

On the other hand one might express doubts: Is tug-the-mouth really sport? There is no Olympic discipline of mouth pull, nor will there ever be one. Our doubts reinforce when we have a closer look at the cultural context of the game.

Mouth pull has been practiced in the traditional world of the Inuit, the Arctic Eskimo. During the long and dark winter season when the sun remains below the horizon for weeks or months, people drew closer in their communal long houses where every family disposed over a sort of cell with sleeping banks and an oil lamp. The communal life determined daily life. In the dance houses called *kashim*, the drums were booming and rumbling for permanent festivity day

and night. The drum dance, *ingmerneq* or *qilaatersorneq*, made people high and provoked their laughter. The shamans, called the *angákoq*, practiced their ecstatic healing displays, putting their settlement fellows into changed states of consciousness. In this atmosphere of social warmth and intensity it happened that people challenged each other, especially the strong men. Besides fist fights and competitions of lifting and balancing, a lot of pull-and-tug games were practiced – stick tug (*arsâraq* or *quertemilik*), stick match, pulling rope (*norqutit*) or smooth seal skin (*asârniúneq*), arm pull, finger, wrist or hand pull, neck pull, ear or foot pull, elbow pull (*pakásungmingneq*), and wrist press (*mûmigtut*). For competitive pleasure, people might tug or turn each other's nose, ear, or even testicles (Mauss 1904/05; Jensen 1965; Keewatin 1989).

In summer time, the traditional Inuit society changed its social character fundamentally. It dissolved into nuclear families forming smaller groups of hunters and gatherers. They met, however, again at summer festivals, *aasivik*, where drums, dance and competitions played a central role once again.

One of these summer events was portrayed by the Greenlandic painter Aron of Kangeq (1822-1869), showing one of the most eccentric pull exercises. His painting showed the ‘ass pull’. In an open-air scene, one sees a group of ten Inuit assembled around two men competing with their trousers down. Jens Kreutzmann (1828-1899), a collector of popular stories and traditions, described in detail how people used a short rope with two pieces of wood fastened at the ends. They put these pieces through their legs and behind their buttocks in order to tug the rope by their back muscles (Thisted 1997, 152-154).



*ethermekot unnamerlotik akforoutok*  
*(Of stor ethnografiske Belydning)*

**Figure 2:** Arse pull. Painting of Aron of Kangeq, 19th century, in the Ethnographic Museum of the University of Oslo. From: Thisted 1997, p.154. With friendly permission of Atuakkiorfik publisher, Nuuk.

Sport or non-sport? Olympic or non-Olympic, global or not-global? And yet, there is another global dimension in the game. It is laughter.

### **A Danish game**

Another situation of play, now from Denmark. People are flocking around in a park, young and old together, or in separate groups. Some of them move between bowls and skittles, others are self-engaged in tug-of-war, others again have joined song games under the instruction of a clown-like entertainer. They are turning traditional ‘old games’ into new games. The place is *Legepark*, the International Game Park in Gerlev, Denmark.

On a green field, a group is engaged in playing *Tyren i det Røde Hav*, “The bull in the Red Sea” (Møller 1990/91, 2: 32). Some remember the game from their childhood, but it is still well-known among kids today. The game is simple and entertaining. The participants stand in a circle holding a tied rope. In the middle of the circle is one person – the bull. The bull has to catch one of the persons in the circle. To avoid that, the persons in the circle will slip the rope and get away from it. But the persons of the circle have to keep the rope up, so that the bull does not get a chance to escape. If the rope falls down, the bull can run out and catch whomever he wants. That means that a person fleeing from the bull must immediately get back and hold the rope again to keep the bull in the circle. This creates a permanent flow forth and back and a continuing balance of tension. If the bull catches somebody, the person will be the next bull.

Game and play are generally regarded as important aspects of sports, but in everyday practice they tend to be neglected in favour of general disciplinary training. In sportive practice, play and game are used as educational entertainment for children or as warm-up, i.e. as marginal in relation to the central process of competition and achievement. On the ideological level, the Olympic rhetoric likes to make reference to play and games. But the question is whether the Olympic ‘Games’ really are games deserving this name. Furthermore, play is more than a supportive element or rhetorical superstructure of sport. It is experimentation, role games and challenge of one’s own identity, revolt, teambuilding, flirtation, contest and competitive engagement, processing of fear and anxiety, all this against the background of a good laugh. Play and games are a laboratory for fundamental motor skills, social learning, and mental development:

One learns more about a human being by one hour of play than by talking during a whole year,

is a wisdom, which is quoted from the Greek philosopher Plato. And in the words of eighteenth century’s aesthetic philosophy, expressed by Friedrich Schiller, we can say:

The human being is only then really human, when playing.

### **New games, old games and ludic diversity**

Play and game, thus, are significant for culture more generally. And they have meaning for the identity of cultures in plural. People do not only speak their own linguistic language, which is different from others, they also use bodily language – by play and game.

Social groups and people in general distinguish themselves as much by their games as they do by their languages: the Scottish Caber tossing, American Baseball, English Cricket, Basque Pelote, African dugout races or the Afghan Buzkashi are practices that are as distinctive as their homes or the structure of their genetic heritage.

This is how the French educationalist Pierre Parlebas (2003, 16) expressed the cultural diversity of games. He proposed the term “ethnomotricity” in order to describe the movement in play and game as an indicator of people’s culture and social milieu. Games have developed a multitude, which expresses the richness of human life and human potentials.

If the variety of play and games represents the common wealth of the peoples of the world, each reduction is a threat against all. That is why, corresponding to biodiversity as a value for the survival of life, one has talked about ‘ludodiversity’ (corresponding to biodiversity) as the value of play and games for the survival of culture: “Vive la difference!” (Renson in Pfister 2004). Ethnomotricity (the cultural value of movement in play and game) and ludic diversity (the value of diversity in play and game) give new impulses to education through movement.

### **Shifting international political awareness**

Play and games are not just historical forerunners, but independent contributions to modern bodily self-determination, different from standardised competitive sport. On the international level, this has been expressed especially by the Council of Europe and by UNESCO.

In 1983, UNESCO launched a Programme of Education, which proposed initiatives on three different levels: elite sport, sport for all, and traditional games and dances (UNESCO 1983). The latter were placed under a sub-programme of their own: *Encouragement for youth movements*. It focused on cultural activities and national heritage, among these traditional games and dances. These activities should be promoted by youth movements on the local level. This made evident that Sport for All and folk games, though connected with each other, fell into different categories. The three UNESCO subprograms concerning competitive sport, sport for all, and games and dances furnished together a trialectical picture of sports policies.

How programs like these are implemented in social practice is, however, always a problem of its own – and was it also in this case. The lines of conflict between East and West, between North and South, between UNESCO and IOC, which had been the background of the declaration of 1983, changed during the 1980s and 1990s. The power of the Communist bloc, which worried the Western colonial powers and encouraged the anti-colonial movements in the world, crumbled down. The socialist and nationalist “radical” states – Algeria, Libya, Tanzania, Nicaragua – were weakened or broke down economically and politically. The question of cultural alternatives to neo-colonialism became silenced.

However, this silence in the cultural struggle about popular games was temporary. When a new type of capitalism and entertainment industry created new dynamics of global hegemony, the awareness of cultural alienation entered a new stage. In the new context of globalisation, popular play and game reappeared on the international agenda. In 2001, UNESCO stated by the *Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity*:

Culture takes diverse forms across time and space. This diversity is embodied in the uniqueness and plurality of the identities of the groups and societies making up mankind. As a source of exchange, innovation and creativity, cultural diversity is necessary for mankind as biodiversity is for nature. In this sense, it is the common heritage of humanity and should be recognized and affirmed for the benefit of present and future generations. (UNESCO 2002)

And in this connection, the UNESCO conference of sport ministers in Athens, 2004, announced the wish to

encourage the promotion and development of traditional games and sports by an international charter as elements of sport for all and an expression of the world's rich and diverse cultural heritage. (UNESCO 2004)

Again, the realisation of such programs will be dependent of changing state strategies, which all too often only secondarily reflect popular movements and the dynamics of civil society. But the repetition of these programs from decade to decade shows, that the declarations of states and power in one or other form nevertheless express some basic contradictions of people's culture. And research took notice, too (Pfister 1996, 1997 and 2004; Yuzo 2005 and 2006).

In this spirit, the new approach towards traditional games was tried in Denmark from the mid-1980s. Following some inspirations from the wave of New Games of the 'Californian' type, old village games from the Danish tradition were 'rediscovered', and people studied their history, partial disappearance and educational values. This resulted in a re-emerging play and game education and the establishment of a Game Park (Møller 1984, 1990/91, 1997 and 2010).

### **Traditional play and games in the Nordic countries**

As mentioned above, there has developed a growing awareness for the significance of play culture in the world of education as well as in the policies of culture, health and integration during the last years. Play and game give the concept of children's and youth culture another perspective than the one-way strategy of handing culture of grown-ups down to the young people. Play and game are a source of creativity from below, renewed by each young generation.

Because of this, the Nordic Council of Ministers became interested in play and games as historical heritage, regional resource and educational innovation. In 2004, the Council funded a Nordic Co-operation of Play and Games (*Nordisk Legesamvirke*), which should build a network and arrange a Nordic Day of Play and Games. The first step was to examine traditional game culture in the Nordic countries, which resulted in a comprehensive report (Nørgaard and Eichberg 2005).

The report gave a survey of research and documentation in the field of traditional play and game in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden, in the autonomous regions of Faeroe Islands, Greenland and Åland as well as among the Sami (Lapps). It described existing networks and activities, presented information from museums and their material collections, and supplied this by an extensive Nordic bibliography.

In this process, especially three different relations to play and game revealed.

(1.) In some regions of the North – though by far not in all – traditional sports and games are today regarded as a particular cultural heritage and as elements of *regional identity*. This is the case on the Swedish island of Gotland where *varpa*, *park* and other games are halfway transformed into 'national sports' (Hellspong 1989; Yttergren 2000; 2002). In Iceland,

*glima* wrestling became in the early twentieth century a part of youth movement and national resurrection. In parts of Norway, *skotthyll* is a regional sport. And in Greenland, Inuit games and competitions are arranged, similar to 'Eskimo Olympics' in Canada (Kalallit 2001).

This connection between games and regional identity corresponded to the role of traditional games in European minority regions like Flanders (Belgium), Bretagne (France), Aosta (Italy), Basque land and Catalonia (Spain) (Aguirre 1978; Amador 1997; Barreau and Jaouen 1998 and 2001; Beaulieu and Ronné 2002; Floc'h and Péru 1987; Guibert and Jaouen 2005; Lavega 2003 and 2005; Liponski and Jaouen 2003; Renson and Smulders 1979-86 and 1981; Renson 1981; Renson, de Cramer and de Vroede 1997).

(2.) In other regions of the North, traditional games are mostly a topic for *historical and ethnographic reconstruction* (Hellspong 2000; Ekrem 1997). Some games have survived in the form of children's games and are practiced outside public attention and control. Whether these traditional children's games are actually disappearing under the influence of educational institution culture or whether they are developing vividly and with new dynamics after the children's own – and pedagogically mostly undiscovered – premises, remains an open point of discussion. As the Nordic expert network also included several researchers making fieldwork in actual children's culture (Kaas Nielsen 1986; 2000; Epstein, Vang and Rasmussen 1995), the contradiction between these different assumptions was recognized as an important challenge: Have we to talk of disappearance, 'underground' survival or current revival of the games? The debate demands further research in order to clear up the picture.

(3.) Play and games are not only something to look back upon, but also to look forward to. Games contribute to *development* – in education and in popular culture in terms of welfare and wellness. The aspect of development becomes especially evident when looking at some interdisciplinary potentials of traditional play and game, producing a sort of spin-off towards social and economic development:

Games and *festivity* are often linked together. This is the case for instance in the Danish festival of gymnastics (*Landsstævne*) and the Breton festival of Lorient where traditional games are used side by side with Celtic music and rock music. The Tanzanian *ngoma* is another way of combining social body culture, and festivity.

Games, *music and dance* play together. They have a common place among others under the umbrella of International Council of Organizations for Folklore Festivals and Folk Art (CIOFF). On a national level, the Breton organisation *Dastum* cares for the registration and development of music and culture in this Celtic country.

Games were sometimes combined with *handicraft* and toy production. A production of this type was started by the "Flemish Central Office of Volkssport".

Games and *visual art* can be connected in many ways. There is the tradition of Nordic fairy tale and troll illustrations, there are styles of avant-garde art, and there can be used actual pop fantasy, comic strips and computer games.

Games and other activities of '*Sport for all*' may join each other. This is what was tried under the umbrella of International Sport and Culture Association (ISCA) and by large traditional-sports festivals of Trim and Fitness – International Sport for All Association (TAFISA) (Pfister 2004). Recent initiatives of 'national traditional sports' in East Asia show how cultures of economically rising economies are setting new focus on this part of their heritage.

Games and *tourism* may also meet. One of their meeting places is the International Game Park in Gerlev, Denmark. Games and toys offer also possibilities to raise the quality development of souvenir production.

Special developmental possibilities may lie in the combination of games with new *media and technology*. In recent times, an experimental project was started in the Gerlev Game Park, which had a background in co-operation between architects, toy producers, IT and robot research, landscape administration and the People's Academy. The project "The virtual landscape" tried to combine practices of traditional play and game with the world of mobile telephone technology, and bodily movement with virtual orientation (Pedersen 2009). The experimentation set the playing human body in relation to robot research, which was promoted at the University of Southern Denmark. This way of innovation deserves, however, also some critical attention, as the technology approach in high degree comes top-down to the world of play, from industrial and educational interests rather than bottom-up from the playing human beings. The other way round, technological game design and computer games can also approach old games (Wilson 2011).

Anyway, traditional play and game deliver perspectives for innovations in-between the cultural genres. They challenge the established cultural habits and the sector-orientation of the dominating policies.

### **Philosophy of play: Starting by the challenges of practice**

The reappearance of old games as new games in Denmark raises questions about the place of play in modern body culture more generally. And it questions the established ways of studying play and game – the phenomenology of play.

As play is a pre-theoretical human practice, it is reasonable to proceed bottom-up from people's practical doing to the questions of philosophy. (Call it a folk way – or a materialistic approach to philosophy.)

Play obtains much good-will in the field of pedagogical and technological practice and in related political discourses in Denmark. Three fields are particularly prominent:

- Play and learning (playwork)
- Space and place of play (playgrounds), and
- Play and technology" (toys, playthings).

All three fields are normally worked upon by educators, engineers, architects, and planners. What is most important for these practitioners, is: building, construction, design – making things and producing ideas under the premises: What to do? The empirical reality of play may here be of secondary importance. That is why philosophical curiosity and astonishment often are underdeveloped. What play is, seems to be rather un-problematical – one knows spontaneously what play is – it should just be applied.

But when looking closer at the cases – and especially when critically examining some tendencies colonizing play by education and production – it is not at all clear what play is. Here, the philosopher enters the playground.

### **Play as the one, the other and the many**

The philosophical phenomenology of play has mainly been organized around two over-arching assumptions, which can be regarded as thesis and antithesis.

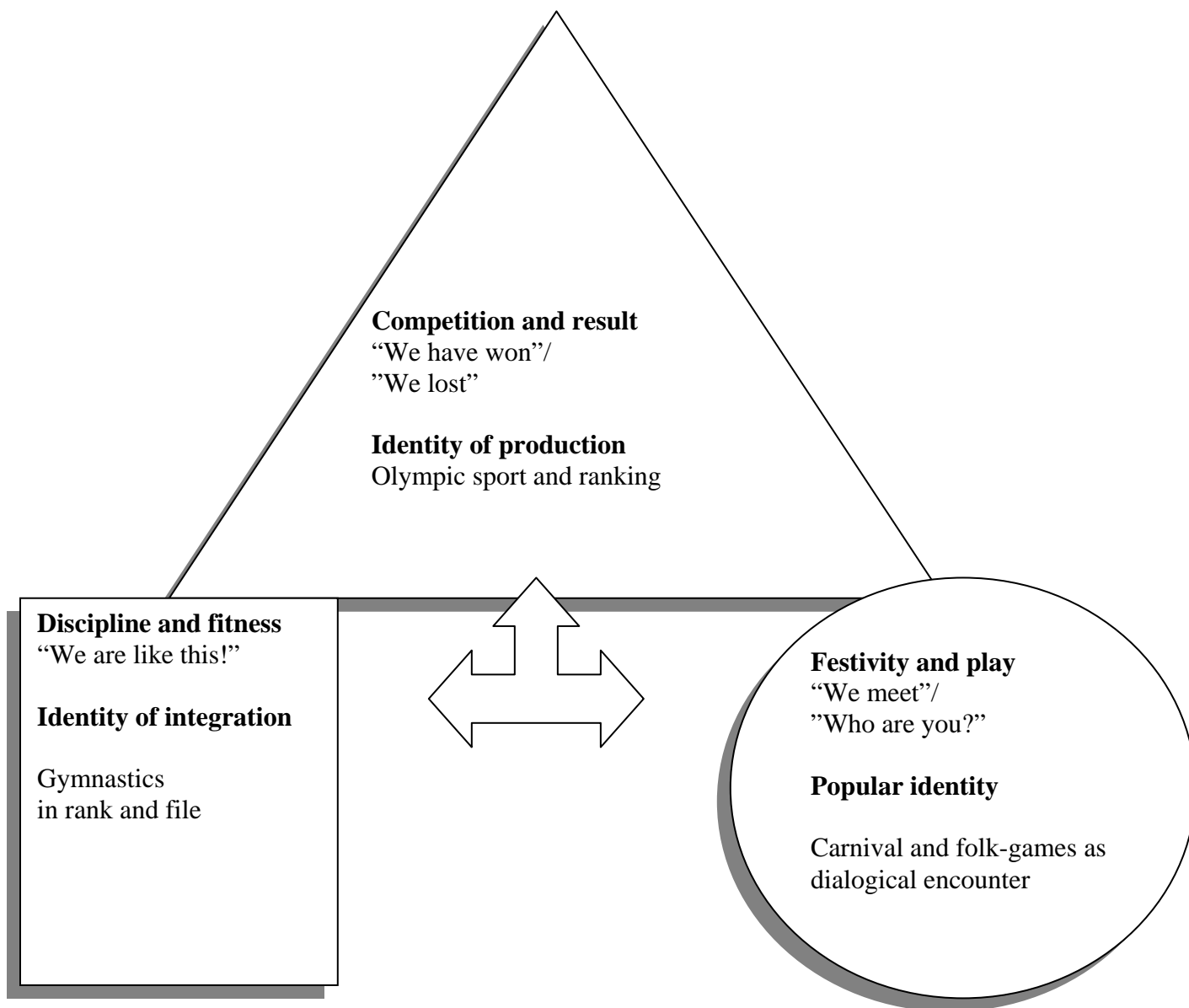


**Thesis: All is play.** All culture is play, as we learned from Johan Huizinga (1938). All people play role games – this is sociology. Language is a game, playing with words – we call it linguistics. Economy can be understood and driven as a competitive game (Andersen 2009). Election campaigns are political games – democracy. Even war can be regarded as (or was at least) play and (computer) game. Also philosophy and performance studies have underlined this all-embracing dimension of play (Schechner 1988). Is there anything in human life which is not play? This can be called a *monistic phenomenology* of play.

However, phenomenology has also thought an **antithesis: Play is the other.** The history of play is not at least a history of decline and degeneration. Play may disappear – there is non-play in human life. The modern adult does not play any longer. Play was lost in modern sports as Huizinga (1938) also postulated. Cultural criticism confronts what happened “in those good old days” with: “but today...” Play is only left living among children and exotic “nature peoples” – is it? – This is the discourse of a *dichotomic phenomenology*. Its central question is, what play is fundamentally, compared to non-play.

And yet, there is also a **third way** of phenomenology: **There are many different ways of play.** In some languages – though not in all – one discerns for instance between *play* and *game*, in Danish between *leg* and *spil*, in Swedish between *lek* and *spel*, in the theory of Roger Caillois (1958) between *paidia* and *ludus*

In another way, Caillois (1958) has also differentiated between agon (fight, competition), alea (hazard game), mimicry (mask), and ilinx (frenzy, ecstasy). Brian Sutton-Smith (1971, 1972 and 1978) differentiated between play of skill, play of chance, and play of strategy, and later on between pedagogical play and dark games. Pierre Parlebas made a system out of the difference of playing alone and playing together. Likewise there is difference between games of perfection (sport) and the display of the imperfect human being in play (carnival). And the (Danish) trialectics of modern sport and play confront the body culture of achievement with discipline and meeting (Eichberg 2004).



**Figure 3:** Trialectics of sport. From: Eichberg 2004.

All these are ways of *differential phenomenology*. This means that analysis even can avoid the strain of defining play – a definition which so far has remained a vain effort. The decisive point is that analysis compares and discovers the differences of play.

Why is it useful – and amusing – to try these differential ways? Here we can turn back to the three practical approaches mentioned above. Playwork, playspace and playware can be analyzed by the help of differential comparison.

**Playwork and learning: The neglect of elderly people in play**

Play and game are normally connected with children, and playwork is an educational profession to support children's learning and development of competences for life. Young dogs play, too.

However, why do elderly people play? Playing alone has many forms: crossword puzzles, sudoku, solitaire. But there are also many social games: rummy, canasta, bridge, doppelkopf, bingo. And there is no lack of bodily play: boules and bocce in Southern Europe, petanque, traditional games in Flanders, Nordic walking, dancing...

While there exist whole libraries of children's play, there is little or no research in the play of elderly people. And also the age groups in between deserve differential attention. Young people often object to play, because they regard playing as something "childish" – and yet they hold festivity and party, and they involve in computer games and Facebook. Adults "have no time" to play – and yet they do playful things "just for entertainment" or for "relaxation", they may call their play "hobby". They may participate in playful activities like "art" and religious rituals. And hazard games make up one of the largest among the economic sectors – a large field of adults' addiction to play and game.

Party, hobby, art, entertainment – play is thus renamed and redefined during people's life circle. This generational variety requires a differential analysis. Playing for what – to master, to cope, to party, to entertain, to relax – to play? Anyway, play is not at all described in a sufficient way as being learning-and-development or what was called the modern Western "rhetoric of progress" (Sutton-Smith 1997).

### **Playspace: Space as fellow player**

Play is normally thought from the perspective of the playing human being, from "the individual". This has been called the modern Western "rhetoric of Self" (Sutton-Smith 1997). The human being plays, and thus there is play. "We play the play." But if we reverse the logic: Play plays us – what happens so?

The existential, humanistic point of play and game is that play is not only a tool, which is utilized by the playing subject. Just as language is not merely a tool, but speaks through the speaker, the game plays through the body of the player. We play the game, indeed – but the game plays us, too. By dissolving the dualism between object and subject, play and games undo the imagination of 'the individual' who is handling the world of his own will. By play and games, we experience bodily that the human is not alone in the world.

This inversion may be especially true for the space of play. The spaces and places of play do not just "surround" the individual, like the onion skin surrounds the inner of the onion. Space is not just "out there", space is a fellow player. And yet, this does not mean a spatial determinism, as the early psychology of architecture tended to assume. Anyway, a differential phenomenology of playgrounds and of the places of play more generally can cast light on this relation.

### **Playware and technology: Work or play – work as play?**

Differential phenomenology of play has a further critical point, concerning the complex relation between play and production. Both, phenomenology in general and the philosophy of play in particular have often had undertones of cultural criticism and distance towards the world of production and productivity. At a closer observation, however, play can also be found in work and production – how that?

And yet, work and play represent two different worlds of human activity, indeed. Seen in dichotomic perspective, work is fundamentally different from play. Normally, play is

even defined by being non-work, by being unproductive. If it is the product that matters, we talk about work. If, in contrast, it is the process and the way that matters, there is play (Møller 2010: 148-166).

In cases of concrete practice, however, analytical problems arise. For instance, sport is placed in a complex way between work and play. A mainstream discourse identifies sport with play and game, but this is naïve, unhistorical and philosophically problematical. There was no sport before industrial modernity, before 1800. What people were involved in were play and games, rituals, festivities and dances. There is good reason to question the established rhetoric of “ancient Greek sport”, “Medieval tournament sport” etc. Sport did not appear before the eighteenth/nineteenth centuries as a specific modern game of producing objectified results – centimeter, gram second, points – by bodily movement. The stop watch became an icon of sport: measurement, quantification, production of records... Sport turned games and exercises away from play and festivity towards productive work. The ball – still nowadays the most wide-spread technological means of play – was turned into an instrument to produce quantifiable results in order to construct pyramids of ranking and success. (For a critical discussion of the so-called Eichberg-Mandell-Guttmann theory of the specific modernity of sport see: Carter/Krüger 1990.)

Quite another case: Rasmus Klump is a Danish series of comic strips for children, which had success all around the world – as Bruin and Rasmus Lump in English, Petzi, Pelle and Pingo in German etc. The picture story begins by Rasmus Klump and his friends building the ship “Mary”. This is a work of construction, as it is done in shipyards, as a matter of production. And yet, Rasmus Klump and his friends play. How that? How are play and work connected?



**Figure 4:** “Rasmus Klump”, first volume 1952.

At this point, philosophical reflection must relate in a differential way to very practical and even economical realities. This is especially true for the case of Denmark, where the market produces Lego bricks, computer games, toy robots, and Rasmus Klump comics, while branding play by Hans Christian Andersen for the world market. These are ways of making play “productive” – though play normally is understood as being “un-productive”, by definition. But what are definitions in relation to complex empirical phenomenology?



**Figure 5:** Pushing at the world market. Shanghai World Expo 2010 – Danish prince Henrik at traditional game. With friendly permission of Gerlev Idrætshøjskole.

If the relation between play and production is opened, also the inverse philosophical and sociological question has to be rethought: How can we understand the work of production? How does the philosophy of play cast light on the theory of production? And: Is industrial or post-industrial work un-productive?

### **Perfect sport and imperfect human beings**

The other globality – globality of play – thus, challenges our fundamental philosophical categories. This may be the point to turn back to the initial case of mouth pulling – and laughter. Popular games can be heard – by people’s laughter at the failure of others and people’s laughter at the failure of themselves. Play makes us missing the target when throwing, playing the loser, tumbling, and mock fight – always creating situations of the unwanted, imperfect outcomes. The grotesque body, the fool, and the carnival are popular images of what is going ‘wrong’ in life, and we react by laughing. Laughter in this movement culture expressed a deep recognition of human failure (Eichberg 2010, chapter 10; also Bakhtine 1968).

The culture of modern sport excluded this or arched over it by a new culture of perfection. Sportive competition became a ritual of the perfect achievement. And failure became

a drama in the striving for perfection. Laughter would mainly persist in this culture as the triumph of the superior. More important than laughter became the culture of smiling, linked to the gesture of selling, the presentation of the fitness-self, the 'happiness-culture' of Stalinism and the order of cheer-leading. However, subversive laughter can be heard from the 'underground' of sports: from the world of fans, from the New Games of Californian type, and from risk sport, all cultivating some new forms of imperfection and disorder.

Maybe, the exclusion of tug-of-war from the program of Olympic sports, where it had its place from 1896 to 1920, has a deeper meaning.

Laughter, thus, reveals itself as a bodily, word-less discourse about the imperfect human being. It tells a story not only about the prevailing order of sports, but also about perfectionism as a central focus in the order of Western thinking and social practice more generally. Popular games, thus, deliver material to a critical philosophy of perfection. The current critique of artificial human enhancement, mostly directed towards phenomena like genetic engineering, beauty surgery, fitness industry, and doping, has focussed on ethical evaluation and political assessment (Petersen 2007). Critical morality stands against the perfection and manipulation of the human being. However, what often was neglected and yet deserves special attention, is the 'practical philosophy' of people's ritual of imperfect doing. Here, laughter in popular game is central.

Play or game? Why are elderly playing? Space playing with us, and the game playing the player? Productive versus un-productive play? Sport of perfection or carnival of the imperfect human being? – There are no easy answers. A philosophy of play in the age of the other globalization, the globalization of play, may have to start from the very beginning.

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