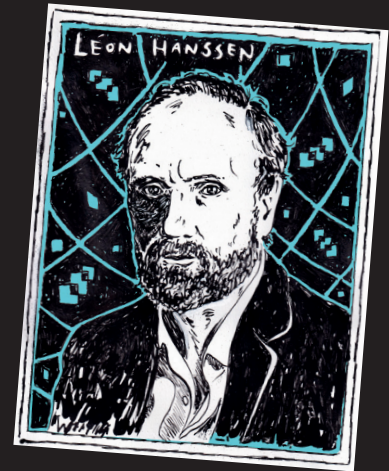


By Way of Introduction:

# Some Remarks on the Advantages and Disadvantages of Huizinga's Concept of Play in Current Debates



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As an introduction to the online and open access journal *Into the Magic Circle*, I would like to make some observations which primarily focus on Johan Huizinga's basic assumptions about the play element of culture and their relevance in contemporary culture. The title of the journal is directly taken from Huizinga's classic work *Homo Ludens* from 1938. What makes his thesis so challenging and fitting as a source of inspiration, whilst at the same time so debatable, and perhaps even outdated with regard to contemporary culture?

Starting from the thesis that culture emerges from play, Huizinga's aim was to integrate the concept of play into culture and to demonstrate the power of play in numerous forms of culture. Huizinga's theory of play as set out in *Homo Ludens* encouraged scholars across the world, from philosophers to sociologists, anthropologists to game and gaming theorists, literary theorists to pedagogists, artists to performers, sport theorists to leisure scientists, and so forth, to reflect upon play and games in culture and sub-categories of culture. The impact of his masterwork is increasingly perceptible in a growing number of fields and disciplines.

*Homo Ludens* has once been characterized as 'a daring, even reckless improvisation'.<sup>1</sup> Even when this is taken as an appraisal, one must simultaneously acknowledge that this scholarly work contains several inconsistencies, particularly in the context of post-postmodernist culture. The difference between the work's title and subtitle arguably already indicate this.

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1 Wessel Krul, "Huizinga's *Homo ludens*: Cultuurkritiek en utopie", *Sociologie*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 2006, pp. 8-28; 11.

The main title explicitly refers to the playing man (notably, it seems that Huizinga is thinking above all of a male figure: a ‘femina ludens’ is missing from his vocabulary), whereas the subtitle focuses on the play element of culture. However, these are essentially different entities. With regard to the subtitle, I must underline the preposition ‘of’, as the subtitle of the English and American editions of 1949 and 1955 (which read: ‘The play element in culture’), are definitely incorrect.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, these editions are still in print.

In 1937, when Huizinga was asked to give a lecture on the concept of play at the Warburg Institute in the London Thames House, it was precisely this discrepancy, which he underlined in his correspondence with the organizers. I quote from his letter of 9 January 1937 to the German art historian and refugee Gertrud Bing, co-leader of the Warburg Institute: ‘Nur mit “of Culture” ist mein Thema genau bezeichnet. Ich weiss, dass es etwas fremd anmutet.’<sup>3</sup>

The problems resulting from this change of emphasis from “man: the player:” to “the play element of culture” become even greater when one realizes how pretentious Huizinga is when it comes to the concept of play. He describes play as ‘an absolutely primary category of life’ and if there is ever anything that deserves the name of a ‘totality’, then, in his opinion, it is play, and nothing but play.

But Huizinga backs down and seems to swallow his words, in a for the contemporary reader perhaps disappointing way, when, in the middle of the first chapter of his book, he lists the elements that make a game a *game*. In fact this is a collage of several sub-definitions. I want to highlight some elements. Huizinga stipulates, among other things, that play is ‘outside “ordinary” life’ and that it must proceed ‘according to fixed rules’. He also says that play must take place ‘within its own proper boundaries of time and space’, that play is community-building, and that there must be ‘no material interest’ or ‘profit’ connected to it.

If one were to draw a diagram of a playing field according to Huizinga’s definition, something as simple as a football pitch would seem suitable, because a soccer field is a playground that indeed is clearly marked out and that has its own proper boundaries and thus forms a complete whole, outside ‘ordinary’ life. But then the question arises as to whether such a model actually corresponds to the complex reality of contemporary culture. Probably, it doesn’t work. Any piece of art of the Dutch artist Constant Nieuwenhuys (1920-2005), for example, though deeply inspired by Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens*, would undoubtedly produce a better result than the elementary model described by Huizinga when it comes to visualize a convincing model of a modern play situation.

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2 J. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. With a Translator’s Note, p. vii [= R.F.C. Hull]: ‘This edition is prepared from the German edition published in Switzerland, 1944, and also from the author’s own English translation of the text, which he made shortly before his death.’ (London, Boston, Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1949); Johan Huizinga, *Homo ludens: A study of the play element in culture* (Boston, MA: The Beacon Press, 1955 = BP, Vol. 15).

3 This letter is, in retrospect regrettably, not included in the edition of Huizinga’s correspondence (*Briefwisseling*, 3 vols., Utrecht/Antwerpen: Veen, Tjeenk Willink, 1989-1991) of which I was one of the editors. The quote in English translation: ‘The only correct wording is “of Culture”. I know this sounds a bit strange.’

It is not merely coincidental that I mention the name of Constant, considering that he remains one of the most prominent heirs and propagandists of *Homo Ludens* in the Netherlands in the 1960's and '70s, together with the writer and cultural activist Simon Vinkenoog.<sup>4</sup> I still remember the glance in Constant's eyes when our conversation once turned to Huizinga and his concept of play.

Therefore, one must agree with some critics of *Homo Ludens*, such as the Italian semiotician and novelist Umberto Eco who, in his dazzling foreword to the 1973-edition of the Italian translation of Huizinga's classic, deems Huizinga's concept of play in some aspects rather disappointing.<sup>5</sup> The Dutch scholar seems to have modeled play after certain, more or less fixed, bourgeois rules of decency that were already difficult to maintain on the brink of World War II breaking out, when the book was published, and which really fail to come to terms with cultural reality in the 1970's, and even more so fifty years after Eco's view of *Homo Ludens* was published.

We are pleased to present the first English translation of Umberto Eco's groundbreaking text in this issue of *Into the Magic Circle*.

Meanwhile, one should realize that play in the present-day world, on the one hand, is increasingly being instrumentalized and exploited by the media and the cultural industry and, on the other hand, that play, in the overwhelming variety of its manifestations, has become a sort of multi-headed, multi-clawed monster. Play is everywhere and anything can be play, very often without fixed rules or without any rules at all. Indeed, everybody and everything seems to play, according to the principle of 'if it works, use it'. One could even argue that the totality of play and the corruption of play in contemporary culture go hand in hand, proliferating especially in contexts without rules.

Regarding the corruption of play, this was certainly an issue that Huizinga himself already raised, and it also a recurrent theme in the secondary literature inspired by Huizinga's work, such as Christopher Lasch's famous essay on "The Corruption of Sports" from 1977, a text that he included under the title "The Degradation of Sport" as the fifth chapter in his even more famous book *The Culture of Narcissism* published two years later.<sup>6</sup>

In fact, one could say that his *Homo Ludens* is partially a lamentation about the degeneration of play in its pure form throughout the past 175 years. In the 1930's, Huizinga's worldview got increasingly overshadowed by the mourning of a decline which, from his perspective, seemed unavoidable, and as such he ended up as a reluctant cultural pessimist.<sup>7</sup> In that given situation, his perspective became more and more inaccurate with regard to the subject of play, particularly in the sense that he did not want to acknowledge the various new faces of play in modern culture.

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4 See Constant, *Opstand van de Homo Ludens: Een bundel voordrachten en artikelen: Bij wijze van experiment* (Bussum: Paul Brand, 1969); Mark Wigley, *Constant's New Babylon: The Hyper-Architecture of Desire* (Rotterdam: Witte de With, center for contemporary art / 010 Publishers, 1998); Simon Vinkenoog, *Vogelvrij: Bouwstenen 1963-1967* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 1967 = Literaire Reuzenpocket, Vol. 231) p. 107; Vincent Pieterse, *from ARTIST-AS-LEADER TO LEADER-AS-ARTIST: the dutch Beat poet and performer Simon Vinkenoog as exemplar of leadership in contemporary organizations* (Baarn: Real Life Publishing | DeWeijer Uitgeverij, 2011).

5 Umberto Eco, "Homo ludens' oggi", in: Johan Huizinga, *Homo ludens*. Traduzione di Corinna von [= van] Schendel. Saggio introduttivo di Umberto Eco (Turin: Giulio Einaudi editore, 1973 [1949]) vii-xxvii.

6 Christopher Lasch, "The Corruption of Sports", *The New York Review of Books*, Vol. 24, No. 7, 28 April 1977; Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1979), chapter V: "The Degradation of Sport", pp. 100-124.

7 See my *Huizinga en de troost van de geschiedenis: Verbeelding en rede* (Amsterdam: Balans, 1996).

Another issue to be touched upon is closely related to Huizinga's not coming to terms with the socio-political and cultural conditions of late modernity, characteristically turning every solution into a new riddle. Here, I am specifically referring to the absence or lack of rules (anomy) and about the role of evil in contemporary culture. *Homo Ludens* is as much a book about play as it is a book against a perceived prevalence of seriousness and evil in our culture.

One of the qualities of the recent Netflix series *Human Playground* is that it pays ample attention to all kinds of dangerous, heavy, often bloody, and even deadly games, which we apparently practice to show what we are capable of.<sup>8</sup> We confront the toughest opponents to prove that we are best able to endure pain. By playing, we hope to reverse our fate. Defying the pain threshold, players aim to gain fame and fortune, but always accompanied by a deeper, spiritual meaning, for example as a rite of passage or to experience freedom.

With his elegant vision of the playful basis of our existence, Huizinga explicitly instilled in humanity a self-image with which it could tackle the challenges and horrors of modern times in a relatively good mood. In the Oscar-winning film *La Vita è Bella* (1997), a Jewish-Italian man, played by director Roberto Benigni, manages to protect his son from the horrors of a concentration camp to which his family was transported, by constantly telling him that the events are all part of a game in which points can be won. Whilst his mother is murdered in a gas chamber and his father dies when being shot by the Germans, the son persists until the last moment in the glamour of the game, which he even believes he will win when the Americans enter the camp in their tanks.

The context of the Second World War is not unimportant here. *Homo Ludens* was published on the eve of this global conflict and there is much to be said about how Huizinga deliberately used his views on the civilizing effect of play as an antidote to National-Socialist ideology. The latter was based on a friend-foe mentality: every supposed friend is a potential enemy until proven otherwise. Huizinga's liberal approach to play does not have this principle of suspicion and counter-struggle, because playing *with* is superior to playing *against*. Even if you have finished a game of football against an opponent, you have played and worked *together*. National Socialism ignored this playful option and was based on the agonal principle of a lethal struggle to end a confrontation. 'Agon' means as much as struggle, danger.

Huizinga's ethical intention becomes even clearer when we take a look at the logo on the cover of the first edition of *Homo Ludens*. It has always amazed me that no one ever paid attention to this logo, until I did it myself almost a decade ago at a conference on the topicality of Huizinga's masterpiece.<sup>9</sup> The logo shows a so-called triskelion, here in the form of a three-legged wheel. The symbol of three circular arches, arranged symmetrically around an axis, dates back far in cultural history. In Dutch cultural history, the three-legged wheel had already appeared as a symbol of peace and freedom in 1647 on the front cover of a pamphlet setting out the conditions that were agreed upon a few months later in the Peace of Münster.<sup>10</sup>

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8 *Human Playground*. A Netflix Documentary Series, 2022. Creator: Hannelore Vandenbussche, narrator: Idris Elba.

9 *Games of Late Modernity: Johan Huizinga's Homo Ludens 75 Years Later*. Leusden: International School for Philosophy (ISVW), January 15-17, 2014.

10 *Extract, uyt het Boeck vande vrede-handelingh vande ho: mo: h. h: Staten Generael der Vereenichde Nederlanden. Veneris den 15. Novemb. 1647* ([z.p.]: [z.n.], 1647).

Due to the lack of relevant sources, we do not know exactly what Huizinga intended by depicting a triskelion on the book cover, but we can certainly guess. In the ideological struggle of the interwar period, each 'side' chose its own symbol: the hammer and sickle for communism, the bundle of rods ('fasces') with an axe in it for fascism, and the swastika for national socialism. My suspicion is that Huizinga deliberately used the triskelion as a counter-symbol to the swastika, seemingly taking for granted that the two show undeniable kinship with each other, not only in shape (the swastika has four segments that extend from an axis), but also in their origin as ancient solar symbols.

How disputable the use of the logo may seem in retrospect, for Huizinga the three-legged wheel emerged as a symbol, first and foremost, of human freedom and autonomy (and therefore not submission), in the second place of cultural progress and development, and thirdly for the recognition of a trinity. The triune principle is repeated on the cover of *Homo Ludens* by the drawing of three circles in the knee cavities of the curved human legs. They can be interpreted both philosophically – the triad of the good, beautiful and true – and in Christian (religious) terms, as representing faith, hope, and love.

In *Homo Ludens*, Huizinga states that you can deny all the finer things in life, such as spirit, beauty, God, but not play: 'Play cannot be denied.' Without play there is no existence. Only by playing, he argues, do we allow the spirit to flow into our existence. It is a spirit that transcends any practical logic. 'The very existence of play', he says, 'continually confirms the supra-logical nature of the human situation.' We thus get a trinity of different levels or plateaus: first, we have play, which is, as it were, pre-existential, in the sense that it precedes our existence (literally also as the love-play of our parents), then there is human existence itself, in playful freedom and development, and finally the playful mind beyond any logic.

Huizinga also argues that play does not necessarily have to be just fun and 'cool'. It can also be cruel and gory, and a deadly outcome is not to be ruled out. Destructiveness and hooliganism can be a part of the game, for example to save the honor of the group. It is also not surprising that the game is often cheated. Cheating is not worrisome as long as the vice does not become all-consuming, and it destroys the game. Still, Huizinga gives the impression that he does not really dare to embrace his insights about the bloody seriousness of the game in his final analysis. This was also at the heart of Umberto Eco's criticism of the *Homo Ludens*.

Huizinga could sweep the terrible and tragic moments of play under the rug with considerable ease because he explicitly excludes play from the category of seriousness. Playfulness as such, he says, is non-serious. Twice, in this context, he refers to a passage in the *Laws* (803a-d) of Plato, in which a dialogue is conducted about play and seriousness. Huizinga reads the passage in question in such a way that although play is a sacred act that must be treated with seriousness, because it falls under the regime of God, in the practice of life it is about leaving seriousness to the gods and spending life playing the finest games imaginable. This disputable interpretation tempts Huizinga to limit his focus to only the elegant manifestations of play in our cultural history. Where Nietzsche once understood tragedy as the interaction of the Apollonian and the Dionysian, of harmony and chaos, it analogously would have been obvious to interpret play as a super-category, a mix of wit and seriousness, intertwining the comic and the tragic. But Huizinga, whether deliberately or not, missed this opportunity.-

And this may have led him to be very critical about modern times, in which play, in his opinion, has come increasingly under pressure as a result of an excessive increase of seriousness. Moreover, by isolating play from 'normal' life and by placing it in a golden cage, he developed a great irritability for the pernicious influences of media and commerce on play. Bertolt Brecht's maxim that you should not build on good old days, but on the bad, new ones, was not spent on his contemporary Johan Huizinga.

In sum, we may say that Huizinga's analysis of the role of play in our culture confronts us with questions concerning, at least, a triad of problem areas: the totality of play, the complexity of play, and the role of evil in play. The key issue remains at stake: is Huizinga's definition of play not too narrow to serve as a mode of representing and theorizing modern culture, particularly the dark side of it? When we zoom in a bit closer, we must conclude, that Huizinga, with regard to his postulate of the totality of play, did not only isolate play from ordinary life, but also from other aspects of life than a favored layer of culture, and that he refrained from applying the concept of play to the 'basis' of social and economic behavior, as did John von Neumann and Oskar Morgenstern in their magnum opus of the same name that was published some five years after Huizinga's book.<sup>11</sup>

One of the desiderata of this new, launched journal should be to integrate or to confront Huizinga's cultural notion of play with Neumann and Morgenstern's socio-economic notion of play in order to get to grips with the complexity of present day game situations. This is a 'play complexity' that goes far beyond Huizinga's elementary two-dimensional model of play, and as an alternative we might consider Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the Rhizome, which they claim 'connects any point to any other point', bringing 'into play very different regimes of signs, and even nonsign states'.<sup>12</sup> This would lead to a concept of play not so much as a structure, but, in a Deleuzian sense, as a network of multiplicities with an always decentered center, and an always displaced periphery.<sup>13</sup> Such a concept of play could prevent us from idealizing play and also allow a critical admission of the role of evil and apparent anti-playfulness in play and game.

Hopefully, these considerations might serve as a starting point for contributions to the hereby launched journal, *Into the Magic Circle*.

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11 John von Neumann, Oskar Morgenstern, *The Theory of Games and Economic Behavior* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1944).

12 Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, *Rhizome: Introduction* (Paris: Les éditions de minuit, 1976); Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translation and foreword by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987) p. 21.

13 See Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*. Translated by Paul Patton (London and New York: Continuum, 1994).