

## Playing at Freedom

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In Exhibition Catalogue: *Pensée Sauvage* – von menschlicher Freiheit, Frankfurter Kunstverein, curated by Chus Martinez and Tobi Maier

We see an intricate structure made from tables, chairs and elements of differently shaped, textured and coloured cloth resembling an ancient animal. One can make out a small opening and a band of blue cloth is laid out in a concentric ring around the structure. "Let us pretend our castle is surrounded by a deep ditch filled with poisonous water!". Whoever steps on the blue either drowns in the deep muddy waters or dies a horrible death through slow poisoning. But, wait a minute. "Let us agree that with a special set of magic shoes we are invincible and free to step on the blue cloth in order to safely cross over to the other side".

The French sociologist Roger Caillois introduced two terms that mark the outer perimeters of what can be understood as games or play, namely *ludus*, derived from the latin word for game and *paidia*, etymologically rooted in "child". In his conception *ludus* stands for ordered and rule-bound play that can be found in every formal game, whereas *paidia* is characterised by the tumultuous, the unordered and at times destructive energy of the new. Play continuously shifts and transforms between different actualisations of *paidia* and *ludus*. With *ludus*, binding rules are introduced and with *paidia* those rules might be neglected or broken up in order to introduce a new configuration before the elements fall into place again. In this sense one could characterise elements of *paidia* as those that introduce a specific kind of freedom into the proceedings of play. Yet, whenever the term freedom is brought up one has to ask what its specific context might be. In other words, it needs to be clarified whether we mean a freedom from something or a freedom towards something. Both of these modalities are present in games and play.

Whenever the "let us pretend" in play becomes the law, that is, when we have (as is necessary) forgotten that we have agreed to the pretense and entered the binding spatiotemporal sphere of rules that constitutes a game's universe one could argue that a freedom from something has been introduced. The players are freed from having to negotiate all the complexities of a chaotic world. Instead they are temporally present in an artificial world that does not have to be negotiated by subjective initiative. Hans-Georg Gadamer has demonstrated very precisely how this seemingly paradoxical situation emerging from play leads to a specific kind of freedom that is necessarily bound up with rules and ludic forms of play. He writes: "the structure of play absorbs the player into itself, and thus frees him from the burden of taking the initiative, which constitutes the actual strain of existence" (Gadamer, 2004, p. 105).

However, the moments of *paidia*, when the law is not laid down just yet, and when things are still up in the air, seems to offer a contrasting type of freedom. Here we can find a freedom to negate, alter or rearrange existing formations. *Paidia*, in the form of a freedom that allows the negotiation and generation of novel sets of ordering structures, the reshaping of boundaries, the birth of new tasks or goals and the ordering and shaping of movements resonates strongly with certain aspects of Lévi-Strauss' conception of the *pensée sauvage*. Importantly, he criticises those strains of ethnologist thought who regard systems of thought as formally related to a specific content and who fail to understand that the specificity of the *pensée sauvage* does not present sets of beliefs with formally contingent and static worldviews but rather a very specific mode of approaching the world which is capable of transforming and assimilating divergent other forms and contents. Furthermore he characterises this mode of thinking as simultaneously analytical and synthetical, capable of negotiating both approaches, and crucially extremely wide regarding its final goals thereby introducing a drive towards universality. In this sense it is synthetic because it does not separate but rather introduces differential relations between parts of a whole. Whether they might be relations between humans, animals, food or natural events does not matter. In contrast, the qualities of modern scientific thought are ontologically firmly locked into the figure of the discrete. From the scythe in and of science to Ockham's razor everything that separates and dis-connects phenomena from each other (such as minds from bodies) has to be regarded as belonging to the evolution of the western scientific worldview.

What then is the relation between this perspective towards ordering the universe and conceptions of games and play and why should we bother to bring them into contact with each other? Firstly, Lévi-Strauss describes the initial human drive for ordering structures or patterns of meaning in a chaotic universe as a basic principle of *pensée sauvage* and it could be argued that the nascent moments or events that give rise to such a symbolic order present themselves with great clarity in forms of play at the moments where the “as if” is negotiated. An approach that is at once analytical because it is hungry to explain and know the world and simultaneously synthetic in that it needs to interrelate all phenomena is a necessary prerequisite of child’s play.

Secondly, games undoubtedly generate consistent worlds that are separated from what could be called the world of the ordinary and they exist in and for themselves as a whole, meaning that every element is related to each other element on a symbolical level. Furthermore, *pensée sauvage* also entails that one treats the systematic knowledge that has been introduced with a high degree of seriousness. Interestingly, as Gadamer has shown, this seriousness is also an important characteristic of the game, since, if it is not present the player has no means of losing him/herself in the game. One just has to think of an adult that does not take the pretense of a child’s gameworld seriously – this position will ultimately shatter the reality of the game universe.

It is this supremacy of the game over the player that has led Gadamer to state that it is in fact the game that plays the player rather than the other way round. In other words, if all playing is a being played, the game itself, rather than being the subject playing it becomes the point of origin. If we take this thought a little further, the transformation from *paidia* to *ludus* in play, could also be read as a shift from a freedom of the subjective towards a freedom that emerges from the trust in an ordered and readable objective reality that has a supremacy over the player and that is freely accepted for a limited period of time. Seen in this light, one could argue that *pensée sauvage*, just as the moment of transformation from *paidia* to *ludus* depends on the connection, rather than the separation of phenomena in the world. Thus, what renders the conception of *pensée sauvage* so relevant, specifically in the context of art and play, is precisely that it entails a slightly different kind of subjectivity. Namely one that is always rooted in the interrelations between subjects in the world rather than the analytical separation of individual phenomena.

We have stated that certain forms of play offer firstly a *freedom towards* something that is given as the transitory moment where the coming rules are negotiated and, secondly, once the symbolical order has been installed in the form of the rules, a *freedom from* a chaotic universe. Most importantly, since, as Gadamer states, all playing is being played, in those instances a specific socio-logik emerges from the shared set of rules. This is where, for example Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed establishes itself as a kind of sandbox that allows people to re-address their roles in societies and to literally generate new perspectives through a form of simulation that is only accessible in play. Here, societal rules are thrown up in the air to be first seen at all and consecutively to be re-addressed.

The blind spot of *pensée sauvage*, however, could be seen in the necessary absence of any kind of relativism, since the universal patterns that have been found to present the world are to be accepted and lived fully. Or, to put it differently, once a rule has been set as binding for all players, there can be no second alternative rule that contradicts or negates the first otherwise the game would become unstable and potentially unplayable. This is where play is played with what Huizinga called a holy seriousness and where the illusion (that shares its etymological roots with *ludus*) becomes reality in the same way that a shared symbolic order constitutes one possible human world. And precisely this constitution of world is based on a *freedom from* if we want to follow Gadamer who writes that: “...unlike all other living creatures, man’s relationship to the world is characterised by a freedom from environment. This freedom implies the linguistic constitution of the world. To rise above what impinges on us from the world means to have language and to have ‘world’” (Gadamer, 2004, p. 441). The question remains where and how this process can still “freely” take place in environments that are characterised by attempts to literally own language through branding and continuously replicate an economically dominated positivist world order. To paraphrase Claude Lévi-Strauss, just like there are zones for wild animals, there still exist zones in which the spontaneity of *pensée sauvage* is relatively safe, namely the field of art, which is appointed the status of a nature reserve in our civilisation, naturally with all the pros and cons

of such an artificial construction. It is in these zones that the playful freedom to constitute worlds both analytically and synthetically can still be exercised and witnessed.

In Roald Dahl's short story "The Wish" written from the perspective of a boy who plays at avoiding the poisonous black snake that is part of the jungle made up of the pattern of an oriental carpet by stepping on all the other colors, the boy manages to avoid the snakes for a long time, until finally, he trips up, steps on the snake, is bitten and ceases to exist. In this universe death is inevitable.

Sources:

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