




## PLAYING, PLAYFULNESS, LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

 <https://doi.org/10.56238/isevmjv3n6-005>

Receipt of originals: 10/15/2024

Acceptance for publication: 11/15/2024

**Maria Ludmila Antunes de Oliveira Mourão<sup>1</sup>**

### ABSTRACT

It is an investigation about play and playfulness in their relationship with culture and language. To this end, the thought of two authors is analyzed: Sigmund Freud and Huizinga. Respecting their different disciplinary fields, it is intended to verify how each one articulated these themes, which are essential when dealing with the human. Huizinga places the ludic as an element of culture, as a founding part of it. Freud approaches playfulness, play, as a great cultural achievement, relating it to the psychic constitution. Thus, it is a matter of surveying how each one relates play to culture and then verifying possible points of approximation and/or divergence, approaching play from an interdisciplinary perspective, evidencing its ambiguous and diverse character.

**Keywords:** Play. Ludic. Language. Culture. Social. Unconscious. Freud. Huizinga.

---

<sup>1</sup> Dr. student at the Faculty of Education – USP

## INTRODUCTION

The work in question investigates how play and playfulness relate to language and culture in the theoretical construction of Freud and Huizinga. It should be clarified here that this is a short theoretical essay, based on common themes of the aforementioned authors, respecting their different disciplinary fields, as well as different experiences, foundations and intentions. Thus, at this moment, there is no intention of an in-depth study, but rather to survey how each one relates play to culture and then verify possible points of approximation and/or divergence. It is a matter of comparing different theoretical conceptions around common themes, as has already been done by other authors<sup>2</sup>. Thus, the scope of play can be verified in different disciplinary fields<sup>3</sup>, approaching play from an interdisciplinary perspective, evidencing its ambiguous and diverse character.

Play was considered in its relationship with language and the unconscious, based on Freud's work, highlighting precisely the playful aspect of these. This is present in the human, from the crossing of language, that is, not only in children, but also in adults, keeping its peculiarities. The texts researched were: "The jokes and their relationship with the unconscious" (1905); "The poet and the fantasizing" (1908); "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" (1920) and "Malaise in Civilization" (1932).

Likewise, in Huizinga's work, we considered how he thinks about this relationship between play and culture, which justifies the choice of his work "Homo ludens: the game as an element of culture" (2008). The chapters delimited for the work were: "Nature and meaning of the game"; "The notion of game and its expression in language"; "The game and poetry" and "The function of the poetic form".

## LUDENS, PLAYFUL

Huizinga (1872 – 1945), was a Dutch historian and linguist, who developed works in the areas of history theory and criticism of culture. In his work "Homo Ludens" (1938/2008), the game<sup>4</sup>, which here we can also understand as playing, is an element of culture, proper to its structure, being present in its construction process. Right in the

---

<sup>2</sup> Bergen, D. (2014). Foundations of Play Theory, for example.

<sup>3</sup> Santos, Boaventura de Souza. A discourse on the sciences; Sutton-Smith, Brian. The ambiguity of play.

<sup>4</sup> It is important to note that this translation is not restricted to playing, but also to play, as the translator warns us: "The difference between the main European languages (spielen, to play, jower, jugar mean both to play and to play)..." (p. 3). Thus, throughout the text the terms play and play will be used.

preface, he draws attention to this aspect of the non-random presence of the genitive in the subtitle of his work, "the game as an element of culture", and not in culture, being at the time a reason for questioning by his peers. His work did not analyze play in culture, but rather as an element of culture, thus marking an important difference to this field of research.

From *Homo Sapiens*, with the hegemony of reason, to the inadequacy of *Homo Faber*, to reach *Homo Ludens*, the author makes a journey highlighting a function as important as reasoning and the manufacture of objects, which is play. For him, "it is in the game and through the game that civilization arises and develops" (p. 1), an idea that has been defended since 1903. Considering the playful factor to be fundamental to civilization, he sought to integrate the concept of play into that of culture. To this end, he approaches the playful character of culture as a cultural phenomenon and not a biological one from a historical perspective, with little psychological interpretation, privileging that this analysis is done by aesthetic means rather than the quantitative methods of the experimental sciences.

Huizinga (1938/2008) then seeks in this work the reason for the game, the true understanding of the concept of game. His analysis goes through the sacred representations of primitive civilizations to children's play.

"We would say, then, that in primitive society there is the presence of play, just as in children and animals, and that, from the beginning, all the playful characteristics were found in it: order, tension, movement, change, solemnity, rhythm, enthusiasm."

For him, acts of worship are always permeated by play, which does not imply the non-recognition of the sacred. Religion is essentially made up of games dedicated to divinity, being the highest possible activity<sup>5</sup>.

Playing is approached as something free, which contemplates liveliness and grace, being a "temporary sphere", an "escape from real life", whether in the world of children, or in sacred experiences, such as in the ritual games of primitive peoples. There is a freedom, a lack of commitment to reality, an indeterminacy and ambiguity. As well as the use of the mask, mentioned by the author, which can refer us to beauty, joy, and, at the same time, to terror, disguise, mystery, there being the "ability to become other".

---

<sup>5</sup> The author refers to Plato (p. 31)



"The sight of a masked figure, as a pure aesthetic experience, transports us beyond everyday life, to a world where something different from the light of day reigns: the world of the savage, the child, and the poet, the world of the game."

In this way, the ludic can be defined as a poetic function, as it has a malleability that allows the creation of something new, outside pre-established parameters. "About the function that operates in the process of constructing images, or imagination, the most we can say is that it is a poetic function; and the best way to define it will be to call it a game function or a playful function" p. 29

## **PLAYING BETWEEN THE SUBJECT AND CULTURE**

In what the author called the "temporary suppression of the habitual world", where laws, rules and customs lose their validity, where doing, we can add, has no value as an act, playing and playing is not something banal, but a high activity, of the "spirit". He explains that there is the transcendence of the immediate needs of life. "... it is located outside the mechanism of immediate satisfaction of needs and desires and, on the contrary, interrupts this mechanism...".

It is interesting to note that in order to talk about play in the Huizinga culture, at a certain moment, he speaks of the restriction of "needs", observing it as a characteristic of playing, or of playing. From the collective to the subject, the author seems to follow the path of playing/playing as a structure of culture, which participates in the construction of civilization, towards what, at the level of the subject, must happen in order for such activity to be possible, and, consequently, group coexistence itself.

Freud (1856 – 1939), Austrian neurologist, creator of psychoanalysis, in 1920 (p. 79) also addresses this relationship between subject and collective, marking precisely the inseparability of these. Watching his one-and-a-half-year-old grandson who, in his mother's absence, invents a game with a reel where he throws the reel out of the crib and then pulls it back, saying in German "fort-da" what it means here and there. What he learns from the observation of this game is that his grandson was reproducing his mother's lack through this. Instead of crying for his absence, or going through it passively, when inventing this game, he lives this experience in an active way, modifying it in a certain way and postponing his satisfaction.

The interpretation of the joke was clear, then. It was associated with the child's great cultural achievement, with the instinctual renunciation carried out by the child (renunciation of instinctual satisfaction), by consenting, without opposition,



to the mother's leaving. She was compensating herself, so to speak, when she herself staged the same disappearance and return using the objects within her reach. In order to estimate the affective value of this game, it is naturally irrelevant whether the child himself had invented it or whether he had appropriated it as a result of an incentive. (emphasis added)

At the same time that what is at stake is a child's demand for satisfaction, which has been postponed through play, there is also at stake the condition that Freud places as necessary for entry into culture: the instinctual restriction. In other words, the drive restriction is what allows coexistence in a group and the construction of civilizations, being its substrate. There is something there, at the same time, at the level of the subject and also at the collective level, of the social. After all, entry into culture goes through a loss.

In "The Discontent in Civilization" (1932) the author analyzes that the structuring of civilization is homologous to the structuring of the subject, verifying how intrinsic and interdependent the two instances are. For him, there is no dichotomy between the individual and the social.

We know that Freud dealt with the unconscious, unveiling it in listening to his patients and thus creating his theory. Although he has built a theory of psychic constitution, being mistakenly known as psychosexual phases in a developmental way, he has always been interested in the social, in his literary and artistic references, and in his continuous dialogue with the social<sup>6</sup>.

Bergen (2014) in his article on the fundamentals of play addresses theories focused on play, education and child development, highlighting the "theoretical giants of the era" (p. 14) such as Freud, Ana Freud, Melaine Klein and Winnicott, Vigotisky and Erikson. Analyzing the role of play in promoting socio-emotional or cognitive benefits.

In Freud, the author verifies that, based on her psychosocial theory, the child creates a world when playing where he maintains control, creates a world of his own, where he can creatively reorder it and order it in another way. Play as an expression of the internal world, thus denoting the emotional purposes of play. He notes, based on Freud, that the activities of children's play in early childhood are later transformed into fantasies<sup>7</sup> and playful thinking of adults, being the most primitive form of expression of

---

<sup>6</sup> An example of this interlocation, we can cite some texts that address the social in a more direct way: "Mal-estar na civilização" (1930); Totem and Taboo (1913); "Mass Psychology and Analysis of the Self (1921)", "The Future of an Illusion (1927)", etc

<sup>7</sup> Fantasizing as a substitute formation for playing, as daydreaming. (Freud, 1908)

humor marked by exuberance and *nonsense*. In this way, the joke is understood as a form of playful thought, in its play on words and release of *nonsense*. The author highlights the relevance of this theoretical construction, concluding that, although treatment models continued to advance after the aforementioned theorists, the use of play in the treatment of childhood trauma is still based on the foundations created by these first theorists.

However, for psychoanalysis, play is the most intense activity, with the most energy expenditure, a great source of pleasure for children, and the child activity is par excellence, so it participates in the psychic constitution and is also one of the indices of obstacles in this path. Play, games, playfulness, are then essential in the psychic constitution, it is by this means that the child will put his parental ties into play, relive situations, take possession of them in another way, to be able to do something else with what he lives or has lived.

## LANGUAGE, POETRY AND PLAYFULNESS

The significant function of the game/play, when connoting a certain meaning, is given by the imagination of reality and its transformation into an image, which evidences a social function that is permeated by language. (Huizinga, 1938/2008)

"... first and supreme instrument that man forged in order to be able to communicate, teach and command. It is language that allows it to distinguish things, to define and verify them, in short, to designate them and with this designation to take them to the domain of the spirit..." p. 7

Freud (1908) also approaches language as that which sustains, both in the activity of the poet and in that of the child (play), the relationship of borrowing of their imaginary objects and relationships with concrete objects that can be represented.

Huizinga (1938/2008) conceives the poetic form as a natural mode of expression and wonders why this poetic form is a form of expression in archaic cultures. He suggests the possibility of a utilitarian motive, since it is a society without books, which may be an easier form of memorization. Finally, he states that the very life of these societies has a metric and strophic structure, and is also present in State documents, legal texts, laws, etc. However, what seems central to this discussion is the very playful characteristic of language, the poetic structure of language itself.



It is interesting to note that this idea of how language presents itself at the beginning of a civilization coincides with the theory developed by Freud, and later, by Lacan, about the arrival of language in the human. Contrary to what one might think, it is not through meaning that it occurs, but through its materiality, which affects the body by resonating in it, leaving psychic inscriptions. This is the basis of the theory of psychic constitution developed by these authors.

"Every civilization is only very slowly abandoning the poetic form as the main method of expressing the things important for life in social community. Poetry always precedes prose: for the expression of solemn or sacred things, poetry is the only adequate vehicle" Huizinga, 1938/2008 p. 142.

Thus, as Huizinga put it, "poetry precedes prose", because the first form of language in archaic cultures is poetic, it is playful, being an "absolutely primary category of life", as he himself also showed, which produces satisfaction and freedom, based on the irrational, related to the spirit. What is at stake is "fun" (p. 5), "pleasure" (p. 5), "joy" (spass and witz) p. 5, citing as examples the baby's cry of pleasure, the passion of the crowd, precisely what touches, above all, the body.

In 1905, in the text "The jokes and their relationship with the unconscious", Freud shows us the emptiness of the word, which allows us to "play" with them and produce both other meanings and none, pointing to a satisfaction and freedom produced there. In 1910, in "The Antithetical Meaning of Primitive Words", he observed their impact on the body, citing the "playing with words" typical of children, such as phonetic inversions, when they invert sound and meaning, comparing them to the functioning of dreams, and also corroborating the satisfaction present there.

Huizinga (1938/2008) addresses the imprecise limit between religious and philosophical expression and poetic expression to investigate poetic creation. In the oldest phases, forms of social life, religion, law, war and politics maintained a closer relationship with play, and over time it distances itself from it. However, he observes that the poet's function has its origin in the ludic sphere and this is maintained, with poesis being a ludic function. The author explains that it is a different structure from the "common life", created by the spirit, which "are linked by relations different from those of logic and causality" (p. 133). It relates to the world of the child, the animal, the wild and the visionary, locating them in a "primitive and original plane", referring to dream, enchantment, ecstasy and laughter.





"In its original function as a factor of primitive cultures, poetry was born during play and as play – sacred play, no doubt, but always, even in its sacred character, within the limits of extravagance, joy and amusement." p. 136

The author brings several examples of "social-agonistic poetry" (p.136) in cultural games collected by researchers in fieldwork.

"The men and women sit in front of each other and sing little songs, some improvised, accompanied by a drum. The songs are always mocking or challenging. (...) The songs always take the form of stanza and anti-stanza, of attack and reply, of question and answer, of challenge and revenge. Sometimes, they resemble riddles. The most typical Inga fuka is called "Inga fuka of precede and follow; Each stanza begins with the word "pursue" or "follow one another," as in certain children's games."<sup>8</sup> p. 137

Huizinga conceives poetry in civilizations, especially in archaic cultures, in addition to its aesthetic character, he emphasizes its vital function that is social and liturgical at the same time, through "ritual, amusement, art, invention of riddles, doctrine, persuasion, sorcery, divination, prophecy and competition" (p. 134). Thus, he points out that it is not only in the sacred but also in social entertainment, in celebrations.

"The formal poetic element is constituted by the assonance that, repeating the same word or a variation of it, establishes a relationship between the thesis and the antithesis. The purely poetic element is constituted by an allusion, by a brilliant idea that comes out abruptly, the play on words or simply the sound of the words themselves, and in this process the meaning can be completely lost." p. 137

Thus, there are different poetic forms present in these games, where the effect is achieved sometimes by a playful variation of the melody, by the sonority of the words, sometimes by the meaning, allusion or improvisation.

## THE INFANTILE AND THE PRIMITIVE

Huizinga observes that, both in religious rituals and in children's games, there was, concomitantly, the awareness that it was a staging, something imaginative, which they themselves set up as a staging and staged, and the credulity and seriousness with which they conducted this experience.

In other words, to recapitulate what we have already said about myth in general, it seems to us that there is room for doubt whether the primitive Hindus and

---

<sup>8</sup> Work by Professor Josselin de Jong, University of Leyden, from the islands of Buru and Babar, in the East Indies archipelago.





Scandinavians ever really believed with all the force of conviction such fictions as that of the creation of the world from the members of a human body. Be that as it may, it is impossible to prove the reality of this belief. We can at least go so far as to say that it is extremely unlikely" p. 153

Freud (1908) reminds us how unfair it would be to think that children do not take their games seriously, because they transpose their world to a new order that pleases them. However, he notes that it differentiates it from reality. At a certain point in his work (1907) he also brings the primitive closer to the child, when he deals with sexual enlightenment to children. The psychoanalyst believed that it was possible to prevent, through enlightenment, the neurosis and intellectual inhibition that the excess of morality of the time exerted on children. However, in 1937, (p. 338) he retreats from this idea:

Long after they have received sexual enlightenment, they still behave like the primitives on whom Christianity was foisted and who secretly continue to worship their ancient gods.

In this way, the author highlights the subject's impermeability to rationality and his susceptibility to what is driven, evidencing the presence of children's fictions in the psychic constitution as well as in the construction of myths, where fictions enter to fill in the gaps about the origin and meaning of the world in general. This helps us to think not through credulity, but rather in the way reality is constructed, based on fictions, as a way of dealing with the complexity of reality, whether from the perspective of the subject, via children's fictions and fantasies, or in the collective, via the construction of myths.

Dealing with this issue, Huizinga (1938/2008) also analyzes the personifications of sacred entities as a way of channeling and appeasing collective emotions or as a "psychological trick to undo social tensions". Finally, he recognizes that in mythical constructions there is no pretension of absolute reality, oscillating between conviction and fantasy.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The rich research developed by Huizinga on sacred rituals and play was quite illustrative for me, providing an expansion of concepts already known, but now seen from another angle, that of the historian. It was possible to verify more closely, and in depth, with this material, the descriptive accounts of rituals, the ludic in primitive civilizations, which seemed surprising to me. What interested me was the playfulness in



culture, above all, the double movement between individual and collective, subject and social.

Huizinga (1938/2008), throughout this work, sought to "... to determine to what extent culture itself has a playful character" (p. 1), trying to answer why this is the case. Starting from the playfulness of culture, it passes through language, relating the ludic function to the poetics, finally attributing this characteristic to primitive civilizations. There is still an impasse:

"Is there any reason to call this innate habit of the spirit, this tendency to create an imaginary world of living beings (or perhaps a world of animate ideas), a game of the spirit or a mind game?"

After all, wouldn't the "poetic imagination", this meaninglessness, which refers to the emptiness of the word, be a characteristic of language, that which connects the subjects, that which makes a social bond, the playful and poetic function of language?

With psychoanalysis, without intending to superimpose the two fields in question, we can answer that this "tendency to create an imaginary world" or this "innate habit of the spirit" is neither a game of the spirit nor a mental game, it has to do with the unconscious crossed and constituted by language and which, therefore, is not innate. This implies the preponderance of the drive, of fictions and fantasies, over the instinctual and the rational.



## REFERENCES

1. Bergen, D. (2014). Foundations of play theory. In L. Brooker, M. Blaise, & S. Edwards (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of play and learning in early childhood* (pp. 12-25). SAGE Publications Ltd.
2. Freud, S. (1905). Os chistes e sua relação com o inconsciente. In: *Obras psicológicas de Freud*. Rio de Janeiro: Imago.
2. Freud, S. (1907). Sobre o esclarecimento sexual das crianças. In: *Obras Incompletas de Sigmund Freud*. 1ª ed. Belo Horizonte: Autêntica, 2019.
3. Freud, S. (1908). O poeta e o fantasiar. In: *Obras Incompletas de Sigmund Freud*. 1ª ed. Belo Horizonte: Autêntica, 2021.
4. Freud, S. (1910). O sentido antitético das palavras primitivas. In: *Obras Incompletas de Sigmund Freud*. Belo Horizonte: Autêntica.
5. Freud, S. (1920). Além do princípio do prazer. In: *Obras Incompletas de Sigmund Freud*. 1ª ed. Belo Horizonte: Autêntica, 2020.
6. Freud, S. (1930/1996). O mal-estar na civilização. In: *Obras psicológicas completas de Sigmund Freud* (Vol. XXI, pp. 67-73). Rio de Janeiro: Imago.
7. Freud, S. (1937). Análise finita e infinita. In: *Obras Incompletas de Sigmund Freud*. Belo Horizonte: Autêntica.
8. Huizinga, J. (2008). *Homo ludens: o jogo como elemento da cultura*. São Paulo: Perspectiva.